THE USE OF GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE: A MATTER OF INCLUSION OR A POLITICAL BIAS?[1]

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ABSTRACT: This article main purpose is to present a reflection that aims at elucidating two perspectives concerning the use of the gender-neutral pronoun in the English language. The first angle seeks to address the positions of some authors who oppose the adaptation and use of gender-neutral language in the context of non-binary individuals, as well as to discuss how this adaptation could impact the prescriptive norms of the English language. While the second perspective aims at clarifying the position of authors and activists opposed to sexist language, taking into account the replacement of pronouns such as "he" and "she" with "they". The methodology consists of reviewing the literature about gender theories and the use of gender-neutral pronouns. The research approach is mainly bibliographic and critical, the main aspect of this type or research is to raise awareness on the topic studied. The research was made through articles, documents, videos and, interviews about the topic. In order to achieve the goal proposed, the article is based on theoretical contributions from authors such as Butler (1990); Helgeson (2017); Pasqualini (2021); Köcher (2021); Murray (2019), among others. After the literature review and reflection, it was possible to realize that some proponents argued that language should not be used as an instrument of discrimination, and therefore defend the appropriateness of pronouns for individuals who identify with a fluid or non-binary gender.

Key words: Gender-neutral language, Political issues, Inclusion. LGBT+ Community

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RESUMO: Este artigo tem como principal objetivo apresentar uma reflexão que visa elucidar duas perspectivas relativas ao uso do pronome neutro de gênero na língua inglesa. A primeira perspectiva procura abordar as posições de alguns autores que se opõem à adaptação e utilização do pronome neutro de género no contexto de indivíduos não-binários, bem como discutir de que forma esta adaptação poderá ter impacto nas normas prescritivas da língua inglesa. Enquanto a segunda perspectiva visa esclarecer a posição de autores e ativistas que se opõem à linguagem sexista, como por exemplo, no que diz respeito à substituição de pronomes como "he" e "she" por "they". A metodologia consiste na revisão da literatura sobre as teorias de gênero e a utilização de pronomes neutros em termos de gênero. A abordagem da investigação é essencialmente bibliográfica e estratégica, sendo que o principal aspecto deste tipo de investigação é a sensibilização para o tema estudado. A pesquisa foi realizada através de artigos, documentos e entrevistas sobre o tema. Para atingir o objetivo proposto, o artigo baseia-se em contribuições teóricas de autores como Butler (1990); Helgeson (2017); Pasqualini (2021); Köcher (2021); Murray (2019), entre outros. Após a revisão da literatura e reflexão, foi possível perceber que alguns proponentes defendem que a linguagem não deve ser usada como instrumento de discriminação, e por isso defendem a adequação dos pronomes para indivíduos que se identificam com um género fluido ou não binário.

Palavras-Chaves: Língua/Linguagem neutras, Questão política, Inclusão. Comunidade LGBT+

1 INICIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Gender equality has been a trendy social issue for a long time. Research on how to achieve gender equality has a long tradition but still remains to be solved. And that may be helpful to study it from a linguistic perspective. In recent decades, many linguist studies on this topic prove that there is a relationship between linguistic gender and social gender. However, is there a way out to language equality? Is it a cultural matter? Is it political? Or is it all together?

The use of gender-neutral language has emerged as a complicated issue in contemporary discourse and language teaching and learning, sparking debates regarding its implications for inclusivity and potential political biases. As language plays a crucial role in shaping societal norms and perceptions, the adoption of gender-neutral terminology has been advocated as a means to promote inclusivity and respect for diverse gender identities. However, critics argue that the push for gender-neutral language may be driven by political agendas rather than genuine efforts towards inclusivity. This paper inquiries into the complexities surrounding the use of gender-neutral language, exploring whether it is primarily a matter of fostering inclusivity or if it is influenced by underlying

political biases. By examining the various perspectives and implications of employing gender-neutral language, this study aims at contributing to a distinction understanding of this evolving linguistic phenomenon.

The topic of gender can be a source of confusion for many individuals due to the nuanced nature of its discourse. The term “gender” can be perceived as more abstract, characterized by fluid conceptualizations. In terms of defining gender, it is a term constrained by social constructs that are employed to classify an individual as either female or male within society. Conversely, according to Helgeson (2017), the definition of the term “sex” pertains to biological subcategories determining male and female sexes.

Throughout the course of societal evolution and technological advancements, society endeavors to adapt to the era in which it is situated. According to Mattoso Câmara (1955), language is a product of culture, as the author contends.

> Language is a part of culture, but a part that stands out from the whole and is dialectically intertwined with it. This condition already makes it possible, or even conducive, to study language separately, as a self-sufficient entity; and the linguist distinguishes himself from the anthropologist. (MATTOSO CÂMARA, 1955, p.268).

