

## **In pursuit of epistemic authority in public intellectual engagement: the case of language and gender**

Public intellectual life is an area of inquiry that has not received a great deal of attention within the field of sociolinguistics. This article investigates the performative dimension of public intellectual engagement in the area of language and gender and, more specifically, how epistemic authority about gender-neutral language is constructed in public intellectual contributions in Catalonia, Spain. Adopting Arendt's notion of truth claim and the Foucauldian concepts of regimes of truth and epistemic sovereignty, we empirically examine the mechanisms of reception and validation of the public engagements of one highly visible linguistic scholar. Our study shows the ways in which this intellectual figure strives to be recognised as having exclusive scientific authority about language. We argue that pursuing the allegedly impartial standpoint of epistemic authority about gender and language inevitably advances the interests of specific political actors and large media corporations of a conservative strand that fervently oppose gender-neutral language.

**Keywords:** public intellectual engagement; epistemic authority; language and gender; gender-neutral language

L'àmbit intel·lectual públic és un terreny que fins ara ha estat relativament poc investigat des d'una perspectiva sociolingüística. Aquest article indaga en la dimensió performativa d'aquest àmbit en el context d'un debat de llengua i el gènere i, més concretament, analitza com es construeix l'autoritat epistèmica sobre llenguatge neutre en les aportacions intel·lectuals públiques a Catalunya. Adoptant la noció d'afirmació de la veritat d'Arendt i els conceptes foucaultians de règims de veritat i sobirania epistèmica, examinem empíricament els mecanismes de recepció i validació de les intervencions públiques d'una persona experta lingüista molt visible. El nostre estudi mostra com aquesta figura intel·lectual s'esforça per ser reconeguda com a autoritat científica exclusiva en relació amb la llengua. Argumentem que buscar un punt de vista presumptament imparcial d'autoritat epistèmica sobre llengua i gènere promou inevitablement els interessos d'actors polítics específics i de grans corporacions mediàtiques d'una línia conservadora que s'oposen fervorosament a formes de llengua neutre.

## 1 Introduction

This study is situated within the sociology of public intellectual life, a relatively underdeveloped subfield of sociology (Baert and Shipman 2012) and a line of inquiry that has gone unnoticed in sociolinguistics. To be sure, public language debates have provided fertile ground for sociolinguists, and the notion of expertise in these debates has been sporadically analysed (Johnson 2001; Milani 2007; Jaspers 2014; Gal 2019; Erdocia and Soler 2022). Likewise, sociolinguists themselves have recounted their personal experiences in communicating and popularising their work beyond academic circles (Heller 1999; Price and McIntyre 2023); thus, the notion of academics as public figures is not an entirely neglected topic within sociolinguistics. However, previous work has tended not to focus much on the phenomenon of public intellectual engagement, broadly understood here as contributions in the public realm on questions of the social world influenced by a political and ideological concern (Posner 2001) and often aiming to change the order of things. In our particular case, by public intellectuals we refer to scholars in their role as specialists in language matters who make judgements, even beyond the academic realm and their field of professional focus, which are aimed at instructing and persuading the public and impacting society (Fleck et al. 2009; Baert and Morgan 2018).

Our study attempts to go beyond reporting different argumentative strategies in a public debate about language or a case of academics going public. It differs from previous sociolinguistic research in that the public interventions made by the academia-based intellectual on whom we focus are not isolated or episodic contributions (as it is the case of many language debates) but occur continuously over a significant period of time. This has

two implications. Firstly, iterated performances normally have observable consequences. Intellectual interventions have effects upon the public realm, and the reception, appreciation, and rejection of intellectual products can, therefore, be empirically traced (Baert and Morgan 2018). Second, our account focuses on the phenomenon of academic celebrity: the intellectual in question is a popular figure in the general media, a well-known public personality who makes regular media appearances. Admittedly, even though current trends in academia have enabled the phenomenon of “celebritisation of academic life” (Bar-El and Baert 2021), such recognisable characters in the terrain of language are not especially common. Due to our work on the publics of sociolinguistics in the south of Europe (Soler and Erdocia 2020; Erdocia 2020; Erdocia and Soler 2022), we have become acquainted with the role of sociolinguistics scholars in the public sphere, many of whom are engaged intellectuals and some of whom have a strong public profile. One of them stands out singularly from the rest, this being the reason for selecting her for our study: Maria Carme Junyent<sup>1</sup>, professor of linguistics at the University of Barcelona.

Here one clarification is in place. The purpose of this article is not to criticise, embarrass or silence the opinions of individual authors. As a matter of fact, we have critically reported in a previous publication (Erdocia 2022a) that Junyent’s views on GNL became the target of a torrent of dismissive remarks and regrettable insults on social networks. Our only purpose is

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<sup>1</sup> The production of this article, in particular the writing and revisions of the manuscript coincided with Junyent’s passing away on 3 September 2023. As other colleagues and people who knew her, we received this news with sadness and sorrow; we take this opportunity to express our sincere regret about her death, she will be missed as a public linguistics figure. Much was written in the days after about Junyent’s standing as a chief public intellectual on language-related matters. An “In Memoriam” note by the Centre de Recerca en Sociolingüística i Comunicació (Universitat de Barcelona) highlighted her activist stance in connection to the safekeeping of global linguistic diversity, but with Catalan and the context of Catalonia as her gravitational centre (see: <https://www.ub.edu/cusc/m-car-me-junyent-1955-2023-in-memoriam/>). This is important for the argument we present in our article. Indeed, Junyent’s *autoritas* on language matters was partly derived from her discourse about Catalan as an endangered language, as we elaborate further below.

to advance our thinking around epistemic authority and intellectuals across the language sciences. We hope readers will not see this article as an interpersonal disagreement or an attempt to silence opinions that may differ in some cases from those of the authors of this article.

We explore the performative and perlocutionary dimension of public intellectual engagement in the area of gender and language. More concretely, we examine the ways in which Carme Junyent constructs and claims epistemic authority about gender-neutral language (GNL) in the Spanish and Catalan context. Here, many institutions have adopted (not without controversies; see Erdocia 2022a) measures to promote the use of GNL. Our account is broadly aligned with Baert and Morgan's (2018) performative approach, including its notion of positioning, according to which intellectual interventions ascribe certain characteristics to their authors while attributing certain features to the other relevant actors (intellectuals, scholars, politicians, etc.). Drawing loosely on Aristotle's typology of rhetoric, this analytical framework (Baert and Morgan 2018) distinguishes three means of persuasion involved in the performative and strategic devices used in the formation of epistemic authority through public interventions: *logos*, logical argumentation, the use of statements of truth and meta-theoretical discussions about what counts as superior or fallacious argumentation; *ethos*, devices to assert the moral authority of either the author or their message; and *pathos*, the use of powerful metaphors and representation of groups with recognisable dichotomies to invoke emotions and provoke a reaction from the public. Because *logos* is the centrepiece of the intellectual sphere, we pay particular attention to this dimension with an emphasis on the notion of truth statements (see Section 2).

Before presenting the details of our study, we first of all elaborate on some conceptual and theoretical issues and provide information about GNL in the Spanish context as well as background information about the intellectual under analysis.

## **2 Theoretical underpinnings**

Statements of truth or truth claims are key persuasion devices in the construction of epistemic authority in public engagement. Inquiries about what constitutes them are not new. In her influential essay “Truth and Politics”, Hannah Arendt argues that the last traces of the antagonism between truth and opinion have disappeared. She says that facts inform opinions; and opinions, which are inspired by interests and often differ widely, can still be legitimate as long as they respect facts. This is not to say, she notes, that truth and opinion should be treated jointly. Truth is different from opinion because of the modes and intentions of asserting its validity (Arendt 2006: 238). For instance, once a statement is pronounced to be true (and perceived to be so) it is supposed to be beyond dispute. Such a construction of authority is the reason for Arendt to say that truth carries within itself “an element of coercion” (Arendt 2006: 239). Put differently, statements of truth (e.g., allusions to science and objective knowledge) in the public realm peremptorily claim to be acknowledged by the public and may, therefore, be intended to preclude debate. In other words, modes of communication that deal with truth, as Arendt expresses throughout her essay, are often domineering and do not always require the use of strategies of dissuasion and persuasion to substantiate claims. Seen from the viewpoint of the public sphere,

conceived as the very essence of political life, truth may conceal despotic intentions when actors who enjoy a prominent position in the public realm attempt to monopolise it.

