Why shall I call you *ze*?
Discourse analysis of the social perception of institutionally introducing the gender-neutral pronoun *ze*

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Abstract

It was the Oxford University's Students Union (OUSU) which first promoted the use of gender-inclusive pronouns to avoid gender-binarism in the English-speaking European academic life. OUSU finds it supportive if students declare their chosen pronouns by which they wish to be addressed at meetings (*he, she* or *ze*). Public attention turned to the emergence of the new pronoun. The present study aims to explore the social perception of the newly appearing gender-neutral neologism by mapping public attitude towards the idea of institutionally introducing a neopronoun (*ze*) in the English language for the sake of celebrating gender diversity. The discourse plane investigated in the research was comments given to online newspaper articles. The genre of comments provides insights into the opinions and feelings of the general public. A near-thousand comments of online dialogues displayed on the websites of six British newspapers (three broadsheets and three tabloids) during a one-year timespan (December 2016 – December 2017) were analysed qualitatively. Arguments on either discourse position were studied, hidden premises were uncovered. The results of the exploratory study reveal that there is a notable imbalance in the voicing of opinions: the promotion of the gender-neutral English pronoun is markedly underrepresented in the public (1.32%) while the set of arguments against its introduction is versatile. The findings of the analysis indicate that the voice of the people does not consider pronoun-binarism as a sign of exclusion or the marginalizing of gender-diverse people; however, the novel pronoun tends to excite shock and refusal in the public.

1   Introduction

Students Union

(OUSU) promoted the use of gender-inclusive pronouns to avoid gender-binarism in 2016. The OUSU found it supportive if students identified and declared their chosen pronouns by which they preferred to be addressed at meetings (*he*, *she* or *ze*). The Transgender Guidance of the university also encourages students and staff to ask about preferred pronouns (cf. Moughton 2013: 15) and its list informally recommends the constructed pronouns *they, zie* and *ey* non-binary people might prefer to use (2013: 12). The potential introduction of a new pronoun arouse public interest. The present study aims to explore the social perception of the newly

appearing gender-neutral (GN) neologism by mapping public attitude towards the idea of institutionally introducing a neopronoun (*ze*) in the English language for the sake of celebrating gender diversity. Thus the paper seeks answers to the following research questions.

RQ1: To what extent does the public find the introduction of the gender-neutral pronoun (GNP) *ze* necessary?

RQ2: How does the public argue in favour and against the introduction of the gender-neutral pronoun (GNP) *ze*?

To arrive at the answers, controversial gender-related terminology is first clarified in the Background section, which is followed by a brief overview of the use of the personal pronoun referencing non-specific antecedents. The Methods section sheds light on the data source, the principles of tagging and the nature of the qualitative analysis. Then the twofold results of the study are discussed, both the social perception of the neopronoun *ze* is evaluated, and the argumentation patter of the public on both sides of the controversy are examined.

2 Background

Stemming from the Latin word *genus* (with the shades of meaning of birth, family, descent, origin, and race), the notion of gender has become many-faceted. It has been used as a grammatical term since the 14th century; from the mid-20th century it has become common to denote biological sex; and lately, it refers to social and cultural identities. Gender-related terminology shows no solid uniformity, thus the present study first sets out to elucidate the boundaries of meaning of the key concepts. Similarly to the profusion and overlapping of concepts in the field of gender, the taxonomy of appropriate personal pronouns referring to individuals with non-binary gender identity has not crystallized either. As a pronoun of reference, many gender non-conforming people prefer singular *they* (cf. Bjorkman 2017), which choice is supported by the argument that *they* is already part of the English language. The study overviews the scope and the limits of the use of singular *they* and other innovative alternative pronouns.

2.1 Gender related terminology

Most of the people (99.939998%) are born male or female (cf. Blackless et al. 2000). A numerically tiny minority, however, resists this binary classification based on their physical conditions. The variety of biological conditions in which a "person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male" (cf. ISNA 2008) is known to be **intersex**. Intersex is a general term for various biological variations. Sex difference variations are "attributable to an individual's reproductive organs and XX or XY chromosomal complement" (cf. DSM-5: 15) in terms of nomenclature. Due to the diversity of the different inborn conditions, the estimated number of people affected varies between 0.000769% and 0.060024% (cf. Blackless et al. 2000).

Gender is distinguished from sex, that is, from biological maleness or femaleness. The field of gender is highly disputed, which has led to the "proliferation of terms whose meanings vary over time and within and between disciplines" (cf. DSM-5: 451). The present study applies terminology which was in effect in the environment of the data collected: (1) the Transgender Guidance of the University of Oxford (cf. Moughton 2013), (2) the Equality Act of 2010, and (3) the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (cf. DSM-5).

Gender expression is a term which "relates to the way a person lives in society and interacts with others" (cf. Moughton 2013: 19). It is the physical, psychological, behavioural and social expression of the self that others perceive. Gender expression is so intimately connected to biological sex that children before the age of ten equate the notions of boy and girl with that of species insomuch that all of these concepts are recognized to be "inborn, inflexible, and intrinsically linked to category membership" (cf. Taylor/Rhodes/Gelman 2009: 475). Others, however, assert that there is no correlation between biological sex and gender expression, these concepts being "independent of one another" (cf. Sander/Pedersen 2018: 3). In contrast to how others recognize one's gender through one's gender expression, **gender identity** is "a person's internal perception and experience of their gender" (cf. Moughton 2013: 19). Stryker (2008: 13) suggests that gender identity "could perhaps best be described as how one feels about being referred to by a particular pronoun."

When one's gender identity does not match one's natural gender, a strong feeling of discomfort may arise. The American Psychiatric Association's (APA) taxonomic tool, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5: 453) defines the "marked incongruence" between one's natal gender and ones gender experience as gender dysphoria. **Gender dysphoria** is to be distinguished from "simple nonconformity to stereotypical gender role behavior by the strong desire to be of another gender than the assigned one and by the pervasiveness of gender-variant activities and interests" (DSM-5: 458). Gender identity disorder was renamed to gender dysphoria in the DSM-5, in order to avoid stigmatization. The psychiatric diagnosis of gender dysphoria was moved out of the "Sexual Disorders" category into a category of its own among the other catalogued mental disorders, or syndromes "characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning" (DSM-5: 20).

The deep sense of discomfort may pursue the person with gender dysphoria to go through **gender reassignment** or **transition**, which is "the process of changing from the gender assigned at birth to a gender with which the individual identifies. This may, or may not involve medical or surgical treatment." (cf. Moughton 2013: 3). On the grounds of gender reassignment, that is, the process carried out "for the purpose of reassigning the person's sex by changing physiological or other attributes of sex" (Act 2010, Part 2, Chapter 1, Section 7), the Equality Act 2010 ensures protections for transgender individuals. A person who has undergone (or is undergoing) gender reassignment has protected characteristics against unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation in employment, education, and the provision of goods and services.

According to the Transgender Guidance of Oxford University, the term **transgender** can also be applied to another group of people, namely those "who do not wish to transition permanently to a new gender role, but who identify as genderqueer, gender variant or intersex or who choose to live permanently with a more fluid gender identity" (cf. Moughton 2013: 2). This extension of the term transgender, however, goes beyond the definition of any of the nine protected characteristics (regarding age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation) listed by the Equality Act 2010 (Part 2, Chapter 1). Thus the individuals whom the University labels as transpeople

but who do not propose to undergo gender reassignment fall under no legal protection from discrimination according to the Equality Act 2010.

