

The Use of Nonbinary Language Strategies in Casual Ingroup Verbal Communication in the Czech LGBTQ+ Community

Original Study

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Abstract: As a Slavic language, Czech poses very specific challenges for nonbinary language expression. The study of nonbinary Czech is a relatively recent field, and while various strategies for nonbinary Czech have been documented, data regarding their actual use in casual ingroup communication is limited. This paper presents the results of a qualitative analysis of several recordings conducted with two volunteer participants from the Czech LGBTQ+ community who employ different language strategies to express nonbinarity. We examine individual users' preferences and document their efforts to creatively avoid gender markers. Additionally, we explore the consistency of these strategies, their mutual interactive influences and the reasons behind their use. We also corroborate some earlier findings with direct examples from our data.

Keywords: Czech, gender identity, grammatical gender, gender-neutral language, nonbinary language, verbal communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Nonbinary language and identity are currently vibrant and extensively examined subjects, gathering substantial attention within the realm of linguistics, as well as various other disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, semiotics, philosophy, and psychology. Linguistic research on nonbinary expression is not limited to the English language (e.g. Gratton 2016; Cordoba 2020; Hope et al. 2023); similar inquiries are underway in other languages such as Swedish (e.g. Vergoosen et al. 2020), Spanish (e.g. Bonnin, Coronel 2021), French (e.g. Knisely 2020) and Italian (e.g. Anzani et al. 2023), among others. As each language presents its own distinctive set of challenges concerning the articulation of nonbinary expression, and many strategies and phenomena are often not applicable across languages, it is important to study the expression of nonbinary

individuals' experiences and identities within each individual language.

This study explores the use of nonbinary and nonbinary affirming language in everyday conversations within a casual LGBTQ+ ingroup setting. Previous research on the Czech nonbinary (and broader LGBTQ+) community (e.g. Filipová 2018; Wehle 2020; Kolek 2022; Poštolková 2022) has primarily relied on surveys, discourse analysis, or media analysis, which are sources that may potentially represent more performative or demonstrative use of language by nonbinary speakers. The use of third-person language in sources such as news articles may also not accurately reflect actual ingroup language use. Given that linguistic gender expression is highly contextual and situational for nonbinary people (individuals who use such language usually do not speak this way in all social contexts), we believe that analysing data from

conversations with fellow community members could yield valuable insights. In an endeavour to express non-binary identities in Czech through language, speakers employ various strategies, with differences in their effectiveness and ease of use. Each strategy is a matter of personal choice, and two nonbinary individuals may not approach nonbinary language in the same way. This paper aims to illuminate the interplay of these strategies in casual, interpersonal communication.

2. GENDER IN CZECH

The nature of Czech as a synthetic inflectional language with some analytical tendencies, which belongs to the Slavic language group (Sussex, Cubberley 2006), presents certain challenges when it comes to gender expression. Czech recognizes three grammatical genders. When referring to people, there is the grammatical masculine pronoun *on* 'he', and its plural form *oni* 'they', which can serve as the default form of reference for a group of indeterminate gender (typically presumed to include at least one individual using *on*). The other binary gendered pronoun is the feminine *ona* 'she', with the plural form *ony* 'they' (referring to groups presumed not to contain any masculine subjects). While the grammatical neuter *to/ono* 'it' (pl. form *ta/ona* 'they') does exist and is used, it is not commonly employed when referring to adult individuals and, for some people, may carry some negative connotations if used in this manner (Wehle 2020, 48).

Compared to English, where gendered speech mostly poses a problem when it comes to the issue of personal pronouns, Slavic languages mark gender in speech more extensively. Due to declension and verb conjugation in Czech, grammatical gender is consistently applied across multiple parts of speech. This includes nouns, pronouns, adjectives, some numerals and verbs, all of which adopt forms consistent with the individual's expressed gender. This presents a problem that simply does not exist in English – the issue of sustaining the gendering of one's own self in first-person speech.

Another problem not commonly present in English and similar languages lies in names. In many Slavic languages, last names are typically gender-marked. Furthermore, since both first and last names are subject to declension (only following grammatically masculine or feminine forms), even gender-neutral first names indicate gender if used in other than the nominative case (on current attitudes to gender-neutral names in Czech, see Valdrová 2022).

The nonexistence of truly gender-neutral language then severely reduces most individuals' options for the declaration of their gender to merely two binary options, necessitating the adoption of novel creative strategies in an effort to bypass this issue.

3. OVERVIEW OF NONBINARY LANGUAGE STRATEGIES

While research into specific nonbinary language strategies in Czech may be sparse, some have been documented in Toby Wehle's 2020 analysis of nonbinary language in translation and the community's attitudes towards it, and later also by Vít Kolek in his 2022 paper "Nonbinary Czech Language: characteristics and discourse". In defining nonbinary language strategies, we build upon Wehle's (2020, 56) list of nine selected strategies that were applied to the issue of English-Czech translation. Some of these strategies cannot be implemented in spoken language at all, or are not applicable in all contexts; some might require significant effort, which may discourage their use in spoken communication. However, even though this paper focuses on verbal expression, we include all these strategies in our adapted and expanded list to provide a comprehensive overview of all that has been documented in previous studies or empirically observed.

The listing of these strategies as separate entities does not imply that only one of them may be used at a time. Each speaker has their own preferences, both for their own expression and for how they wish to be addressed and referred to. They may use more than one strategy simultaneously, be it in a complementary manner or accidentally. As some of these cannot be easily applied across all grammatical persons (see the plural forms strategy, for example), a mixed approach is often necessary.

