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Gender Neutral and Non-Binary Language Practices in the Spanish Language Classroom: Tensions Between Disciplinary and Societal Changes

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This paper is motivated by growing, inexorable tensions between societal impetus to advance inclusive (non-binary) linguistic change across many Spanish-speaking communities, and the seemingly removed reality of the Spanish as a world language classroom. As a first step in reconciling these tensions and breaking free from apparent disciplinary inertia, we set out to map out extant scholarly literature around these complex matters. This critical appraisal is inspired by and rhizomatically anchored in queer and decolonial theories and guided by the urgent need for radical (re)alignment of our language teaching praxis to advocate for diversity and inclusion beyond violently oppressive, colonial, cis-heteropatriarchal norms. We begin by tracing the genealogy of inclusive language change in Spanish, and various attempts across Spanish-speaking communities to broaden understandings of grammatical gender in ways that reflect inclusion of gender-diverse and gender nonconforming people. We then explore these linguistic changes in relation to the views of scholars and governing institutions, who may be seen as custodians of the language's standardisation, stability, and correctness. In so doing, we consider critically the traditional reliance of the (Spanish) language teaching field on prescriptive norms that may ultimately impair teachers' agentic responses to the realities of the classroom. Finally, we consider extant research across a variety of language teaching contexts and how this growing body of work may help inform renewed pedagogical praxis in the Spanish language classroom. We conclude by posing reflexive questions which we hope may prompt deeper, generative conversations around these matters.

INTRODUCTION: MOTIVATION AND POSITIONALITY

It is undeniable. In the past few years, concerted efforts to normalise conversations around sexism, gender diversity and awareness of LGBTQIA+ peoples' rights have increased tremendously. This has been distinctly reflected in language use, particularly in Anglophone contexts, from the purposeful use of inclusive/non-sexist/gender-neutral language to the now relatively widespread self-disclosure of

personal pronouns in email signatures and social media bios. Yet, the pervasive need to assume and ascribe someone's identity within cis-heteronormative, socially constructed gender binaries remains prevalent in many sociocultural contexts. The world language[1] classroom appears to be no exception.

This paper is motivated by the growing, inexorable tensions between these societal changes and a discipline on shifting grounds. As practicing Spanish language educators and researchers working in three major Australian universities, we cannot escape these tensions. While we [the authors] are cisgendered individuals, we have diverse sexual orientations, and having grown up in various parts of Abya Yala[2]– otherwise known as Latin America – we have also experienced the violent realities resulting from interlocking systems of colonial oppression and exclusion that non-conforming gender and sexual identities and expressions endure in our societies (see Chaux et al., 2021).

Increased levels of diversity in gender identities and expressions are also evident in our university student populations. Against this backdrop, many Australian higher education institutions have adopted campus-wide policies and teaching practices that are more inclusive of such gender and sexual diversity (cf. Ferfolja et al., 2020) and, in so doing, highlight the importance of reflecting such inclusion in the language used to communicate with students (see for example, ANU Gender Institute, 2021; RMIT Diversity and Inclusion, 2020; UQ, 2018).

Yet, the language we teach does not officially recognise nor has it automatically embraced these linguistically inclusive practices. Like many other Romance languages such as French and Portuguese, Spanish is a grammatically gendered language which requires identification of people and things as either female or male. In the public arena, several linguistic strategies to recognise the growing spectrum of social gender identities are gaining traction. Yet, the resistance from long-standing, colonial Spanish language authorities – such as the Real Academia Española (RAE) [Royal Spanish Academy] – and orthodox linguists, has left many Spanish language educators without a clear sense of direction as to how to reconcile these tensions and make ethical, context-responsive decisions to create more (gender) inclusive classroom environments and support learners in how they want to be identified. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from professional exchanges with fellow Spanish language teachers reveals that such decisions are largely prompted by personal experiences or by individual student requests as to how they want to be addressed, rather than by professional, scholarly research or departmental support. The challenge we face as Spanish language scholars thus becomes clear: *How can we begin to articulate a renewed pedagogical praxis that acknowledges the growing spectrum of (social) gender identities and provides (grammatically) inclusive alternatives for ourselves and our learners?*

As a first step in reconciling these tensions and attempting to answer this question we set out to critically map out extant scholarly literature around these complex matters. Critical engagement and mapping of the literature is rhizomatically anchored in critical, queer, and decolonial theories and guided by the urgent need for radical (re)alignment of our language teaching praxis to advocate for diversity and inclusion beyond violently oppressive, colonial, cis-heteropatriarchal norms. This paper thus proceeds in three main sections. We begin by tracing the genealogy of gender-inclusive language practices in Spanish and the various attempts made within Spanish-speaking communities to broaden the understanding of grammatical gender to reflect inclusion of gender-diverse, trans, and non-binary individuals. In so doing, we consider the views of scholars and governing institutions, who may be seen as the custodians of the language's standardisation, stability, and correctness. We then explore emerging studies across other language teaching contexts and how these may help inform renewed pedagogical praxis in the Spanish language classroom. We conclude by posing additional questions which we hope may promote deeper, generative conversations around these matters.

SOCIETAL IMPETUS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF INCLUSIVE AND GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

Una lengua recoge como innovaciones aquellos fenómenos que reflejan los cambios que se han producido o se están produciendo en el seno de la comunidad o sociedad. [A language considers innovations those phenomena which reflect the changes that have emerged or are emerging from the heart of a community or society] (Wagner, 2018, p. 224 [Authors' translation]).

