Gender-Neutral Language in Non-Professional Translation: A Case Study from American Young Adult Literature

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Citation: Spallaccia, Beatrice (2025) "Gender-Neutral Language in Non-Professional Translation: A Case Study from American Young Adult Literature", *Journal of Non-Professional Interpreting and Translation (JoNPIT)* 1: A1-A22.

Abstract: Literary representations of nonbinary identities for young readers have become a key topic in cultural debates across Western countries. While far-right movements have sought to reinforce gender normativity, some sectors of the publishing industry now promote young adult (YA) books with non-binary protagonists. In Italy, translating such works from English has proven particularly complex, as Italian is a grammatical gender language. This study recognizes the translation of YA queer literature as a crucial means of fostering diversity in education. The paper presents the results of a workshop in which Italian undergraduate translation students translated excerpts from *All Boys Aren't Blue*, George M. Johnson's 2020 queer memoir-manifesto. After outlining the debate on gender-fair language (GFL) and key developments in queer translation studies, the paper discusses the students' approaches to the translation of GFL, showing that linguistic challenges can be addressed through a combination of traditional and innovative translation strategies.

Keywords: Gender-neutral language; gender-inclusive language; gender-fair language; gender and translation; YA queer literature; queer translation; non-binary identities.

1. Introduction

Recent scholarship has documented the growing recognition of non-binary gender identities, particularly among younger generations (Richards *et al.* 2016; Scandurra *et al.* 2021).[1] Yet non-binary individuals continue to face the challenge of "negotiating non-binary gender in a binary world" (Barker and Richards 2015: 176), both in terms of social and linguistic visibility.

As awareness of gender nonconformity increases, literary representations of queer identities have gained prominence in the United States and other English-speaking countries, despite resistance from ultra-conservative movements (cf. Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Smrdelj and Kuhar 2025). Young adult (YA) literature has been particularly receptive to this change:[2] several publishers now include trans and non-binary protagonists whose stories subvert the heteronormative gender binary (cf. Epstein 2015; Jenkins and Cart 2018). This trend has also encouraged research on the translation of YA literature from a gender-aware perspective (cf. Baccolini *et al.* 2019; Pederzoli and Illuminati 2021; Amadori *et al.* 2022), contributing to the growing field of queer translation studies (cf. Spurlin 2014, Castro and Ergun 2017; Epstein and Gillett 2017; Baer and Kaindl 2018).

The increasing visibility of non-binary authors in YA literature has further consolidated this research trajectory. Their works, ranging from fiction to memoir, affirm intersectional queer identities and foster public engagement with gender diversity. As Vecchiato (2025: 225) notes, "the introduction of literature by non-binary authors [...] marks a significant milestone in the journey towards queer representation in the public sphere." Translating such works is therefore key to promoting diversity in education. However, translators face major challenges when translating texts featuring non-binary experiences from a notional gender language like English into a grammatical gender language such as Italian. In fact, grammatical gender languages, like Italian, German, and French, "pose a far greater challenge to a non-heteronormative language policy because gender binarism is much more firmly entrenched in language structure" (Motschenbacher 2014: 253).

In Italy, this challenge has sparked a heated and polarized debate around gender-fair language (GFL), and most notably on the use of neomorphemes. These are "neologistic elements that avoid binary gender markings" (Piergentili *et al.* 2024). In Italian they have been created by using letters, typographical characters, and symbols, such as the asterisk and -u ending, as well as the schwa. These strategies have not only spread within the queer community but have also begun appearing in various publishing contexts, ranging from the most militant to the most mainstream publishers, aiming to overcome linguistic sexism and enhance the visibility of non-binary identities.

The present study positions itself within this debate by expanding the focus to non-professional translation of YA literature. It first outlines major theoretical developments in GFL and translation, then presents a case study based on a workshop with Italian undergraduate students who translated passages from *All Boys Aren't Blue* (2020) by Black, non-binary author George M. Johnson. The study addresses three main research questions:

[1] The adjective *non-binary* is "as an umbrella term used to refer to people who perceive their gender identity as falling outside the binary construct of male and female" (Mirabella *et al.* 2024: 1).

[2] Young adult (YA) literature refers to "books that are published for readers aged twelve to eighteen, have a young adult protagonist, are told from a young adult perspective, and feature coming-of-age or other issues or concerns of interest to YAs" (Cart and Jenkins 2006:1).

RQ1. Are trainee translators open to linguistic experimentation when translating a YA text featuring a non-binary protagonist?
RQ2. Which strategies do students tend to prefer when translating GFL in a literary text?
RQ3. Can the linguistic challenges posed by GFL in Italian be overcome by combining more traditional and more innovative translation strategies?

To answer these questions, the contribution analyzes selected excerpts, identifying key translation challenges and the strategies most suitable for overcoming sexism and binarism in language, and keeping the stylistic elements of the source text.

2. Gender and/in Language: Moving beyond the Binary

To lay the theoretical groundwork for the case study, this section examines the relationship between gender and language, focusing on GFL and gender-fair translation.

Being deeply intertwined with ideology and power (Wodak 2007), language plays a crucial role in shaping social reality and gender identities. Also, as Butler (1993) argues through her notion of performativity, linguistic and discursive practices actively construct gender norms and identities rather than merely reflecting them.

Scholarly research on language and gender has also investigated how grammatical gender is expressed across different language systems. Corbett (1991: 1) explores gender expression in more than 200 languages, revealing that grammatical gender is central and pervasive in some languages, while it is totally absent in others. Based on their expression of gender, linguists typically distinguish between three major linguistic groups: genderless languages, notional (sometimes referred to as *natural*) gender languages, and grammatical gender languages (cf. Stahlberg *et al.* 2007).

