

# Para Todes: A Case Study on Portuguese and Gender-Neutrality

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## Introduction

“If I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: “I am a woman”; on this truth must be based all further discussion.” (de Beauvoir, xvii)

The above quote, taken from Simone de Beauvoir’s *La Deuxième Sexe*, or *The Second Sex*, has often appeared during discussions on feminism, the concept of gender, and social inequalities. Upon its translation into English, however, a certain amount of sociocultural and linguistic context is lost - namely, that in de Beauvoir’s native French, any and all ways in which she might have chosen to refer to herself would carry a gendered denotation. To phrase this otherwise, she could not have referred to herself as “intelligent”, “polyamorous” or as a “philosopher”; rather, she would have needed to refer to herself as “an intelligent woman” (*intelligente*), “a polyamorous woman” (*polyamoureuse*), or as a “female philosopher” (*une philosophe*). There is a certain validity, therefore, to the idea that while de Beauvoir was commenting upon a certain universality of female experience, as is commonly held, she may

have also been commenting upon the interplay between gender within linguistic and social settings.

Portuguese, as another Romance language, has two grammatical linguistic genders: masculine and feminine. Although linguistic gender is separate from the social concept of gender, the two typically accord when one is talking about a person; feminine forms of address, nouns, and adjectives for a woman, and masculine forms for a man. This raises issues when one considers the rising number of people who identify outside of the gender binary. There are, therefore, movements led by gender-nonconforming, nonbinary and transgender individuals that seek to adapt the language; which is to say, grassroots-level movements to introduce a third, grammatically-neutral gender with the aim of better suiting the needs of the language's speakers.

This article seeks to profile and examine some proposed changes to the Portuguese language, the ways in which these changes would function, and the resulting public and academic responses to each. To further explore this, however, it is important to establish what is meant by the concept of grammatical gender.

### **Defining grammatical gender**

This paper takes the position that gender, in a grammatical sense, can be “defined as a classificatory feature of all nouns of a language that is obligatorily signalled by agreement” (Corbett 4). This is in contrast to a social conceptualisation of gender as a series of social categories, while gender identity is a person's identification as belonging, or not, to each category. That is to say, the articles, adjectives, and other satellite elements of language associated with a gendered noun themselves indicate the gender of the noun. However, in *Gender Across Languages*, Hellinger and Bußmann note that “class membership is anything but arbitrary in the field of animate/personal reference”, explaining that “for a large number of personal nouns there is a correspondence between the “feminine” and “masculine” gender class and the lexical specification of a noun as female-specific or male-specific” (5); a position shared by Motschenbacher. It is important to highlight, therefore, that this article will be concentrating on the use of personal nouns - these being pronouns associated with a particular grammatical person, such as *I* for first-

person, *you* in second-person, or *he, she, or they* in third-person - and of the corresponding linguistic concordance of satellite elements, in the case of Portuguese, adjectives, articles, pronouns, numerals and prepositions.

### **Grammatically-gendered and natural-gender languages**

Now that the concept of grammatical gender has been defined, this being something which affects the subsequent behaviour of words associated with said nouns - we must define the terms “grammatically-gendered” and “natural-gender” with regards to language. For the purpose of this work, “natural-gender” shall be used to refer to languages where grammatical gender only applies in the personal case - to rephrase, when used to refer to a person - and otherwise a neutral gender is used, such as is the case within English and Swedish (Prewitt-Freilino et al.). To give an illustrative example, English qualifies as a natural-gender language as it only applies a grammatical gender in the personal case, and not the impersonal case - objects are exclusively referred to using *it* or *that*, for instance, whereas individuals are referred to exclusively using *she, he, they*, etcetera.

Conversely, “grammatically-gendered” shall be henceforth used to refer to those languages in which a system of noun classification exists but where the rules for gender classification do not differentiate between personal (i.e. human) and impersonal (i.e. nonhuman) referents. This is the case for many languages, those most pertinent to this work being Portuguese, Spanish, and Catalan, but also including languages such as German and French.

### **Grammatical gender in Portuguese**

It is important, at this point, to touch briefly upon the Portuguese grammatical gender and grammatical structure. As noted above, all nouns in Portuguese carry either a masculine or feminine grammatical gender, and satellite elements such as articles, adjectives, number, and preposition reflect the gender of the noun to which they are referring; in the case of referring to a person, the gender of an overwhelming majority of nouns, pronouns, and satellite elements will correspond to that person’s social gender identity, such as terms such as “she”, “her” and

“girlfriend” for a woman, or “he”, “him” or “boyfriend” for a man (*ela, dela, namorada; ele, dele, namorado* respectively). In most cases, this grammatical gender is typically, although not always, signified by a variable gender marker at the end of a noun or adjective, with -o (or in some cases, -or) denoting the masculine and -a (or in some cases, -ora) the feminine; contrast *namorada* (f) and *namorado* (m) above. In cases of mixed-gender groups, or for unknown individuals, or groups where the gender balance is unknown, the masculine is used as a default; use of the masculine is sometimes referred to as a “false generic”, as there is a gendered assumption being made that may not be accurate.

