

# Neutralizing Gendered Elements in Language

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Master's Thesis

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the concepts of gender in a social and grammatical context, comparing their relation and how the social is mirrored (and reproduced) through language. Emphasis is on how markers of gender as a social construct are removed, replaced with a more neutral element, or even with a novel element with the aim of rendering the extralinguistic gender of referents less important or unintelligible. With this aim in mind, two surveys were done to ascertain how native Croatian speakers and anglophones achieve that aim in the languages they speak, especially focusing on the treatment of nonbinary people as well as strategies they themselves employ. The results of both surveys are compared with each other, and the overall results discussed in relation to some proposed solutions for creating a more gender-neutral language. Conclusions are drawn on the popularity and willingness to use certain gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language patterns.

## Key words

gender, grammatical gender, masculine, feminine, neuter, grammar, noun class, epicene, pronoun, preferred pronoun, singular they, they/them, nonbinary, genderqueer, transgender

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## 1. Introduction

Seeing how the issues of gender equality, (hetero)sexism, trans and non-binary inclusivity have become more salient, it is worth studying how such social changes interact with language systems.

This paper aims to explore the ways in which gender as a social construct correlates to gender as a linguistic concept, how gender is expressed in various languages, and how speakers of said languages make their utterances more gender-neutral/inclusive. Therefore, the emphasis is on various processes, strategies and attempts at neutralizing<sup>1</sup> those elements of (a particular) language that expresses the gender identity of referents<sup>2</sup> and/or reinforces the gender binary or a gender hierarchy<sup>3</sup>.

It provides an overview of how gender is defined by both society and linguistics, as well as how the two phenomena interact. It then presents the two studies, their methodology, demographics, results, analysis and conclusions. Both results are then compared and contrasted.

## 2. Gender as a Social Category

According to Rubin (2012, p. 883) the roots of the concept of gender (as distinct from what is now termed sex in the sex/gender binary) appear in the work of John Money, a psychoendocrinologist who focused on intersex individuals in mid-twentieth century. The distinction was formulated by the British sociologist Ann Oakley (Rubin, 2012, pp. 887-888), based on an observation made by Money and his colleagues about how individuals are able to express a preference for what we would today call “gender identity”, regardless of whether the individual fit neatly into the (sex) binary (ibid.).

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<sup>1</sup> Neutralization, in this context, includes any process that either removes such an element, changes it with the aim of making it more inclusive or more neutral, or introduces a new, more inclusive or more neutral, element.

<sup>2</sup> More accurately, the elements that express the gender identity of referent(s) when the speaker wishes to avoid doing so (e.g., to keep the gender of a character in a detective novel a surprise), or when the existing ways of gendering a referent within a language’s grammar would be inaccurate or misleading (e.g., using a generalized masculine or generalized feminine pronoun for a nonbinary person).

<sup>3</sup> Be it forms that prioritize the feminine over masculine or feminine/masculine over any other gender or no gender.



Gender itself is a complex phenomenon whose full definition is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, we will focus on Chase and Ressler's *LGBT/Queer Glossary*, which lists two entries regarding gender, though not one defining gender itself:

**“Gender expression:** The ways in which people outwardly express their gender identities.

**Gender identity:** An individual's identity along a continuum between normative constructs of masculinity and femininity.”

(Chase, 2009, p. 23, emphasis in original)

To the extent that gender signifiers are coded in(to) language, its usage can be considered a form of gender expression. Indeed, the very next term in Chase (*ibid.*) is the term “Gender-neutral pronouns”, defined as: “These relatively new pronouns extend linguistic experimentation with nonsexist language. They are sometimes used to replace gendered pronouns when referring to those transgender and genderqueer people who do not identify as either female or male. These pronouns have not been standardized yet.”<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Gender as a Linguistic Category

According to Pišković (2011, pp. 12-13), gender (in the context of linguistics) represents a term related to one type of system of nominal classification, specifically, a system based on grammatical genders and nominal classification. Said system can, but does not have to be based on extralinguistic (social) notions of gender and/or sex, while most Indo-European and Semitic languages do establish such correspondence (*ibid.*, p. 14).<sup>5</sup>

Gender is a syntactic category that can be inherent to some word classes (e.g. nouns), while it depends on agreement with a head word in some other classes (e.g., adjectives) (Pišković, 2011, p. 21). Pronouns, in languages where that word class is gendered, belong to

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<sup>4</sup> Two examples are listed in Chase (2009, p. 24): *zie/zim* and *they/them*

<sup>5</sup> Such systems tend to mirror social notions of gender without necessarily assigning words to specific genders according to social criteria for gendering persons (clothing, objects, etc.). Hence, words from different languages that signify identical or very similar concepts can differ in grammatical gender, even if the culture(s) associated with said languages have more or less matching notions of gender in the social sphere – their gender is arbitrary. For a more detailed analysis of gender on the example of Spanish, see Harris (1991). For an example of how grammatical gender influences the perception of generic concepts, see Kapatsinski (2006).

the latter category, with their gender depending on the gender of their referent (personal or otherwise). In fact, one of the functions of gender is precisely to assign sex/gender properties to a referent (ibid., p. 30).

## 4. Study of Native Croatian Speakers

### 4.1. Methodology and Aims

The first survey was available online via Google Forms in the period between the 12<sup>th</sup> of March and the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2021. It was spread through virtual snowball sampling aided by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences mailing list and social networks<sup>6</sup>. The intended respondents had to be native speakers of Croatian<sup>7</sup> (or at least reasonably proficient), with knowledge of any additional language(s) being useful as well.

The first section consisted of questions about biological sex, assigned gender, preferred gender, age, place of birth, place of residence, level of education, occupation, and knowledge of other languages, if any. The second section was divided into two subsections: strategies for neutralizing grammatical gender when the gender of the referent was unknown or in order to keep the language gender-neutral, and strategies for neutralizing grammatical gender when referring to a nonbinary person (with some additional questions on whether the respondents themselves were nonbinary, knew any nonbinary people, and, if so, how many).

The aim of the survey was to ascertain which procedures/strategies the respondents preferred for producing gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language, as well as ascertaining whether any difference in demographics (especially being nonbinary or genderqueer) affected the preference. Likewise, an additional aim was to aggregate as many strategies from as many languages as possible.

The questions from the survey are available in the appendix.

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<sup>6</sup> Save for one queer group on Facebook, the places where the survey was posted were not devoted to language gender issues (at least not to its author's knowledge). It is possible that this affected the number of nonbinary respondents, however, the second survey had even more nonbinary respondents despite not being posted in any group specifically devoted to queer issues (again, not to the author's knowledge). Most of the groups were devoted to students or questions unrelated to the survey.

<sup>7</sup> Speakers of Serbian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin were also included.

## 4.2. Demographics<sup>8</sup>

Out of 317 respondents, 242 (76%) were female, 73 (23%) were male, and 2 (1%) were intersex (Fig. 1). Compared to the general population<sup>9</sup>, this is a significant disparity, with female respondents outnumbering males 3 to 1 (Fig. 2). Most respondents (247, 78%) reported being assigned the female gender, while 70 (22%) reported being assigned the male gender (Fig. 3). Concerning gender according to personal choice or preference, 288 respondents (91%) reported identifying as a man or a woman. Of those, a minority identified as a man (62 respondents, 20%), while a majority identified as a woman (244 respondents, 71%, see Fig. 4). Of the remaining 9%, nine respondents identified as nonbinary (2.8%), the same as the number of those who refused to answer. Four (1.3%) identified as genderqueer, same for those identifying as genderfree. Two (0.6%) identified as genderfluid, same for those identifying as agender. One respondent (0.3%) identified as demigender.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 69, with most being 19-23 (Fig. 5). The mean age of the participants was 33.2, with the weighted mean age being 24.03, and the median age being 30.5 years. In comparison to the 2021 Census (Fig. 6), age groups of 15-19, 20-24, and 25-29 were overrepresented (three times as large, just under eight times as large, seven times as large, respectively). The 30-34 age group was slightly underrepresented (around one percent less). The 35-39, 40-44, 45-49, and 50-54 age groups were significantly underrepresented (around half of the general population or less). The 60-64 and 65-69 age groups were barely represented, and all other age groups were not represented at all.

According to the 2011 Census (*Women and Men in Croatia, 2021, p. 24*), 16.4% of the general population had graduated from an institution of higher learning, compared to the 52.37% of the sample (Fig. 7). Four respondents (1.3%) only finished elementary school, 147 (46.4%) finished middle school, 108 (34%) had a Bachelor's Degree, 54 (17%) had a Master's Degree, and 4 (1.4%) had a Doctoral Degree (Fig. 8).

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<sup>8</sup> Note that the source of information about the 2011 Census (as well as the estimates for following years up until 2021) is the Croatian Bureau of Statistics's publication *Women and Men in Croatia*, published in 2021 (p. 7 - sex and age, p. 24 - education), while the source of information about the 2021 census is the same institution's published worksheet titled *CENSUS OF POPULATION, HOUSEHOLDS AND DWELLINGS IN 2021 - FIRST RESULTS*.

<sup>9</sup> Although the 2021 Census lists the terms "men" and "women", it presumably refers to gender assigned at birth which generally correlates with the male and female sex. Nevertheless, it still erases intersex people, and even if referred explicitly to gender, it doesn't distinguish between cis and trans people within the gender binary. The percentage of "men" in the census is 48.2%, and 51.8% for "women".

A significant majority of respondents was born in Zagreb (191), followed by Sisak (13), Split (13), Varaždin (10), Rijeka (9), Koprivnica (8), Čakovec (7), Pula (6), Virovitica (5). Karlovac and Dubrovnik were listed by 4 respondents each. Zadar, Vinkovci, Bjelovar, and Belgrade were listed by 3 respondents each. Požega, Osijek, Ogulin and Đakovo were listed by 2 participants each. Locations with one mention included Vršac, Serbia, Sorengo, Selci Đakovački, Samobor, Priština, Prijedor, Pakrac, Oss, Našice, Mali Lošinj, Kutina, Krapina, Đurđevac, Donji Miholjac, Carrara, Brežice, Banja Luka, Bamberg. One person listed a nonexistent location (perhaps due to a misspelling), and one person refused to list a location (Fig. 8).

A significant majority of respondents listed their current place of residence as Zagreb (191), followed by Sisak (13), Split (13), Varaždin (10), Rijeka (9), Koprivnica (8), Čakovec (7), Pula (6), and Virovitica (5). Karlovac, Dubrovnik, and Slavonski Brod were listed by 4 respondents each. Vinkovci, Bjelovar and Belgrade by 3 persons each. Zabok, Požega, Osijek, Ogulin, and Đakovo were listed by 2 respondents each. The following locations were listed only once: Zafgren, Vršac, Serbia, Sorengo, Selci Đakovački, Samobor, Priština, Prijedor, Pakrac, Oss, Našice, Mali Lošinj, Kutina, Krapina, Đurđevac, Donji Miholjac, Carrara, Brežice, Banja Luka, and Bamberg. One person refused to list a location (Fig. 9).

Regarding occupation, the majority of respondents listed it as “student” (227). Teachers were second with 19 respondents, followed by artists (9), clerks (3), translators (3), linguists (3), and freelancers (3). The job of a dentist, customer service employee, journalist and delivery person were each listed by 2 respondents. The forty other respondents all listed other occupations that included none of the previously mentioned (Fig. 10).

Regarding second language(s), the most widely spoken was English with over a half of respondents listing it (198). German followed with 53 respondents, then Russian (19), French (18), Italian (16), Spanish (11), Swedish (9), and Portuguese (8). Czech, Dutch, and Slovenian were each listed by 4 respondents. Bulgarian, Hindi, Japanese, Hungarian, Norwegian, Polish, and Ukrainian were each listed by 2 respondents. Albanian, Indonesian, Chinese<sup>10</sup>, Korean, Latin, Romanian, Urdu, Ancient Greek, Modern Greek, Greek (without specifying) were all listed once (Fig. 12).

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<sup>10</sup> Although it was not specified, the answer likely refers to Mandarin.

When explicitly asked, the majority of respondents did not consider themselves nonbinary (291, 76%), while 26 (23%) did (Fig. 24).<sup>11</sup> Of those who did not (21 respondents, Fig. 26), 8 (38%) did not specify their identity further, while 5 (24%) said they partially adhere to the gender binary. Three (14%) listed genderqueer, the same for genderfluid, while 2 (10%) identify as agender. An overview of the sex, assigned gender, and gender identity by preference of the 26 respondents who identify as nonbinary is given in Fig. 25. Half of this subset of respondents report being assigned female at birth, not being intersex, and identifying simply as nonbinary (8 respondents), as genderfree (2), or a woman (3). The ratio of those assigned female at birth who now identify as nonbinary and those assigned male at birth who now identify as nonbinary is roughly 2.4:1 to 3.1:1 in favor of those assigned female at birth<sup>12</sup>.

When asked whether they know any nonbinary people, 223 respondents (70.35%) answered yes, while 94 (29.65%) answered no (Fig. 27). Still, 228 respondents (71.9%) listed a number in the following question regarding the number of nonbinary friends/acquaintances.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, many respondents who did list a number did not give exact numbers (Fig. 28). Of those who did give a specific number, the weighted mean is 2.684 friends/acquaintances per respondent.<sup>14</sup>

It must be noted that the sample skews noticeably towards young adults<sup>15</sup>, students by occupation, assigned female at birth and currently identifying as women<sup>16</sup>, those with higher formal education, and people born and living in Zagreb.

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<sup>11</sup> Five of the respondents also listed a binary gender in the previous questions about sex, assigned gender and chosen gender identity. While it is unclear what exactly they meant, it is possible that they feel partial identification with the gender binary, or that they interpreted the first question about gender identity as a question about gender expression, didn't take the survey seriously, or clicked the wrong answer.

<sup>12</sup> The uncertainty is due to some respondents in this subcategory who seem to have taken the survey as a joke.

<sup>13</sup> Curiously, this is 1.57% (or 4.99 respondents) more than those who said they know a nonbinary person, matching the aforementioned 4 or 5 individuals who seemed to have taken this survey as a joke.

<sup>14</sup> Again, taken with a grain of salt due to the aforementioned few respondents in the previous footnote. The number is likely slightly lower, roughly 2-3 nonbinary people per respondent (among those who listed specific numbers).

<sup>15</sup> Without arguing about exact definitions, most respondents are in the 19-23 age range.

<sup>16</sup> Although the presence of nonbinary individuals is not negligible, and neither is the rate at which respondents claim to know someone who is nonbinary or genderqueer.

