

# Nonbinary Czech language: characteristics and discourse

Vít Kolek

## Abstract

*As a morphologically rich Slavic language, Czech contains many possibilities for nonbinary language use. The broad aim of this article is to provide insights into existing and emerging nonbinary language strategies and the metadiscourses that surround them. After outlining the available means of gender-fair language, the analysis turns to possibilities for expressing nonbinarity, presenting emic insights regarding nonbinary community members' own language use, choices, innovations and metalinguistic reflections, as well as wider out-group responses. Discourses coming from the nonbinary community draw attention to less understood connections of language, self-expression, authenticity and social perception, whereas outgroup discourses draw on broad views of what is 'natural' in language and society. Emerging voices suggest that despite the general absence of debates surrounding nonbinary language in Czech academia and public discourse, much is happening 'underground' in personal language use and community interactions, reflecting the ongoing negotiation of tensions between gender-normative structures and the range of feasible agentive practices used to subvert them.*

*Čeština jako morfoložicky bohatý slovanský jazyk nabízí mnoho možností pro nebinární vyjadřování. Širším cílem článku je poskytnout vřled do vznikajících i již existujících jazykových strategií a taktéř do metadiskurzů, které je obklopují.*

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*Po nastínění dostupných prostředků genderově vyváženého jazyka se analýza zaměřuje na možnosti vyjádření nebinarity a představuje emické poznatky týkající se vlastního užívání jazyka nebinární komunitou, jejich volby, inovace a metajazykové reflexe, stejně jako širší reakce mimo komunitu. Diskurzy vycházející z nebinární komunity se věnují především méně známým souvislostem jazyka, sebevyjádření, autenticity a sociální percepce, zatímco diskurzy pocházející mimo tuto skupinu věnují pozornost především širšímu kontextu toho, co je a není v jazyce a společnosti „přirozené“. Objevující se hlasy naznačují, že navzdory obecné absenci debat o nebinárním jazyce v českém akademickém prostředí a veřejném diskurzu se toho hodně děje „pod povrchem“, tj. v osobním užívání jazyka, v interakcích dané komunity, což odráží probíhající obušování hran mezi genderově normativními strukturami a škálou možných agentivních praktik k jejich překonání.*

KEYWORDS: NONBINARY CZECH, GENDER-FAIR LANGUAGE, GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE, TRANSGENDER, CZECH LANGUAGE

## Introduction

The linguistic expression of nonbinarity has increasingly been highlighted as both a possibility and a challenge faced by speakers of many languages, especially languages with grammatical gender. The topic of nonbinarity in language can be observed not only in emancipation efforts of trans and nonbinary communities, but also in debates surrounding legislative moves, such as the possibility to choose a third option for one's legal 'sex' as already implemented in some countries, which is further reflected at the language level.

In the academic sphere, scholars of language, gender and sexuality are increasingly interrogating the ways language relates to ideological normativities, including those negotiated at ideological boundaries (see Hall, Levon and Milani 2019). As a result, trans and nonbinary issues are currently a significant and growing point of interest (Calder 2020). Zimman (2017:85) argues that, in the English-speaking world, 'the 2010s have been the decade of transgender publicity, when the well-honed theories of gender and identity trans people had been developing in-community for decades finally began to be recognised more broadly as a matter of social justice'. A relatively new focus has turned to the discourse practices of trans and nonbinary people, as well as to the possibilities for expressing nonbinarity or gender neutrality in language itself. The vast majority of this research, however, comes from anglophone contexts, and little has been written on morphologically rich language environments like Slavic (although research is emerging; see Vičar and Kern 2017 for Slovenian; Séleš 2018 for Slovak). The inherent 'foreignness' of nonbinary and transgender terminology – and

even the concept of ‘gender’ (Butler 2019) – still invites local consideration. In Slavic contexts, this has specific backgrounds at both the structural-morphological and language-ideological levels.

In the Czech language environment, the topic of what is called ‘gender-fair language’ emerged at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Čmejrková 1995; Hoffmannová 1995; Valdřová 1996, 1997). More recently, discussions of this topic have considered whether ‘traditional’ ways of using gender-fair language may be extended to nonbinary persons (Kolek 2019a). Despite this attention, however, this is still a liminal effort in linguistics and language policy. Still, there is an emerging, elaborate set of linguistic practices that members of the trans community use and discuss that draw attention to specific potentials – and obstacles – in Slavic language contexts and beyond. By focusing on nonbinary Czech and providing insights into existing and emerging language strategies as well as the metadiscourses that surround them, I aim to contribute to recent research on how ‘speakers existing at the ideological margins negotiate the tension between normative ideological gender structures and emergent agentive practices’ (Calder 2020:443), with special focus on how such efforts are represented in Czech (meta)discourse.