While in genderless languages (e.g., Finnish, Chinese, Turkish) nouns and pronouns are unmarked for gender, in notional gender languages (e.g., English, Swedish) only pronouns are usually gendered – and sometimes nouns as well. The absence of grammatical gender in languages like English is crucial in terms of gender diversity because "[it] can reduce the salience of gender distinctions in communication, as gender-specific references are only made explicit when contextually necessary" (Vecchiato 2025: 210). In grammatical gender languages (e.g., Italian, Spanish, and German), nouns and pronouns are gendered, and gender agreement extends to articles, adjectives, and pronouns. Due to this agreement, grammatical gender markers are very frequent (Stahlberg *et al.* 2007: 165). When such markers refer to people, grammatical and referential gender typically overlap, meaning that grammatical forms are expected to align with the referent's gender identity.

With the rise of feminist scholarship in the 1970s, the debate on language and gender initially centered on issues of linguistic sexism and the unequal representation of women in language.[3] In more recent years, queer studies have shifted attention towards the need to move beyond the linguistic gender binary (cf. Motschenbacher and Stegu 2013). The diverse ways in which gender is encoded and negotiated across languages have, in turn, reframed the discussion on language and gender in different linguistic and cultural contexts. Given the scope of this paper, the following section focuses on GFL in English and Italian.

[3] For feminist research on linguistic sexism, see, among others, Lakoff (1973), Cameron (1985), and Coates (2013) for the English language, Sabatini (1987) and Robustelli (2012a) for Italian.

2.1. Gender-Fair Language (GFL)

Recent studies in psychology highlight the central role of language in providing affirmation and recognition for non-binary individuals (e.g., Hord 2016; Mirabella *et al.* 2024). Studying and promoting the use of GFL is therefore crucial both in terms of social respect and identity construction. GFL is an umbrella term encompassing the so-called *gender-neutral* and *gender-inclusive* approaches (cf. Sczesny *et al.* 2016). The former consists in the use of gender-neutral rephrasing to conceal gender, while the latter refers to the strategies used to make all genders visible in language. These strategies vary significantly across languages.

As English expresses gender mainly through pronominal linguistic forms, much attention has been paid to the usage of gender-neutral pronouns, especially singular *they*. Key contributions by Bodine (1986) and Baron (1986; 2020) reveal that singular *they* predates political movements and has been used for centuries as an epicene pronoun. However, singular *they*, which was traditionally – and sometimes still is – used to refer to someone of unknown gender, since the 2010s has taken on a new use as non-binary pronoun, along with other sets of neopronouns like *ze/zir/zirs*, *(f)ae/(f)aer/(f)aers*, *xe/xem/syr*, and the so-called Spivak pronouns (*e/em/eir*).[4] As summed up by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2019), which elected *they* as 2019 word of the year, "though singular 'they' is old, 'they' as a non-binary pronoun is new – and useful."

In Italy, efforts to develop GFL are relatively recent and diverse, aligning with trends in other grammatical gender languages such as Spanish and French, where initiatives include neopronouns, innovative suffixes, and typographical markers.[5] As in these languages, gender-neutral and gender-inclusive approaches coexist in Italian. Table 1 below summarizes the main strategies used to queer the Italian language.

Table 1. Most common strategies for GFL used in Italian (adapted from Comandini 2021; Sulis and Gheno 2022; Lardelli and Gromann 2023a; Vecchiato 2025).

Gender-neutral approach	*Gender-inclusive approach*
- Epicene nouns, such as *persona* [person] and *individuo* [individual] - Collective terms, such as *il corpo docente* [teaching staff] and *il pubblico* [the audience] - Relative clauses or indefinite pronouns, such as *chi ascolta* [those who listen], *coloro che non leggono* [those who don't read] - Verbalization such as *vi diamo il benvenuto* [welcome] - Periphrases such as replacing gendered adjectives with adverbs - Impersonal constructions such as *in Italia si dice che* [in Italy they say]	Replacement of gendered endings with: - Letters (-*u*, -*y*, -*x*) - Typographical characters (-@, -*, _) - Symbols (-ə, -ɜ) - Combinations of female and male endings (*carei tuttei*; *care.i tutte.i*)

[4] Neopronouns are "pronouns which are coined as part of an intentional metalinguistic process", created to provide alternatives to canonical third-person singular pronouns (Rose *et al.* 2023: 1-2). For a more detailed account on the diachronic evolution of non-binary pronouns, see Baron (2020: 185-245).

[5] Examples of these linguistic innovations are the neopronouns *elle/elles* in Spanish and *iel/lea* in French, the -e suffix in Spanish, and the *point médian* in French. For more information on GFL in Spanish and French, see López (2019) and Swamy and Mackenzie (2022), respectively.

All these strategies respond to the dual need to avoid the generic masculine and to provide forms of reference for non-binary people (Comandini 2021: 43-44). While gender-neutral language is now also recommended in institutional guidelines (cf. Università di Bologna 2020), gender-inclusive strategies derive from a more militant approach and have been used mainly by feminist and queer activists and in online communication (Sulis and Gheno 2022). Some recent studies have sought to illustrate how such strategies can be used in written language. Table 2 below brings together these linguistic proposals.

Table 2. Proposals of neutral suffixes and their use in Italian (adapted from Gheno 2020; Comandini 2021; Lardelli and Gromann 2023a; Scotto di Carlo 2024).

Neutral suffix	*Example [child]*
[-u]	Bambinu
[-y]	Bambiny
[-x]	Bambinx
At [-@]	Bambin@
Asterisk [-*]	Bambin*
Underscore [_]	Bambin_
Apostrophe [-’]	Bambin’
Omission of gender suffixes	Bambin
Schwa [-ə / -ɜ]	Bambinə [sing.], Bambinɜ [plur.]