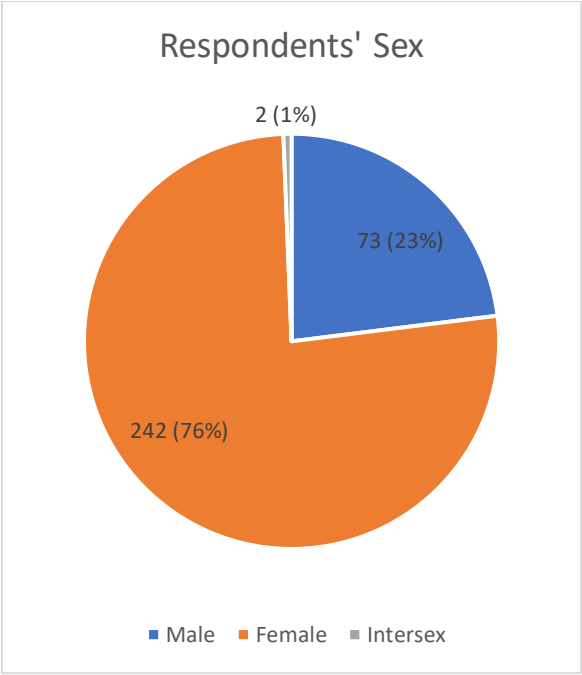


Fig. 1

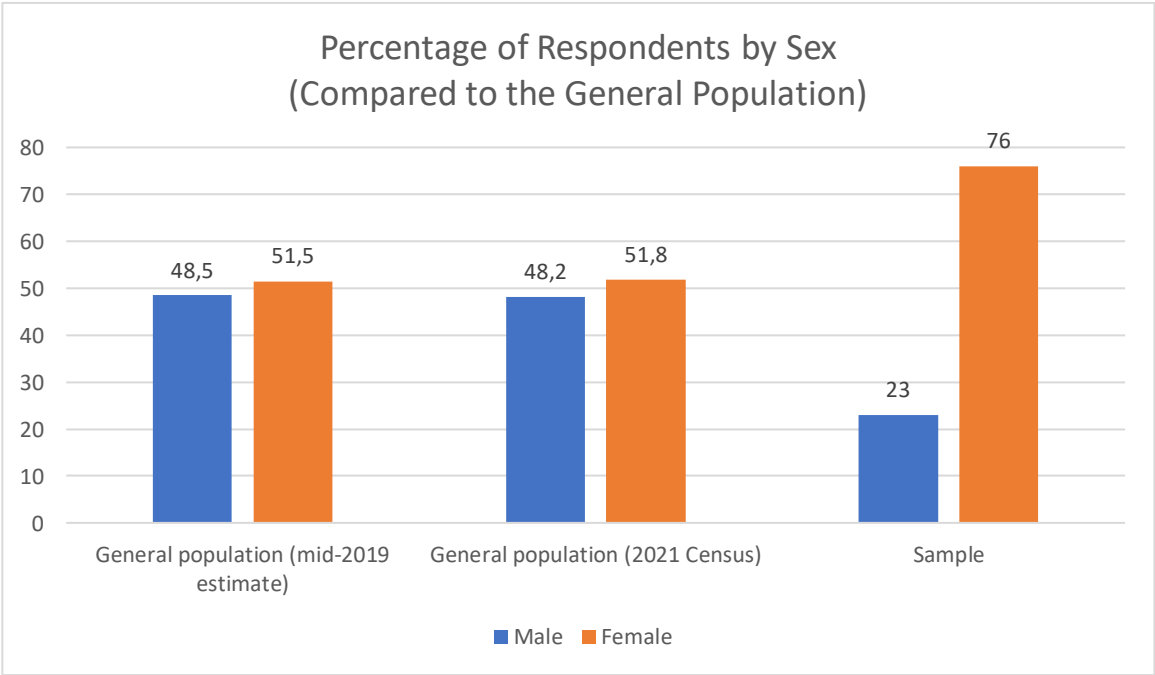


Fig. 2

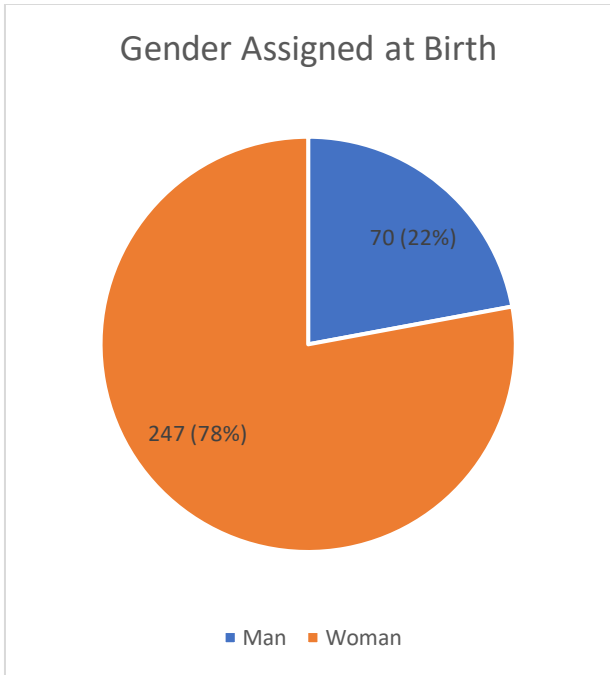


Fig. 3

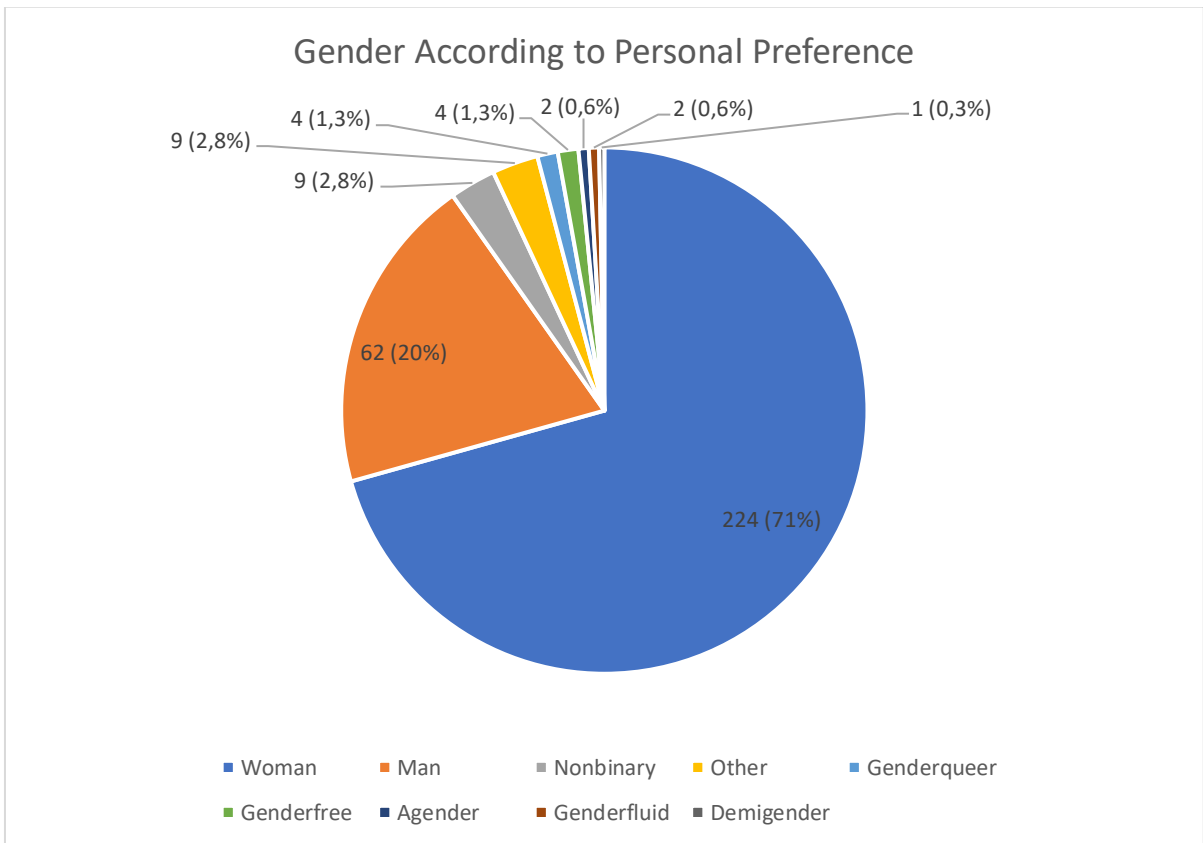


Fig. 4

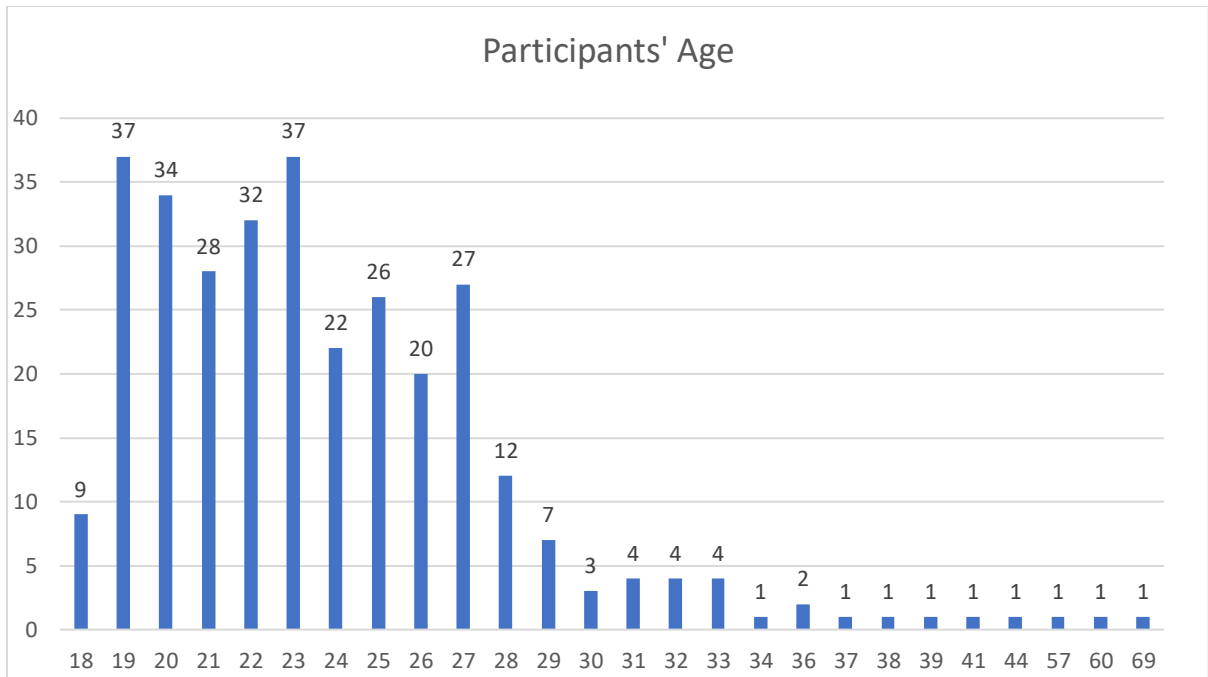


Fig. 5

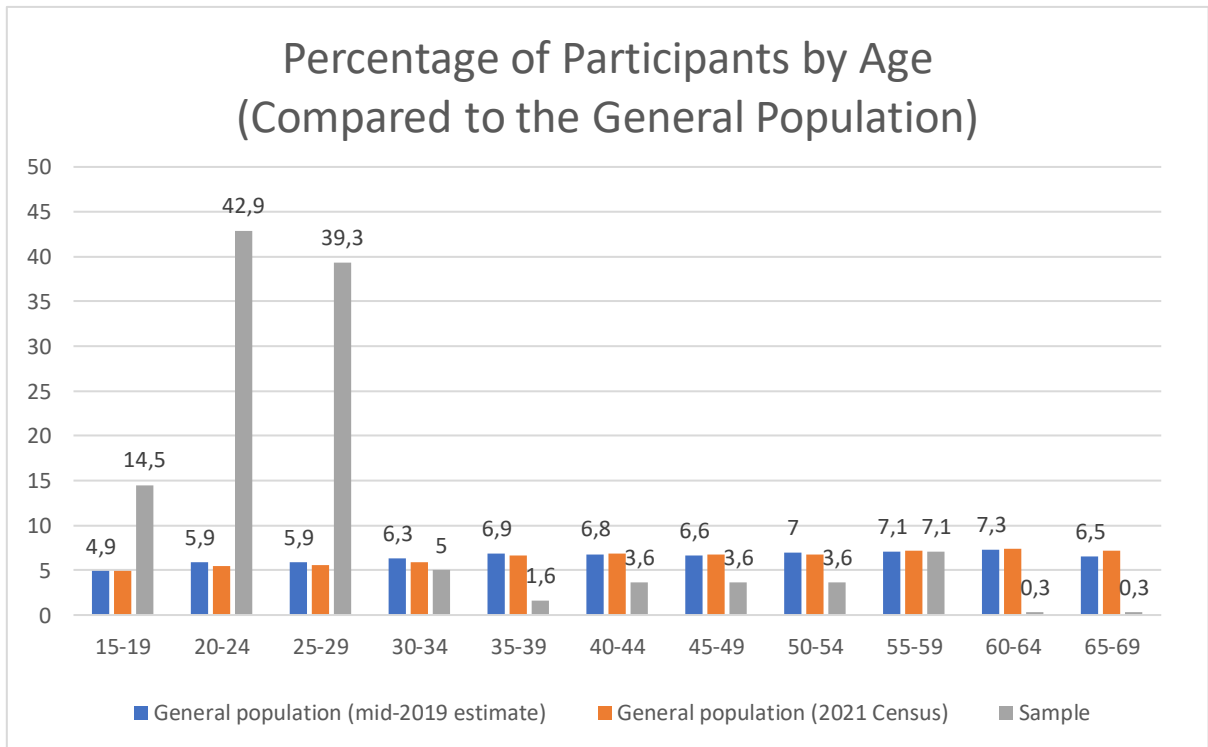


Fig. 6



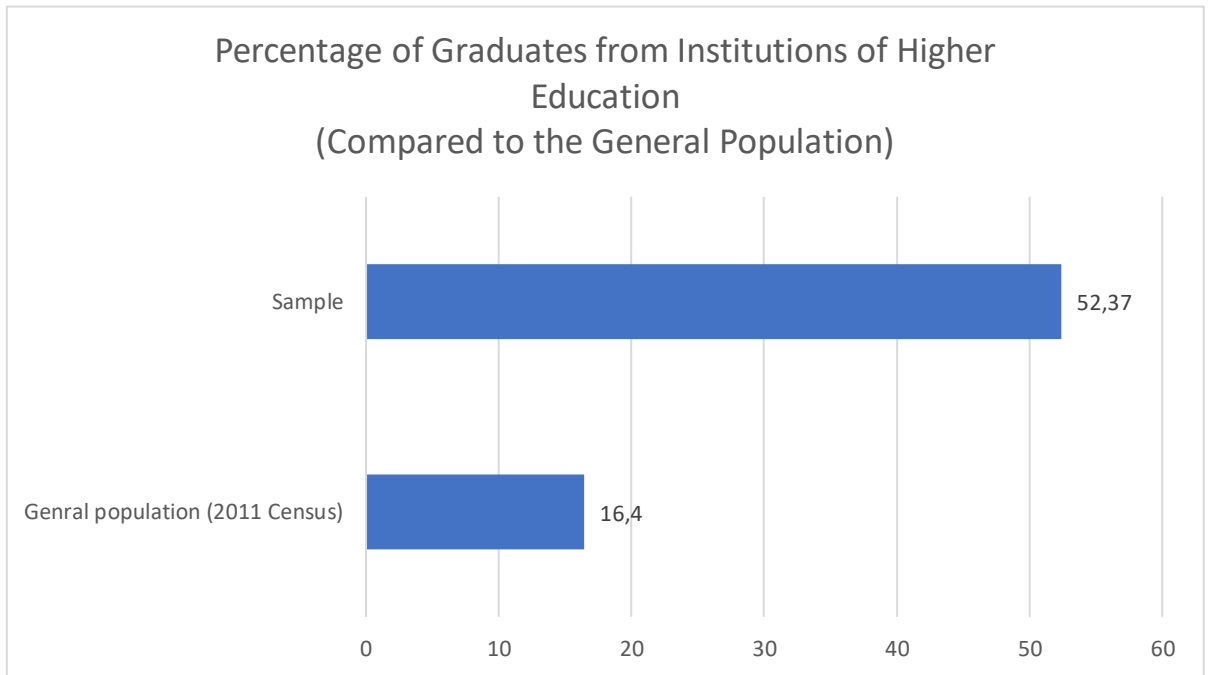


Fig. 7

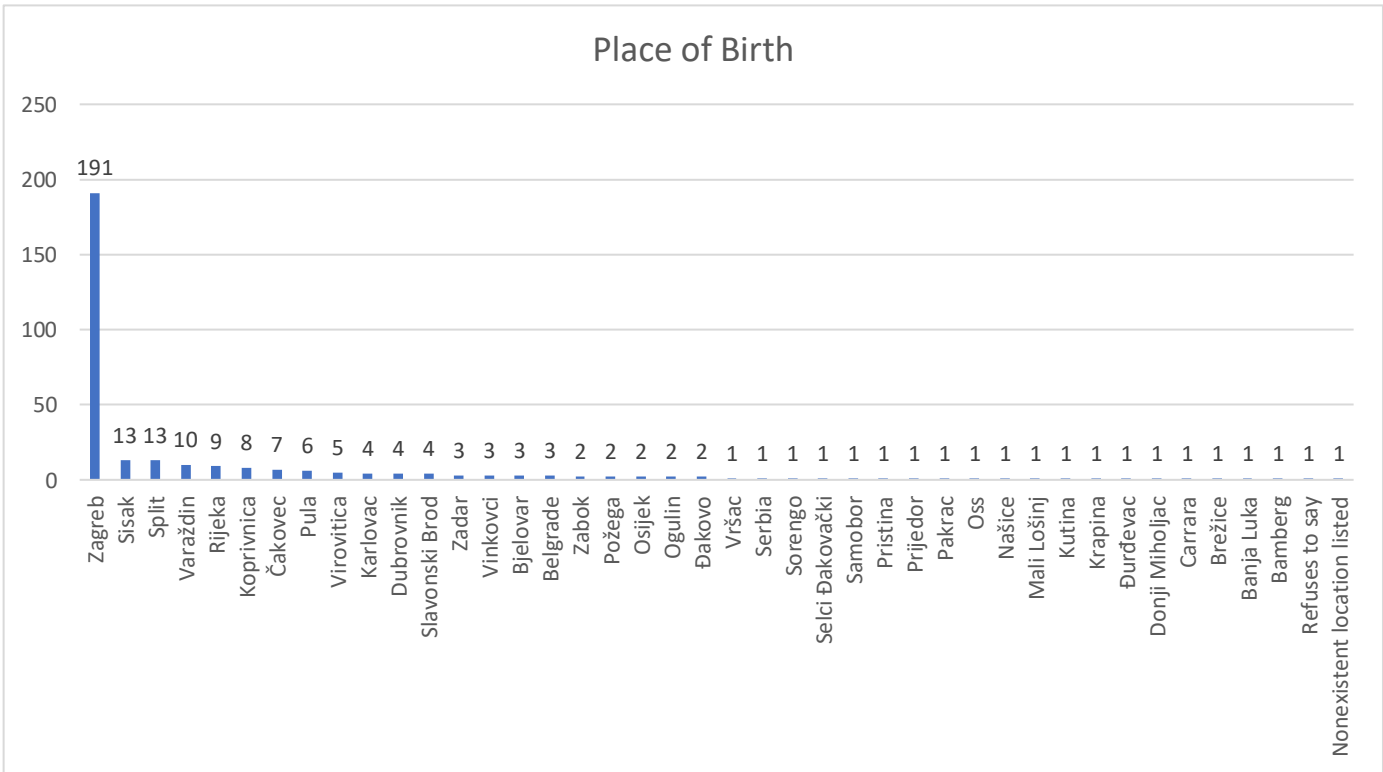


Fig. 8

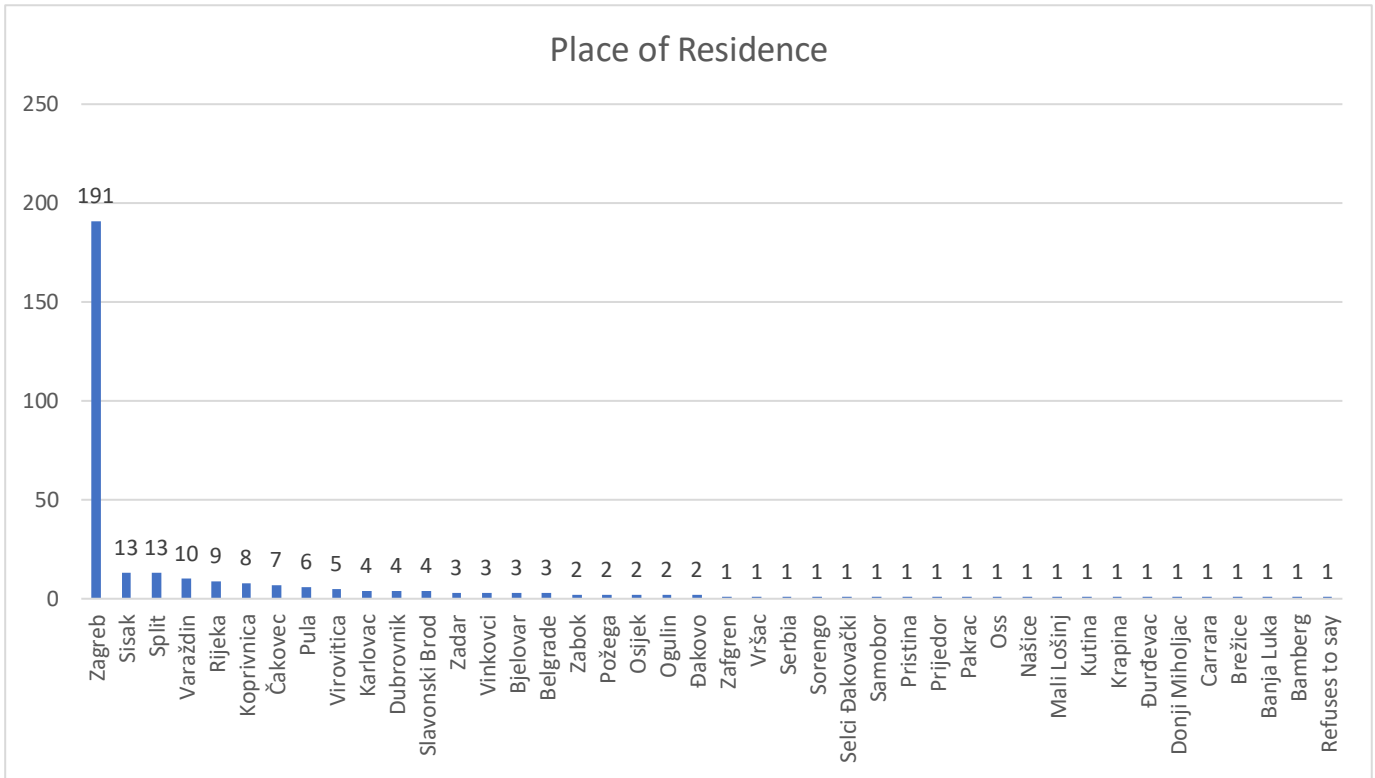


Fig. 9

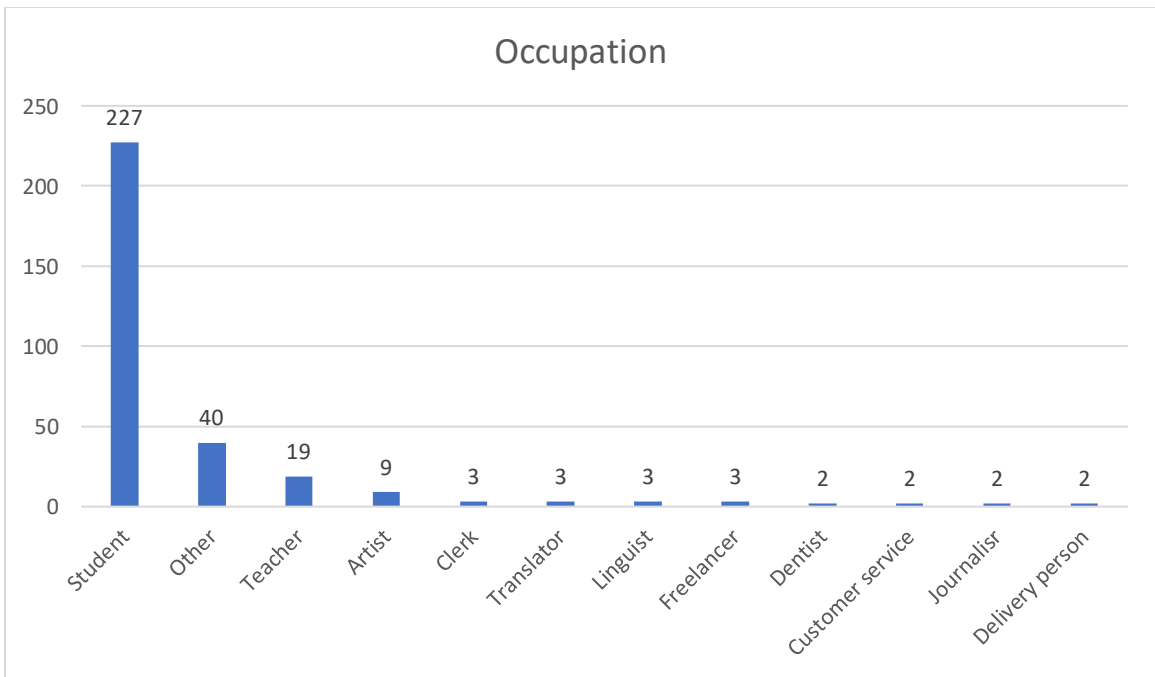


Fig. 10

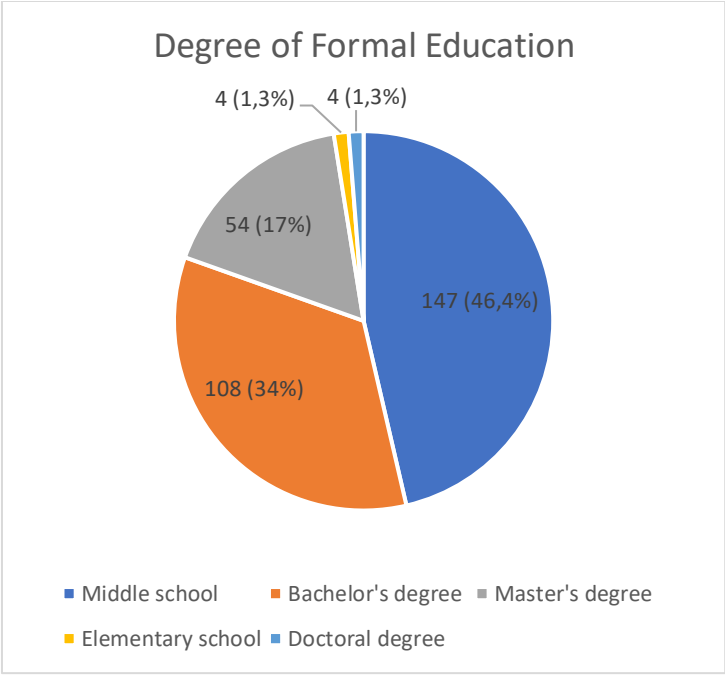


Fig. 11

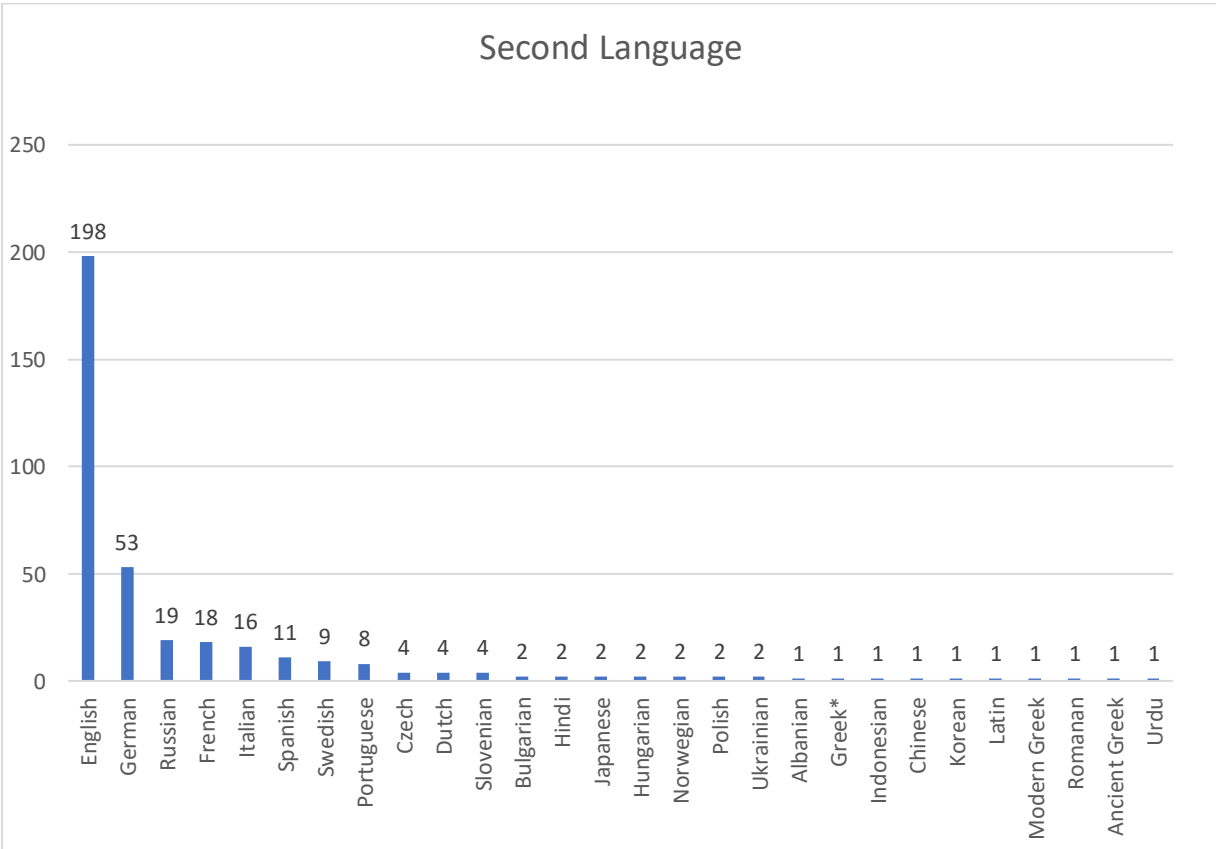


Fig. 12

## 4.3. Results

### 4.3.1. Gender Neutrality in Croatian

Concerning strategies used in Croatian for greater gender inclusivity or neutrality, the respondents were offered a choice of two of the most common strategies (generalized masculine gender and listing forms in both masculine and feminine gender forms), as well as an option of “other”, which could later be clarified in writing. Multiple choices were possible and 187 respondents chose the “generalized masculine” strategy, 130 chose the “both genders” option, and 52 chose “other”. The “generalized masculine” strategy was the most popular single strategy, comprising 50.8% of the total number of selected answers out of the three (Fig. 13). Even when looking at combinations of all three answers, the “generalized masculine” strategy selected on its own remains the most popular (48.9% of all answers), followed by the “both genders” strategy selected on its own (30.3%), and “other” selected on its own (8.2%). Out of combined strategies, the combination of “generalized masculine” and “listing both genders” was the most popular (4.7%), followed by a combination of all three (3.5%). The least popular were the combinations of “listing both genders” with “other” strategies (2.5%), and “generalized masculine” and “other” (1.9%). The full breakdown is depicted in Fig. 14.

Strategies listed under “other” could be sorted into seven categories: avoiding gendered words (28 mentions, 40.6% of all strategies listed in “other”), using the plural (15 mentions, 21.7%), using indeterminate words like “human” or “person” (14, 20.3%), generalizing the feminine gender (7, 10.1%), mixing (randomly changing) grammatical genders (2, 2.9%), using passive constructs (2, 2.9%), using personal names instead of pronouns (1, 1.4%). The full breakdown is depicted in Fig. 15.

Next, the respondents were asked how they decide between strategies if they tend to use more than one. Nine respondents reported preferring to list both genders, seven respondents reported a preference for the generalized masculine gender, six reported preferring to avoid gender entirely/reformulating their utterance, three reported preferring to know the referent’s gender, the same number as those who prefer to talk about the person in the plural. Two respondents reported a preference for using English whenever possible, and two reported avoiding gender-inclusive forms because of the conservative environment they live in. Some preferences were mentioned only once: addressing the person directly, using slang words, explaining the situation if the person is nonbinary, using the word “person”, avoiding gendered forms or using the generalized masculine in formal situations, preferring the generic

feminine gender, preferring the generic feminine gender in e-mails, preferring the generic feminine in speech and using both genders in writing, preferring the generic feminine and using both genders as an alternative strategy, prefers listing both genders in writing, preferring both genders in formal situations.