The citation above emphasizes the dual nature of language as both an integral component of culture and a distinct entity within it. While language is deeply embedded in cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions, it also possesses its own unique characteristics and dynamics that set apart from other aspects of culture. That said, it is inevitable not to think about the changes in societal aspects of cultures and how it affects language.

Thus, there is a discernible need for an examination of the use of gender-neutral pronouns in language as a means of fostering social inclusion.

Binarity, male and female, is a gesture of power in society, and these two roles are a cultural construction, and these two binaries limit the possibilities of expression and identity of sexuality. Butler (1990) proposes that “gender is not something we are, but what we do”, therefore, gender identity is performative, that is, it is a construction of acts repeated and constructed over time, and there is no essence or nature of femininity or masculinity prior to the performance.

Butler (1990), in her work *Gender Trouble*, criticizes the normativity of gender, and introduces the concept of performativity, mentioned above. This concept is related to the fact that gender

> Is not a fixed essence, but rather a series of repeated actions that reproduce the appearance of an identity”. Gender identities are performed through behaviors and gestures that follow the norms already pre-existing in society. (BUTLER, 1990, p.17)

Despite the existing binary categories – male and female – are limiting and exclusionary towards those who do not fit into them, this division does not reflect the complexity of human existence and experience.

Taking into consideration Butler's reference to the queer theory, which challenges social norms and has a profound impact on gender and sexuality in society, it is imperative to reflect upon how this idea seek to destabilize existing traditional power structures and promote the inclusion of diversity.

As the main goal of this study is to reflect upon two issues, firstly, is the use of gender-neutral language a matter of inclusion? And second is the use gender-neutral language a political bias? The answer to both questions is important to raise reflection on teachers of English as additional language in order to make learners' aware of such issues, and demand a critical understanding that language is an important component of culture and, therefore should follow its dynamics and changes.

This work is organized in five sections. First, I intend to present the use and historical context and emergence of the neutral pronoun in the English language; define what a pronoun is, as well as the gender-neutral pronoun and its conceptions in society; look at and describe some of the implications of its use in the language and its impact on society and show how countries such as Spain and Brazil deal with the issue. In addition, I will look at the views of authors, journalists and intellectuals who have differing opinions on the use of the term in the language.

Finally, I will state my own personal opinion on how this important issue might be addressed in an English classroom and how crucial it is this discussion in order to promote inclusivity.

2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

The earliest recorded use of 'they' as a gender-neutral pronoun was in the 14th century in a French poem called "William and the werewolf[4]", in addition, several prolific literary authors have used 'they' to describe someone, like in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" on page 25 […]*And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame* […] and […] *They wol come up* […], and Shakespeare's "Hamlet on page 25, act 1, […] *They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase Soil our addition and indeed it takes* […]. Jane Austin also used the pronoun 'they' and 'them' in her classic novel "Pride and Prejudice", in chapter 5, page 11[…] *They had several children. The eldest of them, a sensible,*

[4] "William and the werewolf", the poem was translated into middle English by a poet only known as William, sometime between 1350 and 1360. https://reflection.eleusinianm.co.uk/medieval-literature/scot-manuscript-ragnelle/william-and-the-werewolf (Accessed in 05/21/24 at 13:37)

intelligent young woman, about twenty-seven, was Elizabeth's intimate friend […], in this casa the pronoun 'they' specify a role undertaken by someone.

As a matter of fact, gender fluidity has been around since 5000 B.C., according to some historians. During the 1880's psychologists had stated in studies through medical views, without considering LGBTQIAP+ people, in 1910 German doctor and sexologist Magnus Hirshfield, had stated the term "transvestite", even though these studies did not condemn trans people, in input gender variety in a medical condition, it laid the groundwork for trans identity be considered a mental disorder. However, in 1980, the U.S. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), considered and published transsexualism as a mental disorder.

Pronouns are common in many languages. Some languages have gendered pronouns, while others have genderless pronouns. These labels are not just random labels, because they are identities that help you learn and understand the gender and sexual orientation of the person.

Gender-neutral pronouns like 'they' and 'them' are pronouns that don't specify the gender of the person. These identifiers express inclusivity and diversity; they also validate the experiences and identity of the person. Therefore, gender-neutral pronouns are actually very personal and somehow powerful.

Gender is present in many languages. In fact, linguists even classify languages into three categories based on how they use gender: grammatical gender, natural gender, and genderless languages.

Grammatical gender languages, also known as gendered languages, are ones in which nouns are designated to be either the female or male gender, with few neutral exceptions (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). The nouns can even vary between genders when they are referred to by people to reflect the person in question's gender.

