Can "they" be translated

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"CAN 'THEY' BE TRANSLATED: CROATIAN LANGUAGE AND NON-BINARY EXPRESSION"

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ABSTRACT

With English speaking countries becoming increasingly more accommodating of non-binary gender expression, the issue of translating such expression into other languages becomes a pressing issue. Croatian, a highly gendered language, currently has no standardized forms that would correspond to the singular, non-binary use of “they” and “their”. Interviews with eleven non-binary users of both English and Croatian were conducted to gain an insight into their views of how non-binary genders could be and are currently being expressed in Croatian. The results suggest that non-binary people have clashing opinions on the use of plural forms for singular antecedents but that a practice of doing so exists. Participants also use the strategy of mixing up gendered terms in order to express their identity. They are wary of the use of neuter gender and find masculine gendered forms to be more gender neutral than the feminine ones. They overwhelmingly prefer paraphrasing that avoids gendered forms and are in favour of using archaic verb forms, such as the *aorist* and *imperfekt,* since they are gender neutral. Finally, the study finds the community hopes academics would pay attention to their language use and introduce it to standardized language. The openness of the community, along with the lack of papers written on the topic, calls for more academic research on non-binary language use in Croatian.

KEY WORDS: non-binary, genderqueer, translation

INTRODUCTION

When talking about gender identities, "non-binary[1]" is a term used to denote an individual who exists outside the categorization of "man" versus "woman". While the term itself is new, identities that can be described as fitting said label can be recorded throughout history. CV Viverito of the Out & Equal non-profit organization reports on more than two genders being present in the Zapotec, Egyptian, Ndongo, Indonesian and Indigenous North American cultures, then cites an 18th century Norwegian citizen who, when asked about gender, responded as believing to be both a man and a woman (Viverito 2021, n.p.). Today, there is a growing awareness and a desire to include non-binary people in public life, especially in English speaking countries. The use of the pronoun "they" with a singular antecedent is now an unavoidable occurrence in the mainstream, seen from pop stars such as Sam Smith and Demi Lovato and characters in Netflix shows such as *One Day at a Time* and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. Accommodating gender neutral language in Croatian has become a pressing issue for translators as the language currently genders not only pronouns but nouns, adjectives and certain verb forms as well. This study looks to the lived experience of Croatian non-binary individuals for possible strategies translators might use when in contact with such texts.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The most easily accessible database for contemporary information on non-binary linguistic expression is the Gender Census blog, which does a yearly survey documenting terminology and pronoun preferences of individuals who identify outside the gender binary. The 2021 survey, which took place between the 10th of February and 10th of March, recorded 44,583 usable responses (Gender Census 2021, n.p.). It found that "non-binary" continues to be the most popular term among individuals who identify outside the binary (chosen by 68.2% of the total sample) both between the under-the-age-of-30 and the over-the-age-of-30 group (69% of under-30s and 63% of over-30s), and it was closely followed by "queer" (48% of under-30s and 50% of over-30s). When choosing pronouns, 80% of under-30s and 75% of over-30s chose the singular "they" pronoun, with the next most popular choices ("he/him" and "she/her", respectively) scoring an under 40% preference. It is also interesting to note that under-30s had a much higher preference for "he/him" (35%) than the over-30s (22%) while a

[1] Spelled also as "nonbinary". The term includes identities such as "genderqueer", "genderfluid", and other gender identites outside the man-woman binary.

much smaller difference can be seen in regards to "she/her" (31% of under-30s and 36% of over-30s). The option of "avoid any (pronouns)/use name" scored 12% with under-30s and 18% with over-30s, while the "mix it up" option earned a 17% preference among the under-30s and a 13% one with the over-30s. When asked how many sets of pronouns they use, the most popular choice was two sets (i.e. both "they" and "she"), closely followed by using just one. The research is fully in English and as such has limited use for Croatian translators, but it can still be a valuable resource in cases where it is impossible to avoid gender and the person themself is not able to state a preference (such might be the case with fictional characters, people who have passed away, or people who are not willing to respond to queries). In those cases, a translator could look at the latest Gender Census survey to gain a perspective of what non-binary people from the source language prefer, and choose some other similarly accepted alternative that is easier to translate into Croatian.

Marijana Šincek's (2020) paper "On, Ona, Ono: Translating Gender Neutral Pronouns into Croatian" explores the issue of non-binary gender expression in Croatian. It is based on two interviews with three non-binary individuals Šincek carried out in 2019 and presents a number of solutions Croatian translators chose when expressing gender neutrality. She reports that two of her participants chose to be referred to with "on" ("he") while the third used "ona" ("she"), and that one of them used pronouns corresponding to their sex assigned at birth, while two used the "opposite" set (the participant whose biological sex was assigned as "male" used "she/her" while the participant assigned as "female" used "he/him"). The participants whose chosen pronouns did not fit their assigned sex reported instances of people still using pronouns that would correspond to their assigned sex (referred to as "misgendering"), and shared that this caused them "a great deal of discomfort and sorrow, especially when coming from a person who is close to them" (Šincek 2020: 102). Šincek considers this to be an indication of an unwillingness towards acceptance of non-binary people into society, "especially when they use pronouns for genders different from their biological sex" (Šincek 2020: 102). A participant also reported that their gender identity was dismissed as something "made up, not real or 'something off of tumblr'" (Šincek 2020: 102). When asked if they would use a new set of Croatian pronouns, were they to be introduced, participants expressed an interest as well as scepticism over the general public's acceptance of such a linguistic intervention. When discussing the translation of "they" paired with a singular antecedent, a pronoun used by all three participants when speaking in English, she found that one of the participants had attempted to use "oni" (masculine form of "they") but found that it

