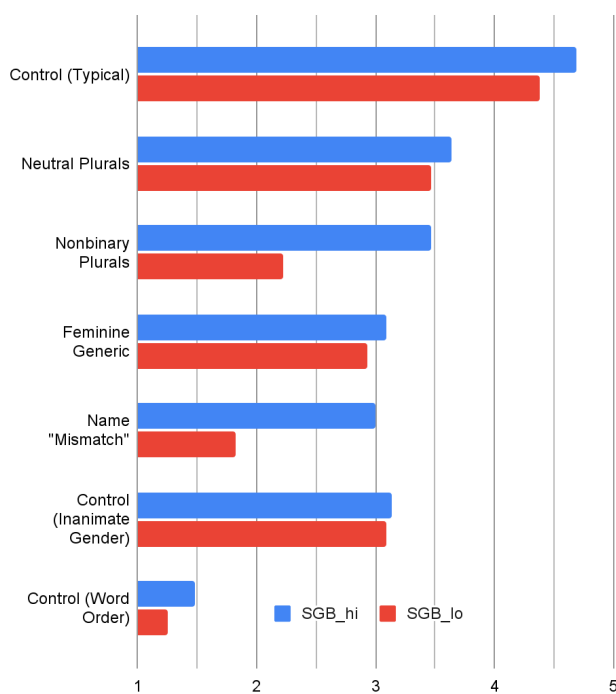


Acceptability of nonbinary and gender-neutral constructions in Maltese

Evan D. Bradley, Penn State University

Use of singular *they* as a component of gender-fair language in English continues to grow (Bjorkman, 2017; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020), and similar movements toward gender-fair/neutral/nonbinary language are underway in other languages (Sendén et al., 2015, *inter alia*). Acceptance of such changes often correlates with nonlinguistic attitudes about gender (Bradley, 2020). Malta has been a global leader in policy toward transgender, nonbinary, and intersex rights, but is Maltese changing accordingly regarding how gender is expressed? Discussion of such issues is largely confined to activist circles, with little consensus, and lower awareness among the Maltese-using community as a whole. This is the first part of an investigation to explore what kinds of “nonbinary” Maltese are accepted by users, and to what degree English trends and nonlinguistic social attitudes drive (or inhibit) gender-related changes in Maltese. Participants rated a variety of sentence types and completed the Transgender Attitudes and Beliefs Scale. Singular indefinites with plurals (4, “neutral plurals”) were rated above the scale midpoint of the scale, but lower than controls. Nonbinary plurals (1–2) and name mismatches (3) diverged depending on participants’ beliefs about gender; those with strong binary gender ideology rated them lower; other rated them at or above the midpoint. Implications for change in Maltese, individual differences, and correlations of English ratings by the same sample will be discussed.

Acceptability ratings of Maltese sentences



(1) Names + plural

Joseph jaraw it-televisxin waqt l-ikel.
Joseph watch-3pl. the-television during
the-lunch
“Joseph watches television during lunch.”

(2) Specific + plural

Dawk l-impjegat tawna skont.
that-pl. the-employee gave.3pl.-prn.2pl. discount
“That employee gave us a discount.”

(3) Names + “mismatched” morphology

Anna huwa infurmat dwar l-istorja ta’ din il-belt.
Anna be-3sg.masc wise-masc about the-history
of this the-city
“Anna is wise about the history of this city.”

(4) Indefinites + plural

Xi hadd kielu il-kejk!
somebody-m.sg. ate-3pl. the-cake
“Someone ate the cake!”

References

- Bjorkman, B.M., 2017. Singular they and the syntactic representation of gender in English. *Glossa* 2 (1), 80. doi: 10.5334/gjgl.374
- Bradley, E.D. (2020). The influence of linguistic and social attitudes on grammaticality judgments of singular ‘they’. *Language Sciences*, 78. doi: 10.1016/j.langsci.2020.101272
- Konnelly, L., & Cowper, E. (2020). Gender diversity and morphosyntax: An account of singular they. *Glossa*, 5(1).
- Sendén, M. G., Bäck, E. A., & Lindqvist, A. (2015). Introducing a gender-neutral pronoun in a natural gender language: the influence of time on attitudes and behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6.