Language has always played a significant role in enabling both the visibility and erasure of certain (marginalised) communities. In recent years, attention to this function of language has come under increased scrutiny at a global scale through the resilient activism of many such communities, in particular, feminist groups and LGBTQIA+ communities seeking to denounce ongoing gender-based oppression and inequalities endured by those who do not conform to socially constructed gender norms (Nagoshi et al., 2013). These groups have challenged and subverted linguistic systems, thereby propelling language reform campaigns centred on strategic and innovative ways to enhance their visibility and discursive inscription, as well as to address sexism, the essentialisation of gender and sexual identities, gender differentiation, stereotyping and many such gender-based discriminatory practices reflected in language (Calder, 2020).

It is important to note that most languages have some degree of gendered expressions and indexing spread throughout available morphosyntactic categories (Papadopoulos, 2021). In some languages, such distinctions are informed by the noun classification system; that is, the set of rules for stipulated morphosyntactic agreement between nouns and other word classes, including adjectives, articles, pronouns, while in other languages, gender marking might extend to verb conjugation as well (Corbett, 2013). Linguistic innovation around the use of personal pronouns to signal identification and inclusion beyond the male-female gender binary is a clear example of the impact of such movements (see Krauthamer, 2021, for an in-depth exploration of the linguistic shifts in the usage pronouns).

In Anglophone contexts, the practice of encouraging self-disclosure of personal pronouns is a case in point (see, for instance, Airton, 2018; Eide, 2018). Yet, the English language itself features low intensity grammatical gender distinction, as it only applies personal gendered pronouns in the third person singular. More explicitly, where 'he/him' is used to indicate male, and 'she/her' for female, while 'they' can be used for both socially constructed genders. The singular use of the gender-neutral 'they/them' was included in 2019 in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a pronoun 'used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is non-binary' (Schmidt, 2019). Beyond the Anglosphere, many other linguistic communities have also started to consider the use of gender-neutral pronouns. In the Arabic language the use of a dual they and you — 'huma' (هما) and 'intuma' (انتما) — as a gender-neutral alternative is used by some. In Hebrew, some people use a new plural ending: 'imot', which combines the 'im' at the end of masculine plural nouns and the 'ot' at the end of feminine ones. Notably, scholars of Hebrew language have not endorsed this linguistic innovation (cf. Bershtling, 2014). In Germany, as well as in Sweden, people have also considered changes in their language to include a non-binary pronoun (Berger, 2019).

However, the existence of a third grammatical gender or non-binary gender reflected in language is not new. Some Latin American Indigenous communities such as the *Muxes* in the southern part of Mexico (Mirandé, 2016), the Two Spirits Native Americans, and the *hijras* of India, have included such variations in their languages, their grammar and social identities for centuries (Dozono, 2017). What may be perceived as 'new' from a colonial logics gaze invested in the perpetuation of mutually exclusive binary constructs (see Xiang, 2018), is the level of attention afforded to individuals

who do not conform to the male-female gender binary to self-identify, and who would like to reflect this in their linguistic choices. Grammatically speaking, in the case of Spanish, the choices are largely limited to the feminine and masculine gender binary. While application of this distinction may be considered unproblematic when it comes to inanimate objects, the conflation of grammatical and socially constructed gender norms has a more pervasive and potentially violent effect when such linguistic choices are used to refer to people.

Beyond the use of personal pronouns, therefore, more wide-ranging proposals for language reform have been conceptualised under a variety of relatively interchangeable banners: gender fair language, gender-inclusive language, non-sexist language, and anti-sexist language. Among Spanish-speaking communities, the more encompassing expression *"lenguaje inclusivo"* has been favoured. According to Pagán (2020, p. 18), *"lenguaje inclusivo"*:

> *a) es una opción consciente a favor del uso de una serie de estrategias lingüísticas que evitan los sesgos de exclusión que se han ido acumulando a lo largo de los siglos en el uso del idioma; y b) es una adopción consciente de medidas correctoras que pueden incluir algunas reformas gramaticales, invención de términos nuevos, etc., desde una actitud de acogida y aceptación de nuevas identidades, nuevas diversidades, nuevas perspectivas, nuevas maneras de sentir y de vivir que desafían el statu quo heredado.*
>
> a) is a conscious option in favour of the use of a series of linguistic strategies that avoid exclusion biases that have accumulated over centuries of language; and b) is a conscious adoption of corrective measures that may include some grammatical reforms, invention of new terms, etc., from an attitude of welcoming and acceptance of new identities, new diversities, new perspectives, new ways of feeling and living that challenge the inherited status quo. [Authors' translation]

As such, inclusive language can be considered "inclusive" of many (disenfranchised) communities across the intersections of gender-orientation, race, ethnicity, ability, religion, age, social class, etc. For this reason, scholars committed to advocacy of gender nonconforming communities, particularly, trans and non-binary subjects, prefer the use of the term "non-binary"' (*lenguaje no binario*) or "gender neutral" language (see, for instance, López, 2020) to refer specifically to gender-based linguistic discrimination.

As in many other Romance languages, in Spanish, pronouns, nouns, adjectives, and determiners all need to agree morphosyntactically with the object they modify or the person they reference. But as Knisely highlights in the case of French, this linguistic requirement of grammatically-gendered languages has "unique implications when applied to humans" (Knisely, 2020, p. 2). This means that when speakers of Spanish refer to themselves (through adjectives, identifying their profession, etc.), they find themselves (socially and linguistically) constrained do so within expected feminine/masculine grammatical gender binaries.