3.1. THE USE OF GRAMMATICAL GENDER CONSISTENT WITH ONE'S SEX ASSIGNED AT BIRTH

It is arguably unclear whether this approach to expression constitutes a specific language strategy of non-binary expression at all, as it is linguistically identical to the expression of a cisgender person. However, it is nevertheless a commonly utilized mode of expression in the perceived absence of better options or in a context where openly defying language and gender norms might not be safe or appropriate. Non-cisgender individuals may still use AGAB¹-conforming language in some contexts or might supplement nonbinarity through other non-linguistic means, such as a gender-nonconforming appearance (Poštolková 2022, 36).

3.2. THE USE OF GRAMMATICAL GENDER 'OPPOSITE' OF ONE'S ASSIGNED SEX AT BIRTH WITHIN THE MALE-FEMALE BINARY

Like using language consistent with one's AGAB, this strategy is morphologically identical to the expression of a cisgender person. By using the 'opposite' binary option, a nonbinary individual is essentially utilizing the same linguistic identity expression as a binary transgender individual. However, if neutral language is not a viable

¹ 'Assigned gender at birth'. In this paper, we treat sex and gender as two distinct concepts, we usually refer to an individual's sex assigned at birth. However, as AGAB is the more commonly used abbreviation to refer to one's sex at birth, we maintain using it.

The Use of Nonbinary Language Strategies in Casual Ingroup Verbal Communication in the Czech LGBTQ+ Community

option, the speaker might consider the ‘opposite’ as a potential alternative.

In some specific circumstances, this strategy may not be purely linguistic, but a hybrid form of expression where language enhances non-linguistic signification. We can use an example of an AFAB² person who, while utilizing masculine language, can be easily identified as AFAB, or presents as distinctly feminine. The purpose of such expression would be to combine masculine and feminine elements as a means of achieving neutrality, or at least obfuscating the markedness of both. In this case, however, the feminine is expressed purely through visual signification, with the language alone supplying the masculine. This resulting androgyny transcends language boundaries, rendering this strategy semiotically significant.

3.3. ALTERNATING BETWEEN THE GRAMMATICAL MASCULINE AND FEMININE

One logically subsequent strategy to the previous is remaining within the masculine-feminine binary, but rather than fixing one’s expression to one grammatical gender or the other, the user moves freely between gendered terms. We can argue that this particular approach relies on highlighting the arbitrariness of grammatical gender: the user does not necessarily identify as both male and female, nor does the particular grammatical gender chosen at any given moment reflect the user’s actual gender or sex. Rather, disregarding the linguistic convention of grammatical gender and the obfuscation of gender markedness may serve as a statement towards the pliability of grammatical gender. It relies explicitly on the arbitrariness of gendered signifiers in grammar. The grammatical gender may be switched based on the situation or alternated in individual utterances (ex. 1).³

(1) Říkala [Fem] jsem, že to vyřeším. A taky jsem to vyřešil [Masc].
‘I said I’d take care of it. And I did take care of it.’

This strategy works in the first person, as well as in direct second-person address and third-person reference. In a language with such a rigid binary structure, it might be a rather convenient and easy-to-adopt way to signal nonbinarity (Kolek 2022, 273).

3.4. AVOIDING GENDER-MARKED WORDS AND PHRASES WHENEVER POSSIBLE

This strategy is based on avoiding gender-marked phrases. However, it might require significant effort to execute, as many expressions are not easily bypassed. This makes the strategy somewhat impractical for spoken language. Moreover, some phrases cannot be effectively

modified and must be completely avoided, reducing the options for expression (see also Kolek 2022, 275).

Examples 2–6 show possible ways of avoiding gender markedness:

(2) Avoidance of a gender-marked conditional through the use of simple present

Chtěla [Fem] bych se zeptat... → *Chci se zeptat...*
‘I would like to ask...’ ‘I want to ask...’

(3) Avoidance of gender-marked conditional by rephrasing the statement as a direct question

Chtěla [Fem] bych se zeptat... → *Můžete mi, prosím, říct...*
‘I would like to ask...’ ‘Can you tell me, please...?’

(4) Avoidance of gender-marked past tense through the use of present tense

Včera jsem říkala [Fem] Pavlovi... → *Včera říkám Pavlovi...*
‘I was telling Paul yesterday...’ ‘I am telling Paul yesterday...’

(5) Avoidance of a gender-marked adjective

Miki je šťastný/á [Masc/Fem]. → *Miki se cítí dobře.*
‘Miki is happy.’ ‘Miki feels good.’

(6) Avoidance of gender-markedness through the use of words like *jeden* (‘one’), *člověk/osoba* (‘person’), etc.

Miki je vysoký/á [Masc/Fem]. → *Miki je vysoký člověk.*
‘Miki is tall’ ‘Miki is a tall person.’

3.5. THE USE OF GRAMMATICAL NEUTER

This strategy utilizes grammatical neuter forms. However, when referring to people, the use of neuter forms may carry established connotations that could be perceived as negative. The pronouns *to/ono* ‘it’ and grammatical neuter in general are mostly (though not exclusively) reserved for inanimate nouns, which can make their use with people potentially problematic. The common notion that neuter is used to refer to animals and children in Czech (e.g. Wehle 2020, 42) might be mostly brought about incidentally, due to the grammatical neuter gender of the words ‘animal’ and ‘child’.⁴ Nonetheless, using this strategy to refer to an adult human would necessitate recontextualization of the -o ending and broadening its commonly understood meaning, and this can be a point of contention among some nonbinary individuals, who

² ‘Assigned female at birth’.