The most recent of these proposals is the use of the schwa (-ə). This is a sign which comes from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), where it corresponds the mid central vowel, and typically denotes a neutral vowel sound. More recently, it has often appeared along with another neomorpheme, that is, the so-called long schwa (-ɜ). This is a non-standard linguistic term indicating a symbol which looks like a backward three and that some users have employed as the plural form of the schwa (cf. Sulis and Gheno 2022). First introduced by Boschetto (2015), the use of schwa has become an experiment that is significant both at linguistic and political level, because it challenges grammatical and social binarism, showing the limitations of these systems and giving visibility to those who do not socially identify within a fixed gender binary model. At the same time, it has polarized both academic debates and public opinion, becoming the symbol of a cultural war between two opposing sides that have either advocated for or rejected this strategy. Few studies have explored attitudes toward gender-inclusive language in Italy. As for speakers’ perception, Scotto di Carlo’s 2024 study on the attitude and usage of GFL shows that “Italians are torn between conservatism and acceptance, with the asterisk suffix gaining momentum in written language, while oral communication still relies on circumlocutions or binary formulae” (Scotto di Carlo 2024: 82).

Some sociolinguists have praised the schwa as an experimental device of inclusive language, useful both to overcome generic masculine and to refer to non-binary people (cf. Manera 2021; Gheno 2022), while other scholars have criticized its use for three main reasons. First, it can cause problems related to morphology, syntax, and pronunciation of nouns and determiners (Giusti 2022, 14-16). Second, it allegedly perpetuates the linguistic invisibility of women in a system historically marked by exclusion and discrimination (Robustelli 2021). Third, several accessibility concerns have been raised regarding the use of the schwa, as it may present challenges for non-native speakers and individuals with dyslexia (De Santis 2022). Also, it may compromise web accessibility for blind or visually impaired users who rely on built-in screen readers such as VoiceOver on Mac and JAWS on Windows (Iacopini 2021). Therefore, “paradoxically, a symbol implemented for inclusivity could end up resulting in ableism […] and thus excluding parts of the population” (Sulis and Gheno 2022: 167). Accessibility remains a core

concern in this debate, given the intersectional perspective that underpins queer theories and their connection to disability studies (cf. McRuer 2006). This linguistic debate has intensified to the extent that the Accademia della Crusca[6] discouraged the use of the schwa, while current Minister of Education Giuseppe Valditara mandated that official school communications adhere to standard Italian, rejecting non-standard symbols such as the asterisk and the schwa (Giannoli, 2025).

Despite these criticisms, the schwa has become popular in an array of domains. As demonstrated Comandini's corpus-based study (2021), within Italian queer online communities, the schwa represents the most common strategy after the asterisk. The publishing industry too has witnessed an increase in the use of the shwa by both mainstream publishers, such as Mondadori, and more independent ones. This is the case of the publishing Effequ, based in Florence, which started using the schwa in 2020 for its non-fiction production, also in translation. However, its founders present their approach as a provisional and experimental attempt to balance innovative linguistic strategies with established forms, recognizing that true precision and fluidity will develop over time (effequ, n.d.).

Recently, translation studies have shown a growing interest in GFL. More specifically, several studies on the translation of GFL have emerged within the field of queer translation studies, as shown in the following section.

3. Queer (in) Translation

The translation of GFL can be situated in the broader context of queer translation studies, a field of research which have emerged from the intersection of feminist translation and queer studies. Both disciplines began to take shape as areas of academic research in the 1990s. Indeed, thinkers like Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), Butler (1990), and de Lauretis (1991) started using the expression *Queer Theory* to mark a critical distance from the gay and lesbian studies of the 1980s, and "to recast or reinvent the terms of [non-normative] sexualities, to construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual" (De Lauretis 1991: iv). Almost simultaneously, feminist perspectives entered the field of translation studies with the so-called "cultural turn" in translation studies, that is, the paradigm shift away from a focus on mere linguistic equivalence toward recognizing culture as "the operational 'unit' of translation" (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990: 8). These turns in translation studies have produced an evolution in the conceptualization of translation itself, which is now seen as "a process of mediation that moves through ideology and identity, and as a site of contention which provides the grounds for gender to be placed on the spotlight" (Misiou 2023: 117).

Recently, queer studies have broadened the scope of gender-based translation studies by further questioning the linguistic constructions of gender and sexuality, leading to what some scholars have described as "a *queer turn* in translation studies" (cf. Santaemilia 2018: 13). As Castro and Spoturno (2022) note, recent research highlights the interconnection between feminism and queer studies in translation. Feminist translation volumes have increasingly included queer perspectives (cf. Castro and Ergun 2017; von Flotow and Kamal 2020), while works on queer translation have integrated feminist approaches (cf. Baer and Kaindl 2018; Epstein and Gillett 2017; Baldo *et al.* 2021; Baer and Bassi 2024).

In queer translation studies, translation is seen as "a space where heteronormative assumptions in both source and target languages can be exposed, subverted, or

[6] Accademia della Crusca is the highest institution for the study of the Italian language.

reimagined" and translators are considered "active agents capable of reshaping texts to resist cis and heteronormative frameworks" (Vecchiato 2025: 207). This is one of the reasons why some of the most recent contributions in this field have analyzed queer translation as a form of activism, that is, as "an activity that aims for social or political change" (Baldo *et al.* 2021: 190).

In the area of literary translation, some scholars have worked to theorize queer translation strategies, as well as modes of translating queer texts. For example, studying how different translation strategies can modify the queerness of a text in the target language and culture, Epstein (2017) coined the terms *eradicalization* and *acqueering*. While the former refers to those translation practices which "remove or downplay queer sexualities, sexual practices, [and] gender identities" in a text (Epstein 2017: 121), through strategies of acqueering, translators can emphasize or even increase the queer elements of the text.

Similarly, Démont (2018) distinguishes between three modes of translating queer literary texts, which are the misrecognizing translation, the minoritizing translation, and the queering translation. According to Démont, both misrecognizing and minoritizing translations are problematic. Misrecognizing translation tends to ignore or suppress the queer elements of a text, often rewriting it from a hegemonic, normative perspective. Minoritizing translations, on the other hand, focuses primarily on denotation – seeking strict word-for-word equivalence – even if doing so diminishes the text's queerness (Démont 2018: 163). Conversely, queer translation has a twofold aim, that is, to acknowledge the disruptive force of the source text and to recreate it in the target language and culture (*ibidem*).