Essentially, intellectuals who play the role of “truth-seekers and truth-tellers”, as Arendt (2006: 229) puts it, in public debates are politically of great relevance. This idea resembles Foucault’s (1977) argument that any approach to the political dimension of intellectuals should not be in terms of ‘science’ and ‘ideology’, but in terms of ‘truth’ and ‘power’.

Drawing on an understanding of power and knowledge as having a dynamic relationship, Foucault argues that truth is centred on the intellectuals and institutions that produce it, which ultimately means that truth is not deprived of power. Each society has its regimes of truth that contribute to the functioning of power relations. By regimes of truth, he means the structures or strategic fields that set the mechanisms for the production, regulation, distribution, and circulation of statements of truth (Foucault 1977). They consist of ordered procedures by which the status of truth-tellers – those who are charged with saying what counts as true – and the institutions they represent are sanctioned and, therefore, positioned as legitimate.

To compensate for the fact that Foucault did not fully elaborate his idea of regimes of truth, we draw on his concept of sovereignty (Foucault 1990). We operationalise it by adopting Rouse’s (2006) notion of “epistemic sovereignty” or full ownership of epistemic authority, which is derived from Foucault’s concept of political sovereignty. For Foucault (1990: 88), mainstream political theorists sought justification for a purely political system to which all the mechanisms of power could conform. They presented an imagined sovereign ruler as being the embodiment of justice who could end all conflict. Sovereignty was conceived as

the “standpoint above or outside particular conflicts that resolves competing claims into a *unified* and coherent system” (Rouse 2006: 103; emphasis in original). Foucault challenged these theories because, in his opinion, they only attached to an aspirational idea of sovereignty, a theoretical construct that was out of reach from actual sovereignty regimes. For him, sovereignty cannot be separated from its embodiment in any actual sovereign system, from a specific location or historical period, or from the dynamic conditions where authority is constantly contested.

We can apply the same critical move to the notion of epistemic sovereignty (Rouse 2006). A classic account of sovereignty would represent it as the standpoint that is beyond the reach of competing truth claims in any situation of epistemic contention. In this view, epistemic sovereignty allows truth to stand forth by suppressing or invalidating conflicting statements that do not conform to dominating epistemologies. Put differently, it constitutes “knowledge as the unified (or consistently unifiable) network of truths that can be extracted from the circulation of conflicting statements” (Rouse 2006: 106). From a Foucauldian account, however, epistemic sovereignty is not unitary or absolute but rather situated and is best understood on a conflictual framework. This is because, as Foucault argues, practices of sovereignty are sustained on the basis of power relations that function at a different location and scale. Power relations are instrumental to the enhancement and circulation of knowledge. Furthermore, epistemic apparatuses within a regime of truth, such as universities, academic disciplines, and media, are both dependent upon and productive of regulatory power.



The juxtaposition of knowledge and truth with power is central to Foucault's account. Rouse (2006) provides a general case that resonates with debates about language and, more particularly, with our case study. In line with the totalising depiction of epistemic sovereignty, we find that some custodians of truth intentionally identify their own epistemic and political positions with the more abstract standpoint of epistemic sovereignty. Rouse dissects such a case using a Foucauldian lens and spells out that

it is one thing to articulate and take up a stance on the political struggles in the midst of which one finds oneself situated historically. It is another thing altogether to seek an epistemic standpoint outside those ongoing conflicts from which that stance can be validated. (2006: 105)

Of course, the appropriation of an impartial standpoint in a context of an epistemic dispute, which is precisely what Foucault objected to, is not a disinterested move. In line with Arendt's (2006: 241) depiction of truth as enhancing "a despotic character", allusions to scientific truth are intended for validation, legitimation, and imposition purposes. Moreover, statements of truth contribute to sustaining and feeding the regimes of truth in which they are accommodated. The monopoly of authority and prestige is also at stake; for instance, academics strive to have their own definition of their research object and categories of perception of the social world recognised as legitimate and endowed with authority (Bourdieu 1988). Foucault's fundamental concern is that intellectuals' political and epistemic criticism in terms of sovereignty misunderstands their own positioning (Rouse 2006: 105).

The aspiration for the impartial standpoint of epistemic sovereignty is often made by invoking a sort of common sense, which is frequently presented as speaking through the impartial voice of science and the precepts of scientific epistemologies. A good example of this in the field of linguistics comes from the language debates in nineteenth-century Hungary, which were about establishing “linguistic expertise as disinterested, scientific knowledge which could be relied upon” (Gal 2001: 32). A few decades later, Saussure’s construction of language as an autonomous entity, with no place for any subjective or social dimensions, endowed linguistics with scientific credentials (Bourdieu 1991). That said, paraphrasing Foucault (1980), straining to establish the scientificity of a discipline (e.g., Linguistics, Sociolinguistics) does not amount to “demonstrating once and for all” that the propositions of the discipline are the outcome of verifiable procedures (see Heller 2020). Instead, such attempts are about investing discourses (e.g., linguistic and language-in-society discourses) and those who uphold them “with the effects of a power which the West since Medieval times has attributed to science and has reserved for those engaged in scientific discourse” (Foucault 1980: 85).

A certain disaffection with scientific knowledge constructions based on the assumption that evidence speaks for itself can be found in current takes on the publics of sociolinguistics in late modernity (see Erdocia and Soler 2022 for an elaboration of the concept of publics). *À la* Latour, these critical views consider science as a social enterprise. They maintain that disciplinary debates rarely revolve only around scientifically or objectively authoritative statements, but around what counts as evidence, its interpretation, and how the message is optimally delivered to mobilise support for political and policy endeavours (Heller 2020; Soler and Erdocia 2020). As a result of the dialectic relationship of sociolinguists and publics,

expertise blurs, voices of epistemic authority are both enacted and contested, and even the notion of evidence itself is challenged (Soler 2021). In short, who as an expert or truth-teller in language matters is mutable and in dispute.

### 3 Background context

Discussions about language and gender have been ongoing in Catalonia for quite some time, particularly in connection to GNL (e.g., Junyent 2013; Lledó 2005); earlier discussions emerged in parallel to those around the Spanish language, which appeared as a reaction to the then flourishing institutional manuals of style promoting the use of GNL (see Bosque 2012). However, in both Catalan and Spanish, GNL debates entered the public sphere later than in anglophone contexts, where such questions had already emerged against the background of language and gender activism in the 1970s and 1980s (Pauwels 2003). As Romance languages, Catalan and Spanish have gender inflection in nouns and accompanying elements in the noun phrase (adjectives and determiners). An important trigger for discussions about GNL in Spain has been the attempts made by some speakers to avoid using the masculine as a generic form, particularly in agent nouns to refer to unspecified collectives (e.g., *los ciudadanos* “the citizens.MASC”). The different alternatives to the generic masculine that have been proposed (e.g., Grijelmo 2019; Lledó 2005) have been met with opposition from some linguists<sup>2</sup> (Roca 2005), who argue that grammar and sexism in society

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<sup>2</sup> With the label “linguists” here we follow Junyent’s use of the term and refer to the broad group of professionals who tend to conceptualise language as an autonomous system and follow a structuralist approach to the study of linguistic phenomena. We do so with the caveat that this definition is not shared by all scholars in the discipline. For a more in-depth discussion of the epistemological and intra-disciplinary tensions in sociolinguistics and our own positioning, see Erdocia and Soler (2022).

are not connected, and thus the use of the masculine generic is not a form of invisibilising women (Escandell-Vidal 2020) (see Erdocia 2022a for a lengthier description of GNL debates in the context of Spain).