³ Unless stated otherwise, all examples used in the strategy overview section are our own constructions created for the purpose of demonstrating specific language phenomena.

⁴ To highlight the arbitrariness of grammatical gender here, it may be pointed out that the word *děvče* ‘girl’ is also neuter, although it clearly refers to a female child. Likewise, the word *člověk* ‘human’ is grammatically masculine, but the word *osoba* ‘person’ is grammatically feminine.

may view the strategy as dehumanizing (see also Wehle 2020, 88).

However, even though neuter may not be commonly used to refer to adult humans, it is an established and widely used grammatical construct (in reference to inanimate nouns and other words that arbitrarily fall under the neuter grammatical gender), and therefore may be among the strategies that would be most viable for widespread use, as all Czech speakers are familiar with it. It is also consistent across the first, second and third person.

- (7) A: *Jelo* [Neut] *jsi včera na ten koncert?*
 'Did you go to the concert yesterday?'
 B: *Ne, zůstalo* [Neut] *jsem doma.*
 'No, I stayed at home.'

3.6. USING PLURAL INSTEAD OF SINGULAR FORMS

Plural forms might arguably constitute not one unified strategy, but multiple distinct ones. Nonbinary language in Czech is realized differently in different 'directions' – in the first person by the nonbinary speaker themselves, and in the second and third person by their conversation partners.

In third-person reference, this strategy is roughly equivalent to the use of the singular *they* pronoun in English (see also Kolek 2022, 273–274), and can be rather intuitive and easy to use for individuals who are familiar with the English *they*. Our data also points to the perceived equivalence of these two strategies (see Discussion).

While in English only the personal pronoun and some verb forms will be affected, in Czech, the plural forms also manifest across other parts of speech, mainly verb and adjective endings, and, less commonly, even nouns (ex. 8).

- (8) *Oni* [MascPl] *jsou* [Pl] *Češi* [MascPl].
 'They are Czech.'

Standard Czech has three different verb endings for third-person plural in past tense: masculine *-i*, feminine *-y*, and neuter *-a*. As *-i* and *-y* are pronounced the same, this does not pose a problem in spoken language. Adjective forms, however, differ more significantly (e.g. *vyšocí* 'tall' [Masc Pl], *vyšoké* [Fem Pl], *vyšoká* [Neut Pl]). In this case, the plural form used will default to the generic masculine.

This strategy is well-suited for use in the third person, but in second-person address, plural forms might be slightly tricky to use. In Slovak, which is similar to and highly mutually intelligible with Czech, plural forms are used in second-person honorific speech, making it entirely gender neutral. In Czech honorific speech, verbs do not take on plural forms, but the honorific second-person pronoun *Vy* 'you' is identical to the second-person plural pronoun *vy* 'you'. Therefore, while using plural forms in the second person in Czech will not be entirely identical to honorific address, it might still be perceived as a modified version of it.

- (9) *Vy jste dělal/a* [Masc/Fem] *ten seznam?* (honorific form)
Vy jste dělali [MascPl] *ten seznam?* (possible nonbinary form)
 'Did you make that list?'

Using plural forms in the first person is also problematic, as it results in an archaic form of self-address known as the 'royal we'. Due to all these issues, a person's preference to be referred to in the third-person plural does not necessarily mean that they also use plural forms when speaking in the first person or that they prefer being addressed using plural forms. This distinction is one of the phenomena demonstrated in our data.

3.7. USING THE 'OPPOSITE' GRAMMATICAL GENDER FOR A GENDERED NOUN

This approach can only be applied to a limited set of words, necessitating its combination with another, more widely applicable strategy (Wehle 2020, 74). The point of this strategy is to modify gender-marked terms, such as those describing family members. In this approach, a gender-marked term is declined as the 'opposite' grammatical gender or structurally modified to behave as such. Wehle (2020, 74) demonstrates this modification on the examples of the terms *bratra* [Fem] and *sester* [Masc] (ex. 10), altered from their original forms *bratr* [Masc] 'brother' and *sestra* [Fem] 'sister', which he uses to translate the word *sib*.

- (10) "*Tak mi říkej sestře,*" *povídám.* "*Nebo bratro, to je fuk.*"
 "Sib is good," I say. "Instead of bro or whatever."

It is worth noting, however, that for the terms 'brother' and 'sister', on which this strategy was initially demonstrated, a gender-neutral term, *sourozenec* 'sibling', already exists. This is true for most gender-marked family terms in Czech, excluding a few examples, such as aunt-uncle or cousin, for which Czech has no gender-neutral word.

This strategy could prove valuable in specific niche cases. Instead of being regarded as a separate strategy, it could be more effectively incorporated into one of the other strategies that offer a wider range of applications.

3.8. USING NEWLY INVENTED GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES

This strategy exists mostly in the form of theoretical propositions that may take different forms. In English, new personal pronouns have been proposed as an alternative to the established *he/she/it* or even the singular *they*, as some users of the English language find the singular *they* difficult to use. Pronouns such as *xe/xir*, *ze/zir* and others are not used broadly but do find niche use in certain queer communities (Hekanaho 2021). In Czech, one such documented example is the Czech neopronoun *one* [one], with its associated verb ending *-e* (Wehle 2020, 76; Kolek 2022, 274). The associated verb and adjective forms would then be usable in the first and second person as well, unlike in

The Use of Nonbinary Language Strategies in Casual Ingroup Verbal Communication in the Czech LGBTQ+ Community

English, where gendered personal pronouns are only a third-person issue.

