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Varying gender, varying speech: A folk linguistic study on spoken Finnish and gender fluidity

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1 Introduction

Due to its lack of grammatical gender, the Finnish language is sometimes misguidedly regarded as completely gender-neutral. In Finnish, gender is not marked in personal pronouns or nominal gender classification. However, it is not gender-neutral, as it has lexical gendered nouns and adjectives, uses derivation and compounding to create gendered forms, displays social gender, and uses masculine forms as generics (Sánchez-Torres 2023: 21–22; for more, see e.g., Engelberg 2016; Hellinger & Bußmann 2001). Furthermore, even "gender-neutral" pronouns carry gender bias (see e.g., Braun 2001; Engelberg 2011; Renström et al. 2022), and languages without grammatical gender are used in sexist ways (see e.g., Sánchez-Torres 2023; Tainio 2006). In fact, gender can be understood as either the outcome of language use (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 493) or as, in itself, a form of sociolinguistic style (Zimman 2017: 348). This chapter further demonstrates that supposedly genderless languages such as Finnish are used as building material in constructing genders.

This study focuses on genderfluid speakers of Finnish. Gender fluidity is defined as a person's gender identity and/or gender expression changing frequently (Katz-Wise 2020). In this chapter, I will use *trans* as an umbrella term that refers to anyone whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth. This includes *nonbinary* people, by which category I refer to anyone who does not identify (solely) as a man or a woman, which in turn includes *genderfluid* people. Gender fluidity has mostly been ignored in sociolinguistics (apart from Benesch 2022, *Chapter 4*; and Lindeman 2024b), upholding the norm of *gender staticity*, or having "a long-lasting gender identity and/or gender expression that does not involve alternating between different gender possibilities"

(Lindeman 2024b). Placing the focus on genderfluid speakers leads us to examine how gender fluidity is *done* linguistically, using situational variation.

The aim of this study is to explore how five genderfluid speakers of the Finnish language conceptualize the relationship between gender fluidity and situational variation of speech. I approach this goal through the following research questions:

How do genderfluid speakers of Finnish describe

1. how they themselves perform gender fluidity through speech?
2. how nonbinary people in general speak?
3. the situational factors that impact the ways they perform gender in speech?
4. intersectional idiolect formation?

Each question will be addressed in its own section (4–7), after which I will apply my analysis to expanding a theoretical model for gender fluidity and situational variation of speech (Lindeman 2024b). Before the analysis sections, I will introduce the theoretical frameworks, participants, data, and analysis method of the study (sections 2–3).

2 Theoretical frameworks

This study uses several different theoretical frameworks, which I present below. Section 2.1 clarifies how gender is viewed in this study, while section 2.2 focuses on language variation and folk linguistics. Section 2.3 presents a theoretical model developed in a pilot study for this project.

2.1 Gender: performance, backdrop, audience, and intersectionality

The Finnish word *sukupuoli* refers to both anatomical sex and social gender (Leino 2016: 450). The primary focus of this study is gender identity and gender expression, both of which I will refer to as *gender*. Anatomical aspects of *sukupuoli* take a smaller role in this study, as gender fluidity is primarily a psychological and social phenomenon. I do however take gendered embodiment into account in the analysis where relevant.

In this study, I approach gender through two different theoretical frames: gender as a linguistic performance, and identity as an intersection. To begin with the first frame, this study adopts the view that gender is not something that a person *is* or *has*. Instead, it is *done* (West and Zimmerman 1987) or *performed* through repetitive semiotic acts (Butler 1988, 1990, 1993). This study focuses on speech as an integral part of gender performance. I conceptualize gender as something that both precedes language use and is accomplished by it (see e.g., Darwin 2017: 2).

Similarly to a stage performance, gender is done against a backdrop and in front of an audience. The backdrop in this metaphor is the gender binary: all people – even those who defy gender norms – are forced to perform their gender/s in some relation to the notion of masculinity and femininity as a binary opposition (Barbee and Shrock 2019: 573; Darwin 2017: 2–3). The audience also plays an integral part in gender performance. Firstly, language users modify their speech depending on addressees and other audience members. This is called audience design (Bell 2001). Secondly, the audience may actively take part in an individual's gender performance. This is called audience participation, and it refers to gendered ways in which audience members refer to or address the individual. In the case of the English language, audience participation manifests in e.g., the usage of first names and third-person singular pronouns (Barbee and Shrock 2019: 579–581). Addressing, referring to, and describing a person are also linguistic sites of *mis*gendering (for more on misgendering, see Ansara and Hegarty 2014). Additionally, listeners from different populations interpret the social meanings of linguistic features differently from each other (Calder 2021), which

means that audiences might perceive and interpret gendered linguistic features differently depending on their demographics.

Finally, intersectionality is a critical methodology that addresses the fact that individuals are always multiply positioned, and that gender is not isolable from other facets of identity but is rather co-constitutive of them (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Davis 2014: 17; May 2012: 160; Milani 2016: 445). Although the main theme of this study is gender, I want to highlight the fact that gender is closely linked to other aspects of identity, and that the participants in my study are more than just their gender fluidity. In section 7, I analyze the participants' conceptions of what other aspects of identity besides gender can be heard in their speaking style, suggesting that idiolect formation and intersectional identity formation go hand in hand. While linguistic features have gendered meanings, the same features are also simultaneously and co-constitutively linked with class, race, region, age, and more, similarly to how gender itself is intertwined with other aspects of identity (Levon 2015: 296; see also Steele *Chapter 2*).

