

Transgender language reform: some challenges and strategies for promoting trans-affirming, gender-inclusive language

Lal Zimman

Abstract

Transgender people's recent increase in visibility in the contemporary United States has presented new linguistic challenges. This article investigates those challenges and presents strategies developed by trans speakers and promoted by trans activists concerned with language reform. The first of these is the selection of gendered lexical items, including both gender identity terms (woman, man, etc.) and more implicitly gendered words (e.g. beautiful, handsome). The second is the assignment of third person pronouns like she/her/hers and he/him/his as well as non-binary pronouns like singular they/them/theirs or ze/hir/hirs. Both of these challenges tap into the importance trans people place on individual self-identification, and they come with new interactional practices such as asking people directly what pronouns they would like others to use when referring to them. The third challenge addressed here is avoiding gendering people when the referent's gender isn't relevant or known, which can be addressed through the selection of gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language. The final challenge is how to discuss gender when it is relevant – e.g. in discussions of gender identity, socialisation or sexual physiology – without delegitimising trans identities. Several strategies are presented to address this issue, such as hedging all generalisations based on gender, even when doing so seems unnecessary in the normative sex/gender framework or using more precise lan-

Affiliation

University of California, USA.
email: zimman@linguistics.ucsb.edu

guage regarding what aspect(s) of gender are relevant. Taken as a whole, trans language reform reflects the importance of language, not just as an auxiliary to identity, but as the primary grounds on which identity construction takes place.

KEYWORDS: LANGUAGE REFORM; TRANSGENDER; DISCRIMINATION

Introduction

The last several years have seen enormous changes in the place of transgender people in the public imaginary in the United States.¹ This shift has been fuelled in part by a growing number of publicly trans figures such as the actress Laverne Cox, athlete and media figure Caitlyn Jenner, and filmmakers Lana and Lilly Wachowski, among others. Of course, these individuals' publicly trans identities did not come into being in a vacuum, but rather were enabled by decades of activist work distributed across innumerable trans communities. If the 1990s were a decade of transgender identity – in the sense that the word *transgender* came into widespread use as an identity label at that time (Valentine 2007) – the 2010s have been the decade of transgender publicity, when the well-honed theories of gender and identity trans people had been developing in-community for decades finally began to be recognised more broadly as a matter of social justice.

Language has played an enormously important role in the sea-change the United States is undergoing in terms of its understanding of and orientation toward transgender issues. One of the milestones in this process is the growing interest in trans-inclusive language within linguistic institutions such as mainstream news organisations, medical providers and schools. These issues have become hot topics on college campuses in particular as some universities are investing in trans-inclusive language practices by, for instance, making 'pronoun pins' available to students who want to signal whether they should be referred to as *she*, *he*, *they*, or some other pronoun (Associated Press 2016). These changes have not gone unopposed, however, and trans-related language has become a popular topic of critique among conservative commentators (including from inside academia, e.g. Craig 2016), who frame trans-inclusive language as a form of political correctness that imposes the leftist ideology that trans people's identities should be affirmed and respected. In either case, language is at the centre of public debates over the place of transgender people in the United States. Trans people remain vulnerable to verbal harassment, physical and sexual violence, and discrimination in healthcare, employment and housing, among other injustices, yet there is clearly a growing segment of the cisgender (i.e. non-transgender) population who recognise the importance of language for transgender liberation. Indeed, trans activism is often centred around

linguistic reform. One recent success, for instance, is the introduction of the word *non-binary* for reference to individuals who do not self-identify as either female or male. Similarly, the word *cisgender* or *cis*, which has been in wide use within trans communities for well over a decade, has recently entered the general lexicon of a broader (cis) population. With the notion of cisgender identity comes the recognition that *cissexism*, or *cisnormativity* – the notion that cisgender identities are ‘natural’, ‘normal’ and ‘good’, while transgender identities are ‘unnatural’, ‘abnormal’ and ‘bad’ – is an organising principle of normative gender systems in the United States (and elsewhere). Because one of the most important ways cissexism is constructed is through language, the identification and dismantling of cissexist language is a central part of trans activism and part of the work that cisgender allies are expected to perform.