**Grammatical gender and gender identity: non-binary identities and misgendering**

An inherent difficulty with a binary-oppositional masculine-feminine grammatical gender system, therefore, arises when one considers those who fall outside of the male-female social gender binary, such as nonbinary individuals, who identify neither as male nor female (Genderqueer and non-binary identities; Ford; CBS News). Given that, as referenced above, social gender identity overwhelmingly corresponds to the grammatical gender used to refer to the individual, languages with such a binary gender designation can often fail to meet the needs of their speakers, which Goetze and Fricker suggest constitutes a hermeneutical injustice:

the concrete situation... is such that the subject is rendered unable to make communicatively intelligible something which it is particularly in his or her [or their] interests to be able to render intelligible (Fricker, 162).

Indeed, studies such as those by Capodilupo et al., Nordmarken, and McLemore suggest that the inability to have one’s gender identity recognised or articulated can cause psychological harm, and can be a significant contributing factor towards the development of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Further to this, studies such as those by Wasserman and Weseley, Hornschiedt, and Motschenbacher have all suggested that a masculine-feminine contrast in grammatically-gendered language may lead to what is termed *dominance thinking*. Dominance thinking refers to a system of binary oppositions, where both terms in each dyad are defined

relationally. In such a system, one referent is superior, and the other inferior or subordinate; in this case, the linguistic preference or privileging of the masculine is likely to both mirror and influence the social views within speakers of that language. In support of this, Gustafsson Sendén et al. found that very quickly following the official adoption of a gender-neutral personal pronoun into the Swedish language, general public opinion very swiftly changed from one of opposition to one of support, with participants reporting both much greater familiarity with such language and also a much higher personal preference towards its use in the three years since its adoption into mainstream Swedish language.

### **Gender-specification, neutralisation, and balancing**

Given the above, it is highly understandable why one would seek to address the lack of a third, or neutral, grammatical gender within languages such as Portuguese. Motschenbacher suggests that Portuguese would best be served following a policy of neutralisation, which refers to the linguistic practice of avoiding the specification of gender, where possible, in order to avoid gender bias or unfortunate or potentially-sexist connotations. In contrast with gender specification - the attempt to increase the visibility of minority genders within a language, such as the addition of feminine inflections to a masculine generic, or masculine inflections to feminine generics - Motschenbacher describes neutralisation as the process of “making men just as invisible as women”.

It is important to note that grammatically-gendered languages with no neutral gender, such as Portuguese, may have difficulty implementing this practice, due to the language’s heavy reliance on masculine false generics. Even so, there have been recent guidelines such as the *Manual para o uso não sexista da linguagem* (“Manual for non-sexist language use”) (Perusso) intended for use in education in Brazil, that innovate and propose practices to avoid the use of masculine generics, such as the use of specific epicenes and feminine generics, such as *as crianças* (“the children”) rather than *os meninos* (“the [male] children”), *a cidadania* (“citizenship; the citizen body”) rather than “*os cidadãos*, (“the [male] citizens”). The *Manual* also suggests practices such as the use of the

gerund to avoid the generic: for example, *votando por esse partido ganharemos pouco* (“We have little to gain, voting for this party”) in place of constructions such as *se as eleitores votarem por esse partido, ganharemos pouco* (“We have little to gain if the voters vote for this party”). In this way, it is possible to avoid using the masculine generic, as its referent can be eliminated from the sentence without impacting meaning.

Another proposed method of accomplishing this is the increased use of reflexive or passive constructions, which rarely see use in contemporary Portuguese: for instance: *na costa, se come muito peixe* (“On the coast, much fish is eaten”) in place of *os caiçaras comem muito peixe*, (“those [men] who live on the coast eat much fish”). This practice is particularly noteworthy here for its innovative nature: it involves the use of already-existing structures and practices within the language in order to circumvent the use of gender-specific phrasing, while neutralisation, as mentioned above, has been theorised to be difficult and highly-limited in grammatically-gendered languages such as Portuguese. One could, however, raise the issue that gender-neutral language – especially constructions such as this - can be used to invalidate a person’s gender identity in a “socially-acceptable” manner; that is to say that for instance, the passive voice could be used to sidestep the use of specifically-inclusive language, much in the same way as gender-neutral language is often used to deny the authenticity of a transgender person’s gender identity.<sup>1</sup> Another potential point of interest is that the passive construction as suggested here, is only used rarely within Portuguese, and is also a relatively formal construction.

