Online Writing and Linguistic Sexism:
The use of gender-inclusive @
on a Greek feminist Facebook page

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1. Introduction

Language and gender has been a field of very active inquiry for decades, research in which has systematically addressed issues of social inequality as reflected and constructed through language use. For example, the issue of linguistic sexism has been a point of scholarly feminist critique since the 1970s (Curzan, 2014; Paterson, 2020). Sexism in language is often exemplified in phenomena like the generic use of a masculine pronominal form like the English he to refer to persons of unknown sex/gender (Curzan, 2014; Henley, 1987). This use amounts to a representation of male experience as “the default” paired with an erasure of women’s representation in language (Henley, 1987; Mucchi-Faina, 2005). Academic work and public debate on the issue of sexist language in general has proliferated over the years, particularly in and around English (Pavlidou, 2015). Despite the approach to the issue being predominantly Anglocentric, especially in the debate’s early stages, this problematization of how sociocultural gender is represented in language has since been applied to languages beyond the English-speaking world (see edited volumes like Hellinger & Bußmann, 2003).

Phenomena in the language-gender nexus such as linguistic sexism are maintained partly due to the use of linguistic resources that encode gender when referring to human agents. Such uses amount to the gendering of discourse and the construction and propagation of conceptions about social reality (Alvanoudi, 2015; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). For example, a widely adopted alternative that aims to mitigate linguistic sexism in the case of the English generic he has been the use of so-called “combined pronouns” such as s/he, he or she, etc., which came increasingly into use between the 1960s and the 1990s in British and American English varieties (Paterson, 2020). More recently, however, the use of combined pronouns for nonsexist generic reference has been criticized for “reinforc[ing] the concept of a gender binary” (Paterson, 2020, p. 7; see also LaScotte, 2016; Wayne, 2005). Indeed, in the case of combined pronouns, the use of he and she
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for generic reference carries the presupposition that gender is a dichotomous, binary social category, which renders reference to the masculine and the feminine supposedly exhaustive. In English, for example, this has in part led to the adoption of the generic gender-neutral form of singular *they*, which is gaining some wider acceptance today (Bradley, 2020; Bradley, Schmid, & Lombardo, 2019).

The critique of linguistic strategies that construct gender as a (male/female) binary, such as English combined pronouns, rests upon a critique of the view that gender is a binary social category at all. Indeed, scholarly investigations of sociocultural gender, for example in linguistics, have long shifted from an essentialist binary view of gender differences between men and women to a post-structuralist approach to the diversity of gender identities performed in daily life (see Cameron, 2005; Pavlidou, 2011). Additionally, non-binary individuals, an umbrella term for those who do not (permanently) identify as either “men” or “women,” find themselves not represented in linguistic resources like the English pronouns *he* and *she*, which leads to their adoption of different preferred pronouns for themselves, including singular *they* or neo-pronouns like *zie* (Airton, 2018; Matsuno & Budge, 2017).

Consequently, this unrest in conceptualizing gender as a binary leaves its mark on linguistic practices as it is through linguistic practices that sociocultural gender can be represented and also constructed to a significant degree. The present study focuses on a novel form of non-binary gender encoding in Modern Greek (henceforth Greek), which also has parallels in other languages beyond English. Specifically, an emergent linguistic practice among some Greek speakers is the use of the symbol @ in writing for substituting morphemes encoding grammatical gender, since Greek grammatical gender is semantically motivated when referring to human agents and it amounts to gender specification (Pavlidou, 2003). This use of @ was first noted by Pavlidou, Kapellidi, and Karafoti (2015), who linked its use to a distancing from essentialist binary understandings of gender, and remarked that @ is used for “denoting gender for which there is no provision in the language’s grammar” (Pavlidou et al., 2015, p. 464, my translation).

Notably, the use of @ is also attested for gender encoding in Spanish, where according to the *Diccionario Panhispánico de Dudas*, @ is used “to integrate in the same word the masculine and

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1 For a more nuanced presentation of non-binary identities, see Matsuno and Budge (2017).
feminine forms” since the sign resembles a combination of the letters <o> and <a>, which are typical Spanish masculine and feminine gender suffixes respectively (“género,” n.d., my translation; cf. los niños ‘the boys,’ las niñas ‘the girls’ > l@s niñ@s ‘the children’). In that sense, the use of @ in Spanish, for example in the context of the form “Latin@,” is “gender inclusive but binary embedded” (Haddock-Lazal, 2016, as quoted in Salinas & Lozano, 2019, p. 4). A novel form that overcomes this binary-gender presupposition in Spanish is “Latinx,” which is now used on social media and in some higher education contexts (de Onís, 2017; Salinas & Lozano, 2019; Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018). It would seem that the suffix -x in Spanish bears a similar function to @’s supposed function in Greek (according to its preliminary description by Pavlidou et al., 2015), and it is unlike the Spanish @ in that it challenges the binary conceptualization of gender (Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018).

Having established how the use of resources like Greek @, Spanish -x, and English they appears to be connected to the gendering of discourse in non-binary terms, the present study will seek to further explore the use of @ in Greek and its indexical value attribution in the context of a feminist Facebook page. We will thus investigate (a) how the deployment of @ in writing relates to the linguistic system of Greek with regard to the resources it provides for specifying sociocultural gender, and (b) how the use of @ can become indexical of particular stances toward issues of gender equality in online interactions. To this end, in the following sections, I first present some notes on Greek grammar and relevant research on Greek language and gender (1.1), followed by a presentation of key theoretical notions pertinent to the present study’s approach (1.2).

1.1. Greek language and gender

Grammatical gender is a central feature of Greek grammar. The Greek grammatical gender system differentiates between three gender values (masculine, feminine, and neuter), which trigger syntactic agreement (Pavlidou, 2003). Parts of speech that exhibit case morphology in Greek almost always encode gender, which includes articles, nouns, adjectives, participles, most pronouns (including the third-person personal pronoun), and some numerals (Pavlidou, 2003).

Nominal grammatical gender is encoded across a variety of suffixes, which differ depending on what “declension” (Holton, Mackridge, Philippaki-Warburton, & Spyropoulos, 2012) or “inflectional paradigm” class (Pavlidou, 2003) nominal elements belong to. Psycholinguistic
research suggests that some suffixes can develop a “dominant gender representation” based on their frequent occurrence with a particular gender value (Mastropavlou & Tsimpli, 2011, p. 48). Specifically, in the written modality, which is of relevance here, supported by historical-orthographic cues, the suffixes -ος /os/, -ας /as/, and -ης /is/ are found to be potent indicators of masculine gender, while -α /a/ and -η /i/ are predominantly associated with the feminine (Mastropavlou & Tsimpli, 2011).

Generally, the grammatical gender of Greek nouns is arbitrary; i.e., not semantically motivated (Holton et al., 2012; Pavlidou, 2003). However, it is notable that neuter nouns usually denote inanimate things (Pavlidou, 2003). Moreover, when it comes to nouns denoting human beings, there is an overwhelming correlation of grammatical gender encoded in the form and sociocultural gender denoted by the form (Pavlidou, Alvanoudi, & Karafoti, 2004). In a study of a major Standard Modern Greek dictionary, Pavlidou and colleagues found that 94.2% of masculine nouns denoting human agents refer to men, and 94.1% of feminine nouns denoting human agents refer to women (Pavlidou et al., 2004). This suggests that, for animate nouns, there is a semantic motivation to grammatical gender assignment, whereby (for human beings specifically) grammatical gender is closely linked to sociocultural gender (Pavlidou, 2003).

Further, the masculine is the “dominant” gender value in Greek grammar, resulting in asymmetries, particularly in the context of generic reference (Pavlidou, 2002b, 2003). Masculine nouns and pronouns can be used generically where the feminine would have been ungrammatical for generic reference, as seen in (1).

\[
\text{(1) O φοιτητής έχει το δικαίωμα να [...]²}
\]
\[
\text{O φοιτητής εξί το δικαίωμα να [...]³}
\]
\[
\text{The-MASC student-MASC has the right to [...]}
\]
\[
\text{‘Students have the right to [...]’}
\]

Masculine nouns also prevail in triggering syntactic agreement when at least one masculine noun is present in a noun cluster (Pavlidou, 2003). Further pragmatic and lexical asymmetries on the

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² Example taken from Pavlidou (2003, p. 183).
³ The transliterations provided for Greek text in this article are loose phonemic transcriptions of the linguistic forms.
basis of gender are also common in Greek, and they are argued to reflect social asymmetries (for an overview, see Pavlidou, 2002a, 2003).

Despite the ubiquity of gender in Greek, research on gender and the Greek language started relatively late, in the 1980s (Pavlidou, 2015). This delay is attributed to a variety of factors, whether political (the 1967-1974 Greek military dictatorship), social (the lesser mass support for the feminist movement in Greece compared to other countries) or academic (the delayed introduction of contemporary linguistics as an active field of inquiry in Greek academia; Pavlidou, 2002b, 2015). At any rate, research on gender in Greek initially raised the issue of language and female visibility (e.g., see the edited volume Pavlidou, 2002a) and later turned to constructionist investigations of gender in discourse and interaction (e.g., see the special issue of Gender and Language prefaced by Pavlidou, 2015).

Research suggests that the widespread encoding of gender in Greek linguistic resources as presented above is particularly socially salient as it is routinely employed in the discursive construction of sociocultural gender in asymmetrical ways. A study of public discourse in the largest public university in Greece (among students, faculty, and administrative staff) revealed that gendered forms were more widely used than gender-neutral alternatives (e.g., grammatically neuter nouns referring to human agents, such as το άτομο ‘the individual’; Pavlidou et al., 2015). Within the use of “gendered” nouns, and particularly in occupational terms, there was a pronounced asymmetry as the generic use of masculines prevailed over the use of feminines, which were usually omitted altogether (Pavlidou et al., 2015). Similarly, in a study of Greek public documents, Georgalidou and Lambropoulou (2016) found that language use in the public sphere consistently constructed a male-dominated sociocultural landscape through linguistic choices like the generic use of the masculine and the complementary use of feminine forms mostly abbreviated as suffixes that follow masculine forms (e.g., εργαζόμενος/η ‘worker.MASC/FEM’). Masculine and feminine gender identities were found to be constructed asymmetrically also through lexical choices across a variety of other genera (Goutsos & Fragaki, 2009).

Further, according to a study of grammatical gender in everyday spoken interactions, the ubiquity of this grammatical feature in Greek renders gendering an unavoidable aspect of Greek interaction even when sociocultural gender as a topic is not interactionally relevant (Alvanoudi, 2015). More
specifically, “gendered categorisation of referents [as men or women] via grammatical gender is part of the routine, subtle and unremarkable meanings produced in interaction” (Alvanoudi, 2015, p. 26). Most importantly, Alvanoudi’s (2015, p. 27) analysis suggested that grammatical gender in Greek interaction “constructs and reproduces gender bipolarity as a tacit presupposition about the organisation of the social world that participants share.”

Finally, it is worth noting that investigations of sexism in language (whether in academic scholarship or in public debate) are often accompanied by proposals for nonsexist language reform, a phenomenon which Curzan (2014) terms “politically responsive prescriptivism.” The same has occurred in the case of Greek, where various strategies for representing women as well as men in discourse are adopted, such as the generic use of masculine and feminine forms alongside each other with the feminine forms often abbreviated (e.g., ο/η μαθητής/τρια ‘the.MASC/FEM pupil.MASC/FEM’). I will be referring to this linguistic strategy as “combined forms” (where no abbreviation is present) or “combined suffixes” (where the feminine only appears as a suffix), analogically to the term “combined pronouns” used for English (Paterson, 2020). However, as Georgalidou and Lambropoulou (2016) note, these alternatives are still flawed in that they do not significantly curtail linguistic sexism as they still amount to the construction of a male-dominated world. In another proposal, Pavlidou and colleagues (2015) suggest increasing the use of gender-neutral language (e.g., the aforementioned neuter nouns like το άτομο ‘the individual’) and standardizing morphologically feminine novel forms for occupational terms where they are lacking (e.g., επιστημόν-ισσα ‘scientist-FEM’ where currently only επιστήμον-ας ‘scientist-MASC’ is standardized).