2.2 Language: styles, situations, and why asking non-linguists about them makes sense

In this study, I analyze language as one mode of *stylizing the self*, or "how people seek to transform themselves into singular beings, to make their lives into an oeuvre that carries with it certain stylistic criteria" (Nuttall 2004: 432). I am interested in both intra-speaker variation (stylistic variation in one language user's speech; style shifts between language varieties) and inter-speaker variation (variation between groups of language users) (Schilling-Estes 2002: 373). My focus in this chapter is on analyzing individual genderfluid speakers' descriptions of their gender/s and speech in different situations.

Although style shifts are often understood as moving in and out of language varieties (see e.g., Schilling-Estes 2002: 376), this study does not assume that genderfluid speakers of

Finnish share a distinct language variety. The assumption is based on the fact that genderfluid people are not constituted as a community, and have hardly any media representation in Finland. The data of this study supports this; the participants reported knowing no or next to no genderfluid people. In other words, the conditions for forming a shared style are poor because genderfluid people in Finland do not form a community of practice. It follows from this that the study does not deal with transitions in and out of a "genderfluid style," but with tensions and dynamics associated with gender fluidity and situational variation.

Style choices can be made on many levels: phonetic, morphosyntactic, lexical, pragmatic; politeness, conversational dominance, self-disclosure, etc. (Coupland 2001: 189; Schilling-Estes 2002: 376). Lal Zimman defines the gender of a voice as "a cluster of features that take on meaning only in context with one another, leaving them open for recombination and change through stylistic bricolage" (Zimman 2017: 339). Although Zimman's study focused on phonetics, I believe the same principle applies to linguistic features more broadly, including other levels of stylistics, such as lexicon and syntax. Speech also constructs and reconstructs gender groups and positions the speaker in relation to gender groups (Schilling-Estes 2002: 389). Genderfluid people speak gender fluidity into existence.

In this study, I approach conscious style choices from a folk linguistic point of view. Folk linguistics is a field that studies non-linguists' views, perceptions, and attitudes toward language (for more, see e.g., Niedzielski and Preston 2003). This study focuses on the views that genderfluid speakers have of their own and other genderfluid people's speech. One obvious limitation of folk linguistics is that it does not reach language use itself, but instead, *metalanguage* that evinces conceptions of and attitudes toward language (for more about metalanguage, see Niedzielski and Preston 2003: 302–314.). It is crucial to note that language users' perceptions of language use do not always correspond to actual language use: people are not always aware of the norms that influence their language use (Fishman 1975: 49), style shifts can vary from deliberate to

completely unconscious (Schilling-Esters 2002: 376), and non-linguists' awareness of language varies in the clines of availability, accuracy, detail, and control (Preston 2002: 50–51). But why focus on conceptions, rather than actual language use, despite this limitation?

I take speakers' agency, "the capacity to act within as well as up against social structures" (Jensen 2011: 66), seriously. Gender is a social structure that language users can work both within and against. Even though people are not always conscious of language norms, trans people have a heightened awareness of speaking voice (Zimman 2017: 340, 348). Another benefit of folk linguistics is that it allows access to local knowledge instead of over-generalized global theory (Albury 2017: 39). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that speakers have goals other than identity, such as instrumental and relational goals, and they are often simultaneous and sometimes conflict (Coupland 2001: 188). Even different identity goals can intersect and conflict. This study utilizes folk linguistics because it aims to respect the goals and intent, agency, self-determination, and locality of genderfluid persons in Finland. Asking what genderfluid individuals do with their speech also allows the researcher to access genderfluid understandings of gender and stylistic variation which can greatly differ from cis (i.e., non-trans) perspectives.

2.3 Working model for gender fluidity and speech

This study was preceded by a case study (Lindeman 2024b) on one speaker, Elbe (pseudonym; uses *she/her* pronouns). In the pilot study, I argued that linguistics has an implicit norm of *gender staticity*, or the belief that an individual's gender identity does not involve moving between different genders, thus ignoring gender fluidity. I also identified micro-situations that Elbe faces in social settings as a bigender and genderfluid person. These included being misgendered, coming out, gender compromising, and gender mirroring. *Gender compromising* refers to a person changing their gender expression in a way that differs from their gender identity at that time,

whereas g*ender mirroring* refers to a micro-situation in which the speaker adjusts their linguistic gender expression either towards or away from their interlocutor's. Gender mirroring can be understood as a gender-specific form of speech accommodation (Lindeman 2024b; for speech accommodation, see e.g., Niedzielski and Preston 2003: 167; Schilling-Estes 2002: 383).

In the pilot study, I developed a working model for describing the dynamics between gender fluidity and situational variation in speech. This model is introduced in figure 1.