Building on the notion of relationality between the source and the target texts and cultures, William Spurlin (2014) stresses the need to focus on untranslatability as well, that is, what gets lost in translation and what cannot be contained in the new text space. In his own words,

> this disruptive, subversive space of indeterminacy between source and target languages, the space of l'*intraduisible*, is a queer space, one that challenges any normative idea of straightforward, untroubled translatability. (Spurlin 2014: 207)

These theoretical notions, developed within literary translation studies, serve as useful analytical tools for the case study presented in this contribution. On the one hand, Epstein's translation strategies and Démont's translating modes provide a framework for understanding the approaches adopted by the workshop participants. On the other, Spurlin's notion of *l'intraduisible* brings into focus the core issue that inspired the workshop in the first place – namely, the seeming untranslatability of non-binary identities and language between two systems that express gender so differently.

The queer space in translation theorized by Spurlin becomes particularly relevant when examining texts which use GFL to challenge the binary construction of gender, sex, and sexuality.

3.1. Gender-Fair Translation

In literary translation, several contributions have investigated the production, reception, and transnational circulation of texts with trans and/or non-binary identities, addressing the specific methods and strategies which were – or could be – used to translate them (cf. Domínguez Ruvalcaba 2016; Rose 2021). The fact that gender expression varies widely across language systems poses many challenges to the translation of non-binary identities, and more specifically to the translation of GFL. For this reason, several of the most recent

studies in gender and literary translation have focused on the translation of GFL into so-called grammatical gender languages. For example, Vecchiato (2025) explores the linguistic strategies through which non-binary authors portray gender-nonconforming characters in two contemporary German-language literary texts and critically evaluates the extent to which these strategies are conveyed or lost in their Italian translation. Pederzoli (2024) focuses specifically on French literary works for children and YAs and their translation into Italian. To this end, the author provides an overview of the most common strategies used to translate GFL from French into Italian and discusses the ethical and educational issues raised by linguistic inclusivity. Another example of gender-fair translation in literature is offered by Misiou (2025), who examines the Greek translation of Bernardine Evaristo's polyphonic novel *Girl, Woman, Other*. Through her interview with translator Rena Hathout and the analysis of her translation strategies, Misiou shows how Hathout's work breaks down language barriers and opens up space for a more inclusionary politics, creating a "politically framed" text in which both women and non-binary characters become more visible (Misiou 2025: 100).

Important insights into gender-fair translation have also emerged from other branches of translation studies, namely, machine translation (MT), audiovisual translation (AVT), and interpreting. Building on previous research on gender bias in MT (cf. Savoldi *et al.* 2021), Piergentili *et al.* (2023), advocate for gender-neutral translation as a form of gender inclusivity and examine the technical challenges of performing it. Lardelli and Gromann (2023b) conduct the first comprehensive survey on GFL in both translation studies and MT with the aim of systematically and critically evaluating existing approaches to gender-fair (machine) translation, and conclude that "one generally acceptable and widely applicable solution does not and could not exist" (Lardelli and Gromann 2023b: 173). At the same time, their survey shows that most studies in gender-fair translation stem from AVT and focus on subtitling or dubbing from English into other languages. In many of these translations, non-binary characters are frequently misgendered, as shown for Polish by Misiek (2020) and for Croatian by Šincek (2020). Other studies have examined AVT of GFL into Spanish (cf. Attig and López 2020; López 2019, 2020, 2022); more specifically, López (2020) theorizes the distinction between direct and indirect non-binary language: the former avoids gender through neutral wording and passive constructions for broad audiences, while the second introduces new endings and symbols (e.g., -e, -@) to include non-binary identities.

In the field of interpreting studies, Facchini and Torresi (2024) conduct an experimental study on the viability of schwa endings in consecutive interpreting from English into Italian and conclude this can be a feasible strategy to subvert gender binary grammatical constraints, although not unequivocally. The authors also call for further studies to analyze both the production and the reception of the schwa in interpreting settings.

The present contribution, therefore, is positioned within an emerging and promising field of research, where gender, language, and translation studies intersect. The following sections present and discuss the workshop conducted with Italian undergraduate trainee translators.

4. Case Study

4.1. Translation Workshop

While previous research has explored feminist pedagogy and translation practice in the classroom (cf. Castro and Ergun 2017; Castro 2024), as well as the translation of queer

YA book between various languages (cf. Pederzoli and Illuminati 2021; Spallaccia 2022; Spallaccia 2024), to the best of my knowledge no study has yet examined the non-professional translation of GFL in literary YA texts by undergraduate trainees from English into Italian.

For this reason, I conducted a workshop on the non-professional translation from English into Italian of *All Boys Aren't Blue: A Memoir-Manifesto*, a YA book by Black non-binary author George M. Johnson, published in 2020 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux and not officially translated into Italian yet. Johnson's memoir traces their coming-of-age as a Black non-binary person through childhood, adolescence, and college, exploring gender identity, family, consent, marginalization, and Black joy. Blending personal narrative and social critique in an emotionally frank style, it examines how white supremacy, toxic masculinity, and queerphobia shape Black queer identities. Despite critical acclaim, the book has faced repeated censorship in the United States, becoming one of the most banned titles since its release. According to the American Library Association (n.d.), it ranked as the most banned book in 2024 for its queer and allegedly sexually explicit content.