could cause confusion. Šincek connects this to the extremely negative reception received by articles reporting on a pop star choosing to go by "they". She also points out that "oni" is not truly gender neutral, as it is the masculine form of the plural pronoun. Another strategy she reports on is the use of archaic past tense forms such as the *aorist* and *imperfekt*, which participants preferred to the more commonly used *perfekt* seeing as they do not require gendering. She concludes by stating that there is no perfect way to translate gender-neutral pronouns into Croatian and that translators must take context into consideration when making their decisions. While the small size of her sample does mean a translator can draw no concrete conclusions regarding their translation choices, the study serves as a beginning of a highly necessary conversation among the Croatian translators. Her focus on prioritizing the context appears to be the one most respectful of the non-binary community and the choice to include them in the research offers its findings a special insight. However, some of her complaints regarding the use of "oni" with a singular antecedent are not fully convincing. When discussing the negative reception of the Croatian articles about a pop star coming out, she hypothesizes that this is partially due to the said public being unused to "oni" having a singular antecedent. She draws on Participant 2's comment about how some people tended to find their use of "oni" confusing and uses the article's reception as a further example of why "oni" is a bad choice. The reported effect of being "confusing", however, does not necessarily translate to provoking mockery and insult, and while Šincek admits that a part of the reason for such a response could have been the society's lack of willingness to accept non-binary individuals, she fails to connect the outrage over the articles to the instances of invalidation and disrespect her participants have reported experiencing.

Similar research has been carried out in other languages with similarly gendered morphology. Szymon Misiek's (2020) article "Misgendered in translation?: Genderqueerness in Polish Translations of English-language television series" analyzes the translation of two non-binary characters whom the source texts refers to using "they". He finds that translators used "oni" ("they", masculine) when forced to translate a singular "they" but otherwise gendered the characters according to their (voice) actor's perceived gender. The author condemns this strategy: "(this) might further the stereotype that non-binary people are really their assigned gender and declaring a genderqueer identity is just a whim" (Misiek 2020: 179). He considers checking a non-binary's person preference to be the best approach to a translation, but acknowledges this is not always possible. This is when he feels a translator ought to turn to the non-binary community fluent in the target language. He also reflects on

the use of neuter, acknowledging the negative connotations of referring to a person in such a way but also pointing out the possible reclamation of such forms among the non-binary individuals in Poland. He calls for more descriptivist research into the question.

In Canada, Gabrielle Dumais's (2021) paper "'What do they say in Quebec?': Non-binary gender expression in informal spoken Quebec French" analyses the different practices speakers of French have when writing and when communicating verbally. By analysing recorded conversations with non-binary speakers of French and their friends she finds that, while they do not use the newly introduced gender forms, there are other strategies they do employ. She reports on paraphrasing, the use of term "person" to avoid gendering a person while still having a grammatical gender to match the rest of the sentence to, and the mumbling of gendered grammar forms (i.e. determiners "une" (feminine) and "un" (masculine)). She finds 3rd person pronouns to be the most difficult gendered form to avoid, and advocates for different grammatical standards to be developed for written and for spoken French, as people clearly use language differently in these occasions.

Non-binary expression in French has also been studied by Jordan J. Tudisco (2021), whose article "Queering the French Academie: Reclaiming linguistic authority for trans and non-binary people" studies the way French trans community converses on transgender-themed forums. The members discuss an instance of a non-binary person using the gender opposite to that assigned to them at birth to navigate the heavily gendered language, as well as balance out their perceived maleness and masculine appearance. Tudisco also notes that French transgender population resorts to English terms when discussing their experience (such as "packer", "tucking", "binding"), which they attribute to the unwillingness of the French Academie to create French correspondents to those words "so as to prevent them from being accepted in French culture" (Tudisco 2021: 7). This is interesting, as they report the French society to be very much against English terminology entering their language, and see "identity politics" as a threat to French unity (Tudisco 2021: 7). It would seem that what they are describing is a double bind French transgender people have found themselves in, as the Academie's refusal to name the words for their experience forces the community into using English terms, thus almost proving the "identity politics" fears correct. Tudisco also reports seeing new coinages used on trans forums which mimic English words but do not exist in English (such as "no-genders" for "non-binary people"). They consider the possibility that English might be becoming "the language of trans" or "the language of non-binary" (Tudisco 2021:13).

The inherent "foreignness" of non-binary and transgender terminology is reflected on by Judith Butler (2019) in her paper "Gender in Translation: Beyond Monolingualism". She believes that "gender" itself is a foreign word outside of English and that gender theorists must not overlook the issues of multilingualism and translation. She acknowledges non-binary people and their need for "other gender vocabularies required for inhabiting the world, feeling at home, or relatively at home, in the language they use, or in refusing the language that is used" (Butler 2019: 17). She considers "the untranslatable" to be an invitation for native English speakers to "cede the mastery of monolingualism" for a multilingual world that is more inhabitable for all (Butler 2019: 22).