Beyond the use of overtly hostile language, such as transphobic epithets, there are many subtle ways language enforces cissexism. Among these is the practice of using words like *woman* and *man* to refer interchangeably to a person’s physiology (e.g. ‘women’s bodies’), childhood socialisation (e.g. ‘how women are raised’), perceived gender (e.g. ‘women often experience street harassment’) and gender identity (e.g. ‘women may be inclined to have other women as friends’). The difficulty of divesting oneself fully of cisnormative language is a common subject of anxiety for aspiring allies, but linguistic analysis offers tools for understanding the linguistic strategies trans people themselves have developed for subverting cisnormativity and the gender binary. After all, trans people, too, have needed to develop ways of thinking and talking about gender in ways that affirm their own and one another’s identities. This article addresses a series of challenges – and potential solutions – faced by those who want to support or promote trans-inclusive language. These challenges include questions about how to choose gendered labels and pronouns, when to select gender-neutral language, and how to talk about gender when it is highly relevant, such as in discussions of identity, human physiology or socialisation. The discussion below draws on materials I have developed for trans-inclusive language training workshops, which are themselves based on over ten years of ethnographic and sociolinguistic research in transgender communities in the United States and in English-medium online spaces. This ethnographic perspective allows for a focus on trans people’s own tactics for inclusive and affirming language use, revealing not only the practices in which trans people engaged but also the cultural logic that makes such practices possible. In the next section of this paper, some background about gender- and sexuality-based linguistic reform is presented. The third section features an overview of sociocultural principles that guide transgender language

reform in the United States, which is followed by a discussion of several specific strategies for more trans-inclusive and trans-affirming language.

Language reform, past and present

Linguistic reform in language, gender and sexuality research

Discussions of linguistic reform have been a central part of the field of language, gender and sexuality studies since its foundation in the early 1970s (see Cameron 1998). Indeed, the field came of age in the context of second wave feminist activism, which was deeply concerned about the naturalisation of androcentric language and norms of usage (e.g. Bodine 1975; Penelope 1990; Spender 1980). Several scholars from this era (perhaps most explicitly Bodine 1975) questioned the logic of grammarians and linguists who had argued that the use of the pronoun *he* to refer to a generic person or *man* to refer to humanity was an accident of history rather than the product of a misogynistic culture. Linguists like Lakoff (1973) and McConnell-Ginet (1978) called attention to the low social value accorded to women's linguistic practices, many of which are – at least ideologically – associated with uncertainty or lack of confidence. Others focused on the greater interactional work expected of women in comparison to men (Fishman 1978; Sattel 1983), while others still addressed the semantic pejoration of words used to refer to women (Schultz 1975). The power to determine linguistic meaning has long been another major thread of research on language and gender (see Ehrlich and King 1992 for an overview), which is the body of linguistic research most relevant for the discussion below. For example, Ehrlich and King's discussion of feminist language reform identifies several realms in which the negotiation of meaning has been especially critical. One of these is in discussions of sexual assault, in which the word *no* and other forms of refusal has been treated variably as always meaning 'no' or as sometimes meaning 'yes,' 'maybe' or 'try harder' (p. 164). Another is in the terminology used to discuss sexual interactions, such as the choice of the word *penetration*, which frames the penis as performing an active role in vaginal intercourse, as opposed to options like *enclosure*, *surrounding* or *engulfing* that suggest greater agency on the part of vaginas (p. 165). A final concerns the meaning of new terminology introduced in the process of language reform such as *Ms* as a title for women that does not invoke marital status or *chairperson* as an alternative to *chair(wo)man*. In all of these cases, a central question is who has the power to determine the meaning of politically charged lexical items.

From the start, then, feminist scholars set the stage for an unapologetically political field of language and gender. With the rise of queer

linguistics in the 1990s (Livia and Hall 1997a), an expanded set of practices was brought into focus as the reflexes not (only) of misogyny, but also of the perpetration of heterosexism, homophobia and gender normativity. Queer linguistics, like queer theory, was founded on the reclamation of the stigmatising word *queer*, so it is unsurprising that the lexical resignification became a central subject of analysis. A variety of authors, such as Chen (1998), Brontsema (2004) and McConnell-Ginet (2001), have focused on the semantic and socio-indexical meanings of *queer* and evaluated its potential to be fully resignified.