(11) *One* by *s náma jet nechtěle?*
'*Xe* wouldn't like to go with us?'

3.9. USING FONTS AND OTHER GRAPHIC ADJUSTMENTS OF GENDERED EXPRESSIONS

This strategy utilizes special symbols, such as asterisks or slashes (ex. 12), to graphically include more than one form of a word in written text.

(12) *Vážení*é [MascPl*FemPl] studenti*ky [MascPl*FemPl], ...*
'Dear students, ...'
Rád/a [MascSg/FemSg] bych se zeptal/a [MascSg/FemSg] ...
'I would like to ask...'

This strategy is sometimes used in mass communication that does not refer to the LGBTQ+ community, as it can be used in media as a form of gender-fair language. While it may be viable as a preference for individual nonbinary persons to use in written communication, it may be problematic to express verbally (Poštolková 2022, 35; Wehle 2020, 46–47), though some options have been proposed (e.g. Kolek 2022, 275).

3.10. ENGLISH SUBSTITUTIONS

One strategy that deserves particular attention is the use of English substitutes or communicating in English altogether, even among individuals who are fully capable of communicating in Czech. While this nonbinary language strategy does not involve modifications to Czech grammar and morphology, it is documented that nonbinary individuals may use English to bypass the limitations of grammatical gender in Czech, citing said limitations as the reason (Filipová 2018, 62). This phenomenon has also been observed by one of the authors when interacting with the nonbinary community and some evidence also appears in our data.

3.11. NAMES AND NONBINARY LANGUAGE

As mentioned earlier, names pose a significant limitation in Czech concerning nonbinary language. Female-marked last names typically take on the suffix *-ová* or, in the case of male surnames that are adjective, they take the feminine form of that adjective. Although the law now allows non-men to use the uninflected form of their surname (e.g. Witoszová 2022), this highlights the prevalence of masculine forms in Czech. The masculine form of a surname is considered the 'default'.

First names are legally required to align with an individual's sex at birth, although, as of June 30, 2023, the Czech Interior Ministry has issued a list of approved gender-neutral names (Odbor všeobecné správy 2023) that can be used for individuals of any sex without the need

for additional approval. However, as mentioned above, the issue of names is more complex. Gender-neutral names, just like any other names, are subject to declension and often take on gender-marked endings in cases other than the nominative case (ex. 13).

(13) *Ahoj Alexi [Masc] / Alex [Fem]!*
'Hi Alex!'

It is common practice for nonbinary individuals to avoid using their legal names in settings where doing so is not necessary. Instead, they choose names that better reflect their gender identity (Anzani et al. 2023, 99). While these gender-neutral 'chosen names' are legally only nicknames, there is a clear effort to use these names with minimal gender marking.

One observed way to achieve this is by keeping them in their unmodified nominative form. However, in Czech, names typically have to be declined either in the masculine or feminine form. As only the feminine form of some foreign names remains morphologically identical across all cases (as *Alex* in ex. 13), a name that is not declined may be in some cases interpreted as a female name.

As another alternative, individuals may adopt a strategy of using the 'opposite' grammatical gender of their AGAB for their name or mixing genders. For instance, an AFAB individual may use a morphologically male name. Alternatively, individuals may restructure phrases to maximize the use of the nominative case, thus avoiding the need to decline their names.

4. DATA DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

For the purpose of this research, one of the authors, who is a member of the LGBTQ+ community, conducted four audio recordings with two volunteer participants in March and April 2023. The aim of the recordings was to observe and document language as it is used in a mostly natural flow of conversation, avoiding an interview-type structured discussion and asking and answering questions one-sidedly. The conversations covered a range of daily topics and also touched on LGBTQ+ related issues. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained.

Participant 1 (P1) is an individual around 30 years of age⁵ and a native speaker of Czech. He identifies as transgender and is in transition from female to male. Participant P1 is in a committed long-term relationship with **individual P3**, who is frequently mentioned in the conversations and identifies as gender nonbinary (AFAB).

Participant 2 (P2) is an individual between 20 and 30 years of age, who is a native speaker of Czech and AFAB. They identify as gender nonbinary.

Researcher (R) is an individual around 30 years of age, who is fluent in Czech and a native speaker of Slovak. They are AFAB and identify as gender nonbinary.

⁵ The exact age is withheld for privacy reasons.

The four recordings, listed in chronological order, are:

- Researcher and Participant 1 (61 minutes)
- Researcher and Participant 2 (79 minutes)
- Researcher, Participant 1 and Participant 2 (110 minutes)
- Researcher and Participant 1 (78 minutes)

The research participants were not given explicit details about the specific nature of the research before the recordings were conducted. They were only informed that they were participating in linguistic research related to the use of nonbinary language in Czech. While this knowledge, although fairly non-specific, is a research limitation, we find it reasonable in the context of the study.

Participant 1 and Participant 2 were not acquainted prior to the conducting of their joint recording, but both were familiar with the Researcher. This familiarity helped create a sense of ease during the conversations, which provided a unique perspective on how nonbinary and nonbinary affirming language strategies manifest in a casual 'ingroup' environment.

