

Macro, Micro, and Meso Approaches to Generalizing in Queer Linguistics: Investigating Non-Binary Pronouns in Dutch

Hielke Vriesendorp*

1 Introduction

As Jones (2021) points out, most work in the field of queer linguistics focuses on language variation and discourse in the context of case studies. In these case studies queer language use is investigated with the goal to uncover how norms around gender, sexuality, and language are negotiated and how queer identities are constructed through linguistic means (e.g. Baudinette 2017). This way these studies avoid presenting LGBTQ+ speakers as homogeneous groups who in essence share certain traits which surface in language use. For example, Barrett's (2017) work on gay men's language does not aim to find an overarching pattern in how all gay men speak, but rather presents case studies of how gay identities are constructed in different subcultures (e.g. leathermen, faeries, bears, barebackers) in order to be able to theorize how gay men may use language variation to index and construct non-heteronormative identities, each in different ways and each intersecting with other systems of social categorization such as race, class, and gender.

This tendency towards the use of highly contextualized case studies is for very good reason: providing highly contextualized, nuanced approaches to how minority genders and sexualities are constructed counters essentialized views of those genders and sexualities. This is important because such essentialized views seriously risk stereotyping, misrepresenting, and harming queer language users. This happens for example in Van Borsel et al. 2009, which compared Belgian gay men's productions of /s/ to those of their straight peers and argued that the higher incidence of dental fricatives in gay men's production corroborated the social stereotype that gay men 'lisp'. As Munson (2010: 1) argues, this pathologized gay men's speech, inviting scholars and laypeople to interpret gay men's speech as 'defective'.

Furthermore, claims about how one queer group's language differs from a non-queer group, may hide the plurality within that group: for example, (2017) found that within a group of transmasculine speakers in San Francisco who had been on testosterone for similar durations of time, pitch and production of /s/ varied considerably depending on a range of factors, including age, gender expression, gender identity, and dialect. Based on their data, a generalization like 'the center of gravity and pitch of transmasculine speakers lowers when those speakers start taking testosterone' would be statistically supported, but still erase the fact that some speakers did so much more strongly than others, and that many did in fact not aim for normative expression of their masculinities. A less complete analysis than Zimman's (2017) could also be read as evidence for a simplistic view of transness in which being truly transmasculine necessarily requires masculine gender expression. Such notions may block trans individuals from access to healthcare and legal recognition, especially in the context of the epistemic injustice that they face, not being treated as reliable sources of knowledge when it comes to their own experiences and lives (Wilson 2023).

The risk of presenting queer data in the aggregate raises the question if doing so is always more harmful than helpful. As Guyan (2022) points out, however, generalizations on the basis of queer data can also help mobilize action and pursue policy goals by temporarily, 'strategically essentializing' (Spivak 1988) queer groups or identities. For example, presenting gay men and lesbians as essentially the same as straight people, including the desire to marry and live otherwise heteronormative lives, has been successful in many places to pursue the policy goal of marriage equality. At the same time, this carries risks by erasing differences within marginalized groups, especially those perspectives within the groups which are further marginalized (for example LGBTQ+ individuals who are in different relationship systems).

The current paper explores one way in which generalizing about queer data may in fact combat queer marginalization, as well as how risks connected to such generalizations may be mitigated. It presents data on what non-binary third person pronoun usage among speakers of Dutch who are

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oriented towards trans inclusion (N=656) and suitability judgements by non-binary individuals (N=171), showing that language users are converging around two dominant pronominal systems (*die/diens* and *hen/hun*) in production, and that both are evaluated very positively by non-binary participants. This analysis may support non-binary individuals as it counters the idea that there are no well-established non-binary pronouns in Dutch yet. Thus, the analysis may be a tool to help language users who are less familiar with non-binary identities misgender fewer people or be an argument to support language policy changes towards non-binary inclusion.