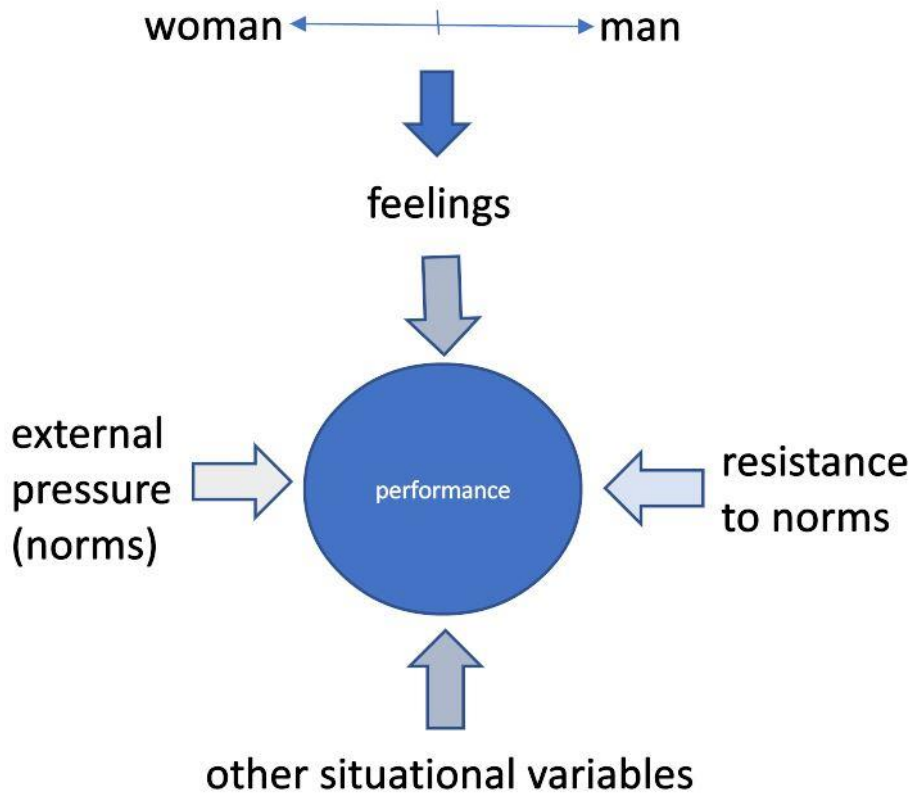

Figure 1. Working model

As figure 1 presents, Elbe described her gender/s as a continuum between her two genders, man and woman. She argued that her current gender is audible in her speech only when she is feeling especially feminine or masculine. Instead of intending to speak differently depending on her current

gender, she described an indirect connection: she reported often feeling gender euphoric ("a joyful feeling of rightness in one's gender/sex" [Beischel, Gauvin, and van Anders 2022]) while being a woman and gender dysphoric ("a negative feeling of conflict between gender/sexed aspects of one's self" [Beischel, Gauvin, and van Anders 2022]) while being a man, and that these changes in her emotional state have an effect on her speech. Feelings would then be one variable among others that influences her speech. Additionally, I argued that on the one hand, cisheteronormativity affects genderfluid people's ability to authentically do gender fluidity through speech, but that on the other hand, they seek to resist the norms by e.g., using gender-neutral language and specialized gender-related vocabulary that reflects gender diversity. This study expands this model by analyzing data from several participants.

3 Participants, data, and methods

In addition to combining different theoretical approaches, I also used several different methods for data collection and analysis. This approach, *scavenger methodology*, is common in queer studies. It has been described as rebellious disloyalty to disciplines, characterized by searching for and collecting suitable data, methods, and theories from different directions, depending on what best serves each study (Leap 2021: 6). True to the scavenger attitude, I have collected spoken, written, and illustrated data. Data collection began with posting a call for participants on several different social media platforms. I then met each research participant for an initial interview, after which they recorded their everyday interactions for a period of 4 to 6 weeks. Participants also filled out a pre-structured recording diary form after each recording. At the end of this period, I interviewed the participants for a second time.

Five genderfluid speakers of Finnish participated in the data collection in 2019–2021. All participants stated that Finnish was their first and only native language, while all of them also spoke

English and, in some cases, several other languages. I asked the participants what pseudonyms they would like me to use for them in this study, as well as which pronouns they use in English. The participants were:

Elbe (*she/her*)

Rei (*it/it*)

Sora (*they/them*)

Tikli (*he/him* or *they/them*; *they/them* in this paper)

JJ (any; *ze/zem* in this paper)

All participants in this study identified with the English loanword *genderfluid* or its slightly nativized Finnish synonym *fluidi*. The word *sukupuolijoustava* (lit. 'genderflexible') has been suggested as another Finnish equivalent (Seta n.d.) but not all informants accepted this translation. Participants used a variety of terms to describe their genders: each one mentioned between two and eleven. Identifying with several terms is typical for people who do not identify exclusively as either men or women; for example, in the international Gender Census (2021), the most common number of gender identity labels per respondent was four, and some respondents listed up to twenty terms.

To my knowledge, the participants did not know each other, apart from two participants who may have talked online prior to the study, as they were recruited through the same relatively small online community. The rest are unlikely to have known each other, as they lived in different cities and reported knowing next to no genderfluid people, or none at all.

The interviews were semi-structured around thematic sections. I used the same interview structure with all the research participants but aimed at a natural conversational flow, so the exact wording and order of questions varied. At the beginning of the initial interview, I gathered background information about the participant. The interview then covered the participant's

1. relationship with their own voice and speech,
2. perceptions of their speech and their stylistic influences,
3. perceptions of their own speech in relation to their gender/s, and
4. perceptions of genderfluid and nonbinary speech in general.

Interview questions did not include definitions of "voice" or "speech", and most questions did not focus on any specific area of speech, such as morphology, syntax or gesture, but speech in general. I did however enquire about voice dysphoria and voice euphoria specifically, as well as give "changing your voice or using different words" as examples of possible linguistic features that could perhaps vary depending on the speaker's current gender. The final interview proceeded in the same way as the initial interview, but instead of the background information section, I asked the participants to reflect on any insights they may have had about their gender performance or speech during the research period.

The interviews were recorded. Initial interviews ranged from 34 minutes to 81 minutes, and final interviews from 36 to 60 minutes. I encouraged the participants to choose an environment they considered comfortable and safe: for some, it was their own or my home, for others, it was a public place. During the initial interview, each participant gave their written, informed consent for taking part in the study and, following the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), received written information on the use of their personal data.