Still, even these proposals cannot meet the challenge of overcoming the issue of a binary conception of gender being propagated through the pervasive presence of grammatical gender encoding in Greek (Alvanoudi, 2015). These observations partially motivate the present examination of the use of @, which apparently overcomes the obstacle of grammatical gender use for human referents in Greek written discourse.

4 The term “prescriptivism” is used in purely descriptive terms by Curzan (2014), who in her work, deconstructs the term’s negative connotations in linguistics.
1.2. Indexicality, writing and “the linguistic”: An ethnographic approach

The notion of indexicality refers to the property through which signs “point to” particular meanings or, as Eckert (2019, p. 754) puts it, “evok[e] something in the physical, temporal, or social world.” Indexicality has been a key concept in recent sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological scholarship that rests on a view of language use as social practice (see Blommaert, 2006, 2010; Eckert, 2012, 2019). The present study draws on these research traditions, focusing on the use of @ in Greek written discourse on a public Facebook page. In what follows, I outline relevant theoretical notions focusing on (a) indexicality and related concepts, (b) the written and “non-linguistic” nature of @’s use, and (c) the relevance of the ethnographic approach adopted here.

In the aforementioned broadly-conceived research traditions, communicative choices made by individuals are seen as necessarily valued in different ways in the context in which they are made, which renders them socially meaningful (Blommaert, 2010; Eckert, 2012). The culturally-shaped variety of meanings beyond reference that are attributed to (linguistic) signs constitute their indexical meanings, which are highly local and therefore inherently variable (Blommaert, 2010; Eckert, 2012). By virtue of this, variation in linguistic expression, be it spoken or written, is “capable of expressing the full range of a community’s social concerns” (Eckert, 2012, p. 94), since examining linguistic variation in a given context in this vein entails examining the “patterns of social, cultural and political value-attribution” active therein, which are reflected in the communicative choices made by the social actors and how they are judged (Blommaert, 2010, p. 5). Thereby, the users’ choice to use @ as opposed to standard Greek gendered suffixes is treated here as socially significant and capable of revealing the values that underlie it as a writing practice.

Another key notion in the present study is that of indexical order as it captures the mutability of indexical meanings (Agha, 2005; Eckert, 2012; Silverstein, 2003). Linguistic (or other semiotic) forms can initially be observable as “pointing to” a specific sociocultural context in which particular people use these forms (first-order indexicality); they can then be recognized by the very people using them as “pointing to” this particular context, and can thus be used by them for bringing this context into being and thereby possibly showing a belonging to this context/group of people (second-order indexicality); finally, the forms can come to be stereotypically associated by outsiders with a particular sociocultural context and users therein, and can thereby be used and commented upon as “typical” characteristics of a particular group’s semiotic practices (third-order
indexicality; Silverstein, 2003). These processes are captured by the notion of enregisterment (Agha, 2003, 2005), whereby “linguistic (and accompanying nonlinguistic) signs come to be recognized as indexing pragmatic features of interpersonal role (persona) and relationship” (Agha, 2005, p. 57). In this sense, the notion of indexical order and the related notion of enregisterment describe the metapragmatic processes whereby signs can come to point to particular aspects of social realities: stereotypical personas of users, their relationships, their status. The present study thus seeks to explore the enregisterment of the use of @ by examining how it is used and commented upon in a particular (digital) space.

Evidently, studying @ amounts to a study of written as opposed to spoken practices. Whereas the study of writing has historically been of secondary, if any, importance in sociolinguistics, in recent years this tendency has begun to wane (Coulmas, 2013; Lillis, 2013). Traditionally, an argument on the “primacy” of spoken language has prevailed in the field, which views writing rather simplistically as “speech written down” and as less “spontaneous” than speech and thus less sociolinguistically valuable in a Labovian sense (Lillis, 2013). However, since linguistic meaning-making is largely understood in sociolinguistics as a process that reflects choices of particular communicative resources to be used (e.g., Coulmas, 2005), it is unclear why the more conscious, more “monitored” choices made in writing should not be an object of interest for sociolinguists, especially since they are socially indicative by reflecting “orientation to a norm” (Coulmas, 2013, p. 10). Writing constitutes a social practice (Coulmas, 2013), which language usage in general is understood as here. Given the unprecedented amount of writing done today “within and across different contexts of production and systems of evaluation globally” (Lillis, 2013, p. 12), considering writing practices from a sociolinguistic standpoint constitutes a compelling pursuit.

Nonetheless, despite the validity of sociolinguistic investigations of writing practices, the study of @’s use could be argued to constitute a study of something not “linguistic” strictly speaking. Yet, @ is used in Greek writing in a way that appears to be very directly contingent upon particularities of the Greek linguistic system (i.e., the ubiquity of grammatical gender). In this context, @ seems to provide a viable resource that serves as a way of undermining the binary gender system’s perceived problematic function for the construction of social reality. That is, the use of @ appears to reflect metalinguistic concerns, so that it could be argued that its “paralinguistic” use is linguistically motivated. Still, this does not suffice for us to call @ a “linguistic” sign. Indeed, the
Diccionario Panhispánico de Dudas dismisses @’s use in Spanish for the very reason that “it is not a linguistic sign” (“género,” n.d., my translation).

Both the challenge of @ not being strictly “linguistic” and that of @ being a writing practice as opposed to a spoken language variation phenomenon are resolved in the context of the present study’s ethnographic approach. This study considers the grounding of ethnography in anthropology, which shapes its ontological and epistemological assumptions on meaning-making as constitutive of social reality (Blommaert, 2006; Blommaert & Dong, 2010). Such an approach is not hindered by the status of @ as a para- or non-linguistic symbol since, in ethnographic studies of language and society, as Varis (2016, p. 57) puts it, “any distinction between the linguistic and the non-linguistic is seen as a fundamentally artificial one.” In fact, the practice of using @ in writing is approached here in the context of what Lillis (2013, pp. 13 ff.) calls the “ethnographic pull” in sociolinguistics. This methodological shift (also attested in more “speech-oriented” contemporary sociolinguistic scholarship; see Eckert, 2012) widens the field’s empirical focus, thereby legitimizing the study of writing in sociolinguistics while embracing its multimodal aspect (Lillis, 2013). These programmatic assumptions accommodate approaching the use of @ in writing as a sociolinguistic practice regardless of its multimodal or conventionally non-linguistic dimension. Notably, the theory on indexicality presented above is also fully applicable to examinations of non-linguistic signs (see Agha, 2005, p. 39 for relevant argumentation). Such theory implicitly recognizes that the preferential treatment of language in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology is an artifact of convention since linguistic signs do not ontologically differ from other forms of semiosis in ways that are epistemologically consequential for this theoretical framework.

Having established the theoretical grounding of the present study, I will now turn to a presentation of the study’s research site (Section 2) and its methodology (Section 3).

2. Research site

The research site chosen for the study of @’s use was Greek Facebook page Feminist Rants (Φεμινιστικά Παραλημήματα). The page constituted a particularly advantageous site for examining the social meaning underlying @’s use not only because @ is used with some reliable frequency
on the page, but also due to the page’s explicit feminist ideological orientation. The page’s “About” section reads:

This page, with Yes, You Are A Misogynist [another Facebook page] as its point of origin, is meant for all feminists[-FEM]\(^5\) and allies who want to share their own stories, experiences, questions, concerns, testimonies, and any other comment concerning feminism or the sexism they experience. (“About,” n.d., my translation)

The page’s ideological orientation provides a first potential indicator for @’s indexical value attribution as it seems to be associated with writing in a timespace configuration governed by norms dictating that users confine their interactions to topics “concerning feminism and the sexism they experience.” The page’s “About” section also explicitly specifies that submissions to the page will be published “provided the content is pertinent to the page” (“About,” n.d.). This is suggestive of the page administrator’s gatekeeping role.

Specifically, the administrator manually approves posts for publication on the page, thereby essentially filtering submissions. This filtering system does not only function to keep submissions to the page consistent in terms of content, but it also features infrastructure that ensures the anonymity of the posts shared. Users submit their posts through a Google form (“Feministika paralirimata,” n.d.), the link for which is given in the page’s “About” description. If approved, submissions then appear published by the page’s account itself and not in any way linked to users’ personal Facebook accounts. The anonymity this infrastructure affords allows users to share potentially sensitive stories as their authorial identity is embodied as a disposable avatar that comes in the form of the hashtag “#feminist_rants_XXXX,” where “XXXX” indicates the unique number corresponding to each post. Consequently, despite Facebook being a so-called “anonymous” social medium since the information users provide on their profiles is “anchored” to their offline identity characteristics (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), the page’s infrastructure allows for entirely anonymous submissions to be published publicly on Facebook. Posts are then reacted to and debated in the comment sections by the page’s followers.

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\(^5\) Glosses concerning gender encoding in Greek (including the use of @) are given in square brackets in the translations where relevant.
All in all, Feminist Rants could be conceptualized as a community of practice (CofP), a concept introduced into research on language and gender by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet as follows:

“A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations—in short, practices—emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor.” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 464)

The concept of CofP has been particularly advantageous for language and gender research as it provides a tool for linking “local” practices to more “global” categories like gender (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Pavlidou, 2011). However, as Feminist Rants constitutes an online norm-governed timespace configuration, or in Blommaert’s (2018) terms, an online chronotope, it might be more advantageous to characterize it using more recent theoretical tools that share this focus on “local” examinations to “global” ends while also taking into account the rapid re-shaping of communicative practices in the current stage of globalization.

Specifically, the “members” of Feminist Rants as a CofP engage with the page in less “stable” ways than those suggested by the concept of CofP, a concept introduced to describe an offline world. The infrastructure of the internet allows for members’ constant mobility between multiple online chronotopes in their daily social life, which are all characterized by complex and dynamic systems of norms (microhegemonies) that users must ratify and attune to in order to participate in “local” practices (Blommaert, 2018; Blommaert et al., 2019). Communicative norms established in particular chronotopes are also always ordered or “stratified” in such a way that their ratification may bear varying degrees of gravity (Blommaert, 2018). This is evident in the case of Feminist Rants when it comes to the use of @ as a communicative norm since @ appears to be used only in roughly one in 10 post submissions (and one in five posts if comment sections are taken into account). Still, the norm is ratified among particular users who recognize this communicative practice as socially meaningful in particular ways that suit the page’s ideological orientation. To other users, the use of @ is evidently not seen as a necessity, presumably because their interpretation of its status as a norm in the context of the page’s microhegemony differs.

Therefore, it might be more suitable to describe Feminist Rants through the theory of “light” communities (Blommaert, 2018), some aspects of which were briefly sketched out above.
According to this theory, individuals engage in complex forms of identity work, often through entirely phatic practices (e.g., liking), as afforded by the characteristics of (online) environments (e.g., Feminist Rants’ anonymity infrastructure), in order to claim membership in emergent, dynamic, and overlapping group formations online and offline. The dynamic conception of social and sociolinguistic norms afforded by this theory especially supports our efforts to reveal the ideological backdrop to the use of @ as a writing norm and how it influences @’s enregisterment.

Finally, another key element that this theory takes into account is the role of algorithmic functions in the shaping of social formations online. Individuals are brought together online on the basis of their common interests as evidenced by their online activity (Blommaert, 2018). Therefore, such algorithmic agency also plays a role in shaping the cohesion of online feminist communities, for example, through the way the Facebook algorithm “suggests” liking pages like Feminist Rants based on other pages the user likes; or, once one has liked the page, through the way it presents posts from Feminist Rants on one’s timeline with particular degrees of frequency and salience (the exact mechanisms behind which remain industry secrets).

3. Method

A digital ethnographic approach was adopted in the present study. This approach was judged to be particularly advantageous for the investigation of the practice at hand as it allows for situated observation of users’ meaning-making practices online and their social bearing (Varis, 2016). This presupposes a view of ethnography as more than a toolkit of methods. Therefore, as mentioned above, the study fully embraced the theoretical grounding of ethnography as a tradition with all that it entails for the treatment of language (see Blommaert, 2006).