At the same time, two strategies in the analysis are presented to mitigate the risk of essentialization and the erasure of marginalized perspectives within the queer data presented. First, the larger dataset was investigated not just for larger patterns, but also at a more zoomed-in micro level, to reveal exceptions to those patterns and present the full(er) scope of pronouns produced and evaluation of those pronouns within the participants, that may otherwise be erased.

Second, the larger sociolinguistic analysis of demographic factors influencing variation in pronoun usage included not just static macrosociological categories such as gender and age, but also 'meso' categories: demographic variables which were more general than locally constructed identity labels, but less static than macrosociological identity labels (e.g. time spent in different queer and non-queer social circles). This allowed the analysis to connect socio-demographic patterns to speakers' interactional goals and contexts, rather than fixed essentialized identities.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Macro and Micro Approaches to Sociolinguistics and Queer Speech

The queer linguistic focus on case studies and micro analysis fits within an established shift of focus within sociolinguistic research, as outlined by Eckert (2012) from how large, fixed social categories influence language variation and change (e.g. Labov 1966) to how language users agentively use linguistic variation to position themselves in the social landscape, especially at the level of local communities (e.g. Moore 2011) or interactional contexts (e.g. Podesva 2007). The former, 'first wave' of variationist studies explored how macrosociological categories such as class, gender, and race influenced language variation and change (e.g. Wolfram 1969, Trudgill 1972, Macaulay 1977). As Eckert (2012: 90) notes, the static treatment of these predetermined social categories served the aim of uncovering, replicable, generalizable patterns across different speakers and communities. This way, the macro studies were able to induce patterns that could be generalized to speakers and communities beyond those investigated. For example, it was found that women's speech tends to be more standard (Wolfram 1969, Trudgill 1972, Macaulay 1977), and later further refine these findings to specify that working class women in fact tend to use more non-standard forms (Labov 2001) and that women may use standard and non-standard language to a larger degree to index social differences and may rely on social capital more than men due to patriarchal pressures (Eckert 1989a).

Following the first wave of variationist studies, the second and third wave that Eckert (2012) outlines, shift their focus to the local dynamics of language variation and the way macrosocial categories become relevant within local settings. Famously, in the 'second wave' Milroy (1980) for example found that the way speakers' social networks looked shaped their use of standard and non-standard variants. Crucially, the study showed that the macro category of gender depended on local context in terms of how it influenced language use. Women in Belfast who had denser and more multiplex social networks (as men prototypically did) used more non-standard variants with covert prestige, due to a larger degree of enforcement of local linguistic norms, whilst women who had more prototypically larger, looser social networks, with consequently less enforcement of local norms, exhibited more standard usage. Although the study was ethnographic in nature, the concept of density and multiplexity of social networks was one that could be applied more generally - shifting focus away somewhat from static categories to how social factors influence interaction - and were applied in this way more broadly in other studies as well (e.g. Eckert 1989b, Bergs 2005).

In the third wave, sociolinguistic research remained focused on local communities, but a new theoretical contribution was made by demonstrating how speakers' language use does not just reflect certain social categorizations or systems, but is also agentively used by speakers to position themselves in the social landscape. For example, Podesva (2007) demonstrates this for a single gay male speaker who uses falsetto phonation to construct different personas in different contexts to establish

different identities in those settings, for example to construct a 'diva' persona. Here, an individual speakers' agency, specific situational contexts, and flexible construction of identity through linguistic variation becomes central, which shifts the variationist's focus away even further from the static generalizable approach to social categories typical for the first wave.