The extension of the term in the Guidance of the University makes it clear that the term transgender is not restrictively used for males transitioning to females or for females transitioning to males, that is, the concept of gender is not viewed as binary at Oxford University. This is another point of difference from the Equality Act 2010, which classifies individuals in a binary manner as male or female (Act 2010, Part 2, Chapter 1, Sections 7, 11, 12). Abstracting the notion of gender from that of the binary biological sex leads to treating the binary male-female gender model "obsolete" (cf. Sanders/Pedersen 2018: 3) and to considering gender as a spectrum. The spectrum model of gender leaves space for broadening the term transgender to include several different gender identity categories. The number of various existing gender identities is not definite. Some estimate that "there are currently more than twenty genders" (cf. Sanders/Pedersen 2018: 3) in the world. The New York City Commission on Human Rights lists seventeen gender identities in its guidance on *Legal Enforcement of Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity or Expression* (NYCHR 2019), while it recognizes thirty gender identities on its *Gender Identity Information Card* (NYCHR 2015). The term transgender is a collective category, whose definition plastically "changes with the perspective of those who use it" (cf. Valentine 2012: 201). Labuski/Keo-Meier point out that the plasticity of the category makes it unusable for studies that aim to "count, measure, operationalize, define or generate empirical data" (2015: 18). Yet, the term transgender is practical in terms of contrasting it with people who remain with the gender they were assigned at birth, also referred to collectively as **cisgender** (cf. Thieme/Saunders 2018).

Finally, it is important to note that none of the above terms (male, female, intersex, gender, gender identity, gender dysphoria, transgender, and cisgender) refer to sexual orientation or physical, emotional and spiritual attraction to other people. They make reference to one's own biological condition (male, female and intersex) or one's own attitude and relationship to one's own gender assigned at birth (male or female).

2.2   Pronouns for referencing non-specific antecedents

With the lack of a pronoun of common gender meaning both *he* and *she* in the English language, the need for a pronoun that refers back to a non-specific antecedent is not without history. The singular *they* has been used with quantificational, non-specific and genuinely epicene (unknown, indeterminate or mixed gender) antecedents since the 1400s (cf. Balhorn 2004). It is the singular *they* that is used grammatically in the following contexts.

A) Everyone should bring their own copy. (mixed-sex, distributive)
B) Could John or Josephina apply themselves to the job of writing the article? (mixed-sex, disjunctive)
C) (*seeing a not yet recognized distant figure:*) They are running to us. (sex unknown)

The feminist movement from the 1970s on has attacked the use of the generic masculine pronoun (*he*) in reference to people in general (cf. MacKay 1980; Phillips 1981; Murdock/Forsyth 1985). To replace the generic *he,* the singular pronoun *they* is increasingly applied in the press and in educational and institutioanl contexts (cf. Jones/Mullany 2016; Pauwels/Winter 2006).

When referring to a group of people rather than to specific individuals, the British press favours the singular pronoun *they* to *he* (cf. Paterson 2014). The generic *they* is becoming more accepted in institutional contexts in Australia (cf. Pauwels/Winter 2006) as well.

The singular *they* is gaining further ground. It is used not only as a non-specific, generic pronoun but as a pronoun referring to a binarily non-specific individual, whose gender identity is neither male nor female. With this meaning, however, the pronoun remains non-generic, that is, specific in the grammatical sense. The singular *they* enables the speaker to make reference to an individual whose gender identity is unknown without the need to assume their binary gender. The "gender-neutral singular pronoun for a known person, particularly as a nonbinary identifier" (ADS 2015) has become popular, which is reflected in the fact that it was selected among the Words of the Year by the American Dialect Society in 2015 and also by Merriam-Webster in 2019.

Drawing the scope of reference of the singular *they* tighter than non-specific, Bjorkman reports that some native speakers of English accept *they* even with an antecedent "that is singular, definite, and specific, referring to an individual whose binary gender is known to both speaker and hearer" (2017: 1), such as in

A) %The professor$_i$ said they$_i$ cancelled the exam.
B) %Our eldest child$_i$ broke their$_i$ leg.
C) %I'll let my cousin$_i$ introduce themselves$_i$.

Yet Bjorkman (2017: 2) warns that even speakers who accept the use of the singular specific *they* in the above contexts do not find the singular *they* grammatical in the following examples:

A) *Janet$_i$ said they$_i$ cancelled the exam.
B) *Thomas$_i$ broke their$_i$ leg.
C) *I'll let my sister$_i$/father$_i$/aunt$_i$ introduce themselves$_i$.

Both sets of sentences contain a singular, definite and specific antecedent. The difference between the two sets is that the second one includes either a proper given name or a gender-specific noun. Even if *Janet* and *Thomas* and the various family relations were known to denote non-binary individuals, the "current status of *they* in English" (cf. Bjorkman 2017: 2) blocks the singular *they*'s automatic acceptability. Bjorkman (2017) argues that it is not only the strength of a cultural or pragmatic assumption that all people can be categorized into a binary gender system which renders the second set of sentences ungrammatical, but there is also a grammatical obstacle to it. Bjorkman (ibd.) refers to the mechanism of pronominal co-reference resolution. In a grammatical sentence, it needs to be guaranteed that a pronoun does not specify for fewer features (number, person, gender) than its antecedent. A pronoun can extend the linguistic features associated with its antecedent, yet it cannot underspecify its referent as Bjorkman claims "referential pronouns can only be interpreted as referring to a previously-introduced referent if they bear a superset of the features that have already been associated with that referent in a discourse" (ibd.: 11).

Since many native speakers feel the singular *they* to be ungrammatical when referring to gender non-conforming individuals, a number of novel GNPs has been proposed. The Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER) lists sixteen acceptable gender pronouns on its website, while

the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Resource Center of the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee catalogues 45 applicable pronouns. Furthermore, the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice (GRSJ) at the University of British Columbia emphasises that the trans*-lexicon is "ever-changing" (2015: 3), new varieties of referencing are expected to emerge continuously. Yet, none of the proffered neo-pronouns have been accepted by influential groups (cf. Moser/Devereux 2016).

A survey (cf. Hord 2016) conducted with the participation of 182 transgender people revealed that the use of neologistic pronouns is significantly outranked by that of traditional pronouns (*he, she*). Novel pronouns are not used in "high concentrations" (cf. Hord 2016: 16) even by people who categorize themselves outside the gender dichotomy. The various neologistic pronouns were in use only by 1-2% of the gender non-conforming participants, "despite the proliferation of them [GDP] on the internet" (cf. Hord 2016: 16). The same survey concluded that it is not uncommon among non-binary individuals not to have a preferred pronoun. Participants expressed they rather "have a pronoun of least resistance" as "none of them [pronouns] fit, including neologism" (cf. Hord 2016: 24). A possible reason for feeling aversion both of longstanding and of neologistic pronouns is provided by Wilchins, who argues that language inherently "favours the same" by pushing what is "unique, unrepeatable, and private" (2004: 35) to the background. The intention of individuals with non-binary gender identity to express uniqueness and peculiarity through personal pronouns, however, contradicts the genuine nature of language, where words are not of equal function. Subtle distinctness is typically expressed through lexical words (nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs), while personal pronouns concern what is universal. The first type of words constitute an open class since new words can be added to the group as necessity arises. Personal pronouns, which organize the grammatical structure, however, belong to function words, along with prepositions, determiners, or conjunctions, which form a closed class. Closed classes "do not easily admit new members," they are "very resistant to the introduction of new items" (cf. Downing/Locke 2006: 16). For this reason, it is unprecedented to invent new prepositions or determiners. The lack of the possibility of creatively adding new items to a finite set of words of a closed class is even more powerful in the case of pronouns, since they form a system. Adding a new item to the grammatically organized system challenges the whole system (cf. Paterson 2014), thus expanding the membership of the closed-class items of pronouns is an even more intricately complicated task. This is not the case when new lexical items are introduced in the dictionary of potentially infinite open-class items, where prolific addition is in accordance with the nature of language. Despite the intention of non-binary individuals who "wish to take [the] power into their own hands and thereby dictate (or demolish) [linguistic] categories for themselves" (cf. Hord 2016: 5), expressing uniqueness is not without limits in the English language.