AIMS

The study aims to gain an insight into the linguistic behaviour of the Croatian non-binary community in order to inform translation choices in situations where non-binary expressions are used in source texts. The focus is on how Croatian non-binary people navigate their everyday language expression, how they accommodate singular "they" in their speech, and how they feel the standard language should develop in order to make room for their existence. Aware of the difference between languages the study seeks to examine possible translation options and bring to attention the nuances that make each of them appropriate. I also hope to contribute to the empowerment of non-binary individuals in their choice of self-expression by helping them learn about the terminology and resources necessary to discover and verbalize their linguistic needs and preferences.

METHODOLOGY

During the period of November 2020 to June 2021, eleven separate interviews were conducted with individuals who identify as non-binary. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and Discord, or in person when possible. All the participants were fluent in and regularly used both English and Croatian, and used "they" as their primary pronoun when speaking English. The interviews focused on the strategies they use when speaking Croatian. Special focus was placed on the issue of translating the pronoun "they" itself. Other topics included the perceived neutrality of the masculine grammatical gender, whether the same could be achieved using the feminine gender and whether the neutral grammatical gender was

acceptable; the translation of gendered nouns such as names of professions; speaking in first person, especially in the *perfekt* tense; using the plural "you" to refer to a non-binary person; the use of the past tenses *aorist* and *imperfekt*; and the lexical gaps for gender neutral words such as sibling ("brat"/"sestra") and grandparent ("baka"/"djed"). They were further asked about how relevant they found potential standardization of any new solutions, and if they thought it was necessary and even possible. The participants were also asked to comment on specific translations previously done by volunteer students of translation at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. These translations, available under Appendices, covered the quintessential problems with accommodating non-binary identities into Croatian, such as translating the singular "they" pronoun, first person speech in past tense, addressing a non-binary person (especially in an informal setting) and translating adjectives, profession titles and descriptive nouns.

The interviews were semi-structured and the participants were asked to comment on specific translations and answer a list of questions, but otherwise encouraged to talk about whatever they found to be relevant to the topic. They were asked about their own linguistic behaviour, the linguistic behaviour they thought was acceptable, and any linguistic behaviour they witnessed from other non-binary people. If a participant brought up a solution or an opinion not previously discussed with the other participants, the others were retroactively asked about it through textual correspondence. The interviews were done anonymously to protect the participants' privacy, and the transcripts were later reviewed and approved by the participant in question.

FINDINGS

At the start of every interview, the participants were asked about their preferred translation of the pronoun "they" when paired with a singular antecedent. This revealed that all of the participants saw "oni" as the closest thing to the English form, but disagreed on its functionality in Croatian. Out of the eleven participants, eight reported using "oni" in Croatian. This, notably, did not translate into a preference for "mi" ("we"). Participants 3, 7 and 10, while in favour of using "oni" as a translation for "they", reported that pairing it with "mi" ("we") carries the connotation of a plural antecedent or "a speaker with a split personality disorder". This reaction is not unusual, as it is not a practice in English to pair singular "they" with a singular "we", but it is interesting that the main complaint the pro-

“oni” group had against first person speech using plural forms was the same complaint the anti-“oni” group had against the use of “oni”. Participants 4, 5 and 6 reported that “oni” is too linked to a plural antecedent in Croatian, and two of them explicitly stated that it leads to confusion. Even among those who were pro-“oni”, participant 9 reported that the use of “oni” sometimes made it unclear whether “oni” was a singular non-binary person, a group of several non-binary people, or a third entity altogether. Participant 3, however, said that this confusion is present in English as well, and participant 8 believes that confusion can be avoided if the pronoun is regularly substituted with the person’s name (the name would then take a singular verb). Participant 11 believed “oni” could be confusing in speech but less so in writing, a belief shared by participant 4, who also suggested that pairing “oni” with a singular verb (“oni je”) could help differentiate singular “oni” from plural “oni”. Participant 7 disagreed and pointed out that English uses “they are” and not “they is” and that the context can make it clear whether the antecedent is in singular or in plural. Furthermore, participants 3 and 10 expressed scepticism regarding this combination of plural and singular forms, with participant 3 saying that this would take decades to be introduced into language and participant 10 doubting Croatian people would be willing to use this enough for it to become common. They, however, reported that they could get used to the use of consistent plural forms, even when used in 1st person, provided there was enough exposure and conversation about non-binary linguistic expression. Participant 11 seems to agree with such a sentiment, as they suggested the confusion surrounding certain translation solutions would be less due to how “controversial” the solutions were and more due to the fact that there is no standardised consensus. This, they believe, leads to people using different forms to refer to non-binary people, which then leads to readers and listeners getting confused. They feel that a form needs to be standardized, and that they could get used to anything, as long as it was agreed upon and used consistently. When asked about the possibility of certain individuals feeling uncomfortable with the standardized solution, they argued that this would benefit those people as well, as they would simply need to ask to be referred a different way rather than have to explain their entire identity to every new interlocutor. While Participant 11 is mostly alone in their high trust of standardization (all the remaining participants stressed the importance of listening and upholding non-binary people’s preferences, with academics slowly introducing it to the grammar), another participant (8) expressed a wish for “a sort of a symposium” where a solution would be agreed on and then generally practiced, “so it’s not all so grassroots”. On the other hand, participants 2, 7, 9 and 10 expressed the opinion that no one cares about what Croatian language standardizers prescribe, and three of them even mocked certain recently