As Calder (2020) argues, work on LGBTQ+ speakers starts to significantly expand in the 1990s, in tandem with the third wave of variationist studies. Whilst some earlier work exists prior to this (especially on mapping queer lexicons, e.g. Legman 1941), a range of variationist studies were carried out which investigated how queer speakers position themselves in the social landscape by means of linguistic variation, within their own local context. For example, Calder (2019) reports on how in a community of drag queens in San Francisco production of /s/ in connection to visual presentation is used to construct a 'fierce femininity' (but see also for example Levon 2009, Podesva 2011, Vriesendorp & Rutten 2017, Zimman 2017, Cuddy 2019, Fine 2019, Jones 2022).¹

When work on queer speakers has made attempts at larger generalizations, beyond identity construction in context, this has generally been done through work on the perception of queer speech, rather than production. Here, evidence has been found for what general populations hear as gay speech (e.g. Gaudio 1994, Zimman 2013, Cuddy 2019). Whilst it may be relevant to queer speaker's treatment in society to know what these perceptions entail, the relative lack of generalizable findings on the actual production of the relevant variables by queer speakers themselves may mean that non-queer perceptions and stereotypes are disproportionately highlighted in discussions on queer language, potentially essentializing and misrepresenting queer language use.

A small number of studies do more explicitly present a macro approach with generalizable aggregate data. Becker et al. (2022) find that in a gender-diverse corpus of speakers, including cis-gender, transgender and non-binary individuals, gender is not a significant predictor of the use of creaky voice (unless this happens in interaction with style). This deviated from established literature on gender differences based only on men and women. They argue that these findings show that it is possible to include of speakers beyond (cis) men and women in aggregate data on gender and that it is able to offer new insights - whilst simultaneously resisting binaristic views that may harm queer individuals. Similarly, Pierrehumbert et al. (2004) aim to use aggregate data on vowel realizations between LGB and straight speakers to argue against bio-essentialist notions of gender and sexuality (although this study is still highly focused on contrasting straight and non-straight speakers).

Mirroring this, sociolinguistic work on linguistic innovations to adapt gendered languages to be more inclusive of non-binary individuals (e.g. Knisely 2020, Gustafsson Sendén et al. 2021, Conrod 2022) may be able to be used in order to combat the marginalization of queer individuals rather than harm them further. The data presented in these studies maybe be used to provide novel language users with practical starting points for more inclusive language, or as scientific backing for more inclusive language policy.

2.2 Non-Binary Pronouns in Dutch

The current paper discusses variation in the use of non-binary pronouns in Dutch, as well as non-binary individuals' evaluation of those pronouns when used in reference to themselves. Dutch, like English, uses gendered third-person singular pronouns (*hij* and *zij*, 'he' and 'she'), but unlike English it has not historically had a well-established gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun for generic reference (singular *they* in English). Where in English the recontextualization of the originally generic form as a specific form has become very common to refer to non-binary referents (Conrod 2022), Dutch innovations are less clearly established and exhibit more variation. For example, in an online 'election for the Dutch non-binary pronoun' organised by *Transgender Netwerk Nederland* ('Transgender Network Netherlands') voters were roughly split between the pronominal systems *die/diens* and *hen/hun*.²

¹ Alongside more variationist work on queer language use, a large share of queer linguistics work focuses on discursive analysis of how normativities around gender and sexuality are negotiated (see Motschenbacher 2011). Whilst connected to queer variationist work, these studies are beyond the scope of the current paper.

² Personal communication with Sophie Schers, *Transgender Netwerk Nederland*.

Both these pronominal systems exist outside of non-binary contexts too and have been recontextualized to be used to refer to non-binary referents. The form *die* is a demonstrative pronoun, which is also in use as third person singular pronoun for recently introduced referents (Haeseryn et al. 1997). As such it can be used both for male and female referents, which may have been the origin of its use as a non-binary pronoun. Still, it does not occur as such after prepositions and is restricted to contexts in which the referent has been introduced very recently. *Diens* is its (somewhat archaic) possessive counterpart. *Hen* is the mostly written, relatively formal object form of *zij* ('they'), with *hun* as its possessive counterpart. The form *hun* also occurs as an object and as a subject form, although in most cases this use is non-standard and strongly proscribed (cf. De Hoop 2020). Its non-binary meaning may have been borrowed from Swedish or as a calque from English singular *they*. The Dutch plural subject forms *zij* and *ze* have not generally been considered as potential non-binary pronouns as they overlap with the feminine third person singular pronouns.