As new linguistic features emerge successfully from the "grassroots" (cf. Jones/Mullany 2016: 2), from a shared public consensus, rather than from the prescriptions of privileged "ivory towers" (cf. Barrett 2016: 2), the discovery of the current social perception of the introduction of a neologistic GNP in the English language appears to be a salient consideration. To uncover the public attitude towards such a linguistic innovation, the present research aims to map the lines of arguments of comments posted by ordinary people to relevant online newspaper articles.

3 Methods

In order to delineate the social perception of the institutional introduction of a neologistic pronoun, readers' comments posted to British online newspaper articles reporting on the Oxford case (2016) were collected and examined. To unveil the voice of the people, the research investigated the discourse plane of online comments given by ordinary people. The genre of comments, best described as the "instances of argumentative evaluative language" (cf. Ehret/ Taboda 2020), embraces immediate, typically brief and anonymous reactions that are posted to an issue. This has the potential to provide insights into the genuine feelings, personal sentiments, stances and opinions of the general public, for which reason comments have come into the focus of discourse analytical research lately (cf. Bouko/Garcia 2019; Boyd 2018; Koller/ Miglbauer 2019; Ruzza/Pejovic 2019; Stopfner 2015).

The research drew on the first best liked comments displayed on the websites of six online British newspapers. To cover a wide range of the public, the data sources included both broadsheet newspapers (*Independent*, *Telegraph* and *The Times*) and tabloids (*Daily Mail*, *Express* and *Metro*). As commenters tend to engage in dialogue with each other, strings of comments are formed (cf. Black/Welser/Cosley 2011). The data contained full strings of comments posted over a one-year period of time (December 2016 – December 2017). A relatively long timespan was selected to be able to examine both the immediate and the succeeding reactions after the Oxford case (2016). Table 1 displays the number of comments analysed in the research.

Online newspaper		Mnemonic	Number of comments	
Broadsheet	*Independent*	Indep	47	99
	Telegraph	Tel	5	
	The Times	Times	47	
Tabloid	*Daily Mail*	DM	308	737
	Express	Expr	76	
	Metro	Met	353	
All			836	

Table 1: The number of comments analysed in the study.

The readership of two of the tabloids (*Daily Mail* and *Metro*) posted considerably more actively than any of the other four online newspapers thus the distribution of the comments is not even among the six data sources. The uneven distribution of the comments posted to tabloids and broadsheets reflects the dynamism of the readership of the former. The unevenness, however, is not considered to distort the results of the present research since the pilot study, which included the analysis of approximately 50 evenly distributed immediate comments, exposed no balance along the broadsheet-tabloid divide in terms of the acceptance of the introduction of the neologistic pronoun.

In order to answer the two research questions, the analysis of the data was twofold. On the one hand, it included the categorization of the acceptance of the introduction of a GNP. The com-

ments were tagged as either expressing an attitude of "for" or "against" the issue. All the comments, even the ones without proper argumentation were divided into either of the two categories based on the attitude or emotion of the commenter, regardless whether a verbal evaluation or a simple emoji was posted. Some comments gave neutral clarifications to the notions related to the content of the articles or simply strayed away from the topic. These comments were tagged "not applicable" to the research question. Microsoft Excel was used to organize the results and to verify the calculations of the manual tagging.

The second plane of analysis focused on the argumentation of the comments. As comments are typically brief, they tend not to give an explicit explanation of grounds of the argumentation. The qualitative analysis of the present research included uncovering hidden premises implied by the comments. Similar arguments on both discourse positions ("for" and "against") were grouped in order to find the argumentation pattern of the general public. Due to its qualitative nature, the delineation of the system of argumentation in the voice of the people required no use of algorithms.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 The social perception of the neologistic GNP *ze*

The result of the study brings understanding about the social perception of the newly appearing GNP *ze*. The ratio of the appreciative and the disapproving comments among the nearly thousand postings sheds light on the extent to which the general public evaluates the neologism as desirable (RQ1). Table 2 shows the number of comments in favour and against transforming language practices related to gender inclusiveness.

Online newspaper		FOR	AGAINST	NOT APPLICABLE
Broadsheet	*Independent*	0	37	10
	Telegraph	0	4	1
	The Times	1	44	2
	TOTAL	1	85	13
	TOTAL %	1.01%	85.86%	13.13%
Tabloid	*Daily Mail*	1	282	25
	Express	3	51	22
	Metro	6	259	88
	TOTAL	10	592	135
	TOTAL %	1.36%	80.33%	18.32%
ALL sources	TOTAL	11	677	148
	TOTAL %	1.32%	80.98%	17.70%

Table 2: The number of comments in favour and against the introduction of the GNP *ze*.

The commenters of the online broadsheet newspapers expressed their opinion in favour of the introduction of non-binary gender visibility in discourse to a mere 1.01 per cent. The proportion

of the readership of the tabloid newspapers who engaged in commenting the GNP appreciatively reached the same insignificant rate: 1.36 per cent of them believed that the English language should be changed in order to promote overt inclusivity of non-binarism. Considering all of the data sources, the general public encouraged discursive inclusiveness on an extremely minor scale (1.32%).

In contrast, the use of binary gender-specific pronouns (*he, she*) was supported by four-fifths of comments (80.98%) across all the six newspapers. There was no notable difference between the ratio of the comments of the readership of broadsheet articles (85.86%) and that of tabloid readers (80.33%). The overwhelming majority of the comments solidified the importance of the unaltered use of the binary gender system with regard to pronouns.

Within the appraisal dimension, the most marked difference between the comments of the two readerships was the ratio of comments tagged as "not applicable" to the RQ. Readers of broadsheet newspapers tended to post comments expressing their attitude considering the message of the article. Slightly more than one-tenth of their comments (13.13%) engaged in communication with other commenters with a digression from the content of the online article. In contrast, the readership of tabloids manifested a different habit of commenting. Nearly one-fifth (18.32%) of their posts could not be categorized as either in favour or against the introduction of the GNP. Yet, these comments were not irrelevant to the discussion. The tabloid posts revealed a community of commenters who are fond of participating in lively personal communication, telling personal stories, providing clarifications for each other, and introducing topics loosely related to the original article for discussion. This finding brings to light a habit of discussion different from what Demata (2016) observed about politics-related Facebook comments being poorly relevant to the original topic, which results in low-level debate.

4.2 Argumentation map of the general public

The comments on both discourse positions employ a set of interrelated argumentation. In what follows, the map of arguments posted to discuss the importance of introducing the GNP *ze* will be delineated (RQ2). First the arguments in favour of the use of the neologistic pronoun will be charted then the arguments against its application will follow. Where applicable, it is also uncovered what the argument entails but the comments fail to identify.

4.2.1 Arguments in favour of the introduction of the GNP *ze*

The one-per-cent encouraging comments posted both to broadsheet and to tabloid newspaper articles support the apparent use of the non-binary pronoun by five sets of argument: respect, minority, progress, medicine, and mitigation.

4.2.1.1 Respect

The use of the GNP *ze* is advocated by the argument that one should respect others' preferences. If a transgender person favours a pronoun that is different from their biological sex, the people in their company should accept it. Avoiding to question others' preferences is considered to be a sign of respect as a commenter draws attention to it: "if someone tells you that's what they

would prefer, then you respectfully call them that" (Met 19)[1]. The argument of respect and politeness presupposes that referring to a transperson by a pronoun other than their chosen one is demeaning. However, not all comments agree with this presupposition, "Of course, [it] goes without saying that using one reference system is definitely not offensive just because someone decided to use a different one" (Indep 15).