In addition to the interviews, I analyzed the recording diaries. The pre-structured diary forms included questions about the recording situation, participants' relationships to their interlocutors, and their gender/s during each everyday interaction recording. I instructed the participants to fill the form as soon after recording as possible. The forms were filled out in writing, and some participants also chose to draw. The diary data consists of 35 diary entries with a total of 1673 words and 17 drawings.

I imported all data to the qualitative research software NVivo, where I analyzed it with a four-stage qualitative content analysis method. The first stage of this method is collecting the body of text, which in this case includes audio recordings, written text, and illustrations. Second, the body of text is reduced into content categories. Third, the categories are clustered based on similarity, and in the final stage they are interpreted in conversation with relevant theoretical concepts (for more about the method, see Lindeman 2024b). The goal of qualitative theory formation here is not to make claims on what conceptions are quantitatively frequent for gender fluid people, but to pinpoint some conceptions that exist among them.

4 Performing gender fluidity with speech

In this section, I will examine how the participants described performing gender fluidity through speech. In both the initial and the final interview, participants answered questions about how gender fluidity can be heard in their speech. In addition to the interview answers, all thematically relevant text passages and drawings from recording diaries were also included in the analysis.

In the working model (figure 1), gender was presented as a continuum between womanhood and manhood, based on how Elbe conceptualized her gender/s. Some other participants, however, performed more than two different genders, and there were diary entries in which the participants did not draw gender/s in any way, or drew a continuum but placed themselves outside it, rather than on it, as shown in figure 2.

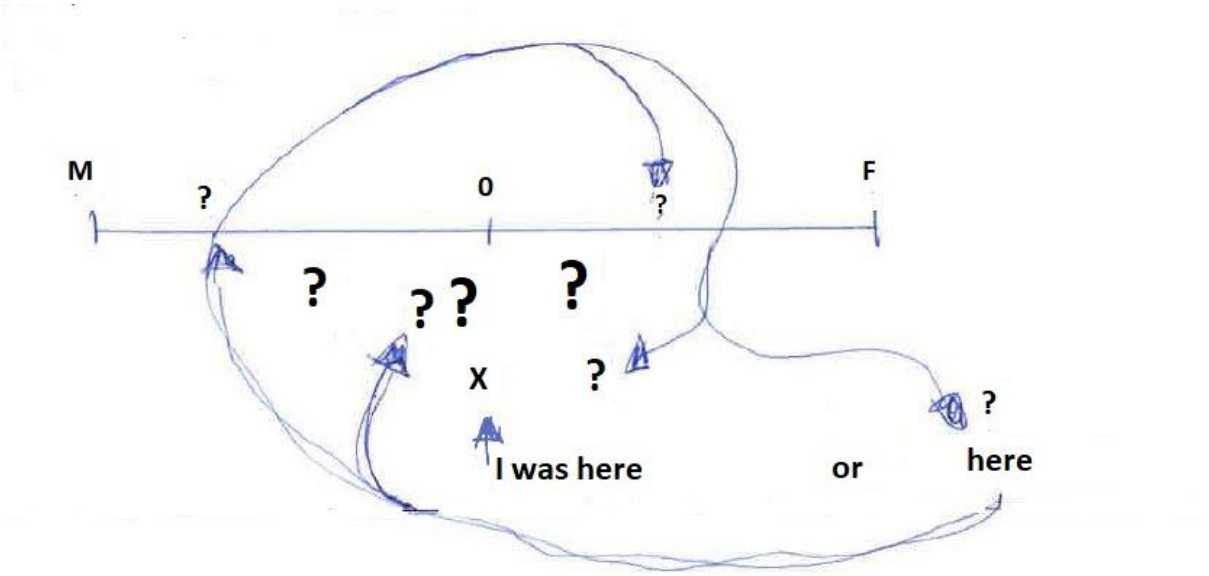

Figure 2. Rei's drawing of its genders during a self-recording situation. (Hand-written parts replaced with typed text and translated.)

All participants stated that they either didn't know what the connection between their gender identity and their speech was, considered the connection weak, or didn't *intend* to speak differently depending on their current gender.[1] However, in an apparent contradiction, they did mention several linguistic features associated with their gender fluidity.

These features can be divided into two clusters: those that vary depending on the current gender of the speaker (listed in the left column of table 1), and those that are connected to gender fluidity but available for the speaker regardless of their current gender (the column on the right). In my analysis I distinguished between metalanguage 1 (language about language) and metalanguage 2 (language about speakers) (following the definitions in Mielikäinen and Palander 2002: 96, cf. Niedzielski and Preston 2003: 302–314). As you can see in the top half of the table, metalanguage 1 includes features that I consider strictly linguistic, such as prosodic features. When describing their own speech, the participants also mentioned feelings and personality traits. These I

[1] Note that intention and awareness are too separate phenomena. It is possible to not intend to speak differently, and yet notice such (unintentional) changes.

have categorized as metalanguage 2, "language about speakers" (bottom half of the table), because feelings and personality traits are features of the language user, rather than the language itself.

Table 1. Features of gender fluid speech according to participants. CG = current gender.