## Background

The main theoretical framework of research on nonbinary language use is constituted by queer linguistics (see Motschenbacher 2010, 2011; Motschenbacher and Stegu 2013). Queer linguistics follows poststructuralist queer theory in analysing the discursive construction of gender and sexual identities while problematising heteronormativity as constituted in the components of biological sex, gender (or gender identity) and (hetero) sexual orientation (Motschenbacher 2012:95). The gender binary holds a central place in the ways heteronormativity is constantly discursively constructed, reproduced, naturalised and institutionalised. A vast body of research has shown how heteronormativity and gender binarism work together to both marginalise and make nonheteronormative and especially nonbinary people discursively invisible (Butler 1990; Hornscheidt 2008; Scheller-Boltz 2017). Contrary to a heteronormative view of the world, the purpose of nonbinary language use is to discursively challenge the idea of only two genders, to deconstruct heteronormativity and create space for additional identities. It is with queer linguistics that ‘an expanded set of practices was brought into focus as the reflexes not (only) of misogyny, but also of the perpetration of heterosexism, homophobia and gender normativity’ (Zimman 2017:88), making space for new research on nonnormative

communities and practices and specifically nonbinary expression in language.

To refer to this kind of language, the terms *nonheteronormative language* (Motschenbacher 2014; Kolek 2019a; Kolek 2019b) and *gender-neutral language* (Urbancová 2019 in Slovak linguistics) have been used. I do not consider the term *gender-neutral language* suitable for the Czech environment, because gender-neutral forms constitute only a small part of possible strategies for nonbinary expression. Similarly, terms such as *nonsexist language*, *gender-inclusive language* and *gender-fair language* have referred mainly to the process of making women visible. Therefore, these terms are still anchored in binarity (cf. Zimman 2017), although *gender-fair language* and *gender-inclusive language* have recently been used to encompass nonbinary contexts. In the present article, I choose the label *nebinární čeština* ‘nonbinary Czech language’, as it is both more precise and already used in the Czech language environment.

Many typologically different languages have dealt with the issue of nonbinary language, including German (Motschenbacher 2014; Kolek 2019c; Kotthoff 2017, 2020; Hornscheidt and Sammla 2021; Löhr 2021), Slovenian (Vičar and Kern 2017; Popič and Gorjanc 2018), Russian (Scheller-Boltz 2017), Slovak (Séleš 2018) and French (Knisely 2020), among others. Scheller-Boltz (2019, 2020) provides an overview of gender-inclusive and gender-fair language use in Slavic languages more broadly. This research suggests that similar linguistic means for nonbinary expression are coming to be adopted across different languages, namely the inclusion of gender-neutral forms (when available) and graphic symbols (\*, \_ , !, @ or others) in written language.

As for the Czech language environment, the topic of gender-fair language emerged only in late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Čmejrková 1995; Hoffmannová 1995; Valdová 1996, 1997), even though the topic of women’s linguistic visibility has more than a century of tradition (Kolek and Valdová 2017). The point and meaning of gender-fair language reform was challenged by local linguists after its introduction (Čmejrková 1995; Hoffmannová 1995), leading to a petition against gender-fair language in 2010. Nevertheless, language activists published the first nonsexist recommendations for the Czech language at the turn of the century (Valdrova 2001, 2005, 2013), issuing the most detailed version yet published in 2018 (Valdrova 2018). The recommendations were followed by academic publications assessing ‘traditional’ ways of using gender-fair language to refer to nonbinary persons as well as possibilities for applying the ‘gender star’ (asterisk) or underscore in the Czech language (Kolek 2019a). These publications included an introduction to queer linguistics written in the Czech language (Scheller-Boltz 2018) and an article dealing with existing queer linguistic

publications in Czech studies (Kolek 2019b). The debate has continued to shape up beyond academia: in 2021 an unofficial platform *Kvíření jazyka českého* 'Queering the Czech language' was founded to discuss strategies for nonbinary language. Recent attention to gender issues in the country provides new space for these topics to enter public and academic discussion, although nonbinary language is rarely part of policy proposals and is still a new theme overall.

## Aims and methodology

This article synthesises possibilities for nonbinary Czech language and provides an analysis of related contemporary discourse. The corpus is constituted by relevant internet sources found online (i.e. newspaper and blog articles as well as recordings of panel discussions) by searching the key term *nebinární čeština* 'nonbinary Czech language'. In total, the corpus consists of 17 newspaper or blog articles and three recorded panel discussions produced between January 2020 and June 2021. To my knowledge, the corpus includes all available sources on the topic at the time of data collection.

Methodologically, the study relies on linguistic discourse analysis (Spitzmüller and Warnke 2011). In particular, I searched for and identified three types of discursive information, which dominate contemporary discourses on nonbinary Czech language: 1) motivations and reasons for using nonbinary Czech language (the question of 'why?'); 2) possible strategies for producing nonbinary language, including the perceived advantages and disadvantages of using those strategies (the question of 'how?'); and 3) the attitudes and positions of members of the nonbinary community and outgroup commentators towards those strategies (the question of perception). While not meant to be exhaustive, the data provide valuable emic insights into the discourses of Czech nonbinary, trans and wider queer communities and are a step towards integrating these largely absent bottom-up perspectives in (Czech) gender linguistic theorising. The diversity of the material allows for an analysis of motivations and proposals for nonbinary expression from not only nonbinary people, but also academic queer theorists, trans organisations and out-group observers.

