

The inescapable cage of a man and a woman: Experiences of non-binary Italians with gender identity (non-)affirmation in the Italian language context



Have you ever tried to imagine what it would be like if we didn’t have words to express the most basic concepts in our lives?

Well, this is something that non-binary people don’t have to imagine because they are often incapable of expressing their gender identity in gendered languages.

Gendered languages, such as Italian, *gender everything* – nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, articles, ... everything is marked by masculine or feminine grammatical gender. For instance, "a nice store" is masculine (*un bel negozio*) while "a nice shoe" is feminine (*una bella scarpa*). The same applies to people; whenever you would speak of other people or yourself, you would gender adjectives, verbs, and pronouns in relation to the gender of the referent.

So what happens when everything is either feminine or masculine, but you're non-binary?

I decided to explore this through the experiences of non-binary Italians with gender identity affirmation in the context of their language because, as shown by prior research, non-affirmation (via misgendering, etc.) contributes to worsening the mental health of this group.

What did I find?

After interviewing thirteen non-binary Italians and using a reflexive thematic analysis, I found that they strongly perceived the near impossibility of their gender in the Italian language. They spoke of how even the most basic word “*non-binary*” is not something that really exists in the Italian vocabulary, let alone proper gender-neutral grammatical structures.

Such lack of representation in language made some feel like they were **invisible** unless they assumed a binary identity. As such, many felt like they were being forced into a **binary "cage"**, and were unable of capturing the entirety of their gender authentically. Such constrictions were further imposed on them through **misgendering** – which other people, and even *gender identity clinics*, participated in.



Moreover, my participants also expressed that using more gender-neutral forms in Italian felt like **a mental exercise**. It did not feel natural to them, because they were talking in roundabout ways, trying to avoid gendering themselves. Consequently, most expressed that **gender neutrality was not worth the struggle** and that the excessive effort and the lack of naturalness of the language were non-affirming.

For many, this lack of affirmation and recognition in their mother tongue brought about feelings of **frustration, powerlessness, and pain**.

However!

Despite this, they were able to experience gender affirmation through engaging with their **support networks**. This is because these networks made my participants feel recognized and accepted through their actions, and gave my participants control over what names or available pronouns they wanted to be referred by. Not to mention that some allies managed to creatively avoid gendering them altogether. As such, seeing **the affirming intent** behind other people’s actions made the Italian language *less frustrating* for them.



So what?

This study brought some interesting insights into how a gendered language affects the experiences of non-binary people with affirmation and influences their well-being.

The findings highlighted the necessity of:

- Support networks
- Non-binary people having the authority in dictating how others affirm and address them
- Continuous improvements in gender-neutral language



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[What Happens If You’re Genderqueer—But Your Native Language Is Gendered?](#)

[The subtle ways language shapes us](#)

[Ignore the Textbook: A Phenomenological Investigation of Transgender Including Nonbinary Student Experiences in Spanish Language Courses](#)