The grammatical feminine/masculine binary noun classification system that characterises many Romance languages appears to be particularly challenging for Anglophone learners (cf. Diebowski, 2021), as the English language does not require such grammatical classification be applied to objects. Comparatively speaking, in English, we typically find a limited number of instances in which individuals' gender may be linguistically (self-)ascribed, for example, with the use of titles (Mr., Mrs., Miss), pronouns (he/him, she/her), identity terms (woman, man, etc.) and more implicitly gendered words (e.g., handsome and beautiful) (cf. Zimman, 2017). When it comes to objects, however, it is useful to draw attention to the fact that in vernacular English some inanimate objects are typically assigned male or female pronouns – a practice not guided by or aimed at grammatical correctness (Pawley, 2004). For instance, in predominantly English-speaking societies, cars, countries, oceans and ships are traditionally referred to as a 'she'. This creative use of the language resorts to the literary device called "personification". Personification is a specific type of metaphor, in which human

qualities – in this case, feminine or masculine social gender attributes – are assigned to objects or other non-human things such as natural disasters. Personification uses a "metaphorical gender" to ascribe socially constructed masculine or feminine traits to objects and abstract concepts. Assigning a metaphorical gender to objects aims to achieve a poetic effect that conveys one's strong emotional attachment to them, especially in cases when using the neuter pronoun 'it' appears too impersonal (Melion & Ramakers, 2016). Since English does not express grammatical gender to the extent of other languages, English speakers often use creative licence to personify objects. For instance, ships often take the feminine gender, especially in informal contexts and when spoken of by men (e.g., She [the ship] is a beauty).[3] But such metaphors can also reveal sexist undertones. In contrast to this figurative – and somewhat flexible and creative – use of language, in Spanish and other grammatically gendered languages, this has deeper implications.

PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE IN SPANISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES

As incisively asserted by Lomotey (2019), Spanish language has long been described as "androcentric" and "prone to misogynist overtones" due to its "long patriarchal tradition which it inherited from Latin" (Calero Fernández, 1999, p. 10). Indeed, Dever (2012) argues that several Spanish nouns can foster gender-based stereotypes that can, in turn, promote discrimination towards women. For instance, *'el gobernante'* (masculine article and noun) means 'the one who governs', while *'la gobernanta'* (feminine-specific ending **-a**) refers to *'the houskeeper'*; on the other hand, some nouns can also promote the erasure of women, for example the word 'soldad**o**' (masculine ending **-o**) is the noun used for both male and female soldiers. As a response to the gender asymmetries reflected in Spanish language, Heredero (2007) and Lomotey (2015b, 2018) propose to create a new Spanish lexicon that may afford more visibility to women, such as the word 'soldad**a**' (feminine ending **-a**) to refer to female soldiers. On the other hand, many scholars (Catalá Gonzálvez & García Pascual, 1995; García Meseguer, 1994) argue that sexism exists independently of language, in other words, it exists in the various ways a speaker uses a language, not in the language itself. In line with this view, these scholars have questioned and critiqued the sexist characterisation of Spanish based on unequal representations of feminine forms (Bengoechea, 2011; see also, Lomotey, 2015a).

Additional scrutiny on gender asymmetries focusses on the use of the plural generic masculine (*masculino genérico*) to refer to mixed groups. Here, the Real Academia Española's (RAE) guideline is to employ words such as *'compañeros'* (plural masculine ending **-os**) to describe a group of both male and female colleagues, and *'niños'* – which translates to *'boys'* – to refer to children in general. Some Spanish-speaking scholars (de Andrés Castellanos, 2000) argue in favour of differentiating between *'compañeros'* (plural masculine ending **-os**) and *'compañeras'* (plural feminine ending **-as**) (colleagues), and *'niños'* (plural masculine ending **-os**) (boys) and 'niñas' (girls) (plural feminine ending **-as**). While these *desdoblamientos*, along with others such as *'todos y todas'* to address mixed groups are becoming increasingly common in Spanish-speaking communities, they are not approved by RAE. Indeed, RAE deems such *desdoblamientos* as "artificiosos e innecesarios desde el punto de vista lingüístico", in other words, unnecessary noun repetition and redundant syntactic complexity (Real Academia Española [RAE], 2019), which also goes against the principle of linguistic economisation (*economía del lenguaje*).

Conversely, van Horn (2016) argues that RAE's position promotes morphological gender binaries as sexist and potentially transphobic responses; and while highly valuable in terms of promoting inclusivity, these *desdoblamientos* ultimately overlook those who do not (wish to) identify within the male/female gender binary. Against this backdrop, it is therefore important to consider the use of *direct* non-binary language (DNL), which uses neologisms, neopronouns as well as neomorphemes to signal an overt move beyond social and linguistic gender binaries (López, 2020).

Perhaps the most controversial example of DNL is the use of the morpheme **-e** to replace the masculine **-o** and feminine **-a**.