Neutralisation in grammatically-gendered languages is considered a difficult task – with critics such as Motschenbacher suggesting that such practices would not be feasible within languages with no neuter grammatical forms, owing to the degree of change necessary, not only to vocabulary but to grammar and in some cases structure. It can be argued, however, that one could work within the existing language structure, to create a third, complementary neutral gender that conforms to the

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<sup>1</sup> For more discussion on this point, please see my MA thesis on the subject: <http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/id/eprint/60330>, p.47.

existing grammar of the language – a process that Gustafsson Sendén et al. refer to as “balancing”. Balancing of a language typically involves the adding of a feminine form to a masculine generic; however, the addition of a neutral form would follow the same goal of increasing specific visibility; in this case, of being directly inclusive of minority gender identities.

It is of note here that the platonic ideal of such practice would have to conform to certain expectations, or would need to accomplish certain things. It is appropriate, therefore, to progress onto what this article would expect of a theoretical neutral gender within Portuguese.

### **Expectations of a neutral gender within Portuguese**

#### ***1. The proposed neutral gender must be distinct from the grammatical masculine or feminine, at least in cases where there is a grammatical gender distinction.***

This expectation precludes the existence of a gendered ‘false generic’ such as the existing practice of masculine-as-generic for reasons detailed above, but allows for the existence of dual-gender or epicene nouns, such as *estudante* (“student”) or adjectives, such as *fervente* (“zealous”). Allowing for dual-gender and epicene nouns is important, as they can be said to be the closest to “true” gender-neutral terms within Portuguese; it would perhaps not be unreasonable to consider these a sort of “halfway point” between existing Portuguese grammar and a theoretical “true neutral” gender. As such, these constructions may well be used as a theoretical starting point for the implementation of a neutral gender and gender-neutral practice.

#### ***2. The proposed neutral gender must, where possible, conform with the existing grammar of the Portuguese language.***

Conformity with existing Portuguese is perhaps one of the easiest ways to ensure its assimilation into the language, and to facilitate its adoption outside of marginalised communities and entry into mainstream use, due to the comparatively-lesser degree to which the existing grammatical framework would need to be altered to allow for this new neutral gender. Acceptance into the mainstream is an important factor to be considered if a newly-introduced linguistic practice is to become commonplace, and

involves such factors as ease of use, and ease of implementation, with the latter being what is relevant to this specific point. Grammatical conformity is not the only factor governing mainstream acceptance of gender-neutral language, however, with studies such as those by Gustafsson Sendén et al. finding the largest governing factors to be time and exposure.

**3. The proposed neutral gender must be intelligible to speakers of Portuguese unfamiliar with its use.**

The proposed neutral genders have, for some time now, seen use within transgender and certain political-activist communities, but in order for the practices to become commonplace, they must be easily understood, and their meanings evident, to those outside of these communities.

**4. The proposed neutral gender should mirror existing vocabulary and linguistic practice.**

Similarly to the previous two criteria, this reduces the risk of the neutral-gendered language appearing “marked” or incongruous with current practice, and therefore removes, or at least mitigates, one of the possible barriers to implementation in the Portuguese language.

**5. The proposed neutral gender must function in terms of use as a singular, specific personal noun, alongside functioning as a more generalised group noun; this is to say, it must account for the existence of individuals outside the gender binary.**

Several current practices in Portuguese involve the construction of phrasing so as to omit personal gendered nouns, instead opting for use of a generalised group noun where appropriate, such as referring to a group of students as “o alumnado” (“the student body”) rather than “alunos e alunas” (“[male and female] students”). This practice, although important, does not allow for the existence of a singular personal noun outside of the male-female gender binary – that is to say, while “o alumnado” allows for and designates a neutral collective, this approach does not provide a neutral equivalent to “aluno” or “aluna” in the singular - and thus only partly addresses the issue. The proposed gender will,



ideally, account for the existence of gender-neutral, non-binary and non-conforming individuals.

**6. The proposed neutral gender must function in both written and spoken contexts.**

The majority of existing practices within Portuguese apply only to written Portuguese, and the importance of a written neutral gender should not be undermined. However, it is important to consider that gender-neutral language, especially that which pertains to the specific reality of certain individuals - namely gender non-conforming, genderqueer and non-binary individuals - must be a language that is capable of being spoken, as spoken language generally forms a much larger part of most people's everyday existence than written language. It is interesting to note here that previously suggested practices in this vein have included the use of the -x and -@ as alternative gendered markers, although their use will not be further explored here for wordcount and time constraints.<sup>2</sup> Such proposals, however, have faced criticism for the difficulty in pronouncing or vocalising them – for instance, @ is not a linguistic symbol and has no associated phoneme, while -x as a marker would introduce a number of consonant clusters that do not appear within contemporary Portuguese (Woodstock).