The workshop took place in March 2024 within my course Gender and Communication. It involved 36 undergraduate students who were attending the course at issue and were enrolled in the third and final year of the First-Cycle Degree Program in Intercultural and Linguistic Mediation at University of Bologna – Forlì Campus (Academic Year 2024-2025). Although my course was not specifically focused on translation, all participants had a background in translation studies and had been studying translation for at least three years, that is, since their enrolment in the degree program. Furthermore, students had a solid background in gender studies, having previously taken two courses in the field: Intercultural Gender Studies (first year) and Introduzione alla Storia di Genere[7] (second year). My course Gender and Communication was designed to cover three intertwining macro-areas: queer studies from the second half of the 20th century to the present, gender representations in new media, and a critical exploration of the debate on gender and language in English and Italian. More specifically, right before the workshop, the students attended a lecture on GFL, which outlined the different strategies developed over the years in English and Italian to challenge linguistic sexism and binarism, also in translation. To provide further context for the translation task, the workshop opened with a presentation on the author and their book, as well as on the trend of book banning in the US. During this introduction, particular attention was paid to the main queer elements of the text, both from cultural and linguistic perspectives. For the workshop, participants were asked to translate a selection of passages from the book's introduction, titled "BLACK. QUEER. HERE," with a total length of approximately 1,200 words. Students were provided with the source text in English, were instructed to read through it, and to consider the target audience, the context and communicative purpose of the text prior to translating. Since this study aimed to investigate the human translation of GFL, students were asked to translate during the workshop, using the department's computers, where lab technicians had previously disabled the use of machine translation tools. Students were also asked to comment on their chosen strategies by inserting in-text comments in their Word files; however, due to time constraints, few students complied, making it impossible to provide a comprehensive account of their motivations.

[7] Introduction to Gender History (my translation).

4.2. Quantitative Overview of Students' Translation Strategies

Students' approaches to translation vary greatly in the strategies they employed. The two tables below provide a quantitative overview of the strategies employed by all 36 students. Both tables draw on the approaches and strategies summarized previously in Table 1. Each table consists of three columns: the left-hand column specifies the approach adopted,[8] the central column lists the strategies for GFL, and the right-hand column reports the total number of times each strategy was used by the workshop participants. More specifically, Table 3 shows the strategies used to translate GFL referring to the non-binary author, while Table 4 displays the strategies employed by students to translate the passages of the source text referring to people in general.

Table 3. Translation strategies for GFL, with reference to the non-binary author.

Gender-neutral approach (TOT: 94)	Epicene nouns	29
	Periphrases	65
	Relative clauses	0
	Impersonal constructions	0
	Verbalization	0
Gender-inclusive approach (TOT: 207)	Schwa (-ə)	207
	Other typographical characters or letters	0

Table 4. Translation strategies for GFL, with reference to generic people.

Gender-neutral approach (TOT: 394)	Epicene nouns	170
	Collective terms	94
	Relative clauses	32
	Impersonal constructions	6
	Verbalization	0
	Periphrases	92
Gender-inclusive approach (TOT: 307)	Schwa [-ə]	279
	Long schwa [-ɜ]	23
	Other typographical characters or letters [-u endings]	5
	Combinations of female and male endings	0
Other strategies (TOT: 28)	Generic masculine	4
	Splitting (*m*/*f*)	12
	Double form (*m* and *f*)	12

Table 3 indicates that the gender-inclusive approach was most frequently adopted by the students when translating GFL with reference to the author's non-binary identity. The schwa ending stands out as by far the most commonly employed strategy for replacing the gender markers which characterize the Italian language. Also of interest is the use of epicene terms and periphrases, which were the most common strategies within the gender-neutral approach. Several students reported adopting a mix of these strategies to avoid overloading the literary text with the repeated use of the schwa. No occurrences of relative clauses, impersonal constructions, or verbalizations were found in students' texts.

[8] Here *TOT* refers to the total occurrences of the strategies associated with that approach.

Conversely, Table 4 shows that students most often adopted the gender-neutral approach when translating passages referring to people in general. At the same time, workshop participants also showed a tendency to combine the gender-inclusive and the gender-neutral approaches, as evidenced by the frequent use of the schwa ending, and of strategies based on epicene nouns, collective terms, relative clauses, and, in a few cases, impersonal constructions. Among the students who succeeded in explaining their approach to the source text, some justified their choices as a way to keep the text accessible to disabled people. However, among all strategies, the schwa ending emerges as the most widely used. Interestingly, few texts also display the use of the long schwa *[-ɜ]* to refer to groups of people, to avoid gender markers and the generic masculine (e.g., *lɜ bambinɜ* – the children). In one text only was the *-u* ending employed for the same purpose. Finally, Table 4 also records the use of three strategies that do not belong to either the gender-inclusive or the gender-neutral approach, namely the use of the generic masculine, splitting (e.g., *bambino/a*), and the extended double form (e.g., *bambino e bambina*). As discussed in the following section through the analysis of selected examples, these strategies do not fall within the scope of gender-fair translation for different reasons: while the generic masculine renders female and non-binary genders invisible, splitting and the extended double form fail to move beyond the linguistic binary. The following section presents a qualitative analysis of selected strategies used by students to translate passages from the source text. The passages were selected to highlight different translation challenges and to illustrate the variety of approaches adopted by the students.

4.3. Qualitative Analysis of Students' Translation Strategies

It is worth starting by analyzing some of the translation strategies employed for the title "BLACK. QUEER. HERE." (Johnson 2020: 1). Since the very beginning of the book, these words are pivotal in the author's articulation of their intersectional identity as a Black and queer person. Table 5 below includes five different translations of this title as well as anonymized reference to the student who provided them *[S + number]*.[9]

Table 5. Selected translations of the title (back translations on the right).

(1) BLACK. QUEER. HERE. [S15]	BLACK. QUEER. HERE.
(2) PERSONE NERE. PERSONE QUEER. PERSONE QUI. [S34]	BLACK PEOPLE. QUEER PEOPLE. PEOPLE HERE.
(3) PERSONE NERE. QUEER. QUI. [S22]	BLACK PEOPLE. QUEER. HERE.
(4) DI COLORE. QUEER. QUI. [S35]	COLORED. QUEER. HERE.
(5) NERƏ. QUEER. QUI. [S14]	BLACK *(n)*. QUEER. HERE.

In (1), S15 decided not to render in Italian the title of the chapter and thus left it in English. Although foreignization is a basic strategy widely discussed in translation studies (cf. Venuti 1993; Sturrock 2010), in this case, leaving the title untranslated is not a viable

[9] In tables 5, 6, 7, and 8, the letter *[S]* followed by a number refers to the student who provided the translation at issue, while *(n)* stands for neutral, *(m)* for male, *(f)* for female.

solution because it may hinder comprehension for some readers who are not familiar with the English language.