The period on which we are focusing in the present article began on 16 July 2021, when the Catalan Minister of Equality and Feminisms, Tània Verge, publicly and on Catalan TV defended the use of the recently introduced gender-neutral morpheme in Catalan (a suffix -*i*) as an “act of love for the Catalan language”. During the TV interview, Verge argued that the -*i* morphological ending showed that Catalan has a non-binary morpheme for gender, with political implications for making non-binary people more visible. She added: “el llenguatge és una eina de comunicació i de compromís amb alguns objectius socials” (language is a tool of communication and of commitment to some social goals; Planta Baixa, 2021). Just four days later, on 20 July 2021, Maria Carme Junyent, professor of linguistics at the University of Barcelona, responded to Verge in an opinion piece (Junyent 2021b), arguing that Verge’s arguments, from a linguistic point of view, were flawed and made little sense, and that *totis* (or the gender-neutral morpheme -*i*) presented a far too challenging grammatical complication that would make its use unsustainable. More broadly, the Catalan debate emerged just a few months after the Spanish government (a centre-left coalition) asked the Real Academia de la Lengua Española (RAE) about the possibility of amending the Spanish constitution to re-write it with more inclusive language forms. RAE’s response was that the text of the constitution is grammatically fine as it stands (RAE, 2020), and that replacing the masculine generic forms with gender-neutral ones would constitute a politically motivated act that was beyond the institution’s responsibility (Muñoz Machado 2020).

In the weeks following the Verge vs. Junyent confrontation, other authors joined the conversation, leading up to the publication on 1 September 2021 of a book edited by Junyent (2021a) on the very topic of language and gender. The book bears the explicitly provocative title *Som dones, som lingüistes, som moltes i diem prou* (We are women, we are linguists, we are many, and we say enough), and it includes 70 opinion pieces by women with a special connection to language (professional linguists, scholars, copyeditors, translators, etc.) on the pros and cons of GNL. Most of the authors share the general thesis against GNL expressed by Junyent in her opinion piece responding to Verge, but some do explore the limits of GNL discourses from a critical perspective and point out some potentially positive aspects of it. The publication of the book is important for our article as it marked a turning point in the development of the public debate about GNL. Indeed, the debate gathered a significant amount of media attention, with the editor Junyent appearing in a wide range of Catalan media outlets (with many interviews and op-eds) up to the final point of our data collection for this article (5 April 2022).

Junyent, therefore, became such a central figure in the Catalan context that a focus on her as a public intellectual figure seems justified. A professor of linguistics, Junyent founded in 1992 the Grup d'Estudis de Llengües Amenaçades in Barcelona, a research group to promote the value of linguistic diversity and research on endangered languages. In recent years, she had become increasingly known to the general public in Catalonia for her critical stance on linguistic issues – not just GNL, but also the minoritisation of Catalan. Her stance had earned her even more public recognition and allowed her to occupy more institutional spaces. In 2019, she was awarded the Creu de Sant Jordi, one of the most prestigious

symbolic recognitions offered by the Catalan Government, for her work on the minoritisation of Catalan language (Generalitat de Catalunya 2019). In March 2022, Junyent was named President of the Consell Lingüístic Assessor of the Department of Education of the Catalan Government (Generalitat de Catalunya 2022), a consulting body dedicated to providing advice to the government on matters of language and education. Finally, from January 2022 to June 2023, Junyent had had a weekly spot of approximately 15 minutes on *El Matí de Catalunya Ràdio*, one of Catalonia's most listened-to radio morning shows, where she presented and discussed topics related to general linguistics (including language and gender). This media presence was added to her longstanding collaboration with *Vilaweb*, a widely read online newspaper in Catalonia, in which she had published regularly since 2015, with a peak in August 2020, when she wrote a short article every day. In sum, given all this background, Junyent's academic, institutional, and media profile make her a very singular case that is worth analysing from the point of view of her multifaceted public figure, with potential implications for the validation of epistemic authority and the circulation of linguistic knowledge across society at large.

#### **4 Material and methodological procedure**

We collected a total of 37 media items, mostly articles, op-eds, and interviews in online newspapers, but also round-table discussions and book presentations (available online post facto). As already mentioned, the timespan of our material ranges from 16 July 2021 to 5 April 2022, although most of the items were published in September 2021, when the debate was at its peak. We selected items with content that was relevant to the topic of our study:

GNL controversies in connection to the Catalan language. Given that much of the controversy in the debate was played out on social media, we followed relevant media accounts (particularly, but not exclusively, Junyent's Twitter profile) from where we would obtain regular notifications of newly published items in a range of media outlets. All the items were produced with a Catalan-speaking audience in mind, and the vast majority were produced originally in Catalan, including those that appear in the Catalonia edition of Madrid-based newspapers (e.g., *El País*). We did not, however, exclude items written in Spanish, but we decided not to include items focusing on the GNL debate in the Spanish language to ensure the consistency and coherence of the study, and also because of our better knowledge of the Catalan sociolinguistic context and its nature as a language-ideological fertile pool (Erdocia and Soler 2022). We also did not include social media interactions in our data: relevant and illuminating as they may have been, we considered that this would exceed the scope of our study.

In terms of analytical procedure and tools, we considered that reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was an approach that suited our goals and research orientation. As Braun and Clarke (2021) explain, there are different types of thematic analysis, each with its own paradigmatic underpinnings, some more positivistic and code-oriented, other more critical and constructivist. RTA belongs to the latter as "it emphasises the importance of the researcher's subjectivity as analytic *resource* and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation" (Braun and Clarke 2021: 330; emphasis in the original). In RTA, themes do not "emerge" from the data, they are not there to be "discovered" by the researcher, but they are instead *generated* by the researcher in a process of constant thinking and rethinking, going back and forth from data to theory (Braun and Clarke 2021:

342). Braun and Clarke (p. 331) outline six specific steps to conduct RTA: 1) data familiarisation; 2) systematic data coding; 3) generating initial themes; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining, and naming themes; and 6) writing the report. While two authors were involved in this process, we did not strive for “inter-rater coding reliability”, but coding was done in a collaborative way, developing a richer and more nuanced reading of the data (Braun and Clarke 2019: 594).

We started collecting data for our study in August 2021, and we took the Verge vs. Junyent exchange in July as the starting point for data collection since we felt this was the moment that inaugurated the public performances we wanted to analyse. We continued collecting online material until April 2022, when it was clear that the frequency of items touching upon the debate had considerably decreased (24 of the 37 items in our data set appeared between July and September 2021, while the remaining 13 were sparsely distributed between October 2021 and April 2022). We downloaded the items, primarily into PDF files; in the case of interviews and round-table discussions, we first transcribed the audio files<sup>2</sup>. The reading and coding process began afterwards, with both authors involved in different intensities and roles.

In stage 1 of the analysis, Soler took the lead in carefully reading the data set. The guiding question at this point was: what main ideas feature in the debate; what argumentative positions can be detected? This led to a first general overview of the exchange of opinions in the public debate, which we present by way of a topic summary in subsection 5.1 of our findings below. Stage 1 comprised steps 1 and 2 of Braun and Clarke’s six-step RTA, as outlined above.