Recent work has tested the way the gender-neutral use of these pronouns are judged by Dutch speakers in Flanders (Decock et al. 2023), showing that using combinations of *die*, *hen* and *hun* does not cause comprehensibility problems for the general population. However, the use of these pronouns was deemed more awkward than the use of binary pronouns or name repetition. This awkwardness seems to stem from the innovative use *die* and *hen* conflicting with their existing grammatical constraints: in the study *die* was used with referents that were less recently introduced, and *hen* in contexts referring to a single referent. Furthermore, in one of the conditions of the experiment, *hen* was used as a subject. As Decock et al. (2023) report, the latter seems to have been particularly marked to participants, who were able to recall this referential strategy much better than other strategies. The use of *die* seemed less marked: participants who read texts with *die* as a subject, but *hen* as an object often thought they had read a text in *hen* had been used both in subject and in object position. This suggests that overall non-binary *hen* is much more salient than non-binary *die*.

Beyond this perceptual work and the more informal data from *Transgender Netwerk Nederland*, little is known about which pronouns language users produce to refer to non-binary referents. The current paper presents data from a cloze task taken by a sample of language users oriented towards trans inclusion. Whilst elsewhere I report the overall patterns in these data from a more grammatical Dutch linguistic perspective (Vriesendorp accepted), the current paper presents a variationist queer linguistic analysis, including the influence of social factors on variation between the dominant forms.

3 Methods

3.1 Design

The current study (approved by Utrecht University's Faculty Ethics Assessment Committee; ref. 23-020-02) was carried out as an online questionnaire through Qualtrics and was filled out by 702 participants. As the target audience of the study was language users who intend to appropriately gender non-binary individuals, 46 participants who indicated they found using inclusive language to refer to non-binary individuals unimportant were excluded from the analysis, as they were not deemed to be particularly relevant to the development of the novel forms. The questionnaire was distributed through convenience sampling, especially through social media, LGBTQ+ networks and groups and a small number of LGBTQ+ events, mainly initiated by the researcher (30 y/o Dutch white genderqueer man based in Amsterdam). The sample was relatively young ($M_{\text{age}} = 28$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10$) white (95%) and predominantly university educated or currently in university (89%). Most participants were LGBTQ+, with only 24% of participants reporting being both straight and cisgender.

The first element of the survey consisted of a 'fill in the blanks' cloze task embedded in a short relatively colloquially written story about the non-binary British singer Sam Smith, who uses *they/them* in English, but has not commented on what pronouns they use in Dutch (this was made explicit in the questionnaire). Participants' responses were recorded with an open textbox.

The second element of the survey dealt with participants' own pronouns. For this, participants were asked to fill out in an open textbox what pronouns they used themselves (briefly, as they would in a round of introductions). To test the suitability of the dominant pronouns in production for non-binary individuals themselves, participants were then asked to evaluate on a 7-point Likert scale how they would feel if someone referred to them using a range of pronouns including *die*, *diens*, *hen* and *hun*, as well as the binary pronouns *hij* and *zij*.

The final element of the survey consisted of a range of macrosocial demographic questions (region, rurality, gender, trans status, age, sexuality, university education, migration background, and ethnicity/race). In addition to this, a number of questions was asked to investigate social factors beyond more static identity labels. Most importantly, participants were asked what social circles participants moved in, by indicating on a scale from 0% to 100% how much of their social time they spent in circles with (1) mainly cisgender heterosexual people (2) women who love women (3) men who love men (4) transgender, non-binary and genderqueer people (5) a mix of queer and non-queer people (6) a mix of queer people. They were also asked to assess their political alignment on a 7-point conservative-progressive scale and a 7-point left-wing-right-wing scale, and whether they were familiar with Sam Smith, the non-binary referent in the cloze task.