In grammatical gender languages, for example, every noun has a grammatical gender (masculine and feminine) and the adjectives accompanying the words match the recognized gender. In Spanish language, for instance, *la luna es bonita*, "*la luna*" is feminine, and "*bonita*", which is an adjective, must also be feminine. In French, *le soleil est chaud*, "*le solei*" is masculine, and "*chaud*", which is an adjective, must be in its masculine form.

Natural gender languages, on the other hand, do not represent their grammar by a person's gender and most of the nouns, with some exceptions, are considered genderless (Gygax et al., 2019). Instead, gender is characterized through the language's pronouns (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). These personal pronouns determine whether the noun refers to someone whose gender identity or sex is female or male. English, for example, is a natural gender language, which means that the gender of

the actual individual is referred to ‘she/her’ and ‘he/him’ but none of the other nouns are categorized for gender.

Yet, there are particular English nouns that are related to natural gender, determined by specific suffixes. English has a small group of nouns with feminine derivational suffixes: {-e} as fiancé/ fiancée; {-enne}as comedian/comedienne; {-ess} as patron/patroness; {-etta} as Henry/Herietta, {-ette } as usher/usherette; {-euse} as masseur/masseuse; {-ina} as George/Georgina; {-ine} as hero/heroine; {-stress} as spinner/spinster and {-ix} as aviator/aviatrix. All but one of these femininizing suffixes {-ster} as in seamster/seamstress are foreign origin. These suffixes have been added to masculine forms or to a base morpheme. In addition, English also has about fifty pair of words with separate forms for the masculine and feminine, such as bull/cow; uncle/aunt; gander/goose; nephew/niece. (Stageberg and Oaks, 2000, p.104-105)

In genderless languages, such as Finnish, Estonian, and Hungarian, pronouns do not have a classified gender. Those languages do not generally need a particular strategy to be gender-inclusive, except for some very specific cases present in particular guidelines for those languages. As in most of Uralic languages, in Finnish, pronouns lack grammatical gender, with the third-person pronoun ‘*hän’* representing ‘he’, ‘she’ and ‘they’.

Within contemporary English, it is possible to find two third person singular pronouns ‘he’, and ‘they’ are widely used to describe or portrayed to be gender-neutral in writing. As mentioned before, this is not something new, the first record of ‘they’ being used as a gender neutral comes from Geoffrey Chaucer’s 1395 work, “The Pardoner’s Prologue” from “The Canterbury Tales” […] *And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame* […], […] *They wol come up* […], these examples demonstrate since 14th century the use of gender-neutral pronoun which has existed in the English language since the beginning of the Modern English period.

When it comes to the first record of “he” as a gender-neutral pronouns, it is difficult to affirm when was first used. Many historians have published it was in late 18th century. Therefore, the Journal of Sex Roles analyzed the role of sexist language and published that

> The use of he as pronoun for nouns embracing both genders are a simple, practical convention rooted in the beginnings of the English language. He has lost all suggestion of maleness in these circumstances [...] It has no pejorative connotations; it is never incorrect.

There are some disadvantages to using ‘they’ as a substitute for ‘he’, such as ambiguity, reference problems and vagueness. MacKay (1980) refer to the use of ‘they’ as a vague way of referring to someone, those authors elucidate that

> Plurals are less precise than singulars. While the singulars he, she and it, refer exactly to one and only one entity, the plural 'they' refers vaguely to any number of entities refers vaguely to any number of entities greater than one. (MacKay, 1980, p. 358).

MacKay (1980) affirm that 'they', as a singular, represents a loss of precision and impact in sentences such as 'they' seemed to refer to any entities, the ambiguity stated above refers to Bodine (1975), as he explains singular 'they' violates a rule of English grammar which is number of agreements, this violation could lead to many changes elsewhere in English. The authors also call attentions to another issue, once 'they' is used as a singular may cause malfunction of 'they' as a plural, which he calls "side effects", which, in other words means

> If 'they' gains widespread currency as a singular, the plural function of they will almost certainly suffer. A new type of ambiguity observed in the corpus serves to illustrate this problem. For example, when 'they' replaces 'he' in A patient may not wish to recover as much self-control as the nurses wish him to regain and they may be annoyed at his over-anxiety, the original and previously unambiguous use of 'they' becomes ambiguous, referring to either patient or nurses." (MACKAY, 1980, p. 360)

The citation above clarifies how singular 'they' may change the meaning of sentences and may transform into multiple meanings in a single sentence. Also, the author discusses the ambiguity and how it can affect the meaning of a sentence and make it confusing and meaningless.

Studies have also shown that grammatical gender languages tend to create societies with a greater emphasis on gender inequality than natural gender language societies (Harris et al., 2017).