After the conversations were recorded, the obtained recordings were transcribed into text to facilitate further analysis of the gathered data. Given the highly contextual nature of certain language strategies employed by the speakers, a qualitative analysis approach was chosen for the data through manual conversation analysis. Alternative methods like quantitative or frequency analysis did not produce particularly useful results. For example, when examining the use of the third-person plural as a strategy for nonbinary affirming language, its significance is only evident within the context of the phrases (distinguishing it from merely referring to a group of people). Similarly, the 'opposite' language use strategy appears identical to a cisgender person using the 'correct' grammatical gender, making it indistinguishable without considering the broader context.

The individual instances of nonbinary language use were collected from the text and then organized and sorted into categories based on the speaker, grammatical person, and the specific strategy used.

5. RESULTS

Following is a summary of notable instances of nonbinary language use found in the recordings by both Participant 1 and Participant 2. The examples are presented in the order of first person, second person, and third person. Individual recordings are not treated separately, as certain phenomena appear across multiple recordings.

5.1. PARTICIPANT 1

Participant P1 does not identify as nonbinary and refers to himself using the grammatical masculine; therefore, first-person nonbinary speech is not relevant in his case. The individuals he addressed in the second person are

P2 and R. He differentiates direct address based on the communication partner's preferences.

Towards R, he mostly uses masculine forms in direct address (ex. 14), as they are previously acquainted, and he is aware of R's preference. This tendency could be regarded as his default method of addressing nonbinary individuals, as he uses the same approach when speaking to his nonbinary partner. Using plural forms in the second person might present challenges, as we have previously highlighted. Therefore, opting for a simpler masculine form could be a more suitable choice.

- (14) *Takže víš co, jenom to, že máš pocit, že vyčníváš, nebo že seš jediný [Masc], kdo to dělá...*
'So, you know what, it's just that you feel like you stand out, or you're the only one who does that...'

Regarding singular forms, one has the option to select from masculine, feminine, and neuter forms. Since the neuter form constitutes a distinct strategy, when deciding between the masculine and feminine singular forms, the previously mentioned approach of embodying femininity (expressing it voluntarily or being physically identifiable as AFAB) while using masculine language expression remains a viable possibility.

Upon meeting P2 for the first time during the recording, P1 almost immediately asks about P2's preferred language without any prompting. This is a common practice in introductory conversations involving non-cisgender individuals as it helps establish a baseline for how to address and refer to the communication partner. When made aware of P2's preferred language, which is grammatical neuter – the *ono* pronoun and corresponding verb and adjective endings in Czech, roughly equivalent to *it/its* pronouns in English – P1 attempts to respect this choice and use neuter forms when speaking to P2 (ex. 15).

- (15) *A ty jsi studovalo [Neut] v Brně nebo tady? A tys mi vlastně říkalo [Neut], že ses tady narodilo [Neut], že jo?*
'And you studied in Brno or here? And, actually, you told me that you were born here, right?'

P1 also addresses P2 using a plural form (ex. 16). It is unclear whether this is a reference to P2's household, perhaps as a means of avoiding gender-marked speech, or a deliberate use of plural forms in the second person to refer to an individual as part of the plural forms strategy.

- (16) *P2, co jste vy měli [Pl] na oběd?*
'P2, what did you [Pl] have for lunch?'

The individuals referred to in the third person by P1 are mostly P1's nonbinary partner P3, and several other nonbinary individuals, including R, P2 and others who are not present or whom he is not closely acquainted with. Much like with the second person, P1 appears to have a default preference when referring to nonbinary

The Use of Nonbinary Language Strategies in Casual Ingroup Verbal Communication in the Czech LGBTQ+ Community

individuals who have not indicated a different preferred language – third-person plural. This is the strategy that he uses primarily when referring to his nonbinary partner, and thus this inclination is understandable (ex. 17).

(17) *Jo, jo, já tě úplně chápu, protože teď říkáš přesně to, co mi říkali [Pl] i P3, že jo.*

'Yeah, yeah, I totally get you, because now you are telling me exactly what P3 told me too, right.'

When referring to P2, who prefers to be addressed and referred to in grammatical neuter, P1 tries to follow P2's grammatical preference, but as he is apparently not used to it, he mistakenly refers to P2 using his default preferred method (third-person plural) on several occasions (ex. 18).

(18) *Pokud mají [Pl] P2 zájem.*

'If P2 is interested.'

P1 does, however, demonstrate an effort to respect someone's preferred language, even when that individual is not present and when it is somebody P1 does not know (e.g. an internet personality). For instance, when P1 realizes that an English-speaking person uses *it/its* pronouns, he makes an effort to adjust his language to grammatical neuter in Czech.

(19) *Ale že má [Sg] za sebou [Name] právě taky nějaké...nějaké traumata, takže taky člověk pochopí, proč by stáli [Pl] za to odstranit ze sebe nějakou takovou tu lidskou agency... Stálo [Neut]. Proč by stálo [Neut]...*

'But [Name] has also overcome some...some traumas, so it's understandable why they would want to remove this human agency from themselves. ...Why it would. Why it would want to...'

There is also evidence that P1 refers to people who might not be nonbinary but whose gender he does not know using third-person plural, which corresponds to how the pronoun *they* is used in English for people of indeterminate gender.

(20) *Přišel jí tam někdo anglicky mluvící a ujišťovali [Pl] se...*

'Somebody came in there speaking English, and they were asking...'