Although researchers situated within queer linguistics largely agree that resignification is in some sense possible, they also resist the simplistic notion that language reform will directly transform social attitudes and undo structural oppression. It is clearly not enough to introduce new words, such as *cisgender*, with the expectation that a new lexical item will eliminate cissexism. Wong (2005), for instance, discusses resignification in Hong Kong where the word *tongzhi* (meaning 'comrade') was adopted as an in-group term for lesbians and gay men. However, Wong shows how heteronormative news outlets' reappropriation of *tongzhi* served to challenge the positive resignification lesbians and gays had been engaged in and instead worked to reinforce negative stereotypes while mocking the queer appropriation of the term. As Ehrlich and King (1992) point out, language reform is most successful when it takes place in a community that supports the change in question and its social implications, and that holds its members accountable for whether they adopt the new form(s). The practices outlined in this article, then, should be seen as just one tool among many for addressing the cultural permeation of transphobia and cissexism. Language is a useful first step, however, because shared linguistic ground facilitates collaborative work addressing other forms of oppression.

Although there is a body of literature on lesbian and gay activists' challenges to heteronormative language (e.g. Armstrong 1997; Kitzinger 2005; Livia 2000; Murphy 1997; Pastre 1997; Queen 1997), the linguistic interventions pursued by transgender communities have received little attention from scholars of language, gender and sexuality. This fact is all the more striking given that scholars of language, gender and sexuality have long recognised the challenges trans people pose to normative uses of gender in language (e.g. Bing and Bergvall 1996; Livia and Hall 1997b). What follows is not an exhaustive list of trans language reform efforts, but rather a discussion of some core principles underlying that work and their current manifestations in US-based communities where I have worked, taught and lived.

Transgender language reform

As one of the primary means of constructing gendered identities, language is a matter of central concern to transgender people. The importance of language in the articulation of trans identities reflects the deeply gendered nature of language itself. Gender can be indexed in more or less direct ways, to use Ochs' (1992) language. Ochs emphasises that there are only a few forms in English that index gender directly – i.e. as referring exclusively to members of one gender – all of which become salient for those undergoing a shift in gender role or presentation. Third person singular pronouns *she* and *he*, for instance, are normatively taken to be used exclusively in reference to women and men, respectively.² Overtly gendered nouns, such as *woman*, *female*, *girl* and *lady* or *man*, *male*, *guy* and *dude*, function in large part to index the gender of the referent, along with other social characteristics. Though relatively small in number, these words are high in frequency; it is unusual for a person not to be gendered if they are to play any kind of significant role in a speaker's discourse. Where marking gender is the norm, words that can be used to refer to a person of any gender, such as *person*, *human* or *individual*, arguably carry their own gendered implications specifically because they refuse to specify their referent's gender. Less frequently, one also finds direct gendering in the form of titles like *ma'am*, *sir*, *Ms*, *Mr* or the relatively new gender neutral option, *Mx*, which is designed as a gender-non-specific blend of *Mr* and *Ms* (Peters 2017). However, most linguistic forms that carry gendered meanings do so indirectly, such as the choice to describe a person as *beautiful* or *handsome*, the use of gendered intensifiers like *fabulous* or *fuckin' awesome*, a speaker's implementation of grammatically standard or non-standard forms, or the production of certain kinds of phonetic features.

Often, when gender is indexed directly, it is not asserted but rather presupposed (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013). In the case of an assertion, a speaker might claim, 'She is a woman'; in that case, a response like 'No, she's not' will probably be interpreted as negating this assertion about the referent's gender (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013:169–70). By contrast, an utterance like 'That woman is a professor' presupposes the referent is female, and a response of 'No, she's not' will be taken to be a rejection of the idea that the referent is a professor, not a negation of her status as a woman. Correcting presupposed information therefore requires additional interactive work. If utterances that presuppose someone's gender are both frequent and potentially difficult to correct, then much of the negotiation of gender attribution must be done implicitly, presenting particular challenges to those who are often *misgendered* (i.e. referred to as a gender they do not identify with).