Thanks to the interest of the public (both everyday speakers as well as translators), the range of possibilities for gender-fair language is growing. This article first addresses currently available and developing forms for gender-fair language. I then examine the potential of gender-fair linguistic strategies for nonbinary expression while also considering commentary regarding the respective linguistic strategies. I focus, in particular, on discussions that have arisen in the internet environment regarding the

contemporary usage and productivity of those strategies. Finally, I turn to contemporary discourses surrounding nonbinary language more generally, addressing the motives and arguments for and against the use of nonbinary Czech language.

## Gender-fair language use in Czech

The Czech language is a richly inflected Slavic language with three grammatical genders and seven grammatical cases. The principles of sentence agreement require gender-specific grammatical suffixes in five different parts of speech: nouns, adjectives, some pronouns, past participles of verbs and some numerals. The following example is taken from Valdřová (2019:227):

Oba <sub>m. pl.</sub>	naši <sub>m. pl.</sub>	noví <sub>m. pl.</sub>	členové <sub>m. pl.</sub>	zaplatili <sub>m. pl.</sub>	poplatky.
Obě <sub>f. pl.</sub>	naše <sub>f. pl.</sub>	nové <sub>f. pl.</sub>	členky <sub>f. pl.</sub>	zaplatily <sub>f. pl.</sub>	poplatky.

'Both of our new members paid the membership fees', in masculine and feminine forms respectively.

The use of the generic masculine imposes masculine grammatical indications marked on multiple parts of speech (i.e. the first example may refer to two men or to a man and a woman), which is pervasive due to the morphological inflection of Czech. However, various techniques and strategies may be combined to formulate gender-fair texts in the Czech language, depending on reference and context. As an overview, Valdřová (2001, 2005, 2018) specifies the following possibilities (also available in English in Kolek and Valdřová 2020):

- 1) Feminisation/gender specification, i.e. the inclusion of feminine noun forms: *občané<sub>m</sub>* a *občanky<sub>f</sub>* '[male] citizens and [female] citizens' instead of *občané<sub>m</sub>*. In written form, a forward slash is used: *doktor<sub>m</sub>/ka<sub>f</sub>* 'doctor'; however, using parentheses is not suitable: \**doktor<sub>m</sub>(ka<sub>f</sub>)*.
- 2) Various types of circumlocutions:
  - Titles and institutions, teams, professions, specialisations, etc. instead of the generic masculine: *rektorát* 'rectorate' instead of *rektor<sub>m</sub>* 'rector'.
  - Epicenes: *odborná síla* 'skilled labour' instead of *odborník<sub>m</sub>* 'a professional'.
  - Collective nouns: *žactvo* 'pupils' instead of *žáci<sub>m</sub>* (a *žákyně<sub>f</sub>*) '[male] pupils (and [female] pupils)'.
  - Nouns with adjectives: *učitelské platy* 'teachers' salaries' instead of *platy učitelů<sub>m</sub>* 'salaries of teachers'.

- Verbal adjectives: *vyučující* ‘teaching’ instead of *učitelé<sub>m</sub>* ‘teachers’.
  - Deictic labels: *váš podpis* ‘your signature’ instead of *podpis žadatele<sub>m</sub>* ‘signature of the applicant’.
  - Circumlocutions using subordinate clauses: *kdo má zájem* ‘[those] who are interested’ instead of *zájemci<sub>m</sub>* ‘applicants’.
  - Conversion to passive verb voice: *Formulář A musí být doručen* ‘Form A must be submitted’ instead of *Žadatel<sub>m</sub> musí doručit formulář A* ‘The applicant must submit form A’.
  - Omission of the generic masculine: *dopravní podnik* ‘public transport company’ instead of *úředníci<sub>m</sub> dopravního podniku* ‘employees of the public transport company’.
  - Other creative means according to the context and type of the text.
- 3) Graphic symbols, in written contexts, which allow nonbinary interpretation (e.g. a star /asterisk, or an underscore): *učitel<sub>m</sub> \*ka<sub>f</sub>* or *učitel<sub>m</sub>\_ka<sub>f</sub>*.

This overview shows that ‘[g]ender specification and gender neutralization are two main and largely opposite approaches to combating sexism in language’ (Kirey-Sitnikova 2021:144). Yet because feminisation (as shown earlier under ‘1) Feminisation/gender specification’) is actually ‘a combination of masculine and feminine forms and excludes everything outside the feminine-masculine binary’ (Kirey-Sitnikova 2021:148), only neutralisation strategies allow for a nonbinary interpretation, as shown in ‘2) Various types of circumlocutions’ and ‘3) Graphic symbols’. This point is also emphasised by Zimman (2017:97), who argues that gender neutrality is especially important as a resource for affirming nonbinary gender identities. Therefore, among the means of gender-fair language as assessed in Kolek (2019b), only the latter two possibilities may be considered suitable to refer to nonbinary persons.