Dependent on CG: metalanguage 1	**Non-dependent on CG: metalanguage 1**
- Prosody: pitch, timbre, stress, length - Gendered expressions when referring to self - Topics	- Gender-related jokes, memes and online slang - Topics (especially gender itself) - Vocabulary: specialized gender and sexuality vocabulary, inclusive / gender-neutral vocabulary when referring to self or others - Playing with gender and language
Dependent on CG: metalanguage 2	**Non-dependent on CG: metalanguage 2**
- Feelings - Personality traits	

To start with the left column of the table, all participants except Sora named stylistic features that vary depending on their current gender. High pitch was associated with femininity and low pitch with masculinity, and additionally, JJ also described the timbre of zir voice as changing depending on zir current gender. Tikli and Elbe mentioned *äänenpaino*, which I have roughly translated as "stress" in the table. Previous folk linguistic studies on the Finnish language have however shown that non-linguists use the word *äänenpaino* to describe many different linguistic features, such as stress, accent, and intonation (Mielikäinen and Palander 2021), so it was left unclear what exactly the participants meant. Similarly, Elbe mentioned "lengthening" or "prolonging" her words when at her most feminine, but it is unclear if she meant speech tempo, sound length, some morphological phenomenon, or perhaps something else, as the expression she used, *pitkittää*, is not a linguistic term, and non-linguists use it to describe several different phenomena (Mielikäinen and Palander 2021: 186). Additionally, Rei related that the gendered language it uses to refer to itself changes depending on its current gender, while Tikli and Elbe mentioned that the topics they choose to talk about differ between their masculine and feminine

days. Tikli, for instance, finds it difficult to discuss feminine fashion choices when they are feeling masculine even though they are comfortable with the topic when feeling feminine.

As mentioned above, the participants also described their speech in relation to feelings and personality traits associated with different genders, which I consider to be metalanguage 2 (see bottom left corner of table 1). In this data, femininity was associated with cheerfulness, flirting, flamboyance, and pride, while masculinity was associated with anxiety, restraint, self-confidence, coldness, technicality, and taking up space. JJ mentioned confrontationality in connection to zir femininity, while Rei described confrontation as a part of masculine communication culture that it sometimes takes part in. It is particularly interesting that femininity was mostly associated with positive feelings while masculinity was associated with negative feelings. In the pilot study, I attributed this to Elbe's self-described experiences of gender euphoria and gender dysphoria (Lindeman 2024b). This certainly plays a key role in the experiences of the participants who were assigned female at birth, but interestingly JJ, who was assigned male at birth, also associated cheerfulness with zir femininity. This may point to culturally shared stereotypes and gendered expectations around masculinity and femininity instead of gender euphoria and dysphoria alone.

As I have argued elsewhere (Lindeman 2024a: 106–107, 114–115), the line between metalanguage 1 and 2 can be quite blurry, and sometimes notions that look like commentary on the speakers can, on closer inspection, comment on the language itself but in broader terms. For example, non-linguists described gay men's speech as "feminine," which looks like commentary on the speakers' gender expression rather than on their speech. However, they also listed linguistic features that are considered feminine, which speaks for categorizing the notion of femininity as metalanguage 1 (Lindeman 2024a: 106–107). Although I have categorized the notions around feelings and personality traits as metalanguage 2 in the table above, I want to point out that feelings do impact how people speak (for more about emotional prosody, see e.g., Hoekert et al. 2007), and it would be simplistic to claim that the participants are unable to draw the line between language

and language users. I would rather propose that they are, again, describing speech but in broad terms.

Some of the participants also stated, as mentioned above, that they do not *intend* to speak differently to perform their different genders. There were two exceptions to this: the participants who experienced voice dysphoria described conscious efforts to alter their pitch, and Tikli, who had gone through the medical evaluation process required for gender-affirming treatment, had also intentionally tried to speak in a way that would convince the healthcare professionals that they are transmasculine. Tikli's goal in these evaluation appointments was not to perform their gender/s authentically, but to perform gender in a way that would grant them the treatment they needed (similarly to what has been documented in other countries as well, see e.g., Borba 2017; Konnelly 2021). Elbe and Rei described similar tensions between their inner experience of their current gender and the gender expression they chose to perform, which were not always the same.

Overall, pitch was the only clearly metalanguage 1 feature that was mentioned and gendered in the same way by more than one participant. It seems that the participants do not share a uniform style of linguistically performing changes in their gender/s, or if they do, it is unintentional or subconscious. However, there was a greater consensus on the features that were considered to be related to genderfluid identity but non-dependent on the speaker's current gender: Four participants mentioned preferring gender-neutral language when referring to themselves or other people (for example, saying *vanhempi* 'parent' instead of *äiti* 'mother' or *isä* 'father'); three participants mentioned using specialized gender and sexuality vocabulary (*cis* and *femme*, for instance); two participants talked about gender-related jokes, meme references,[2] and online slang; two participants mentioned gender as a common topic of conversation; and one participant described forming

[2] One example that JJ gave was making references to the meme "Two bros chillin' in a hot tub" which makes fun of straight men trying hard not to appear gay (see Know your meme n.d.).

playful expressions such as *nätti poika* ‘pretty boy’ by combining words that have feminine connotations with words that have masculine connotations. There was also no extralinguistic metalanguage in the data concerning the features that are non-dependent on the speaker’s current gender, which speaks to the impression that these features are more clearly defined in the participants’ accounts.

As outlined in section 2.1, gender performance also includes audience participation. Equally important to what the genderfluid person themself says is how other people address them or refer to them. I will return to this notion in section 6.

5 Performing gender fluidity – or non-normative gender?

If only some of the features that the participants mentioned were directly related to gender shifts, it raises a question: Are the features that are available to the speaker regardless of their current gender specific to genderfluid people, or could they be connected to a non-normative gender identity more broadly? Are the same stylistic choices perhaps employed by trans or nonbinary speakers in general? I approach this question by comparing 1. how the participants described genderfluid people’s speech with 2. how they described nonbinary people’s speech in general. In the interviews, I asked the participants to describe not only their speech but also that of other genderfluid and nonbinary people.