One thing transgender people share with scholars of language, then, is the recognition that language is one of the primary fronts on which gender is negotiated (see also Bershtling 2014; Edelman 2014; Gratton 2016; Hazenberg 2016; Kulick 1999; Valentine 2003; Zimman 2009, 2014, forthcoming). As Ochs (1992) emphasises, a central feature of indexicality is that it *constitutes*, rather than reflects, social meaning. That is, people do not select linguistic forms that index femininity because they are women; rather, they are women because they repeatedly engage in practices that index femininity. Furthermore, because we know that identity is a dialogic construction (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 2005), being constituted as a woman linguistically also depends on how *other* people use language, such as their attribution of a gendered third person pronoun (see also Borba 2015 on trans people's interactions with institutional gatekeepers). The affirmation of trans identities is thus accomplished – or withheld – through everyday discourse (Speer 2005). In this sense, being trans is not only about expressing one's gender sartorially or through other forms of material and visual self-presentation, but also about linguistic performativity. Although most transgender people would resist the notion that one is only a woman or man if one is recognised as such by others, it is clear that the lives trans people are able to lead, their safety and their overall wellbeing (Pflum *et al.* 2015) are all heavily influenced by the recognition, or misrecognition, they experience through others' language.

There are a few over-arching principles that drive transgender language reform, which have been discussed in greater detail in other contexts (Zimman, forthcoming). One of the most basic principles motivating the strategies I describe below is the strict separation trans people draw between gender identity and the sexed body. In a cissexist cultural context, bodily characteristics like physical size, hair patterns, facial features and body shape are prioritised in the gender attribution process. Yet asserting a self-identified gender that does not correspond to one's assigned sex requires an overt rejection of this logic. Rather than the body determining gender identity, trans communities generally see an individual's internal sense of self as a truth that transcends the material self (see also Edelman and Zimman 2014; Zimman 2014; Zimman and Hall 2009). Rather than equating gender with externally defined characteristics – biological or otherwise – self-identification is promoted as the ideal way to determine an individual's gender identity (see Stanley 2014 on *gender self-determination*).

In the next section, I identify four specific challenges for trans-inclusive and trans-affirming language, and the ever-evolving tactics for negotiating them, based on observations made over a decade of research and nearly two decades of activism and engagement in transgender communities in

the United States, primarily in metropolitan areas on the West coast. As Zimman (forthcoming) demonstrates, these principles can be subject to critical examination in ways that illuminate the development of contemporary discourses about trans identities. However, the purpose of this article is to focus on describing the types of linguistic reform which many trans people are advocating and how those practices might be realised in everyday language use.

Challenges and strategies

This section is organised around four major challenges for trans-affirming language. Each of these will correspond to a broader principle of language and gender as it is understood in English-dominant transgender communities. Though my fieldwork is based in Western US cities, many of these principles are primarily negotiated in virtual spaces where trans activists exchange ideas, strategies and support. The first challenge I discuss concerns the selection of gendered labels, which offers prime territory for the assertion of gender self-determination. The second concerns the assignment of third person pronouns, which reflects a desire for more overt intersubjective engagement over gendered language norms. A third challenge is how to use gendered language in cases where gender is not particularly relevant, which call for gender neutrality and inclusion. This third point also addresses the use of binary language that erases the experience of trans people whose identities fall outside the female/male divide. A final point of concern is discourses in which gender *is* highly relevant, as in discussions of reproduction, healthcare or gender identity itself; here we see a principle of greater specificity and willingness to talk openly about the aspects of gender and sex that are often euphemised.

Challenge 1: gender labels

The simplest level of trans-inclusive language reform deals with the use of overtly gendered language in the form of gender identity labels (*woman, man, trans, non-binary*, etc.), kinship terminology (*mother/father/parent, sister/brother/sibling*, etc.), less frequent direct indexes of gender such as professional roles (*waiter/waitress/server, masseuse/masseur/massage therapist*, etc.) and pronouns (to be discussed below).

Gender self-determination is realised on a linguistic level most directly through the practice of self-identification with or against direct indexes of gender like these. This emphasis on the individual's internally felt sense of self, rather than adherence to external criteria, undermines any suggestion that trans identification is rooted in gender stereotypes regarding

what it means to be a woman or man (e.g. Hausman 1995; Lorber 1994; Shapiro 1992). Instead, self-determination rejects both clinical and social expectations that trans women be normatively feminine and trans men normatively masculine. The notion that the only requirement for membership in a gender category is one's self-identification with that category deeply destabilises the gender essentialism that has often been attributed to trans people (even as it presents other issues, as Zimman, forthcoming, discusses).