The idea of using the morpheme **-e** instead of **-o** or **-a** in Spanish is not new. In 1976, the Spanish writer, teacher, and researcher from *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC),* Álvaro García Meseguer proposed the introduction of a neutral gender form to refer to people with nouns and adjectives ending in **-e**. In his proposal García Meseguer provided an example of its use:

> Así, cuando une se dirija a un grupo en una conferencia, en una carta circular, etc., podrá comenzar diciendo '*querides amigues*'. *Les trabajadores* podrán escribir en sus pancartas reivindicativas "estamos *hartes* de ser *explotades*". Les polítiques podrán llamar *compañeres* a sus *partidaries. Les progenitores* podrán educar a sus *hijes* más fácilmente en forma no sexista. En los periódicos, los anuncios por palabras solicitarán *une cocinere, une abogade* o *une secretarie.* (García Meseguer, 1976, p. 7)
>
> Thus, when you address a group at a conference, in a newsletter, etc., you will be able to start by saying *'dear friends'. The workers* will be able to write on their protest banners "we are tired of being *exploited*" . Politicians will be able to call their *supporters comrades. Parents* will be able to educate their *children* more easily in a non-sexist way. In newspapers, ads will ask for *a cook, a lawyer,* or *a secretary.*

There is no evidence of the official adoption or rejection of this initiative at the time. At present, in Spain, there are heated debates and overt resistance to linguistic representations beyond the traditional feminine/masculine grammatical gender binary (Erdocia, 2021). Many argue that adding *-e* or using *-elle* are not the answer to an ongoing struggle against a social problem or to eliminating machismo or homophobia (Maldonado, 2017), while others contend that gender neutral language ridicules the struggles of women (Junyent, 2021). Conversely, Álvarez Mellado (2017) and Diz Pico (2017) state that the *-e* is a useful morpheme not only to use with nouns, adjectives and articles (*le*/*les*), but also along with the neo-pronoun *elle*, and, importantly, as a useful strategy to include el *"tercer sexo"* (non-binary gender individuals), arguing that the use of *todes, nosotres, elle, amigues, guape* resolves many issues such as being easy to pronounce, having clear morphological agreement, being linguistically economical and socially inclusive. On the other hand, other linguists, such as Álvarez de Miranda and Bosque (ABC Cultura, 2018) vehemently oppose any alteration of RAE's guidelines, whether it is the duplication of articles and nouns *los* and *las* or the use of *-e* and *elle*. Some scholars believe that RAE holds this position on the basis that "all nouns can be described by masculine and feminine forms, and they reject usages that promote the existence of more than two morphological genders" (Heredero, 2007; Lomotey, 2018; Papadopoulos, 2019; van Horn, 2016).

If we then move to Latin America, the use of *-e* started to become more visible in Buenos Aires in 2018 with the discussion of *Proyecto de Ley de Interrupción Voluntaria del Embarazo* (the abortion law), which was eventually approved by the Senate in early 2021. Daniela Luria, linguist and researcher in CONICET (similar to CSIC in Spain) explains that female youth from secondary schools while waiting for the senate decision spontaneously started to use the morpheme *-e* which has, since then, became increasingly normalised as a response against oppressive patriarchal and cis-heteronormative systems (Álvarez Mellado, 2017; Tosi, 2019).

There are also scholars from different fields who dispute the notion of "inclusive language". Scholars who, from a sociological perspective, fundamentally oppose what they perceive to be "linguistic impositions" such as the use of *-e,* and other scholars who, from a linguistic perspective, believe that use of such linguistic strategies are borne from a political stance and the urgent need to advocate for social inclusion of non-binary individuals (cf. Sarlo & Kalinowski, 2019). Despite ongoing opposition from official linguistic authorities (RAE) and many Spanish speakers, the use of this form

is gaining traction and being used in different spaces such as newspapers and media outlets, government reports and across educational sectors, in addition to trans and non-binary advocacy groups (Politi, 2020; Tosi, 2019). In the Argentinian context in particular, Romero and Funes' (2018) analysis of new conceptualisations of gender in Argentinian Spanish linguistic practices, states that the new morpheme *-e* is part of a sociohistorical moment that goes from the use of *@* to innovative uses of *x* and *-e*. They maintain that these alternatives expand beyond the binary representation of masculine and feminine, and, in so doing, allow for the inclusion of and representation of other genders (Niklison, 2020).

Indeed, in the early 2000s, the use of the 'at' symbol (@) to graphically replace the vowels a/o gained some momentum as it presented itself as an inclusive ending in nouns and adjectives such as *tod@s* but was soon replaced by the letter *'x'*, such as in *todxs* (see Acosta Matos, 2018; and Papadopoulos, 2022, for in-depth historical overviews). The use of the @ symbol has not been as widely adopted because it visually resembles a combination of the vowels a/o; indeed, the suggested pronunciations for it include –oa / -oas, *compañeroas*, which may effectively reinforce the feminine and masculine, and excludes non-binary possibilities. Furthermore, from an accessibility perspective, both the @ symbol and the consonant *'x'* present issues for artificial intelligence screen readers.

Yet, the use of the 'x' has received a lot more scholarly attention, particularly because of its use in writing as an alternative that "expands the possibilities of identification to those whose identities do not fit the feminine and masculine binary and allows writers to not assign undesired gender identities to anyone" (Acosta Matos, 2018, p. 40). However, the adoption of this consonant as a marker of inclusivity is not as widespread in Spain or Latin America (see Álvarez Mellado, 2017; cf. Borba, 2019, for a discussion of the use of the -x in the Brazilian context). One of the arguments against its use has to do with the perceived pronunciation difficulties among Spanish-speaking communities (as opposed to Anglophone ones) as it is typically placed where the a/o vowels would be expected. Some suggested pronunciations include the "e" vowel sound (López, 2019). Nevertheless, this consonant has a long history beyond its place in the colonial development of Spanish as named language. This is clearly evident in some indigenous languages of the Zapotec region in Mexico and other indigenous languages whose linguistic systems do not conform with grammatical gender as codified in Spanish and which include much wider uses of this consonant (cf. discussion and critique of this point in Salinas, 2020; Salinas & Lozano, 2021).