As regards the digital dimension of the approach, digital ethnography has long been problematized as an approach to the study of society online, and the particularities of its application vary widely across studies (Hine, 2017; Varis, 2016). The approach was adopted here for the study of a writing practice in an online space. According to Blommaert (2018, p. 61), “online writing practices display an incredible dynamism and innovativeness dislodging the traditional boundaries of ‘writing’ (and, evidently, those of language in its traditional sense).” Not only does this description capture the intriguing choice of @ as a stand-in for grammatical morphemes, but from a
methodological standpoint, the potential digital ethnography affords for situated in-depth observations also allows the present study to delve into this dynamic nature of the online writing practice at hand and examine its social function unhindered by a conventional understanding of writing. Consequently, digital ethnography provided a highly suitable framework for examining this online writing phenomenon from a sociolinguistic perspective in this study.

Data collection was primarily based on naturalistic observation of the Facebook page Feminist Rants, which included: anonymous posts made on the page, features of the page as a semiotic surface, and interactional data in the form of comments. Observational data, stored in the form of screenshots and as field notes, were also combined with interview data. Three semi-structured ethnographic interviews were conducted, one with the page administrator, and two with page followers. In what follows, I outline the protocol followed for observational data collection (3.1), how participants were selected and related ethical considerations (3.2), and how the data were approached analytically (3.3).

3.1. Observational data collection

The goal set for observational data collection was to cover the goings-on of Feminist Rants over 500 posts, covering 50 posts per session over 10 data collection sessions, starting from post labelled “#feminist_rants_2340” and ending with post “#feminist_rants_2846.” This precluded a more filtered engagement with the page (e.g., preferentially examining the posts that appeared on the immersed researcher’s Facebook news feed). That is, the internet’s algorithmically configured bias in the presentation of information which shapes so-called “bubbles” for users (Blommaert & Dong, 2019) was also considered in shaping our observational data collection protocol. Our design acknowledged that, as noted before, every user’s, including the researcher’s, internet experience is tailored based on their usage data, which shape a filter “bubble” determining what content the user is presented with (Blommaert, 2018). Such algorithmic bubble effects underlie the engagement of users with this particular page as well as the researcher’s own contact with the page. By actively acknowledging this, a more principled data collection protocol was devised, whereby the researcher collected data on the page in principled “visit sessions.”

6 The slight discrepancy in numbering is owed to particularities such as double-posting of submissions by mistake, which resulted in a single post being assigned more than one number label.
At the same time, choosing this quantitative criterion of number of posts to be covered rather than a time-based criterion (i.e., time to be spent on the page) overcame the practical limitations imposed on digital ethnography by the infrastructure of translocal communication media (see Varis, 2016). Real-time observation of digital environments would necessitate a virtually continuous presence of the ethnographer on-site. The present study featured the more feasible decision of working with the medium’s infrastructure to determine how communicative events unfolded (e.g., through timestamps). Infrastructure such as that of timestamps provides “traces” that give insight into the processes that delivered the “products” (finished posts, comments) that the ethnographer must necessarily work with (Varis, 2016).

For the page chosen, this strategy entailed smaller sacrifices compared to a Facebook page that features more straightforward posting practices. Due to the page’s anonymity/filtering infrastructure (see Section 2), only comments and reactions can be added continuously, in real time documented in timestamps. Posts are drawn from the Google form and published onto Facebook by the administrator in “batches,” thus providing no legitimate infrastructural trace as to when the posts were actually written in the first place, but only showing information on which posts were approved and shared first and which were published later. Further information on when posts were submitted is presumably only available to the administrator, but remains irrelevant to the present study’s aims as original submissions through the Google form are not subject to interactional engagement from other users until they are posted on Facebook, which is when their “social life” demonstrably begins, so to speak.

This anonymity infrastructure the page provides further complicated the already thorny issue of “identity uncertainty” that reigns supreme on the internet (Blommaert & Dong, 2019). That is, the internet’s infrastructure, to a very significant extent, restrains the digital ethnographer to a role of simple “witness” as the full, offline identity characteristics of individuals whose behavior is observed online can never be fully ascertained (Blommaert & Dong, 2019). The acknowledgement of the particularities of the Facebook page at hand allowed the analyst to refine his focus, accepting his role as that of a witness of unique, one-off identity performances linked to disposable avatars. Further investigation of post authors’ identities would have been futile and, in fact, unethical, considering that the page puts measures in place to reassure users that their identity is protected.
As a result, users’ posts were approached as self-contained identity performances, in line with the page’s structure.

All in all, the data collection sessions were spread out over a four-month period, starting in early February 2020 and ending in early May 2020. The researcher’s presence and data collection on the page were made known to the page’s administrator before data collection began to avoid the controversial digital ethnographic practice of “lurking” (see Varis, 2016). Over this period, the researcher also engaged in informal interactions with the page’s users through private messages or public comments, thus building a relationship with the page’s user base and inviting users (including the administrator) to participate in interviews if interested.

3.2. Participants and ethics

Interview participants were recruited through the researcher’s immersion in the page. The page administrator, also the administrator of the affiliated page Yes, You Are A Misogynist (Ναι, Είσαι Μισογύνης), was the first informant approached. She was notified about the aim of the ethnographic investigation, which served to establish common ground, thus initiating what Blommaert and Dong (2010) define as the “mutual learning process” whereby informants are acquainted with the ethnographer’s aims as the ethnographer also gets acquainted with their cultural practices. Two more informants were then approached individually based on their observed participation in the page’s interactions. These informants were treated as commenters only, as the identity of post authors is safeguarded by the page’s infrastructure, which makes authors themselves virtually impossible to reach given that their submissions to the Google form are anonymous. They were not asked if they had ever posted on the page either, in order to avoid the potentially intrusive character that such a question might be felt to have.

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on eliciting the informants’ reflexive insights into their practice of using @ in writing, paired with any observations they had regarding its social meaning. This aimed at both (a) illuminating personal histories of use of @ pointing to the informants’ indexical biographies (Blommaert & Backus, 2013) as shaped through their historical encounters with the practice, and (b) eliciting ideological statements on the pragmatics of @’s use, which are a valuable data source for investigating enregisterment (Agha, 2005). The interviews lasted approximately one hour each and were conducted through a live chat via Facebook
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Messenger. This instant messaging function was considered particularly suitable as it comprised a written channel. Both the interviewees and the researcher could thus readily provide examples of the written practice with accuracy and without causing disruptions in the conversation (especially since @ has been noted by the interviewees to have no equivalent in speech). Additionally, the interviewees’ privacy was further safeguarded as it was not required of them to expose themselves beyond the medium of Facebook. Interviewees were asked to share only as many personal details as they felt comfortable with, and their avatars were anonymized. The pseudonyms used here are “admin” (for “administrator”), “Lina,” and “Mary.”

From an ethics standpoint, the present study was conceived as empowering research since it constitutes “research on, for and with” the people (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton & Richardson, 1992, as quoted in Rice, 2006, p. 124). This is in line with the classic ethnographic concern of foregrounding people’s voices on their own practices (“for” the people). At the same time, the interview component of the chosen methodology ensured an interactional engagement with the informants by a researcher who was himself a follower of the page (“with” the people).

Another central ethical concern pertained to not infringing on users’ privacy given that the stories posted on the page often cover sensitive topics (e.g., family conflicts, incidents of sexual harassment, seeking medical advice). On the one hand, the anonymity afforded by the page’s infrastructure as discussed above ensured that users’ identities were protected. On the other, because the posts’ authors were not reachable, they could not provide their informed consent for the scrutinizing of their writing on their personal stories. This latter concern was alleviated through the considerations that (a) the stories were willingly anonymously posted on a public forum (a public Facebook page), (b) this anonymity was respected and no efforts were made to breach it despite the analytical advantages that such efforts might have yielded, (c) the page administrator, the only reachable actor in a “cultural leader” position, expressed no apprehension or concern regarding the researcher’s investigation of the page and its potentially sensitive content, and (d) the anonymity of the posts remains virtually unbreachable.

Finally, the identities of commenters whose comments were analytically addressed were anonymized entirely. Clearly, the searchability of content on the internet does not preclude that commenters’ identities might be retrievable. However, it was felt that the users’ sharing of content
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(i.e., comments) in a public domain combined with the fact that their content does not typically expose personal sensitive issues (but rather comments on others’) neither does it engage in potentially prosecutable political activity (cf. Varis, 2016) rendered the anonymized discussion of comments with the aim of analyzing @’s use a reasonably safe and unobtrusive research practice. Further, users who do not feel comfortable sharing “anchored” identity details when commenting on the page seem to proceed to take their own provisions, as is the case with interviewee Mary, who comments on the page using an anonymized Facebook profile so as not to expose her offline identity.

3.3. Data analysis

The initial descriptive analysis of the observational data was generally driven by three main questions that relate to our research focus:

I. Is @ used consistently throughout a given post to fully substitute generic masculines?
II. Is @ used or commented upon in comments as well as posts?
III. Are there unexpected uses of @ that have not been considered?

Questions I-III were designed to refine our focus and yield a rough sociolinguistic description of @’s use. The analytical approach was underlain by the ontological and epistemological assumptions on language adopted in ethnographic approaches (Blommaert, 2006), and it was further theoretically grounded in the tradition of systemic functional linguistics (SFL; Martin, 2013) and its views of (a) language as a set of resources and language usage as a reflection of choices made based on the resources available; (b) language as social semiotic, which privileges the investigation of context; (c) meaning-making as multimodal, which abandons the preferential treatment of language as a primary meaning-making resource, treating it as one of many modes used for making meaning. These theoretical staples drove the descriptive component of the analysis of @’s use on the page.

For the analysis of the interview data and comments, the study drew on what Smart (2011) defines as traditions of discourse-oriented ethnography, particularly Geertz’s interpretive ethnography, in an effort to illuminate the ideologies underlying @’s use. In analyzing the interviews, emphasis was put on linking so-called “experience-near” concepts (users’ own rationalizations about their
behavior) to “experience-distant” concepts (sensitizing concepts employed by the researcher; Geertz, 1983). This principle also drove the data reduction process for interview data to a significant degree. Still, acknowledging that language users are not always in a position to articulate rationalizations or provide explanations for their social behavior (Blommaert & Dong, 2010), the analysis addressed not only explicit metalinguistic/metapragmatic commentary, but also traced the use of @ as a socially meaningful practice in the context of identity work.

Finally, the data reduction process for observational data (posts and comments) was driven by a key incident analysis approach (see Emerson, 2007; Kroon & Sturm, 2007). Key incidents are chosen by analysts as “empirically rich” occurrences during naturalistic observation, which might be unremarkable to participants but can be particularly theoretically sensitive for analytical purposes (Emerson, 2007). The analysis presented here thereby relied on data constituting such a “key incident,” which allows the analyst to uncover “socio-cultural meanings and registers as embedded in the concrete, particular doings of people” (Erickson, 1977, as quoted in Spotti, 2009, p. 36). The key incident approach was thus particularly revealing for the purposes of investigating @’s enregisterment.

In the following sections, I first present users’ descriptions of the use of @ combined with my own description of observed patterns of use (Section 4), and I then provide a key incident analysis supported by further insights from interview data (Section 5).

### 4. Analysis: Using @ as a gender-neutral language strategy

This section presents users’ metalinguistic observations on their use of @ in writing paired with occurrences of @ as observed in the data (4.1) before delving deeper into patterns of @’s use in writing (4.2) and its use as a nonsexist language strategy compared to other alternatives (4.3).

#### 4.1. Inclusive writing: A general description

The keyword that users rely on to describe the use and usefulness of @ is “inclusivity.” As a result, when @ is viewed as a suffix (or a stand-in for a suffix) in written discourse, its reference is conceptualized in broad terms, perhaps best summarized by interviewee Lina as follows: “Essentially, @ is an umbrella that encompasses all social genders and non-genders. Therefore, it
is everything at once and none of them at same time” (Lina, 2020, my translation).7 Crucially, “everything at once” includes non-binary gender identities according to all three interviewees.