3 METHODOLOGY

To discuss the complexities about the use of gender-neutral language, exploring whether it is primarily a matter of fostering inclusivity or if it is influenced by underlying political biases, bibliographic research was adopted as well as a qualitative research approach.

This methodology was chosen mainly because a literature review "consists of evaluating and synthesizing existing knowledge on a particular topic or research question" (GIL, 1996), such type of research helps to better understand the current state of knowledge, identify gaps, problems and arbitrary questions within the subject matter. The research sources of this work are linked to articles and books published by authors who were chosen through the relevance of their works, which treat the theme with another perspective, in a coherent way, such as Butler (1990), Helgeson (2017); Pasqualini (2021); Köcher (2021); Murray (2019). Also, it was used interviews and videos, by intellectuals who mainly discuss this topic.

The qualitative approach “focuses on obtaining descriptive and in-depth data, providing a rich and detailed understanding of the contexts and meanings associated with the phenomena studied” (FLICK, 2009), which suits the need of the theme through its social relevance. And in the context of this article, it is important to raise a reflection on how teachers of English as an additional language might treat this particular issue of gender-neutral pronouns use to make learners’ aware of its social, cultural and linguistic relevance.

Initially, the selection of articles, as well as interviews and videos, was made thorough research, with the aim of comparing the different views of authors on the issue of gender neutrality in the English language. The authors chosen are highly influential in fields of linguistics, philosophy and social studies and discuss gender roles in society, which provides the basis for the methodology of the work. Therefore, in the next section we will present, first a discussion related to gender, sex and stereotypes to clarify its concepts to move forward to political views.

4 GENDER, SEX AND STEREOTYPES

Today, when it comes to defining gender and sex, many people have difficulties to understand the difference between them. According to Helgeson (2017) in his work called The *Psychology of Gender*, “gender is more seemingly abstract, it can be defined by social criteria to designate an individual as man or woman”. Otherwise, “sex is usually defined as being composed of male and female subcategories which are determined by biological criteria”. (Helgeson, 2017, p. 30)

These categories may be conflicting, gender and sex are both socially constructed and categorize people based on arbitrary criteria that have changed throughout history. It can be stated currently, clothing, body positioning, hairstyle and many corporal expressions may categorize gender, while chromosomes, genitalia and hormones can code for categories of sex. It is known each category is composed of two composed binaries: male and female; man and woman.

According to Darr and Kibbey (2016), there are two main differences between gender and sex, that is

> Gender is a category consisting of two sub-categories, man and woman, which are determined by social criteria surrounding self-expression. However, due to misconceptions of gender as an idea, many believe that sex and gender are inalienably linked or that gender is predetermined by the sex category assigned to an individual at birth. This is further complicated by the existence of gender roles, or the norms that are associated with a specific gender category (e.g. mothers being caregivers). (DARR AND KIBBEY, 2016, p. 73)

This is an example on how society may assume and associate a role in society as a gender. As a result of non-binary gender, it shows that these roles also exist in binary, but are not related and not necessarily are constrained in two categories. It is also important to explain the definition and how society perceives the role of sex. Once more, Darr and Kibbey (2016) advocate that

> Sex is a social category consisting of the sub-categories, male and female, which are determined by biological criteria such as genitalia and hormones12. Although this might seem straightforward and natural, male, and female are not actually such clear-cut categories: intersex refers to the sex of an individual who has both feminine and masculine biological characteristics or has ambiguous genitalia at birth. These ambiguities are often surgically altered by doctors shortly after birth in order to facilitate an individual's entrance into society as a fully functional male or female. (DARR AND KIBBEY, 2016, p. 73)

Darr and Kibbey (2016) discuss the nature of sex as a social category consisting of the subcategory's male and female, determined by biological criteria such as genitalia and hormones. Although this division may seem simple and natural, the authors argue the categories of male and female are not so straightforward. They introduce the concept of 'intersex', which refers to individuals who have both female and male biological characteristics or ambiguous genitalia at birth. These ambiguities are often surgically corrected soon after birth to facilitate the individual's integration into society as a man or a woman.

Henceforth, stereotypes can be characterized as "a system of behaviors that are assigned to a certain group" (PASQUALINI, 2021). Gender stereotypes are aspects that we link and establish for men and women in society. These characteristics are not assigned on the basis of biological sex but rather through the social roles that the two play. Some of these conceptions are embedded in society and as a result we grow up and without realizing it we externalize these perceptions to other people.

The main component of gender stereotypes is that men should be masculine, and women should be feminine. If you were a man, would you want to have a career and work outside, or would you prefer to stay at home and look after the children? How would other people react? Or if you are a woman, would not you prefer not to have children? These are examples of the social pressure we suffer from society when it comes to social roles.