#### 4.3.2. Gender Neutrality in Other Language(s)

Strategies in English (Fig. 16) were dominated by the use of singular they (82 mentions), followed by respondents noting that it is inherently more gender neutral, even when using a generalized masculine noun (62). Listing both masculine and feminine forms where such exist was a strategy mentioned 16 times, followed by paraphrasing (4), and addressing the person(s) directly in the second person singular/plural (4). The least utilized strategies are asking the person about their preference (2), using the impersonal pronoun “one” (1 mention), and referring to the person in the neuter gender as “it” (1).

In German, the strategies (Fig. 17) included the generic masculine gender (15 mentions), listing both masculine and feminine forms (9), using the respectful plural “Sie” (4), using gender-inclusive forms (3), some respondents mentioned that it is inherently less gendered than Croatian (3), some used impersonal constructs (3), collective nouns (1), listed all gendered forms (1), the impersonal pronoun “man” (1), and the passive (1).

Strategies in Russian (Fig. 18) were dominated by the usage of the generalized masculine gender (13 mentions), followed by listing both masculine and feminine gender forms (4), and the usage of the grammatical plural (1).

Strategies in French (Fig. 19) were tied for the first place with 5 mentions of both generalized masculine gender and listing both the masculine and feminine gender forms. Next was paraphrasing with 3 mentions, the grammatical plural or the masculine/neuter singular pronoun “il” (2), using innovative feminine forms (1), using the impersonal pronoun “on” (1), and using the neopronoun “el” (1).

In Portuguese, the strategies (Fig. 20) included the usage of the generic masculine gender (3 mentions), followed by listing both the masculine and feminine gender forms (2), using the innovative suffixes “-@” or “-x” instead of “-o” or “-a” (2), paraphrasing (1 mention), using the grammatical plural or the pronoun “eles” (1), and avoiding pronouns (1).

In Spanish, the strategies (Fig. 21) included listing both the masculine and feminine gender forms (3 mentions), the generalized masculine gender (2), the neopronoun “elle” (2), paraphrasing (1), and asking about the person’s preferred gender (1).

Strategies in Italian (Fig. 22) are dominated by the usage of the generalized masculine gender (5 mentions), followed by listing both the masculine and feminine forms, using the respectful pronoun “Lei”<sup>17</sup>, using the respectful plural form, and paraphrasing (all received 1 mention each).

In Swedish, the main strategy (Fig. 23) was using the gender-neutral neopronoun “hen” (5 mentions), two respondents noted how the language is generally more gender-neutral than Croatian, one mention was made of the pronoun “man” and the generalized masculine gender, respectively.

Other languages did not have enough speakers to allow assessment of the frequency of strategies, so they will be listed here briefly with the number of mentions for each strategy. Czech: generic masculine (3 mentions), listing both masculine and feminine gendered forms (2), using the person’s name (1). Bulgarian: paraphrasing to avoid gender (2), listing gendered forms in both genders (2), generic masculine (1). Polish: both gendered forms (1), generic masculine (1). Hindi: paraphrasing (1), both gendered forms (1). Urdu: paraphrasing (1), both gendered forms (1). Ukrainian: generic masculine (2). Slovenian: generic masculine (2). Dutch: generic masculine (2). Norwegian: listing both genders (1). Chinese: plural forms (1). Greek<sup>18</sup>: altering the article (1). Indonesian, Korean and Hungarian were each mentioned once as already being gender-neutral, lacking grammatical gender.

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<sup>17</sup> Usually used as third person singular feminine when not capitalized and second person singular when capitalized. The respondent explicitly listed the capitalized form.

<sup>18</sup> Presumably, modern Greek.