Aside from these two possibilities, however, new ones appear to be emerging. Possibly the first empirical metalanguage research on the use and acceptability of nonbinary language strategies among nonbinary individuals in the Czech language was authored by Wehle (2020). The range of linguistic strategies identified by Wehle includes some creative innovations, such as the use of neuter gender, or novel pronouns. Other strategies identified include:

- Using the gender a person was assigned at birth
- Bypassing gendered phrases
- Using the opposite gender a person was assigned at birth
- Using the neuter grammatical gender

- Switching between feminine and masculine gender
- Using plural instead of singular, including the third person plural
- Using the ‘opposite’ grammatical gender for a gendered noun, changing its structure
- Using new grammatical structures and pronouns
- Using fonts and other graphic adjustments of gendered expressions

Wehle examined the acceptability of three of these strategies among non-binary individuals using a questionnaire technique. Although Wehle found a certain disunity of opinion, nonbinary community members typically assessed the strategy of incorporating experimental adjustments at the graphic level as most preferred, the strategy of using grammatical gender corresponding with the gender assigned at birth as second preferred, and the strategy of using neuter grammatical gender as least preferred.

## Nonbinary Czech language in discourse

### *Language strategies for nonbinary Czech*

The corpus contains a range of comments regarding the possibilities and difficulties of nonbinary personal reference in Czech, which often provide elaborate metalinguistic description. As stated in the opening of one interview by a nonbinary person named Ade:

*[N]ebinární čeština neexistuje. Na druhou stranu je to všechno, na co česky mluvící nebinární lidé přišli, že jim při vyjadřování vyhovuje.*

‘There is no nonbinary Czech language. On the other hand, it’s all that Czech-speaking nonbinary people have found that suits them when expressing themselves’ (Source 1).

Later in the interview, however, Ade further elaborates on this thought and notes several options for (self-)reference:

*Někteří nebinární lidé mluví rodem, který jim byl přiřazen na základě anatomie, některým vyhovuje opačný, někteří rody střídají, někdo používá střední rod.*

‘Some nonbinary persons use the grammatical gender that was assigned to them according to their anatomy, some prefer the opposite grammatical gender, some alternate them, some use the neuter.’

Ade’s comment highlights the fact that the community’s language strategies involve not just nonbinary language in a true sense, but also choices from the traditional possibilities of masculine and feminine grammatical gender (or their alteration). The choice to use one’s grammatical gender assigned at birth or its ‘opposite’, or even to alternate between the two



grammatical genders, is based on the traditional binary scheme of (grammatical) genders, but it may at the same time subvert this binary scheme in discourse. In particular, even if the alternation of masculine and feminine grammatical gender relies on binary grammatical genders (cf. Bershtling 2014), it may attract attention and be an effective strategy to express non-binarity. In one discussion of nonbinary Czech language (Source 2), non-binary individuals indicated that they use different grammatical genders across various contexts (e.g. at work vs. in personal life) in order to suit the given situation. For example, one participant explained that they work as a teacher of the Czech language for foreigners, and in this context, they use the feminine grammatical gender. However, in their private life, they behave like a *hospodské hovado a k tomu se mužský rod hodí lépe* ‘pub yob, and as such, it is more suitable to use the masculine’. Here, traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity, such as the trope of ‘heavy drinking Czech masculinity’, intersect with language choice.

Another innovative linguistic strategy highlighted in the data is the use of the neuter grammatical gender. In Czech, the neuter grammatical gender is used either to label inanimate objects, or – in the case of people – to refer to young or immature people (e.g. *dítě* ‘child’, *děvče* ‘girl’; Osolsobě 2017; cf. Coady 2018). Because of this, using the neuter may have a dehumanising or ridiculing effect or other negative connotations, much like using the pronoun ‘it’ to refer to individuals in English (Chen 2021). Another association may also be with a variant of Moravian dialects in which the grammatical suffix *-e* is often used. Whereas use of the neuter in personal nouns is not registered in my data, neuter gender agreement in verbal and adjectival forms occurs in (self-)reference and is available for take-up. For example, a nonbinary person named Alžbětko (Source 3) uses this strategy when saying *Já jsem to rodičům nijak nekomunikovalo<sub>n</sub>* ‘I have not communicated<sub>n</sub> this to my parents’. Interestingly, this strategy is also taken up by the host of the discussion, as in the sentence *Jste vlastně zaměřené<sub>n</sub> na ekologii, na ekologický aktivismus* ‘You are basically focused<sub>n</sub> on ecology, on ecological activism’. However, the full use of this strategy is hampered by the absence of person references in the neuter grammatical gender (e.g. to indicate occupation). For example, the term ‘teacher’ has the masculine form *učitel* and the feminine form *učitelka*, but no neuter form.

Another means present in the dataset is the creative use of an archaic Czech politeness style known as *onikání*, which involves using the plural third-person pronoun (*oni*) with singular reference, as in *oni jsou moc velký dobrák* ‘they are a very good person’. This type of expression, common in the Czech general language in the past, is now considered archaic and carries ironic and humorous connotations (Kwak 2021). But it is nevertheless emerging in nonbinary use, in part related to the influence of anglophone

practices and the similar use of ‘they’ in English (cf. Sheydaei 2021). However, unlike English or languages without grammatical gender, this strategy cannot be used in all grammatical persons. In addition, the relevant personal pronoun also carries gender-specific forms for masculine, feminine and neuter grammatical gender (*oni<sub>m</sub>, ony<sub>f</sub>, ona<sub>n</sub>*), again imposing the choice of either one of the binary variants or the neuter variant. Another difficulty for nonbinary use is that it is not entirely clear what grammatical forms (masculine vs. feminine; singular vs. plural) should then be carried by the personal nouns (*Oni je/jsou učitel<sub>m.sg.</sub>/učitelka<sub>f.sg.</sub>/učitelé<sub>m.pl.</sub>/učitelky<sub>f.pl.</sub>* ‘They is/are a teacher<sub>m.sg.</sub>/teacher<sub>f.sg.</sub>/teachers<sub>m.pl.</sub>/teachers<sub>f.pl.</sub>’).