On the other hand, many scholars and activists in Anglophone contexts use the 'x' at the end of certain nouns and adjectives (e.g., Latinx and Chicanx) (see Padilla, 2016; van Horn, 2016), while others use it at the beginning of the word to embrace their indigenous roots (e.g., **X**icana/o) (see Noriega et al., 2012) and, in so doing, decolonise language by highlighting intersections of race/ethnicity and (grammatical) gender politics (Acosta Matos, 2018). The emergence of the term *Latinx* (pronounced la-teen-ex) is a particular case in point. This term is used in the U.S. both in social and (higher) education contexts as a pan-ethnic label to advocate for inclusiveness and understanding of intersectionality of the Latino community living in the U.S. (Salinas & Lozano, 2019, 2021; Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018). Van Horn (2016) states that "like the use of they/them/their pronouns in English (in place of the gendered pronouns he/him/his and she/her/hers), "Latin**x**" is an attempt in Spanish to include non-binary people, those who are neither male nor female" (pp. 3-4). Even though Merriam-Webster and the Oxford English Dictionary include the term Latinx, RAE does not accept its use. They assert that there is no connection between the linguistic conventions of grammatical gender and social gender oppression.

Salinas and Lozano (2019), in their review of the evolution of the term *Latinx,* state that there is a dearth of scholarly evidence tracing the origin of the term. They conclude that the term appears "to have been born out of the LGBTQIA+ community in the U.S. as a way to resist the gender binary" (Salinas and Lozano 2019, pp. 303-304). However, other authors (e.g., Padilla, 2016; Scharrón-del Río

& Aja, 2020) suggest different reasons for the origin of the term. For instance, Padilla (2016) states that *Latinx* emerged in early 2004 (but its use became more noticeable between late 2004 and mid-2015) among left-leaning and queer communities in an attempt to promote inclusivity in language, particularly among social media users on sites such as Twitter, blogs, and digital publications beyond LGBTQIA+ communities. Indeed, *Latinx* has been adopted by some scholars in U.S. higher education institutions in their scholarly writing, professional presentations, and associations (e.g., Leek, 2016) and by colleges and university students (e.g., Columbia University students changed their group name from Chicano Caucus to *Chicanx* Caucus, *Latinx* Heritage Month as observed by Armus, (2015)) to advocate for inclusiveness and understanding of intersectionality of the Latino/a community living in the U.S. More recently, Salinas and Lozano (2021) propose Latin***** as an alternative that may generate self- reflection regarding "intersecting identities related to power, privilege and oppression" (p. 249).

Despite RAE's reluctance to consider the various positions articulated by linguists and LGBTQIA+ communities (Álvarez Mellado, 2017; Diz Pico, 2017; Padilla, 2016) who advocate for the inclusion of the pronoun *elle* and the ending *-e*, these alternatives have become rapidly visible among Chileans and Argentinians in particular and are now commonly used in social media, schools and universities (Alemany, 2019; Tosi, 2019). To date, six Argentinian universities (Rosario University among them) have publicly declared that they would accept the inclusion of *-e* in academic writing (Alemany, 2019). During the 2019 presidential campaign of the current Argentinian president, Alberto Fernández, the use of morpheme *-e* was on the rise and he expressed his support of it. He pointed out that, although RAE's view is that the masculine plural already includes women, this still contributes to sexism, and the "invisibility" of women and other marginalised communities beyond the male/female binary. As such, he recognised that the *-e* also includes transgender and non-binary people and called this a valuable political initiative in which traditional grammatical conventions should be irrelevant. The Argentinian president added that language should be adaptable as we change it every day (Alemany, 2019). On Monday the 16th of March 2020, after three days of declaring quarantine because of the spread of COVID-19 in Argentina, at a time of crisis and uncertainty, Fernández demonstrated his ongoing support for these communities by defying traditional linguistic conventions and publicly addressing the Argentinian people as "*hombres, mujeres, argentinos, argentinas y argentines*" (Politi, 2020).

It is also important to consider studies on how Spanish language is used and taught in Spanish-speaking countries' education systems. In the Argentinian context, for instance, Tosi (2019) suggests that since 2018, inclusive language has been used in schools and tertiary institutions in Argentina. She states that the majority of secondary students use it orally and in writing, and that this has now become part of everyday school discourse. For example, students use it all the time either in class or in the playground with *amigues* (friends) or with those teachers who also use it. The author also indicates that some teachers see the use of inclusive language as a pedagogical tool (reading, oral and writing workshop) to teach inclusiveness and respect towards non-binary and gender nonconforming students. Tosi also considers tertiary students and shows that lecturers use inclusive language as a didactic strategy too with the aim of analysing writing and literary texts and, in so doing, initiate generative discussions around its use. Tosi (2019) concludes by reminding us that linguistic education cannot avoid or exclude inclusive, non-binary language strategies; however, it can neither insist or impose nor can it prohibit or silence it.

And yet, despite – or possibly because of – the increasingly widespread use of inclusive and direct non-binary language in social media and everyday interactions, in June 2022, Buenos Aires City Mayor Horacio Rodríguez Larreta banned the use of *-e* as well as *x* or the @ sign to signal gender inclusivity in schools across the capital district. His argument centred on the "simplification" of children's learning adding that "teachers have to respect the rules of the Spanish language because

children have to master the language as it is" (TIMES/AFP, 2022). This policy, the first in the world to explicitly prohibit the use of gender-neutral language in schools has only added fuel to what is being described as a 'culture war' in many Latin American countries including Brazil as well as Spain (see, for instance, Erdocia, 2022 - Pre-print). This paradoxical situation provides a poignant example of the polarizing effect that 'lenguaje inclusivo' continues to generate among Spanish-speaking communities at the intersection of social justice, ideology, politics and policy.