Helgeson (2017, p. 155) explain that "gender-role stereotypes differ from many other stereotypes because gender is a category that is activated immediately upon meeting someone". The quote relates to something that many people have experienced, such as when you meet someone who has feminine characteristics, such as long hair, breasts and this person is dressed in clothes that are considered masculine, baggy pants, loose sweatshirts, sneakers, in addition, they have more abrupt features, so you assume that it is a woman, however, it can be a trans man or a non-feminine trans woman. Another situation occurs with babies, if the child has long hair, it is a girl, but if it is wearing

blue, it must be him. This can cause some discomfort because you do not know which pronoun to use, and our perceptions of gender roles are deeply ingrained in our culture.

Hence, it follows that misgendering someone is not always a matter of offense or discrimination. Gender is automatically related to appearance, clothing and social role. Therefore, it is automatic for human beings to relate the person they first meet to a pre-established gender according to their appearance. Not everyone is able to guess their pronouns when they meet them. This is the main reason some universities around the globe are discussing gender neutral pronouns in their classes and record systems.

5 POLITICAL BIAS

A study conducted at Harvard University in 2016 revealed that 1% of 4,000 students expressed a preference for the use of gender-neutral pronouns in the college's identity records system. Furthermore, few universities have shown resistance towards embracing more inclusive language practices. However, some institutions, such as the University of Tennessee, have publicly demonstrated resistance towards adopting gender-neutral language practices.

The primary reason for this resistance stemmed from the local population's perception and adherence to traditional gender norms and linguistic conventions, which may have hindered the acceptance and implementation of gender-inclusive language practices.

Tennessee's consider the pronouns 'they/them' would completely replace the use of she/her/her and he/him/hers, instead, it was only a suggestion to address other people with gender-neutral pronouns without knowing their gender, this made University of Tennessee president Joe DiPietro and UT-Knoxville Chancellor Jimmy Cheek to remove the educational pronoun guide from the Office's website, and the Tennessee Senate Education Committee added discussion of the matter to its agenda, and very little about diversity and inclusion was discussed.

Although the opposition of the campus around gender-neutral pronouns, the situation spread awareness about the existence and linguistic nuances on the campus, and became a popular topic in the newspaper, *The Daily Beacon*[5], there were resentment from faculty and students, at the decision to take down the non-gender guide pronoun. Genderqueer and non-binary students allegedly felt marginalized and insecure on campus, with no support coming from the campus, they stated: "We

[5] The daily Beacon. "1973 Beacon utilized genderless pronouns" by Tanner Hancock, News Editor and Heidi Hill, Assistant News Editor Sep 14, 2015 https://www.utdailybeacon.com/news/1973-beacon-utilized-genderless-pronouns/article_fb49e298-5a85-11e5-9e5f-8bbd4c8a78ba.html

fear what this could mean for our safety across campus since many transgender individuals receive verbal and physical abuse due to their gender identity".

In Europe, the discussion about the suitability of language for a neutral approach is divided. In 2022, the discussion reopened a debate in European societies about the sexism present in language, the sexualization of language and the deconstruction of cultural codes. French education minister Jean Michel Blanquer says that the idea of "inventing" words, which happens in the French language by using terms to include gender endings, is impracticable. The French Ministry of Education states that this type of writing has no bearing on the fight against sexism and only serves to hinder the understanding and learning of the language, which is already considered difficult to learn due to its grammar and spelling rules.

In Spain, the Ministry of Equality has proposed the creation of a grammatical gender with the ending "e", valid for people of any sex. The 2022 gay pride poster had the caption *Orgullo de Todas – Todos – Todes*. According to DeCock (2021), professor and linguist of Catholic University of Lovaina,

> The language is in constant evolution. To give one example related to gender terms, Spanish has lost the neutral existed in Latin and Greek. In other words, there were changes about gender and linguistic definitions in other times and it is not impossible that can happen again. (DeCock, 2021)

In Germany, a survey conducted stated that "the majority believe that they are going too far when more and more attention is paid to gender neutrality". A study by Köcher (2021) takes stock of the current state of opinion in Germany on freedom of expression, which includes an aside on inclusive language. The study also showed that one in two citizens is convinced that it is now necessary to be careful about how to behave and what to say in public: 41% complain that political correctness is exaggerated and 35% consider that it is only possible to freely express one's opinion in a private circle. (Köcher, 2021)

Köcher (2021) concludes that

> Most believe that they are going too far when they pay more and more attention to gender neutrality, whether by demanding the simultaneous use of masculine and feminine in speeches, or job offers aimed at all three genders. (KÖCHER, 2021)

Although, in Belgium, the subject opens a huge discussion, and the polarization is much bigger. Dister (2021), another linguist and professor at University Sao Luis of Brussels, has a different point of view about this subject, she claims that