3.2 Data Analysis

For the macro analysis of what non-binary pronouns were produced in the cloze task, all textbox answers were automatically standardized by removing any spaces and rendering all entries lowercase and their frequencies calculated. The macro analysis of what pronouns non-binary participants found appropriate for themselves all participants who had ticked 'non-binary' in the gender question were selected (N=171) and the frequency of their Likert-scale evaluations were calculated, split by their textbox answers to what pronouns they used themselves. Those were manually coded into four categories, depending on what pronouns were explicitly mentioned in the textboxes: (1) only *die* and/or *diens* (2) only *hen* and/or *hun* (3) both *die* and/or *diens* and *hen* and or *hun* (4) none of these four were mentioned. Participants' Likert scale evaluations of the pronouns *die*, *diens*, *hen*, *hun*, *hij* and *zij* were analyzed through data visualization based on the 4 coded textbox answer types.

The risk of essentializing inherent in the use of aggregate data was mitigated by means of two analytical strategies. First, the macro analysis was expanded to include not just the dominant patterns that were found, but also at a more detailed, micro level the full range of referential strategies that were used in production, and the full range of non-binary participants' evaluations of the tested pronouns, beyond the data points that were in line with dominant patterns in the data. Second, the analysis of what social factors predicted variation between the most dominant pronouns included not just macro variables but also 'meso' variables that were generalizable, but more closely connected to how speakers might use non-binary pronouns in interaction in their own lives.

For the analysis of the demographic predictors two logistic regression models were fitted with only tokens of the most commonly used pronominal systems found in production as the binary outcome variable (*hen* and *hun* were coded as 1, *die* and *diens* were coded as 0). The first model included the data points in all subject and object conditions (where *hen* and *die* were dominant), and the second model included the data points in the possessive condition (where *hun* and *diens* were dominant - both with potentially different levels of salience to their respective counterparts). Using the `buildmer()` function (Voeten, 2019), a best fit model was automatically selected for each model with all demographic factors included as well as each demographic factor in interaction with the grammatical function of the cloze task gap. No random effects were fitted as participants only inputted one data point per grammatical condition.

4 Results

4.1 Production

The most common pronominal reference strategies used by the participants in this study were *die* and *hen* and their grammatical variants *diens* and *hun*. As can be seen in Figure 1, these strategies combined made up 76% of the responses as a subject in a main clause, 83% as a subject in a subordinate clause, 85% as a direct object, 82% as an indirect object after a preposition, and 82% as a possessive. Beyond these forms the rarer strategies of name repetition (5% of the data) and the masculine pronouns *hij/hem/zijn* (3%) were most common. A smaller number of participants used subject plural forms (as a calque from English singular *they*; 1%), some used *het* ('it'; 0.2%) and some used neologisms (0.1%). The given neologisms were *dij*, *z'r*, and *xij*.

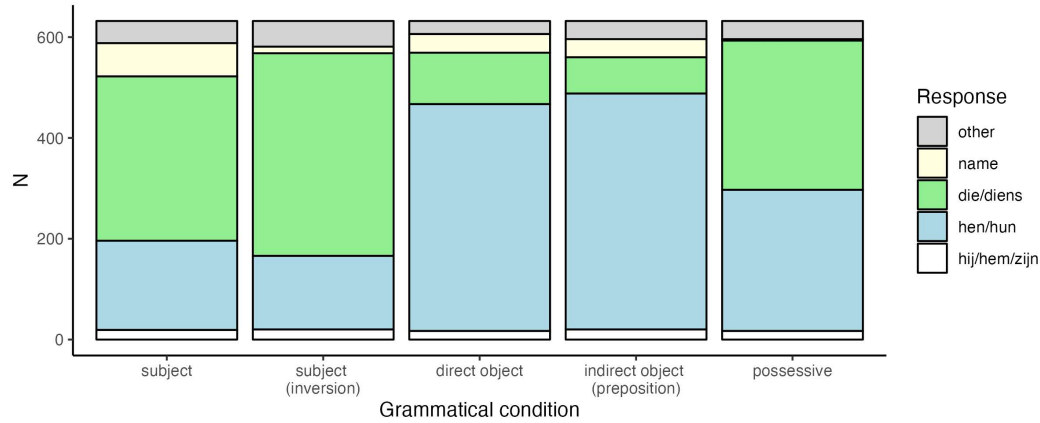


Figure 1. Production of non-binary pronouns per grammatical condition.