Conversely, the authors of (2), (3), and (4) attempted to avoid using both traditional gendered markers and neutral morphemes. In (2) and (3) respectively, S34 and S22 employ the epicene noun *persone* [people] to keep the sentence genderless. Although, as shown in Table 1, the use of epicenes is generally one of the strategies of the gender-neutral approach, it is not effective here for two main reasons. First, the translations come from a misinterpretation of the source text, since the title does not refer to Black and queer people in general, but specifically to the protagonist. Second, it does not preserve the conciseness and immediacy that usually characterize titles – and, in this case, the queer slogan that the title most likely alludes to (i.e., *we're here, we're queer*).

The authors of (4) and (5) decided to keep only the adjectives, along with the adverb, but they followed two different approaches to avoid the generic masculine. In (4), S35 used *di colore* [of color], an expression that is genderless in Italian but has been frequently contested by Black movements because it takes whiteness as the 'default' identity in terms of skin color. Conversely, in (5), S14 adopted the most radical solution, using the schwa to translate *Black*. I consider this to be the most suitable solution given its ideological alignment with GFL principles; in fact, considering the explicitly queer content of the book, this strategy both preserves and highlights the queerness of the text from the very beginning. For this reason, it can be considered as an example of what B.J. Epstein (2017) calls "acqueering" as defined before in this contribution (cf. § 3).

As for the translation of the chapter's textual content, due to space constraints, the remainder of this section presents three excerpts and a selection of their translations. This selection is designed to illustrate the range of approaches adopted by the students in engaging with the source text, as well as the ways in which they combined different strategies in pursuit of a twofold aim: first, to avoid the generic masculine and linguistic sexism; and second, to employ neutral terms so as to preserve the author's non-binary identity. The first excerpt chosen for this analysis reads as follows:

> **EXCERPT 1.** Gender is one of the biggest projections placed onto children at birth, despite families having no idea how the baby will truly turn out. (Johnson 2020: 2)

Table 6 below provides four different translations:[10]

Table 6. Selected translations of excerpt 1 (back translations on the right).

(1) Il genere è in assoluto una delle più grandi proiezioni riposte alla nascita, anche se le famiglie non hanno idea di come crescerà davvero. [S4]	Gender is by far one of the biggest projections placed at birth, even though families have no idea how will actually grow up.
(2) Il genere è una delle più grandi proiezioni riposte su **un bambino e una bambina** alla nascita, anche se le famiglie non hanno idea di come **crescerà** davvero. [S33]	Gender is by far one of the biggest projections placed on boys and girls at birth, even though families have no idea how they will actually grow up.
(3) Il genere è una delle più grandi proiezioni fatte **sugli individui** alla nascita, anche se le loro famiglie non hanno idea di come **cresceranno** davvero. [S10]	Gender is by far one of the biggest projections placed on individuals at birth, even though families have no idea how they will actually grow up.

[10] My emphasis in bold in this and following tables.

(4)	
Il genere è una delle più grandi proiezioni imposte su di **noi** alla nascita, anche se le nostre famiglie non sanno come **cresceremo** davvero. [S20]	Gender is by far one of the biggest projections placed on us at birth, even though families have no idea how we will actually grow up.

What makes this excerpt challenging is the translation of the nouns *children* and *baby* without resorting to the generic masculine. As Table 6 shows, students attempted to use different approaches. In (1), S4 decided to omit both nouns at issue. Translation by omission may be regarded as a valid strategy in professional translation, but only when "the meaning conveyed by a particular item or expression is not vital enough to the development of the text" (Baker 2011: 42). In this case, however, the omission of *children* and *baby* results in a grammatical error, as the reader is unable to identify the subject of the verb *crescerà* [will grow up].

Conversely, in (2), S33 resorted to splitting and used both the male and female noun for *child*, that is, *bambino* and *bambina*. This strategy is often used by speakers and writers who want to avoid the generic masculine (cf. Sabatini 1987), but it can be problematic for two main reasons: first, when splitting is to be applied to the nouns' dependent forms (e.g., articles, adjectives) it may generate redundancy, especially in a literary text; second, it reaffirms the linguistic binary female/male, thus excluding non-binary people.

Both issues of linguistic sexism and binarism are successfully overcome by S10 and S20 in (3) and (4): in the former, *children* is translated through the epicene noun *individui* [individuals] which becomes the explicit subject of the verb *cresceranno* [will grow up] in the last part of the sentence. In the latter, the translator provided a less literal rendition of the terms at issue, using a strategy of rephrasing, that is, by replacing *children* with *noi* [us].

This example, together with the translations examined here, demonstrates that, in some cases, the Italian language can offer strategies that allow for the simultaneous avoidance of both linguistic sexism and gender binarism. While this kind of text requires particular care to ensure GFL in translation, avoiding gendered expressions in Italian proves especially challenging in those passages of the memoir that rely more heavily on nouns and adjectives to describe people. Excerpt two below serves as a good example of this challenge.

> **EXCERPT 2.** Surrounded by whiteness, I wasn't going to dare let my classmates get comfortable using that word [the n-word] with or around me. Anytime a white student even tried to utter it, I checked them. White kids love to test Black kids on things like that. Certain Black kids were fighting so hard to fit in, they would let white kids steal that part of our culture just so they could pretend they were accepted in white society. (Johnson 2020: 6)

Table 7 below provides three different translations.

Table 7. Selected translations of excerpt 2 (back translations on the right).