4.2.1.2 Minority

The number of transgender people at Oxford University is unspecified. The Transgender Guidance of the university states that no such data is available. Despite the lack of precise or approximate figures, the guide clearly indicates that its content, the advice and information collected for transgender people, applies to "a small number of students and staff" (cf. Moughton 2013: 1). The argument referring to the number of minorities maintains that even a numerically small group's voice should be taken into account. A commenter raises this argument with intense fervour by posing the poetic question "So only groups in large numbers have any rights?" (Expr 54).

4.2.1.3 Progress

The use of a GNP departs from the standard, traditional binary gender system. Those who advocate the use of the GNP regard departures from tradition as progressive by the very fact that any radical deviation is a sign of effectively diverging from what is treated as old-fashioned. With an attitude of appraisal of neophilia, moves which leave established tradition behind are indisputably judged as an advancement, as a favourable innovation. Thus not conforming to gender binary norms in language use is compared among the comments to social changes such as "when women were admitted to the University. Or given the vote." (Expr 52). Equating change immediately with progress and development, however, does not leave room for weighing whether the change itself has advantageous or harmful effects.

4.2.1.4 Medicine

The biological sex of the majority (99.93998%) is binary, either male or female. About one in every 1,666 individual, however, cannot indubitably fit this categorisation (cf: Blackless et al. 2000). A fairly small number of people show characteristics of atypical, intersex anatomies, where the degree of ambiguity forms a broad spectrum. Due to the non-binary nature of the intersex condition, a parallel is drawn between the existence of the intersex and the importance and feasibility of the use of the GNP *ze* among the comments highlighting the fact that "medical science doesn't find it [the in-between] at all confusing." (Expr 69). Yet, the socially constructed category of intersex conditions reflects numerous biological variations. There is no medical agreement where exactly to separate the category of intersex from that of the male or the female. The intersex category is not a discrete or natural one (cf. ISNA 2008), thus the reference in the commenter's argument to the lack of confusion in medicine regarding the definition of the intersex is an overstatement.

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[1] The mnemonic abbreviations refer to the six online newspapers (See Table 1). The comments were numbered chronologically. That is, for example, the code 'Met 1' refers to the first comment given to the article reporting on the Oxford case (2016) published online in Metro.

Furthermore, the parallel fails to support the argument that language should overtly signal one's non-binary gender identity since "the vast majority of people with intersex conditions identify as male or female […], they are perfectly comfortable adopting either male or female gender identity and are not seeking a genderless society or to label themselves as a member of a third gender class." (cf. ISNA 2008). Besides adopting a male or female gender identity, intersex people tend to settle into a binary-gendered world. People with intersex conditions manage to participate in activities that are associated with the binary sex as long as they were "encouraged normality in behaviour" (cf. Reilly/Woodhouse 1989: 571) in their childhood. The statistically marginalized group with inborn intersex conditions do not find the concept of binary gender to be oppressive to them, and consequently they do not strive to make the binary system of gender collapse in order for them "to live happy, fulfilling lives" (cf. ISNA 2008). Moreover, people with intersex conditions discourage assigning the third gender to children with intersex anatomies arguing that this gender category, which "in essence doesn't exist" (cf. ISNA 2008), unnecessarily traumatizes the child.

All in all, the references to the existence of the intersex condition among the comments unintentionally strengthen the further use of the binary pronoun system (*he - she*) rather than the introduction of the GNP *ze*.

4.2.1.5   Mitigation

The last argument among the comments in favour of introducing the GNP *ze* is slightly similar to the argument of respect in the sense that both of them concentrate on the preferences of the person referred to. Rather than emphasizing the importance of courteousness and respect, however, this argument aims at lessening the gravity of the issue by underlining the lack of effort or skill it takes to "call people what they want you to call them, it's not difficult" (Met 176). Not recognizing any of the dilemmas the use of the non-binary pronoun invokes, by asking "Why can't they use 'ze'?" (DM 22), mitigates the issue. At the same time, the mitigation argument does not provide a reason proper for replacing the traditional pronoun system. The supporters of the mitigation argument seem to persuade not by reason but by ignoring the necessity of choice the opposing views necessarily pose.

Table 3 provides a summative overview of the five different arguments raised in favour of the introduction of GNP *ze*.

	Topoi	Main argument
1	Respect	One should respect others' preferences.
2	Minority	Even a numerically small group has rights.
3	Progress	Change means progress and development. (neophilia)
4	Medicine	If medicine distinguishes the intersex category, language can also classify the inter-gender.
5	Mitigation	It is not difficult to pronounce the word *ze*.

Table 3: The topoi and arguments for introducing the GNP *ze*.

4.2.2   Arguments against the introduction of the GNP *ze*

81% of the comments posted by the readership of both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers show a versatile argumentation when voicing opinions against the introduction of the GNP. The set of arguments which disapprove of the institutional change of the English pronoun system amount to a dozen.

4.2.2.1   The source of the initiative

One of the arguments against the introduction of the GNP *ze* questions the authenticity of the source of the advocates, namely that of the Oxford University Student Union (OUSU). The comments tend to depict the OUSU as a politically motivated group of students who loudly organise events focusing on issues unrelated to the academic advancement of their peers. The OUSU is characterised as "the usual bunch of student lefties arranging marches and selling discount stationary" (Times 10). The advocates of the introduction of the pronoun *ze* are described as "viciously-intolerant and identity-obsessed far Left" (Indep 5). Focusing on the disputed nature of the source rather than on the content of the reasoning in disproving the argument is the argumentum ad hominem fallacy. Other comments against the introduction of the GNP that make reference to the source of the initiative draw attention to the relatively small number of students at the OUSU. Trying to falsify an argument by pointing to the numerically small support it gets appears to be the argumentum ad numerum fallacy. However, the comments do not attempt to disprove the need for the introduction of the GNP by barely attacking the number of its supporters. Instead, they call attention to the fact that "the Student Union are not representative of the entire student body" (DM 269), and more problematically, they do not represent the real needs of the students, at which "Most students are just as annoyed as you." (DM 269).

4.2.2.2   The lack of necessity

A great number of comments posted both to the broadsheet and to the tabloid newspapers question the need of introducing a neologistic pronoun. 42 comments point out that the English language has already got various ways of expressing gender-neutrality in its pronoun system. The comments list pronouns *they*, *it*, and *one* as GN. Commenters find pronoun *it* to be inappropriate as a reference to a living person, however, they seem to agree that the singular *they* properly fulfils the function. The possible ungrammaticality of the plural *they* to be used with a singular referent is considered among the comments, yet commenters provide informed reply in defence of the singular *they* by alluding to Oxford Dictionary (Met 297). It is worth noting that the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), "the definitive record of the English language" (cf. OED 2019) as it characterises itself, does not list *they* among its entries with the specific meaning of reference to a person with neither of the binary genders, that is, it does not adopt *they* as a singular pronoun of reference for non-binary individuals. Yet, in the explanation of usage, the OED mentions the transgender meaning of the pronoun *they* as preferred by some people. Moreover, it should not go unnoticed that in reference to a male or a female person of unspecified sex the OED consequently applies the pronoun *they* rather *he* or the combination *he or she*. The reason of the Dictionary for using *they* in the samples and definitions of its entries is twofold:

he is evaluated as old-fashioned and sexist; while the dual construction *he or she* sounds tiresomely long-winded (cf. OED 2019). The OED's practice clearly indicates that the otherwise plural pronoun *they* is accepted as a norm in reference to a single individual.