Critical appraisal of extant literature through the lenses of queer and decolonial theories suggests that social resistance and framing of academic debates in some parts of the Spanish-speaking world ultimately risk reinscribing normative, binary logics rather than engaging with the complexity of our human experience. Beyond the scholarly realm, thanks to trans and non-binary activism, however, there appears to be a significant and increased use of the morphological expression of *-e* in social media, newspapers, university websites, and activist groups in Spain, Chile, and Argentina. In the latter, teachers, scholars and even politicians recognise that the use of the morpheme *-e* is an expression that has emerged from and is supported by the society at large and that, with time and ongoing use, may be accepted and become the norm. Ultimately, as argued by Acosta Matos (2018, p. 46), all of these graphic alternatives have the potential to enable speakers of the language "to learn, recognize and acknowledge the multiple possibilities of expression that the Spanish language has had and could possibly have. This is particularly important for non-binary individuals who do not actively signify queerness in their bodies and may be mis-gendered." This cannot be more imperative than in the (Spanish) language classroom.

PEDAGOGICAL TENSIONS IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

As the previous sections make plain, there are inexorable tensions between unfolding sociocultural changes and traditional language teaching practices. These tensions have long been the focus of research attention (Sunderland, 2000). For instance, more than 10 years ago, Liddicoat (2009, p. 192) highlighted that:

> [T]he language classroom presents a potential conflict for the gay and lesbian student in that it combines a heterenormatively constructed context with questions which makes self-disclosure a relevant activity. Much of the questioning focus in language classes – and most especially in beginner-level classes – is placed on the personal world of the learner.

In recent years, these unfolding sociocultural developments have accelerated the need to consider the impact of these practices on the student body, particularly gender nonconforming students. Indeed, as argued by Djavadghazaryans (2020, p. 270, emphasis ours):

> The lack of awareness of the connection between grammatical and social gender and its effects on nonbinary students as well as the limited efforts to address these challenges lead to an absence of inclusive vocabulary and teaching materials, while reinforcing heteronormative stereotypical binary assumptions on gender and sexuality, perpetuating potentially sexist and exclusionary classroom practices, as well as teaching strategies that can easily *become offensive and violating* to gender nonconforming students.

The following example illustrates a common scenario learners and educators encounter when working with the idea of grammatical gender in Spanish. Informed by both communicative language learning methodologies and principles of Intercultural Language Teaching (ILT) language educators tend to

foster peer to peer interaction (Liddicoat, 2013); in so doing, they also strive to enable students to address each other in "grammatically correct ways", and to consider pragmatic features of the target language in everyday exchanges (e.g., greetings, introductions). To facilitate these processes, gendered nouns such as man and woman, together with gendered pronouns and adjectives are typically introduced by most teachers on the first class in beginning language courses. These elements are also introduced in the first chapters of most (Spanish) language textbooks.

An example illustrating this point is being able to introduce oneself, indicating country of origin or nationality, which may begin with the teacher's input as so:

> ¡Hola! Me llamo Profeso**r** Gonzáles. Yo soy colombian**o**. ¿Y tú? ¿Eres australian**o** o australian**a**?
> [Hello! My name is Professor (male ending) Gonzáles. I am Colombian (male ending). And you? Are you Australian (male ending 'o') or Australian (female ending 'a')?]

This very basic introduction is already loaded with cis-normative assumptions, since, following this model, students are explicitly required to answer within male/female binary parameters. In order to enable their learners to make this call, what usually follows is an explanation along the lines of: "For most nationalities, if you are male, your nationality adjective will end with an 'o' and if you are female, it will end with '-a'". Ultimately, these practices not only perpetuate traditional grammatical conventions, but more importantly, they reinforce pervasive cis-normative and even transphobic assumptions typically based on students' names and appearance.

Given increased understanding around gender diversity in student populations, it cannot be assumed that every learner will be able to adhere to (or feel comfortable with) one of these two options. For Spanish, when it comes to describing people, these binary grammatical and semantic gender categories have traditionally been compounded with socially constructed, hetero, and cis-normative understandings, which exclude individuals who do not fall into either side of this binary (Barrett, 2014). Teachers may find this interaction challenging and potentially uncomfortable. Yet, the relevance of asking students to decide which gender they identify with – for grammatical purposes – must be challenged, particularly in the current environment, in which inclusion of people of diverse gender identities and expressions is at the forefront of discourses in many educational institutions.

Currently, in the field of Spanish language education, there is a paucity of studies explicitly addressing the impact of these challenges and recognising the wide-ranging pedagogical contexts in which Spanish is taught. Among these few, Liddicoat (2009) focuses on beginner-level Spanish language classrooms in an Australian university context. The author presents the case of overtly heteronormative principles applied to classroom interaction. He illustrates this with an example of a male student referencing '*mi novio*' (my boyfriend), and the recast by the teacher instructing him to use '*mi novia*' (my girlfriend) instead. In another study, Pryor (2015) found that some Spanish language teachers would avoid using the name and pronoun the student requested if this was considered grammatically incongruent or not the name that appeared in the official class list. Pryor also remarks that such gendered learning environments make students who identify with a gender that does not 'match' their physical appearance susceptible to being misgendered by their teachers. These studies suggest that for many teachers of Spanish it is easier to focus on grammatical correctness than to break established societal norms or even provide non-binary options for those who might wish to use them.