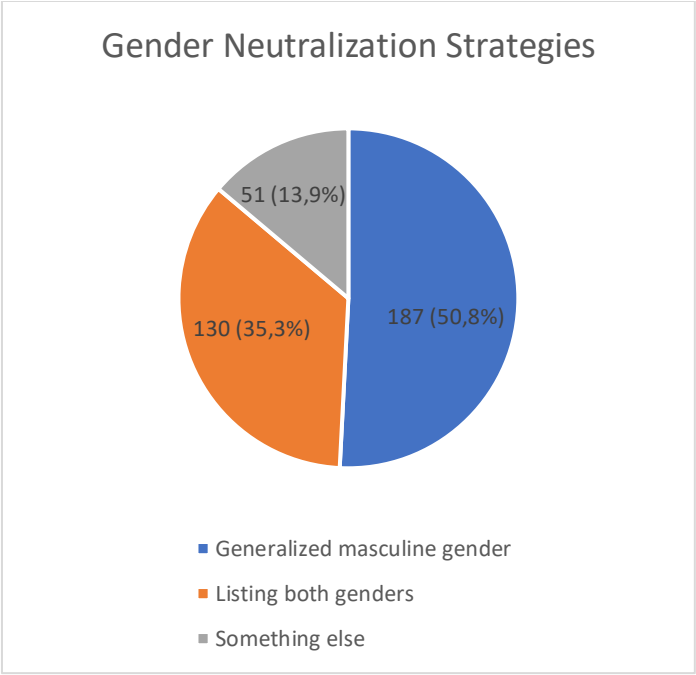


Fig. 13

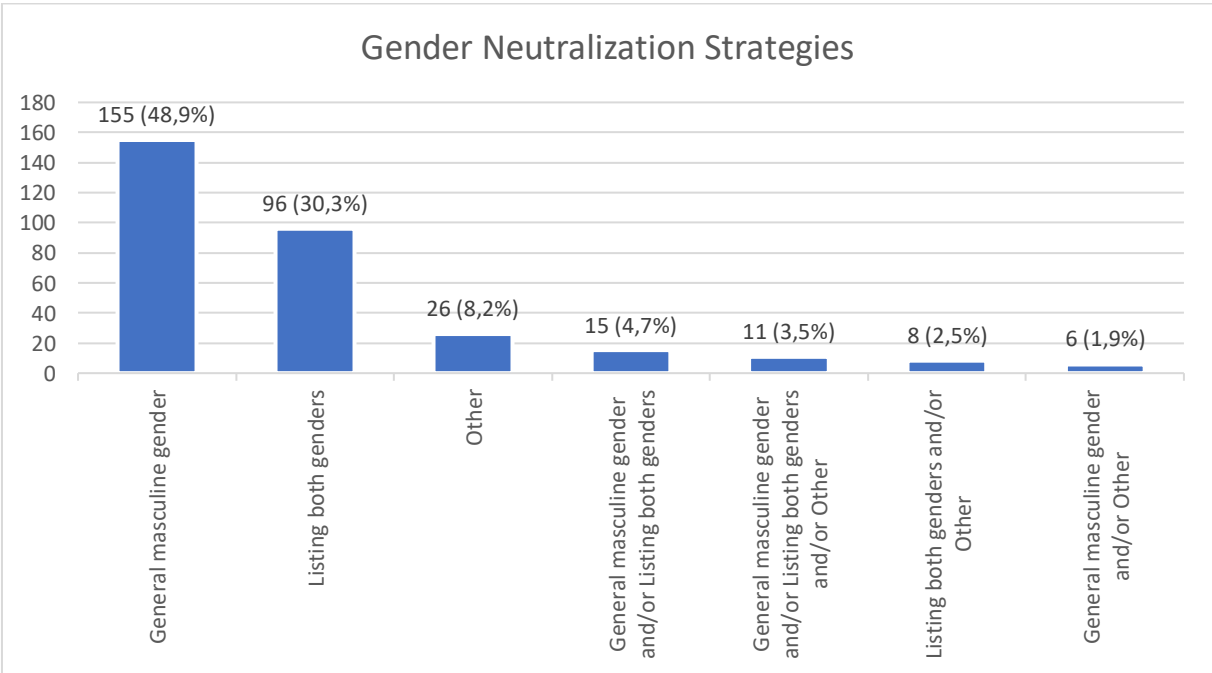


Fig. 14

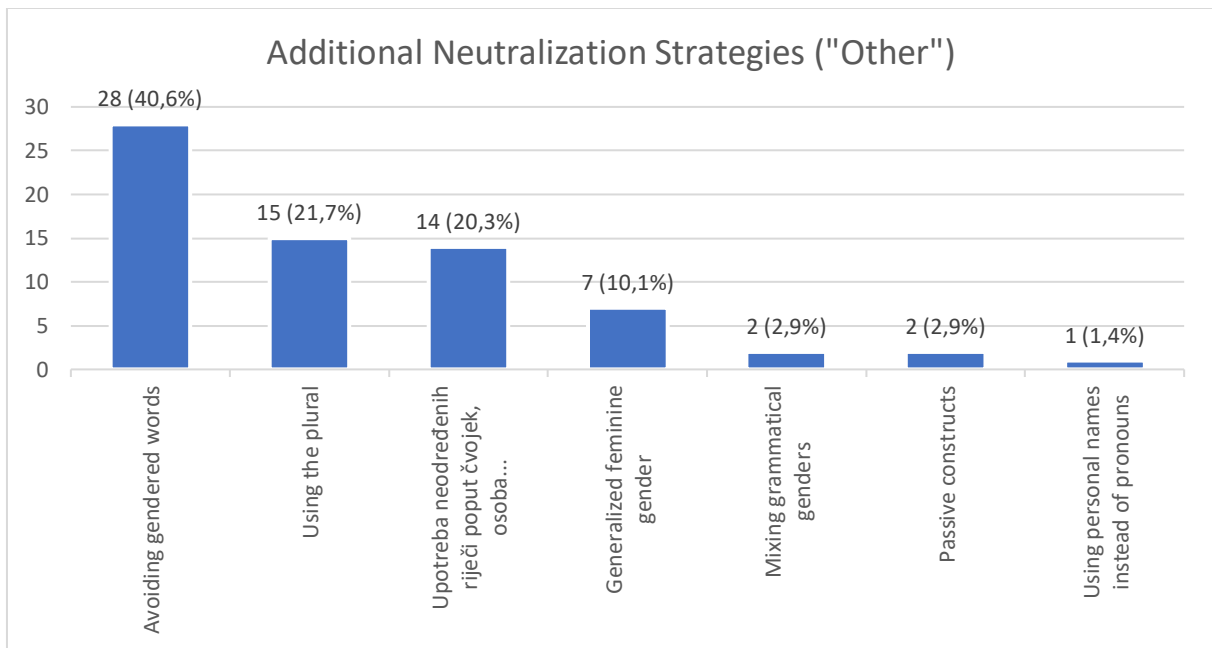


Fig. 15

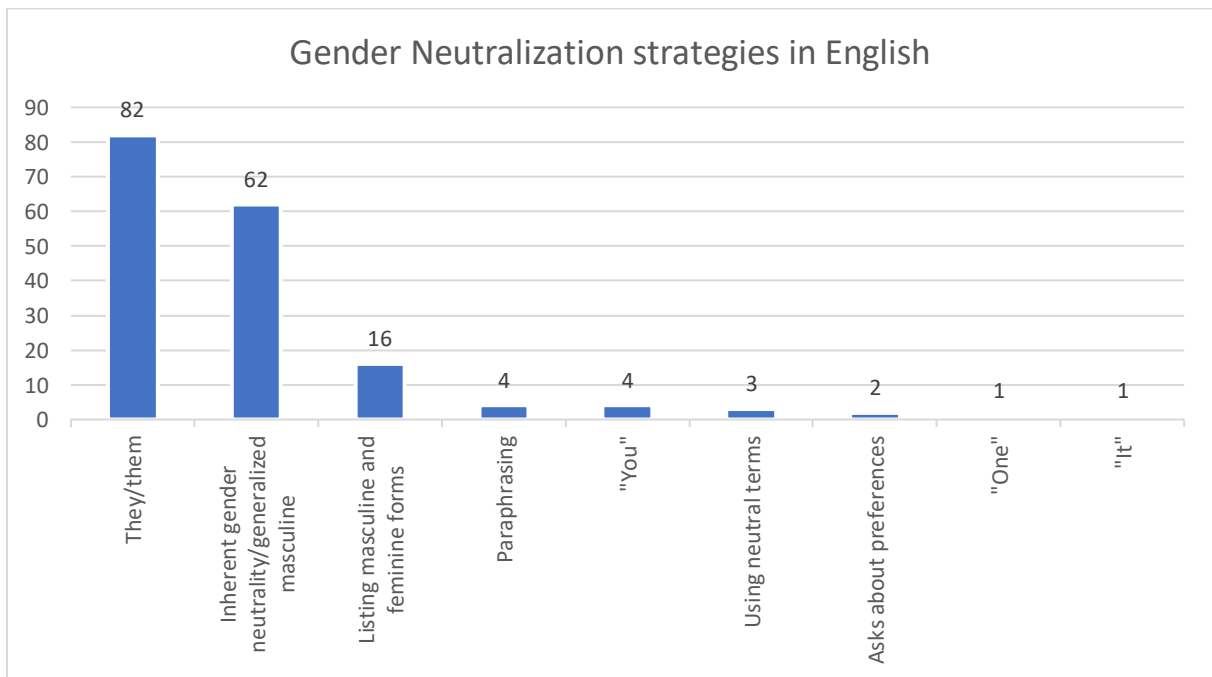


Fig. 16



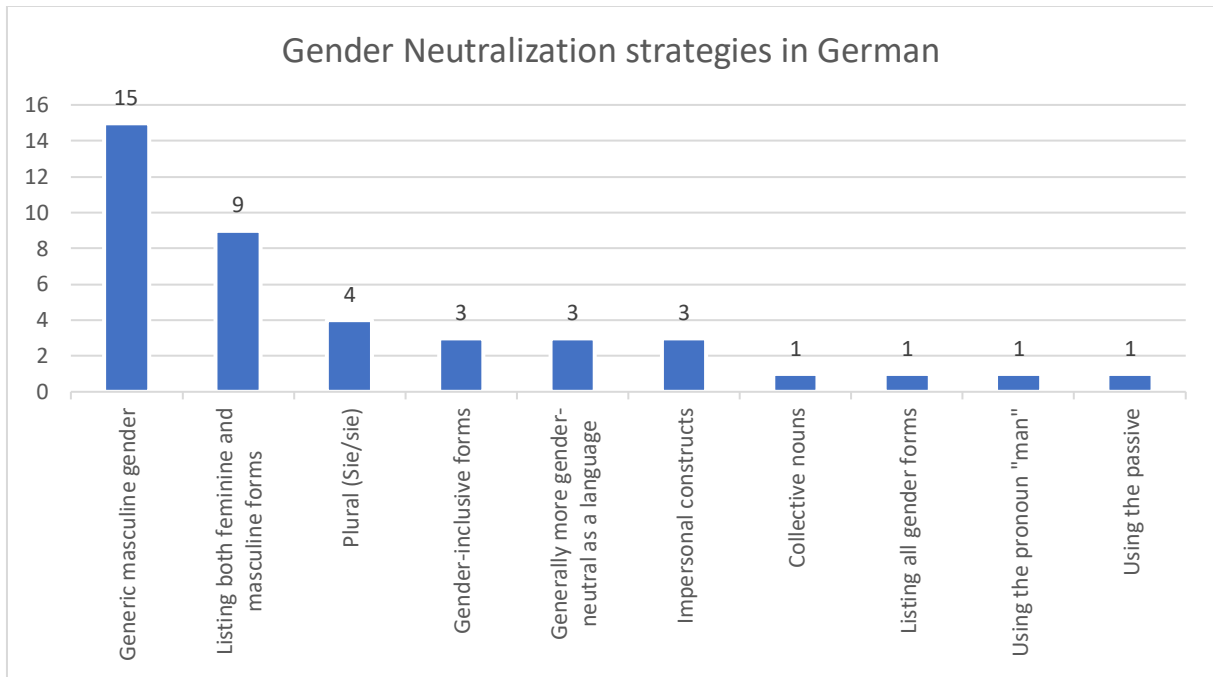


Fig. 17

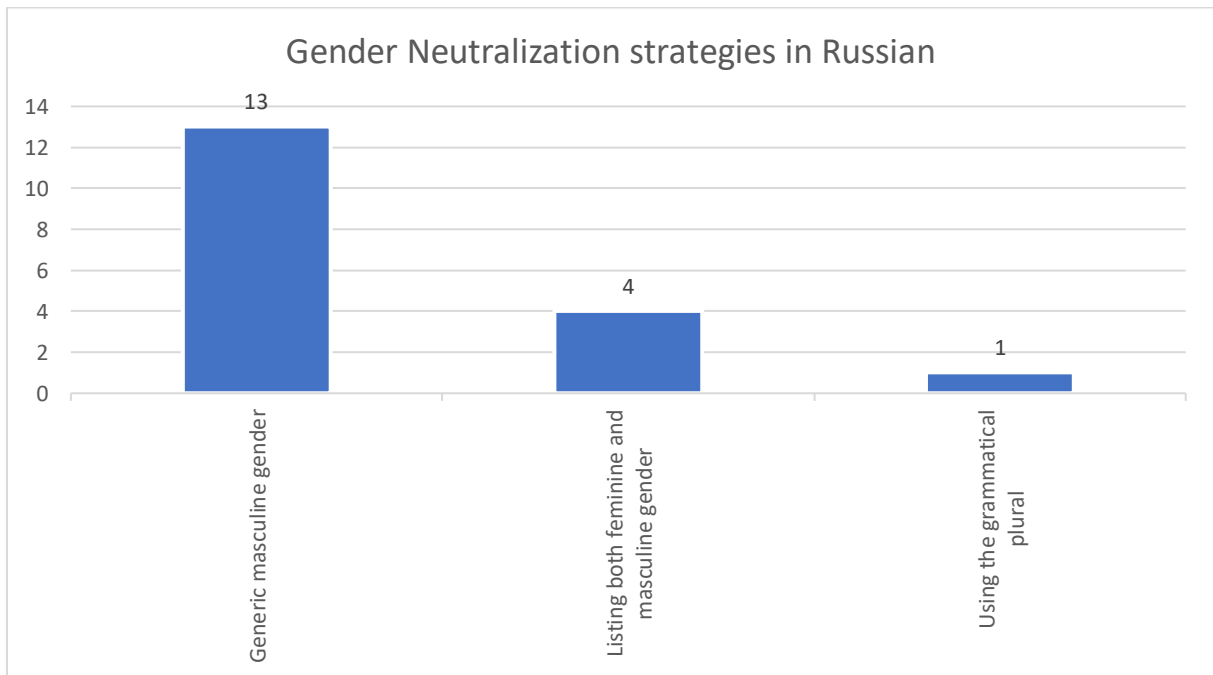


Fig. 18

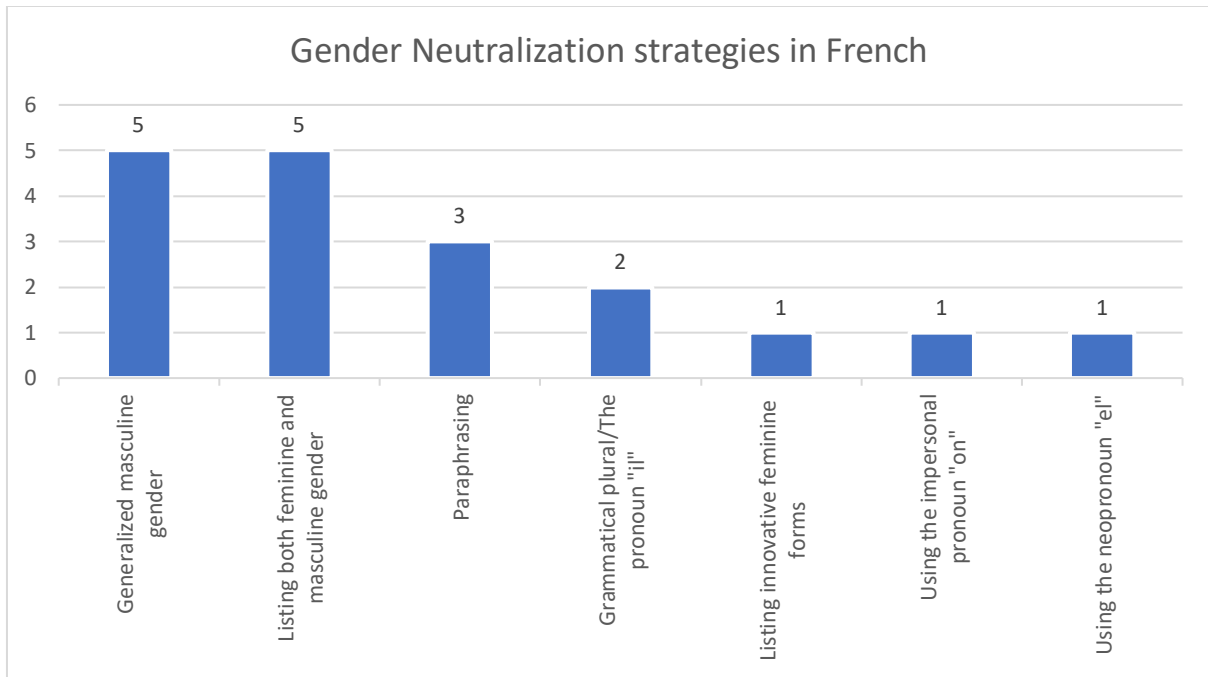


Fig. 19

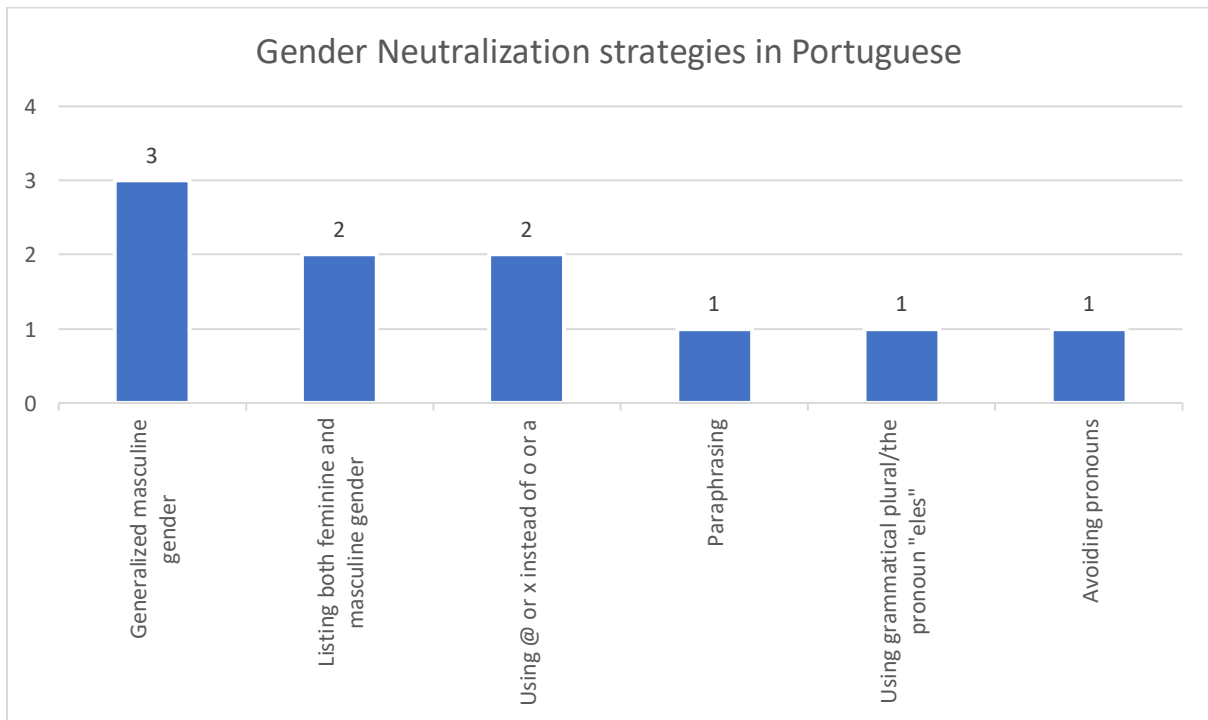


Fig. 20

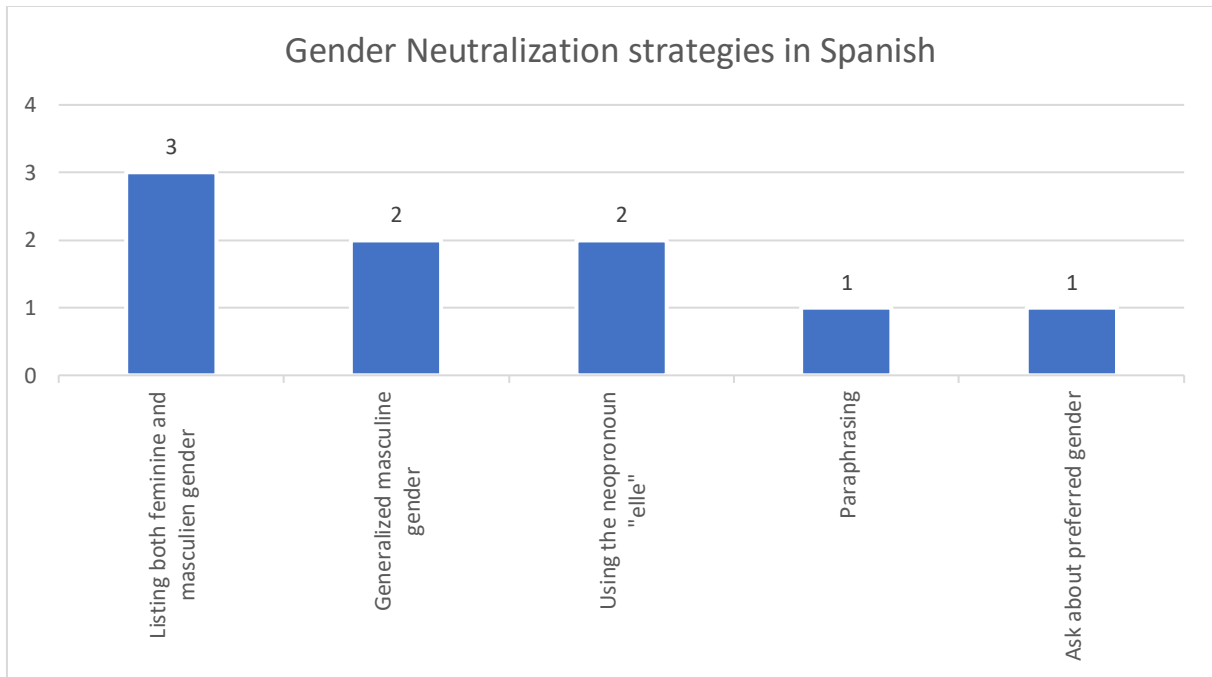


Fig. 21

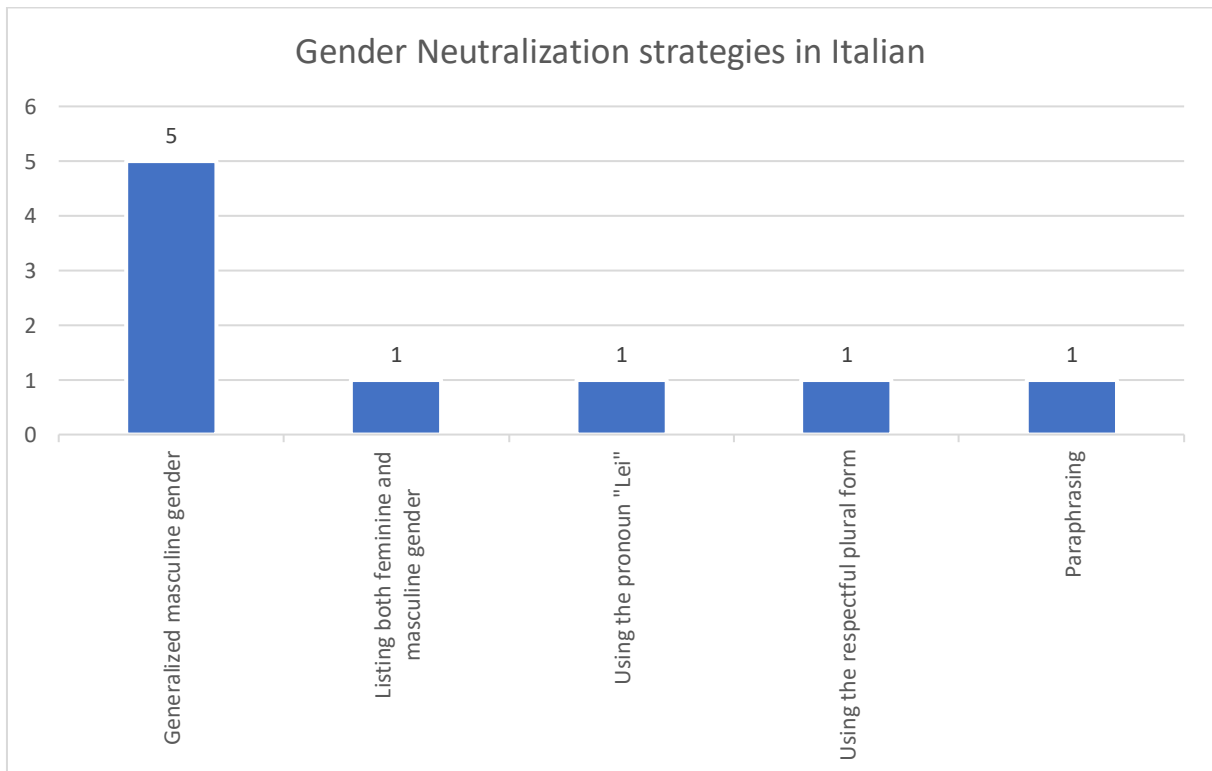


Fig. 22

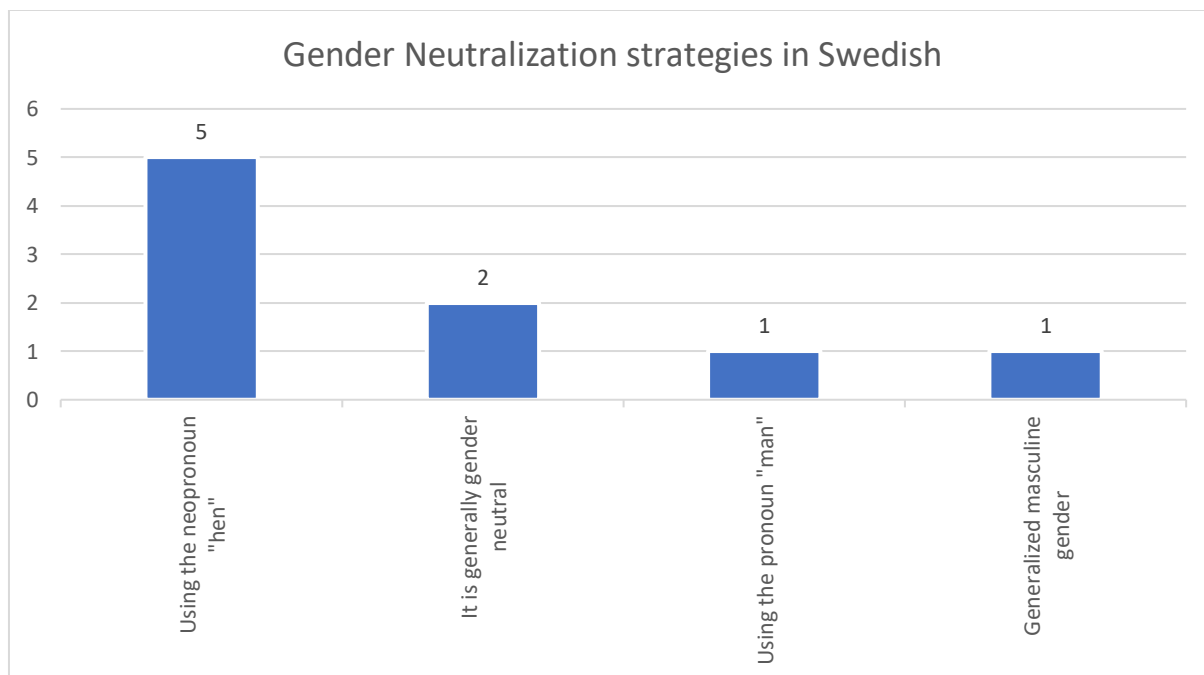


Fig. 23

#### 4.3.3. Referring to Nonbinary People in Croatian

Binary respondents listed many strategies (see Fig. 31), the dominant of which was simply asking the person in question (17 respondents), followed by paraphrases (12 respondents, some examples were given: using adverbs instead of adjectives, using the aorist or imperfect tense, using the passive voice), using “oni” (“they”) with a singular meaning (11 respondents), using the masculine gender (8 respondents), using the English they/them pronouns (8 respondents), using the person’s gender assigned at birth (5 responses), using either the masculine or feminine gender (4 respondents), alternating between the masculine and the feminine genders (4 respondents), using the feminine gender (3 respondents), using the neuter gender (3 respondents), referring to the person in the plural (3 respondents), using the polite plural form (3 respondents), addressing the person directly in the second person singular (1 respondent), using both the masculine and feminine gender<sup>19</sup> (1 respondent), referring to the person as “onie”<sup>20</sup> (1 respondent).

<sup>19</sup> It is unclear from the answer whether this strategy is the same as the prior strategy of alternating genders.

<sup>20</sup> The third person plural pronoun “they” with both the masculine (“-i”) and feminine suffix (“-e”).

Nonbinary respondents frequently made a distinction between referring to themselves vs. other nonbinary people, so their responses will be divided into three subgroups: reference to self, reference to others, and other responses that did not make such a distinction. Starting with ways of referring to oneself, five respondents mentioned using the feminine gender for themselves (with one noting they do not mind the masculine gender either). One respondent listed the masculine gender, one listed both as equally acceptable, and one listed they use their gender assigned at birth.

Among ways of referring to other nonbinary people, the most popular strategy was simply asking them (5 respondents), followed by using their name (2 respondents), with other strategies being mentioned only once: using the feminine gender, using both masculine and feminine gender, paraphrasing, blending gendered words (the example given was “nekie”<sup>21</sup>), following the person’s surroundings (the respondent noted this strategy is preferred in an unsafe environment, presumably meaning an environment that is not accepting of gender variance). Strategies listed without a distinction were: paraphrasing to avoid gender (3 respondents), using the aorist/imperfect tense<sup>22</sup> (2 respondents), using the respectful plural (2 respondents), referring