In stage 2 of the analysis (RTA's steps 3 to 5), Erdocia took the lead, particularly with the task of funnelling the data through the theoretical framework of the study to refine, define, and name the themes of the analysis. For this stage, the focus was on Junyent's engagement, and the question that guided our inquiry was: how is knowledge about language and expertise in the area performed and validated in the public arena? This led to the generation of the key themes around which we built our analysis: 1) Junyent's construction of epistemic authority; 2) Junyent's performances against public authorities; and 3) media validation of Junyent's epistemic standpoint. We elaborate on these themes in Section 5. In RTA, themes and topic summaries are different, in the sense that themes are "patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept" (Braun and Clarke 2019: 593). To generate themes, in stage 2 of the analysis, the back and forth from data to theory was more intense than in stage 1, which had produced a topic summary of the debate. This is not to suggest that in stage 1 we took an atheoretical and naïve approach to data analysis. On the contrary, our approach, as already mentioned, was inevitably informed by our previous knowledge of how language-ideological debates are structured in Catalan media (Soler and Erdocia 2020), as well as the disciplinary, epistemological, and professional tensions amongst linguistics scholars in this context (Erdocia and Soler 2022). In addition, we are also not suggesting that the outcome of stage 1 (a topic summary of the debate) was theoretically irrelevant, a simple summary of the different positions of the debate. These positions themselves and the way they are presented (as we analysed them) fed directly into and informed our analysis in stage 2.

However, it is important to emphasise that in stage 2 of the analysis, our paradigmatic assumptions, as well as our personal positions as researchers, took a central role. With that in mind, we explicate these two components next. In terms of our theoretical and paradigmatic orientations, we undertake our analysis from three main starting points. First, to claim truth about the appropriateness of, for example, masculine generics in standard Catalan or Spanish on the basis of the scientific status of a discipline (e.g., Grammar, Linguistics) entails refuting or challenging epistemic alternatives (e.g., sociolinguistics, experimental research on perceptions of linguistic gender bias, gender activism). In short, constructing truth statements is a way of strengthening certain epistemic alignments, undermining counteralignments and, often, evading disagreements. We assume that manifesting truth claims automatically positions the claimant (intellectuals, scholars) in one of the competing blocs at work in the epistemic and ideological struggle (Blommaert 1999). This assumption also involves the position of the authors of this article. The social approach to epistemology that we adopt implies the denial of the traditional framing of epistemic viewpoint as a view from nowhere (Fricker et al. 2020).

Second, in line with Arendt's reflections, we understand truth claims as embedded in discourses of epistemic authority that present a range of arguments other than exclusive scientific knowledge, such as interpretations and judgements of the political factors, moral values, and disciplinary authority that pervade the particular linguistic context of dispute around GNL (see Erdocia 2022a; Erdocia 2022b). Evidence- and value- based arguments interact and feed each other discursively.

Third, the consideration of something as true needs agreement and consent, that is to say, it is also the result of social practices (Fricker et al. 2020). Following Foucault, regimes of truth entail specific constraining and enabling ways of linking manifestations of truth with the procedures and subjects who are their operators in the public sphere. Truth in the public domain is a contested issue and power over its constitution, framing, and dissemination shifts between, institutions, scholars, media, and the publics (Fleck et al. 2009).

We acknowledge that these theoretical orientations feed directly into our own stance in favour of GNL proposals, which differs from the views of Junyent, who is at the centre of our analysis. As critical sociolinguists, we are in principle supportive of GNL proposals, albeit not uncritically, a way of explicitly opening the debate within society at large about gender inequalities. Our previous writings on the topic emphasise precisely the notion of language as a terrain of ideological struggle (Erdocia 2022a, 2022b; Soler 2021, 2022), a struggle in which some linguists have become active agents, as we aim to show in our analysis. We therefore disagree with Junyent on one of her core arguments, namely that language is an abstract object, and that speakers can have little conscious impact in determining its evolution. In sum, although we have striven to adopt an epistemic reflexive lens throughout the entire research process (Salö 2018), we assume that the outcome of this study is influenced by our epistemologies and subjectivities, and we own any potential colouring of the analysis that this may entail, in line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) reasoning around RTA.

## **5 Claiming epistemic authority**

## **5.1 Background: the epistemic struggle**

To contextualise the epistemic dispute in which Junyent is involved, we draw on the public discussion about GNL in connection mainly to the Catalan language in the period between July 2021 and April 2022. Broadly speaking, two main lines of epistemic-related arguments emerged in the discussion: those in favour and those against GNL.

Those against GNL maintain that language functions and develops naturally with its own internal rules and norms. They consider that grammatical gender has nothing to do with biological sex, and treating the two as parallel creates a confused belief that by changing the grammatical gender rules one can alter social relations to achieve greater social justice and to reduce gender inequalities. This belief is argued to be incorrect, because social reality does not change as a result of linguistic (formal) change. That is to say, societal changes can bring about language change, but not the other way around. Finally, and importantly, if language is considered to work internally in its own way, this means that speakers have no access to allow them to modify its deep-level grammatical structures (i.e., no agency to modify them).

In contrast, those in favour of GNL shift the focus of attention from institutional regulation to speakers' right to choose whichever forms they find themselves more comfortable with. In addition, they hold that while language does not shape social reality and determine a vision of it, it does provide a framework with which to interpret it. Certain linguistic structures are imbued with gendered power inequalities, so it is justified (from a feminist

perspective) to attempt to modify these linguistic structures with the goal of reducing those inequalities. Finally, they argue that society has already changed, and that the debate itself is a sign that language is but adapting to ongoing societal changes.

The epistemic nature of the struggle is exemplified in the following fragment from a radio programme. The discussion between Junyent and Esther Monzó, professor in translation studies, revolves around the impact of language on social inequalities, as evidenced by empirical studies. Monzó notes that the fact that some scholars seem to ignore what studies about language and gender bias have shown is the source of the controversies around GNL. Drawing on experimental studies (for an overview of which ones, see Monzó-Nebot 2021), Monzó argues that masculine generics represent the dominant group (men) and advocates for alternative forms of representation through language. Extract 1 shows how the conversation continues.

**Extract 1** (Junyent and Monzó, radio show *Pròxima Parada, À Punt*, 20 September 2021)<sup>3</sup>

**Junyent:** But we do not represent the dominant group [when we use the masculine as a generic]. That is the error and that is what these proposals are achieving. <[>

**Monzó:** These <[> experiments tell us the contrary. Again, we should focus on whether you think these experiments are not well done methodologically. # But the data that they provide, the facts that they outline are that what we call unmarked is cognitively marked. It is indicating the image of a man ## Experiments that have been done since

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<sup>3</sup> All extracts have been translated by the authors. Transcription conventions: #, short pause; ##, long pause; (xxx), uninterpretable speech; [%], laughter; <[>, simultaneous speech; <...[?], unclear speech; [...] ellipsis of text; [TEXT] clarification fragment.

the 70s in which what we have been talking about before in the video that you showed us, that's a replica study of an experiment in 73. I mean, these studies are older than me<sup>4</sup>.

During the debate, other voices emerged that were critical of Junyent's stance. For example, Rudolf Ortega, a linguist at the newspaper *El País*, wrote in an opinion piece on 26 July 2021: "despite linguists insisting that the grammatical reason is on their part, and that they stress the idea that the masculine generic includes everything, it is increasingly clear that language makes some groups invisible, in this case half of the population." (Ortega, 2021). Bel Olid, Catalan writer, translator, and gender activist, noted that gender-neutral language forms had existed in Catalan for some time, and the fact that they have been circulating amongst a minority of the population does not make these forms less relevant or insignificant. Olid mentioned this and other rebuttal arguments during a radio debate with the very Junyent on 2 September 2021. That said, it is true that the counterarguments to Junyent's thesis did not gather much media attention; this is key, because it is revealing of the structure of the debate itself and its political-economic dynamics. However, given the stated aims of our article and space constraints, our goal is not to dissect all sides of the debate in great detail, but rather to focus on Junyent's own discourse strategies to gain epistemic authority. Suffice this brief presentation of different voices in the debate as an illustration of the

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<sup>4</sup> **Junyent:** Però és que no representem el grup dominant [usant el masculí genèric]. Aquest és l'error i això és el que s'està aconseguint amb aquestes propostes <[>]

**Monzó:** Aquests <[>] experiments ens diuen el contrari. De nou, ens hauríem de centrar en si trobes que els experiments estan mal fets en els mètodes. # Però és que les dades que ens estan donant, els fets als quals estan remetent és que el que es diu no marcat està marcant cognitivament. Està indicant la imatge d'un home ## Experiments que estan portant-se des del 70 en què el que hem comentat abans el vídeo proposat és una rèplica d'un experiment del 73. És que. És que son més vells que jo.

background of epistemic contention against which Junyent's public engagement is situated.