Some linguistic innovations occur within explicit metalinguistic proposals in the data, most notably in reference to new nonbinary pronoun forms. One proposal observed is to use a new pronoun *one* [ɔnɛ] as a complement to Czech third person pronouns *on<sub>m</sub>/ona/ono<sub>n</sub>* (‘he, she, it’), along with the grammatical suffix *-e* for past participles (e.g. *one byle* [‘one was’]), as in *One byle na našem oddělení jako stážiste, pracovale se mnou na několika úkolech* ‘One was in our department as an intern, working with me on several tasks’. The authors of such proposals demonstrate awareness of the Czech grammatical system and, namely, the fact that it is necessary to resolve not only the forms of the pronoun but also other congruent parts of speech; in the example above, this is shown in *stážiste*, a creative gender-neutral noun form. Another similar proposal, occurring on a Tumblr page dedicated to nonbinary Czech (Source 4), focuses on a new pronoun *oň* [ɔɲ], meant for nonbinary reference. The page makes the proposal for ‘neopronouns’ following the examples of English *xe* and *ze*, proposing the neopronoun *oň* (as in *oň milovale* ‘oň loved’) along with the new pronoun’s entire pronominal paradigm. It is of note that members of the nonbinary community also mention the innovative possibility of using the inflection form *-ý* in past participles (a combination of *-i* from the masculine animate grammatical gender and *-y* from the feminine animate grammatical gender; e.g. *bylý* ‘they were<sub>m+f</sub>’ would be a mix of *byli<sub>m.pl.</sub>* and *byly<sub>f.pl.</sub>*), though I found no elaborations or examples of this form or its use. This strategy does not provide solutions for all parts of speech; however, it may be used as a substitute for graphic signs when using past participles in the plural.

In written language, using both grammatical genders together complemented by a graphic symbol (e.g. *student<sub>m</sub>\*ka<sub>f</sub>*) is another available strategy attested in the data. The organisation TakyTrans suggested a similar forward slash in one of their Facebook posts (Source 5). However, the slash is a traditional graphic symbol designed to make women visible and, contrary to the asterisk and underscore, does not go beyond binarity. The forward slash’s function – as evidenced by a contribution from the

*Internetová jazyková poradna Ústavu pro jazyk český* ‘Internet Language Reference Book of the Institute for the Czech Language’ – is to ‘*naznačovat alternativu či záměnnost*’ (‘indicate an alternative or ambiguity’) (Source 6). During the debate ‘*Ne/binární čeština*’ [Non]binary Czech Language’ (Source 2), the possibility of using the asterisk in written language is mentioned, suggesting a negotiation of existing practice and ongoing change. Participants in the discussion take the stance that the asterisk should be limited to nouns and past participles only. However, the asterisk may also be used with pronouns, adjectives and numerals, which have different feminine and masculine forms. Additionally, one participant in the discussion argues that *když už to chceme vyslovit, je to problém, protože to vyslovit nejde* ‘if we want to pronounce these forms, it is a problem because they are impossible to pronounce’ (Source 2). However, the asterisk may be pronounced with a glottal stop in Czech, which is also the case in German (Scheller-Boltz 2022).

Finally, the data contain reference to formulations that fully avoid expressing grammatical gender, but metalinguistic comments authored by community members often highlight these as problematic. According to participants in the ‘*Ne/binární čeština*’ debate (Source 2), this type of language use *vyžaduje cvik a více energie, omezuje to, co jsme schopni vyjádřit, není běžný způsob mluvení* ‘requires some practice and is more demanding, it limits the things we are able to express, and it is not a common way of speaking’. For instance, the sentiment *jsem unavená/unavený<sub>m</sub>* ‘I am tired’ may be expressed as *chce se mi spát* (literally, ‘I want to sleep’); it is also possible to use the plural if there are more people involved (e.g. *v práci jsme toho měli hodně* ‘we had a lot of work on our hands’ instead of *měl<sub>m</sub> / měla<sub>f</sub>, jsem hodně práce* ‘I had a lot of work on my hands’). In the debate, participants compare this way of using language to speaking in a foreign language, pointing out that speakers may lose their individuality (i.e. their idiolect) when concentrating on grammar and vocabulary (Source 7).