to the person in English (2 respondents, one person explicitly mentioned the singular they), referring to the person in the plural (1 respondent), referring to them in the feminine gender (1 respondent), mixing masculine and feminine genders (1 respondents), referring to them as “person” and the feminine gender<sup>23</sup> (1 respondent), using otherwise gendered past participles without the gender suffix: “gladn/nervozn/bil”<sup>24</sup> (1 respondent), using the innovative suffix “-u”: “reklu”<sup>25</sup> (1 respondent).

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<sup>21</sup> “Some” with both the masculine (“-i”) and feminine suffix (“-e”).

<sup>22</sup> Which, unlike the perfect tense, do not inflect for gender.

<sup>23</sup> The noun “osoba” (“person”), is of the feminine gender in Croatian.

<sup>24</sup> As opposed to the gendered gladan/gladna, nervozan/nervozna, bio/bila.

<sup>25</sup> As opposed to the standard rekao/rekla/reklo.

#### 4.3.4. Referring to Nonbinary People in Other Language(s)

Nonbinary respondents listed singular they as their preferred choice while speaking English (8 mentions), listed English as a language preferred in general because of its gender neutrality (2), and noting that they prefer asking a person about their gender, using singular they if they did not have a chance to ask and are speaking English (1).

Respondents who do not identify as nonbinary tend to prefer asking a nonbinary person how to refer to them (4 mentions) unless an easier solution is present in the language in question.

In English (Fig. 29), the overwhelmingly preferred strategy is the singular they (31 mentions), followed by using gender neutral forms (e.g., spokesperson instead of spokesman, 2 mentions), with the following strategies receiving one mention each: using the passive, addressing the person in the second person singular, using both feminine and masculine forms.

In German (Fig. 30), the preferred strategy seems to be using the respectful third person plural pronoun “Sie” (3 mentions), followed by the use of the passive (2 mentions), with the following strategies receiving one mention each: paraphrasing, using gender neutral nouns (the example given was Lehrende instead of Schuler or Schülerin), using the gender assigned to the person at birth, and using both masculine and feminine forms<sup>26</sup>.

All the other strategies are not mentioned more than once, and they include: using the plural in Hindi, using the plural in Urdu, using the plural in Bulgarian, using the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural in Dutch, listing both masculine and feminine forms in Slovenian, using the neutral gender in Greek, using the gender assigned at person’s birth in Czech, using the generic masculine in Italian and in Russian, using the pronoun “il” or “vous” in French (each mentioned once), using the gender neutral pronoun “hen” in Swedish, using the polite pronoun “Usted” in Spanish, using the polite pronoun “Você” or innovative suffixes “-@” or “-x” in Portuguese (each mentioned once).

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<sup>26</sup> Again, without explaining exactly whether it is a practice of combining suffixes, alternating genders, or something else.