@’s generic usage is common with plural forms, where it can replace the generic masculine and achieve maximum inclusivity by essentially not marking the forms for gender and thus encompassing all, any or no gender values, including sociocultural genders not semantically connected to the language’s grammar. This description can be applied to many instances of @ found in the data sample. Most of these are apostrophes to the page’s audience found in greetings (2a), goodbyes (2b), wishes (2c) and other affiliative acts (2d), which, taken together, account for most of the occurrences of @ in post submissions.

(2a) Αγαπημεν@, σας χαρετιζω ολ@ [2490]8
agapimen@ sas xeretizo ol@
Dears-PTCP-@ you-ACC.PL greet-1.SG all.ACC-@
‘My dears, I greet you all’

(2b) Τα αγωνιστικά μου φιλιά σε όλ@!!!! ta agonistika mu filia se ol@
the militant my kisses to all-@
‘My militant kisses to everyone!!!!’

(2c) Καλή χρονιά σε όλ@ σας kali xronia se ol@ sas
good year to all-@ you-GEN
‘Happy new year to all of you’

(2d) PS. Σας αγαπώ όλ@ [2390]
PS. sas agapo ol@
PS. you-ACC.PL love-1SG all-@

7 Interview quotes (including larger excerpts) are always presented as translated by the author from Greek. Instant message breaks are not observed and uninterrupted strings of instant messages are presented merged in the same paragraph. Commas, full stops, and capitalisation are also added to improve readability in this paragraph format.
8 The numbers in square brackets accompanying the examples indicate the unique number assigned to the post from which the example is taken (i.e., “XXXX” in the context of the label “#feminist_rants_XXXX” that posts on the page have). Post numbers are referred to similarly (citing “XXXX” only) in the main text. If the example is drawn from a comment rather than the main text of a post, that is also noted.
‘PS. I love you all’

These examples pertain to @ replacing a gendered suffix specifically where the masculine would have prevailed as the generic. This echoes interviewee Mary’s observation that @ is used to guarantee inclusion for “All people that are not/do not identify as men. For women, and obviously not only [women], because it is not the case that only these 2 [genders] exist” (Mary, 2020, my translation). This statement at once frames @ as a nonexistent linguistic strategy and explicitly presents its ideological grounding in a view of gender as not a binary category.

@’s use for generic reference seems to extend rather uncontroversially to singular forms too. Mary gives the example of being able to write @ ψυχολόγ@ ‘the-@ psychologist-@’ in place of o ψυχολόγος ‘the-MASC psychologist-MASC’ to refer generically to psychologists, which alludes to Pavlidou and colleagues’ (2015) problematization of the lack of standardized non-masculine forms for many Greek occupational terms. Similar occurrences (beyond occupational terms) are attested in the data, as in (3).

(3) κάποι@ φίλ@ που μπορεί [...] [comment under 2783]

kapi@ fil@ pu bori [...] 

Some-@ friend-@ who can-3SG [...] 

‘some friend who can [...]’

All in all, @’s use for generic reference seems to be its most common one. In these contexts, it functions as a suffix that does not encode a specific gender value, and in doing so, it is inclusive of all gender identities, including those not defined in binary terms. In fact, it is used generically regardless of grammatical number as also indicated by the examples so far.9

@’s use for singular specific reference was also acceptable to interviewees although the admin and Mary did not find its usefulness immediately obvious. In these cases, @ can be used to refer to individuals whose gender has not been specified in the discourse or is defined beyond a gender binary. Its former use can also amount to not assuming an interlocutor’s gender identity when it has not been specified. Figure 1 below presents an example of this in the form of a comment that

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9 Note that grammatical number might be rendered locally ambiguous through @’s use for generic reference as the symbol substitutes grammatical suffixes that also encode number.
has been edited in an act of self-repair (Table 1 features a translation, my own). The submitted post’s anonymous author, to whom the comment was addressed, was initially assumed to be female through the use of the gendered form καλή ‘good, dear-FEM’ in an apostrophe; yet, the commenter then edited the gendered form to include @ instead of the gendered suffix –ή in an effort to avoid gendering. (Note that the bottom version of the comment in Figure 1 constitutes its latest version according to Facebook’s infrastructure for visualizing a comment’s “Edit History.”)

Table 1. From gendered suffix to @. Comment edit history translation (my own).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Edit History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[ANONYMOUS USER, earliest comment version:] First of all, let me inform you that it is not the case that there are two genders my dear[-FEM]. I stopped reading from that point on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ANONYMOUS USER, edited comment version:] First of all, let me inform you that it is not the case that there are two genders my dear[-@]. I stopped reading from that point on.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The use of @ as a strategy that leaves gender unspecified is also exemplified in a submission where elements referring to the first person consistently feature @, as seen below.

(4) δεν είμαι μόν@ [...] δεν είμαι εξωγήιν@
    δεν ime mon@ [...] δεν ime eksoyiin@
    NEG be-1SG alone-@ [...] NEG be-1SG alien-@
    ‘I am not alone [...] I am not an alien’
Finally, despite having provided a somewhat coherent description based on users’ commentary on the use of @ as a writing practice, it should be noted that these naturalistic data seldom feature increased consistency in the use of @ as a substitute for all gendered suffixes over longer stretches of discourse. In fact, inconsistent uses can be observed in the context of the same sentence, as in (5).

(5) οταν καποι@ δηλώνει οικονομικά φιλελευθερ@ [...] πέφτετε επάνω
οταν καπι@ διλοι ικονομία fileleφθερ@ [...] peftete epano
when someone-@i declares economically liberali [...] fall-2PL on
tης έσαν τα όρνεα «δεν γίνεται να είσαι φεμινίστρια και
tis san ta ornea “δεν γίνεται να έσαι φεμινίστρια και
heri like the vultures “NEG is_possible to be-2SG feminist-FEMi and
φιλελεύθερη»
fileleftheri”
liberal-FEMi”
‘when someone declares themselves economically liberal [...] you fall onto her like vultures [saying] ‘you can’t be a feminist and a liberal’’

In (5), the terms καποι@, φιλελευθερ@, ης, φεμινίστρια, and φιλελεύθερη are all co-referential as indicated by their indexation in the gloss, yet the first two are suffixed with -@ while the latter three feature standard feminine suffixes. As a result, in this written form, the terms do not agree for gender. Similarly, in (6) it is two adjacent terms that do not agree, the first being a (generic) masculine form, and the second an @-form.

(6) καλύτεροι φεμινιστ@
kaliter-i feminist-@
better-M.PL feminist-@
‘better feminists’

Such inconsistencies are to be expected when it comes to an informal (i.e., unstandardized and generally non-institutionalized) writing practice, and they underscore the fact that @ is used as an
element that falls “outside grammar.” Where a grammatical suffix would trigger agreement in Greek, the use of @ does not follow the same pattern as it constitutes a writing practice whereby a graphematic element is added to substitute grammatical suffixes in their written form as a result of relevant metalinguistic concerns. Additionally, all three interviewees underline the practice’s written-only scope stating that they find the idea of pronouncing @ in oral speech inconceivable as it stands at the moment. The practice has thus apparently not been elaborated in the oral modality, where the decreased affordances for on-line monitoring of speech production would require a consistent production of a single sound (pattern) in suffix positions.

The brief description provided so far could be summarized as follows: @ is used as a substitute for suffixes in written discourse, functioning as a nonsexist language strategy. By substituting suffixes that encode gender, @ is used as a strategy to avoid gendering discourse through Greek grammatical gender with all that this entails for interaction: avoiding generic masculine use, not conceptualizing gender as a binary, not assuming an interlocutor’s gender identity, etc. This preliminary description serves as a point of departure for examining other analytically relevant variation patterns exhibited in @’s use in the following section.

4.2. “Binary embedded” @ and overgeneralized @

In what follows, I examine more writing variation patterns found in the data, touching upon “binary embedded @” (4.2.1) and what at first appears to be overgeneralized usage of @ (4.2.2).

4.2.1. óλ@ vs. óλ@ς

In an excerpt from our interview, the admin notes:

@ can include non-binary\(^{10}\) and agender individuals too. Personally, I didn’t have this in mind from the beginning, so often instead of saying e.g. óλους [‘all-MASC’] or óλες [‘all-FEM’] I would say óλ@ς. But someone[-FEM] on feminist rants sent me a rant [saying] that in this way I am not including all genders and that the correct form is óλ@, so I’ve been considering it after that. Until then, I just substituted the letters that change across the TWO

\(^{10}\) I underscore terms that are quoted untranslated (i.e., as they appeared in the original Greek interview text) either because they are Greek forms pertinent to the analysis or because they are forms that appeared in English originally. The latter is the case here.
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genders, I hadn’t considered that in this way some individuals are excluded. (admin, 2020, my translation and italics)

In the excerpt above, the admin comments on a distinction between (a) the use of @ as a substitute for letters that vary across masculine and feminine suffixes, and (b) the use of @ as a substitute for the entire suffix. Indeed, plural forms in Greek nominal inflectional paradigms tend to feature –ς as a final letter only in masculine and feminine suffixes in the nominative and/or the accusative case (see Holton et al., 2012). Neuter plural suffixes never feature a final –ς, which suggests that the practice of creating a form with @ which includes that letter is based on taking note of only the masculine and the feminine grammatical gender as options for human reference; or at any rate, this use fails to represent the entire range of grammatical gendered suffixes found in Greek (let alone surpass it). In this sense, this use of @ in Greek could be labeled “binary embedded” borrowing the term used by Salinas and Lozano (2019), as it suggests a conceptualization of gender as a binary since only the grammatical genders of masculine and feminine are considered for generic representation.

Still, it is important to note that, as the admin points out (see italics above), a user like herself can be introduced to the use of @ without knowing from scratch that it is intended to include non-binary reference. This suggests that even though the non-binary dimension of @ seems to be established now among some users, including all three users interviewed in this study, local interpretations of the writing practice might not immediately conceptualize @ as non-binary. Its function would then be understood entirely as that of a nonsexist writing practice that eliminates masculine generics. In this sense, we can make the pre-theoretical observation at this point that it is not so much that non-binary gender reference is overall embedded in the practice (in fact, @ is not a grammatical element that systematically refers to sociocultural gender through grammar at all), but rather @ provides a resource for this view of gender to be expressed, which according to the interviewees, has now become central to @’s use.

So, the “binary embedded” use of @ may be marked as problematic by some of the page’s followers, like the admin suggests. In the excerpt, she states that, after a submission to the page (or a “rant,” using a term drawn from the page’s name) which explained that binary embedded @ was less inclusive and that forms like ὄλ@ were the “correct” way to use @, the admin adjusted
her use of @ by dropping the –ς. Yet, binary embedded @ is not entirely uncommon on Feminist Rants as 11 such occurrences were found in the data set, most of which involved forms like ὀλ@ς where three grammatical gender suffixes were available (masculine, feminine, neuter) but only the masculine and feminine were represented in the @-form. Notably, in two of these cases it was not the letter –ς that was indicative of only the masculine and feminine being represented, but the letter –ν /n/, which indicated that the @-form was a variation on the masculine and feminine accusative case of the definite article in the singular (τον, την respectively), but excluded the neuter (το) from consideration: τ@ν [comment under 2501; 2577].

In some cases, binary embedded @ was used with forms that can be grammatically formed only with feminine and masculine suffixes, and for which neuter is not an acceptable option. These @-forms were based on nominal/adjectival forms denoting humans, such as γκόμεν@ς [2701] based on γκόμενους ‘boyfriends-ACC’ and γκόμενες ‘girlfriends-ACC,’ and ρατσιστ@ς [2845] derived from ρατσιστές/ρατσίστριες ‘racists-MASC/FEM-ACC.’ Yet, such forms denoting human agents that are attested exclusively with masculine and feminine (often only with masculine) suffixes were framed by interviewee Mary as an issue that @ provides a solution for, seen in her example of @ψυχολόγ@ ‘the@ psychologist-.’