Relatedly, it is noteworthy that trans community members often uphold the use of (pseudo)generic masculines as acceptable, in addition to being a means of nonbinary reference. In this respect, they show that it is not always possible to draw neat lines between the positions of gender minorities and the more mainstream positions of gender equality advocates. For example, Ade (who uses the masculine when referring to themselves in Czech, albeit not entirely happily) points out that the feminine form contains grammatical suffixes that make the word longer. Participants in the debate on nonbinary Czech (Source 2) similarly elaborated arguments for the generic masculine: *dá se vysvětlit, že zahrnuje všechny gendery* ‘it may be understood that it includes all genders’, *dá se chápat jako neutrální* ‘it may be understood as neutral’, or even that *mužský rod se posunuje do toho*

*neutrálna* ‘the masculine grammatical gender is being pushed to neutrality’. Repeated references of this kind overall point to ideologies of language and gender that do not easily fit established expectations in the field regarding minority and majority discourses or perceptions of (linguistic) equality. Another possibility commented on in the discussion was the declination of nouns according to an inflectional paradigm of a different grammatical gender than they originally belong to.

In sum, current discourses surrounding nonbinary Czech language offer various suggestions that do not always meet the characteristics of strictly nonbinary Czech language and may in fact reproduce binarity. Other proposals strive to enrich the language by means of a new pronoun and a set of grammatical suffixes. Regardless of the preferred solution, these proposals often explicitly acknowledge the complexity of gender-fair language. Further discussions continue to take place, both within the forums outlined above and on the platform *Kvíření jazyka českého* ‘Queering the Czech language’ (Source 8) founded in 2021, which focuses precisely on such individual suggestions.

### *Motivations for nonbinary Czech language*

A broad factor commonly referred to in the dataset concerns discomfort with expressing nonbinary gender identity in reference to oneself and to others. For example, in the interview with Ade (Source 1), titled ‘*Čeština bez rodů? My ji potřebujeme, říká nebinární Ade* ‘Czech language without grammatical gender? We need it’, says nonbinary Ade), Ade emphasises the interests of the nonbinary community and strives to draw empathy with their constant discomfort in linguistic expression. In Ade’s view, more extensive awareness of nonbinary Czech language *by bylo žádoucí, protože současný stav je pro nás [= nebinární osoby] nepohodlný* ‘may be desirable because the current state is uncomfortable for us [= nonbinary persons]’. Nonbinary Czech language is described by the interviewer as a *radikální podoba jazyka, který se vyjadřování genderu snaží vyhnout úplně* ‘radical form of language which strives to avoid expressing gender fully’. In this discourse, the question of how such language change would come into being is not discussed, but efforts towards such ‘radical’ linguistic interventions are justified via personal references to discomfort and real-world psychological hardships:

*[M]noha lidem by to [možnost se nebinárně vyjadřovat] zmenšilo míru stresu během dospívání, když zjišťují, kdo jsou, a některým i po zbytek života.*

‘For many people it [the possibility to express themselves in a nonbinary way] would lessen the measure of the stress during their adolescence – when they are finding out who they are – and that would go for some of the people for the rest of their life.’

Another argument concerns (in)authenticity. The need to select one of the two binary genders is described by Ade as *přetvařování* ‘posturing’ because it implies something that is not true. Ade’s closing argument emphasises the natural need of nonbinary persons to *používat jazyk tak, aby vyjadřoval realitu* ‘use the language to express their reality’. The problem of (in)authenticity is framed as activated in any situation of language use; due to typological characteristics of the Czech language, one needs to out one’s own gender identity in nearly every sentence.

Another component of the reflections in the data is the discourse of inclusion, ethics and equal opportunity that has been mainstreamed in European gender discourses and, which are – at least declaratively – common in Czech public discourse. Community members, however, feel excluded from such public motions and their own ‘mother tongue’, as indicated in another article supporting nonbinary Czech: *Je čas přidat do češtiny nové zájmeno? Nebinární lidi mrzí, že s nimi jejich mateřský jazyk nepočítá* ‘Is it the time to add a new pronoun into the Czech language? The nonbinary people feel disheartened that their mother tongue does not include them’ (Source 7). Such inclusion-based reasons are given as a point of comparison to existing arguments regarding the use of feminine word forms to refer to women (see Kolek and Valdřová 2017, 2020) or to extralinguistic efforts for equal opportunity, equal approaches to language, and ethical principles relating to women’s rights (see Stefanowitsch 2018).

Activist discourses produced by trans-positive organizations also frequently voice arguments combining issues of discomfort, (in)authenticity and belonging. This is seen in statements by the TakyTrans organisation, which brought nonbinary Czech language into focus during Prague Pride 2020 (Source 2). In this discourse, organizers emphasized the limitations of the grammatical system of the Czech language for nonbinary self-expression:

*Jsmo si vědomi toho, že náš mateřský jazyk, čeština, je limitovaná, a že nám neumožňuje se vyjadřovat tak, jak bychom chtěli.*

‘We are aware of the fact that our mother tongue, the Czech language, is limited and it does not enable us to express ourselves in a way we want to.’