introduced Croatian words, or expressed complete indifference to what Croatian standardizers think. The main relevance standardization holds for participants 4, 6 and 7 is the validation it would give to non-binary identities, but they want any new forms and rules to come from the community itself, not be forced upon it. Participant 4 also spoke of medical professionals their organization has a lot of contact with, who lack the language to accommodate trans people and who would benefit from standardized forms.

Two of the participants (1 and 4) also believe that, due to the lack of knowledge about non-binary identities, any solution should come with a brief explanation that would introduce readers to the issues of non-binary linguistic expression. They both described a footnote or an addendum that would simply state the linguistic strategy is employed to express that a speaker is non-binary, and participant 4 reported that "people are in a way alright with that and are not that confused". The same participant reported pairing this strategy with the use of both masculine and feminine gendered forms separated with an underscore (i.e. "profesor_ica"). Participant 2, who also uses German, said that they find the underscore solution to work the best. Participant 5 described the underscore solution as "the only thing we (an LGBT+ organization) have found so far that is all-inclusive because it allows space for all that's in-between", but found that it could confuse people unfamiliar with the practice. Participant 9, who used to work with the same organization as participant 5, reported it as their first contact with "two-gendered" expression, and also reported seeing the forms separated with a semicolon. They see it as a means of raising awareness of gender variance and inclusivity, a response to the sexism of using "oni" (masucline "they") for mixed groups, as something that both challenges the patriarchy and the binary understanding of gender. They also reported using "onie" (a merge of "oni" (masculine "they") and "one" (feminine "they"), and used the form during our interview. Participant 8 personally prefers the slash (/). They also reported that they tended to perceive forms such as "onie" as a mistake in typing, and preferred written solutions separated in a more visibly deliberate way. When asked how these forms would be pronounced in verbal communication, participant 5 said such a thing is impossible, participant 2 proposed a pause before the feminine suffix, and participant 8 worried that such a gap could result in people only hearing the feminine form. Throughout the interview they referred to their non-binary friend as "frend-frendica" ("friend(masculine)-friend(feminine)". When asked about it, they confirmed that this was their preferred translation of "friend" if that friend is non-binary as they find it not too hard to pronounce and therefore convenient to use in verbal communication. Participant 4 felt that the underscored two-gendered expression was

the best solution for written texts, but prefers switching between genders in spoken conversation.

When it came to switching between genders, five participants reported using this strategy to refer to themselves while the others were familiar with it. Participant 4 described their strategy: "I go by the feeling, even though sometimes it can happen that I write a whole email using only one gender, and sometimes I switch 16 times in a sentence." Participant 1 reported feeling closer to such language (which they describe as "fluid") than one that would consistently use the same gender. When it came to potential shortcomings of this strategy, several participants worried it could be unclear that all sets of pronouns referred to the same antecedent (2, 7, 8, 9) but feel that it could be avoided using appropriate strategies. They also noted that it would pose no problems if the switching was happening in first person, since then it would clearly be the same person speaking, or if the text was discussing a single non-binary person. Participant 11 raised an additional concern that switching which remains consistent on a sentence level would become invisible if that sentence was taken out of context (e.g. in citations), therefore erasing the person's gender identity. For this reason, they prefer the use of different genders on a clause level (with nouns and verbs not matching in gender). A number of participants felt that they would not perceive such a structure as odd (participants 1, 6, 9, 10, 11), or that they could eventually get used to it (participant 3, who also described their first contact with it as a "mental slap"). Participant 2, however, felt that this was additionally confusing and preferred the switching to happen between sentences. Participant 10 also warned against using this strategy indiscriminately, as not all non-binary people felt comfortable with all gendered forms. Their concerns were confirmed by a number of other participants, who reported that they use gendered forms that correspond to genders "opposite" of those assigned to them at birth. They feel that expressing that they are not the gender they might be perceived as takes precedence over showing that they are non-binary. Participant 2, for example, uses only masculine forms as feminine forms make them feel extremely uncomfortable. They explained: "The main part of [my] gender identity is not being a woman which, in this binary Croatian, places me into the masculine gender and I am personally okay with that. But there are people who are not, they might struggle with the language more than I need to." Similarly, participant 6 reported taking great issue with being seen as a woman and said, "Even though masculine pronouns do not fit me 100/100 and I am the happiest when speaking English with friends and they use "they", it's still better than feminine pronouns because feminine pronouns cause me great offence and pain". Participant 1 reported using the "opposite" gendered forms in writing because they hated seeing that they

referred to themself with feminine pronouns, but added that they hoped to find a better strategy. Participant 9 uses mainly "ona" and feminine forms but reported being okay with anything, as long as it was not masculine forms. They also reported that many non-binary people are forced to use their assigned gender in professional settings and are vehemently against translators using a non-binary person's assigned gender (as was the case with translations regarding Sam Smith, an individual assigned male at birth who recently came out as non-binary and uses "they" as their pronoun). Participant 4, who prefers people to switch between pronouns when referring to them, shared that they found that a majority of people still stuck with the forms corresponding to the gender they were assigned at birth: "Some people put in the effort to mix it up, but some, and it seems to me that they are a majority, they say "okay, alright" but then only refer to the person with their assigned gender because, 'you don't care and it's easier for me this way'."