We turn now to present the analysis of her interventions.

## 5.2 Knowledge and legitimation

As one would expect, linguists and their object of study are at the centre of the construction of epistemic authority as related to language and gender. Extract 2 nicely captures many of the arguments included in Junyent's public performances around GNL. Adopting a markedly Saussurean orientation to language, she describes language as an autonomous, self-regulating entity and maintains that nobody should dare to meddle with language artificially, particularly not in its grammatical aspects. The piece then revolves about GNL regulatory proposals in institutional settings.

**Extract 2** (Junyent, opinion piece, *Vilaweb*, 27 July 2021)

We, linguists, know (in general) that all languages are equal and that, if we had to demonstrate the contrary, we wouldn't succeed. And there is one thing that is clear to us: language is not something that we do. But politicians don't do it either. It's the people who do it. If people change it, and they succeed, then changes will be introduced and established [...] But this is what happens with proposals about gender-neutral language, that politicians impose them on us. When I talk about imposition, I talk about the courses, the guides, norms, etc. etc. about GNL (and nowadays inclusive language) that have been produced all over the country, and I talk about the moment in which this, which no one has discussed,

which does not emanate from the people, which is not a frequent thing, becomes law. [...] Because languages work the way they do, beyond the will of speakers. And that is why we can say all languages are equal. Because no one can control them. And yes, I am outraged that someone may try to do that. Whenever I have talked about this I have provided linguistic arguments, I have provided examples. [...] Well, then, if any linguist – myself included – would do this [to provide arguments for how to change language], besides betraying our job, we would be doing what all dictators have tried to do always: to invent a way of speaking with which we could supposedly control thought. No one can invent a language (a natural one, of course, I do not talk about artificial languages), and whoever tries to do that is because they do not have any idea of how languages work<sup>5</sup>.

Junyent portrays linguists as the only ones who know about the real functioning of linguistic mechanisms. In other words, linguists are represented as the actors holding the exclusive authority to make informed claims about language-related matters. Junyent characterises linguistics with a view from nowhere, so to say, evoking a position of epistemic neutrality in a context of competition for recognition. As we will see below, this depiction of linguistics and linguists is a recurring theme in Junyent's interventions.

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<sup>5</sup> Els lingüistes que, en general, sabem que totes les llengües són iguals i que, si haguéssim de demostrar el contrari, no ens en sortiríem, hi ha una cosa que tenim claríssima: la llengua no la fem nosaltres. Però tampoc no la fan els polítics. La fa la gent. Si la gent la canvia i se'n surt, doncs els canvis s'introduiran i s'estabilitzaran [...] això és el que passa amb les propostes de llengua no sexista, que són els polítics els que ens les imposen. Quan parlo d'imposició, parlo de tots els cursos, guies, normes, etc. etc. de llengua no sexista (ara inclusiva) que s'han fet arreu del país. I parlo del moment en què això, que ningú no ha debatut, que no ha sortit de la gent, que no és habitual, es converteix en llei. [...] Perquè les llengües funcionen com funcionen al marge de la voluntat dels parlants. I per això podem dir que totes són iguals. Perquè ningú no les pot controlar. I sí, m'escandalitza que algú vulgui fer-ho. Sempre que he comentat això he donat arguments lingüístics, n'he posat exemples [...] Doncs bé, si qualsevol lingüista –o jo– féssim això [donar arguments sobre com modificar la llengua], a part de traïr la nostra feina, estariem fent allò que tots els dictadors han volgut fer sempre: inventar una manera de parlar amb què suposadament controlarien el pensament. Ningú no es pot inventar una llengua (natural, és clar, no parlo de les llengües artificials) i qui ho intenta és perquè no té ni idea de com funcionen les llengües.



The construction of epistemic authority in the public realm is not solely confined to claiming linguists' pre-eminent position over language issues. It is also about putting in the spotlight those external actors who do meddle in matters of language. As illustrated in Extract 2, Junyent talks about the nature of language and describes it as something that speakers, not politicians, do with their daily practices. The identification of and emphasis on *the other* – politicians – is probably inevitable in a context of epistemic contest and when a wide range of actors from non-linguistics backgrounds are involved. What is perhaps more relevant for our account is that Junyent situates the purportedly abstract epistemic position of linguistics out of reach for any of the competing epistemic standpoints (Rouse 2006) more in favour of GNL. The statement “they have no idea about how languages work”, implying that GNL relies on fallacious arguments, exemplifies this point.

In this fragment, Junyent advances an argument according to which the course of action on GNL taken by some institutions is a top-down initiative imposed only with a political agenda in mind, that is, with no scientific knowledge basis (see Erdocia 2022a). For instance, she unambiguously signals GNL manuals of style as indices of political imposition resulting from a wrong presupposition of how language works. The way in which she asserts the validity of this statement in the public sphere is a good example of a truth claim in the sense that it seems to preclude debate, on the basis of the opposition between valid and invalid knowledge. Significantly, this argument is eloquently voiced in terms of oppositions pivoting around the ideas of social control and imposition: linguists vs. politicians, true vs. fallacious argument, legitimate vs. illegitimate knowledge. Structuring the multiplicity of approaches

to GNL or, more generally, to language regulation in terms of we vs. they dichotomies is indeed characteristic of Junyent's interventions as will also be made clear in Extract 6.

It is worth noting Junyent's use of strong analogies. For instance, while linguists are assigned a benign role, those promoting "a way of speaking with which [they] could supposedly control thought" are "dictators" (or "totalitarian" in Extract 4), and this implicitly refers to those arguing for GNL. In Aristotle's terms, this exemplifies epideictic intervention, that is, a means of persuasion used by intellectuals to praise people's moral integrity or condemn their lack of it (Baert and Morgan 2018). Once again, we find oppositional we/good vs. they/bad structures in Junyent's discourse.

### **5.3 Performing against authorities**

If GNL is merely represented as a top-down phenomenon, then it follows almost logically that the epistemic authority about language-related matters by politicians, government officials, and institutional leaders is brought into question, indeed characterised as illegitimate. The criticism of governing authorities meddling with language as something unacceptable is a significant theme in the debate; we see this discursive move illustrated in Extracts 3 and 4, frequently accompanied by truth statements. In Extract 3, Junyent reacts to a journalist's question about who is entitled to change the norm and if the government can or should do that.

**Extract 3** (Radio interview/debate with Junyent, RAC1, 2 September 2021)

**Marquès (journalist):** Because who must change the norm? We need to see who has to change the norm. Can the government do that?

**Junyent:** No, of course not #. Because it's insane. I mean, if the government can change the norm, we are lost. What do they know? I mean, no #. Because we should understand that the norm is not something that someone makes up or imposes to someone else, or that is created by someone. The norm is a selection made from the variation of language<sup>6</sup>.

Junyent's explicit answer "What do they know?" is unambiguous. The recurring argument is similar to the one already seen above in Extract 2, that politicians do not have the authority to sanction language-related matters in connection to GNL with a top-down approach. This argument re-appears again in Extract 4, with a passage following the thread that language (particularly in its formal aspects) can only be changed by actual speakers' uses. The reasons behind proposals for using GNL, she argues again, are based on misunderstandings of how language works.