Similar reports of personal experience find their way into scholarly considerations. One source text (Source 9) illustrates a personal account from a researcher in the field of geography of sexual identities, who describes how he came to start thinking about nonbinary language. The researcher had collaborated with a nonbinary person from abroad, and language obstacles emerged when he began writing about their collaboration in Czech. In his reflection, he comes to the conclusion that it is necessary to find linguistic strategies suitable for nonbinary reference, or what he describes

as “*nebinární nářečí*” (“nonbinary dialect”; used with quotation marks to indicate a certain distance from this term). In his own words, his aim as a scholar is to *dát nebinárním lidem hlas, kterým by takto o sobě mohli poprvé promluvit česky a [on] by tak mohl mluvit o nich* ‘give a voice to nonbinary persons which they may use to talk about themselves in Czech for the first time and to give [the author] the possibility to talk about them.’

However, this example also illustrates conflicting perspectives between academic discourse and the perspectives of actual community members by assuming that nonbinary individuals need ‘help’ from above. In fact, this statement was criticised by the TakyTrans organisation as marginalising, in that it implied that nonbinary persons are not able to participate in (public) discourse or find their own voice without assistance. This illustrates the importance of understanding the metalinguistic perspectives of those who struggle with gendered structures in language and society, so that our scholarship does not erase the bottom-up, in-group, emic efforts and choices being developed in nonbinary and queer communities. As seen in these examples, the arguments proposed by nonbinary persons in support of nonbinary language, whether as individuals or as part of an organisation, tend to focus more on personal hardship and the desire for authenticity rather than on matters of representation and voice. Such arguments, however, are consistently linked to the possibilities and limitations of the Czech grammatical system.

### *Arguments against nonbinary Czech language*

The data also provide some insights into discourses that are positioned against the use of nonbinary language. These discourses in many ways resemble the resistance to gender-inclusive language reported for other contexts in research on women, gender and language (e.g. Abbou 2011; Formato 2019) as well as ‘anti-gender’ discourses more broadly (Borba, Hall and Hiramoto 2020), but with some distinct constructions of nonbinary (language) concerns specifically.

A prominent argument against nonbinary Czech language emphasises the ‘disconnectedness’ of the debate and its participants from social reality. For instance, reactions to the interview with the nonbinary individual Ade characterise the trans community as a ‘bubble’ and closed group, blind to the outside world. In one such reaction (Source 10), the author describes the debate on nonbinary Czech language as ‘absurd’, stating that it is an issue *rezonující uvnitř sociální bubliny odtržené od reality okolního světa* ‘resonating within a filter bubble disconnected from the reality of the wider world’, where *nemůže diskuze plodit jiné nápady než ujeté* ‘the discussion may not produce any other ideas than crazy ones.’ To illustrate the ‘crazy’ idea, the author mentions the demand that people should provide their

preferred grammatical gender/pronoun when introducing themselves – a practice originating in English speaking countries and starting to emerge in the Czech Republic.

Related arguments involve concerns of ‘social engineering’ and stress the intentionality of changing society in negative and unhealthy ways. Thus, the author of Source 10 warns against the ‘salami tactics’ employed to try to change the Czech language and calls the efforts to create a non-binary Czech language egoistic, claiming that unhealthy societies *nasazují sociální inženýry* ‘deploy social engineers’ to deal with these calls. However, these social engineers *přehlížejí skutečnost, že pohlaví jsou jen dvě a do nich se zkrátka musíme nějak vejít* ‘overlook the fact that there are only two genders, and we simply have to fit into those.’ An important aspect of this (anti)discourse involves other social changes pertaining to allegedly controversial aspects of LGBTQ+ people’s lives. In the view of commentators advancing this discourse, ‘social engineering’ interference with language use is ‘only a first step’ on a slippery slope towards other social changes in which minority groups will demand more rights.

Finally, arguments against nonbinary language often demonstrate an underlying language-ideological position regarding the centrality of language to culture and thought, by which interventions in language are perceived as generally dangerous. Calling queer people *zblblíci* ‘idiots’, the author of Source 11 emphasises that a small percentage of those ‘idiots’ would *chtít mluvit do tak zásadních věcí, jako je JAZYK ... jehož význam si neuvědomujeme, ale přes který lze kontrolovat myšlení ... je zle* ‘like to have a say into such principal things as LANGUAGE ... while we do not realize its importance, however, it is possible to control the free thought in doing so ... it is bad.’ The criticism reflects wider argumentation against ‘genderist’ innovations as compromising the wider symbolic importance of language as ‘an important force unifying national society’ (Özörencik and Hromadová 2019:108), a perspective traditionally present in the Czech Republic’s academic and public discourses. Yet from a different angle, this argument echoes the nonbinary community’s own upholding of the importance of language to legitimizing nonbinary existence, as outlined by Ade’s arguments.

## Conclusions and prospective development

The Czech language has various and long-established linguistic strategies of gender-fair language. Many of these strategies have now been appropriated to refer to nonbinary persons, especially if they involve gender-neutral forms. These language strategies may facilitate the (self-)identification of nonbinary persons and their representation in society at a conceptual level.

At the same time, these language strategies may challenge binary perceptions of gender identity and binary conceptualizations of grammatical gender, thus disrupting heteronormative perceptions of social life.

A range of linguistic strategies for expressing nonbinarity emerged from the analysis, mainly in the reflections of nonbinary community members themselves. Some strategies are arguably grounded in binarity, and thus promote its reproduction, whereas other strategies exploit possibilities already available in the Czech language system but not normatively used for nonbinary reference (e.g. the neuter or third person plural); these are found to be employed in creative ways by speakers who modify their functions to assist with nonbinary person reference. Still, the question of gender agreement remains difficult. In this regard, the analysis also reveals a range of emerging innovative forms, such as the new pronoun *oň* and the inflection character *-ỳ*.