The core linguistic question, when it comes to gendered lexical items like these, is how assignment to these categories is determined. As part of the standard language ideology (Lippi-Green 1997) that frames virtually all discourses about language in the United States, certain definitions of words related to gender are seen as more correct, true, official, natural or scientific than others. Genital and reproductive anatomy is usually naturalised as the ultimate authority in sex/gender assignments, but of course this is not the only way to understand gender. One potential alternative to this cissexist state of affairs would be to develop an alternative set of criteria – for instance, prioritising a person's style of dressing and presentation as defining characteristics of their gender. To an extent, this does describe norms of interaction in many trans communities, wherein someone wearing a dress is likely to be referred to with feminine language regardless of their physical characteristics. However, members of the trans communities where I have worked in recent years almost universally cite gender as determined *solely* by self-identification. A person who describes herself as a woman is a woman, whether or not she has any of the physical or social characteristics normatively associated with women. While the dominant system for gender attribution enables – even requires – that people make assumptions about one another's gender identities in the process of assigning gendered language, trans people treat each individual as the ultimate source of authority on their own gender and thus the determiner of what language others should use. On one hand, this model of identity is highly individualistic, but it also recognises that agency over the linguistic construction of identity is distributed across speakers rather than strictly the purview of each individual's self-determination. From this perspective, when I speak about you I am not just representing my own point of view; I also bear some form of responsibility towards you when it comes to the way I represent you linguistically.

There are two primary tactics to address the question of gendered label attributions, which I will mention here only in brief because they are expounded on at greater length in the sections that follow. The first involves openly talking to people about how they identify and what kind

of language they want others to use when talking about them. The second is the avoidance of gendered terminology (e.g. selecting *person* rather than *woman* or *man*) when a person's self-identified gender is not known and cannot be practically determined by asking them directly. Both of these approaches are common within trans communities and both demonstrate deference to the autonomy and authority of individuals to self-identify their genders. Crucially, these practices are not meant to be applied only to people who are known to be trans, but to everyone, regardless of embodiment or gender presentation. One of the most problematic aspects of cissexism is the belief that trans people can always be identified based on their appearance, embodiment or voice. To avoid the assumption that anyone who doesn't 'look trans' must be cis, the practice of asking people how they want to be referred to must be practised consistently. The next section on pronouns addresses this idea in greater depth.

Challenge 2: pronouns

Perhaps because of their frequency and automaticity in discourse, the third person singular pronouns (*she*, *he*, singular *they*, and alternative third person singular pronouns like *ze* or *ey*) may qualify as the single greatest source of concern among English-speaking cisgender people who want to adopt trans-inclusive language. The most common solution trans people advocate for this challenge is asking people which pronouns they would like others to use – yet this solution brings its own anxieties for those who were acculturated to the belief that it is deeply offensive to ask someone whether they want to be referred to as *she* or *he*. Beyond the potential for awkwardness, the prospect of asking someone which pronouns they use may feel intrusive or like it involves singling out and calling attention to those with ambiguous gender or sex. These concerns, however, are based on a particular model of gender attribution that must be challenged for trans-affirming language to take hold.

My students are now too young to recognise this example, but readers may recall Pat, a gender-ambiguous person who was a recurring character on *Saturday Night Live* in the 1990s. Pat's gender presentation created deep unease in the other characters they³ interacted with, who would always try desperately to determine how Pat should be gendered without revealing this confusion. The underlying cultural knowledge that makes these sketches funny says that the gender normative characters must never directly reveal to Pat that they are uncertain about how to refer to them because it would cause such deep offence (and because Pat is apparently assumed to have no awareness of their own gender ambiguity). Furthermore, it is notable that

these interlocutors are usually focused on determining Pat's *sex* rather than Pat's gender identity. No one in the world of these sketches would think to directly ask Pat which pronouns should be used in reference to them, since knowing Pat's biological characteristics is seen as enough to determine whether Pat should be called *she* or *he*.

The idea that it is offensive to ask people how they should be gendered is grounded in a model of gender that says a person's status as a woman or man must always be easily identifiable. To suggest that a person's gender is not obvious is to suggest that they have failed to enact that gender correctly. By contrast, all trans people have, by definition, experienced a disconnect between how they see themselves and how they are seen by others. Because trans people tend to see gender as a matter of inner self-identification that may or may not be evident to others, it is essentially unremarkable for a trans individual to encounter someone whose gender identification is not evident from their body or style of presentation.