The analysis suggests that genderfluid people share many of the features with other nonbinary people. Among these are specialized gender vocabulary; gender-inclusive vocabulary; gender-related online language, memes, and jokes; playing with gendered language; gender as a topic; and modifying one’s pitch. What seems to set genderfluid speakers apart from other nonbinary speakers is exactly what motivated this study: the variance of stylistic features that depends on current gender. When asked how other genderfluid people speak, the participants mentioned the following

features as ones that are dependent on current gender: taking space in a conversation, quantity of speech, speech topics, *äänenpaino*, pitch, and gendered vocabulary when referring to self.

It is noteworthy, however, that none of the participants knew even a handful of genderfluid people besides themselves. Some did not know any genderfluid people, while others knew one person or only communicated with other genderfluid people in a written form. Because of this, they stated that their conceptions were only based on themselves, some other individual speaker, written Finnish, spoken English, or in some cases, pure imagination. This bolsters the claim that there is no community of practice for genderfluid speakers of Finnish. All in all, further research is needed to investigate if the features that the participants of this study attributed to both genderfluid people in specific and nonbinary people more broadly also apply to trans men and women, and if situational variation that is dependent on the speaker's current inner experience of gender is unique to genderfluid speakers or also applies to some other identities under the nonbinary umbrella, such as genderflux people.

6 Putting the "situation" in situational variation

In this section, I will focus on the situational factors that impact how the participants perform – or don't perform – gender fluidity, based on the speakers' own accounts. One of these situational factors is of course the current gender of the speaker, but speakers must consider other situational factors as well. Previous research has shown that nonbinary people sometimes present as binarily gendered to mitigate emotional costs, seek social pleasures, secure material resources, and access binarily-designated spaces (Barbee and Shrock 2019: 13). Because of this, I asked the participants to talk about how being in/out of the closet and their interlocutor's gender/s impact their speech, and if they have noticed any other situational factors that influence their linguistic gender performance. For this section, I analyzed the answers to the aforementioned interview questions, as well as relevant passages in the recording diaries. The analysis yielded the following five clusters:

closet and safety, audience design, audience participation, the relevance of gender, and the speaker's state.

As members of a marginalized minority, genderfluid people must decide in which situations they bring up their gender identity ("come out of the closet") and in what situations it is better to hide it ("stay in the closet"). In the interviews, the participants related that they base their decision on their assessment of the psychosocial or physical safety of the situation, as illustrated by data excerpt (1):

(1)[3] JJ: *it always takes intense investigation to find out what the other person's attitudes are and (.) it is (--) [my] own survival instinct like (--) what if the other person hits [me]*

The closet is typically performed by the speech act of silence (Karkulehto 2011: 84). This is evident in this data as well, as the participants described several ways of avoiding voicing their gender identity. One of these was complete avoidance of speaking with unsafe people, best illustrated by JJ's answer to me when I asked zir how ze would talk in a situation where ze wants to hide zir gender identity:

(2) JJ: *I think I would speak less then (--) some relatives (--) I don't speak to them at all*

Family members and relatives, as well as unknown bystanders, were typically people who the participants did not want to come out to. Besides avoiding interaction, other ways to perform the closet included avoiding topics related to gender and sexuality; avoiding referring to oneself or one's own gender; giving up gender-neutral language when referring to others; not correcting misgendering, or using an excuse other than gender identity to do it; avoiding using "queer code" or queer terminology; avoiding topics related to one's gender assigned at birth; and neutral use of voice matching one's presumed binary gender. Perceived safety, on the other hand, allowed the

[3] All excerpts are translations, as the original data is in Finnish. Transcription conventions can be found in the appendix.

participants to discuss gender and other intimate topics, come out, correct misgendering, and express feelings more authentically.

In addition to evaluating interlocutors' safeness, the participants described several aspects of audience design. They mentioned modifying their speech depending on their interlocutor's gender (cis or non-cis, man or woman, type of gender expression) and sexuality (straight or non-straight), perceived knowledge level on gender diversity, and social proximity to the participant. As discussed in Lindeman (2024b), Elbe also described gender mirroring, or in other words, reflecting her interlocutor's linguistic gender expression by performing gender either similarly or differently than them. Being romantically and/or sexually interested in the interlocutor also played a part in audience design: Sora, for example, mentioned that they tend to linguistically perform masculinity when on a date with a woman, while Elbe noted that she tends to perform femininity to attract heterosexual men.

The participants also paid attention to audience participation, or how other people take part in performing their gender linguistically. They described noticing if people gender them correctly, misgender them, or do not gender them in any way. This, in turn, sometimes leads to the participant either correcting the misgendering or thanking them for gendering them correctly or not gendering them at all. The corrections, as related by participants, were in the vein of JJ's *"kamoon mä oon muunsukupuolinen, älä viitti"* ["c'mon, I'm nonbinary, can you not"] or Sora's *"en oo nainen"* ["I'm not a woman"]. Elbe also described more indirect ways of coming out or correcting an incorrect assumption of her gender, such as asking *"kummalle puolelle mä meen?"* ["which side should I go to?"] if someone suggests playing a game where men play against women. Sora, on the other hand, also described thanking their interlocutors for using gender-affirming language:

(3) Sora: *aaand then for example if my partner says like (.) aren't you looking handsome (.) then I might say like oh it feels so nice when you say it like that (--) like thank you (.) like also (.) in a way [I] emphasize it if something goes r- right*

Furthermore, the participants pointed out that the relevance of gender varies from situation to situation. JJ gave a fitting example of a situation where gender plays a very minor role and does not really impact zir way of speaking:

(4) JJ: *somewhere like (.) a McDonalds drive-through like (.) I don't know if it [gender] has any effect [on my speech] (--) one has other tasks to execute there*

Tikli, on the other hand, talked about their visits to a trans clinic, giving an example of a situation where gender becomes especially salient. In excerpt (5), they allude to the material consequences that making stylistic choices in speech might have for a trans person, and describe the pressure they felt around linguistically performing gender "correctly":

(5) Tikli: *especially when I was at the trans clinic and I had to like LARP the binary man woman role difference (.) to get the diagnosis that I wanted (.) then then uh (.) thoughts like what like (.) men usually use some sayings or words (.) or then like stress and things like that (--) at that time I had exactly like (.) those kinds of thoughts in the background like can I now go to the clinic to pretend to be a man because I can't talk like them*

This excerpt shows disalignment between the speaker's experienced gender and their gender expression. Many of the participants talked about situations where they felt pressure to perform gender in a particular way, which I have previously called gender compromising (Lindeman 2024b). Working life seems to be a typical context for gender compromising (also see Wijayawardena, K., Wijewardena, N., and Samaratunge 2017) – in excerpts (6) and (7), Rei, who works in a male-dominated field, describes the incongruity of its inner gender experience and outward gender expression:

(6) Rei: *I have noticed that the @situation@ impacts speech (.) but (.) and in a way like situations are gender@ed@ (.) but it doesn't necessarily have to do with how I @experience@ my gender (.) it's like what @role@ I take in those situations*

(7) Rei: *regarding things that (--) I know a lot about (.) that for example have to do with my profession (--) then I might take (--) well perhaps a more masculine role (--) but it doesn't necessarily have to do with my inner experience of gender but more the kind of cultural (--) how I have been taught (.) to speak for example*

Lastly, the participants found that the speaker's condition or state impacts their speech. JJ, who was assigned male at birth, found it easier to express zir femininity when intoxicated, because ze said that alcohol lowered zir inhibition. Elbe, in turn, talked about how gender dysphoria and gender euphoria impact her speech. In her recording diary, for instance, she writes about a real-life situation where gender dysphoria led to her trying to deepen her voice:

(8) Elbe: *[I had] quite a strong sense of being a man, which for once felt like not only body dysphoria but also voice dysphoria. I noticed that I was conscious of my gender and tried to keep my voice deeper (--).*

7 We are more than our gender/s

To take into account the multiplicity of identities that the participants inhabit, and the intersectionality of both identity construction and adjacent idiolect construction, I asked the participants which aspects other than gender are important parts of their identity, and how these facets of identity can be heard in their speech. The analysis of the answers given to these questions yielded the following clusters of identities that intersect in the speakers' idiolects: personality traits, hobbies and interests, social roles (e.g., extrovert, outsider), work or professional identity, sexual

and romantic orientation, relationship styles and roles (e.g., polyamory), politics and values, disability, and class.

The intersection between gender and sexual and romantic orientation was quite strong in this data. This is unsurprising, as genderfluid people do not fit into the binary categories of heterosexuality or homosexuality – if a person has multiple genders, it is hard to say what the "same" or "different" gender compared to them would be. This is only one example of the intersections that made the participants multiply marginalized, as the participants also commented on the disadvantages related to class, disability, and relationship styles such as polyamory. Rei, for instance, was not only genderfluid but also pansexual and polyamorous. These dimensions had a mutual impact on how it referred to its partners and how open it could be about its own gender, its partners' genders, as well as the number of its partners, in different situations. Interestingly, the participants did not mention race at all. This might be due to them all being white (or white-passing), which is often seen as unmarked.

A thicker, more nuanced intersectional analysis was not possible in the scope of this study. I will however include these results into the improved theoretical model of the dynamics between gender fluidity and situational variation of speech. I will go on to suggest how this can be modelled in the conclusion.

8 Discussion and conclusions

In this chapter, I have discussed performing gender fluidity in a grammatically genderless language in relation to situational variation and from the point of view of the speakers themselves. The study suggests that the participants rarely seek to *purposefully* alter their speech according to their current gender. However, the participants who experienced or had in the past experienced speech-related gender dysphoria, and/or had undergone the medical evaluation at a trans clinic, did

describe conscious attempts at altering their pitch or modifying their vocabulary in those situations. The participants also reported variance in their prosody, gendered expressions when referring to self, and topics of discussion, depending on their current gender in the situation.

The most consistent and prominent stylistic features, however, were described as available to the speakers regardless of their current gender. These included e.g., using specialized vocabulary around the topics of gender and sexuality, preferring gender-neutral expressions when referring to others, and gender-related jokes and meme references. The results imply that these could potentially be features shared by not only genderfluid speakers specifically, but also by nonbinary or trans speakers more generally. Situational variation that is dependent on current gender could thus be a feature that sets genderfluid speakers apart from other non-normatively gendered speakers. Further research with a larger sample of speakers of different genders is needed to confirm or refute this notion, as this study was limited to only five genderfluid speakers and the results can therefore not be generalized.

The participants related that perceived safety or danger, interlocutors' attributes, being gendered by others, the (ir)relevance of gender in the situation, and the genderfluid person's condition or state (e.g., gender dysphoria or euphoria) all influence how they perform gender with speech. The results regarding safety are congruent with earlier research in that Gratton (2016) also concluded that nonbinary speakers made different stylistic choices in safe and unsafe environments, but contrary to Gratton's study, the data here suggest that the speakers tend to conform to norms in unsafe situations, rather than use more norm-resistant features. The participants also related that their gender identity intersects with their personality traits, hobbies and interests, social and work roles, sexual and romantic identities, relationship styles, politics and values, disabilities, and class in forming their idiolects.