Indeed, grammar, understood as the core component of language, accounts for a big part of Junyent's criticism of GNL. In Extract 4 (from an interview together with linguistics colleague Neus Nogué) grammar is presented as a structured system, a sort of naturally self-evolutive and self-adaptative organism that admits no planned changes. Junyent represents linguistics through the voice of authority-as-objectivity, that is, as an objective enterprise with the

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<sup>6</sup> **Marquès (periodista):** Perquè qui ha de canviar la norma? Hem de veure qui ha de canviar la norma. El govern pot canviar la norma?

**Junyent:** No, és clar #. I és que és brutal. O sigui si el govern pot canviar la norma estem perduts. Què saben ells? És que no #. Però és que hauríem d'entendre que la norma no és una cosa que s'inventi algú o que imposi a algú o que creï algú. La norma és una selecció que es fa a partir de la variació de la llengua.

rather neutral aim of describing and explaining exclusively linguistic phenomena. This is not at all an original argument in GNL debates; in fact such a view of language in it can be traced back to the 1970s and the then emerging language and gender debates in Anglophone contexts (see Cameron 2012). What seems newer in her argumentation is the confrontational style she adopts, particularly her opposition to politicians not only meddling with language, but imposing certain rules and norms without the greenlight of linguists.

**Extract 4** (TV interview/debate with Junyent and Nogué, TV3, 1 September 2021)

**Junyent:** I think there is an underlying misunderstanding, which is that supposedly grammar is something that someone has created – grammarians, academics #, and they are always men. And that's not true. We all make the grammar, and one can only wish we would know where it comes from #, that's what we, linguists, work on, trying to understand language #. So, a system that has worked for millennia, which has kept adapting itself to all situations, to try and modify it, I do not know how to define this, but really, we are way less than an ant within an entire universe, to believe that now, with one artificial modification, we will fix a system that has worked for millennia ##

**Heredia (journalist):** OK, then, let's take a look at it. Because in the prologue, by Carme Junyent, we read: who is the Generalitat de Catalunya [the Catalan Government] to make suggestions of how we need to talk or write? #

**Junyent:** Indeed, who are they? ## That is to say, we speak, and the work of linguists is to explain and to explain to us how we speak. I am constantly being asked: What should we do? <[>]

**Heredia:** Yes <[>], I was about to ask, to both of you #

**Junyent:** Well, let's see what Neus may have to say, but to me, this is not our job, and if we did that, we would be dictators. That is, indeed, totalitarian. To tell people how they should talk<sup>7</sup>.

This rather narrow understanding of linguistics has consequences for the discipline itself because it delineates the scope for what research on language can or cannot be considered as linguistics. For example, and following Bourdieu (1991), the focus on conceptualising language as an autonomous system leaves no place for any subjective or social dimensions, and indeed this is what endows linguistics with scientific credentials, according to some linguists and public actors (see Extract 6). Importantly, such a view may also curtail the potential policy implications of research with a different orientation to language (e.g., psycholinguistic and experimental approaches to linguistic gender bias; see Extract 1).

Seen from the public realm, and leaving aside disciplinary implications, modes of assertion that allude to an objective knowledge free from ideological grounds and characterisations of alternative epistemic standpoints as of a totalitarian nature, such as the ones in Extract 4

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<sup>7</sup> **Junyent:** jo crec que hi ha un malentès de fons que és que se suposa que la gramàtica se l'ha inventat algú, la crea algú. Els gramàtics, els acadèmics #, i sempre són homes. I això no és cert. La gramàtica la fem entre tots i tant de bo sabéssim d'on surt, vull dir #, amb això treballem els lingüistes, intentant entendre el llenguatge #. Clar, un sistema que ha funcionat durant mil·lennis, que s'ha anat adaptant a totes les situacions, pretendre que es pot millorar, jo no sé com es pot qualificar, però de veritat, és que som molt menys que una formiga en l'univers com per creure que ara, fent una modificació artificial, arreglarem un sistema que ha funcionat durant mil·lennis ##

**Heredia (periodista):** Val, som-hi doncs, perquè en el pròleg, la Carme Junyent diu: qui és la Generalitat de Catalunya per fer propostes de com hem de parlar o escriure? #

**Junyent:** És que qui és? ## És a dir, nosaltres parlem, i la feina dels lingüistes és explicar i explicar-nos com parlem. A mi em demanen continuament que digui, doncs què hem de fer? <[>

**Heredia:** Sí <[>, jo li anava a demanar, els hi anava a demanar ara #

**Junyent:** Doncs a veure quina resposta té la Neus, però jo, és que aquesta no és la nostra feina, i si la féssim, seríem dictadors. Això sí que és totalitari. Dir-li a la gent com ha de parlar.

and 6, are true claims intending to be peremptorily acknowledged by the public. Following Arendt, such modes of communication that deal with truth are necessarily domineering.

In Extract 5, two key actors on issues to do with language enter the picture: the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (IEC; Institute of Catalan Studies) and the Real Academia Española (RAE; Spanish Royal Academy). In contrast to government institutions and politicians in the Catalan context, IEC is repeatedly presented in the debate as an actor that does hold legitimate epistemic authority about questions to do with language. However, because it has remained largely silent on GNL proposals, unlike RAE (Bosque 2012), Junyent indirectly criticises IEC's approach to GNL, blaming this institution for its silence and ambiguity from a normative perspective. As a result, IEC's (but not RAE's) epistemic authority is portrayed as inadequate, since as a language regulatory body, it should intervene more actively on this question than it has done so far. Junyent expresses this idea in Extract 5, a passage from an interview with one of the largest Madrid-based Spanish newspapers.

**Extract 5** (Junyent, interview in *El País*, 21 January 2022)

**Interviewer:** You are angry because those who promote inclusive language ignore linguists, aren't you?

**Junyent:** Yes. Someone has some random idea and starts suggesting things. Things that if you know how languages work, they do not make any sense. But since no one listens to professional voices... Although these voices haven't really spoken much either [...] At any rate, this kind of silence happens in the case of Catalan, right? In the case of Spanish, RAE has indeed clarified its position and said that this didn't make any sense, and they did that with a

well-reasoned report by Ignacio Bosque, who then fell victim to a discrediting campaign. Here (in Catalonia), the Institute of Catalan Studies doesn't say a thing. The excuse they normally give is that if this ends up being accepted by people, they will have to accept it too. There are teachers who force their students to write like this. Who protects the student? Within teaching, instructions are clear. Texts published by the University of Barcelona are all written like that. But yes, they have not consulted any philologist<sup>8</sup>.

Extract 5 contains an additional recurring theme in Junyent's interventions: the rather poor role that linguists have played in the discussions about GNL. More concretely, Junyent directs her criticism to the fact that linguists were not consulted in deliberations that led to the adoption of GNL proposals (Erdocia 2022a), on the one hand, and that professional bodies such as IEC, which were in a position to have their voice heard, desisted from speaking up against GNL, on the other hand. Junyent's extensive media exposure and willingness to embody a public discordant voice based on exclusive academic and scientific grounds probably serve as a counterpoint to the relatively scarce presence of linguists, including IEC, in the particular discussion on GNL. In her purported role as a public expert in linguistics-only matters, Junyent has stood out from other critics with a marked ideological orientation who fight GNL on a culture-war logic (Erdocia 2022b). Indeed, Junyent identifies

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<sup>8</sup> **Entrevistador:** Está enfadada porque quienes impulsan el lenguaje inclusivo pasan de los lingüistas, ¿no?