Further, other occurrences of exclusively masculine/feminine nouns do not display an –ς, such as in the example με πάμπλουτ@ τουρίστ@ ‘with filthy-rich tourists’ [2761]. In this case, the grammatically and pragmatically plausible neuter formation of the adjective πάμπλουτος/η/ο (as in πάμπλουτο κορίτσι ‘filthy-rich-NEUT girl-NEUT’) might have driven an analogical formation of τουρίστ@ over τουρίστ@ς despite this noun not having a grammatically or pragmatically plausible neuter form. Still, another example where –ς could have been expected but was not featured is seen in (6) above, where the masculine/feminine noun “feminist” is seen in the nominative plural form without an –ς (φεμινιστ@, not φεμινιστ@ς) although –ς would have been featured in both its traditional forms: φεμινιστές/φεμινίστριες ‘feminists-MASC/FEM-NOM’.

A variety of grammatical or pragmatic factors may influence the production of @ forms with or without final elements like –ς or –ν, which cannot be reconstructed or otherwise empirically investigated in the present analysis. The fact remains that these forms can be construed as “binary embedded” and thereby “not correct” uses of @, a symbol which to some has the function of
erasing binary understandings of gender from grammatical representation (beyond functioning as a nonsexist alternative to the generic masculine). In fact, the relatively small number of binary embedded @ uses in the data examined, the understanding of @ as a non-binary-inclusive resource, and the admin’s observation that the issue has been brought up on the page and has led to a change in her own practices all seem to indicate that binary embedded @ might be a less canonical realization of the writing practice compared to its non-binary counterpart.

4.2.2. @ and “overgeneralization”

From its description so far, it seems that @ is used as a writing strategy to achieve gender-neutral reference where otherwise discourse would have been gendered through the presence of gendered suffixes, amounting to a sexist representation of gender through the use of the generic masculine and/or reinforcing a binary conceptualization of gender. Yet, the use of @ is attested also in contexts where gender-neutral reference would have been possible through existing resources. One such example is given in (7) below.

(7)  Αδελφες μου και αδελφ@  
    aðelfes mu ke aðelf-@
    siblings-FEM my and siblings-@
    ‘My sisters and siblings’

The Greek lexical theme αδέλφα- seen above can form the following plural noun forms: αδέλφ-οί ‘brothers’, αδέλφ-ές ‘sisters’ and αδέλφ-ια ‘siblings-DIM.NEUT’. This means that there is a grammatically and pragmatically acceptable neuter form (αδέλφια) for gender-neutral reference to siblings (regardless of other semantic characteristics, such as age, despite the form originating as a diminutive construction). Yet, in (7), this form is not used, and the feminine form αδέλφιες appears independently of the inclusive @-form, presumably for purposes of foregrounding. So, where αδέλφια could have functioned as an all-inclusive form, @ is employed once again.

Another relevant pattern that recurs in the data pertains to the Greek reflexive pronoun ο εαυτός μου ‘myself’, as in (8).

(8)  Δεν μπορώ να πω σε ένα χοντρό άτομο [...] να “αγαπήσει έτσι τ@ εαυτ@ του”  
    δen boro na po se ena xondro atomo [...] na “agapisi etsi t-@ eaut-@ tu”
    NEG can.1SG to say to a fat individual, [...] to “love thus the-@ self-@ its,”
‘I cannot say to a fat person […] to ‘love themselves like that’’

This example constitutes another case of overgeneralized @ use. Generic reference in (8) is achieved through the noun ἀτόμο ‘individual,’ which is a grammatically neuter noun that does not semantically encode the sex/gender of its referents. The noun then functions as an antecedent for the reflexive pronominal construction τον εαυτό @ ‘itself-@’.

The Greek reflexive pronoun is comprised by (a) the grammatically masculine noun εαυτός ‘self’., accompanied by the (agreeing) masculine definite article ο ‘the.MASC,’ resulting in the phrase ο εαυτός ‘the self’; and (b) the possessive genitive form of the personal pronoun. The referent’s gender is referred to only in the third person singular form of the pronoun; it is not encoded in the noun εαυτός, which remains grammatically masculine at all times, and in fact has no other gendered forms in wide use, unlike nouns like, say, φεμινιστής/φεμινίστρια ‘feminist-MASC/FEM.’ Hence, for the third person singular we have: ο εαυτός τον ‘himself’, ο εαυτός της ‘herself’ and ο εαυτός του ‘itself.’ Notably, for the plural, there is no grammatically encoded gendered distinction in the third person: ο εαυτός/οι εαυτοί τους ‘themselves.’ The phrase ο εαυτός may vary in number in plural contexts (‘the self’/‘the selves’).

In example (8), since the antecedent (ἀτομο) is grammatically neuter and semantically gender-neutral, the use of the (standard) neuter accusative form τον εαυτό του would have sufficed for grammatical gender-neutral reference Yet, @ was still applied to ο εαυτός, the noun involved in the pronominal construction, which does not normally display different gendered forms. It seems that the semantic motivation behind grammatical gender found in the vast majority of Greek nouns (Pavlidou et al., 2004) is perceived as extending to the abstract noun ο εαυτός here. This tendency is also exemplified in the construction of novel feminine forms of the noun εαυτός, which are also attested in the data as seen in (9) below.

(9a) πώς αντιμετωπίζουμε τις εαυτές μας [2445] 
pos adimetopizume tis eaftes mas 
how regard-1PL the-FEM.PL self-FEM.PL our 
‘how we regard ourselves’

(9b) μαθαίνουμε να προστατεύουμε την εαυτή μας [comment under 2785] 
mathenume na prostatevume tin eafti mas
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Learn-1pl to protect-1pl the-fem.sg self-fem.sg our
‘we learn to protect ourselves’

These examples indicate that the noun εαυτός can also be sometimes gendered through novel formations that rely on the language’s grammatical system. Specifically, this yields the novel form εαυτή ‘self-fem’, realized through the application of the dominantly feminine suffix –η (Mastropavlou & Tsimpli, 2011). In (9a), the form is inflected for number too, yielding the plural εαυτές, following the relevant inflectional paradigm. Since both (9a) and (9b) involve plural reflexive pronominal constructions, the number of the noun εαυτός varies.

It might be that the gendering of the noun εαυτός is owed to the noun’s involvement in a pronominal construction. The fact that most Greek pronouns encode gender (Holton et al., 2012; Pavlidou, 2003) might prime users to “look for” gender encoding in the reflexive pronominal construction. As pointed out above, the genitive form of the personal pronoun is the only form involved in the reflexive construction that encodes the referent’s gender through grammatical gender. The fact that the personal pronoun does so only in the third person singular form (Pavlidou, 2003) leaves the reflexive pronominal forms across all other paradigmatic cases with a single grammatical gender marking, on the noun εαυτός (and the agreeing article), which is masculine. The general tendency to replace masculines for reference to individuals that may not be male might thus be overgeneralized for this reason, resulting in a novel formation for what otherwise is an abstract noun. Additionally, it is possible that in the context of the pronominal construction, o εαυτός is interpreted as much more directly referring to the individual than it would in a more generic context like: η θεωρία του εαυτού ‘the theory of the self’ (cf. (?)η θεωρία της εαυτής).

Another similar novel formation is attested in a comment under post 2841 (the post analyzed in Section 5). As seen in (10), this novel formation pertains to the noun άνθρωπος ‘human, person,’ which is grammatically masculine but again does not semantically encode gender. In the comment in which the form is attested, the referent that άνθρωπος refers to has been identified as female, so the noun changes into the novel female formation άνθρωπη.

(10) να είσαι η άνθρωπη που θέλεις [comment under 2841]
na ise i anthropi pu thelis
to be.2sg.sbjv the-fem person-fem who want.2sg
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‘be the person you want [to be]’

All in all, the ways in which @ is overgeneralized in novel formations and is accompanied by further neologism creation invariably pertain to issues of grammatical gender encoding and its (perceived) semantic motivation. This further stresses @’s role as a resource used to refer to people’s gender in novel terms, and situates it as a practice within a wider web of strategies to increase, for example, women’s visibility in language (see η εξωτηρί). The fact that established grammatical norms and/or lexical meanings might sometimes be innovated upon in ways that would seemingly not be necessary (as gender-neutral reference would be achieved grammatically either way) is a further indicator of @’s function as a novel element “outside grammar”—a point I will return to in the Section 6. @’s relationship to other nonsexist language strategies is further elaborated below (4.3).

4.3. @ and friends: Nonsexist language use through other resources

As mentioned before (see 1.1), a common strategy used in Greek for increasing women’s visibility in (written) language is using “combined forms” where both the masculine and the feminine are used, with often the former form being written in its entirety and the latter being presented adjacently as a suffix (“combined suffixes”; e.g., φοιτητές/τριες ‘students.MASC/FEM’). As has been noted, this still amounts to a construction of gender as binary, which the use of @ typically overcomes as an issue.

When asked about whether she considers combined forms a “solution” to linguistic sexism (which is what she frames @’s use as), Mary replies as follows:

This [use of combined forms] doesn’t make much of an impression on me. It’s a bit as if they’re sugarcoating it. It doesn’t say much to me... Okay, it’s better than the plain [generic masculine] “φοιτητές” ['students'] obviously. But, again, it doesn’t include many individuals... And also the masculine comes first (usually). This, too, means something. Of course, if the feminine is first, it’s possible that this stems from a rationale of “ladies first” [tongue emoji] So, again you can’t make head nor tail of this. I’d say that this particular practice [of using combined forms] leaves me indifferent, personally. Maybe I am too steadfast, but yeah (Mary, 2020, my translation)
Similarly, the admin brings up combined suffixes as a nonsexist language strategy while commenting on the fact that a variety of such strategies are found around, and that @ has not “caught on”:

I had also read at some point that there is an instruction for the language of public documents to become more neutral with regard to gender and I am sure that they mean that people should put a slash [after masculine forms] and after that put the feminine suffixes too, whereas @ is much more economical. (admin, 2020, my translation)

In this comparison, which focuses on how functional and adopted various strategies are, the admin does not bring up the potential of @ for non-binary reference, but she finds it preferable on the grounds that it is more “economical” to use, a point that she later brings up again. The advantage of @’s use being very “practical” is also mentioned by Lina, who says that this was a thought that led her to adopt the practice when she first encountered it.

So, it appears that combined forms/suffixes are a different nonsexist language strategy that individuals might be aware of when they use @, and in these examples, @ is comparable to that other strategy, which leads to comparative evaluative judgements. Mary states that combined suffixes leave out many individuals (thus pointing to how they promote a binary view of gender) and that the positioning of masculine and feminine within these combinations can also become socially indicative (e.g., promoting benevolent sexism through a “ladies first” rationale). As a result, Mary does not adopt combined suffixes (better than masculine generics though they might be) as in the end they do not really provide solutions in her view. The admin does not take as strong a stance, but she does note that using @ is less cumbersome. (Although not making the comparison, Lina also stresses that @ is very practical to use.)

Still, it might be reasoned that, since the masculine and feminine grammatical genders are the only semantically motivated ones in Greek and thus promote generic reference to human beings in terms perceived as problematic, the third grammatical gender, the neuter, could be mobilized to provide a more inclusive way of referring to gender. Indeed, some such uses of (novel) neuter formations are found in the data, as seen in (11) below.

(11a)  Για τα φίλα μου
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για τα φίλα μου
for the friends-NEUT my
‘For my friends’

(11b) Για όλα/εξ/ονς αυτά/εξ/ονς και τοσα/εξ/ονς
για ολα/εσ/υs αυτα/εσ/υs και τοσα/εσ/υs
for all-NEUT/FEM/MASC those-NEUT/FEM/MASC and so_many-NEUT/FEM/MASC

ανωνυμες/α/ους και επωνυμες/α/ους αλλα/εξ/ονς [2630]
anonimes/a/us ke eponimes/a/us ala/es/us
anonymous-FEM/NEUT/MASC and eponymous-FEM/NEUT/MASC others-NEUT/FEM/MASC

‘For all of them and so many anonymous and eponymous others’

In the examples above, taken from the same post, which does not feature @, we see the neuter grammatical gender mobilized for inclusive reference, also leading to novel formations like τα φίλα ‘the-NEUT friends-NEUT.’ Notably, the neuter is found used in this way also in posts featuring @, such as 2627, where, as seen in (7), the form αδελφ@ is found, while the post also features the forms όσα ‘those_who-NEUT’ and όλα ‘all-NEUT’ for generic reference. An interesting strategy that combines all Greek grammatical genders is also found in the same comment an excerpt of which is seen in (10) above. This excerpt, seen in (12), shows that, besides suffixes, full forms can also be combined, which is what we see in (11b).