Traditionally prescriptive approaches in language teaching are only exacerbated by the dearth of studies that explore Spanish teachers' experiences, attitudes, and practices towards LGBTQIA+ learners. Some studies in the area of teaching and learning of Spanish have addressed these matters, but their focus has been mainly on the experiences on students disclosing their sexuality or gender identity (Pryor, 2015), and on the limited understanding of transgender students' grammatical gender

practices in the classroom (Parks et al., 2016). More recently, Cahnmann-Taylor and Coda (2019) have highlighted the difficulty that Spanish languages educators may experience in "troubling the normal". Building on this work, Baros (2021), focused specifically on the experiences of three transgender and non-binary (TGNB) learners of Spanish and noted that "instructor efforts to recognize TGNB identities, acknowledge problematic linguistic and cultural patterns, and take advantage of opportunities to highlight the experiences and perspectives of TGNB students outweighs the potential exclusivity of the content itself" (p. 18).

A recent study conducted by Engra Minaya (2020) combines the perspectives from Spanish teachers (n=104), learners (n=91), and popular Spanish language teaching textbooks (n=28). Findings reveal that while teachers and learners have an overall positive attitude toward the treatment of LGBTQIA+ matters in the classroom, their approach varies widely in terms of depth, and it is largely done in *ad hoc* manner. The teachers' age (younger) and gender (female) are two significant individual variables behind the increased predisposition to integrate discussion of these matters. Perhaps unsurprisingly, systematic examination of 28 Spanish language textbooks reveals that the overall positive attitude toward LGBTQIA+ communities is not reflected in the actual textbooks, which largely homogenise, invisibilise and, in some cases, completely erase existence of these communities. These results mirror Rodríguez's (2017) earlier findings on a smaller sample of Spanish language textbooks.

Beyond issues of improvised teaching strategies and of invisibility in learning materials, there is a dearth of research focused on the linguistic implications of integrating LGBTQIA+ identities in the Spanish language classroom. Parra and Serafini's (2021) recent discussion of conceptual frameworks and concrete pedagogical strategies and authentic resources available to integrate the topic of 'lenguaje inclusivo' (LI) in the curriculum of Spanish as foreign/second language and Spanish as a heritage language is a clear exception. The authors propose specific, actionable strategies and learning activities framed within a multiliteracies approach to explore LI in the classroom. While highlighting its multilayered nature, some of these activities still present LI as a 'topic' of interest, to be discussed, researched. and even debated, which may risk dehumanization of marginalised communities and their ongoing struggles, and possibly, even that of some learners inside the classroom. As such, considerable work remains to be done on the development of deliberate pedagogical approaches, curricula and learning materials to ensure that these are inclusive of both teachers' and students' sexuality and gender identities and expressions.

GESTURING TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE FUTURES

We now return to our initial question of how can we begin to articulate a renewed pedagogical praxis that acknowledges the growing spectrum of (social) gender identities and provides (grammatically) inclusive alternatives for ourselves and our learners? In this paper, we argue that a crucial first step in addressing this complex question consists in queering the spectrum of available linguistic and rhetorical options beyond the male/female grammatical gender binary and acknowledging that debates around their use are deeply entrenched in colonial logics. This can help open up curricular and pedagogical spaces for teachers and learners to explore and recognise the right to (re)construct their identities in the target language (Knisely, 2020; Knisely & Paiz, 2021). Finally, and more importantly, these queering practices can also serve a springboard for radical (re)alignment of our language teaching praxis to dismantle normativities and embrace diversity in all its forms.

While articulation of specific curricular and pedagogical strategies have been gaining momentum in the teaching of English (see, for instance, Merse, 2015; Moore, 2020b; and, notably, Paiz, 2019; Paiz, 2020, 2021; and Seburn, 2021, in relation to the development of inclusive materials), there are also many emerging scholarly works in French (Knisely, 2016, 2020, 2021; Peters, 2020; Pilon, 2020), Italian

(Formato, 2019), German (Djavadghazaryans, 2020), and Japanese (Arimori, 2020). Nevertheless, much empirical and pedagogically grounded research remains to be conducted on the wide variety of Spanish language teaching contexts.

Indeed, scholarly work focused on theorisation of more inclusive and LGBTQIA+ affirmative teaching practices remains largely confined to the Anglosphere. Notably, nearly two decades ago, Nelson (2002, 2006) highlighted the need to make language teaching and learning environments friendlier toward learners who do not 'fit' within cannons prescribed by heteronormality. Nelson argued that Queer Theory (Warner, 1993) could provide a useful theoretical framework to explore the linguistic and cultural patterns through which sexual identities are expressed in the English language classroom. While Nelson's focus was on negotiating day-to-day sexual identities (e.g., gay, lesbian, heterosexual) in the ESL context, we find that the principles of Queer Theory and its applications in education afford us a suitable lens to further understand the use of grammatical gender in Spanish teaching. The key aim of Queer Theory – to facilitate restive inquiry, rather than simply accomplish inclusion – can help us discuss and address the limitations posed by the masculine/feminine grammatical (and social) gender binaries (see also, Moore, 2020a, for a loving critique around application of this theory in the context of ELT).