The second argument emphasizing the lack of necessity of introducing a new pronoun is more contextual than linguistic. Commenters insist on the fact that it is not the pronoun form (either binary or gender-non-specific) that we prefer to use when being sympathetic and kind with the other but "When the person is present it is more usual, and friendly, to use his or her name. I fail to see the need for this bizarre neologism." (Times 20). The comment slips focusing on the usage of the pronoun itself and offers another possible way of referencing, thus it is not a valid counterargument against the introduction of a new pronoun; yet it emphatically underlines the lack of a pressing and essential need to change the pronoun system in the English language.

4.2.2.3   The lack of neutrality

Further comments notice the fact that the GNP *ze* cannot fulfil its function of being neutral in terms of gender. Although the intention of introducing *ze* is to offer a variation of the third person singular pronoun which is GN, it bears no neutrality unless everyone was called *ze* and the pronouns *he* and *she* were not used any longer. Commenters call attention to languages, such as Hungarian, in which "there's no distinction for the pronoun he/she, '*ő*' can mean either a man or a woman" (Met 161). In a similar manner, other languages such as Finnish, Malay, Armenian, Bengali, Yoruba (cf. Dembroff/Wodak 2018) do not make a differentiation between the male and the female referent by using a gender-specific pronoun. Instead, one single GNP is applied to all individuals, which makes discourse gender-blind. Thus, despite the intention of seeking to deemphasize gender through the use of a new pronoun, the pronoun *ze* stresses gender by specifying that the person referred to has neither male nor female gender identity, it immediately reveals that the person referred to has a gender history of a non-binary person. In this sense, the pronoun *ze* is a gender-diverse pronoun (GDP), not a GNP. The use of a GDP aids expressing non-binary identity by recognizing gender identity rather than gender expression or biological sex in everyday speech interactions. The intention of introducing gender-diversity into the language by the use of a GDP, however, cannot be fulfilled. There is an ever-growing number of gender identity types, which could only be reflected by the use of a plethora of pronouns and not by that of one single neologism. One single neo-pronoun for the umbrella term that includes an overabundant number of non-binary identities would excessively over-simplify diversity. It would rob individuals with non-binary gender identity of the choice of expressing their standalone labels. Theoretically, the continuously expanding diversity could only be reflected linguistically by a myriad, that is, an infinite number of pronouns. For the discussion of the problem of the plurality of pronouns see Section 4.2.2.7.4, Consequent Confusion.

4.2.2.4   Political Correctness

One of the lines of argumentation sees the issue of the introduction of the GNP from a broader perspective. Commenters identify the problem as part of a popular framework, namely that of political correctness (PC). An unstated premise, PC is experienced to be meaningless, makes the adoption of the new pronoun useless among the commenters. Comments focusing on the

futility of PC are also concerned about problems of gravity and express rage at spending money on the enforcement of the application of PC in society rather than on solving real problems in the world. The pointlessness of PC is underlined by the following hypothetical contrast: if "we didn't waste billions in PC cr*p every year more money would be available for things that really matter." (Times 27). The pointlessness of PC is supported by the idea that it serves nothing else but the protection of the self-importance of sensitive individuals, as one "Gotta be so so sensitive not to offend someone's fragile ego" (DM 183). Commenters find that natural self-assertion would suffice to solve the problem of misgendering: "Just correct people and move on if you don't identify with the gender. If someone said *she* to me I wouldn't be bothered, I'd just correct them." (Met 214). It is not only the futility of PC that comes to the foreground of the arguments, but its criminalizing effect as well. An expression that does not completely fit PC regulations protecting the over-sensitive has the power to make the outspoken person an offender, as a comment warns: "In our contemporary PC culture they are seeking to compel you to say things that conform with their demands or you will be guilty of an 'offence' under their 'code of behaviour'" (Times 30). Thus the control over language use raises issues of values, too.

4.2.2.5   Silence and freedom of speech

The introduction of the GNP *ze* in fear of offending non-binary people by the usage of the traditional binary pronouns worries a large number of commenters. One of their concerns focuses on the motivation of the initiative by arguing that the strenuous effort to avoid offending people by certain language use leads to an alarming direction. Commenters pinpoint the unfeasibility of completely avoiding offence by arguing that "it's impossible to prevent offence, any form of address has the potential to cause offence, even 'Ze'" (Met 183). An ironic comment points out that any linguistic utterance is a potential offence to someone, thus if a non-offending regulation wishes to be consequent, the following should be proffered: "Let's ban everything just to make sure no one is offended, ever." (DM 97). If the motive of change is the fear of offence, silence is supported in favour of open reasoning. A commenter warns that if the tendency of silencing certain expressions for fear of offending is strengthened in our society, "We won't be allowed to talk to anyone in 20 years for fear of offending!" (DM 175).

The motive of banning certain language use for fear of offending can violate the freedom of speech as well. Similarly to psychology professor Peterson, who famously refused to use any pronoun other than *he* or *she* in the name of free speech, for which reason his visiting fellowship was denied by Cambridge University (cf. Marsh 2019), a commenter firmly declares that they cannot be silenced by "absurd" regulations, and "when I next speak at Oxford I'll be using the familiar universally-recognised pronouns if they should arise naturally in my paper, because I too have freedom of speech and in my case I will always prioritize making what I say as intelligible as possible to an English-speaking audience." (Indep 5). In the argumentation of the commenters, introducing regulations on the use of pronouns does not only entail a superficial stylistic change but it sets a direction that dumbs discussions by the curtailment of the freedom of speech. Commenters warn about the unfairness of the gains and losses: "You want your freedom of choice but deny us our freedom of speech" (Met 226). Imposing control over the English language, "what people can and cannot say, […] will lead to what conversations and

debates people are permitted to engage in." (Times 30). Along the same lines, another commenter forewarns that it is an "extremely dangerous argument that people have a right not to be "offended" or to hear anything that might potentially cause them discomfort. If accepted, this claim gives […] [them] a basis on which they can then set about shutting down debate on campus, censoring dissent and silencing anyone whose opinions they don't like." (Indep 5). Numerous commenters are disturbed to see Orwell's infamous Thought Police from 1984 being "appointed" (DM 252) and flourishing in the academia: "It's getting worse. The thought police seem to be rampant in our uni's (sic!)" (DM 248).

4.2.2.6 Minority

The argument referring to the number of people affected by the new measure appears not only among the supporters of the introduction of the GNP *ze* but among its opponents as well. There is no official estimate about how small the number of transgender people at Oxford University is (cf. Transgender Guidance 2013), yet numerous comments focus on gauging how narrow the range of students and staff might be to whom the regulations apply. Comments make rough evaluations about the number of people with gender identity issues where the upper-range of the estimations reaches "an extremely small part of the population – less than 1%" (Times 30), middle-range estimate judge "one in a thousand" (Expr 73), however, the lowest estimations predict "1/10,000" (DM 126). Reckonings foretell that "There'll be a maximum of 2 transgendered people given their prevalence at any uni this size." (DM 233). Proposing the question how many transgender people might be affected by potential misgendering, for whose protection "this rule has to be brought in" (Times 21), is relevant for the opponents of the introduction of the GNP *ze* since the measure shows signs of being out of proportion. A displeased comment summarizes how "absolutely ridiculous" it finds that "now we need to change the way we speech (sic!) to each other because of 1% of the population" (Met 211). Commenters find it "a bit unfair to change something because a few people get offended" (Met 301) and to expect the vast majority, approximately 99% of the population, to conform. Others are concerned that the initiative for the introduction of the GNP is another instance of an attempt to "impose the agenda of a minuscule minority on everyone else." (Times 30). A comment satirically emphasizes the topsy-turvy nature of the confusion: "Now ze fleas on ze tail of ze dog are wagging it!" (Times 25). The new non-binary pronoun system introduced in order to please the minority triggers value changes which makes commenters feel discomfited. A comment encapsulates how a disproportionate measure can lead to the majority's feeling embarrassed simply for not being the minority: "Again making a rule for a majority of a minority group that opresses (sic!) the masses. I should be ashamed for identifying as the gender I was born as. Because some people dont. (sic!)" (DM 19). Commenters fear that due to the institutionally instated value change, the condition of being ordinary becomes disgraceful, and the currently existing state of affairs becomes unaccepted.