**Neutral practices: The -e as a gender marker**

One such proposed neutral practice, for the Portuguese language, is the establishing of -e as a neutral gendered marker for personal nouns and adjectives, as a complement and contrast to the -o and -a. There are, however, several considerations to take into account with this proposal, as there are many instances in which this approach would either be confusing to an audience, or in which this would fail to convey the desired neutrality. As an example of the former, “e” would not work contextually as a singular definite article in the same vein of the Portuguese “o” or “a”, as it means “and”, and such a duality would lead to unclear or confusing language use; as an example of the latter, “ele” is already the masculine third-person singular pronoun, contrasted with the feminine “ela”, and

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the use of the -x and -@ as gendered markers, see my MA thesis on the subject: <http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/id/eprint/60330>.

so in order to avoid a false masculine generic as outlined above, an alternative would be required. There are many such instances of the latter issues, both pronominal and prepositional, for which there are various proposed solutions (Espectrometria não-binária), some of which are listed below:

- The proposed equivalents for “ele” and related prepositions (“dele”, “nele”, et al.) include “elu”, the phoneme for [u] being partway between the latter [e] of “ele” and the [a] of “ela”, with the prepositional equivalents being formed in the same manner as their alternatives (“delu”, “nelu”, et al.).
- The proposed equivalent definite article would be “le”; as an illustrative example, the equivalent to “o menino” or “a menina” (the boy, the girl) would be “le menine” (the children).
- As suggested by previous proposals, this approach advocates the omission of definite personal articles, and thus the suggested equivalent to “pelo” or “pela” would be “por”, although there seems to be no clear consensus whether this approach is preferable to other existing suggestions of using “pele” or “pelle”, corresponding with the above framework.
- Words ending in -ã or -ão, such as “irmã” or “irmão” will have an equivalent of -ane, such as “irmane”, as the logical suggestion of -ãe presents some difficulties in its resemblance to “mãe”, meaning “mother”.
- Words ending in -go or -ga have their equivalent in -gue, such as “amigue” has the equivalent to “amigo” and “amiga”. Similarly, words ending in -co or -ca have their equivalent in -que, such as “técnique” for “técnico” and “técnica”.
- Words ending in -r in the masculine and -ra in the feminine have an equivalent in -re in the singular (“professor”, “professora”, “professore”) and -ries in the plural (“professories”). This is, again, to avoid the potential masculine false generic of -res (“professores”), and is based on the wide online use of the term “não-binaries”, used interchangeably with, and as a shorthand for, the term “gente não-binária”/”pessoas não-binárias”.
- First-person singular possessives, “meu” / ”meus” and “minha” / ”minhas” have two proposed alternatives, “mi” / ”mis” and “minhe”

/ "minhes", such as in the phrase "meu namorado" / "minha namorada" / "mi namorado" / "minhe namorada". There does not seem to be a general consensus on which is preferred, although both seem generally well-understood and well-received.

- Second-person singular possessives, "teu" / "teus" / "seu" / "seus" and "tua" / "tuas" / "sua" / "suas" will have similar equivalents in "tu" / "tus" / "su" / "sus" and "tue" / "tues" / "sue" / "sues", with the same general reception as the first-person possessives.

These suggestions, taken from online gender-variant communities' efforts to catalogue their language use, naturally involve the sort of large-scale change to the language mentioned earlier within this article. As such, it is important to analyse the thought processes and decisions made in the process of creating, or forming, this grammar. For this reason, this grassroots practice will now be evaluated against the criteria detailed above.

**1. The proposed neutral gender must be distinct from the grammatical masculine or feminine, at least in cases where there is a grammatical gender distinction.**

Of immediate note here is the comparison of proposed neutral words ending in -e with dual-gender epicene nouns, such as "estudante". This comparison will be of relevance throughout this evaluation, and so it is important to establish this similarity at this early point.

The use of the -e as a gendered marker is both audibly and visually distinguishable from the current grammatical masculine and feminine, and uniquely, does not suffer from the phonological difficulties encountered by other proposals detailed within this work.

**2. The proposed neutral gender must, where possible, conform with the existing grammar of the Portuguese language.**

The use of the -e conforms with existing grammar within the language, with established framework already existing in Portuguese to circumvent any difficulties that could be encountered, grammatically speaking, by this use. For example, use of the -e turns the masculine *amigo* into *amigue*, where the hard [g] sound is preserved by the addition of the u; similarly, *técnico* into *técniue*, *psicólogo* into *psicóloiue*.