(12) Δεν αρέσουν σε όλους, όλες, όλα [...]
δεν aresun se olus oles ola [...]
NEG appeal-3PL to all-MASC all-FEM all-NEUT [...]
‘Not everyone likes […]’

So, in both (11b) and (12), we find the neuter being used alongside the masculine and the feminine to achieve inclusive generic reference. In fact, the order of the gendered suffixes is switched around in (11b) across the various gendered forms used; we find ‘neuter-feminine-masculine’ and ‘feminine-neuter-masculine’ order—notably, the masculine is always featured last, as is the case throughout the post. This points to Mary’s observation on how the order in which genders are represented in combined constructions might be thought of as socially indicative. (12) features the
order “masculine-feminine-neuter,” which is the most common (if not the only) order found in descriptions of Greek grammar when the grammatical genders are presented.

All in all, it seems that the neuter may also provide a way for representing gender more inclusively in Greek written discourse although this practice appears much less widespread than the use of @ in the data sample examined. Additionally, despite Mary noting that she may use the neuter sometimes and the admin finding it “not bad” overall, all interviewees (including Mary) mention that the use of the neuter has downsides compared to using @. The admin and Lina, for one, note that the neuter gender in Greek is mainly associated with inanimate things, as Pavlidou (2003) also points out, and might thus be “inappropriate” for reference to human beings (admin, 2020). This observation relates to the grammatical gender’s distribution across lexical items in Greek, which suggests that its established function in the language is a deterrent for its use in gender-neutral human reference.

The same can be said about the other observations made by the interviewees on the function of the neuter: its established grammatical function renders it not preferable for human reference. The admin and Mary note that the neuter’s use may lead to unacceptable or downright impossible formations citing the examples of the nouns for ‘parliament member’ and ‘Greek person.’ Both nouns have one or two standard gendered forms (masculine and/or feminine), and novel neuter formations would be awkward at best. ‘Member of parliament’ is denoted by the standard masculine noun βουλευτής (typically also used for women), and sometimes the less prestigious feminine variant βουλευτίνα. Mary notes she would never write *το βουλευτό ‘the-NEUT parliament_member-NEUT,’ but would gladly write @ βουλευτ@. Similarly, the admin states that she would not be able to find a way to apply the neuter to the noun Ελληνας/Ελληνίδα ‘Greek-MASC/FEM.’ So, a broader use of the existing neuter gender dimension is restricted for users based on grammaticality and/or acceptability judgements.

Lina also raises the issue that, in functioning outside grammar altogether, @ can cover virtually any gender identity, which the neuter could not. A short example she gives focuses on gender-fluid individuals, who would supposedly be “pinned down” if a particular grammatical gender value were to be constantly used to refer to them.
The statement that most clearly points to the value of @ as a novel extra-grammatical element is made by the admin, as seen in Excerpt 1 below, where she talks about why using @ is preferable to using the neuter.

**Excerpt 1**

Admin: […] Also, I don’t see the reason for using something that already exists, it’s better to create something ours that expresses what we want to say.

Interviewer: Very interesting, what you’re telling me. So, you think that it’s preferable to make something new rather than see what you can do with the linguistic means that already exist? Why?

Admin: Because language has to evolve anyway, I think. That is, I would be more open to something even newer rather than us fitting new concepts into old linguistic shapes. It’s like trying to say that language preemptively plans for everything, but that is not true. (admin, 2020, my translation)

Judging from the excerpt above, the admin is averse to using existing linguistic resources (“old linguistic shapes”) to express contemporary concerns surrounding sociocultural gender (“new concepts”), and views the changes that this brings as a natural (and necessary; “has to”) extension of linguistic change. Indeed, the diverse picture of writing practices painted so far documents the perceived unfitness of existing linguistic resources and established ways of using language when it comes to finding ways to render writing more inclusive in terms of gender representation.

Still, when it comes specifically to the neuter, it appears that its formation might be informing @-formations to a certain degree as suggested by the example in (13).

(13)  ὂλ@ ἐμείς τ@ φεμινιστ@  [2575]
       ol@ emis t@ feminist@
       all-@ we the-@ feminist-@
       ‘All we feminists’

Since the declinable forms in (13) are all in nominative case, the presence of τ- in the definite article can only allude to the neuter form τα ‘the-NEUT.PL.’ No masculine or feminine Greek
definite article form includes τ- and the baseline assumption when creating a novel article form that is a free morpheme would be not to include any other elements besides @ itself (cf. Mary’s example of @ ψυχολόγ@ but not τ@ ψυχολόγ@).

In the end, the picture revealed by the various strategies that users writing in Greek use online to avoid linguistic sexism is a diverse one given that users are aware of and often rely on varying ways of achieving nonsexist and/or non-binary generic reference. The comparison of the strategy defined by @ to other practices leads to observations that ultimately point to @ being preferable as it is not bound by existing grammatical and lexical norms. As a novel sociolinguistic norm for writing, @ can stand for virtually anything in terms of gender (“everything and none of them at the same time”; Lina, 2020), and what its use amounts to is the (para)linguistic reification of a more inclusive view of gender.

In the following section, I delve further into this preliminary conclusion by examining @’s indexical value attribution through a key incident.

5. “Feminist @”: A key incident analysis

This section focuses on a post on Feminist Rants and its comments section, which has been singled out as a key incident as it features explicit debate about the use of @ and its social meaning. The key incident analysis is complemented by interview data, which provide further support to the analytical observations made. The post, numbered 2814, features a very controversial submission, followed by a comment made by the admin prior to the post’s publication. The admin’s comment appears in the Facebook post’s main body under three stars (***). Such in-post commentary by the admin is somewhat rare but not unattested on the page, and it is common in controversial submissions (see also post 2572 in the Appendix). The post and relevant comments are presented below over the course of the analysis as anonymized screenshots (Figures) followed by translations (Tables).
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Table 2. Key incident post translation (my own).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE ICON</th>
<th>Feminist Rants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#feminist_rants_2814</td>
<td>I don’t know if I am a feminist[-FEM] because I like most conventions of the patriarchy oppressive to others[-@] concerning the display and the hiding of the body, obligatory youthfulness, vanity, the excessive attention to aesthetic and formalities. Nonetheless I consider unjust the fact that [these conventions] are applied only to women. What I would want is a top-down equality, that is, A world where men will also be obligated by social conventions to be always young, beautiful, happy, well-dressed, polite, somewhat “feminine” and passive without women being freed of these [obligations]. Would it be possible for such a worl [sic] to exist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin: I was also unsure momentarily as to whether you are a feminist[-FEM] but this @ you used convinced me that you are. It wasn’t entered to substitute a gendered suffix of course but it’s the thought that counts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The post expresses a woman’s uncertainty as to whether she is a true feminist. She is unsure as to whether the label describes her because she likes some oppressing conventions established by the patriarchy, and thinks they should continue existing but be generalized beyond women so that they stop being “unjust.” For example, besides women, men should also be expected to be “beautiful,” “well-dressed,” and “passive.” The submission ends with an open question as to whether such a world could exist. The submitted text is then followed by a reply by the admin (under the three asterisks), which sarcastically states that even though it was unclear for a moment whether the submission’s author was a true feminist or not, her use of @ definitely qualified her as one. The admin also comments that @ was not used correctly (“to substitute a gendered suffix”) but “it’s the thought that counts.”

Evidently, the admin’s sarcastic remark suggests that the use of @ would typically index that its user ascribes to feminist views: that “the thought” to use @ qualifies one as a feminist (even more than using @ “correctly” does). What is ironic about this submission is that, despite the author using @, the views she expresses are not judged by the admin (or the commenters, as will be seen below) as enough to qualify her as “a feminist.” The admin’s comment within the post thus establishes an indexical relation between using @ and constructing the identity of a feminist. Similar metapragmatic judgements were also shared in the interviews.

In her interview, the admin says that, to her, the use of @ among a public of strangers functions as “a statement” (see Excerpt 2 below).

**Excerpt 2**

**Interviewer:** What do you mean when you say that you use [@] as a statement?

**Admin:** [I use it] when I want to declare where I stand ideologically, as if I want to say indirectly “feminist here.”

**Interviewer:** So the use of @ shows that about you?

**Admin:** It shows that I belong to a broader fourth-wave feminist wave [*sic*] and that gender issues concern me. (admin, 2020, my translation)
Speaking about her personal use of @, the admin states that it indexes a feminist ideological stance, which in fact she further labels as a “fourth-wave feminist” stance (a point which I shall return to in Section 6).

Similarly, Mary notes that when she sees an individual using @, she will “assume about this individual that they have (usually) sat down to do their research and get informed about some [gender-related] topics” (Mary, 2020, my translation). She thus thinks that there is a higher chance that the individual and herself are “in the same wavelength” when it comes to views on gender (Mary, 2020, my translation). Notably, Mary refrains from using particular terminology or labels for the identities one can perform through the use of @ although she notes that the use of @ is dominant among “feminist spaces” and describes individuals using @ as individuals “of that space” (Mary, 2020, my translation).

Judging from our interview, Lina further refrains from passing whole identity judgements when she sees individuals using @, stating that the symbol’s use “doesn’t tell me much, beyond the fact that they [i.e., the user] choose to be inclusive in written discourse” (Lina, 2020, my translation). This statement still suggests that the use of @ reflects a metalinguistic concern with gender-inclusivity in written discourse, which constitutes an ideological stance. Lina also acknowledges that, despite not knowing of intense opposition to @’s use, she finds that some individuals consider it superfluous and that those same individuals might view an @ user as “a social justice warrior or as queer” if they were to take any interest in judging the agent behind the practice (Lina, 2020, my translation).

Indeed, when it comes to individuals not engaging in the practice, Mary notes that the use of @ will draw their attention as peculiar, whereas among frequent commenters “within a feminist page” its aim would be obvious (unlike among some feminist page “passers-by”). This suggests a divide between a sort of in-group that is well-acquainted with the practice and those on the outside that might have varying degrees of awareness of it, supposedly accompanied by varying sets of views and concomitant judgements on its use. The admin also comments on how people that have no contact with feminism see the practice in her view:
Excerpt 3

Admin: I believe that many people today understand what [@] means, precisely because of how mainstream feminism has become, but, like everything that has been tied to feminism, it has taken on the stigma of being irrational. There are of course also those[-@] who just don’t know about it, like my dad.

Interviewer: So, since, as you also told me before, [@] has been tied to feminism, is it for this reason that you think we see it often on feminist rants e.g.?

Admin: Yes, definitely. And even if not everyone[-@], almost everyone knows what it means, it’s a bit like a common dialect of feminism. (admin, 2020, my translation)

Taken together, the metapragmatic judgements interviewees shared along with the comment the admin made on submission 2814 above, point to @’s enregisterment (Agha, 2003, 2005) as a semiotic element that characterizes “feminist-oriented” identities (for lack of a better term), and which may function as a third-order indexical (Silverstein, 2003). That is, @ not only indexes a particular ideological stance that reflects a concern with issues of gender representation in language (with a focus on inclusivity), but it can be used as a “statement” in order to enact a particular persona, signaling that one identifies with this ideological stance; through this function, @ is also seen and commented upon as a practice “typical of” a particular persona (e.g., that of a “social justice warrior” to outsiders or that of a true feminist, as in this key incident). In indexing such figures of personhood (Agha, 2005), @ also functions to generate a differentiation between an in-group of individuals concerned with gender issues that use it, and outsiders not engaging in the practice, who might still recognize it as “typical” of this in-group. Indeed, the admin views it as (part of) “a common dialect of feminism” (admin, 2020, my translation).