The logistic regression models that were fitted to predict which social factors influenced variation between *die* and *hen* are reported below. Table 1 shows the predictors for the subject and object conditions. Independent variables which predicted usage of *hen* over *die* were spending time in predominantly straight cisgender social circles, using the label *queer* or the label *hetero* ('straight') in response to a question about sexuality, as well as being familiar with Sam Smith. Predictors which predicted *die* over *hen* were using the label *homo* ('gay man') and being cisgender or neither cisgender nor transgender. There was a significant interaction between grammatical condition and age, where younger participants changed their pronominal choice more on the basis of grammatical condition (i.e. *die* in subject position and *hen* in object condition) than older participants.

	Estimate	SE	z-value	p-value
(Intercept)	2.28	1.58	1.44	0.149
Grammatical condition = subject (inv.)	-7.89	1.95	-4.05	< 0.001
Grammatical condition = subject	-7.18	1.93	-3.72	< 0.001
Grammatical condition = direct object	0.393	2.03	0.194	0.846
Estimated time spent in straight cis circles (%)	0.009	0.002	4.30	< 0.001
Sexuality "Homo" = yes	-0.552	0.211	-2.62	0.009
Sexuality "Queer" = yes	0.380	0.125	3.03	0.002
Age (log)	-0.311	0.477	-0.652	0.514
Familiar with Sam Smith = yes	0.374	0.147	2.54	0.011
Trans status "Cisgender" = yes	-0.423	0.135	-3.13	0.002
Sexuality "Hetero" = yes	0.381	0.152	2.51	0.012
Trans status "Neither" = yes	-0.422	0.196	-2.15	0.031
Grammatical condition = subject (inv.) * age (log)	1.49	0.590	2.52	0.012
Grammatical condition = subject * age (log)	1.41	0.585	2.41	0.016
Grammatical condition = direct object * age (log)	-0.241	0.615	-0.391	0.696

Table 1. Best-fit logistic regression model of pronominal choice between *hen/hun* (=1) and *die/diens* (=0) in the subject and object conditions.

At first glance, the significant predictors in both models may appear to contradict themselves: seemingly opposed sexuality labels *straight* and *queer* both the usage of *hen* over *die*, for example, whilst being cisgender predicts the opposite. However, the meso measures included in the model allow for a first starting point towards connecting the findings to how they may play out in interaction. The effect of time spent in predominantly straight cisgender social circles predicting *hen* usage, suggests that less experienced users are more likely to use *hen*, as they spend less time in circles where they might encounter non-binary individuals to refer to. To them, the relatively salient form *hen* (see Section 2.2; Decock et al. 2023) may be in line with the fact that non-binary identities and

non-binary pronouns are simply more novel and more salient to them. The same may have been the case for the straight participants. At the same time, the other demographic factors predicting *hen* over *die* may also be connected to the salience of *hen*. Participants who were familiar with Sam Smith may have been more invested in actively indicating their awareness of Smith's non-binary identity. Similarly, participants describing their own sexuality as *queer* may have been more likely to have partners that use non-binary pronouns and therefore have more experience or be more invested in actively signaling to non-queer interlocutors that a person is non-binary.

Conversely, participants who spent less time in predominantly straight cisgender social circles used more *die*. These participants likely have more experience talking about non-binary individuals with other queer interlocutors and may be used to more casual usage of non-binary pronouns and therefore choose the less salient form *die*. The other macrosocial categories which predicted *die* were also identities which may be relatively likely to be familiar with non-binary identities but less personally invested in actively signaling a person's non-binary gender. These were gay men, cisgender participants (who were generally still LGBQ+) and participants who were neither cisgender nor transgender (suggesting a relative ambivalence towards transness and cisness).