Another complaint against the use of "oni" was that its plural form could also lead to the choice of plural pronoun ("vi") when addressing the person, thus creating the impression of professional distance not appropriate for all contexts. Participant 5 reported, "It's very hard to introduce it to a conversation in a natural way, and then people start addressing you with "vi", and then you feel even more uncomfortable, it really causes discomfort." They added that they do not feel comfortable being referred to with "vi" even by children (a context that would naturally occur among cisgender people) even though they are 25. The sentiment was shared by participant 4, who reported that people asked to use "oni" often felt like they were addressing the non-binary person with great respect, which was odd when talking to a friend . This could be due to the pronoun "oni" being used as the Croatian polite V-form in the past. Participant 9 reported that a friend raised similar complaints, jokingly refusing to use plural forms as it would sound like she respected the participant, "which she did not". They are themself very pro-"Vi" and cite the way people already address cashiers as examples of everyday use of this strategy. Participant 2 agrees that using "vi" should not be a problem as it is a form already used in Croatian, and thus would not require people to learn any new words. While many participants acknowledge the connotations of distance (1, 3, 6) they do feel like this could be lost through sufficient use, and participant 10 even feels that non-binary people deserve this way of address: "If you're hardcore enough to go around and tell Croatian people that you are outside of gender binary, then you deserve to be addressed with respect". They add that their (cisgender) brother used to find it odd that non-binary people used plural forms, as those used to be reserved for royalty, but has grown to like it. Participant 4, however, warns that the use of the formal "you" can still be gendered in the choice of the verb form, and

reported hearing “vi ste radila tamo” (“you worked (feminine) there”) and other similar uses of the form. When asked how they would personally translate a direct address to a non-binary speaker (example sentence used being “Are you crazy?”, where the adjective “crazy” required gendered, and the sentence carried the tone of disrespect discordant with the perceived formality of plural “you”) the participants overwhelmingly preferred paraphrased solutions (such as “Jesi ti van svake pameti?”/”Are you out of your mind?”, used with a 2nd person singular).

When asked about the forms they personally used in their daily life, it was revealed that very few of the participants actually used “oni”, despite being majorly in favour of the form. Participant 1 said they would prefer people addressed them with either “on” (“he”) or “oni” (“they”), but that “oni” was preferred, participant 9 reported using “oni” in the past, and participant 8 uses “oni” in combination with “on” (“he”) which they keep using out of habit, as it corresponds to their assigned gender. The use of pronouns out of habit was also reported by participant 1, who occasionally uses “ona” (“she”), their assigned pronoun, despite hating to hear it, and participant 6 reported going with whichever pronouns people used for them, as they had no preference. Participants 3, 10 and 11 also go by their respective assigned sets of pronouns, as they expressed no discomfort with them. They all still warned about respecting other non-binary people’s gender expression, as they believe their own preferences are not the norm. Participants 2, 5 and 9 use the “opposite” forms to those assigned to them at birth. When asked about strategies employed by their non-binary friends and acquaintances, they echoed the same solutions.

The four options for situations where it was impossible to avoid gendered forms used by this study’s participants thus appear to be plural forms, a mix of forms, the forms a person was assigned at birth and the opposite of the forms they were assigned at birth. When asked about the way they refer to non-binary people who are not speakers of Croatian, participants 1, 2, 6, 7 and 10 reported using “oni”, and participant 2 also reported trying to avoid all gendered forms. Participants 4, 8 and 11 reported trying to explain the Croatian situation to foreigners and asking for their opinion. They agreed that this could be tricky in situations where the person cannot be reached (too famous, dead, fictional). Participant 8 shared an example of their non-binary friend who speaks Italian and who gave them a strategy to use when they needed to gender them in Croatian. They also reported that people seemed to understand how gendered Croatian is and agreed to ignore gendered elements that “snuck in”.

Whether they were pro- or anti-“oni”, all the participants cited it as the possible translation of “they”. When asked if there is an issue with it being the masculine form of

“they”, only one participant (9) expressed having considered it that way. They reported that it was feminist friends who had made them aware of this issue, and that this is why they will sooner use “one” or “onie” when referring to a mixed group. Participant 1 also saw how using “oni” might be a feminist issue, while participants 2, 3, 7, 8 and 10 feel that masculine plural has become gender neutral enough to be used for non-binary antecedents. When asked if the perceived neutrality of masculine grammatical gender extends to words denoting professions, participants 7, 8 and 10 agreed, restating that masculine forms are often seen as gender neutral. Participant 3, however, feels that masculine forms such as “pjevač” (“singer”, masculine) carry the connotation of a male antecedent and do not see it as sufficiently neutral to refer to non-binary people. Participant 6 reported using two-gendered forms to talk about professions, while participant 9 prefers to describe what a person does (i.e. “I work at the kiosk.”) They still acknowledged that this can be clumsy and/or insufficient sometimes (i.e. “I work at a hospital.” could mean the person is either a nurse or a doctor).