Moving on, the second part of the admin’s comment on the submission concerns a metalinguistic statement about @’s use, whereby the submission’s author is said not to have used @ “to substitute a gendered suffix,” implying that her use of @ was wrong from a syntax-pragmatics interface perspective. This observation is taken up in the comments section, sparking further metalinguistic debate as the passage in which @ is used in the submission, glossed below in (14), generates multiple readings.
Generally, the passage as it stands can generate two grammatical readings, presented as R₁ and R₂ below.

R₁: most of the conventions of the patriarchy that oppress others

R₂: most of the conventions of the patriarchy that others find oppressive

In both these readings, the suffix @ does substitute a “gendered suffix” (interpreted as “a suffix that refers to a person’s/people’s gender”) as it refers generically to “others,” meaning “other people.” In the comments section, the admin and another user (presented as the orange user below) propose a third reading whereby the form with @, όλλ@, does not in fact refer to human beings and their gender (see Figures 3a, 3b/Table 3).

Figure 3a. Comment on post 2814. Screenshot captured on March 7, 2020.
Table 3. Translation (my own) of the comment thread under post 2814, as presented spread across Fig. 3a and 3b.

[BLUE USER:] Fantastic bait for decrepit pages of the manosphere!

Btw, I have the impression that the @ in others[-@] [the form found] in the post truly substitutes a gendered suffix. Unless of course the admin insinuates that the conventions of the patriarchy are oppressing only for others[-FEM] [i.e., women], whereas for others[-MASC] [i.e., men] they are a delight, in which case I pass 😊

[ORANGE USER:] [replying to BLUE USER] the others[-@] is used as an adjectival modifier to [the term] conventions
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The users in this comment thread engage in a conversation about the term 's syntactic function. The blue user proposes R as their reading of the passage in question, in which case, they note, does indeed substitute a “gendered suffix.” The pink user also ascribes to the same reading. No users opt for R. The orange user and the admin propose a third reading, *R, whereby “is used as an adjectival modifier” to ‘conventions,’ an inanimate feminine noun, and should thus have agreed for gender (becoming ). However, this reading renders the sentence ungrammatical, which is acknowledged by the admin (“it doesn’t make a lot of sense though”).

A reading like R could be a result of the lack of transparency in the form due to the presence of @ which substitutes the suffix that would have encoded gender, case, and number in the form. However, if the feminine form had been used, garden-path ambiguity would have been perhaps even more plausible as the form would have agreed with the immediately next form. In any case, in the sentence’s current form, any such garden-path reading is resolved when the entire sentence is taken into account as R does not generate a well-formed proposition. So, at first glance, it is unclear why the users continued with reading R despite seeing that it generates an ungrammatical sentence. One has to ask to what extent this debate truly is about grammar.

Looking at the comment section overall, the submission seems to have been controversial for the page’s audience as most commenters disagree with the author with varying degrees of hostility.
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(e.g., see Appendix; Disapproving comments 1) and another commenter (seen as the blue user above) raises the question as to whether the submission has been made in earnest or ironically (e.g., see Appendix; Disapproving comments 2). The general stance taken in the thread seen above when it does not focus on metalinguistic commentary is also one that disagrees with the author and constructs her as “not a true feminist.” So, it would seem that, by the page audience’s standards, the submission’s author does not qualify as a true feminist given her views. Therefore, the use of @ in her submission, as commented upon by the admin within the post, is incongruous with the identity that she constructs through her stance-taking moves (liking oppressive patriarchal conventions, wanting them to be perpetuated and extended to men).

In Agha’s (2005) terms, this renders the author’s use of @ not “appropriate to context,” but a “tropic use.” As a sign enregistered as signaling a “feminist-oriented” persona, @ being used alongside textual cues that construct the author’s persona as not feminist (a judgement voiced by the post’s audience overall) is incongruous, which renders the use of @ a mere “trope” as defined by the audience’s judgements. Note that this is not meant to suggest that the author’s judgement would have also viewed her own use of @ as the deliberate deployment of a trope (unless the post was ironic, as suggested by one commenter; see Appendix). It is the judgement that the page’s followers, led by the admin’s initial comment, form here about the submission overall as an identity performance, that renders @’s use (recognizable as) tropic.

So, when the admin takes issue with the grammar-related function of @ in the post, it is possible that (a) she has not paid close enough attention to the post’s text in order to disambiguate the garden-path reading she proposes (*R_3) and/or (b) she takes issue with @’s use on the level of (meta)pragmatics, as shown by her comment in the post, which causes her to judge @’s use as “wrong” also on the level of syntax, despite her reading being ungrammatical upon closer examination. After all, since @ substitutes grammatical morphemes, often obscuring the syntactical arrangement of passages, and given that @ generally operates “outside grammar” as argued above, grammaticality judgements can be articulated in less absolute terms as @ provides a “grey area” when it comes to grammatical representations. The same could have occurred in the case of the orange user, who by also ascribing to *R_3, is aligning with the admin’s judgement on
the author’s identity.\textsuperscript{11} Notably, even after the admin concedes that her reading is ungrammatical (“it doesn’t make a lot of sense”), her final statement reaffirms sarcastically that even the grammatical reading proposed by the blue user and also supported by the pink user (R\textsubscript{2}) amounts to the expression of an opinion that in no way renders the post’s author a true feminist. Evidently, the question of whether @’s use was syntactically correct is of secondary importance. It is the fact that @’s use is (judged as) tropic in the post that the admin primarily takes issue with, and it appears that the commentary on the syntactic function of ἅλλαν@ follows this initial judgement as a further argument concerning how the post’s author is “wrong” in her use of @.

In the end, what this key incident shows is that when the use of @ is explicitly commented upon, it is its (meta)pragmatic effects that are the issue of utmost importance. Still, since @ is inserted in linguistic text, its use also opens up issues of linguistic “correctness” judgements. However, it seems that such issues take on a secondary role given the users’ evident primary orientation toward viewing @ as an enregistered token for the performance of feminist-oriented identities. Indeed, the main conclusion here is that @ functions as an enregistered semiotic element indicating a feminist ideological orientation, particularly in metalinguistic terms (i.e., a concern with inclusive language).

6. Discussion and conclusions

Based on the present ethnographic investigation, we can conclude that @ is used in Greek writing as a semiotic element that creates space for inclusivity in terms of gender representation by functioning outside the Greek grammatical gender system. In this sense, Pavlidou, Kapellidi, and Karafoti were correct in their early observation that @ stands for “gender for which there is no provision in the language’s grammar” (Pavlidou et al., 2015, p. 464, my translation), but the diverse picture of @’s use illustrated in the present data sample also indicates much more. For example, apart from including non-binary gender identities in specific reference, @ can be said to function primarily for generic reference, encompassing all, any or no particular gender identities.

\textsuperscript{11} Alignment with the admin’s position when she openly takes a stance against a submission is also exemplified and commented upon (indirectly by the submission’s author) in post 2572 (see Appendix).
In fact, the use of @ in Greek written discourse can be understood as a form of politically responsive prescriptivism (Curzan, 2014) from a linguistic standpoint since all the interviewees frame its use as a “solution” to the issue of linguistic sexism. Its adoption is informed by feminist metalinguistic views on the underrepresentation or even the erasure of genders beyond the masculine in language use. In fact, all the interviewees note that their (first) encounters with the practice were in one way or another linked to feminism: Lina assumes that she must have first seen @ on “some feminist page” (Lina, 2020, my translation); Mary says she first heard about the practice at a feminist workshop on gender and the Greek language; the admin mentions first seeing @ “when [her] internet engagement with feminism started” (admin, 2020, my translation). Indeed, the page’s administrator, known publicly only by her pseudonym Hurrfem Sultan, has been active for over five years writing about everyday sexism and promoting feminist thought through Greek-language pages, such as her other Facebook page Yes, You Are A Misogynist—see Chamaleli, 2016 for an interview (in Greek).

This association between @ and social actors involved in its use with feminism has also led to @’s enregisterment as a semiotic practice that indexes “feminist ideology.” Today, @ can be found in wide usage on Greek feminist pages, according to the interviewees. It seems that the online dimension of this writing practice is central to its adoption too, given the lack of any equivalent to @ for spoken language and the fact that the practice remains informal/not institutionalized and thus unattested in formal offline writing contexts. When the admin frames the use of @ as related to “fourth-wave feminism,” she provides a valuable lens for approaching both the feminist and the online dimension of @’s use.

Fourth-wave feminism is understood as a current movement in feminist thinking that is characteristically associated with the adoption of digital technologies (the internet and social media) in promoting feminist debate and action (Blevins, 2018; Evans & Chamberlain, 2015; Rivers, 2017; Zimmerman, 2017). According to Blevins (2018, p. 100), fourth-wave feminism “has largely been identified by the young people who affiliate with it online,” and among its defining characteristics are (a) a rejection of a view of the online and offline dimensions of our lives as separate, as well as (b) increased inclusivity and a renewed focus on intersectionality (Blevins, 2018; Zimmerman, 2017). Hurrfem Sultan’s active engagement on the online plane (e.g., through promoting commentary on day-to-day sexism experienced in offline settings on Feminist
Rants or through commenting on offline and online sexism herself on Yes, You Are A Misogynist) underscores the former view that our online practices matter for our offline social lives too, as these two aspects are interconnected. Further, not only is the increased inclusivity of spaces like Feminist Rants mentioned in all the interviews, but these spaces’ intersectional approach to feminism is seen in posts such as 2572, where the admin (in an in-post comment) and most of the post’s audience (in the comments section) suggest support for views that link feminism to a concern with, for example, race- and class-related injustice, rejecting an “economically liberal” approach to feminism (see Appendix for the post in full along with its most popular comments).

In fact, pages like Hurrfem Sultan’s could be conceptualized as “consciousness-raising groups,” the resurgence of which characterizes fourth-wave feminism according to Blevins (2018). Feminist Rants displays key features of consciousness-raising groups as it provides a place for people “to vent about everyday sexist experiences” (Blevins, 2018, p. 92), fostering empathy and community formation, hosting discussions, and promoting feminist politics (Blevins, 2018).

This understanding of Feminist Rants’ community is entirely in line with our view of “light” group formations online (Blommaert, 2018), which is again informed by a view on the interconnectedness of the online and the offline, and on the importance of “light” practices for community building. For example, the fact that most Feminist Rants submissions feature affiliative speech acts toward the page’s community (e.g., greetings, goodbyes, expressions of gratitude), and that it is in such affiliative acts that we find most tokens of @, underscores the function of affiliative practices for the construction of the community at hand and the role of @ in this context. By engaging in “light” practices, such as “heart-reacting” someone’s testimonial and commentary on an everyday encounter with sexism, followers of Feminist Rants establish bonds of conviviality (Varis & Blommaert, 2015), and it seems that the semiotic practice of using @ is associated with these bonds as in many cases “I love you all” becomes “I love you all-@.” This observation is supported by remarks made by the interviewees; for example, Mary’s remark that the use of @ might signal to her that an individual might be “in the same wavelength” as her, and this will lead her to form a positive opinion about them (Mary, 2020, my translation). Similarly, when the admin frames the use of @ as “a common dialect of feminism,” she addresses @’s use as a form of meaning-making embedded in an imagined group’s (Greek-writing feminists’) distinctive identity.
The use of @ as a writing practice renders it no less sociolinguistically relevant for community formation. In fact, Lillis (2013) notes how community formation can emerge around writing practices based on common resources for meaning-making—in this case, the wide availability of @ as a symbol that can be typed on virtually any keyboard. In fact, under a conception of literacy as social practice inspired by New Literacy Studies, the use of @ can also be understood as a situated meaning-making practice that amounts to identity work (Gee, 2008; Lillis, 2013): becoming recognizable as a feminist online. In their online engagement with feminist spaces, users like some followers of Feminist Rants acquire @’s use as a social practice which involves the manipulation of certain technological tools (for typing), in order to make meaning in particular ways that are socially recognizable. This reliance on a writing practice for identity construction is rendered all the more relevant on a page like Feminist Rants, where the guaranteed anonymity of each post (as each submission is linked but to a disposable numeric avatar), provides no further contextualizing cues as to who the author is beyond their text. In the key incident analyzed, for example, it is possible that @ became such a central topic of debate precisely because when judging an anonymous author’s identity on Feminist Rants, what the page’s audience has to work with is the author’s semiotic work as articulated through their writing practices—and @ has been established as a recognizably “feminist” writing practice.