**3. The proposed neutral gender must be intelligible to speakers of Portuguese unfamiliar with its use.**

On this count, there is a lack of consensus regarding intelligibility. In the comment detailed here, a user hereafter referred to as *R* of the internet discussion forum Reddit details their experiences with using the neutral -e; they have been understood, for the most part, but in spoken use, the neutral -e was often mistaken for the masculine -o.<sup>3</sup>

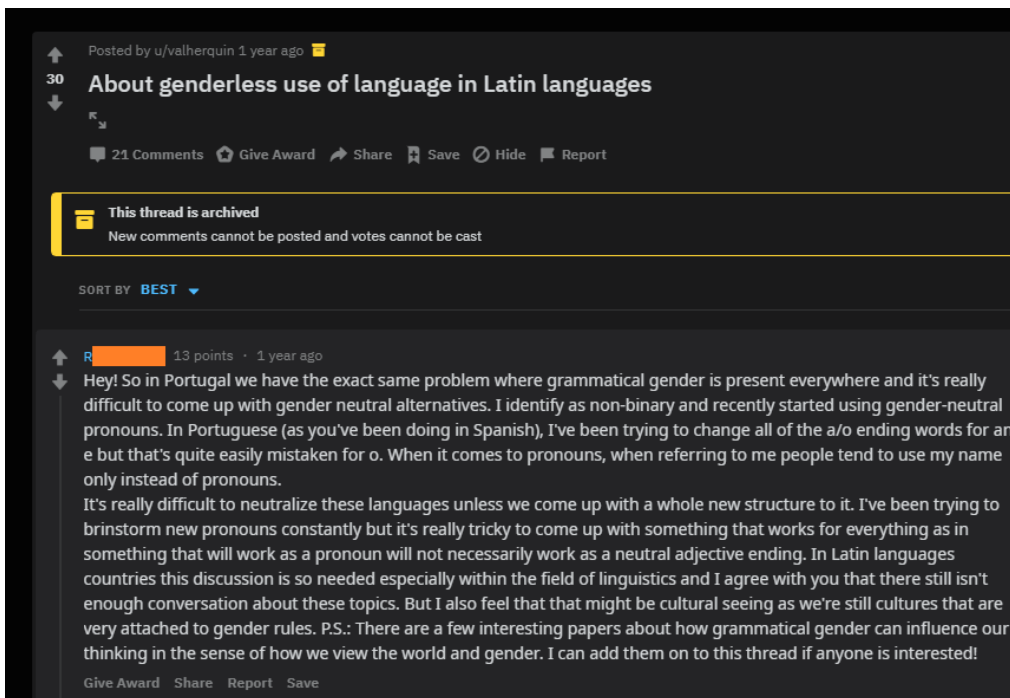


Figure 1: Reddit user’s comments on intelligibility (with transcript below)  
Source:

[https://www.reddit.com/r/NonBinary/comments/7b5jmh/about\\_genderless\\_use\\_of\\_language\\_in\\_latin/dpfg46q/](https://www.reddit.com/r/NonBinary/comments/7b5jmh/about_genderless_use_of_language_in_latin/dpfg46q/) Accessed: 09 August 2019.

Hey! So in Portugal we have the exact same problem where grammatical gender is present everywhere and it's really difficult to come up with gender neutral alternatives. I identify as non-binary and recently started using gender-neutral pronouns. In Portuguese (as you've been doing in Spanish), I've been trying to change all of the a/o ending words for an e but that's quite easily mistaken for o. When it comes to pronouns, when referring to me people tend to use my name only instead of pronouns. It's really difficult to neutralize these languages unless we come up with a whole new structure to it. I've been trying to brinstorm new pronouns

<sup>3</sup> Username masked for purposes of anonymity.

constantly but it's really tricky to come up with something that works for everything as in something that will work as a pronoun will not necessarily work as a neutral adjective ending. In Latin languages countries this discussion is so needed especially within the field of linguistics and I agree with you that there still isn't enough conversation about these topics. But I also feel that that might be cultural seeing as we're still cultures that are very attached to gender rules. P.S.: There are a few interesting papers about how grammatical gender can influence our thinking in the sense of how we view the world and gender. I can add them on to this thread if anyone is interested!

From this arise two questions: One, if *R*, here being used as a wider allegory for users of this gender-neutral Portuguese, had their language use generally understood but misconstrued, to what extent can it be said their language use was *intelligible*? If the neutral gender is misconstrued as the masculine, then does this proposition suffer from the same downsides as the use of the masculine as a false generic? And two, to what degree can any proposed neutral gender be reasonably expected to be immediately intelligible to language users unfamiliar with its use?

However, there also exists a line of argument to the contrary; the language used by *R* seems to have been understood as referring in some capacity to their gender identity, which has led to the use of their name in place of a gendered third-person pronoun such as *ele* or *ela*; as such, it could be argued that their use of this neutral -e has served its functional purpose in both avoiding misgendering through use of the masculine or feminine, as well as communicating, if not their gender identity, then at least a preference for gender-neutral language which seems to have been generally recognised as a result.