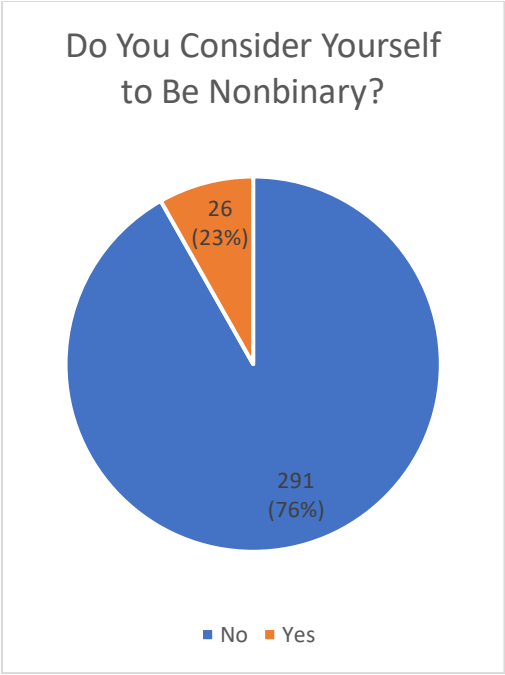


Fig. 24

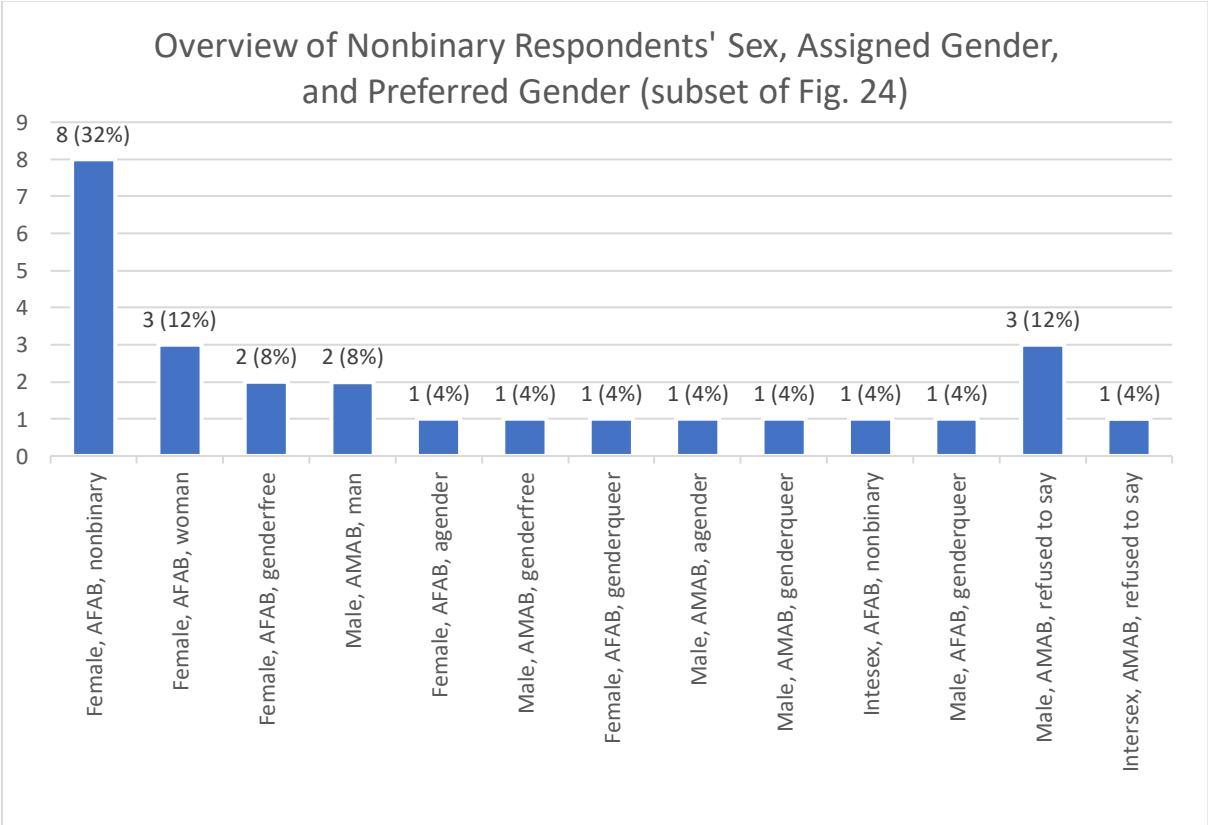


Fig. 25

### Gender Identity of Nonbinary Respondents (subset of Fig. 24)

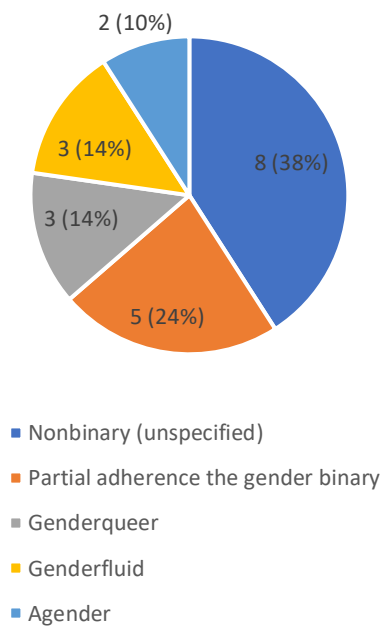


Fig. 26

### Do You Know Any Nonbinary People?

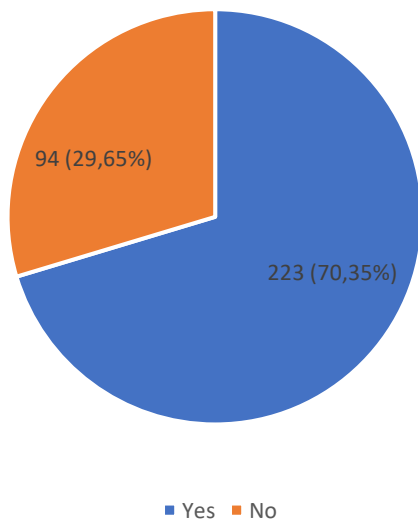


Fig. 27



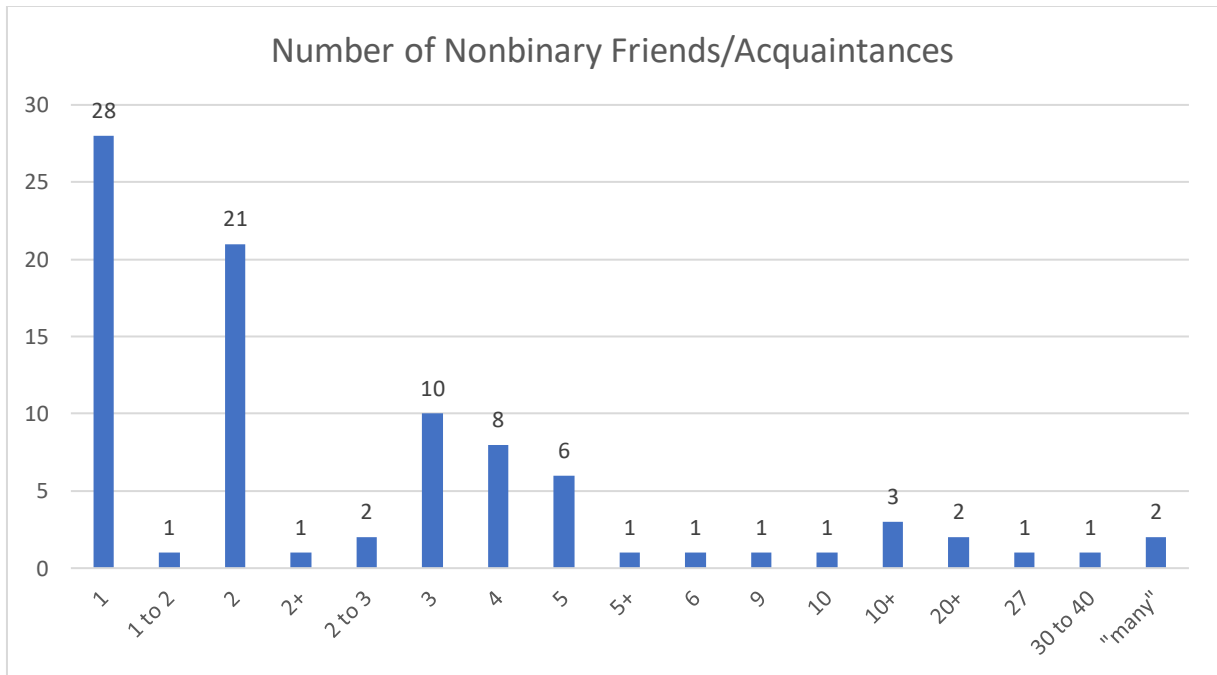


Fig. 28

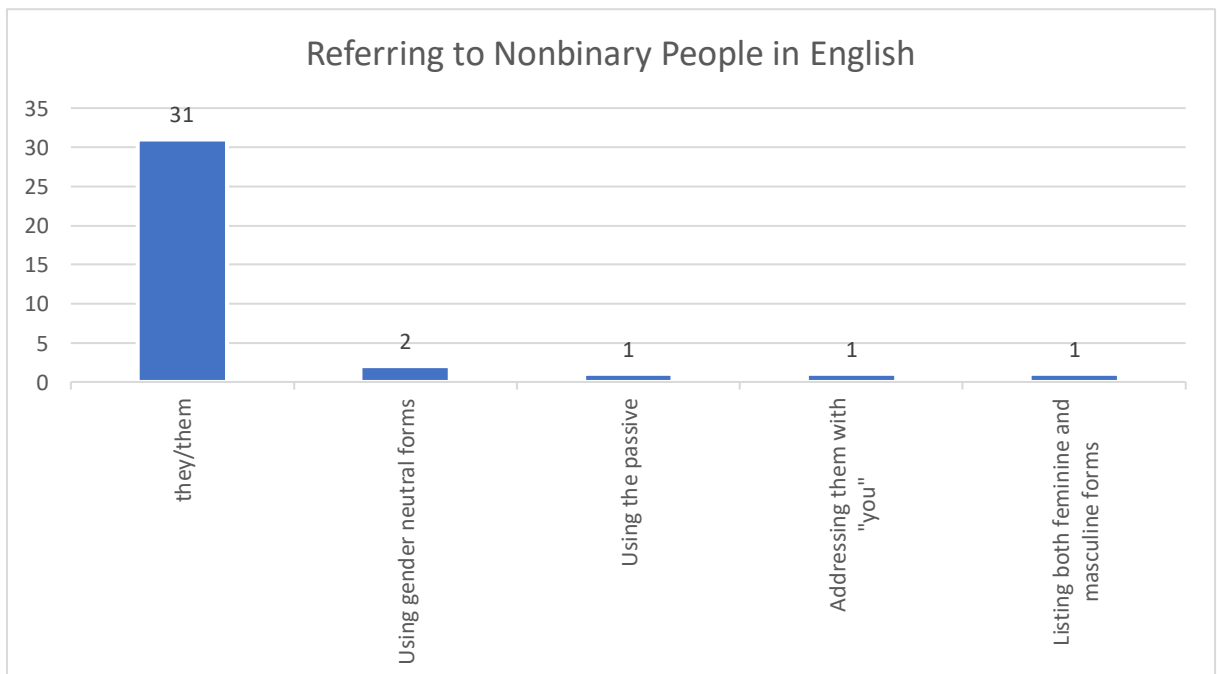


Fig. 29

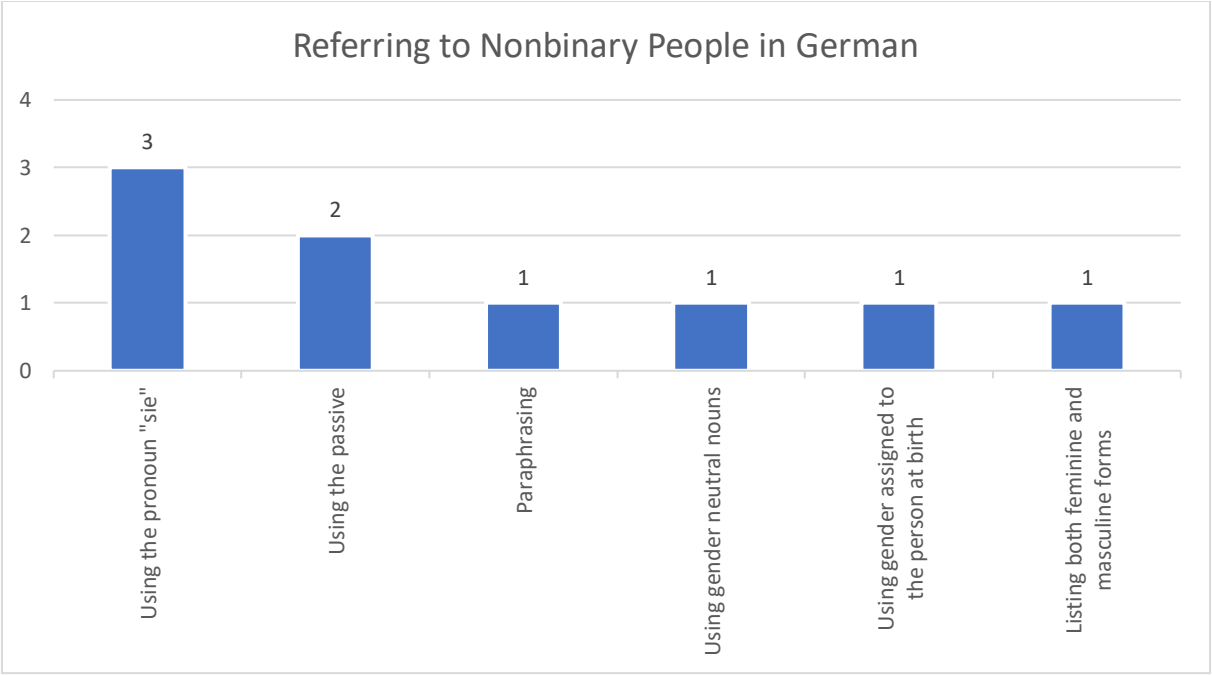


Fig. 30

## How Binary Respondents Refer to Nonbinary People

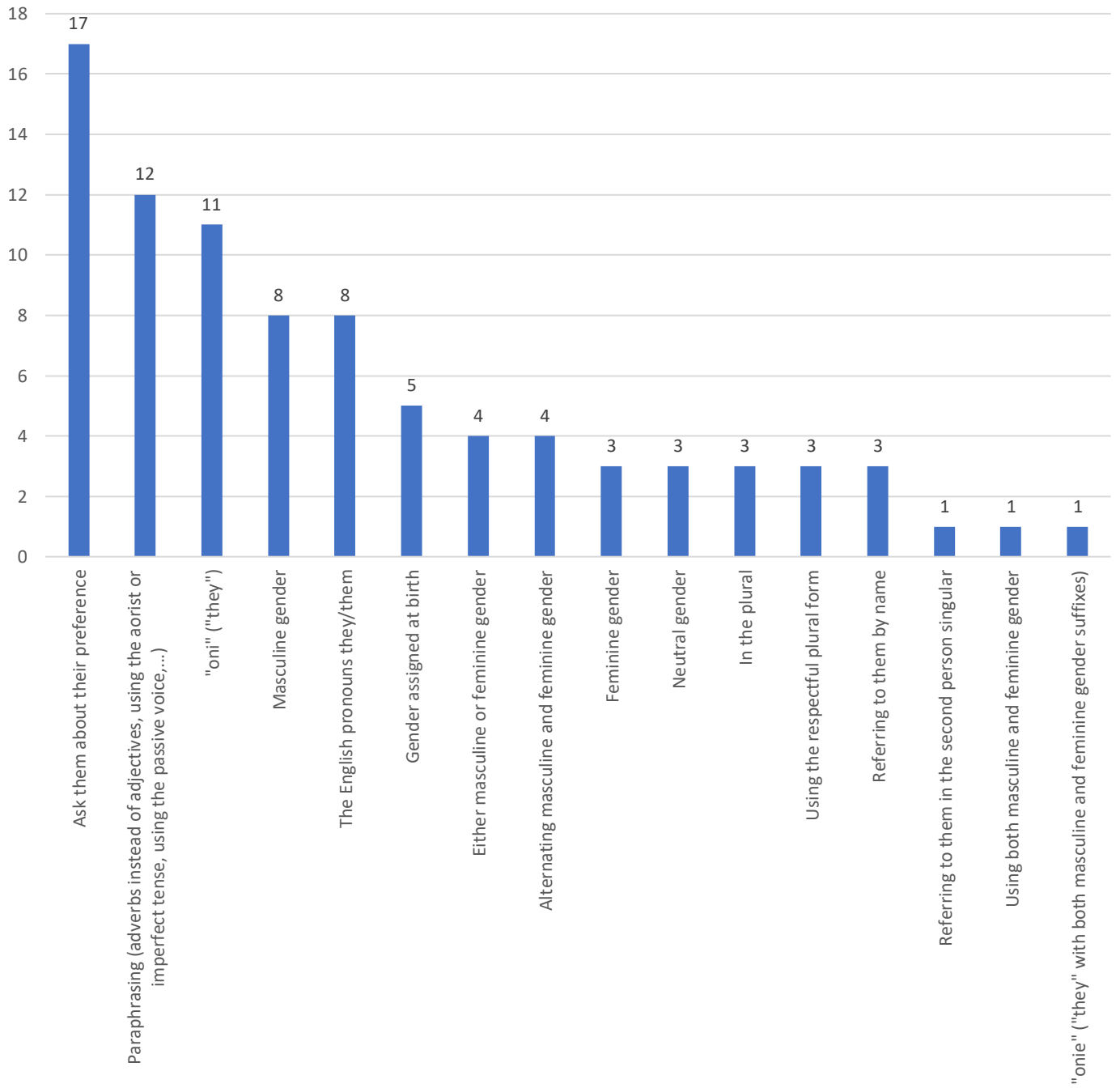


Fig. 31

#### 4.4. Analysis

Keeping in mind the previous caveat that the sample skews towards young adult<sup>27</sup> cis AFAB female university students born and living in Zagreb, we can reach some conclusions about their approach to neutralizing gendered elements and addressing nonbinary people in Croatian and other languages.

When it comes to making Croatian more gender neutral, using the generalized masculine gender or both masculine and feminine gender dominates all other strategies, despite very explicitly gendering the referent. While this is understandable from a practical standpoint as Serbo-Croatian is heavily gendered, alternative approaches exist, such as using the aorist or imperfect tenses instead of the perfect tense, using the passive, or the grammatical plural to avoid such explicit gendering.

A greater effort is present when referring to nonbinary people, with significant portions of respondents paraphrasing and/or using the grammatical plural with singular meaning<sup>28</sup>. Some linguistic creativity is even present in this category in the form of the plural neopronouns “onie” and “nekie” (See footnotes 16 and 17), as well as the suffix “-u” (See footnote 21). Nevertheless, nonbinary respondents report a significant rate of using the masculine and/or the feminine gender for and among themselves (likely because of the aforementioned prevalence of gendered forms).

When it comes to making foreign languages (more) gender neutral, Croatian respondents are well acquainted with the (comparative) gender neutrality of English and the singular they. Overall, the use of the generic masculine gender, using plural forms, paraphrasing or listing both masculine and feminine forms were popular strategies, with some mentions of neopronouns.

For nonbinary people, an important strategy was asking for their preference in addition to aforementioned strategies of using the plural or neopronouns. Notable is the decreased preference for the use of the generic masculine forms in comparison to the prior category of making the language in general more gender-neutral/inclusive.

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<sup>27</sup> See footnote 15.

<sup>28</sup> A strategy that has likely become more popular, if not adopted altogether, thanks to the influence of the English singular they.

## 5. Study of Anglophones

### 5.1. Methodology and Aims

The second survey was available online via Google Forms in the period between the 18<sup>th</sup> of July and the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2021. It was spread through virtual snowball sampling aided by social networks. The intended respondents had to be active speakers of English, native or not, with knowledge of any additional language(s) also desirable, especially if it was their first language.

Content-wise, this survey was shorter, inquiring about biological sex, gender, age, country of birth, country of residence, first language and other language(s), whether the respondents had any nonbinary friends or acquaintances, and, finally, the strategies used in their first and other language(s) when they wish to avoid gendering someone or refer to someone nonbinary/genderqueer.

The aim of this survey was to gather some more data on various neutralization strategies, and to do so from native speakers of languages that are not Croatian. Another aim was comparing the preferences to those from the first study, at least in case of languages that were more significantly represented among the respondents.

The questions from the survey are available in the appendix.

### 5.2. Demographics

Out of 82 respondents, 55 (67.1%) were of the male sex, while 26 (31.7%) were of the female sex, with one respondent refusing to answer (Fig. 32). The majority of 55 identified as either a man or a woman (34 women, or 41.5%, and 21 men, or 25.6%), with the rest identifying on the nonbinary/genderqueer spectrum (again, with one respondent refusing to say). Most of the latter identified simply as nonbinary (18 respondents, 22%). (See Fig. 33) A large majority (73 respondents, 89%) said that they have at least one nonbinary friend or acquaintance (Fig. 39).

The respondents ranged in age from 16 to 44 (most being in their twenties), with the mean age being 27.5, weighted mean age being 24.6 years, and the median age being 27. Over half of the respondents (44) were born and reside in the USA, none of the other countries

having more than 6 respondents born in it nor more than 7 currently residing in it (both of those being the UK; see Fig. 35 and 36).

The most common first language was English (56 respondents), followed by Spanish (6), and Polish (5). (Fig. 37) Almost half of the respondents (33) said that they do not speak any foreign language(s), with the most common one amongst those that do being English (27 respondents), followed by Spanish (15 respondents), French (11), and German (10). (Fig. 38)

Nonbinary people were significantly represented among the respondents, as well as a significant number of nonbinary acquaintances or friends. It is, therefore, likely that the respondents were faced with the problem of addressing a nonbinary person (assuming their language is not already gender-neutral).

Most respondents were young adults<sup>29</sup>, born and residing in the US or another anglophone country (the UK or Australia), making the sample good for drawing conclusions on using gender-neutral forms in English. Other languages were not very well represented and the data can be considered closer to a case study than statistics. Nevertheless, some minor conclusions can be made about Spanish, French, and German.

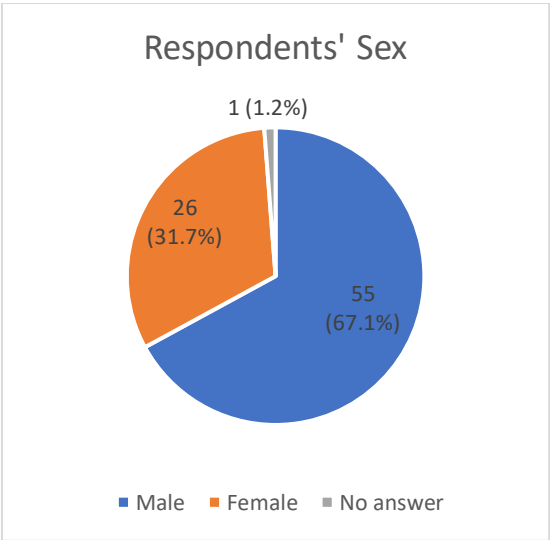


Fig. 32

<sup>29</sup> Again, without arguing about exact definitions, all but four respondents are in the 18-40 age range, with the weighted mean average being within the 18-25 age range.