**Junyent:** Sí. Alguien tiene la ocurrencia y empieza a proponer cosas. Cosas que, si sabes cómo funcionan las lenguas, no tienen sentido. Pero como nadie escucha a los profesionales... Aunque tampoco los profesionales han hablado [...] De todas formas, todo eso de que los profesionales no hablan ocurre en el caso del catalán, ¿eh? En el caso del castellano la RAE sí que dejó clara su postura y dijo que esto no tenía sentido, y lo hizo con un informe muy razonado de Ignacio Bosque, al que montaron una campaña de descrédito. Aquí (en Cataluña), el Instituto de Estudios del Catalán no dice nada. La excusa suele ser que esto, si se acaba aceptando por la gente, ellos tendrán que aceptarlo. Hay profesores que obligan a sus alumnos a escribir así. ¿Quién ampara al alumno? En la enseñanza hay directrices claras. Los textos que publica la Universidad de Barcelona están todos escritos así. Eso sí, no han consultado a ningún filólogo.

herself in some interventions as feminist and the inclusion of only female authors in her edited volume conveys an unequivocal message distinct from that of reactionary groups.

#### **5.4 The role of media: amplifier more than challenger**

Returning to the role of linguists in society, our data indicates that public linguistic intellectuals, or at least the strategies (e.g., appropriation of epistemic authority) used by some of them to transmit their message, appear to have some influence on the publics (see also Erdocia and Soler 2022). The editorial “Grammar and Politics” in Extract 6, which *La Vanguardia* devoted to Junyent’s volume, demonstrates this point. *La Vanguardia*, published in Barcelona, is one of the most influential newspapers in Catalonia and throughout Spain. Reproducing linguistic examples from the volume and providing their own interpretative framework (“certain ideological impositions”), the editorial questions the practical implications and effectiveness of adopting GNL in institutional settings. Resonating strongly with Junyent’s opinions, and in line with the centrist-conservative orientation of the newspaper, the piece aims to send a note of caution on this “verbal revolution”.

#### **Extract 6 (Editorial, *La Vanguardia*, 10 January 2022)**

We are, therefore, facing an issue that excites sensitivities and calls for caution. But caution need not be mistaken for silence or an unquestioned grammatical surrender. That is where the interest in this essay and some of its argumentation comes from. For example, that in carrying out this verbal revolution, a set of incoherences, confusions, and banalisations



appear, even cases that lead to legal insecurities. Or that the double forms, supposedly inclusive, end up having an undesired exclusionist binary effect. Or that, in most cases, certain ideological impositions do not contribute anything perceptible or practical towards equality. Or, in sum, that it is society, and not grammar, that needs to change so that progress can be something more than cosmetic or symbolic. [...] This reminder, diverse and contrasted, that grammar is one thing and that politics is another, seems relevant to us. Grammar is a science and it deserves to be considered as such. Politics is not, as we unfortunately and frequently observe. It is necessary to free language from any sexist hindrance and to promote in it the visibility of women. But not by any means nor at any cost<sup>9</sup>.

The newspaper reiterates Junyent's arguments according to which linguistics is a scientific field of inquiry free from ideological bias, indirectly noting the trustworthiness of linguists' scientific knowledge. Perhaps surprisingly for a language discussion in the twenty-first century, these arguments closely resemble the language debates of nineteenth-century Hungary, which aimed to spread the idea that linguistic expertise was a "disinterested, scientific knowledge which could be relied upon" (Gal 2001: 32).

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<sup>9</sup> Estamos, pues, ante un asunto que excita sensibilidades y aconseja prudencia. Pero la prudencia no debe confundirse con el silencio o la acrítica claudicación gramatical. De ahí el interés de este ensayo y de algunas de sus reflexiones. Por ejemplo, que en el ejercicio de esta revolución verbal se producen incoherencias, confusiones, banalizaciones e incluso casos que abocan a la inseguridad jurídica. O que el desdoblamiento de propósito inclusivo tiene como efecto indeseado un lenguaje binario excluyente. O que, en la mayoría de casos, ciertas imposiciones ideológicas no aportan nada tangible o práctico a la igualdad. O, en definitiva, que es la sociedad, y no la gramática, la que tiene que cambiar para que el progreso sea algo más que cosmético o simbólico [...] Este recordatorio, diverso y contrastado, de que la gramática es una cosa y la política es otra nos parece oportuno. La gramática es una ciencia y como tal merece consideración. La política no lo es, como por desgracia observamos a menudo. Es preciso liberar el lenguaje de toda rémora machista y fomentar en él la visibilidad de la mujer. Pero no de cualquier manera ni a cualquier coste.

The last part of the fragment, in which grammar and politics are starkly juxtaposed, is of particular importance for our account. It is not only that Junyent successfully gets her gravitas recognised and her stance against GNL validated by a well-respected newspaper in the institutional realm. The editorial also reproduces the simple axiom that because linguistics is science, it should receive consideration. Such a truth statement in the general media has two effects. Firstly, as already indicated in Extract 2, it suppresses at the stroke of the pen conflicting epistemic standpoints adopted in other research on language (e.g., empirical data resulting from experimental research is less scientific and should, therefore, not receive consideration) and invests the conventional conception of linguistics, understood in a narrowly structuralist sense, with the status of a dominating epistemology. Second, with this editorial Junyent also succeeds, perhaps unwittingly, in reducing the epistemic struggle of which her own stance is part (Rouse 2006) to a matter of mundane political party strife. As *La Vanguardia* puts it, unlike linguistics, “politics is not [a science], as we unfortunately and frequently observe”. Whether Junyent’s rejection of GNL is a product of her structuralist approach to language alone or whether it is tied to some other political ideological stance (e.g., anti-totalitarianism, as we have seen above in Extract 4) is something we can only speculate about, but the *La Vanguardia* piece does seem to connect her structuralism to a conservative ideological stance, regardless of Junyent’s own position about the latter.

Media, then, may have played a key role in amplifying and giving more currency to Junyent’s thesis. However, it could have also played a different role, indeed challenging or scrutinising Junyent’s position. In one of the first appearances during the debate (on 31 August 2021), Junyent was interviewed on Catalan public television with another colleague, Neus Nogué.

The bulk of the interview revolved around GNL and the upcoming publication of Junyent's edited volume on it. However, toward the end of the interview, the journalist (Lídia Heredia) decided to shift the topic and ask her two guests about the question of the sustainability of Catalan. There was a moment of pause in the conversation, during which short interviews in the streets of Barcelona were shown, people being asked about what they think of the question of the future of Catalan. Many say yes, the language is indeed in danger, something needs to be done about it, etc. Opinions were expressed both in Catalan and Spanish, and so on. When the short videoclip finished and the conversation at the table resumed, the following exchange took place.

**Extract 7** (Interview, Els Matins, TV3, 31 August 2021)

**Junyent:** I think they have said it very clearly. Everyone has this perception that the language is losing ground, and they even say it in Spanish, I mean # Maybe it is about time that someone from above, in this case yes, say something because #

**Heredia (journalist):** Ah but this can be done from above? ##

(laughter)

**Junyent:** This...

**Nogué:** Well language policy is about that.

**Junyent:** That's it, I mean # I do believe in personal responsibility, but in any case, they better need to get started with it. In particular because we are very helpless when we want to speak in Catalan and we cannot, and then we do not know who to appeal to<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> **Junyent:** Crec que ho han dit clarament. Tothom té aquesta percepció que s'està perdent i t'ho diuen fins i tot en castellà, és a dir # Potser ja comença a ser hora que algú des de dalt, en aquest cas sí, digui alguna cosa, perquè #

**Heredia (periodista):** Clar, però això sí que es pot fer des de dalt? ##  
(riuen)

Here the journalist deserves credit because on the spot, likely in an improvised manner, she detects a contradiction and asks her interviewees about it. Why is it fine for the government to plan language-in-society issues when it comes to the status of Catalan in Catalonia, but not when it comes to issues of gender-neutral language? Junyent's laughter seems revealing of the inconvenience of the question, and her colleague's response is indicative of the limiting view of what language policy and language planning is, a very contextually and historically situated view in the background of Catalonia and with Catalan as a minoritized language. However, the paradox remained unresolved, and it did not seem to bother Junyent too much at the time. This kind of pattern (of asking her both about GNL and the sustainability of Catalan in one and the same conversation) repeated itself in many of the interviews she gave in the weeks and months that followed this instance. In fact, this may tie in well with the idea that Junyent's status as a linguist with relevant opinions for the general public about the future of Catalan, on which she had published two books recently (see Junyent 2021c and Junyent 2020) is something she capitalised on during the GNL debate and helped her present her stance authoritatively. This also connects to the fact that linguists, understood as those who conceptualise language as an autonomous object, have traditionally held a position of power in language related debates in Catalonia, an authoritative position that may have started to change in recent times (see Erdocia and Soler 2022). Indeed, the latter perhaps gives us additional clues to understand both

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**Junyent:** Això...