> Inclusive writing is based on a false assumption that the masculine erases the feminine. Who thinks that when we say *passage piétons* [crosswalk] it means that women cannot cross? It's simply an economy of language.[6]

In Brazil, the opinion and position of government officials is extremely opposed to the use of gender neutrality in official documents and in the use of language in schools. According to an article in the newspaper G1[7], the Brazilian Supreme Court vetoed a law that proposed using the term *todes* and *amigues* in classrooms. Some states in the country, have specific bills such as Alagoas, Ceará, the Federal District, Espírito Santo, Maranhão, Mato Grosso and Paraíba, as well as São Paulo, have proposed to address issues related to neutral language. For example, Alagoas presented a bill in 2020, which is still pending deliberation in the state's Legislative Assembly, while Ceará brought a similar proposal in 2023, in process in the same legislative body. In the Federal District, two bills, dated 2021 and 2023 respectively, are currently being discussed in the Legislative Chamber. In Espírito Santo, there is a bill from 2022 under analysis in the Legislative Assembly. In Maranhão, a proposal dating from 2021 is currently under debate in the state's Legislative Assembly. In Mato Grosso, there is a 2021 bill pending analysis in the state Legislative Assembly. As for Paraíba, although two bills have been presented, these have been shelved. In São Paulo, dozens of bills were proposed between 2020 and 2022 in relation to neutral language, showing widespread concern about the issue. Additionally, at the municipal level, a bill on the subject is currently before the capital's City Council. The multiplicity of legislative initiatives on the subject reflects a broad public and political debate on the issue of neutral language and its social and cultural implications. The proposition of those bills, yet under debate, prohibit the use of any trace of neutral language in public tenders, official documents, teaching materials and in any communication from the state government.

It could be said that the use of neutral language has become a cultural/political war in Brazil. On one hand, LGBTQIAP+ activists defend its use as a way of not making the language sexist. On the other hand, members of parliament claim that its use is a political ideology and a way of introducing gender ideology into schools. Most of the proposals come from MPs[8] allied to Jair Bolsonaro, which is an extremist for right-wing party. In accordance with the right-wing party federal deputy Dani Cunha says that: "The concept of 'neutral language' is the result of gender ideology, which teaches that biological sex is not enough to define human sexuality. Boys can be girls and girls

[6] From the original: Dizendo "pedestre", o francês tem formas diferentes para o masculino (*le piéton*, o pedestre) e o feminino (*la piétonne*, a pedestre). Usa-se a forma masculina na expressão "faixa de pedestres".
[7] G1 available at: https://g1.globo.com/educacao/noticia/2023/02/13/
[8] From the original: Medida Provisória (MP) está no artigo 62 da Constituição Federal. Ela é um instrumento com força de lei, adotado pelo presidente da República, em casos de relevância e urgência para o país. Produz efeitos imediatos, ou seja, já vale ao mesmo tempo em que tramita no Congresso, mas depende de aprovação da Câmara e do Senado para que seja transformada definitivamente em lei.

can be boys, if neutral language is taught in schools, young people would be told that gender is a social abstraction and that they can choose what they want to be at the mercy of their own wills."

As clearly stated above, it is a question that has many opinions and it has been seen as something specially political, many right-wing politicians try to combat the use of neutral language, especially because their parties are extremely conservative, and they try to justify their prejudiced positions by making excuses that these terms are unfeasible in Portuguese or that they would cause confusion and make the language even more difficult to learn.

6 LANGUAGE AND POLITICAL AGENDA

To which degree can the position of some authors be considered just a thought against the use of neutral language, motivated by making the language more unviable, or is it a political position against the community fighting for the inclusion of its identity in linguistic norms? Some authors, such as Murray (2019) have a specific position against neutral language. Regarding the community that fights for appropriateness, he advocates that

> GLB (Gay, Lesbian, Bi) became LGB so as not to diminish the visibility of lesbians. Then a T got added (of which much more anon). Then a Q and then some stars and asterisks. And as the gay alphabet grew, so something changed within the movement. It began to behave – in victory – as its opponents once did. When the boot was on the other foot something ugly happened. (MURRAY, 2019, p. 09)

Murray (2019) clearly explains the LGBT community was built through the behavior of "revenge", as the citates above, they started to act like their "opponents" or in other words, acting violently and intolerantly towards those who disrespected them. It can be seen between the author's lines that the community could withstand disrespect but could not act abruptly to defend itself. Murray (2019) has an extreme view of the gay community. They assert that those who support them and defend them against discrimination just want to be part of an "agenda", or fit in with a politically correct group of people, he pronounced that