Aside from the concern of causing offence, to which I will return momentarily, two other primary worries fuel cis people's reluctance to ask trans people about their pronouns. The first concern is that asking people for their pronouns is on a par with asking about private aspects of their identities; this comes up especially often in relatively public contexts like the classroom, where asking about a student's gender identity would be invasive and inappropriate. Yet asking for someone's pronouns is fundamentally different from asking about their identity, primarily because pronouns are already used publicly and on-record. Unless a speaker goes to lengths to avoid using a pronoun in reference to someone, they will eventually be faced with a choice about which pronouns to use. The question then becomes whether the speaker selects pronouns based on their own perceptions of the referent's gender or whether the speaker allows the referent to indicate which pronouns they want the speaker to use. Furthermore, knowing a person's pronouns does not, in fact, tell you how they identify, since pronouns do not always map one-to-one with identity and because a person's preferred pronouns can change based on the context. For example, in the context of a college classroom where students are asked to introduce themselves and provide their names and gender pronouns, a student who recently started coming out as a trans woman and uses *she/her* with friends may take any number of approaches. If she wants to be referred to as *she* and *her* in the class, she can assert that and feel more confident that she won't be misgendered by classmates or professors. On the other hand, if she has just begun coming out or isn't presenting her gender in a feminine way, it's possible she would feel more comfortable allowing classmates and professors to perceive her as male for the time being, in which case she

could give the *he* and *him* pronouns *without having to describe herself as male*.⁴ If she's questioning her pronouns or isn't sure she wants to fully assert her desire for *she/her* pronouns in that space, she might want to stake out gender-neutral ground by selecting pronouns like *they* and *them*. Alternatively, if she feels uncomfortable with all of these options, she could opt to say she doesn't care what pronouns people use and let them make their own choices. Whatever decision she makes, by being asked she has been given a greater degree of agency over how she will be understood in that space.

A second area of worry is whether asking trans people about their pronouns singles them out or calls attention to their gender ambiguity or the visibility of their trans status. And this certainly can happen if pronoun checks are not practised consistently. In the classroom example just discussed, a professor who only asks certain students to give their pronouns because they believe those students might be trans has failed to understand that *anyone* could be trans or have pronouns that are not easily deduced from the outside. This is why trans communities that advocate pronoun checks emphasise the importance of normalising pronoun checks for everyone. Universal pronoun checks make it clear that trans people are not being asked simply because they are (perceived as) trans, and they recognise that some people's gender identities are *not* visible while giving them space to express those identities. In addition to asking, another way to routinise pronoun checks is to offer one's own pronouns when introducing oneself. One might successfully integrate a pronoun check into an introduction by saying something like, 'It's nice to meet you Alex. What pronouns do you use (or: what pronouns should I use for you)?' but one could just as easily say, 'I'm Lal and I use *he/him/his* pronouns,' either followed with a question like 'What about you?' or left open-ended for an interlocutor to choose whether to offer their own pronouns. Treating pronouns more like names – terms of reference that must be asked for rather than assumed – allows us to tap into pre-existing sociocultural linguistic norms in which we regularly tell people how they should refer to us.

How one handles pronoun checks, of course, depends on the audience. Asking someone who is completely unfamiliar with the practice, 'What pronouns do you use?' is certain to be confusing. And, of course, there is always the possibility of causing offence when asking someone who operates under the assumption that it is rude to express uncertainty about someone's gender. This means that pronoun checks often require a bit of metalinguistic negotiation regarding why the speaker has asked for or offered their own gendered pronouns. Trans people tend to be prolific metalinguistic commentators (Edelman 2014; Hazenberg 2016; Zimman

2016), and trans-affirming language reform asks cisgender people to become more conscious of the ways they use language and why, and to be able to discuss such matters with others. This aspect of trans language reform requires that people fundamentally change how we think about pronouns. Pronoun attribution is usually rapid and automatic, occurring with little or no conscious intervention on the part of the speaker. Trans people's own linguistic practices, however, increasingly involve bringing pronoun attributions above the level of awareness (Silverstein 1981), putting them in a realm more commonly associated with names than pronouns.