**Nogué:** Sí, sí sí, la política lingüística és això.

**Junyent:** És que és això # Jo crec en la responsabilitat individual, però de totes maneres, s'hi han de posar. Sobretot perquè estem molt desprotegits quan volem parlar en català i potser no podem i aleshores tampoc saben a qui apel·lar.

Junyent's emphatic defence of her arguments as well as media playing an amplifier, rather than a challenging, role towards her stance, for a somewhat symbiotic relationship. In other words, Junyent's possible sense of the declining role of linguists as experts on language matters in the public sphere, combined with media still seeing her as the go-to expert (besides some media outlet's political agendas), may have combined to give more emphasis to Junyent's public exposure and to boost her message.

## **6 Discussion and concluding remarks**

In the eyes of the publics, social sciences are undermined by the lack of an overall consensus about some of their central contributions (Fleck et al. 2009). Language studies are fragmented enterprises that are divided among rival disciplines with different approaches and epistemological and ontological frameworks. Not surprisingly, the publics of sociolinguistics (Erdocia and Soler 2022) is often a terrain in which competing professional visions struggle for dominance in language-in-society matters, for institutional legitimacy, and for financial reward. By concentrating on the performance of one single intellectual, we are following the example of research on public intellectual life within sociology (e.g., Bar-EI and Baert 2021), which provides in-depth empirical evidence from individual cases. We are nonetheless mindful of the potential limitations of such an approach, which requires us to adopt a cautionary tone in our claims.

In line with Arendt's reflections on the construction of authority, our study presents an attempt from an intellectual with a prominent position in the public realm to secure the

position of being the only person with scientific authority to talk about language. In our analysis, we have seen how the appropriation for the impartial standpoint in a context of epistemic struggle around GNL is conveyed through the disinterested voice of science and the precepts of scientific epistemologies, as well as performatively enshrined by means of truth claims. Such claims, which draw on a Saussurean conception of language, refute or invalidate competing epistemic standpoints from, for example, experimental research on perceptions of linguistic gender bias and gender activism. Following Foucault (1977) and Rouse (2006), this represents an attempt to seek an impartial standpoint outside the ongoing epistemic dispute over GNL. The use of analogies and oppositional structures in Junyent's interventions is also a central performative device to construct and claim epistemic authority. Indeed, the oppositional structure linguists vs. politicians, which derives from other dichotomies (e.g., true vs. fallacious argument, legitimate vs. illegitimate knowledge) of an epistemic nature is intended to move the disaccord from the epistemic realm to the terrain of politics, reducing the contention to a mundane matter of "politics as usual". As Fleck et al. (2009: 8) put it, one of the best antidotes against "annoying" policy proposals is to question the scientific foundation on which they have been built. Here we see that GNL policies are criticised according to the terms of scholarship but also of those of politics (Erdocia 2020). To do that, Junyent mobilises a set of arguments from within theoretical linguistics but presented as an intervention in a language-in-society debate, for which she then needs additional strategies to claim authority on the topic at hand. Indeed, in her interventions, Junyent frequently emphasises the epistemic authority of linguists on language matters and subtracts any authority to those outside linguistics, particularly politicians. The former hold objective and value-free knowledge about language; the latter are merely interested in power games.

What does our analysis of her public engagements say about the linguistics scholar under examination as a public intellectual? First, her reliance on authoritative pronouncements and her representation of the professional group of linguists as privileged carriers of superior knowledge about language situate our public linguist close to the 'legislator' type of intellectual (Bauman 1987) and distant from the 'embedded' or dialogical intellectual (Baert and Shipman 2012). Unlike the 'legislator', the dialogical intellectual is paradigmatic of postmodernism as they are supposed to thrive in a landscape of contingency and epistemic uncertainty. Second, Junyent's critical view of (a general and rather vague idea of) politics and politicians aligns well with the 'free-floating' type of intellectual or non-partisan performer who has the courage to criticise any authority. Not only that, Junyent seems to have enhanced her public profile by building an image of an academic confronting incompetent governance on language matters and battling to expose an entrenched 'mainstream' (Baert and Shipman 2012: 191) of GNL ideologists.

This last idea brings us to our final argument. Not only does our analysis depict an intellectual figure through their public interventions, it also provides valuable insights into understanding the mechanisms of reception and validation of intellectual products. Certainly, our case study is a rebuttal of the declinist narrative according to which intellectual influence in society has diminished (see Davis 2009). But our analysis further advances some evidence to address the question of how and why certain intellectual engagements in language-related matters catch on. Admittedly, GNL is a hot topic beyond the Catalan and Spanish context, a topic that is ideologically and academically contested. In addition, as pointed out by Junyent, the fact that a small number of regulations on GNL in

institutional settings are mandatory is not without normative problems. That said, it seems that factors intrinsic to Junyent's engagements add to making her such a highly visible figure in public linguistics. For instance, Junyent is a female intellectual in a male-dominant environment. Also, the oppositional character of her criticism of GNL is directed at part of the political establishment and is, therefore, an eye-catching way to speak "truth to power" (Miszta 2007).

All these factors are possibly part of Junyent's recipe for popularity in the media. Yet an additional set of interconnected factors makes this case of special interest. It is widely recognised that academic authority enjoys lower levels of public trust in these late modern times, and the ability of intellectuals to feed the public's expectations has become limited (Davis 2009; Fleck et al. 2009). Our particular case seems to differ; as the "Grammar and Politics" editorial in *La Vanguardia* implies (Extract 6 above), the appreciation by part of the public of Junyent's scholarly standing and scientific credentials is also part of her success. To be clear, epistemic authority in public engagement still matters. Discussions about the role of intellectuals are mainly discussions about the social functions and uses of knowledge (Wisselgren 2008). Regardless of Junyent's intentions to present herself as a free-floating intellectual, free from any political partisanship, her interventions inevitably serve the interests of those specific political actors and large media corporations situated in the centre and right of the ideological spectrum who fervently oppose GNL. That said, and in that regard, the latter leads us to raise one important question that remains open, which has to do with the political economy of the very debate: how its structure may reinforce some voices while toning down others, and how some interests and agendas are served by it, as noted briefly above in Section 5. In the case presented here, Junyent's views on GNL



are certainly not the only ones in the debate; as any other language ideological debate, the discussion is more polyphonic than what we have been able to present, but given our primary goal in the article (an analysis of the discursive construction of an expert's epistemic authority on language matters), we have had to leave other voices by other contributors to one side. Key to us, however, is how and why some narratives manage to get more fronted and circulated than others, and for the benefit of whom, something that future studies will do well to delve deeper into.

Each society has its regimes of truth where the regulation and circulation of statements of truth are the result of contingent political commitments, media alliances, and systems of power (Foucault 1977; Heller 2020). This general politics of truth not only favours some epistemic standpoints and makes them function as true. It also sanctions those "who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Foucault 1977: 13), as illustrated with the example where centrist-conservative-oriented media buy into Junyent's judgements. We can, therefore, conclude that public engagement in language matters, whether we like it or not, is a move in the political and ideological game that academia-based intellectuals must make when they agree to go public.

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