> What everyone does know are the things that people will be called if their foot even nicks against these freshly laid tripwires. 'Bigot', 'homophobe', 'sexist', 'misogynist', 'racist' and 'transphobe' are just for starters. The rights fights of our time have centered around these toxic and explosive issues. But in the process these rights issues have moved from being a product of a system to being the foundations of a new one. To demonstrate affiliation with the system people must prove their credentials and their commitment. How might somebody demonstrate virtue in this new world? By being 'anti-racist', clearly. By being an 'ally' to LGBT people, obviously. By stressing how ardent your desire is whether you are a man or a woman - to bring down the patriarchy. (MURRAY, 2019, p. 12)

Regarding the use of neutral pronouns in the English language, Murray (2019) enounces that it does not matter what you look like or how you want to be called,

> Society may tolerate you. It may wish you well. But your desire to dress in ladies' underpants is no reason to force everyone to use completely new pronouns. (MURRAY, 2019. p. 202).

This sentence reinforces how problematic the view of some authors can be regarding the use of the correct pronoun to refer to a queer-non-binary person. Contemporary authors, journalists and opinion formers are influencers of opinion, and this directly affects minority groups, due to the fact that many conservatives and anti-LGBT+ people use the speeches of some authors to justify their discriminatory acts against the community, such as trans and non-binary people.

In accordance with Paglia (2020), "the use of neutral pronouns in English Language is just a matter of political imposition and way of linguistic control, while the introduction of non-gendered pronouns is an attempt to implement a specific ideology and it interferes with free expression". This author clearly states that a speech against neutral pronouns, affirming it is pushed by a political agenda, besides, such action can be seen as a mandatory use of it, in other words, a way of social control.

Paglia (2020), also criticizes what it is perceived as "forced cultural change", arguing that language should evolve naturally over time and not be modified by decree or intense social pressure. The adoption of new pronouns should be an organic process, reflecting real changes in society. Paglia (2020) likewise, expresses her lack of confidence in identity politics, which, might give priority to group identities over individuality, at the same time it might raise a concern about the excessive emphasis on identity categories, that could fragment society and damage social cohesion.

Shapiro (2019) in corroboration with the previous author, in *The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great*, exemplifies the imposition of neutral pronouns as a violation of freedom of expression. Shapiro (2019) believes that

> Forcing people to use specific pronouns is a form of coercion and control of speech, which goes against the principles of individual freedom, he also criticizes what he calls "language policing", claiming that attempts to regulate language to settle non-binary gender identities are a form of authoritarianism. (SHAPIRO, 2019)

This author declares that "people should have the right to use the language they consider appropriate without being forced to adopt new pronouns". One of his most controversial speeches about the gender-neutral issue is that he maintains that using neutral pronouns or pronouns that don't correspond to a person's biological sex is a denial of biological reality.

Based on the reflections of the above-mentioned authors, it is possible to observe that some of them consider the use of the neutral pronoun in the English language merely as a challenge to the structure of the cultured norm of the language or an ambiguity in the linguistic system. However, other authors approach the issue from a political point of view, claiming that it is an attempt to impose a politically correct behavior or idea on people. Furthermore, it is clear that some writers use their works and positions to conceal their discriminatory stances and opinions against the LGBTQIAPN+ community, which already faces such behavior on a daily basis in society.

7 LGBTQIAP+ COMMUNITY'S OPINION

> "Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short, wear shirts and boots, because it's OK to be a boy, but for a boy to look like a girl is degrading, because you think that being a girl is degrading. But secretly you'd love to know what it's like, wouldn't you? What it feels like for a girl?"

The *Cement Garden* (1993) directed by Andrew Birkin, the citation from the movie mentioned before, has many interpretations, but the main one reflects on how society degrades the female figure and link their image with something shameful, embarrassing or fragile, and a man having feminine features is a reason of shame.

In 2000, Italo American singer Madonna released the song *What It Feels Like for a Girl*, with the same scene from the movie, the singer discusses during the song issues of gender and power, offering a perspective on women's experiences and the social restrictions faced by women. Madonna criticizes the humiliation of gender norms, highlighting how women often face harsh judgments and negative stereotypes when they challenge these norms. […] "When you're trying hard to be your best, could you be a little less?" […] The lyrics of Madonna's song suggest the constant pressure for women to conform to social expectations and lower their aspirations or efforts to be accepted.