(1)	
Con **tutti i bianchi** che mi circondavano, non avevo alcuna intenzione di lasciare che si abituassero a usare la *n-word* con me, o dove potevo sentirla. Appena **i compagni** di scuola **bianchi** provavano solo a pronunciarla, **li** fermavo subito. **I ragazzini bianchi** adorano	With all the white people *(m)* around me, I had no intention of letting them get used to using the n-word around me, or anywhere I could hear it. As soon as my white classmates*(m)* tried to say it, I stopped them *(m)* immediately. White kids *(m)* love to

punzecchiare **quelli neri** su cose come queste. **Certi compagni neri** volevano integrarsi talmente tanto con **i bianchi** da permettergli di appropriarsi di questa parte della nostra cultura solo per poter credere di essere accettati dai bianchi. [S3]	tease black kids *(m)* about things like this. Some black classmates *(m)* wanted to fit in with white people *(m)* so badly that they allowed them to appropriate this part of our culture just so they could believe they were accepted by white people.
(2) Con tutte le **persone bianche** che avevo attorno, non volevo proprio lasciare che si abituassero a usare la *n-word* con me, in nessun posto. Appena una **persona bianca** provava solo a pronunciarla, la fermavo subito. **I/Le compagni/e bianchi/e** adorano punzecchiare **quelli/e neri/e** su cose come queste. **Alcuni/e** volevano integrarsi talmente tanto con le persone bianche da permettergli di appropriarsi di questa parte della nostra cultura solo per poter credere di essere **accettati/e** nella società bianca. [S7]	With all the white people around me, I didn't want them to get used to using the n-word around me, anywhere. As soon as a white person tried to say it, I stopped them right away. White schoolmates *(m + f)* love to tease black ones *(m + f)* about things like this. Some *(m + f)* wanted to fit in with white people so badly that they allowed them to appropriate this part of our culture just so they could believe they were accepted into white society.
(3) Con tutte **le persone bianche** che mi circondavano, non avevo alcuna intenzione di lasciare che si abituassero a usare la parola n**** con me, o dove l'avrei potuta sentire. Appena una delle **persone bianche** nella mia classe provava solo a pronunciarla, intervenivo subito. Tra **teenager** era normale punzecchiare la **comunità nera** su cose come queste, **che talvolta voleva integrarsi** talmente tanto da permettere loro di appropriarsi di questa parte della nostra cultura, solo per poter credere di far parte della società bianca. [S19]	With all the white people around me, I had no intention of letting them get used to using the n-word around me, or anywhere I might hear it. As soon as one of the white people in my class even tried to say it, I would immediately intervene. Among teenagers *(n)*, it was normal to tease the Black community about things like this, which sometimes wanted to integrate so much that they allowed them to appropriate this part of our culture, just so they could believe they were part of white society.

The biggest challenge this excerpt poses to translators lies in the repetition of nouns such as *classmates*, *student*, and *kid(s)*, along with their adjectives and personal pronouns. Table 7 shows three very different approaches. In (1), S3 strongly resorted to the generic masculine, shown by expressions like *tutti i bianchi*, *i compagni bianchi*, *i ragazzini bianchi*, *certi compagni neri*, and *i bianchi*. This rendition, which is by far the most immediate and effortless translation, is not suitable for a book with such a strong focus on gender, as it fails to overcome both linguistic sexism and linguistic binarism.

Conversely, in (2), S7 produced a more gender-sensitive translation, achieved by resorting to the epicene noun *persona* (employed twice) and to multiple splitting forms, such as *I/Le compagni/e bianchi/e* and *quelli/e neri/e*. While these strategies underscore the student's attempt to inscribe the target text within a feminist sensibility attentive to gendered dynamics, their reiteration generates a certain redundancy in the passage at issue. Furthermore, in the Italian context, splitting forms are predominantly associated with administrative registers rather than literary works, where their function is primarily to render female presence linguistically visible (cf. Robustelli 2012b: 21).

The last translation included in the table exemplifies a distinct approach to translation and the adoption of alternative strategies. In fact, the author of (3) demonstrates a more skillful use of several strategies: while the epicene noun *persona* still appears twice, the translator sought to mitigate its repetition by introducing the English gender-neutral noun *teenager*, which is commonly used in Italian, as well as by

employing the collective term *comunità nera* [Black community] and the relative clause *che voleva integrarsi* [which wanted to fit it]. This final translation can therefore be considered the most effective of those analyzed, in terms of gender inclusivity, clarity, and style.

Lastly, passages in which the author's non-binary identity is articulated more explicitly compound the translation difficulties. Excerpt three below exemplify this challenge:

> **EXCERPT 3.** I learned that kids who saw me as different didn't have an issue until society taught them to see my differences as a threat. Those differences, like being effeminate and sassy, were constantly under attack my entire childhood from kids who didn't even know why I needed to be shamed for those differences. (Johnson 2020: 9)

Three translations of this excerpt are featured in Table 8.

Table 8. Selected translations of excerpt 3 (back translations on the right).

(1) Imparai che **coloro che** pensavano che **avessi qualcosa di diverso** non avevano nessun problema finché la società non insegnava loro a interpretare le mie differenze come una minaccia. Quelle differenze, come l'essere una **persona effemminata e sfrontata**, sono state attaccate per tutta la mia infanzia da **coloro che** non sapevano nemmeno il motivo per cui me ne dovessi vergognare. [S28]	I learned that those who thought I had something different had no problem with me until society taught them to interpret my differences as a threat. Those differences, such as being an effeminate and outspoken person, were attacked throughout my childhood by those who didn't even know why I should be ashamed of them.
(2) Mi resi poi conto che **chi mi considerava diversə** non aveva nessun problema finché la società non insegnava loro a vedere le mie differenze come una minaccia. Per tutta la mia infanzia, queste differenze, come **l'effeminatezza** e **la sfrontatezza**, sono state attaccate da **bambini e bambine** che non sapevano nemmeno il motivo per cui mi sminuivano. [S23]	I then realized that those who considered me different *(n)* had no problem with me until society taught them to see my differences as a threat. Throughout my childhood, these differences, such as effeminacy and sassiness, were attacked by boys and girls who didn't even know why they were putting me down.
(3) Capii che **lɜ bambinɜ** che mi consideravano **differente** non si facevano problemi finché la società non insegnava loro che le mie differenze erano una minaccia. Per tutta l'infanzia, queste mie differenze, come l'essere **effemminatə e sfrontatə**, sono state attaccate continuamente **da chi aveva la mia età** e non capiva nemmeno perché dovessi vergognarmene. [S32]	I realized that the children *(n)* who considered me different didn't have a problem with it until society taught them that my differences were a threat. Throughout my childhood, my differences, such as being effeminate *(n)* and sassy *(n)*, were constantly attacked by those who were my age, who didn't even understand why I should be ashamed of them.