#### **4. The proposed neutral gender should mirror existing vocabulary and linguistic practice.**

Of contemporary proposals, the neutral -e is perhaps the practice that most mirrors existing grammar and linguistic practice, with rules already existing within Portuguese grammar to conserve sounds when vowel change would change phonemes (such as the aforementioned “go → gue” change). It also best mirrors existing vocabulary, since alongside using word stems from pre-existing words within Portuguese, the

majority of grammatically gender-neutral terms within Portuguese already end in -e; e.g. *estudante, ajudante*. This leads to a grammatically-neutral Portuguese that fits within the contemporary language while causing the least possible disruption.

**5. The proposed neutral gender must function in terms of use as a singular, specific personal noun, alongside functioning as a more generalised group noun; this is to say, it must account for the existence of individuals outside the gender binary.**

It is a specific and deliberate choice that use of the -e in the singular personal specific sense centres nonbinary and gender-variant language users, while eliminating gender bias when used in the plural.

**6. The proposed neutral gender must function in both written and spoken contexts.**

Uniquely among contemporary proposals, the neutral -e not only functions in both spoken and written contexts, but unlike similar practices such as use of the -x or -@, is clear from its written form how it is intended to be pronounced, a fact which further normalises its use within regular (phonetic) Portuguese.

**Case study: Avon Brasil’s 2016 campaign “#SintaNaPele”**

From this, we now move to look at a case study where the gender-neutral -e ending was employed. AVON Brasil, the Brazilian branch of the renowned cosmetics company AVON, launched an advertising campaign for their new product, *BB Cream Avon Color Trend* on the 28th June, 2016. The commercial for the product consists, in short, of several well-known public figures dancing a group choreography, as short descriptions of the product flash up on the screen. However, there are a great many aspects of this particular advertising campaign that could be considered noteworthy, and so the campaign merits further analysis.

Primarily, and perhaps of greatest relevance to this paper, is the use of the gender-neutral -e marker within the campaign. The product itself - a BB or “blemish balm” cream, an all-in-one combination of a range of products such as moisturising cream, primer, foundation, and concealer - is of a class of cosmetics that sees wide use among persons of all genders and gender expressions, rather than being seen as a “woman’s thing”, as

makeup and cosmetic products so often are. AVON Brasil takes this concept of a unisex cosmetic and runs with it - the final phrase that flashes up on the screen during the commercial proclaims the product to be “para todes” - “for all”, using the proposed gender-neutral -e, rather than the masculine and false-generic “para todos”, or the feminine “para todas”. Indeed, the typesetting used revels in and spectacularises this use - the “E” of “TODES” is coloured magenta, attention-grabbing and unignorable among the remainder of the word in white.



Figure 2: AvonBR, BB Cream Color Trend e a Democracia da Pele | Avon Apresenta.  
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Imd5MyfGbo&feature=youtu.be>.  
Accessed: 14th August 2019.

Immediately upon viewing this commercial, the use of the -e as a linguistic choice is something made readily apparent, the importance of which cannot go unacknowledged. With this piece of advertising, AVON allies itself squarely with the queer community; the queer linguistic practice of “todEs” breaks into a more mainstream community, the public figures featured in the ad campaign - such as Jessica Tauane, Liniker, Assucena Assucena and Raquel Virgínia - are all well-known and active within the sphere of queer politics, and the video was posted on YouTube with the message:

A pele não tem gênero nem preconceitos. Essa é o recado que o Novo BB Cream Matte Avon Color Trend tem para você.”

“Skin has no gender, nor prejudice. That’s the message that the new BB Cream Avon Color Trend has for you.<sup>4</sup>

Avon’s message of inclusivity in this campaign continues - not only are the public figures featured active within queer politics, many of them are transgender, genderqueer, or gender non-conforming. Indeed, the commercial serves well to forge a link in the viewer’s mind between “todes”, gender non-conformity, and unisex:



Figure 3: AvonBR, BB Cream Color Trend e a Democracia da Pele | Avon Apresenta.  
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Imd5MyfGbo&feature=youtu.be>.  
Accessed: 14th August 2019.



Figure 4: AvonBR, BB Cream Color Trend e a Democracia da Pele | Avon Apresenta.  
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Imd5MyfGbo&feature=youtu.be>.  
Accessed: 14th August 2019.

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<sup>4</sup> Translation mine.





Figure 5: AvonBR, BB Cream Color Trend e a Democracia da Pele | Avon Apresenta.  
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Imd5MyfGbo&feature=youtu.be>.  
Accessed: 14th August 2019.

