

Navigating gender-inclusive language in Arabic: strategies and challenges for nonbinary Egyptians

Farida Soliman¹

¹*Department of Linguistics, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK*

Arabic, much like other grammatically gendered languages, possesses a two-gender grammatical system with feminine and masculine distinctions. Historically, this grammatical gender system has created a reliance on masculine grammatical gender, which research has showed perpetuates an over-representation of men in perception (Koeser and Sczesny 2014). Arabic's journey with inclusive language is relatively novel, with current (and minimal) efforts focused on feminisation of the language to be more inclusive of women. While this is surely a step in the right direction, the same issue remains: how do we move away from binary attempts at achieving gender inclusion? To answer this question, it is important to distinguish between the linguistic and sociocultural barriers that challenge the use of inclusive language.

From a linguistic perspective, Arabic's highly inflectional nature presents a challenging endeavour in the avoidance of binary grammatical gender (and consequently social gender). While other languages, such as Spanish, have found success in introducing exogenous morphology (e.g., the use of Latinx or amigxs), similar strategies remain incompatible with Arabic due to its extensive gender agreement, and strict reliance on grammatical gender in first-, second-, or third-person speech.

From a sociocultural perspective, there is still a lack of acceptance, understanding, or acknowledgement of nonbinary gender identities or 'queerness' in the Arabic-speaking world. Therefore, the typical goal often found in the Global North of increasing 'visibility' and 'representation' may run counter-intuitive to the needs of queer Arabs. However, it is worth noting that people's reluctance to adopt gender-inclusive language predates the inclusion of nonbinary individuals. Many Arabic-speakers consider inclusive strategies to be inefficient as the use of the masculine is perceived as sufficiently representative of women and men.

Based on these barriers, I aim to firstly identify the existing and emergent strategies used by Arabic speakers to achieve gender inclusivity. This includes exploring how Egyptians co-opt or subvert the existing morphological options, incorporate variation and code-switching to navigate pronouns and self-expression. Secondly, I aim to explore how nonbinary Arabs navigate gender and identity performance in different contexts (e.g., safe and unsafe spaces) through language. To do so, I adopt an ethnographic approach to explore how Arabs categorise these different spaces depending on audience, location, and overall social context. Through this limited ethnography and in-depth interviews with nonbinary Egyptians, I strive towards a deeper understanding of how language interacts with space during the performance of gender and how these changes are perceived by the speakers themselves.

Overall, this paper will offer an important contribution to the understanding of gender inclusivity in language, particularly in an understudied context. By identifying the strategies used by Arabic-speakers to create gender-inclusive environments while navigating safety, anonymity, and self-expression I offer a more nuanced understanding of positive representation that is (ironically) not rooted in the visibility of nonbinary Egyptians.

References

Koeser, S., & Sczesny, S. (2014). Promoting Gender-Fair Language: The Impact of Arguments on Language Use, Attitudes, and Cognitions. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 33(5), 548. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0261927X14541280>