

A beautiful mess: Moving towards non-binary language

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Language mirrors society

What is your home language? How has it shaped the way you think and see yourself – your identity?

Language supports us not only in expressing ourselves, but also in understanding the world around us, in making sense of what has been, what is, and what will be. At the same time though, it also limits us on all these levels. It is difficult to describe, and even more difficult to imagine, what we do not have the words for. Therefore, we need to sometimes go on long and meandering journeys, going here and there, painting a rich landscape, like in *A Room Of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf¹, searching for a language that enables us to express ourselves.

Language mirrors society, culture, and intersecting systems of inequalities, like classism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. For example, why is the colour “white” mainly seen as neutral or not even as a colour in itself? And why is it often associated with cleanliness? Why is the word “slut” generally associated with women who have (many) sexual relations with men, but not the other way around? Those are just some examples from the English language. Languages like French or German, but also Spanish, are in different ways – if not even more – gendered languages. In these languages, there exist, to some extent, words for female and male persons. In German, the logic would be *die Bäckerin* – the female baker; *der Bäcker* – the male baker, *die Ärztin* – the female doctor; *der Arzt* – the male doctor. And you always have to choose one. If you speak about a group of artists, you generally use the plural of the male version as soon as there is just one man in the group. In this way, any woman in the group gets rendered invisible because a reader of the text never knows if the group consists only of men, or of a mix of men and women. The female plural is only used for a group that consists solely of women.

Systems like heteropatriarchy are so intertwined with our thinking that it is hard to grasp them, to describe them, let alone to unravel our language from them. How can we describe something and speak about something that we have no words for? We have to find or create our own ways. Like Audre Lorde said, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”²

Language shaped by history and systems of inequality

There are many attempts to show and change bias in languages. French, for example, is a language that has been historically shaped³ by systems like heteropatriarchy, and institutionally preserved through the *Académie française*.⁴ It operates in a binary that prioritises masculine forms over feminine forms, therefore outweighing and marginalising them. While activists are coming up with many different hacks, and linguists are working on changing the grammatical rules, designers have different tools they can work with, most importantly the power of creativity. CAC Brétigny currently shows the works of the

1 Woolf, V. (1929). *A Room Of One's Own*. London: Hogarth Press.

2 Lorde, Audre. (1979; 2017). *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*. Penguin Modern. London, England: Penguin Classics.

3 Perrier, G and Loison, M. (2020). *Interview of Eliane Viennot about non-sexist language: the trajectory of a politically committed academic*. <https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-cahiers-du-genre-2020-2-page-109.htm>

4 Bye Bye Binary. (2021). “Imaginaires typographiques inclusifs, queers et non binaires”, *RADDAR, Design politics*, vol. 3. (Pp. 16-29). Lausanne: T&P Work UNit. ; Camille Circlude ° Caroline Dath. (2021). “Une révolution typographique post-binaire”, *Le Signe Design*. Vol. 2. (Pp. 72-95). Chaumont : Centre national du graphisme. Les Presse du Réel.

collective Bye Bye Binary that uses exactly those tools and powers to explore and propose how the French language can move towards more justice.

Let us go on a journey

Invitation to getting lost

Before having a closer look at the work of Bye Bye Binary, I would like to take you on a journey. I invite you to leave the straight, well-trodden path of English and other European/Western languages. Because “[m]oments of disorientation are vital”,⁵ as Sara Ahmed says. Such moments are able to offer us the hope of alternative directions. This excursion might help us to get a different perspective on what creating and living with/in a non-binary language might entail.

The article you are reading is written in English. However, I, the author of this text, am not a so-called native English speaker. At least not in the classic British English kind of way. My home languages are Sesotho and Setswana. I am a Black, lesbian, non-binary person born and raised in Soweto – southwestern part of Johannesburg, South Africa, where there are eleven official languages. I grew up multi-lingual, learning Sepedi, Zulu, Xhosa – and yes, also English. In the last few years, I have additionally started to find my feet in the German language.

A unifying term

While some languages across the world operate within a cis-heteronormative system (excluding humans who do not define or categorise themselves as either women or men), it is not alien for some people in some cultures to speak languages that are constructed outside of a gender binary. My home language Sesotho is such an example. It is closely linked to Setswana (predominantly spoken in Botswana and northwestern parts of South Africa) and Sepedi (mostly found in the north-eastern regions of the Limpopo province), under an umbrella term the “Basotho languages”. In Sesotho, we use the letter *o* as a third person or subject pronoun. Which means that *o* is understood and used as a word. Unlike the English language that creates a strict gender binary – she or he – in Sesotho, the word *o* is a unifying term referring to those two and other genders, making it inclusive.