Further, the dynamic nature of the use of @ as an online writing practice (Blommaert, 2018; Lillis, 2013) has also been exemplified in the analysis through the illustration of the various ways in which @ can be employed and judged. In fact, the lack of a “standardized” point of normative reference renders the use of @ highly variable locally, from user to user. Its use can also be seen as parallel to the deployment of various other resources in an effort to ensure gender-neutral human reference in Greek discourse (e.g., the use of the neuter gender). However, it does seem that @, by virtue of not corresponding to any existing grammatical forms, but instead providing an alternative to them, has come to function as an “umbrella” for the expression of various approaches to nonsexist language (e.g., a more “binary embedded” use versus one more strongly oriented toward non-binary-inclusivity). That is, @’s use as a writing practice is impossible to pin down to existing language forms, which renders this practice a site with increased potential for semiotic innovation and vast localized variation.
Whether the use of @ in Greek is informed by the innovative gender-related ways in which the symbol is employed in other languages like Spanish remains an open question that the present study cannot answer. Still, it can be noted that Lina (but not Mary nor the admin) was aware of the symbol’s use in other languages such as Portuguese due to people using it in her wider network. All in all, what we can conclude from the present study is that the way in which @ compares to Spanish “binary embedded” @ is not easily summarizable, as the Spanish @ appears to have been gaining more attention and spread (being commented upon in reference works and academic scholarship) whereas Greek @ remains a highly variable “fringe” writing practice. It is mostly not “binary embedded” (which brings it closer to Spanish –x), but it can be binary embedded too, ostensibly in forms like ὅλ@ς.

Further, when it comes to situating the Greek @ within a wider, more globalized tradition of nonsexist language reform (Curzan, 2014), one can note that all the interviewees seemed to be aware of nonsexist language initiatives in other languages too, such as English and Swedish. Mary and the admin explicitly noted the challenges that the adoption of gender-neutral language alternatives faces in Greek as opposed to a language like English that does not mark gender grammatically apart from its semantic presence in third-person pronominal forms. In fact, the admin reconfigures the practice of “asking for someone’s pronouns” that is common among some English speakers by adapting it to the Greek context as “asking for someone’s suffixes.” She states that the issue in Greek differs from “the pronoun issue” due to the pervasiveness of grammatical gender and its effects on the gendering of discourse (see Alvanoudi, 2015). Therefore, it appears that, while nonsexist linguistic strategies like the conventionalization of singular they in English and the use of @ in Greek writing might be underlain by similar concerns with gender-inclusivity, the local conditions shaped by the particularities of the linguistic resources users have at hand (e.g., a grammatical gender system) affect the direction in which they will adopt inclusive meaning-making strategies in and around language.

More specifically, in the case of Greek, the presence of grammatical gender is so ubiquitous that users find it difficult to resort to alternatives within the existing gender system which would be gender-inclusive as desired, so they turn to a form that functions outside grammar, namely @, and use it to effectively replace the grammatical forms that create perceived problems. It might be, as in Hurrfem Sultan’s case, that this strategy may also be accompanied by an idea that “old shapes,”
existing linguistic resources, are not preferable for expressing a new approach to social issues like those in the gender-language nexus. It seems that differentiating between what is technically a linguistic resource and what is not is often not a major concern to users even in clearly metalinguistic debates like the one on language and gender—the wide employment of @ is a testament to this. What users like the present study’s interviewees appear to share is metalinguistic views that frame existing linguistic resources as not enough for expressing their views on the social world as they only function to construct it in established ways that they find problematic. As a result, these language users resort to alternatives that may just be “multimodal,” which especially in the case of writing, an inherently multimodal affair (Lillis, 2013), should come as no surprise. Once again, the divide between the linguistic and the non-linguistic proves to be of little relevance when examining social agents’ meaning-making practices from an emic perspective, even from an angle that prioritizes language, such as the sociolinguistic angle adopted here. Notably, this renders some critiques of @, such as the one found in a Spanish Dictionary dismissing @ as “not linguistic” (“género,” n.d.), commentaries of little relevance to the social bearing of the issue of gender-inclusive linguistic representation (or “para-linguistic” representation, for that matter).

Examining @’s use from a sociolinguistic qualitatively-oriented research perspective, the present study has also raised questions that warrant further investigation through different methodological approaches. For example, future large-scale quantitative investigations could shed more light on the diverse patterns of @’s use by examining larger corpora and exploring writing variation as sociolinguistically meaningful. Further, the interplay between Greek grammar and @ as an extra-grammatical writing element inserted in Greek written discourse warrants further study from a theoretical standpoint too.

All in all, the present study hopes to have shown that the use of @ in Greek written discourse is underlain by an ideological concern with the conceptualization of gender and its encoding in language. @ thereby functions in socially meaningful ways, becoming an indexical of “feminist” identity among some speakers of Greek. Despite its not strictly linguistic nature (and, to a certain extent, because of it), @ is used in Greek as semiotic resource to provide solutions to perceived linguistic problems that pertain to gender equality in linguistic representation and to the recognition of diverse gender identities beyond binary conceptions of gender as valid.
7. Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Disapproving comments 1 (from post 2814; screenshot captured on March 7, 2020)

[PURPLE USER:] How deeply did you soul-search yourself, in order to understand that in fact you like the frames of the patriarchy? Seriously now, have you never felt e.g. pressured to smile and be happy, while you don’t want to? Do you think that this is nice and normal? I am simply asking because it truly strikes me, this mindset. It is the patriarchy itself that brings you up since you are a child with the impression that everything that you describe is normal and you have to like it. In most cases, we don’t want these [things] by personal choice. Still, even if you want all these things consciously, what makes you think that others should want them too? Especially the “young[-@] and beautiful[-@]” statement struck me very badly. So, you think that the
main problem is that the world doesn’t have enough frames? You are so into spending time, money and energy to remain forever young and beautiful (sorry to ruin it for you, but this is not so very possible, but anyway). I get it. Still, what makes you think that everyone would like to do the same as you? What makes you think that this will lead the world to something better? And there’s also this other thing: how do you define what’s beautiful? Because I, e.g., think that all[-@] are beautiful[-@], being simply thmeselves[-@] [sic]. It doesn’t seem to me, though, that you mean the same thing. In general, this shit-society will become better if we are freer[-@] to do whatever we’re into, each[-@] [of us]. Not [do] whatever you (or anyone else) thinks is best. In general, self-reflect. Something is going wrong [with you].

[BROWN USER:] Yes. But. Not everyone[-MASC], everyone[-FEM], everyone[-NEUT] likes formalities and, generally, particular forms of behavior. I mean, it’s your right. Feminism is not a book of rules that tells you to do this and that, but the freedom to be the person[-FEM] you want. BUT. Important. Without oppressing/imposing on those[-@] around you. <3

**Disapproving comments 2** (from post 2814; screenshot captured on March 7, 2020)

[RED USER:] So those[-@] who are not young[-@], beautiful[-@], happy[-@] and well-dressed[-@] don’t have a place in the society [that is] ideal to you? A very problematic stance.
[BLUE USER:] In any case maybe she [the submission’s author] is being ironic.

[RED USER:] [It is] difficult for one to make out irony in a written text.

Post 2572: main text and admin’s comment (screenshot captured on May 2, 2020)

Φεμινιστικά Παραληρήματα
February 7 · ☀

#feminist_rants_2572

Μόνο εγώ βρίσκω ότι υπάρχουν δύο μέτρα και δύο σταθμά όταν κάποιος δηλώνει οικονομικά φιλελεύθερος, καθώς οι αυτοί τη δήλωση ξαφνικά χάνονται κάθε καταδίκη πατροναρισμού, κάθε ελευθερία αυτοπροσδιορισμού και κάθε διαθεματικότητα, ενώ πείτετε επίσης της σαν τα όρνεα "δεν γίνεται να είσαι φεμινιστρία και φιλελεύθερη"; Γίνεται να είσαι φεμινιστρία και κάθε τι άλλο, προφανώς, αρκεί να ανήκεις στον αριστερό κινηματικό χώρο. Καί μετά θα βγάλετε και θα πείτε "μιλάς από θέση προνομίου". Όλοι σχεδόν έχουμε προνόμια. Δεν θα νιώσουμε ασχήμα κι ενοχικά για αυτά. Δεν θα νιώσουμε ασχήμα γιατί με τα προνόμια μας, στο μέτρο του δυνατού, κάποιοι προσπαθούμε να κάνουμε καλό. Ότε θα νιώσουμε ασχήμα επειδή δεν έχουμε την πολιτική αντίληψη που θεωρεί η αντιμ θέσφατο.

Admin: Όλοι έχουμε προνόμια, η διαφορά είναι ότι δεν πιστεύουμε όλοι ότι τα συστήματα που μας έδωσαν αυτά τα προνόμια πρέπει να διακινούνται, τι δεν έχετε καταλάβει; Ο καπιταλισμός παράγει προνόμια για κάποιους μόνο επειδή παράγει καταπέλτες και φιώχες για κάποιους άλλους (την πλειοψηφία). Δεν γίνεται να είσαι φεμινιστρία και νεοφιλελεύθερη για τον ίδιο λόγο που δεν γίνεται να είσαι φεμινιστρία και white supremacist. Μπορείς να είσαι φεμινιστρία και λευκή, και να χρησιμοποιείς το προνόμιο σου για καλό αλλά ΌΧΙ να είσαι φεμινιστρία και να πιστεύεις στην λευκή ανωτέρότητα που σου έδωσε αυτά τα προνόμια.

149
66 Comments

[FEMALE ICON] Feminist Rants

#feminist_rants_2572
Do only I find that there is a double standard when someone[@] declares themselves economically liberal[@], because when it comes to this statement suddenly every condemnation of patronization is lost, as is every freedom of self-identification and every [concern with] intersectionality, while you fall onto her like vultures [saying] “you can’t be a feminist and a liberal”? It is possible for one to be a feminist[@FEM] and whatever else, certainly, as long as one belongs to the space of leftist movements. And then you will come out and say “you speak from a position of privilege.” Almost all of us have privileges. We will not feel bad and guilty about them. We will not feel bad because through our privileges, to the extent that it is possible, some of us try to do good. Neither will we feel bad because we do not have the political view that the admin considers the word of god.

***

Admin: We all have privileges, the difference is that we don’t all think that the systems that gave us these privileges must be perpetuated, what have you not understood? Capitalism creates privileges for some only because it creates oppression and poverty for some others (the majority). You cannot be a feminist and a liberal for the same reason that you can’t be a feminist and a white supremacist. You can be a feminist and white, and [you can] use your privilege to do good but [you can] NOT be a feminist and believe in the superior social status of white people that gave you these privileges.

**Post 2572: most popular (i.e., most reacted to) comments** (screenshot captured on August 13, 2020)

1. "Φεμινίστρια" + νεοφιλελεύθερη = "φεμινισμός" για λίγους και εκλεκτούς, οι υπόλοιποι να πάτε να πνιγήτε.
   Like · Reply · 26w · Edited

2. Η στην admin προφανώς
   Like · Reply · 26w

3. Like στην admin, προφανώς.
   Like · Reply · 26w
[LIGHT BLUE USER:] “Feminist”+neoliberal = “feminism” for a chosen few, the rest can go choke.

[LIGHT GREEN USER:] The [heart emoji] [goes to] the admin obviously

[DARK GREEN USER:] [The] like [goes to] the admin, obviously.

[GREY USER:] It is possible for you to be a feminist and a liberal. It is possible especially if you have only just been acquainted with feminism. Once you get deeper into it, you will realize that it is not possible. Everyone[-fem] is welcome.

[YELLOW USER:] The admin always gives you[-pl] the answer you need, like a doctor prescribing you your meds. [sunglasses emoji]