

# RESEARCH NETWORKING PROJECT 'LANGUAGE AND GENDER: ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION'

Opening event

17/11/2023

Sofie Decock & Sarah Van Hoof

DUTCH

# WHO WE ARE

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# JOINT RESEARCH PROJECT (WEAVE)

Do small words make a difference?

Investigating the effects of gender-neutral pronouns on mental gender representations and perceptions of text quality in Dutch, French and Norwegian (2023-2027)

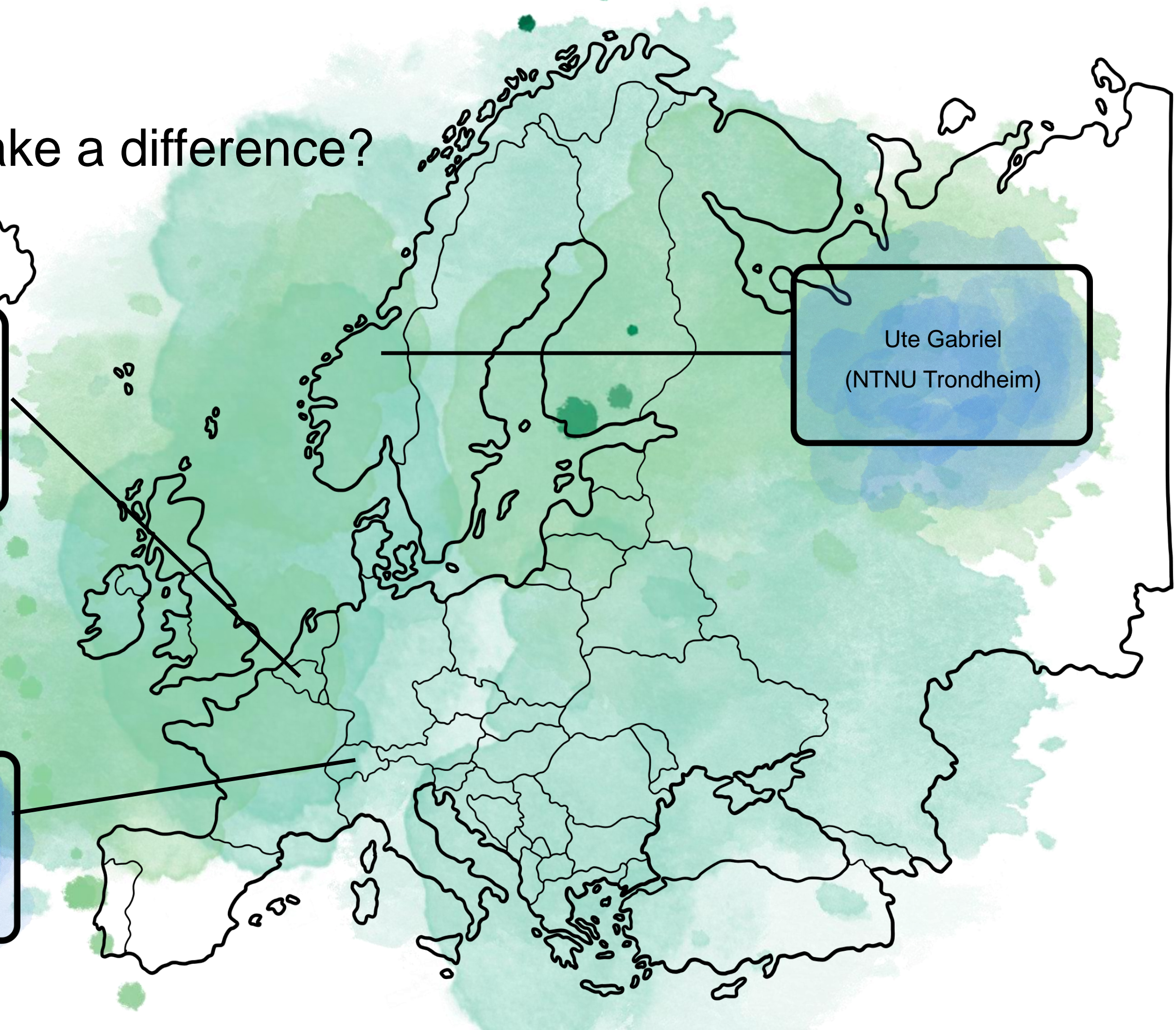
# Do small words make a difference?