Table 2 shows the predictors for the use of the possessive conditions, where only the predictor of trans status was significant. As for the subject and object conditions, participants who were cis and participants who were neither cis nor trans were less likely to use *hen* and more likely to use *die*. This suggests that similar dynamics may be at play for the possessive forms.

	Estimate	SE	z-value	p-value
(Intercept)	0.482	0.176	2.74	0.003
Trans status "Cisgender" = yes	-0.692	0.202	-3.42	< 0.001
Trans status "Neither" = yes	-0.608	0.310	-1.96	0.025

Table 2. Best-fit logistic regression model of pronominal choice between *hun* (=1) and *diens* (=0) in the possessive condition.

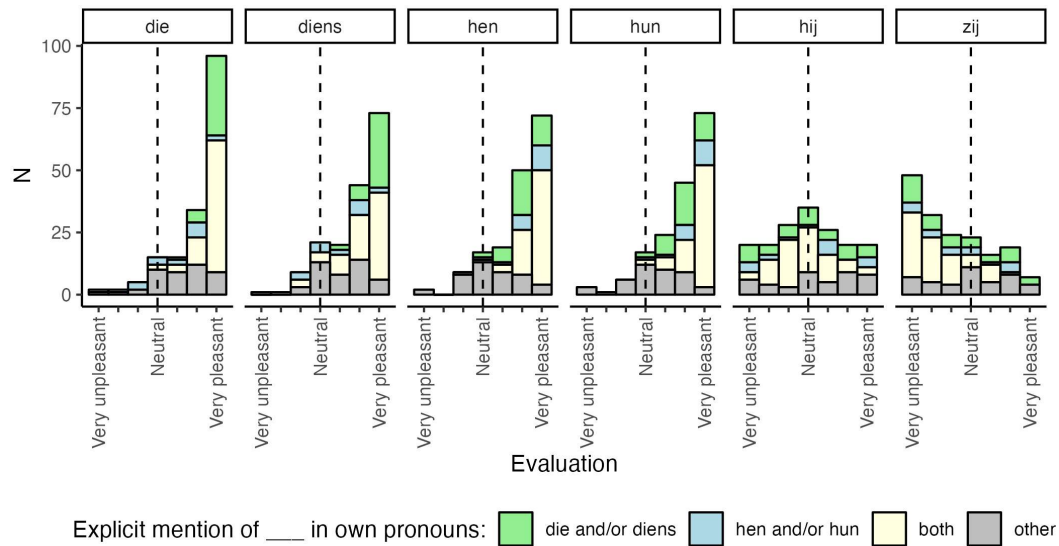


Figure 2. Likert scale ratings to the question ‘How would you feel if someone referred to you using ___?’ for *die*, *diens*, *hen*, *hun*, *hij* and *zij* by participants’ mention of own pronouns.

4.2 Evaluation by Non-Binary Participants

A plurality of 41% of non-binary participants indicated both a form of *die* and a form of *hen* in their brief text-box description of their own pronouns, where 22% indicated only forms of *die* and 11% only indicated forms of *hen*. 26% of participants did not explicitly mention either of the pronouns,

sometimes because they only indicated binary pronouns (15% of all non-binary participants) and sometimes because they indicated they used any pronouns (5%), only mentioned English pronouns (2%), alternated between binary pronouns (2%), or indicated they did not use any pronouns (1%).

When asked about how they would evaluate each of the pronouns *die*, *diens*, *hen*, and *hun*, large majorities of participants gave positive ratings, especially compared to the binary pronouns *hij* and *zij*, as can be seen in Figure 2. The smaller number of participants who negatively rated the options either did so because they preferred the other dominant non-binary pronouns or because they used binary pronouns. In two cases those participants did use English *they*, but neither of the Dutch pronominal options.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This paper presented data on the production and evaluation of non-binary pronouns in Dutch. At a macro level, it was found that the pronominal systems *die/diens* and *hen/hun* were largely dominant in production. Furthermore, a majority of the non-binary participants of the study mentioned at least one of these forms as their own pronouns, and an even larger majority positively evaluated those forms being used to refer to them themselves, especially in comparison to the use of binary pronouns. At a meso level, it was found in the production task that the pronouns *die* and *diens* were more likely to be used by participants who were part of social categories which made them more likely to be experienced, casual users of non-binary pronouns, and that *hen* and *hun* by those who were less experienced users or those who were more motivated to want to stress the referent's non-binary gender identity. At the micro level, it was found that alongside the dominant use of *die/diens/hen/hun*, other referential strategies were also used in the production task, including neologisms, name repetition, and the use of plural forms. In addition to this many, non-binary participants themselves did not mention any of the forms *die*, *diens*, *hen* or *hun* as their standard pronouns, and some did not evaluate those forms positively in reference to themselves.