P1 refers to nonbinary people by default most commonly in third-person plural, except for instances where a plural form is not necessary because the singular form lacks any discernible gender markedness. Thus, singular and plural forms can alternate within a sentence (ex. 21):

(21) *Jo jo, já vím, že P3 to má [Sg] třeba podobně, že P3 kolikrát chodí velice, velice feminně oblíkaní [Pl], mají prostě krásné, krásné goth outfity a všecko. Ale taky vím, že je to tím, že už jsme spolu tak dlouho a tak, tak vím, že se stejně identifikuje [Sg] spíš jako... jako maskulinní.*

'Yeah yeah, I know that P3 is similar with this, that P3 often dresses very, very feminine, they have beautiful goth outfits and everything. But I also know that because we have been together for so long, so I know that they identify as more... more masculine anyway.'

Although P1 seems to try to employ plural forms only when necessary, the use is not entirely consistent. In some instances, P1 uses a plural form where a singular form would have been sufficiently gender-neutral. In example 22, the singular form (*ne*)bere '(doesn't) take' would have sufficiently avoided any gender markedness in both instances.

(22) *Ty prášky jsou úplně prostě koňské tabletky, takže asi P3 jako neberou [Pl] stovku, asi berou [Pl] něco jináčího.*

'Those meds are just these absolutely horse-dose pills, so P3 probably doesn't take 100 mg, they probably take something else.'

P1 reports that in a home environment, he predominantly uses grammatical masculine to address P3, as both masculine and neutral forms are acceptable to P3. However, when referring to P3 in the third person, a clear preference for neutral forms becomes evident.

P1 can also be observed using plural forms of nouns (*bezlepkáři* 'gluten-free individuals' in ex. 23) when referring to a nonbinary individual. Upon a later inquiry as to the motivations of this, P1 confirmed that this is a deliberate effort to avoid the male markedness of a noun. Using the masculine plural form of the noun can lead to its interpretation as the generic masculine, which may be perceived as more neutral.

(23) *A tam jsme právě řešili, že doma dohromady nejíme lepek, protože P3 jsou [Pl] bezlepkáři [GenMascPl].*

'And that's where we were discussing that neither of us eats gluten at home, because P3 eats gluten-free (lit. are gluten-free individuals).'

There are some other notable instances that could be interpreted as P1 avoiding gender-markedness in certain utterances. P1 utilizes the word *člověk* 'person' in the manner described in the section 'Avoiding gender-marked words and phrases wherever possible', tying the gender-marked words to it, thus effectively downplaying their gender-markedness by making it arbitrary (ex. 24). Some evidence of using English substitution to replace an originally gender-marked word is also present (ex. 25).

(24) *Kterou ty jako člověk, který je právě dohnaný...*

'Which you as a person, who is forced to...'

(25) *Jestli by byli třeba úplně open...*

'If they were totally open to it, for instance...'

No instance of P1 using the grammatical feminine has been observed in reference to any nonbinary individuals, whether they were present or not. The only exception

to this pattern is when declining his partner's nickname – a diminutive form of P3's chosen name – which is observed to be declined unambiguously as feminine. When later asked about this, P1 explained that he treats this nickname (in ex. 26 replaced by *Nikola*, a pseudonym morphologically similar to the original) as a common noun it resembles, rather than a personal name, and thus declines it in the feminine form arbitrarily. The feminine dative form takes on the ending *-e*, while the masculine ending would be *-ovi*.

- (26) *Co? Jo šestnáct dokonce! Když **Nikole** [FemDAT] bylo šestnáct.*
 'What? Oh sixteen, even! When Nikola was sixteen.'

Regardless of whether he is using third-person plural or gender-unmarked singular terms to refer to an individual, when it comes to names, a nonbinary person's chosen name is habitually not declined in P1's utterances, even in instances where masculine names or certain feminine names would typically be declined. This practice is maintained even when a name is distinctly masculine. This occurs in reference to R (illustrated in ex. 27 using the masculine pseudonym *Marcus*), P3 (illustrated in ex. 28 using the gender-neutral pseudonym *Charlie*), and other nonbinary individuals as well. In example 29, P1 demonstrates a potential effort to avoid gender marking in name declension by relocating the name from its more typical position as a premodifier within a phrase to a postmodifier position. This adjustment is made to preserve a more neutral-sounding case form.

- (27) *Ano, snažím se **Marcus** [ACC] konvertovat na Arkham Horror.*
 'Yes, I am trying to convert Marcus to Arkham Horror.'

- (28) *Já si myslím, že u mě to možná vychází v tom, že se snažím **Charlie** [DAT] nechat nějakou queer agency.*
 'I think that for me, it's mostly caused by the fact that I try to leave Charlie some queer agency.'

- (29) *Máti od **Charlie***
 'Lit. Mom of Charlie'

While retaining the nominative form seems to be an explicit attempt to maintain as much gender neutrality within the chosen name as possible, as we have previously outlined, this might make the name appear morphologically as a female name. In Czech, even gender-neutral names are declined as either masculine or feminine, and names of foreign origin, such as *Charlie*, either take on masculine endings or maintain the same form across all cases, which marks them as feminine.

5.2. PARTICIPANT 2 (P2)

When examining P2's self-referential expressions, the strategy most commonly utilized entails employing grammatical neuter in first-person speech (ex. 30). This

might lead us to infer that this particular strategy is the primary choice P2 generally prefers. When questioned about this by P1 in conversation, P2 confirmed this to be the case.