In its use of the neutral -e, Avon therefore brings the concept to a wider audience, while making visibly clear its meaning as an all-encompassing neutral tool, and well-establishing its links to queer politics and the gender conversation. Even the launch date of the product seems to have been carefully curated in order to achieve this - 28th June, anniversary of the Stonewall riots, perhaps the most famous queer political protest, a protest with heavy involvement from transgender figures such as Marsha P. Johnson, Zazu Nova and Jackie Hormona (Carter). This begs the question, however: how did the general public respond to the use of the neutral -e? Was it understood, and what criticisms or opposition did it face? The comments on the Youtube video carry a range of responses, from users praising Avon for the campaign, to those complaining about the quality of the product. What is notably absent, however, is any complaint about the use of the word “todes”. The closest comment is below, by a user under the name of Fernando Costa de Campos:

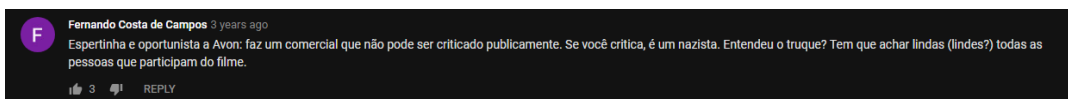


Figure 6 Comment from a Youtube user regarding the Avon commercial  
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Imd5MyfGbo&feature=youtu.be>.  
Accessed: 14th August 2019.

Espertinha e oportunista a Avon: faz um comercial que não pode ser criticado publicamente. Se você critica, é um nazista. Entendeu o truque? Tem que achar lindas (lindes?) todas as pessoas que participam do filme.

Very clever and opportunistic of Avon: making a commercial that cannot be openly criticised. If you criticise it, you're a Nazi. You see the trick? You have to find all the participants in the film beautiful.<sup>5</sup>

Campos here, while invoking Godwin's Law, criticises the stance Avon takes in allying itself with the queer community; by pandering to a marginalised group, Campos claims, Avon renders itself immune to criticism on any ground - regardless of its legitimacy - because of the "protected political status" enjoyed by that group.<sup>6</sup>

**Co-opting of language and profitability: criticisms of capitalist "lip service"**

Distasteful historical comparisons aside, this interpretation - of Avon purely paying lip service to the queer community in order to sell cosmetics, of capitalising upon a social movement that is rapidly gaining traction, for reasons of financial gain rather than any genuine political stance - is seemingly widespread. There is an angle to be considered here, however, regarding the idea of media representation, especially within advertising, as a marker of social progress: Harms and Kellner note that through advertising campaigns, businesses seek to sell "socially-desirable ways of life", more than any individual product. If we are to accept this premise, it must logically follow that Avon - a multinational and successful business enterprise - in looking to sell a product seemingly aimed at specifically the queer and gender-variant community, is presenting such as "socially-desirable"; the question that follows is what the implications of such a business decision may be. Avon is a business, and thus, as a business, aims to sell products - in this case, gender-neutral cosmetics - and to profit from doing so. Avon are looking to profit from gender-neutral cosmetics; thus, it can be reasonably surmised that Avon believe gender-neutrality to be a profitable concept. For a business to directly and explicitly engage with the gender conversation - a socially-

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<sup>5</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>6</sup> An internet adage; "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches 1".

divisive topic - it must follow that that business believes it to be in their best financial and/or social interest to do so; i.e that doing so will increase, rather than decrease, their customer base. Through this line of thinking, it can be claimed that this marketing decision by Avon constitutes at least a tacit level of support for gender-neutrality, which is compounded by the explicit centering of transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals and use of concepts such as the neutral -e, “Para todes”.

Returning to criticisms of co-opting and exploiting political causes that have been levelled against Avon, the following comment was made on the official AVON Facebook page following the launch of the commercial:

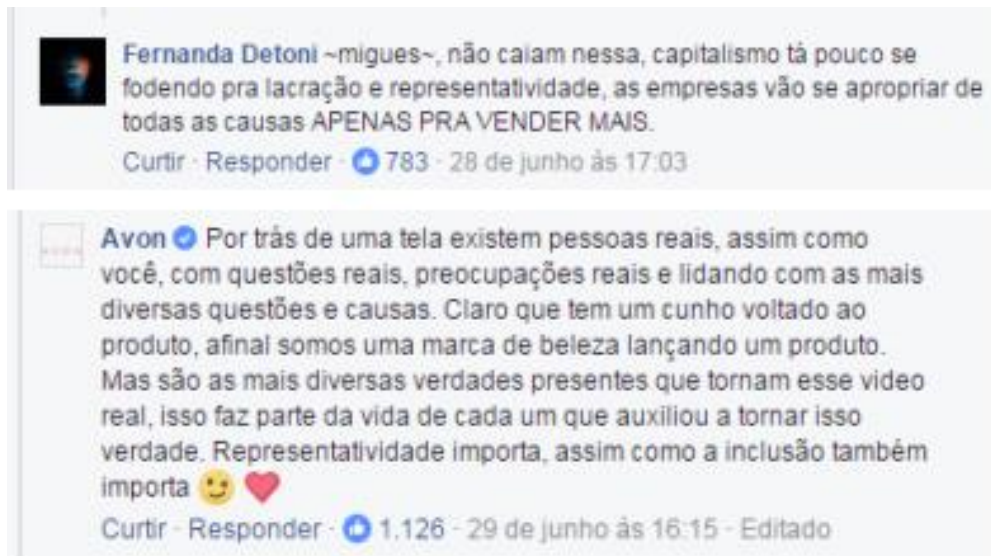


Figure 7: AVON. Facebook. Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/avonbr/videos/10154064384211195>. Accessed on: 13 August 2019.