Participant 8 feels that gender neutrality extends to adjectives as well, while participant 7 prefers using a paraphrased description, often pairing the adjective with the noun “person” and thus using the grammatical feminine gender without gendering the person feminine. This is a strategy also used by participant 9, who offered more creative paraphrasing (i.e. “I’m not smart.” as “I cannot think of anything.”). Participant 7 also feels that, while profession names read as neutral when gendered masculine, this is not true of other less used words. For example, “27-year-old” would not be read as gender neutral if translated as “27-godišnjak”. Participant 6 agreed, and suggested another paraphrase (“(...) ima 27 godina”, “(...) is 27 years old”).

When asked about using feminine forms to describe and denote a non-binary person, participants reported feeling that these read as more gendered, except in cases such as “osoba” (“person”) and “pop-star” (“pop zvijezda”), nouns whose grammatical gender is feminine but who say nothing about the gender of the person. They do not feel like “one” (“they”, feminine) would work as a translation for “they” as it reminds them too much of an antecedent that is several women, and one participant compared it to the phrase “women and non-binary people”, which is popularly used online and which they feel to exclude non-binary people that were assigned male at birth.

When asked about the neuter gender, five of the eleven participants reported negative connotations, citing transphobic discourse and calling it dehumanizing and objectifying. Participant 8 is not necessarily uncomfortable with it, though they see the allusion of an object antecedent as well, and participant 1 does not mind being referred to that way. Participant 6,

however, has an extremely positive opinion on the neuter gender and argued that, since Croatian genders objects as masculine and feminine, neuter gender does not necessarily carry the same connotations as in English. They would love for the use of neuter gender to be more explored among non-binary people. When this argument was brought up with those who were anti-neuter gender, participants said that the history of its use for transphobic purposes overwhelmed any other considerations, and participant 4 pointed out that even the uses of neuter gender with a human noun, such is the case with "dijete" ("child"), still infantilize the non-binary person. Several participants pointed out that it would be a different story if a person was to choose neuter forms for themself. Participant 2, who knows some English users who go by "it", finds the practice to be quite powerful and participant 9 stressed the importance of context, stating "it is one thing when I call myself a (slur) and another when a cis straight guy calls me that". Participant 10 pointed out it is a translation of "it", a pronoun also used by some English-speaking non-binary people, and not really a translation of "they".

Regarding the gender markers in Croatian verbs, the use of *aorist* and *imperfekt*, archaic but gender neutral past tenses was seen as a positive strategy. All eleven participants agreed that it is a good substitute for the more commonly used but unfortunately gendered *perfekt*, and even reported finding its archaic tone charming. They all either used it themselves or knew of people who used it, and reported that it is easy to get used to and a very good strategy for when one wishes to avoid gendering themselves or others. Participant 5 reported using a dialectal form of *perfekt* for the verb to be ("bi' sam" instead of "bio/bila sam"/"I was") which they perceived as a way to "slip through the cracks" of gendered language, and which they reported using with people they have just met. They feel this would only work in Zagreb, and thus cannot use it in the city they are originally from. When this was brought up with other participants, they also brought up "bija sam" (another dialectal form for "I was"). A few participants (1, 7, 10) liked this strategy though they pointed out it is regionally limited and would not work in standardized speech. The others were less fond of it, citing that "bi' sam" is basically still gendered masculine and that *aorist* is a much better option.

In addition to being highly gendered in its grammatical forms, Croatian also lacks certain gender neutral words commonly used in English. One such term is "sibling", which in Croatian must be either "brat" ("brother") or "sestra" ("sister"). Ten participants reported struggling with this gap and wishing there was a solution, and participant number 8 suggested "surođenac", inspired by Czech forms. Participants 2, 9 and 11 enjoyed this solution and felt that it would work well. Participant 9 pointed out it is still a little gendered (since it is a

masculine noun), something that was also felt by participant 1. Participant 7 felt it sounded a little strange but had potential, while participant 10 described it as too cold and something they would never use, except maybe ironically or to mock Croatian language standardizers for trying to introduce yet another strange word. One participant shared this term with two friends, one of whom agreed there could exist a more gender neutral term, and one of whom disliked it but conceded it might be due to their personal opposition to linguistic change.

Another lexical gap exists in Croatian for the English "grandparent", which in Croatian must be either "djed" ("grandfather") or "baka" ("grandmother"). Participant 8 suggested the term "praroditelj", analogous to terms "prabaka" ("great-grandmother") and "pradjed" ("great-grandfather"). They added the prefix "pra-" to the word "roditelj" ("parent"), hoping to denote a familial relation one generation removed from the term it was modifying. Participants 2, 7 and 9 liked the solution, participants 10 and 11 felt it was a bit too cold for what the term represents but that it could still be used. Participant 1 felt it was still too gendered, but when asked if "roditelj"/ "parent" was also too gendered, they conceded this might be just their own biased sense of how gendered a suffix is. The additional two participants did not like this term, with one still expressing a resistance to new terms and the other saying it felt too cold and clinical. When asked about "grandchild", participant 8 translated it as "unuče" ("grandchild", gender neutral), which the participants liked and reported using.