This chapter's main contribution is to propose a theoretical model for the dynamics between gender fluidity and situational variation (figure 3). Drawing from the results discussed above, I have

revised the prior working model (figure 1). In both versions, gender is treated as not a fixed social variable but a situational variable.

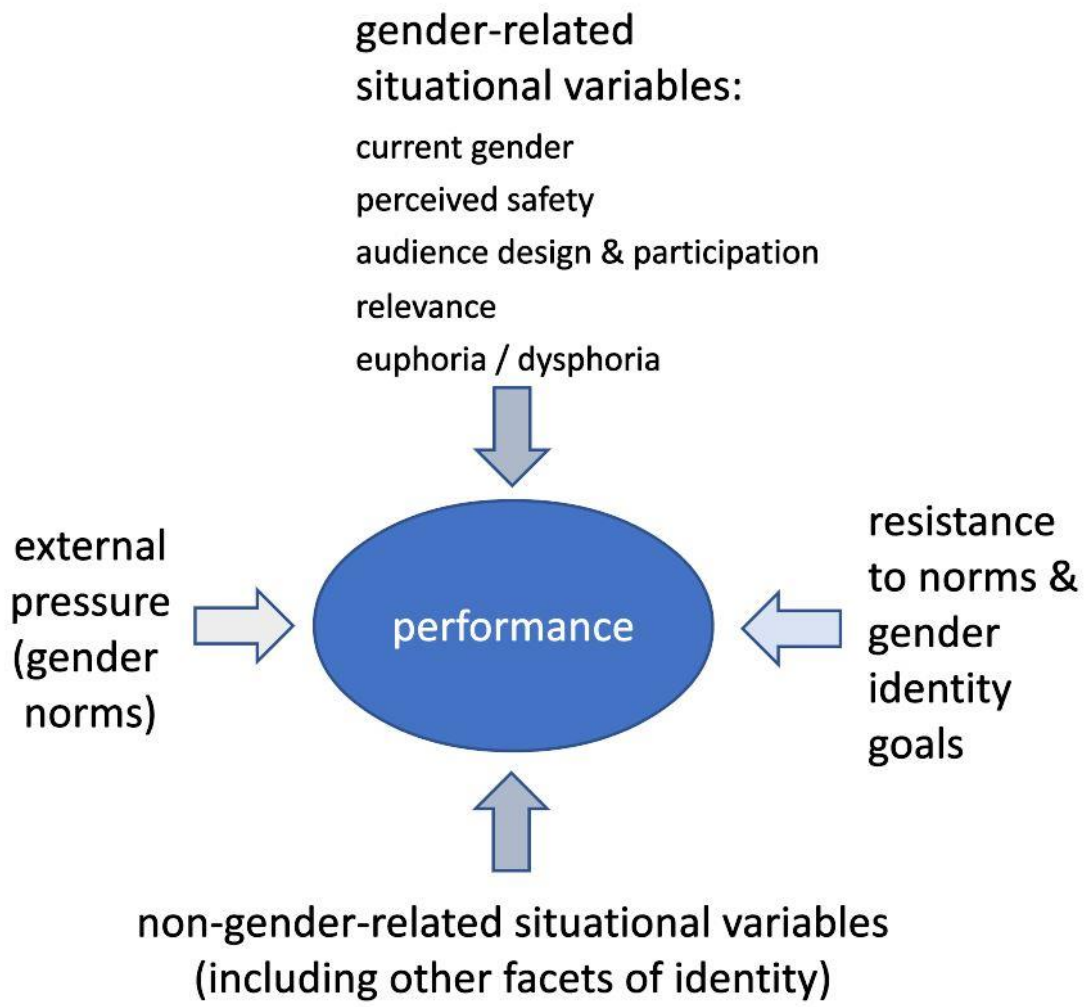

Figure 3. Revised model

The new model differs from the former one in that gender is no longer visually presented as a continuum between two genders, as it did not reflect all the participants' understandings of gender fluidity. Furthermore, current gender and gender-related feelings (euphoria or dysphoria) are now both placed under the rubric *gender-related situational variables*, alongside perceived safety, audience design, audience participation, and relevance of gender. Finally, I have added gender identity goals as another aspect aligning with norm resistance and

working against the external pressure of gender normativity. I continue to argue that in each situation there are both gender-related and non-gender-related situational variables at play, intersecting and sometimes conflicting, and that non-gender-related variables include other facets of the speaker's identity, such as sexuality, class, and dis/ability. Although the arrows point inwards, the process is circular: gender is an accomplishment of language use, and ultimately, linguistic gender performance has the power to shape gender norms.

It could be argued that the model describes the dynamics between any individual's gender and speech. It is true that everyone needs to adapt or resist gender norms to some extent, and that there are always non-gender-related situational variables at play. For trans people, however, the conflict between gender norms and gender identity goals tends to be much starker than for gender-conforming cisgender individuals. Similarly, the gender-related situational variables listed in figure 3 have a heightened relevance in trans lives, and with genderfluid speakers, the impact of changes in current gender should not be overlooked.

As evidenced by this and many other studies, trans speakers face the battlefield every day, worrying for their psychological, social and physical safety, fighting for the right to live authentically, and struggling to be recognized. Inspired by the title of this volume, I will end this chapter with a call to arms for potential allies: Will you join our ranks on the symbolic battlefield called language?

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

(.)	pause
(--)	omission

-	interrupted word
@ @	emphasized
[ ]	added clarification