4.2.2.7 Consequences

Several comments criticize the introduction of the GNP *ze* for the consequences it entails. These arguments can be grouped around four topics: coercion, offence against the majority, the loss of variety and confusion.

4.2.2.7.1 Coercion

The introduction of GNP is aimed to celebrate diversity by offering a new possibility of referring to non-binary people. Commenters, however, point out that the guidance of the university does not encourage a simple, optional form of support by presenting an additional alternative but carries out persuasion by threat. A comment warns that according to the university's harassment policy misgendering "may amount to harassment. That implies a degree of coercion, and one might infer a lack of choice in the event that one might be so unwise as to wish to retain the status quo." (Expr 45). Indeed, the Transgender Guidance of the university clarifies "Persistently 'accidentally' addressing an individual with the wrong name or pronoun might be experienced as harassment by the person concerned." (cf. Moughton 2013: 16). The definition of "harassment" in the University Policy on Harassment and Bullying describes the nature of the engagement as either an intentional wrongdoing or one that has the "<u>effect</u> of violating another person's dignity" (2014: 2, emphasis added). That is, if the use of a pronoun is experienced by the person referred to as intimidating, the language use might be categorized as an act of harassment. The consequences of committing harassment are not insignificant as "Any unlawful discriminatory behaviour, including transphobic harassment or bullying [...] will be regarded extremely seriously and could be regarded as grounds for disciplinary action, which may include expulsion or dismissal" (cf. Transgender Guidance 2013: 16). Risking expulsion or dismissal for applying a pronoun which is not found to be the most appropriate by the person concerned is what the comments evaluate as coercive. According to this argument, the regulation, which promotes diversity on the surface, stigmatizes the use of traditional binary pronouns as potentially degrading, humiliating and offensive as long as a binary non-conforming person experiences it to be hostile. Keeping the coercion element in the foreground, the adoption of referencing people by a new pronoun is an institutional change by which the new pronoun is not organically introduced with the potential to become widespread but its use is imposed by pressure. Wright (2007) warns that imposing new linguistic features without the speakers' perception of them to be beneficial is characteristic of totalitarian regimes.

4.2.2.7.2 Offence against the majority

The comments which show that the introduction of the GNP *ze* is an offence against the majority are twofold. On the one hand, introducing the optional use of the GNP can create the lack of considerations, argue the comments, insofar as many people do not wish to be asked about their preferred pronouns. People tend to find it rude if their expressed gender is not obviously perceivable for the others, as a comment passionately puts it "I am in fact male. I am quite happy to be male, indeed positively pleased to be male. I think that if someone did me the discourtesy of addressing me in such a way as to diminish or ignore the fact of my masculinity then I would feel quite at liberty utterly and completely to ignore that person." (DM 246). Both male and female commenters reveal their openness to be "happy for anyone to assume my gender" (Met 351). Enquiring about one's preferred pronoun, however, is expected to recoil when non-binary people are asked. Commenters emphasize that the question concerns one's private life and thus it can create situations which "tick people off or cause some ppl to get all militant assuming that the question was overtly personal." (Met 58). Educator Elizabeth Reis (2016) experienced how discomforting it is in the classroom to ask about students' preferred

pronouns. In her practice, the ice-breaking ritual of sharing preferred pronouns is "easy only for whom the answer is obvious," however, it terrifies and isolates those "who are still considering their gender or who have just begun to transition."

On the other hand, as discussed in Section 4.2.2.3, the introduction of the GNP *ze* does not provide gender-neutrality for those who wish to hide their gender identity or gender history, but it calls attention to the fact that the person referred to as *ze* does not conform to the traditional binary gender classification. Gender-neutrality could only be reached if every individual was referred to by the same pronoun, in this case, *ze*. Although OUSU did not intend to propose the use of the neologistic pronoun in such a generic, unspecified way, commenters still examined this logical consequence. The comments emphasize that gender-binary people also have feelings and it is a sign of inconsiderateness to "discriminat[ing] against people who want to be referred to by their gender pronoun" (Indep 30). Many commenters ardently stick to their gender being reflected in their pronoun. "I'm a man. Spelled M. A. N. Man." (Met 225) or "I am a woman and proud, please don't make changes in my name" (DM 72). Comments summarize that the generic use of *ze* creates a problem that affects most of the people in society in an offensive way: "by using "ze" for everyone they are literally reversing the problem and misgendering every cis-person" (Met 297).

4.2.2.7.3 Loss of variety

If the neologistic pronoun *ze* was used in a generic way, that is, the gender-specific pronouns *he* and *she* were eradicated, the English pronoun system could fully support gender neutrality in discourse. Although gender neutrality could be ensured when referring to anyone with the same pronoun, the gender-blind pronoun system does not appeal to commenters who find the result less than exciting: "Imagine a gender-neutral world. I couldn't think of anything more boring and unsexy" (Times 35). Commenters do not prefer homogenous egalitarianism, and thus they do not wish to lose variety in the name of equality.

4.2.2.7.4 Consequent Confusion

Comments also alert about the impracticality of the introduction of the convention of using preferred pronouns when referring to others. On the one hand, in order to prioritize gender identity by refusing to rely on physical reality including one's gender expression makes it "difficult to remember what pronoun to use" (Met 22). On the other hand, the group of individuals who do not identify with the gender binary is not homogeneous. If all the different gender identities are lumped under one neologistic pronoun *ze,* the gender identity of the particular individual cannot be expressed and misgendering becomes inevitable. The "one-size-fits-all approach" (cf. Jones/Mullany 2016: 1) is insensitive to many gender binary non-conforming individuals. Aiming to be able to sensitively reflect one's gender identity through the use of a preferred pronoun, the introduction of an indefinitely great number of pronouns would be necessary. That is, the intention of expressing gender identity through the use of the most appropriate pronoun leads to the proliferation of pronouns, eventually, to the introduction of an infinite number of personal pronouns.

It is not only the infinite number of pronouns which makes the use of a preferred pronoun expressing one particular gender identity less than practical, however, their application is even

more complicated if one takes real life situations into account. Namely, most gender guidance, including the Transgender Guidance of the Oxford University (cf. Moughton 2013), call attention to the importance of being tactful when referencing individuals of non-cisgender identities in different environments in order not to out the transgender person by carelessness. The set of preferred pronouns can vary in private, at the workplace, with family or with a different circle of friends. The diversity of settings further multiplies the infinite number of pronouns a person might be referred to according to personal preferences. The difficulty of the choice of the most appropriate pronoun increases to an even greater degree when different settings with different personal pronouns of preference overlap, such as family members arrive at the campus.

Relying on personal preferences of gender identity when referring to another person can cause confusion for the very nature of the identification in the case of bigender individuals. Namely, it is not impossible to have alternating gender identities, some people "identify as men at some times and as women at others" (cf. Dembroff/Wodak 2018: 374). The mercurial cognitive and emotional changes about one's own gender identity makes referencing excessively dynamic. The unpredictable gender flips, the "involuntary alternations in experienced gender" (cf. Dembroff/Wodak 2018: 391) place the consistent and appropriate referencing of a bigender person beyond the bounds of possibility. The impracticalities imposed by the introduction of relying on self-identity in referencing is the reason for a commenter to express distress at "snowflakes […] confusing everything and everyone" (DM 111).

