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What are you reading?

López, A. (2020). Cuando el lenguaje excluye: consideraciones sobre el lenguaje no binario indirecto. *Cuarenta Naipes (3)*, 295–312.

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López, A. (2020). Cuando el lenguaje excluye: consideraciones sobre el lenguaje no binario indirecto. *Cuarenta Naipes (3)*, 295–312.

In this article, Spanish translator, interpreter and translation scholar Ártemis López argues that using inclusive language to refer to nonbinary individuals can unintentionally exclude the very audience it aims to include. In recent years, we have seen the emergence of inclusive language initiatives, both in official government documentation and in the media (Renström, 2025; Lardelli, 2024). Inclusive language initiatives are heralded as representation for all kinds of audiences, regardless of gender identity, disability, age, nationality, or ethnicity. As a subset of inclusive language, gender-fair language is often celebrated as a way to break out of gendered hierarchies by removing binary or generic masculine language. However, there is comparatively less academic attention to the pitfalls of gender-fair language. López, who identifies as nonbinary themself, posits that when gender-fair strategies aim to remove all references to specific genders from the language, they may unintentionally obscure identities that are less common or known, such as nonbinary identities.

To distinguish between strategies that obscure nonbinary identities and those that explicitly include them, López applies the terms Indirect Nonbinary Language (INL) and Direct Nonbinary Language (DNL). INL refers to strategies that remove any marked gendered language, such as pronouns, adjectives, determiners, and other grammatical structures that imply the referent's gender identity. In strongly gendered languages such as Spanish, INL may be used to circumvent non-inclusive grammatical forms such as the generic masculine by using epicenes or avoiding adjectives. DNL, on the other hand, replaces marked gendered forms with neopronouns, neologisms and neomorphemes, aiming specifically to represent non-binary and other gender-nonconforming identities.

Implementing both INL and DNL can pose significant challenges depending on the target language. One element that may increase the number of interventions needed is the presence of grammatical gender in a language. English is known as a natural gender language, meaning that gender is mainly communicated through personal pronouns (Gygax et al., 2019). This means that implementing gender-fair language in English requires minimal interventions. Singular *they* can be used both as INL, for a referent of unspecified gender, and as DNL, for a nonbinary referent. However, this can pose significant challenges when translating into grammatical gender languages such as Spanish, which reflects grammatical gender in pronouns, nouns, adjectives, and determiners (Gygax et al., 2019).

López' article specifically looks at erroneous translations and the erasure of nonbinary characters in a book and three television series. The cases include translations from an English-language source text into both peninsular and Latin-American Spanish. According to López, the ambiguous nature of singular *they* creates opportunities for accidental and intentional mistranslation. Translators who are less aware of identities that fall outside of the gender binary may not pick up the use of singular *they* as DNL and will erroneously translate it using language that misgenders the referent. On the other hand, López warns, a translator who does notice the use of DNL may deliberately choose to misinterpret and mistranslate it by assigning the referent a binary gender identity.

López' analysis of these translations and their notes on the pitfalls of using INL impacted my own research, which similarly examines the translation of a nonbinary character from an English Young Adult novel into Spanish. Translators must always negotiate between the intentions of the source text and the social and grammatical constraints of the target language. López argues for increased use of DNL, both by authors and translators. However, both in English and Spanish, explicit use of nonbinary language remains controversial. Some English-speaking nonbinary individuals use neopronouns such as *xe* or *ze*, but these are not widely accepted (Hekanaho, 2020). In Spanish, neopronoun *elle* and neomorpheme *-e* are similarly disputed. The Real Academia Española, the prescriptive institute presiding over the stability of the Spanish language, does not recognise these forms of DNL as 'correct Spanish' (Granizo, 2022). This is a sentiment I encountered among some of my research participants

as well, who called the use of DNL in English and Spanish 'unnecessary', 'nonsensical', and even 'woke'.

I found that while the English source text copiously used singular *they* as a form of DNL, the Spanish translation leaned on a mix of INL and DNL, with the former featuring more prominently. As López warns, this indirect referencing to the nonbinary character may obscure their gender identity, which led me to measure the impact of these translation strategies on readers' perception of the character. My findings indicate that, while on the whole, readers of the original text and translation did not perceive the character as significantly different, readers of the translation did perceive the nonbinary character as significantly less decisive and more careful than in the original text. This shows that the choices made by the translator regarding the use of INL and DNL may impact readers' perceptions.

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