All three students attempted to address the twofold challenge of avoiding the generic masculine while preserving the protagonist's queer identity, but they adopted different strategies and achieved different outcomes. In (1), the translator resorted to three strategies that are typical of the gender-neutral approach: the relative clause *coloro che* [those who], repeated twice to translate *kids*; a periphrasis for the adjective *different* [*qualcosa di diverso* – "something different"]; and the epicene noun *persona* with its

adjectives *effemminata e sfrontata* [effeminate and outspoken person]. This translation succeeds in avoiding linguistic sexism but also inadvertently obscures the protagonist's non-binary identity. For this reason, although unintentionally, it risks introducing a form of eradicalization into the target text, as it "eradicates the radical nature of queerness" present in the source text (Epstein 2017: 121).

Conversely, the linguistic queerness of the protagonist and of the source text are kept and, to a certain extent, enhanced by S23 and S32 in (2) and (3) respectively, through the use of two neomorphemes. The former text employs the schwa ending (-ə) for the adjective *diversə* [different] to refer to Johnson, and in doing so, it underlines the protagonist's non-binary identity. This is followed by more traditional strategies such as the nominalization of the two adjectives *effeminatezza* and *sfrontatezza* [effeminacy and sassiness], the relative clause *chi mi considerava* [those who considered me] and the splitting form *bambini e bambine* [boys and girls]. Thus, by blending the new morpheme with more traditional strategies of the gender-neutral approach, the target text succeeds in answering the twofold aim of keeping the queerness of the source text and being comprehensible for a contemporary Italian audience of young readers.

Finally, in (3), S32 followed a similar approach but used the so-called long schwa (-ɜ). This symbol has been used recently in translated books published by mainstream publishers as the plural form of the schwa.[11] In the passage at issue, the long schwa is used to provide a gender neutral rendition of *kids* (i.e., *lɜ bambinɜ*), while the schwa (ə) appears in two adjectives which refer to the protagonist (*effemminatə e sfrontatə*). Therefore, this last translation joins the most militant solutions developed to queer the Italian language with more traditional strategies, such as the common-gender adjective *differente* and the relative clause *chi aveva la mia età* [those who were my age]. Both (2) and (3) include examples of acqueering strategies and can be seen as suitable approaches to the source text at issue. However, considering that the schwa is still a linguistic experiment which raises several doubts on its correct usage and understanding by Italian speakers, (2) is probably the most indicated translation for a book addressing a wide and diverse readership.

The passages examined in this section represent only a small portion of the results produced by the workshop participants during the translation of *All Boys Aren't Blue*. Although this analysis cannot, for constraints of space, provide an exhaustive account of all the translations proposed, it nevertheless demonstrates the commitment of these non-professional translators to respect and value the queer nature of the text they were provided. It also highlights the need for an integrated approach to the translation of works which challenge language and society structures alike.

5. Conclusion

This study sought to contribute to the ongoing debate on GFL and its translation between linguistic systems with differing expressions of gender. To do so, it outlined the evolution of the gender-and-language debate with a strong focus on GFL, queer translation, and gender-fair translation. Although the debate on GFL has landed at the center of the academic debate, few studies focused before on the translation of GFL in texts for young readers.

The innovative contribution of this paper lies in its twofold focus on GFL in YA literature and on its non-professional translation by undergraduate students. By focusing

[11] See, for example, the American YA novel *Cemetery Boys* (Thomas 2021), translated into Italian by Martina del Romano and published by Mondadori.

on the translation of Johnson's memoir-manifesto *All Boys Aren't Blue*, the present study addressed the three initial research questions by providing a quantitative overview of the students' translation approaches to the source text, along with a qualitative analysis of selected strategies. In particular, it demonstrated that the students involved in the workshop were open to linguistic experimentation with GFL as a means of respecting and valuing non-binary identities. The study further revealed the students' willingness to combine different strategies and to integrate gender-inclusive and gender-neutral approaches, in order to simultaneously overcome linguistic binarism and to respect the stylistic elements of the literary text. Ultimately, the findings suggest that this combination of approaches can help address the linguistic challenges posed by GFL in Italian, at least in the text under examination.

The translation workshop I conducted with my students served as an experiment to open up the debate on gender and language to a younger generation of prospective translators with a strong gender sensibility. In this respect, the study underscores the need to strike a balance between different strategies when translating this type of texts between a notional gender language like English and a grammatical gender one like Italian. More specifically, given the novelty of neomorphemes like the schwa and the difficulty arising from their systemic use in Italian, translators must adopt a mixed approach to both respect the structure of the target language and preserve the queerness of the source text.

At the same time, a few methodological limitations can be identified in this study. First, space constraints allowed only for the analysis of a small number of excerpts. Second, the students' un-compliance with the instructor's request to justify their chosen strategies made it impossible to provide a comprehensive account of their motivations. Third, the study lacked follow-up research with a diverse group of YA readers, including disabled readers, to investigate issues of accessibility and readability. Further research of this kind should be undertaken to address these methodological limitations and build on the findings of this study.

In a recent interview, George Johnson stated: "Students have publicly said on record that works like mine have saved their lives, works like mine have helped them come to terms with who they are and feel validated" (Johnson in Advani and Treisman 2022). This is just an example of how vital the production, circulation, and translation of books that offer young readers alternative models and identities is. In this regard, it is also worth stressing that increasing queer visibility, in both language and society, does not necessarily entail rendering women invisible. As demonstrated by the translation strategies employed by the participants in my course workshop, it is both possible and necessary to pursue a joint struggle against linguistic sexism and gender binarism, and to provide the Italian YA audience with much-needed queer narratives in a time of deep hostility against the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalized groups.

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