- (30) *Jo, šiju si, ale ještě v tom nejsem moc **zkušené** [Neut].*
***Ušilo** [Neut] jsem si moc moc fajn sukýnku ze starých závěsů, co jsem **našlo** [Neut] v sekáči...*
 'Yes, I sew for myself, but I'm not very experienced yet. I made a really nice skirt from old curtains, that I found at a thrift store...'

This strategy of expression seems to be used effortlessly, without any evident hesitation or difficulty. P2 generally appears proficient in its execution. However, P2's use of this strategy is still noticeably inconsistent. While P2 shows a clear preference for using the grammatical neuter in first-person speech, this strategy is often supplemented with the use of the grammatical masculine. This switching back and forth appears on a continuous and unpredictable basis, and grammatical masculine and grammatical neuter often switch back and forth even within a single sentence (ex. 31).

- (31) *Vidíš, já jsem u něj jednou **bylo** [Neut], protože jsem se **chtěl** [Masc] pobavit o... No já jsem se **chtěl** [Masc] pobavit o top surgery, ale já si s tím nejsem **jisté** [Neut]...*
 'See, I went to him once, because I wanted to talk about... Well, I wanted to talk about top surgery, but I'm not certain about it...'

In some cases, this variation may be the result of unclear articulation. However, in other instances, the distinct difference between the two forms is clear. Certain forms, particularly verbs in which the masculine form is indicated by the verbal ending *-l* (e.g. *byl* 'was') and the neutral form by the verb ending *-lo* (e.g. *bylo* 'was'), are articulated with an indistinct vowel at the end, rather than a clearly defined neuter ending (ex. 32). This pronunciation variation makes it difficult to differentiate between a prolonged *-l* sound (masculine form) and *-lo* (distinct neuter marker). This may only be a characteristic quirk of speech for P2; however, we explore this further in the Discussion section.

- (32) *Tak jsem **byl/o** [Masc/Neut], tak jsem... Tak jsem tak jako **řekl/o** [Masc/Neut] oukej, tak já nepřijdu, v pohodě.*
 'So I went, so I... So I like told him like okay, so I won't come, it's fine.'

P2 employed the grammatical feminine form in the first person on only two occasions (ex. 33). Given the infrequent occurrence, it is plausible to consider these instances to be potential mistakes, remnants of prior habitual use of female language.

- (33) *Já bych hrozně **chtěla** [Fem], aby se na mě lidi koukli a říkali si hmm, ten kluk je tak krásný že vypadá úplně jako holka.*

The Use of Nonbinary Language Strategies in Casual Ingroup Verbal Communication in the Czech LGBTQ+ Community

'I would really want people to look at me and think hmm, that boy is so pretty that he looks totally like a girl.'
Já musím ušetřit prachy na to, abych mohla [Fem] nakupovat.
'I need to save money so that I could go shopping.'

There might be indications of the previously mentioned English substitution strategy, as P2 is observed incorporating English phrases that could be interpreted as an attempt to avoid using gender-marked terms (ex. 34, 35).

(34) *Připadám si underdressed.*
'I'm feeling underdressed.'

(35) *Já jsem hodně málo OK.*
Lit. 'I am not very OK.'

Various counterarguments to this evidence could be made, such as that *underdressed* does not have a widely used equivalent in Czech that conveys the same sentiment; this might simply be an attempt to express this sentiment first and not necessarily an intentional avoidance of gender markers. *OK* is also a commonly used term in Czech, and P2 has been observed using other English substitutions that are unrelated to grammatical gender expression (such as *top surgery* in ex. 31). However, it is important to note that an individual who employs English substitutions to minimize the use of gender-marked language may naturally apply such substitutions for various purposes in their speech. Someone who is not already accustomed to utilizing English substitutions in their everyday communication would probably not resort to this strategy in the context of nonbinary language; instead, they would likely opt for an alternative approach.

There are more somewhat inconclusive but notable examples from P2's first-person speech, such as possible attempts to talk around a marked term using neutral terms. In example 36, P2 uses an adverb (*nekvalifikovaně*) instead of a more common adjective, which is gender-specific. In example 37, P2 uses a phrase that avoids any gender-markedness tied to P2, as the adjective (*smutný*) is tied to the object (to 'that') and not to P2 as a subject. In example 38, P2 avoids the use of a gender-marked verb form in the past tense by instead speaking in the present tense when describing a past event.

(36) *Připadám si hrozně nekvalifikovaně.*
'I'm feeling very underqualified.'

(37) *Je mi to hrozně smutný⁶.*
'That is very sad to me.'

(38) *Tak si tam laboratořím...*
'So I'm there "labbing".'

P2 may prefer using the generic masculine (or intentional masculine gender markedness) when discussing hypothetical scenarios involving P2 or R (ex. 39).

(39) *Musíš si sám [Masc] vytisknout štítek.*
'You have to print your own tag.'
Donutí tě, aby sis do sebe nacpal [Masc] prášky...
'They make you force yourself to swallow the pills...'

While this evidence is not definitive, it is highly likely that a woman speaking in conversation with another woman would employ female-marked terms in this context, such as *sama* and *nacpala*.

In the data, there are no instances of P2 directly addressing any other nonbinary individual in the second person in a manner that would necessitate the use of a gender-marked term. Therefore, it is not possible to clearly determine P2's preferences in this regard. P2 has also not consistently made references to any other nonbinary individuals in the third person, making it difficult to assess their inclination or preference when addressing unknown individuals within this category.