**Fernanda Detoni:** ~migues~, não caiam nessa, capitalismo tá pouco se fodendo pra lacração e representatividade, as empresas vão se apropriar de todas as causas APENAS PRA VENDER MAIS.

**Avon:** Por trás de uma tela existem pessoas reais, assim como você, com questões reais, preocupações reais e lidando com os mais diversas questões e causas. Claro que tem um cunho voltado ao produto, afinal somos uma marca de beleza lançando um produto. Mas são as mais

diversas verdades presentes que tornam esse video real, isso faz parte de cada um que auxiliou a tornar isso verdade. Representividade importa, assim como a inclusão também importa

**Fernanda Detoni:** ~Friends~, don't fall for it, capitalism is slowly falling victim to political correctness, businesses are going to take advantage of any and all causes JUST TO SELL MORE PRODUCTS.

**Avon:** Behind every brand there are real people, like you, with real difficulties, real worries, and dealing with many different problems and causes. Of course we have a vested interest in selling the product, at the end of the day we're a cosmetics brand launching a product. But it's those diverse realities that make the video real, it's part of life for everyone who helped make this happen. Representation matters, just like how inclusivity matters too.<sup>7</sup>

It is, of course, understandable why a person might hold this viewpoint, why they might be suspicious or sceptical of a business acting in this way. It is not, however, within the scope of this work to divine whether or not the aims of the Avon campaign are genuine or self-serving. Instead, perhaps, it may prove enlightening to discuss this marketing strategy in further depth. As discussed above, BB cream is seen as one of the more unisex cosmetic products - and in which case, it would be in the company's best interests to actively market the cream to as many demographics as possible; not only this, but also to communicate to these demographics that the cream is for use by all. In doing so, it would make sense to use language that, at least in theory, all users would be able to identify with - hence the use of the neutral -e, which also grants the possibility of a political angle from which to market the product.

It has been suggested by socioeconomists that advertising campaigns aim to sell not only a product, but rather "socially desirable ways of life", and that the unisex designation of products is perhaps a way of engaging the queer consumer demographic, while avoiding alienating, and minimising resistance from, more traditionalist or conservative stakeholders.

Of potential note, however, is the ease with which the neutral use of the -e is picked up, even by those who oppose the business practices of

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<sup>7</sup> Translation mine.

the company using it. Examples of this can be seen in the comments above - Detoni using “migues” - a shortened form of *amigues* - and De Campos using “lindes” to describe the video participants. The criticism within these comments appear to be levelled at Avon’s business practices, rather than their use of language - although there may be many reasons for this, and it must be noted that a lack of vocal dissent does not necessarily equal tacit acceptance.

### **Conclusion**

It is to be expected, as can be surmised from works such as those referenced above, that the Portuguese language’s status as a grammatically-gendered language problematises and complicates the introduction of linguistic practices that afford its users a greater degree of gender-neutrality. It is equally important to recognise, however, that this status does not preclude nor disqualify attempts at gender-neutrality, especially from grassroots movements led by those who are most affected by the existing lack of gender-neutrality, in particular, queer, transgender and nonbinary individuals. Language is, after all, self-deterministic - its active use is what governs and determines its legitimacy. It is important to note, also, that the practices and proposals detailed and analysed within this work provide only a contemporary picture of gender-neutral queer linguistic practice within Portuguese - this work is by no means exhaustive, nor are the proposals detailed here necessarily the only options for gender-neutral linguistic practice. It can be expected that, as these proposals are discussed, and further trialled and implemented, new methods and practices may be devised.

In this author’s opinion, the proposal relating to the use of the neutral -e could perhaps be the one most likely to enter common practice, for the reasons discussed above regarding not only its ease of understanding and conformity to Portuguese grammar norms, but also - quite crucially - its emerging adoption outside of queer communities and circles, as shown here by its use within the #SintaNaPele advertising campaign by Avon Brasil. Regardless of whichever practice may become commonplace in the future, and whichever practice may, eventually, become officially accepted and acknowledged by the relevant language academies, these contemporary practices and proposals constitute an important and well-

needed step towards the institution of greater gender-neutrality within the Portuguese language, to the great benefit of those who need it - and, especially, for transgender and nonbinary language users.

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