Challenge 3: when gender isn't relevant

The use of language to gender people is so pervasive that it is often done even when a person's gender is arguably irrelevant to the discourse. For instance, speakers often refer to brief encounters with strangers by saying things like, 'The guy who made my coffee today did a terrible job', or 'A woman who was just hired at the corporate office is holding a seminar on statistics'. Of course, such details do the work of setting the scene, and at times may be relevant for the interpretation of what is said. However, gender attributions like these also reinforce the idea that a person's gender can be deduced visually and/or aurally. Furthermore, identifying an unknown café barista as a man or a new employee teaching statistics as a woman may be relevant only because they either adhere to or deviate from gender stereotypes – perhaps the idea that men are not well suited to food preparation or that a woman teaching statistics is remarkable in some way. Gender neutrality is thus a useful tool for avoiding the assumption that a person's gender identity can be deduced and interpreted based on stereotypes and offers an alternative way of talking about people when it is not a realistic possibility to ask them how they want to be described.

The primary tactic for gender-neutral language is to seek out epicene versions of words that are usually gendered. Some examples of this approach have already been given: *parent* rather than *mother* or *father*; *person* rather than *woman* or *man*; *child* rather than *girl* or *boy*; and of course *they* rather than *she* or *he*. At times, the gender neutral option may feel clunky or unnatural, but of course the same argument can be (and has been) made for the choice some feminists make to place female referents first ('women and men' rather than 'men and women'); it was also offered to support the contention that *he* or *she* could never take the place of generic *he*. Of course, the perception of speech as sounding natural, articulate or aesthetically pleasing derives from a long history of socially informed norms of use. In other words, referring to a group of people's *spouses* rather than their

husbands and wives may sound less elegant precisely *because* it challenges the history of language use that produces notions like linguistic elegance.

Gender neutrality is especially important as a resource for affirming non-binary gender identities, since non-consensual gender attributions usually rely on the gender binary. For instance, groups of people are often addressed as *ladies and gentlemen* when one might use the phrase *honoured guests* (or simply *everyone*), while children may be called *boys and girls* when they might just as well be called *children*. These phrasings presume that everyone referred to is either female or male, but never both or neither. Closely related to the concept of *gender neutrality* is *gender inclusivity*. While gender neutrality avoids marking gender at all, gender-inclusive language recognises that there are more than two genders. Most conventional attempts at gender inclusivity reinforce the binary as well, as references to ‘both’ genders are common. For example, an utterance like ‘Both women and men should have access to college-sponsored athletic teams’ could be rephrased more inclusively as, ‘All students should have access to college-sponsored athletic teams.’ Similarly, ‘Whether you have a girl or a boy, be sure to show your child lots of love’ could become ‘Regardless of gender, be sure to show your child lots of love.’ This strategy also problematises second-wave language like *the other sex* – initially developed as an alternative to *the opposite sex* – and offers in its place phrasing such as *another sex*.

Of course, gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language of this sort only work when the intended meaning is in fact gender-neutral. For instance, someone who believes only cisgender women and men should be allowed to compete in collegiate sports may feel that ‘all students’ does not reflect their point of view. This brings us to the final challenge, which is how to negotiate talking about gender when one’s intended meaning is *not* gender-neutral or gender-inclusive.

Challenge 4: when gender is relevant

The final challenge discussed in this article is how to talk about gender when it *is* decidedly relevant to the discourse. The problem that needs to be addressed here, too, is a product of cissexism, and specifically of the assumption that someone’s physiology, gender socialisation experiences, perceived gender and self-identified gender will always align in the expected ways. Words like *woman* and *man* or *female* and *male* are often used to refer to different aspects of sex and gender, which for trans people may or may not align. Some examples will be useful to illustrate this problem and how it might be addressed. Each of the following sentences, which are

slightly modified versions of real utterances observed by the author, uses the word *women* to refer to different aspects of gender and sex:

- 1 *Women* grow up being taught to accommodate others' needs.
- 2 *Women* face negative assumptions about their professional capabilities.
- 3 All *women* need access to cervical cancer screenings.