At present, nonbinary Czech language discourse is in its infancy. Therefore, an important part of its metadiscourse entails the ongoing negotiation of (non)binarity in the Czech language. Contemporary discourses evince a certain tendency towards personalised, emotionally charged expression, both from the side of the nonbinary community and from the side of critics who warn of the presumed negative consequences. Discourses coming from the nonbinary Czech community take the form of a broad metadiscussion that draws attention to aspects of queer communicative experience and exposes some less understood connections of language, self-expression, authenticity and social perception. Metalinguistic positions in the nonbinary community also sometimes counter expectations about discourses of gender-fair language; for instance, in stressing a preference for the generic masculine over the feminisation that is otherwise increasingly employed in Czech. Out-group discourses rejecting attempts at nonbinary language similarly draw on broad and vague views of what is 'natural' in language and society, reflecting both the wider 'organicism' language ideologies (Cameron 1995) as well as Czech traditional views of language as sacred for society, which continue to affect (the absence of) these topics in academic circles.

Even though discourses opposing nonbinary language remain strong, the emerging voices analysed in this article suggest that much more is happening 'underground' – in personal language use, community interactions and group outlets – and that arguments supportive of nonbinary language reform are now beginning to infiltrate academic and more mainstream discourses. These developments point to ongoing negotiations of the tension between normative ideological gender structures and the range of feasible agentive practices from the 'ideological margins' (Calder 2020).



## About the author

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Source 2: *(Non)-Binary Czech Language discussion* in Prague Pride 2020, online stream from 3 August 2020. <https://youtu.be/eZey2HjxzKE?t=1271>

Source 3: *Nebinární lidé: příliš se lpí na biologickém pohlaví* [Nonbinary people: is the society too focused on biological sex?] Discussion. Lidovky. [https://www.lidovky.cz/video-idnes.aspx?idvideo=V211628\\_161951\\_idnestv\\_jaha](https://www.lidovky.cz/video-idnes.aspx?idvideo=V211628_161951_idnestv_jaha)

Source 4: Profile *Nebinární čeština* [Profile Nonbinary Czech language], Tumblr. <https://nebinarni-cestina.tumblr.com/>

Source 5: Organisation TakyTrans. Facebook post on non-binary Czech language. <https://www.facebook.com/TakyTrans/posts/144186972651250/>

Source 6: *Internet language reference Book of the Institute for the Czech Language*. Entry: lomítka [slash]. <https://prirucka.ujc.cas.cz/?slovo=lom%C4%ADtko>

Source 7: Rambousková, Bohdana (2020) *Je čas přidat do češtiny nové zájmeno? Nebinární lidé mrzí, že s nimi jejich mateřský jazyk nepočítá* [Is it time to add a new pronoun to the Czech language? Non-binary people regret that their mother tongue doesn't count them]. Lui. [https://www.lui.cz/lide-zivot/17601-je-cas-pridat-do-cestiny-nove-zajmeno-nebinarni-lidi-mrzi-ze-s-nimi-jejich-matersky-jazyk-nepocita?utm\\_source=www.seznam.cz&utm\\_medium=sekce-z-internetu](https://www.lui.cz/lide-zivot/17601-je-cas-pridat-do-cestiny-nove-zajmeno-nebinarni-lidi-mrzi-ze-s-nimi-jejich-matersky-jazyk-nepocita?utm_source=www.seznam.cz&utm_medium=sekce-z-internetu)

Source 8: *Kvíření jazyka českého* [Queering of the Czech language], Facebook group. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/416110101104497957/>

Source 9: Pitoňák, Michal (2020) *Myšlenka nebinárního nářečí: aneb jak v češtině dát hlas nebinárním lidem?* [The idea of a non-binary dialect: or how to give a voice to non-binary people in Czech?]. <https://pitonak.blog.respekt.cz/myslenka-nebinarniho-nareci/>

Source 10: Lhotská, Kateřina (2020) *Společnost: čtvrtý rod pro třetí pohlaví* [Society: a fourth grammatical gender for the third gender]. *Neviditelný pes – Lidovky*. [https://neviditelnypes.lidovky.cz/spolecnost/spolecnost-ctvrty-rod-pro-treti-pohlavi.A200907\\_244012\\_p\\_spolecnost\\_wag](https://neviditelnypes.lidovky.cz/spolecnost/spolecnost-ctvrty-rod-pro-treti-pohlavi.A200907_244012_p_spolecnost_wag)

Source 11: *Konvička o požadavku aktivistů pro genderově neutrální češtinu: Bojují za svá práva nebo za kontrolu nad myšlením?* [Konvička on the activists' demand for gender-neutral Czech: are they fighting for their rights or for mind control?] *Sputnik*. <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20200840/konvicka-o-pozadavku-aktivistu-pro-genderove-neutralni-cestinu-bojuji-za-sva-prava-nebo-za-kontrolu-14297711.html>