6. DISCUSSION

The data clearly supports the notion that each speaker has their own preferred strategies that they tend to default to and appear most comfortable using, which is consistent with the findings of Wehle (2020) and Kolek (2022). This might be influenced by their individual preferences or by those of other nonbinary individuals with whom they regularly interact. For P1, for example, his inclination towards using third-person plural, interspersed with masculine singular in both the third and primarily second person, seems to be influenced by the preferences of his partner and others he regularly interacts with.

Even though a speaker may have a preferred strategy, they will make an effort to adjust their speech when interacting with someone whose preferred form of address differs from their usual strategy. P1 does not typically use the neuter singular form in the second person when interacting with other nonbinary people who do not prefer this form. However, upon learning of P2's preference, P1 began using it. This effort to respect personal preferences extends to the third person as well, even when the individual whose preferred reference strategy differs from P1's most common one is not present, although P1 does occasionally make some mistakes in execution. This adjustment is also applied across languages. From P1's usage, we can infer that P1 regards third-person plural forms as equivalent to the *they* pronoun in English, and grammatical neuter as equivalent to the *it* pronoun.

It is not always the case that one user exclusively prefers a single strategy. Users may combine various strategies, or find multiple strategies acceptable for address and reference. There might be many reasons for

6 Note that the adjective form used by P2 is not standard Czech but rather a dialect (as the standard form paired with *to* would be *smutné*).

this – the alternation might be a deliberate choice, as previously stated, or result from the difficulty of execution of a certain strategy, or problems with its implementation across different grammatical persons and cases. As explained, someone who prefers to be referred to in the third-person plural will probably employ a different strategy than the first-person plural when expressing themselves in the first person, as this direct equivalent could be seen as the ‘royal we’. Similarly, they may have a different preference for second-person address (see also the honorifics issue in Czech and Slovak).

Speakers can be seen switching between strategies not only based on the grammatical need (such as the third versus first-person issue), but also seemingly without apparent reason, often back and forth within a single sentence. It is possible that some alternations, especially between the masculine verb ending (-l) and the neutral verb ending (-lo) in the past tense, might be attributed to either unintentionally unclear pronunciation or intentional obfuscation as a means of neutral expression. While the masculine -l is grammatically a male-marked ending, in the context of spoken language as it unfolds in time, this ending is essentially a non-choice. It is only when one reaches the end of a past tense verb, such as *chtěl* ‘wanted’, that one makes a gender-marking decision – whether to leave it as it is (i.e. masculine form) or add -o or -a. Since grammatical neuter in the first person is not a commonly used speech strategy (although it might be one of the easiest nonbinary language expressions to adopt and consistently adhere to), the male endings might serve as a fallback in situations where speech flows quickly, emotions run high, or for other moment-specific reasons. The masculine and the neutral forms may be emotionally equivalent to an AFAB speaker specifically because these terms are non-feminine: expressing oneself using the grammatical feminine may trigger one’s physical or social gender dysphoria, in which case any language expression that does not signify femaleness is acceptable.

The masculine language here might further counteract the nonbinary individual’s perceived feminine appearance, resulting in the construction of a language-transcendent form of androgyny that we have alluded to in earlier sections. The individual might gravitate towards the use of male language in an attempt to construct androgyny through the physical feminine (intentionally expressed or passively embodied) and the linguistic masculine.

Names are an important issue in nonbinary gender expression, both linguistically and as a means of identity affirmation. Nonbinary individuals adapt their use of names based on context. They may limit the use of their legal name to specific situations, presumably due to its overt gender-markedness. In ingroup settings, their chosen name is considered their primary name, and additional nicknames may stem from it. Chosen names tend to be original, and some can be even derived from appellatives. They can be gender-ambiguous and are chosen to best represent an individual’s identity and expression (Anzani et al. 2023). Our data suggests that

these names are seldom declined, or if they are, it is often based on the grammatical gender of the word from which the nickname was derived or with which it shares similarities. This practice is likely in place to avoid marking gender through grammatical case forms.

7. CONCLUSION

Nonbinary (and nonbinary affirming) language in Czech represents an ongoing, cooperative endeavour within the queer community. This initiative involves not only nonbinary individuals but also their affirming communication partners. Its goal is to bridge the gap between a unique identity experience and a language that may lack adequate tools to express it effectively. In fact, Czech possesses an abundance of gender-expression means, which makes it challenging to convey the desired expression while minimizing gendering.

Given the variety of strategies employed to address this complex issue and the diverse preferences of individuals involved, it is currently impossible to definitively prescribe a single ‘correct’ approach to refer to and address nonbinary individuals. While this might be helpful in order to popularize and spread the understanding of nonbinary inclusive language in broader society, what is most needed now is further extensive documentation of actual language interactions within nonbinary communities to better understand the linguistic construction and expression of these identities. An interdisciplinary approach from a combined linguistic and semiotic perspective might be beneficial in understanding the complicated issues inherent to nonbinary expression in a language such as Czech.

We have attempted to demonstrate the interaction of various language strategies in small-scale research, from which we could only gather a limited number of examples. As a collaborative effort, nonbinary language in Czech would certainly benefit from gathering and analysing a larger corpus of data obtained from the community in ingroup settings, demonstrating the actual daily use of nonbinary language. While expressing nonbinary linguistically within the restrictive conditions of the Czech language may appear to be an unsolvable problem, the inventive language games played by the Czech queer community are certainly worth paying attention to.

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The Use of Nonbinary Language Strategies in Casual Ingroup Verbal Communication in the Czech LGBTQ+ Community

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