Participant 8 also described their ideal system of referring to non-binary people in Croatian. They believe it should include a mix of plural pronouns, generalized masculine gender with adjectives, and generalized masculine gender mixed with *aoirst* when it came to past tense. They cited other languages, such as Romanian, where a mix of masculine and feminine genders became a third gender category, and argued this could be done in Croatian as well. Participants 5 and 6 also expressed a desire for new things to be introduced into Croatian. Participant 6 felt like the neuter gender had a lot of potential and could be used were it to lose the dehumanizing connotations, while participant 5 felt the history of Croatian might offer some lost gender neutral terms that could be modernized and reintroduced. They feel this should be done through a collaboration between a non-binary person and an open-minded Croatian linguist. Other participants hope that academics would take a closer look at what the non-binary community prefers and then help standardize those forms. When asked who an academic, or a translator, could turn to in order to find out what the community prefers, participants mentioned LGBT+ organizations such as Zagreb Pride and Trans Aid. Participant 1 suggested looking for books written by non-binary people, though they could not

recommend any, and participants 2 and 3 felt studies such as this one should be used to find out what a majority of non-binary people prefer. Participant 8 also cited Facebook groups dedicated to Croatian non-binary people, as well as the website Nonbinary Wiki that documents linguistic choices for all the bigger languages. Participant 4 stressed the importance of "word of mouth", and non-binary people and their allies simply using their preferred forms until they get picked up by the wider public. Participant 10 also sees it as the crucial part of normalizing non-binary linguistic expression, writing off standardization as less relevant. Participant 3 stressed that anything introduced to the language must already be used by the community, and participants 6 and 7 acknowledged the non-binary community is yet to agree on which forms they would like to see used. Participant 2 feels several solutions need to be tried out until the optimal one remains, and participants 6 and 8 called for more education about non-binary identities.

CONCLUSIONS

The conducted interviews hoped to learn how Croatian non-binary individuals navigated the highly gendered language, as well as help them better articulate their specific linguistic needs. The results showed that non-binary people who use Croatian found a number of strategies through which to express their identity, but also that their opinions on the acceptability of certain solutions often vary. The biggest point of discontent proved to be the use of "oni", the masculine form of "they". While a majority of people did use it, a few participants felt it was too confusing and too tied to a plural antecedent. It still remains the closest Croatian translation of "they" the participants reported was in use. While there are other solutions the participants have reported using - masculine forms; feminine forms; mixing of forms - those solutions all correspond to different strategies reported by English speakers (as shown by the Gender Census survey). Participant 10's comments show that there is a sensitivity to these differences, as their complaint regarding neuter gender was that it is already a translation for "it", and therefore cannot be a translation of "they". Furthermore, even the participants who used other strategies to refer to themselves reported using "oni" for foreign speakers that used "they", implying that members of the same community do not necessarily see their own strategies as a satisfactory solution. Furthermore, participants did concede that "oni" being a masculine form of "they" might be a problem, though only from a feminist standpoint. Feminine plural was seen as too markedly gendered, and the entire neuter gender received a majorly negative reception. This shows that these participants see the masculine plural as the most gender neutral, and that translators should be cautious of using

neuter gender as many participants see it as transphobic and dehumanizing. The "mix it up" strategy appears to be popular in English as well as in Croatian, and participants believe it would work as long as it was clear that all the sets of pronouns referred to the same referent. The issue of out-of-context citations and potentially using a set of pronouns the referent is not comfortable with also demands nuanced care. When it comes to using gendered forms, both these interviews and the Mysiek (2020) paper suggest that translators ought to take great care not to misgender the referents. Looking at the case of Sam Smith, as well as the Polish instances of translating speech by and about non-binary characters, there exists a tendency among translators to gender non-binary persons according to the binary gender they are perceived as. While the interviews show that some non-binary people do use their assigned gender, it is also clear that a number of non-binary people find such gendering quite hurtful. It seems that any translators who wish to remain respectful should avoid this strategy unless they have explicit confirmation from the non-binary person that it is acceptable to gender them in a specific way. It might be best to avoid this strategy altogether in cases where contacting the person is impossible. If a person can be contacted, interviews suggest that it should be done. Participant 8's experience shows how much easier the process of speaking about a non-binary person is with their wishes clearly defined, and participant 4's statements show this strategy is already in use on a larger scale as well. One can also notice participants listing different strategies to use in written and in spoken communication. There are a number of graphic ways to use two-gendered terms in written speech, and the participants reported no negative feelings about this practice. Speech poses a bigger challenge, but the participants still listed a number of strategies a translator could use. Translators can consider merging full gendered forms together, switching between genders, utilizing the noun "osoba" to achieve grammatical but avoid social gendering, or choose a binary gender the person is comfortable with (though, again, one should be wary of simply going with the gender the person was assigned at birth). The strategy of using some dialectal forms to avoid gendering was also mentioned, which is reminiscent of the Quebecois speakers from Gabrielle Dumais' study, and this similarity in international behaviours is something possibly worth looking into. If expressing gender can be avoided, it might be best to do so, as many participants reported using paraphrases to avoid gendered terms altogether. They also responded very well to the use of *aoirst* and *imperfekt*, and expressed willingness to "bring aorist back".