The paper takes a three-pronged approach to analyzing data on queer speakers and queer language:

- (1) At a macro level, it reports on aggregate patterns in a way that may be used to reduce harm to queer individuals.
- (2) At a micro level, it presents a fuller range of individual or less frequent perspectives beyond the dominant patterns reported in the macro analysis.
- (3) At a meso level, it analysed sociolinguistic variation by means of categories that shift the focus from static identity labels to how social factors influence language use in interaction.

The macro analysis adds to an increasing body of research on linguistic innovations to include people of minority genders in languages where traditionally pronouns or other linguistic forms are gendered in a binary way. As such, the presented data may be used as an argument or a tool to help fewer non-binary individuals be misgendered. This is corroborated by the perceptual data presented, which showed that non-binary individuals evaluated the forms *die/diens* and *hen/hun* much more positively than the binary pronouns *hij* and *zij* (in reference to themselves).

Such a macro analysis cannot be replaced with highly contextualized case studies. In fact, a reliance on case studies alone may be more harmful than the use of aggregate data, when the uniqueness of each datapoint is stressed to an excessive degree. For example, in recent academic conference on language and gender, angled towards equality and inclusion, where it was argued by a number of panel discussants that it was still unrealistic to advocate for the use of non-binary pronouns in German, as there were too many unique options available ('from A to Z'). In such cases, conducting only studies with no generalizability might contribute the notion that using queer-inclusive language is too complex and nuanced for anyone who is not a highly skilled ethnographer to meaningfully engage with. This is of course highly undesirable when queer-inclusive language innovations have the potential to combat queer marginalization at a much larger scale.

By presenting data in the aggregate the current paper engaged in 'strategic essentializing': it foregrounded the top-line numbers on what pronominal forms are most often used to refer to non-binary referents, for a 'strategic' purpose (presenting findings which may reduce how often non-

binary people are misgendered). At the same time, this essentialization risks erasing other queer data and perspectives. For example, the dominance of the use of *die/diens* and *hen/hun* and their general acceptability to non-binary participants could be taken as evidence that these are the exclusive or correct way to refer to non-binary individuals. This would misrepresent or even erase non-binary individuals who do use different pronouns, or who evaluate these pronouns negatively. It could also contribute to the notion that being non-binary necessarily requires the use of gender-neutral pronouns (untrue for at least 26% of non-binary participants). Similarly, sociolinguistic generalizations of how certain social groups use *die* or *hen* more than others, could contribute to essentialist notions of those social groups.

To mitigate these risks, the paper used two de-essentializing strategies. First, it reported not only the dominant patterns in the aggregate data, but also a full range of other datapoints in both the production and evaluation of non-binary pronouns in Dutch. This stressed that the flexible use of *die/diens* and *hen/hun* can be seen as a relatively reliable 'go to' option to refer to non-binary individuals when no further information is available, rather than the exclusive way to refer to non-binary individuals. Second, by using 'meso'-level social factors in the analysis of what social factors influenced variation in non-binary pronouns usage, it was possible to analyze those factors as linked to how they may become relevant in interaction, rather than to present the use of certain variants as automatic or inherent to an essentialized social group.

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Institute of Language Sciences
 Utrecht University
 Utrecht, Netherlands
 h.a.d.vriesendorp@uu.nl