4.2.2.8   English language

The possible introduction of the GNP takes commenters by surprise as they intuit the English language to be less GN than other languages. If the notion of gender-neutrality is to be consequently reinforced in other than English languages, commenters foresee a major hurdle: "What are the French, Germans and Latinos going to do? Their whole language is based upon gender!" (Met 221).

Regarding gender, languages are classified into three groups: natural gender languages, grammatically gendered languages and grammatically genderless languages. English, a West Germanic language, belongs to the class of natural gender languages, which is characterized by distinguishing gender through pronouns, though not making such a distinction among most nouns. It is only a small group of nouns which are gendered, such as mother, brother or stewardess, while the majority of nouns are not gender-specific, they have no grammatical marking of gender.

In contrast to natural gender, which is a semantic concept, grammatically gendered languages, for instance German or French, have both semantic and grammatical gender. In grammatically gendered languages, gender is reflected in nouns, adjectives, adverbs and articles that accompany them. In practical terms, gender is reflected in more parts of the language than in the case of natural gender languages since various parts of speech used in conjunction with a semantically gendered noun also reflect gender. This could be the reason why commenters are unsatisfied with the fact that although English contains fewer instances of gender reference than German and French, it is still the English language which is targeted: "I am surprised that these people choose to pick on the English language rather than the Romance languages which are much more gender specific. That bothers me." (Expr 36).

Finally, the third group, genderless languages, which typically belong to the Uralic (Finnish), Turkic (Turkish), Iranian (Persian), Sinitic (Chinese), and Bantu (Swahili) language families (cf. Prewitt-Freilino/Caswell/Laakso 2012: 269), lack gender distinction of grammatical gender. It is important to note that the class where a certain language belongs to does not indicate how gender roles are treated in society, as Prewitt-Freilino/Caswell/Laakso pinpoints, "it would be mistaken to believe that the grammatically genderless languages automatically lead to a more gender-neutral society" (cf. Prewitt-Freilino/Caswell/Laakso 2012: 270).

4.2.2.9 Teenager sensitivity

Another concern reminds of the possible serious effect of the introduction of the use of the GNP on young adults. Namely, commenters point out that it is natural for teenagers to be undecided about various issues, including gender: "Who can be certain at that age?" (Times 8). However, schools strengthening teenagers' natural uncertainty by encouraging them to experiment with gender expression and by offering them the choice of questing their own gender can lead to psychological problems. The registered charity organization "Educate & Celebrate", which runs the Ofsted-recognised programme to support LGBTQ inclusion in schools with the help of £200,000 funding form the Department of Education in the UK (cf. Weale 2017), published a transgender guide (cf. Atkinson 2017), which was introduced into some British primary schools as a resource for children from the age of seven, parents and teachers. The transgender guide acknowledges that teenagers go through a difficult period when their bodies change (cf. Atkinson 2017: 25). Yet, the guide uses the conflicting feelings one encounters in the period of puberty about one's changing body, which naturally happens during the pubertal change (cf. Bell/Foster/Mash 2005; Lerner/Easterbrooks/Mistry 2003; O'Donohue/Benuto/Tolle 2013;), as a springboard for teenagers to start considering transitioning. Commenters are worried that schools inspiring young people to regard their own biological sex with suspicion "cause confusion and emotional problems" (Times 6). The impact of educational institutions is undeniable, besides maladaptive coping mechanism, it is the role of social influence that increases the risk of developing rapid onset gender dysphoria, which apparently occurs in the context of belonging to a "peer group where one, multiple or even all friends have become gender dysphoric" (2018: 1). Although there is no data about the number of those who opt for detranstion to their original biological sex, yet hundreds of young transgender regret their decision of changing sex (cf. Lockwood 2019).

4.2.2.10 Transgender aspiration

Numerous commenters are bewildered by the idea of the need for the introduction of the GNP for transgender people as it appears to be an illogical motion, one that treats transgender people disrespectfully. Transgender people strive to go through transition in order to live with the gender they identify with, the one that was not assigned to them at birth, of which the GNP *ze* deprives them: "I thought the aim of transgender people was to become the gender they believe they are. Thus, surely, a man would, eventually, want to be referred to as 'she' and a woman 'he'." (Times 13). Referring to transgender people with the GNP *ze* bars them from being completely accepted as having the gender they wish to be assigned. Comments point out that calling transgender people *ze* is discourteous: "Surely if somebody was a man and then transitioned into a woman or a woman transitioned into a man would it not be more correct to called (sic!)

them the gender they identify as now I would find this more insulting personally because when people transition they transition to the gender they where (sic!) always suppose (sic!) to be they didn't transition to be called ze" (Met 90). Comments pinpoint the heart of the problem by calling attention to the fact that transgender people wish to change gender, that is transition from male to female or the other way round, but they do not strive to lose gender: "if they [transgender people] change their gender from male/female and reverse [...] why would we call them "ze"? They don't want to be in-between, they want to be one or the other." (Indep 36). Bornstein/Bergman (cf. 2010: 15) also examine the phenomenon that it is not rear in transgender communities to judge the movement towards GN language, including neologisms, negatively. Serano (2010) explains why transgender people defy the use of GNPs by claiming that the GNP implies that the femaleness or maleness of transgender people is of fake quality. Consequently, "third-sexing me [a transwoman] with labels like MTF, boy-girl, he-she, she-male, ze & hir – anything but simply female (…) will only ever serve to marginalize me further" (cf. Serano 2010: 86f.).

4.2.2.11 Religion

Part of the comments defy the introduction of the use of the GNP on grounds of belief. Christians who believe in the Bible find the neologistic pronoun offensive as it questions one of the genuine characteristics of God, namely, that of omniscience. According to the Biblical tradition, God, who is constantly in the state of knowing everything, created the world binary regarding the sexes. The use of a non-binary pronoun system implies that God erred when creating couples male and female. Comments highlight the paradoxicality for God, an omniscient entity, to be mistaken: "God created us male and female. God does not make mistakes" (Expr.31). In an argument, insisting that a claim is true on grounds that a valid authority stated it to be true without offering other supporting evidence is an error in reasoning: the fallacy of appeal to authority (argumentum ad verecundiam). Although the posts which appeal to the Bible as an unquestionable authority are fallacious, the issue they raise stresses the problem of the definite need of prioritizing irreconcilable systems of thought in a diverse community as equal acceptance is impossible: it is unfeasible to use both a binary and a non-binary pronoun system at the same time.

4.2.2.12 Self-identity problems

The introduction of the GNP aims to celebrate diversity regarding one's gender identity. A great number of the comments express concern about determining the choice of a referential pronoun by the gender identity of the person referred to. Commenters foreground that gender identity is not permanent but transitory, which makes it nonviable to be used as a consistent point of reference. "I have always used sex-based pronouns and will continue to do so – because for me, something immutable is more relevant to classification than an "identity" that people might choose and change during their lifetime." (Indep 15). Furthermore, commenters find it bizarre to base a system of reference on a not only capriciously changing point, but on one that is merely conceptual, one that is an "alternative reality" (DM 290). It is firmly asserted in the comments that even if one's relation to one's own body or to one's assigned gender has changed, what changes is one's thoughts about them, yet the physical reality remains unaltered – unless one goes through sex-reassignment surgery. Ironic comments warn that altered gender

identity "can't change sex any more than you can change race or species" (Met 36). The idea that changing one's gender identity creates an alternative reality is brought to light by comments which ridicule the lack of reality of an attitude change to oneself. "I want to be rich. Doesn't mean it will happen" (Met 148). Even sharper comments emphasize the absurdity of the desire to leave biology-given male and female self-identities behind: "I want to be a tree." (Expr 14); "Can i (sic!) identify as a dolphin?" (Met 36); "I want to be a lobster"(Met 38); "Can I be a tractor please?" (Met 40). Regarding the difference between attitude and physical reality, it is worthy to note that even the first legally recognized non-binary person in the USA declared that "Gender is just a concept. Biological sex defines all of us,", and "Two fake gender identities couldn't hide the truth of my biological reality. There is no third gender or third sex. […] Biological sex is immutable." (cf. Shupe 2019). Yet claiming the clear difference between biology and self-identity can lead to undesirable consequences, as for example in Maya Forstater's case, who lost her job at a thinktank after tweeting what "until recently [was] understood as basic facts of life […]: sex is a biological fact, and is immutable" (cf. Bowcott 2019).