The interviews also document an interest among non-binary people in cooperation with linguists and translators, be it through showing experts what their preferences are (participants 1, 4, 7, 9, 10) or through asking for their help to find new terms (participant 5,

8). Some also report seeing standardization as a means of validating their identity, something they would like to see happen. This suggests that an academic consensus regarding the terminology to use would benefit the non-binary community and help translators. Ultimately, most issues regarding non-binary expression seem to stem from the lack of awareness about their existence and the lack of validation the community is receiving from the general public. This forces non-binary people to limit their linguistic creativity in order to avoid further confusion. Translators are in a unique position to make this situation better, be it through using the community's preferred terminology or through making sure not to invalidate and erase non-binary identities in texts they are tasked with translating. The Croatian non-binary community, evidently, exists and wishes to cooperate with language experts, and translators are invited to reach out and enable this conversation to continue.

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APPENDICES

Interview questions:

-the translation of “they”

-is it a problem that “oni” is gendered masculine?

-is the masculine grammatical gender more neutral?

-could the feminine grammatical gender be used? Could “one” be used?

-could the neuter gender be used? Does it make a difference that genders are used differently in Croatian?

-how should one translate profession titles?

-How would one translate “sibling” and “grandparent”?

-How would one translate adjectives?

-How would one address a non-binary person? Would they use plural “you”?

-Is the plural “you” always acceptable? Show an example sentence.

-How would one translate 1st person speech by a non-binary person? Especially in past tense?

-How do you feel about aorist? Is it too archaic?

-How important is standardization to you? How do you think new forms should be introduced?

-Do you know of any other ways non-binary people expess themsleves in Croatian?

-Is there anything you would like to add?

Source texts:

1. Source: BBC news (https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-49688123)

Sam Smith has asked fans to use the pronouns “they/them“, not “he/him“ after coming out as non-binary.

The pop star wrote on Instagram: “After a lifetime of being at war with my gender I’ve decided to embrace myself for who I am, inside and out.”

The singer added: “I’ve been very nervous about announcing this because I care too much about what people think.”

On Friday, the 27-year-old said they had been "surrounded by people that support me in this decision"

2. Source: Ness, *Spider Apples* (unpublished novel)
Note: Bennie is non-binary and uses they/them pronouns.

“Bennie asked me to keep an eye on you. Said it was important. Told me to make sure you didn’t get hurt outside. That sort of thing.” Melliot sniffed again.

Bennie *had* mentioned Melliot in their phone message.

“I don’t think Bennie wanted you to kidnap me,” Stella said. She stood, then sidestepped towards the door.

“You’re not going to leave,” Melliot said, still on the floor. She stared up at the ceiling. “I don’t know why you’re looking for Bennie, but I’m sure what they’re doing is none of your business.”

“They’re my parent.”

3. Source: Carmilla, 3x21 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRzBozCNeF4, 00:05-00:17)
Note: LaF is non-binary and uses they/them pronouns.

Laura, LaF, and Carmilla are standing around the Dean’s unconscious body.

Carmilla: (to LaF) Are you insane? You brought her here? The only reason we’re not messily dead is because she couldn’t get to us.

LaF: Yeah. She’s a real threat all unconscious and drooling.

Carmilla: Oh, yeah, well she won’t be unconscious forever, lab rat.

Laura: (to LaF) How’d you even get her here?

Example translations:

- Dvadesetsedmogodišnji pjevač su u petak rekli da su „okruženi ljudima koji me podržavaju u ovoj odluci.“
- U petak je 27-godišnjak rekao da su „okruženi ljudima koji podržavaju njihovu odluku.
- U petak 27-godišnja zvijezda objavljuje da je do sad „bila okružena ljudima koji je podržavaju u toj odluci.“

#

Carmilla: Jesi li ludi? Doveli si je ovdje? (…) Ma da, neće zauvijek biti onesviještena, štreberčino.

Laura: Kako si je samo dovukli ovdje?

#

Carmilla: (obraća se LaF) Jesi ti van svake pameti? Dovesti je ovamo? (…) Ma nemoj, pa neće biti u nesvijesti zauvijek, štreberčino jedna.

Laura: (obraća se LaF) Odakle ti uopće ovdje?

#

Carmilla: (LaFu) Jeste li ludi, LaF? Doveli ste je ovdje? (…) O da, pa neće biti onesviještena zauvijek, laboratorijski štakore.

Laura: (LaFu) Kako ste je uopće doveli ovdje?

“Nakon cjeloživotne borbe sa svojim rodnim identitetom odlučio sam prihvatiti samoga sebe onakvoga kakav jesam, izvana i iznutra.”

#

- „Nakon cjeloživotnog rata s vlastitim rodom, odlučih prihvatiti tko sam, izvana i iznutra.”
- „Nakon cjeloživotnog ratovanja sa svojim rodnim identitetom odlučili smo se prihvatiti kakvi jesmo, izvana i iznutra.”
- “Nakon cjeloživotne borbe s rodom, prihvaćam se za ono što jesam, izvana i iznutra.”