Overall, the studies and scholarly publications reviewed in this paper all point to the colonial legacy entrenched in gender binary distinctions and attitudes towards acts of linguistic resistance emerging from various speech communities. As language teachers and scholars, we acknowledge and seek to further understand the constant evolving nature of such linguistic innovations, whether it is the use of *-e* or neo-pronouns such as *elle* or any other grammatical form emerging from the grounds in everyday interaction. From a linguistic perspective, and as noted by Álvarez Mellado (2017), gender inclusive language is one of the most interesting linguistic transformations in recent times and it is worth not losing sight of it as its development continues to unfold. More importantly, from a social justice perspective, it presents an opportunity to reflect deeply on our own positioning and to engage in more nuanced conversations which may help develop strategies to support diversity and inclusion more generally in our societies and classrooms alike. Finally, from a pedagogical perspective, it is important to note that there are no toolkits or one-size-fits-all solutions that will guarantee removal of gender bias and gender binaries in our language classes. We propose instead that our collective efforts as a community of practice are focused on creating principled spaces for professional dialogues that acknowledge the evolving nature of these linguistic and sociocultural matters. In so doing, we must remain supportive of and compassionate towards ourselves and each other as we continue to learn about and clearly articulate, for ourselves and the field, context-responsive ways to problematise normativity in all its forms, and to listen, embrace and be respectful of all types of human diversity and difference in our classrooms and beyond.

Therefore, in addition to ensuring that we explicitly introduce available options for all of our students to be able to express their identities in the language of study (see, for example, Duarte et al., 2022), our learning objectives, resources and assessment practices should also reflect alignment with liberatory praxis of inclusion (see, Knisely, 2022b, for specific strategies applied in an intermediate French language course). It is also important to consider how to "proactively plan for and respond to resistance" (Knisely, 2022a). Indeed, resistance to such pedagogical practices can be experienced both inside and outside the classroom, in disciplinary and institutional contexts, but also, and perhaps most importantly, it can also be experienced by learners as they interact with members of the given language speaking community. Preparing students to navigate potential instances of resistance is thus imperative. As pointed out by Sherer (2020, p. 64, our emphases):

> In order to adequately prepare students to use inclusive language, [educators] must also *honestly* tell students that they are likely to face judgment if they use inclusive language outside

the classroom so that they can make informed decisions about *how* and *when* to incorporate it into their [languaging/communicative repertoires]. [Educators] must also give students the tools to explain *why* they choose to use inclusive language in Spanish.

Therefore, in addition to providing opportunities to discuss and research historical and sociocultural aspects of inclusive and non-binary language (Parra & Serafini, 2021), it is important to co-create principled classroom spaces where we actively *model* gender-neutral, direct and indirect non-binary languaging practices, both in our communication with students and our teaching resources. In these spaces, learners can be explicitly and implicitly equipped to agentively negotiate their – potentially fluid, context-sensitive – languaging choices to talk about themselves and others, and to be able to advocate for themselves and others in the process. This may entail integration of examples of non-binary languaging practices and discussion of strategies to avoid and negotiate misgendering in the language of study (Knisely, 2022a). These may be considered emerging pedagogical practices, and may look different across educational contexts, and even from one semester to the next. Future avenues of pedagogical inquiry focused on the student experience of such pedagogical practices would be invaluable.

To conclude, and following decolonial thinkers' theorisations around future possibilities (e.g., Stein, 2019), we conceive of such collective pedagogical efforts as *gestures* because gestures "have a special relationship to possibility as they invite participation in shared meaning making without demanding it or determining its form" (Amsler, 2019, p. 929). One of these gestures can be the intentional practice of empathy and compassion with ourselves and others. As we engage in exploration of perspectives that may be unfamiliar to us, we further develop and practice our *ethical response-ability* (Haraway, 2008) to learn from one another. Whatever we do, say, write or teach in our classes, we must do so while remaining open to understanding, un-/re-learning to see and listen to one another, as we want to be seen and heard and sitting with the discomfort that such processes may entail. Another gesture consists in formulating reflexive questions that may promote ongoing critical dialogue and engagement in the co-construction of future pedagogical possibilities, in a non-judgmental space:

- What would it entail to disinvest ourselves from heteronormative and binary grammatical gender conventions in the (Spanish) language classroom?
- What other kinds of in/exclusivities may be generated through a non-binary language lens?
- How can we respectfully and constructively challenge expectations of linguistic and societal gender norms in our classrooms?
- How can we hold space to actively engage in queering our classroom practices?
- What type of learning materials should we curate, craft and draw upon to explore the presence of our (multiple) selves in the classroom?
- How can we critically articulate and evaluate our positioning and response-able strategies to model respectful engagement with human diversity as a continuous process?

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NOTES

[1] In this paper, we use the term 'world languages' (WL) to refer to modern/foreign (imperial) languages (which, in some cases, may also be considered community or heritage languages). We acknowledge that this term is not ideologically neutral nor unproblematic and that its use is not without shortcomings and ambiguities; however, its (re)definition falls outside the scope of this paper.

[2] Abya Yala is the pre-colonial name given to the American continent by the Kuna-Tule people of present-day Panama and Colombia and can be translated as "land in its full maturity" or "land of vital blood". This term was reclaimed in the early 1990s by Indigenous movements in the Americas to refer to the 'American continent' in its entirety (North, Central and South), de-linked from the European lens (Porto-Goncalves, 2011).

[3] This practice of feminising ships is distinctly entrenched, dating back in English to as early as the 14th century, as documented in the Oxford English Dictionary. Historians and writers provide various reasons for the tradition of calling ships 'she' (Melion & Ramakers, 2016). For instance, a boat may have a mothership and sister ships. The vessel can be viewed as a motherly, womb-like figure.

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