Sofie Decock (PI)  
Sarah Van Hoof  
Hanne Verhaegen  
Chloé Vincent  
(Ghent University)



Ute Gabriel  
(NTNU Trondheim)

Pascal Gyax  
Tiziana Jäggi  
(University of  
Fribourg)



# GOAL

- to experimentally study, in 3 languages, 3 possible uses of gender-neutral 3rd person pronouns:

1. for reference to **nonbinary** individuals

*Sasha went out yesterday. **They** had a great time with **their** friends.*

2. for **generic** reference

*If a reader like this book, **they** may want to read other books by this author too.*

3. for **specific gender-hiding** reference

*I had a discussion with a student over **their** assignment. I told **them they** needed to respect the deadline.*

# GOAL

- For all 3 types of usage we will investigate the effects of gender-neutral 3rd person pronouns on
  - readers' **mental gender representations**
  - readers' perceptions of text quality: **text comprehensibility** and **appreciation**
- We will take into account respondents' familiarity with and attitudes towards gender-neutral 3rd person pronouns and their attitudes towards nonsexist language and the gender binary
- We hope to get into view
  - the implementation (acceptance and diffusion) of the pronouns in real time
  - by comparing 3 languages, the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences affecting the chances at success of gender-neutral 3rd person pronouns

# FIRST RESULTS

- A study of the comprehensibility and appreciation of 3rd person pronouns for **nonbinary** reference
- Focus on *hen-hen-hun* and *die-hen-hun* in Flemish Dutch, in **newspaper reporting**
- Online survey experiment
- Representative sample of 352 Belgian participants