Brazilian LGBT+ Activist and Drag Queen Rita Von Hunty[9] opens discussion and a comparative narrative of authors. Rita Von Hunt observes the similarity of how different realities and visions in a similar configuration. In one of her Talk Shows[10] she discusses how the creation of things

[9]Rita Von Hunty or Guilherme Terreri Lima Pereira is a professor, actor, comedian and Brazilian drag queen. Guilherme was born in Ribeirão Preto on October 17, 1990. Rita Von Hunty is a 'persona' Guilherme has created to disrupt paradigms about being a caricature or a superficial LGBTQ+ character. Her name comes from Rita Hayworth, a famous American actress from the 1940s. "Hunty" is slang in the drag community for showing affection or caring and "Von" refers to royalty. Rita Von Hunt YouTube channel is called "Tempero Drag" at https://www.youtube.com/@TemperoDrag

[10] Rita Von Hunt YoutTube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAzsxxMMlIM

is directed related to the creation of words, the first comparison is from the African writer and specialist researcher Amadou Hampâté Bá, which states:

> What Maa Ngala (God) says is. In the beginning, there was only a living void, living from the life of Being. One that calls itself Maa Ngala. Then he created Fan, the primordial egg, which in its nine compartments housed nine fundamental states of existence. When this egg opened, the creatures that came out of it were mute. So, in order to give himself an interlocutor, Maa Ngala took a portion from each of the creatures, mixed them together and, through a breath of fire emanating from himself, created a separate being: man, to whom he gave a part of his own name, Maa (man). (HAMP TÉ, Bá. p, 05)

The second comparative analysis Rita Von Hunt proposes came from the Bible:

> In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. But the earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God moved over the waters. And God said: Let there be light. And the light existed. And God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. And he called the light day, and the darkness night. And it became evening and morning, (and it was) the fifth day. (GENESIS, I, 1-5).

It is interesting how she relates two different contexts to associate on society beliefs and perceives the creation of words came with the creation of the world. About this matter, Fiorin (2003) explains the fascination that language produces on people comes from a place of power, in other words, to create and transform the real universe and exchange experiences, to being able to talk about what existed, and might existed. From Fiorin (2003) perspective

> Verbal language is therefore the material of thought and the vehicle of social communication. Just as there is no society without language, there is no society without communication". (FIORIN, p, 06)

Verbal language is essential for structuring and expressing thought. It allows individuals to formulate and organize their ideas in a more complex way, reflect on abstract concepts and develop logical thinking, as well as playing a fundamental role in shaping how each society perceives the world, based on the language they speak or the culture in which they are inserted. Language development is closely linked to cognitive development. Through language, individuals are able to organize their perceptions, memories and knowledge in a structured and coherent way.

From what I gather, gender neutral language may be essential to those who identify as a non-binary person. Many situations can be simplified by using a neutral pronoun. An example of this is in the classroom. In a personal experience, an internship student asked me if I was a teacher, and since I identify as gender fluid, the situation became uncomfortable for me, and because of my inexperience in the school classroom, how do I explain to a 12-year-old what gender neutral, gender fluid, and all these terms are? It is a long way to go in society, and it is still rarely under discussion.

8 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The answer to the question "the use of gender-neutral language: a matter of inclusion or a political bias?", in my opinion, is both. When it comes to inclusion, gender-neutral language represents a 'hot topic' in society. It also represents an attempt to include people and identities that do not fit into the traditional binarism. Some of the issues addressed include visibility and representativeness, which seeks to recognize the identities that exist in the LGBT+ community, in order to promote more respectful and welcoming behavior.

However, when it has a political addressment, these issues such as linguistic change, it reflects a fragile topic. Some impacts as translation and ambiguity such as, the use of neutral pronouns as "they/them" in the singular can cause confusion and ambiguity, especially in contexts – additional language classrooms – where it is important to distinguish between the singular and the plural, and the feminine morphemes usage, which has been fading over time.

Furthermore, the lack of consensus can also be a problem when adapting a neutral language: there is no universal definition of a gender-neutral pronoun, and options such as "ze/zir" or "xe/xem" can also confuse or overwhelm speakers and learners.

The negative points also include social and cultural resistance, challenges in education and it is also considered a political bias, since, according to authors and intellectuals previously cited in this work, it implies freedom of expression and non-functionality of the language.

Adopting a new process in the language can be difficult for some people, especially those who are used to the current binary pronoun system, however, we live in a modern society and the language may or may not change or adapt to the changes we experience over time.

From my point of view, as a future English teacher, I believe that there is still a lot to be done and discussed, firstly by linguists – who oppose to the use – , secondly by legislators and thirdly by society as a whole. In summary, these entities show a certain resistance, even when it comes to respecting someone who is gender-fluid, or LGBT+.

What is important to bear in mind is that language provides and performs various functions of identification within the 'different groups of people'[11] today. Neutral language, such as gender-neutral pronouns, usage might represent a conscious change, in other words, it might mean that society is becoming flexible in accepting those different groups of people.

There is and will be a lot of struggles concerning this matter, neutral language, in general, to be accepted, seems, to me, an 'utopia', mainly because it is in regard of a stigmatized group.

[11] By 'different groups of people' I am addressing to all minorities. Blacks, indigenous, women, LGBT+ and etc.

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