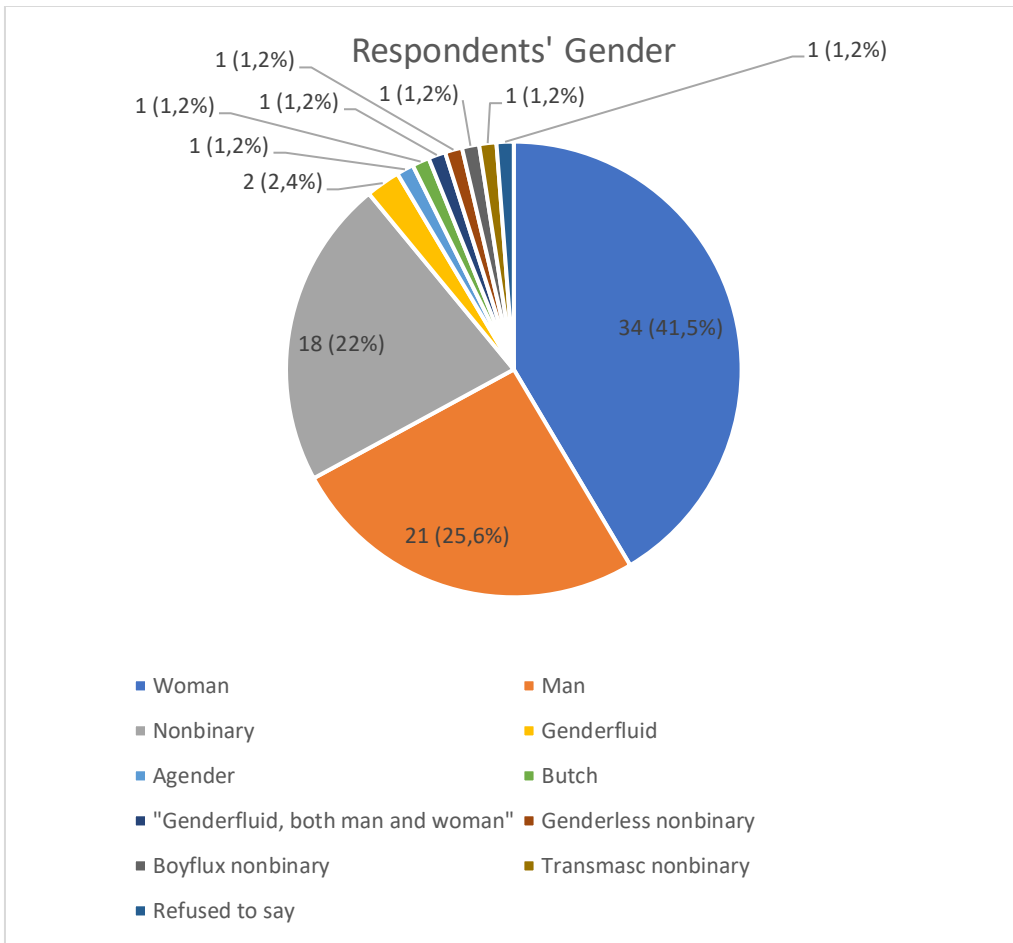


Fig. 33

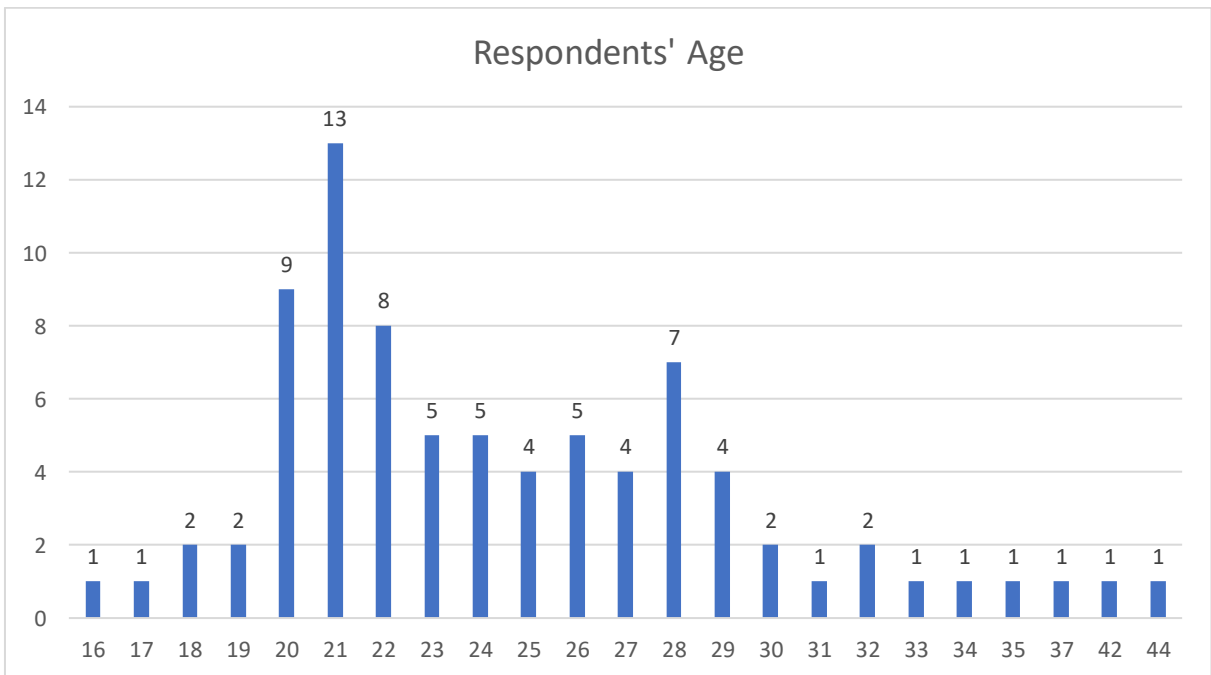


Fig. 34

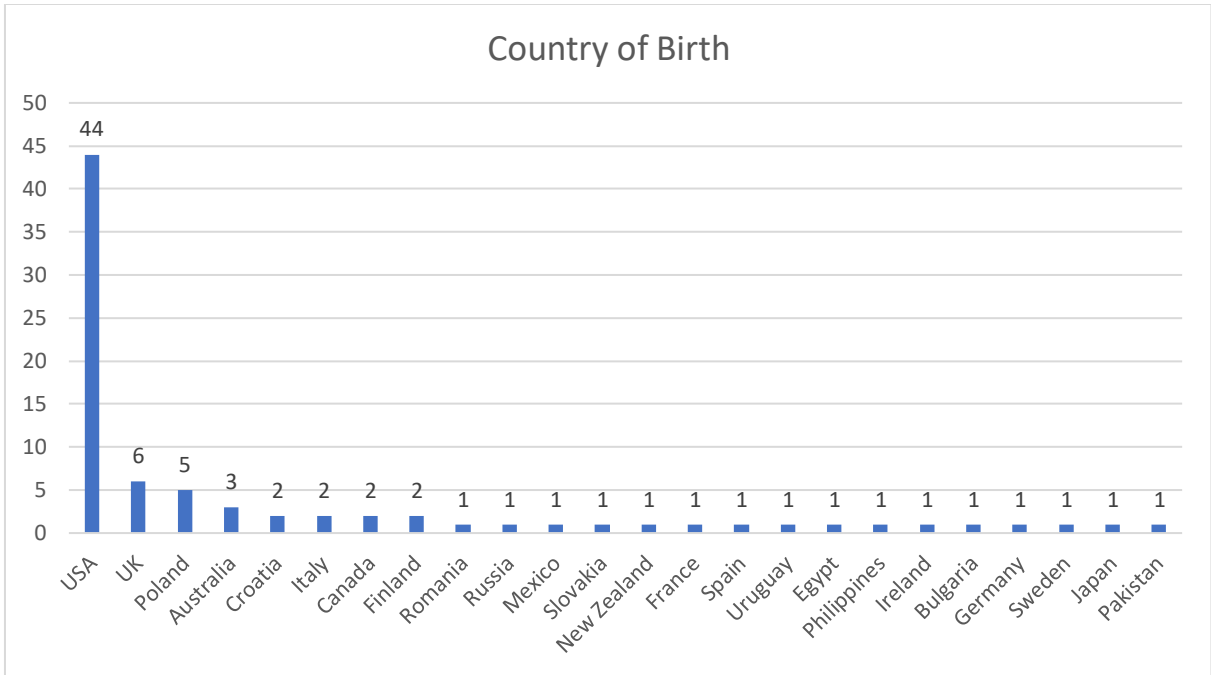


Fig. 35

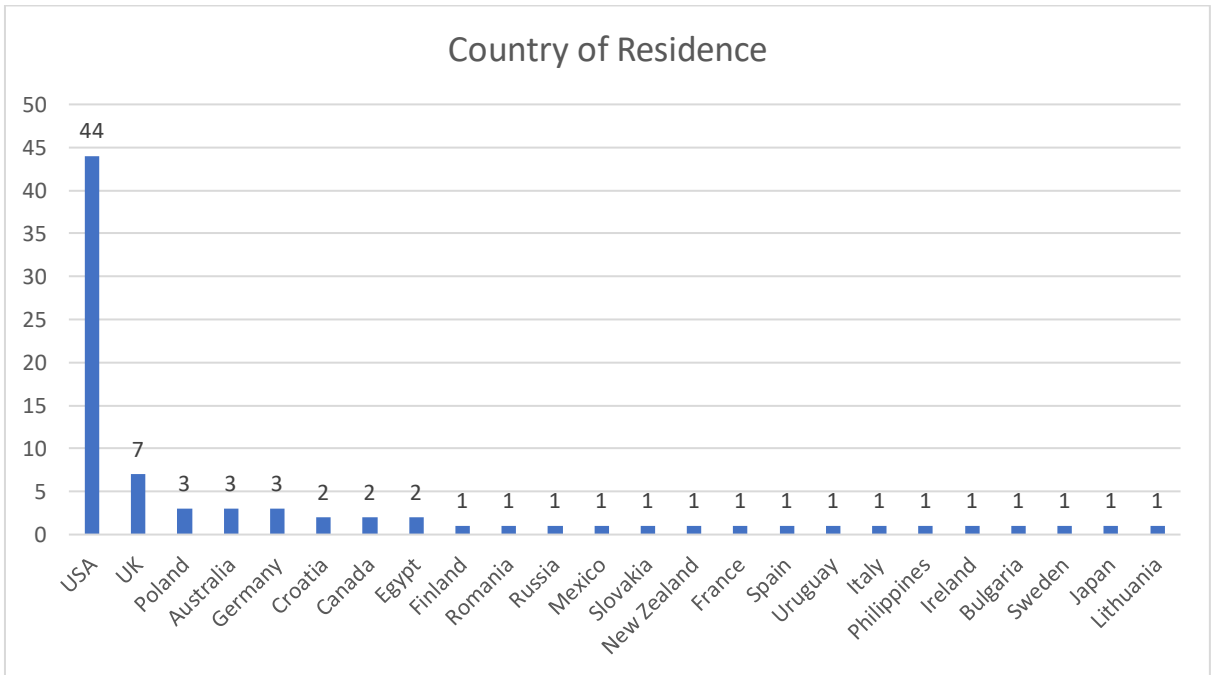


Fig. 36



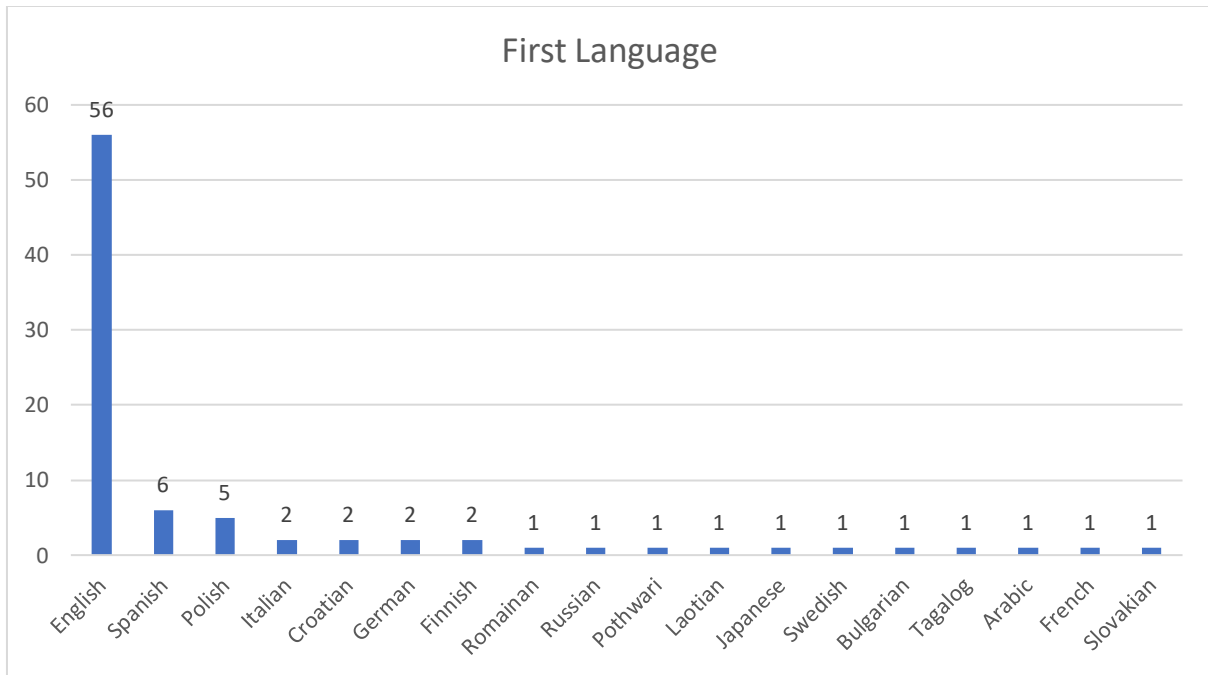


Fig. 37

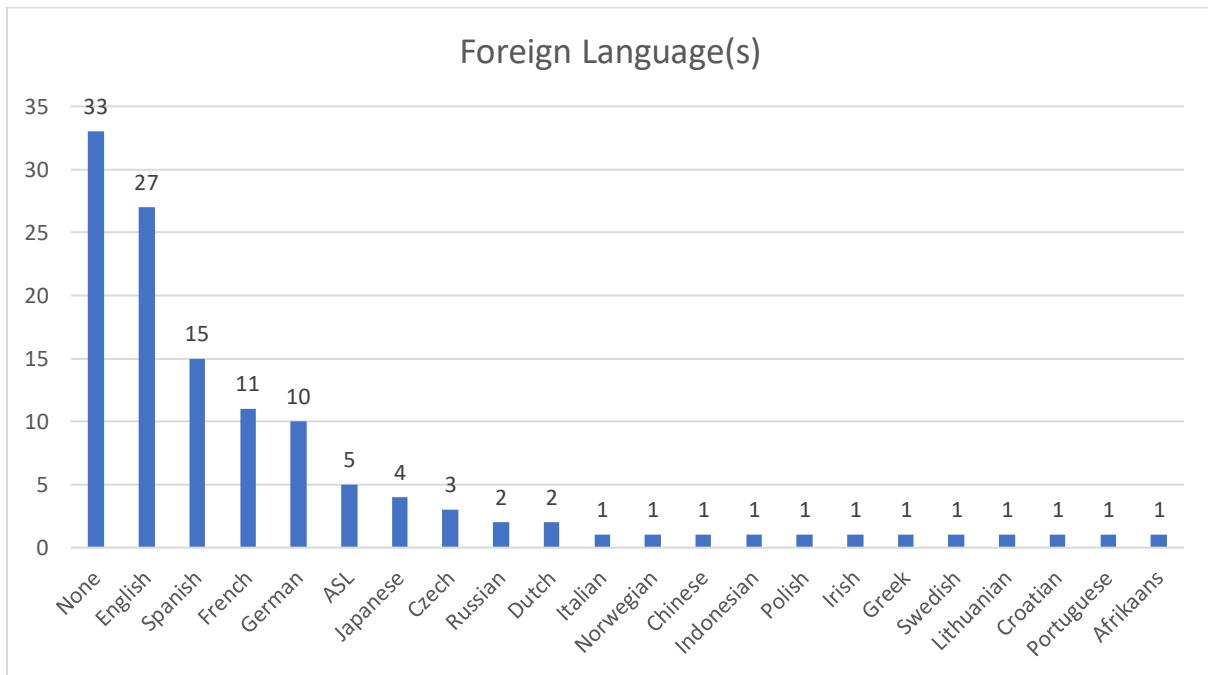


Fig. 38

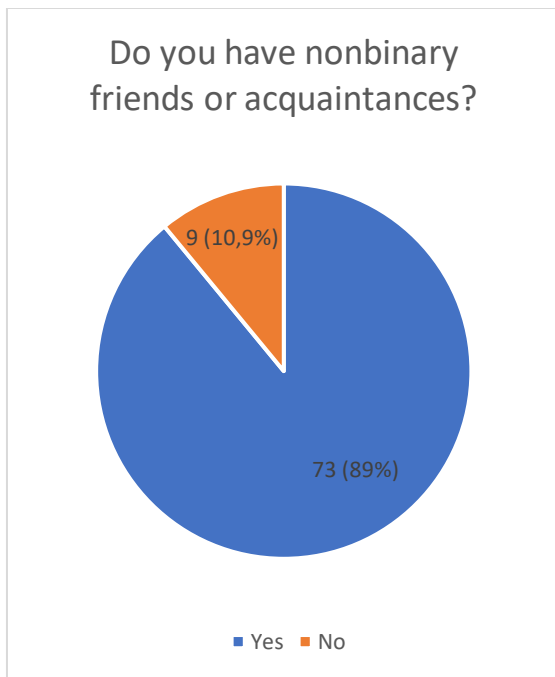


Fig. 39

### 5.3. Results

#### 5.3.1. First language

Out of speakers of English as a first language, the most common strategy was using the pronoun they as singular (47 mentions). This is followed by the strategy of asking the person for their preference and following that (27), the use of impersonal phrases or forms (19, e.g., titles, “everyone”, “y’all”, “folks”, etc.). Using the person’s name or nickname was mentioned 12 times, and the other five listed strategies were mentioned only once (using gender assigned at birth, avoiding reference to the person, calling them “dude” or “honey”, using the impersonal pronoun “one”, and looking for some widely-accepted gender-neutral word that would fit them). A graph with the number of mentions for strategies can be found in Fig. 40.