O ithutela ho ba eng? – What is she or he studying towards or to be?

O rata ho bala dibuka tse feng? – Which books does she or he prefer or like to read?

For third person in singular and plural (she / he / they) the word *ke* is used with a noun. For example:

Ke Lebogang. – She or he is Lebogang.

Ke Lerato le Tumelo. – They are Lerato and Tumelo.

The word *ke* is also a first-person pronoun, meaning I. But it also means she / he / it is / they (in plural). It includes all of these and does separate them. So, actually the translation would be:

Ke Lebogang. – She or he is, or I am Lebogang.

The problem of English as reference point

Since *o*, like the word *ke*, does not necessarily translate to she or he, it refers to all people, all genders. It has a neutral tone that prioritises a person and not their gender. It is complex because Sesotho is a tonal language, and these sentences change their meaning based on the tone in which you say them. On the

5 Ahmed, S. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press.

one hand these sentences suggest either that person or this person (whatever the gender), on the other hand they refer to a person where the words *o* and *ke* also mean you. For example, the first sentence I constructed as an example can also mean: what are you studying towards or to be?

This, however, is my understanding of the language. There are several aspects that make it difficult or even uncomfortable for me to grasp Sesotho in English. One of them is that it feels like forcing a triangle into a circle: since Sesotho and English are very different from each other, it feels like it is almost impossible to explain one with the other. Another aspect is that it is even difficult to find or trust resources on the language because “experts” who studied and explained it (sometimes many decades ago), laid the foundation. Sesotho for the longest time seems to have been studied by non-native speakers who came with a Eurocentric/Western perspective.

Translating *o*, that in fact conflates genders, into a language like English, that has binary gender markers, forces this pronoun to be defined, spelled out and fitted into this very binary prism. It forces me to think strictly in binary terms, which otherwise I never think in – especially when speaking my language. So, I feel most comfortable when translating *o* to not only she and he, but rather all genders. This is also true when talking about substantive pronouns like her/him or it – to *ena* which in my thinking loosely translates to “this one” or “that one”.

Context

O is slightly indefinite unless you become more specific, or you are talking in a context where it is clear whom you are referring to. This is why I tend to rather think of prioritising a person instead of their gender. Another aspect is that in South Africa, there is a strong shift of names becoming less gender specific. My name Lebogang, for example, is non-binary, used for and by people assigned female or male at birth or who have other genders. Together with the genderless form of the word *o* the language creates a space that allows for defining it based on context and/or people. And I would argue that it is inclusive of people who like me are non-binary or might use other genders. Perhaps one could also argue that the language here is more inclusive and embracing than society is – where violence against women and the LGBTQI+ community prevails. Because even in communities where people speak inclusive and non-binary languages, such violence is there, operating outside of the language.

Apart from this, Sesotho is not a grammatically gendered language. It does not assign genders to nouns, like for example the table: *la table* (in French), *der Tisch* (in German), or the sun: *le soleil*, *die Sonne*. Sesotho also does not use gender markers like fireman or waitress. In fact, even when Western communities in related discourses, through the English language, are pushing for inclusive makers that recognise those whose genders are outside the binary, languages in the Global South have long established themselves as gender sensitive and inclusive. In the Basotho and Nguni languages there are words in singular and plural forms like *motswadi*/*batswadi* and *umzali*/*abazali*, respectively, which loosely translate to “the birthing person” or “the birthing people” including women and men and those who identify as either one or the other.

However, it is not that easy. Words like *mosadi* (woman) or *monna* (man), *mme* (mother) or *ntate* (father), *ausi* (sister) or *aubuti* (brother) have an importance in Sesotho. Generally, some of these words, depending on contexts, are used out of respect to address people. For example, when greeting a man who has children, you would say “father”. Or greeting a young woman or man (who is not a parent) but a little older than you, you would say “sister” or “brother”. These words strongly feel like substitutes where otherwise, words like “she” and “he” do not exist. These words then emphasise gender differences but more importantly, roles placed on certain bodies, creating a relationship between language and gender. At times, they directly show how gender inequalities get perpetuated in languages. But they also can directly point us to the idea that language is not innocent. Language is not neutral.