Numerous commenters disapprove of gender identity being reflected in the pronoun system as they find it to be a personal issue of the individual. Commenters feel that people have the right to treat the individual with a gender identity crisis as an ordinary individual without a gender identity crisis and they wish not to express a personal gender identity crisis through referencing. Following the argumentation of the comments, a self-identity issue, which is an entirely personal aspect of the transgender person, might at most be reflected by a neologistic first person singular but not the third person singular. Comments firmly highlight that a person with a gender identity crisis should not expect others to identify them through this sole and personal aspect of theirs: "whatever else you want to call yourselves is down to the individual but don't try to change everybody else" (Expr 26). Regarding gender identity, comments also argue that the use of the GN neologistic personal pronoun would strengthen alternative realities and thus it would further deepen self-identity problems: "Why should anybody reinforce their delusion?" (Met 201). As a commenter mockingly expressed it, "if you see yourself as a kangaroo don't expect me to play along." (Times 46). Comments dealing with the theme of self-identity sharply disapprove of changing the English pronoun system in order to please people with gender identity crises.

A summative overview of the variety of arguments against the introduction of the GNP *ze* can be found in Table 4.

	Topoi	Main argument
1	Source of the initiative	The OUSU is not trustworthy in terms of providing appropriate help for students.
2	The lack of necessity	- The English language has got various ways of expressing gender-neutrality in its pronoun system. - Compared to pronouns, it is friendlier to use proper names.

	Topoi	Main argument
3	The lack of neutrality	The pronoun *ze* is not gender-neutral but calls attention to the gender history of a person with non-binary gender identity.
4	Political correctness	Political correctness does not provide real solutions to real problems. The sum of money invested into enhancing political correctness should be invested into solving social problems of gravity.
5	Silence and freedom of speech	- Introducing pronoun *ze* for fear of offence supports silence in favour of open discussion and reasoning. - One's freedom of choice should not restrict others' freedom of speech.
6	Minority	Introducing measures in favour of a minuscule minority that restricts the majority is out of proportion and unfair.
7	Consequences: A) Coercion B) Offence against the majority C) Loss of variety D) Confusion	A) The regulation stigmatizes the use of traditional binary pronouns as potentially offensive, which can be regarded as a form of harassment leading to disciplinary action including expulsion or dismissal. B) - To get to know one's preferred pronoun it needs to be asked, which is rude and intimidating. - To refer to everybody by the same pronoun *ze* is inconsiderate of those who want to be referred to by *he* or *she*. C) To refer to everybody by the same pronoun *ze* makes the English language less diverse. D) - To prioritize gender identity over physical reality (including one's gender expression) makes it difficult to remember which pronoun to use. - The proliferation of neologistic pronouns eventually leads to the introduction of an infinite number of personal pronouns, which is unfeasible. - The diversity of settings multiplies the infinite number of pronouns a person might prefer to be referred to. - Unpredictable gender flips make appropriate referencing impossible.
8	English language	English (as a natural gender language) distinguishes gender only through pronouns, there is no grammatical marking of gender on nouns, adjectives, adverbs, articles. Grammatically gendered languages deserve to be more in the centre of attention than English.

	Topoi	Main argument
9	Teenager sensitivity	It is natural for teenagers to be uncertain about various issues, including their feelings about the pubertal change. Encouraging them to question their gender can lead to psychological problems.
10	Transgender aspirations	Transgender people strive to change gender (transition from male to female or the other way round), not to lose gender. The use of the GNP *ze* implies fake femaleness/maleness.
11	Religion	God created people male or female. God is omniscient thus cannot err.
12	Self-identity problems	- Gender identity is transitory and capricious. A pronoun should refer to permanent qualities, which do not change, e. g. one's biology-given sex. - Gender identity is a personal issue. A person with a gender identity crisis should not expect others to identify them through this sole and personal aspect of theirs.

Table 4: The topoi and arguments against the introduction of the GNP *ze*.

5   Conclusion

The present discourse analytical research aimed to explore the social perception of institutionally introducing a GNP (*ze*) in the English language for the sake of celebrating gender diversity. The result of the study reveals that the promotion of the GNP is markedly underrepresented in the English-speaking public (RQ1). The general public encouraged discursive inclusiveness by the introduction of the GNP *ze* on an extremely minor scale (1.32%), while the use of the binary gender-specific pronouns (*he, she*) was supported by four-fifths of comments (80.98%). The comments of the readership of broadsheet and tabloid newspapers displayed no notable difference between the two audiences in this respect, both of them noticeably opted for keeping the traditional binary pronoun system.

The multitudinousness of the line of argumentation of the public differed on the two planes (RQ2). The set of reasoning in favour of the introduction of the GNP *ze* incorporated no more than five arguments including 1) respect; 2) minority; 3) progress; 4) medicine; and 5) mitigation. While the set of arguments against the introduction of the GNP *ze* profusely amounted to a dozen embracing 1) the source of the initiative; 2) the lack of necessity; 3) the lack of neutrality; 4) political correctness; 5) silence and the freedom of speech; 6) minority; 7) consequences A) coercion, B) offence against the majority; C) loss of variety; D) confusion; 8) English language; 9) teenager sensitivity; 10) transgender aspiration; 11) religion; and 12) self-identity problems.

It is not only the number of arguments that differs greatly on the two planes, but the types of the argumentations show differences, too. Arguments in favour of the introduction of the GNP *ze* are based on kindness (1), equal rights activism (2), the trendiness of neophilia (3), confusing

the concept of intersex with transgender (4), and mitigating the gravity of the issue (5). Arguments against the introduction of the GNP *ze* defame the source of the initiative (1), find the hauling of a well-functioning pronoun system without a sound reason destructive (2, 8), highlight that the neologism does not fulfil its function of neutrality (3, 7, 10), lean towards sensibility rather than political correctness (4), emphasize that the rights of the people in the community should not be harmed by the demanded interest of the minority (5, 6, 7), reveal the paradox of the coercive nature of a seeming recommendation (7), prefer physical reality over imaginary worlds (7), wish to remain practical (7), show concern for society and the healthy and natural development of teenagers (9), protect a shared culture of theism (11), are inclined to keep personal issues private rather than public (12), view identification to be reasonable through permanent rather than transitory and capricious qualities (12).

The present discourse analysis of vox populi investigated a sample of the opinion of ordinary people who were engaged in spontaneously responding to online articles reporting on the Oxford case (2016), which cannot be regarded as representative of the entire society in terms of e. g. age, education, socioeconomic status, or marital status. Yet, the research calls attention to the opinion and reasoning of those who showed genuine interest in the topic. In this instance, the findings of the analysis indicate that the voice of the people does not consider pronoun-binarism as a sign of exclusion or the marginalizing of gender-diverse people. However, the novel pronoun tends to excite shock and refusal in the public. People tend to find the introduction of a GNP unnecessary, confusing, impractical, coercive in an institutional context, and dangerously leading to lose touch with physical reality. Since new linguistic features emerge successfully from a shared public consensus, it is important for future policy makers to gauge the opinion of the wider public prior to institutionally changing language use.

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