Out of other languages spoken as a first language, Arabic was listed once as heavily gendered and particularly problematic when it comes to nonbinary people. Two respondents tend to use impersonal constructs in Italian that avoid gendering the referent, with one mention of asking the person about their preference and replacing the gendered suffix of

adjectives with an asterisk<sup>30</sup>. One respondent said that they use the person's name when speaking German, while one other respondent said that they refer to the person with the noun meaning "human (being)" when speaking Russian. Concerning Croatian, one respondent uses the person's gender assigned at birth, and the other has no nonbinary friends or acquaintances and do not know how to refer to one. Two speakers of French mentioned "écriture inclusive"<sup>31</sup>, and there was one mention of the neopronoun "iel/ielle". One speaker of Romanian lamented a lack of a gender-neutral way to refer to people and listed the phrase translating to "that person" as the closest. The situation was identical in Slovak, with one mention of no such alternative and one mention of using the word for "person". Two people lamented the lack of a gender-neutral alternative in Polish, two mentions were also made of using impersonal phrases such as "person who cleans", and one mention was made of using the plural, neopronouns, and the neuter pronoun, respectively. In Spanish, two people mentioned the gender-neutral innovative suffix "-@", one person mentioned the innovative suffix "-e", one noted a lack of a gender-neutral alternative, and one said they use the word for "person". Swedish was mentioned once as having the gender-neutral pronoun "hen". Tagalog and Laotian were each mentioned once, both as not having grammatical gender, and, therefore, no issues. The same was said about Finnish, twice. Pothwari was mentioned once as having a polite plural that can be used for nonbinary people.

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<sup>30</sup> E.g., bell\* instead of bella or bello

<sup>31</sup> Explained as a gender-inclusive way of writing about a person by adding both the masculine and feminine suffixes, e.g., petit.e or petit-e.

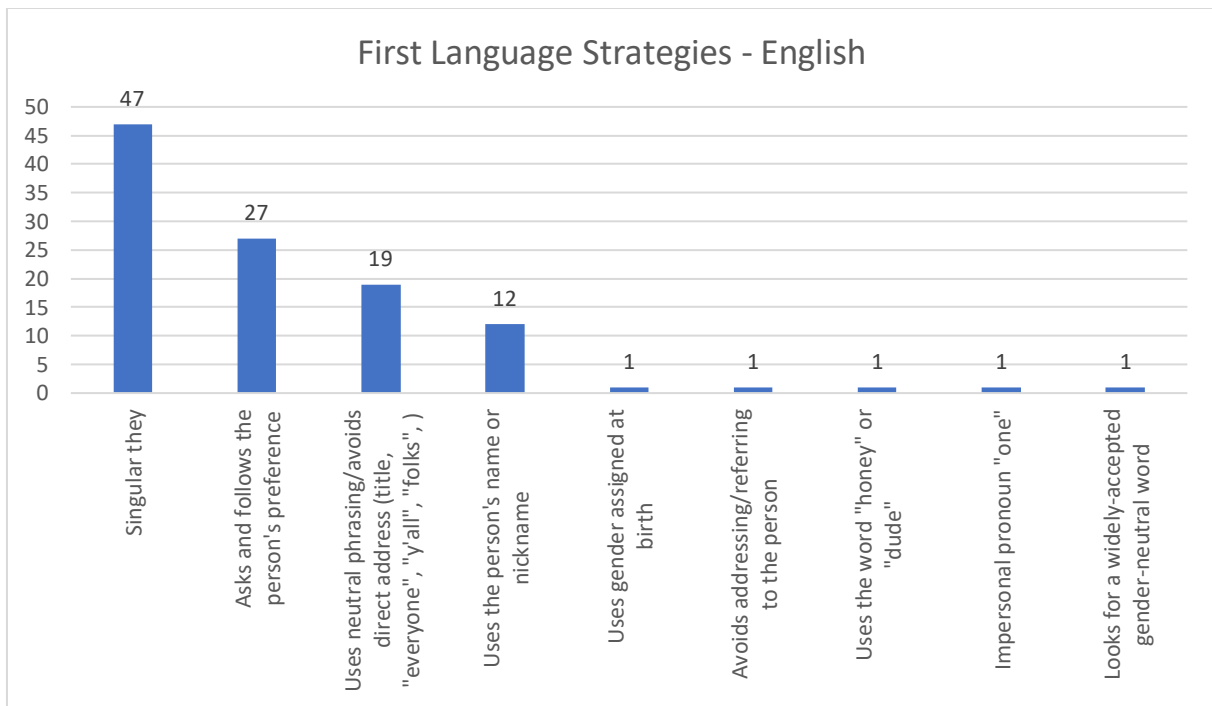


Fig. 40

### 5.3.2. Other language(s)

Speakers of English as a second language also showed a preference for the singular they (16 mentions), followed by avoiding gendered words and constructs (10), asking for the person’s preference (5) and using neopronouns (4). The three remaining minor strategies were referring to the individual simply as “person”, calling them by their name or assuming their gender based on appearance. Please consult Fig. 41 for an overview.

Out of languages with less data available, Spanish as a second language had 11 responses listed, with the most popular being the strategy of referring to the person by their name (6 mentions). Two respondents confessed to not knowing how to refer to nonbinary people in Spanish, while all the other strategies had only one mention. These include: using informal pronouns or slang terms, using the neopronoun “elle”, asking for the person’s preference, trying to avoid referring to them, addressing them directly, and using the innovative suffixes “-@”, “-x”, “-e”, “-e/ex”. See Fig. 42.

French as a second language had 8 listed responses. The two most popular were tied with three mentions both: using impersonal forms or constructs and not knowing how to refer to nonbinary people. Usage of neopronouns (not specified which ones) followed with two

mentions. One mention each was given to: asking the person for their preference, using the impersonal pronoun “on”, using the neopronouns “iel/ielle”, and using the “écriture inclusive”. See Fig. 43.

There were six responses in relation to German as a second language, the most popular being the usage of impersonal forms/avoidance of gendered forms (5 mentions), followed by the usage of neopronouns (2), and asking about the person’s preference (2). Using the person’s name, addressing the person directly and not knowing how to address a nonbinary person were all mentioned once. See Fig. 44.

One speaker of Swedish and one speaker of Lithuanian listed “gender-neutral forms” as their strategy. Greek and Croatian both had one appearance of the strategy of using a person’s name. Portuguese and Afrikaans both had one mention of the strategy of asking the person for their preference. Irish, Indonesian, Dutch, Chinese, and Norwegian were all listed once with the speakers noting they do not know how they would address a nonbinary person in those languages. Italian had one mention and the strategy of using “impersonal forms”. Russian had one mention of impersonal forms and one other respondent who did not know what they would do. Czech had three speakers who did not know how to refer to a nonbinary person, with one mention of asking the person what they would prefer. One speaker of Japanese noted that they would likely address the person directly, by name, or by informal pronouns or slang terms, also noting that the language is not particularly gendered. American Sign Language (ASL) had five listed replies (each listed once): not being inherently gendered, not knowing how to refer to a nonbinary person, using new terms they have learned, using gender-neutral phrasing by default, and using the position of chiremes in relation to the face to signal gender.

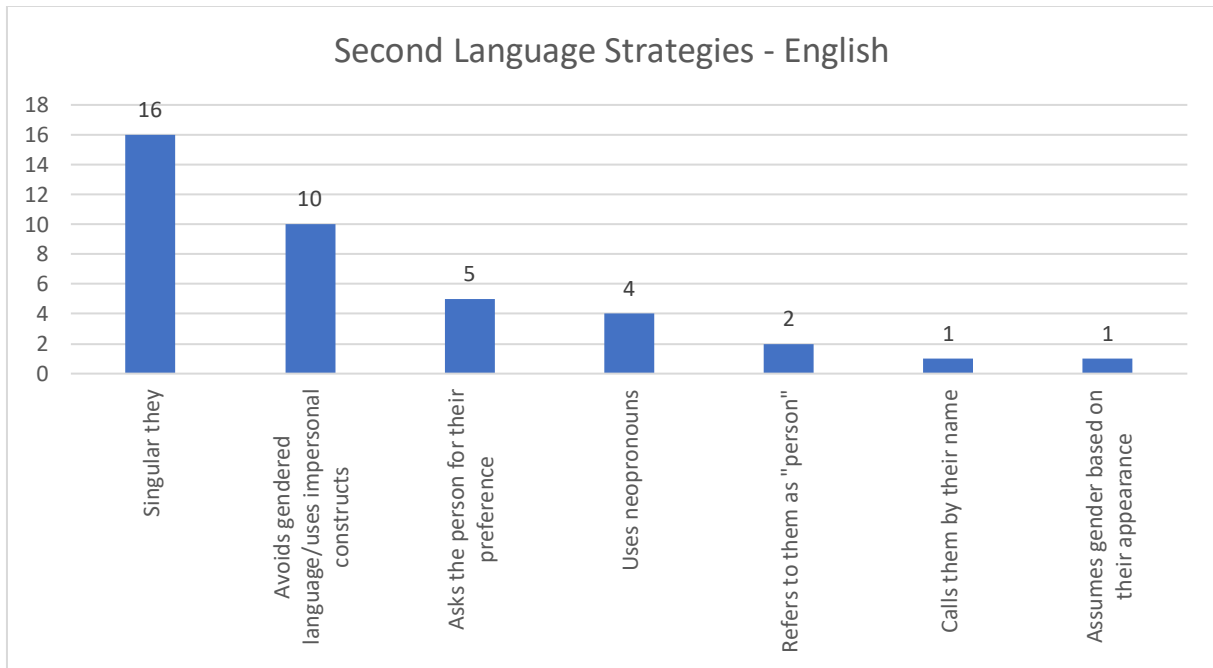


Fig. 41



Fig. 42

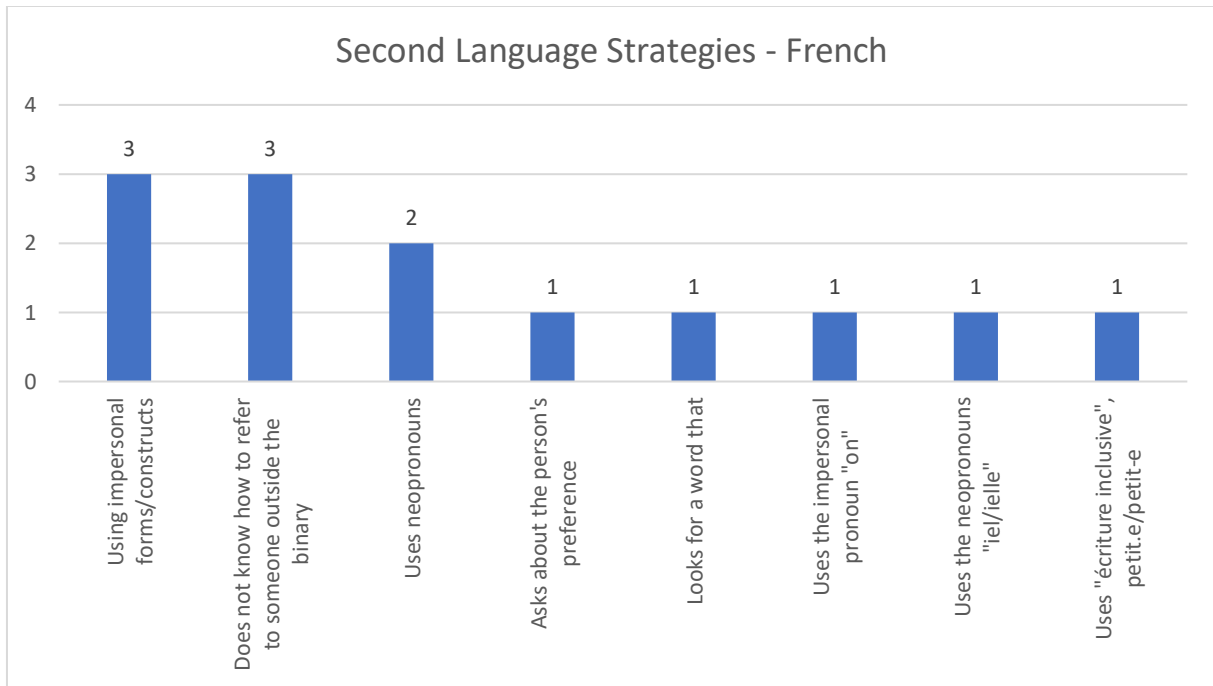


Fig. 43



Fig. 44

## 5.4. Analysis

Although not representative of the anglosphere, nor even the US, due to a small number of respondents, the sample is significantly comprised of nonbinary young people with a significant number of those with nonbinary acquaintances. This allows one to carefully make out trends in nonbinary/genderqueer circles, or at least identify some issues or strategies in particular languages.

In English, the usage of singular they dominates both native and non-native speakers, with asking about the person's pronouns also being relatively popular. The usage of names, nicknames, and terms that have been or have become less gendered such as “dude”, “honey”, “y'all”, “folks”, “everyone” is, understandably, also frequently mentioned, as are impersonal or gender-neutral words or phrases.<sup>32</sup>

Spanish seems to abound in different innovative solutions to gendered words, although none seem to be agreed upon as the best, at least as not as simply addressing the person by name. French and German share the preference for using impersonal forms/constructs and avoiding gendered forms, with neopronouns and gender-inclusive forms being mentioned but seemingly not unanimously known or accepted.

Many respondents seem to not know any particular way to refer to a nonbinary person, usually defaulting to using impersonal constructs, the person's name, or simply asking for their preference.

## 6. Comparison

The two studies differ in certain important aspects. First of all, the study of Croatian participants had nearly four times more respondents than the study of anglophone participants. Demographically, the former was dominated by people assigned female at birth, while the latter was dominated by those assigned male at birth. Interestingly, both studies had the majority of respondents identifying as women. The anglophone study also had a larger proportion of nonbinary respondents, both in relative and absolute numbers. Young adults were the dominant age group in both studies.

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<sup>32</sup> Something that abounds in English, a much less gendered language than others mentioned the most in this survey.



Both groups of respondents were largely familiar with the singular they in English, as well as at least mentioning the strategy of using the grammatical plural, paraphrasing (either through the passive voice or using a neutral-yet-gendered word such as various words meaning “person”), using the generic masculine gender, neopronouns, or some form of including both masculine and feminine forms, or using the person’s name or nickname. Another commonly mentioned strategy was asking a specific person about their preferred pronouns, especially if the respondents knew that the person in question was nonbinary.

## 7. Conclusion

To summarize, the strategies employed by respondents varied, with few that can be considered universally accepted. The notable exceptions are the English singular they gender-neutral pronoun, reliance on plural forms (possibly influenced by the singular they in bilingual speakers)<sup>33</sup>, and generic use of one of the binary genders (usually masculine).

The large majority of respondents expressed willingness to abide by the individual person’s choice of address, either by asking the person outright, or by adapting if their assumptions prove incorrect. This could be because respondents who were willing to participate in a study about gender-inclusive/gender-neutral language are generally far more willing to adapt to social changes, or because the social changes have already spread among the population (or at least its young, urban, educated portion) – or a combination of the two. This question remains to be answered.

Nevertheless, such changes appear to be significant enough to warrant further study, among the populations that have more or less accepted them, if nowhere else.

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<sup>33</sup> Although this study did not have enough monolingual speakers to assess this hypothesis, it remains an interesting question for future studies.

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# Appendices

## The First Study (Croatian Respondents)

1. Spol [Answers offered, only one answer possible: Muški, Ženski, Intersex]
2. Rod koji Vam je određen pri rođenju [Answers offered, only one answer possible: Muškarac, Žena]
3. Rodni identitet prema Vašim vlastitim preferencijama [Answers offered, only one answer possible: Muškarac; Žena; Rodno nebinarna osoba/Nonbinary; Genderqueer; Genderfluid; Agender; Genderfree; Other: [Open answer]]
4. Dob [Open answer question]
5. Mjesto rođenja i mjesto u kojem trenutno živite [Open answer question]
6. Zanimanje [Open answer question]
7. Najveći postignuti stupanj obrazovanja [Answers offered, only one answer possible: Nezavršena osnovna škola; Osnovna škola; Srednja škola; Bakalaureat; Magisterij; Doktorat]
8. Koje strategije koristite kada i ako želite izbjeći rodno obilježavanje u jeziku? [Multiple choice, more than one answer possible: Koristim muški rod neovisno o rodu osobe (npr. Jesi li bio kod svog doktora?); Navodim i muški i ženski rod (npr. Jesi li bio kod svog doktora ili doktorice?); Nešto drugo (molim navedite ispod)]
9. Molim Vas, ovdje navedite koje još strategije koristite. [Open answer question]
10. Ako koristite više od jedne strategije, molim Vas, navedite koju preferirate u kakvoj situaciji i zašto? [Open answer question]
11. Ako govorite jezik/e osim hrvatskog/srpskog/bosanskog/crnogorskog, molim Vas, navedite koje jezike govorite i kako se s navedenim problemom nosite u tom jeziku/tim jezicima (ako je na njih to primjenjivo). [Open answer question]
12. Smatrate li se rodno nebinarnom osobom? [Answers offered, only one answer possible: Da, Ne]
13. Poznajete li ijednu rodno nebinarnu osobu? [Answers offered, only one answer possible: Da, Ne]
14. Ako ste na prethodno pitanje odgovorili s da, molim Vas, navedite broj nebinarnih prijatelja/poznanika. [Open answer question]
15. Ako ste rodno nebinarna osoba i/ili poznajete rodno nebinarnu osobu/e, molim Vas, opišite koji gramatički rod upotrebljavate pri referiranju na sebe/druge ili koje

strategije upotrebljavate kako biste izbjegli rodno obilježavanje sebe/drugih. [Open answer question]

16. Ako govorite jezik/e osim hrvatskog/srpskog/bosanskog/crnogorskog, molim Vas, navedite koje jezike govorite i kako se s navedenim problemom nosite u tom jeziku/tim jezicima (ako je na njih to primjenjivo). [Open answer question]
17. Ako imate ikakve dodatne napomene, možete ih napisati ovdje. [Open answer question]

### The Second Study (International)

1. Sex assigned at birth [Open answer question]
2. Gender [Open answer question]
3. Age [Open answer question]
4. Country of birth [Open answer question]
5. Country of residence [Open answer question]
6. First language(s) [Open answer question]
7. Other languages you speak [Open answer question]
8. Do have any nonbinary friends/acquaintances? (Answers offered, only one answer possible: Yes, I know some nonbinary people (only) online; Yes, I know some nonbinary people both online and in real life; No, I do not know any nonbinary people)
9. Please describe the strategies you use in your first language when talking to/about someone nonbinary or genderqueer (or when you simply wish to avoid gendering someone) - i. e., neopronouns, impersonal forms, etc. [Open answer question]
10. Please describe the strategies you use in other languages you speak when talking to/about someone nonbinary or genderqueer (or when you simply wish to avoid gendering someone) - i. e., neopronouns, impersonal forms, etc. [Open answer question]
11. Comments about this poll/the topic it deals with. [Open answer question]