In Sesotho a term *nyopa* (a very insulting word used both formally and informally) refers to a barren woman. In fact, there is no term for barren men. Perhaps this is rooted in cultures that have always blamed women when a couple was not able to conceive a baby. To give an example from another language: isiZulu, the most used Nguni language in South Africa, uses words or phrases that not only perpetuate stereotypes and create gender inequalities, but also breed sexist attitudes. The word *isoka* in isiZulu is a term used for a man with multiple sexual partners. *Isoka* has a mild celebratory meaning that places men in innocence. But a term that means the same describing a woman, *isifebe*, carries a different, derogatory meaning. While *isoka* has a positive connotation, *isifebe* translates to “slut”.

Even when using *o*, putting a focus on societal roles is still boxing people into a certain gender. So, when is a language fully non-binary? Sesotho is non-binary because of the use of *o*, but at the same time it is not, because of the gendered roles assigned to people. Or is this maybe again the reflection of a Western, English based thinking? Can a language be non-binary despite having these kinds of gender markers? Is it maybe even desirable to have the language tools to make gender and binaries visible, in order to talk about them and at some point, also overcome them?

Hoping for other possible futures

It would be ideal to have a language with which everyone, no matter their gender, can fully express themselves and also be represented and addressed respectfully. A language that for example uses an epicene pronoun like *o*. I think that much can be learnt from less well-known, but gender-non-binary languages like Sesotho. They could inspire and contribute to the discourse around finding ways to make languages like French more inclusive. However, it becomes clear that all of this is very complex. There is no one and simple, straight way forward of how we can solve these issues. Rather, it seems we need interference from all sides and angles, all at the same time. I think some of the experiments and ideas for changes could be inspired by non-Western, non-European languages that, despite their own issues, are less gendered than languages like English, German, – or French.

Bye Bye Binary: Using design to overcome binary language

Moving towards a non-binary language

It becomes clear that we still need a language that supports us in expressing our differences and deconstructing those systems of inequalities in order to be able to understand and point them out, – and to then overcome them. This is the tension in which many feminists, but also anti-racist activists work. We wish for a world in which skin colours and genders do not matter anymore, but right now we need to be able to see and acknowledge and talk about them, in order to overcome the hierarchies that heteropatriarchy and white supremacy create, and to dismantle these systems themselves.⁶ In this sense, the Franco-Belgian collective Bye Bye Binary does not believe in or even aim for a gender-neutral language, but for an inclusive, non-binary or post-binary language. Because a neutral language would render invisible the differences and injustices that we need to see. The collective focuses on de-masculinising typography and on creating inclusive and non-binary ways of writing and speaking the French language. They highlight design justice in their pedagogy and practice. They focus on inequalities in typography and graphic design, but also in society in general, and while doing so explore ways to overcome them.

Bye Bye Binary uses tools from graphic design and typography in combination with the power of creativity and with queer perspectives. Their exhibition, on show at CAC Brétigny, shows works that

⁶ Collins, P. H. (2002). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.

for example address injustices like violence, insults and demeaning lexicon/words calling against, Black, PoC, women and queer people, in order to reverse these stigmas by using the space to overturn power dynamics.

Re-claiming language

Often people and institutions such the *Académie française* say that challenging grammatically gendered language in these ways makes it incomprehensible, decreases readability, excludes people with reading or seeing impediments, or even endangers society.⁷ However, this is not as dangerous as excluding or rendering everyone who is not a straight cis-man invisible. To make this point, the collective also uses references to police violence. This is why they have a police car on one of the posters on display, saying:

“There is a certain violence in the criticism of inclusive writing. For example, it has been described as a ‘mortal danger’. Inclusive writing has not caused people to be killed, unlike real mortal perils like police violence.”

With the colourful flags, the collective is embracing being queer by using inclusive and non-binary typography as manifestations of their anger. One of the posters titled “Abortion is queer as fuck” is about fighting stigmas about abortion, re-claiming the narrative, and moving away from prevailing ideas of abortion as a sin.

Central to their work is the creation of ligatures (two or more graphemes that connect to form one glyph). They intentionally move away from separating the male and female forms, to close the gap between them and to transition towards an inclusive and non-binary typography.⁸

In their work, the collective is also meandering here and there. Not following a straight path, they question, deconstruct and non-binarise the norms and standards of the French language, and also, the rules of graphic design and typography. They question those rules, bend them, and even invent new possibilities. They create new imaginaries and fantasies, – not just one vision, but many different ones. They create a beautiful mess.