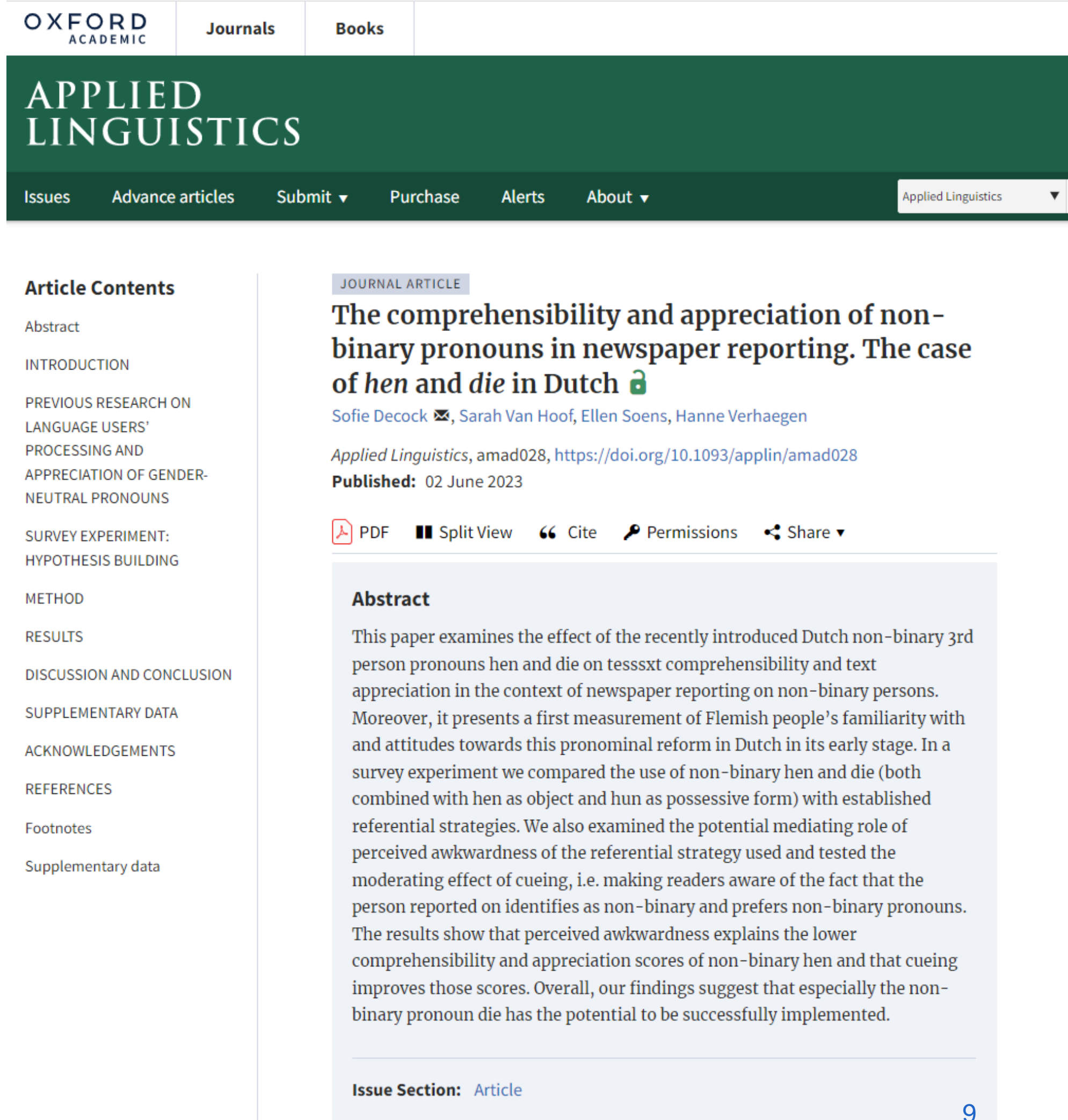
# MAIN TAKE-AWAYS

- Only *hen-hen-hun* significantly lowered text appreciation compared to binary pronouns
- No evidence for negative impact of gender-neutral pronouns on text comprehensibility
- Low familiarity (compared to Swedish *hen* or English *they*): 46,3% of respondents not yet familiar with gender-neutral pronouns (January 2022)
- Attitudes towards gender-neutral pronouns were neutral to slightly negative (January 2022)



# READ MORE

Decock, S., Van Hoof, S., Soens, E., & Verhaegen, H. (2023). The comprehensibility and appreciation of non-binary pronouns in newspaper reporting. The case of *hen* and *die* in Dutch. *Applied Linguistics*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amad028>



The screenshot shows the Oxford Academic website for the journal *Applied Linguistics*. The page features a dark green header with the journal title and navigation links for Issues, Advance articles, Submit, Purchase, Alerts, and About. The article title is "The comprehensibility and appreciation of non-binary pronouns in newspaper reporting. The case of *hen* and *die* in Dutch". The authors listed are Sofie Decock, Sarah Van Hoof, Ellen Soens, and Hanne Verhaegen. The article is published in *Applied Linguistics*, volume amad028, on 02 June 2023. The page includes a table of contents on the left, a PDF download option, and a split view option. The abstract is visible in a light blue box at the bottom right.

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- SURVEY EXPERIMENT: HYPOTHESIS BUILDING
- METHOD
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JOURNAL ARTICLE

**The comprehensibility and appreciation of non-binary pronouns in newspaper reporting. The case of *hen* and *die* in Dutch**

Sofie Decock, Sarah Van Hoof, Ellen Soens, Hanne Verhaegen

*Applied Linguistics*, amad028, <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amad028>

Published: 02 June 2023

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the effect of the recently introduced Dutch non-binary 3rd person pronouns *hen* and *die* on text comprehensibility and text appreciation in the context of newspaper reporting on non-binary persons. Moreover, it presents a first measurement of Flemish people's familiarity with and attitudes towards this pronominal reform in Dutch in its early stage. In a survey experiment we compared the use of non-binary *hen* and *die* (both combined with *hen* as object and *hun* as possessive form) with established referential strategies. We also examined the potential mediating role of perceived awkwardness of the referential strategy used and tested the moderating effect of cueing, i.e. making readers aware of the fact that the person reported on identifies as non-binary and prefers non-binary pronouns. The results show that perceived awkwardness explains the lower comprehensibility and appreciation scores of non-binary *hen* and that cueing improves those scores. Overall, our findings suggest that especially the non-binary pronoun *die* has the potential to be successfully implemented.

Issue Section: Article

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# ADDITIONAL ONGOING RESEARCH ON GI- LANGUAGE

## Laura Robaey

PROJECTS

PUBLICATIONS

TEACHING

Projects as PhD researcher

→ Gender-sensitive language use in interpreter-mediated interactions between service providers and transgender or non-binary persons (2023 - 2029)

Supervisor: Sofie

Decock

Co-supervisor:

Jelena Vranjes

# ADDITIONAL ONGOING RESEARCH ON GI- LANGUAGE

The influence of the Genderstern on text comprehensibility in a GFL-context (German as a Foreign Language)

Researchers involved:

- Lisa Zacharski, Evelyn Ferstl (University of Freiburg)
- Sofie Decock (Ghent University)
- Griet Boone (Antwerp University)

THANK YOU FOR YOUR  
ATTENTION