Design is not neutral

Because design itself is not neutral. Just like society and language, the design discipline has been shaped by systems like heteropatriarchy, classism, and white supremacy.⁹ These systems of inequalities create divisions through gender, race, sexuality, nationality, class and so on. Design researchers like Ece Canli and Luiza Prado de O Martins point out how artefacts, spaces, and technologies which we all interact with daily in society manifest these inequalities. As an example, they show that “the high security checkpoints at the borders and airports that legalise/illegalise bodies with ‘wrong’/ ‘right’ papers; the everyday gendered goods that underpin the representation of heteronormativity and performativity of feminine/masculine and female/male dichotomies; the gender-segregated public bathrooms that enforce binary perceptions of gender and silence queer and trans identities.”¹⁰

Design researcher Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020) too describes design as a disciple which is knotted and tied up in these dynamics of inequality. Referring to Patricia Hill Collin’s matrix of domination,

7 Bye Bye Binary. (2021). “Imaginaires typographiques inclusifs, queers et non binaires”, *RADDAR, Design politics*, vol. 3. (Pp. 16-29). Lausanne: T&P Work UNit.

8 Camille Circlède ° Caroline Dath. (2021). “Une révolution typographique post-binaire”, *Le Signe Design*. Vol. 2. (pp. 72-95). Chaumont: Centre national du graphisme. Les Presse du Réel.

9 Canli, E. & Prado de O. Martins, L. (2016). *Design and Intersectionality. Material Production of Gender, Race, Class – and Beyond*. In Ellens, P. (ed.) *Sense & Sensibility*. Eindhoven: Onomatopée, pp. 175–181.; Costanza-Chock, S. (2020). *Design Justice. Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

10 Canli, E. & Prado de O. Martins, L. (2016). *Design and Intersectionality. Material Production of Gender, Race, Class – and Beyond*. In Ellens, P. (ed.) *Sense & Sensibility*. Eindhoven: Onomatopée, pp. 175–181.

Costanza-Chock explains how design contributes to the inclusion or exclusion of people based on their intersecting gender, sexuality, race, class, and dis/abilities – just to name a few. Privilege and oppression are distributed and manifest themselves through designed artefacts, no matter if those artefacts are clothes, furniture pieces, digital interactions – or typography.

Typography too, stems from such similar practices and is not guilt free. Bye Bye Binary (2021) in their paper *Imaginaires typographiques inclusifs, queers et non binaires* critically interrogate this, showing John Baskerville's work as a "classic example of the invisibilisation of women in the history of typography"¹¹ where Baskerville's companion and associate Sarah Eaves who incredibly contributed to the print shop is not given credit for her work in developing typefaces and prints.

They de-construct the established norms by making women and other people outside the binary visible in the language and history of typography. Therefore, they also challenge what makes "good" design. Principles like "less is more" are still dominating design education and general discussions on what makes good design. The problem is that such principles are in reality neither objective nor universally applicable – even if the established canon claims the opposite. They exclude and even stigmatise colourful, rich, decorative graphic design and typographies often originating from womxn and/or BIPoCs.¹²

Bye Bye Binary uses typography as a tool for liberation. They blend the lines between typography, illustration, and graphic design. They use many colours and layers, and play with a variety of elements and create together. They refuse to follow or even reproduce a canon. By opening up many alternative paths they offer a multitude of possibilities. They do so by taking up space, creating tools for the means and aims of their communities, so that we can express ourselves and imagine a better future where language is inclusive and non-binary or even post-binary.

A collective societal effort

No matter if we take inspiration from other languages or experiment with typography – there is a need to question the status quo, the norms, the supposedly neutral, and to open up possibilities for alternative, better futures in which we can all see ourselves supported by and represented in and through languages we speak. The de- and reconstruction of language is not just a role of linguists, activists, or designers, it is a collective societal effort.

Lebogang Mokoena (2023)

¹¹ Bye Bye Binary. (2021). "Imaginaires typographiques inclusifs, queers et non binaires", *RADDAR, Design politics*, vol. 3. (pp. 16-29). Lausanne: T&P Work UNit.

¹² Buckley, C. (1986). "Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design". *Design Issues*, 3(2), pp. 3–14.

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