In example 1, the word *women* is used in reference to people who were raised in a female gender role. In addition to being an essentialising statement that erases the intersections of gender with race, class, sexuality, age, cultural context and so on, this example also equates the category of *woman* with the set of people who were assigned to a female gender role at birth. Such an equation implies that trans women are not truly women because they were not raised as girls and that trans men and others assigned female at birth are women because they were socialised as such. Example 2, by contrast, uses the word *women* to refer primarily to people who are perceived as women. The cultural logic of misogyny does not care or bother to find out whether the target identifies as a woman, so a trans man or non-binary person who is perceived as female by others may be subjected to the same treatment as cisgender and transgender women who are perceived as female. To equate this category with 'women' is, at best, to erase the fact that some self-identified women do not experience this form of misogyny because they are not perceived as women, and that some men and non-binary individuals do experience it because they are perceived as such. The third example also uses the word *women*, but in this case is discussing people with a particular body part. These types of examples can be the most difficult for people to deal with because of the tight ideological link between physiology and gender, such that a woman and a person with a cervix are seen as co-extensive categories, save the case of women who once had a cervix but no longer do. To refer to cervical cancer screening as something that all women need is to define womanhood by the presence or absence of certain reproductive organs.⁵ Here again, trans men who have cervixes are cast as female, while trans women's lack of a cervix is used to deny them access to their self-identified gender. Social euphemisms are particularly common in talk about the body, especially where women are concerned (e.g. *women's health* in reference to sexual/reproductive health or *feminine hygiene* in reference to menstruation products). As example 9 will highlight below, trans people tend to take a much more direct approach to talking about somewhat taboo parts of the body.

There are two primary strategies for addressing the conflation of different aspects of gender and sex, one of them quite simple and the other a bit more complex. The simpler strategy is to hedge all generalisations about gender. This would allow us to turn examples 1–3 above into utterances such as in examples 4–6:

- 4 Women *often* grow up being taught to accommodate others' needs.
- 5 *Most* women face negative assumptions about their professional capabilities.
- 6 Women *typically* need access to cervical cancer screenings.

In addition to being more trans-inclusive, these changes also recognise the variability in cisgender people's bodies and experiences. After all, not all cisgender women are raised to be accommodating, not all cisgender women are assumed to be professionally incompetent, and not all cisgender women have cervixes. Hedging generalisations about gender and sex is one of the easiest ways for a speaker to make their language use more trans-affirming.

The other strategy for making utterances like examples 1–3 trans-inclusive involves being more specific about which aspect(s) of gender or sex are relevant. This approach requires some deeper thought than simply hedging a generalisation would, but it is in wide usage in many trans communities and offers its own set of benefits. Because the normative gender system does not provide the vocabulary to make these distinctions, trans people have developed an expanded lexicon for gender that in many ways aligns with the discourses of academic researchers. The most basic distinction is one already introduced above, between the characteristics of the body and the categories a person actively claims for themselves. However, there is a further distinction made by many trans people between sex, gender identity, assigned sex/gender and perceived gender. While sex refers to a person's embodiment, which is not a fixed, unidimensional state but rather a set of multidimensional characteristics that can change over time and be understood in a variety of ways, a person's *assigned sex/gender* is the category they were placed in at birth, which generally does not change. These categories can be further distinguished from how a person is perceived, or read, by others. This vocabulary would transform examples 1–3 to the utterances in examples 7–9:

- 7 *People assigned female at birth* (often) grow up being taught to accommodate others' needs.

- 8 (Most) *people who are perceived as women* face negative assumptions about their professional capabilities.
- 9 *Everyone with a cervix* (typically) needs access to cervical cancer screenings.

To the uninitiated, these phrases can seem wordy, complex or even amusing (particularly in the case of example 9). Yet each of these statements manages to express normative expectations about gender without delegitimising or erasing trans individuals. They also have the added bonus of being more technically accurate than the sweeping generalisations delivered in examples 1–3. They allow for specific recognition that, for instance, cisgender women who do not have cervixes do not need access to cervical cancer screenings. This approach requires a rehauling not only of the lexicon, but of the way people think and talk about gender. It requires more reflection about which aspects of gender really are relevant when we talk about the experiences of women and men. It requires that we become more comfortable talking about body parts rather than using identity-based euphemisms. It requires that we learn to identify when trans people are included in our ideas and when they are not. It requires us to say what we mean, and mean what we say.

Conclusion

The linguistic practices described in this article are at times complex, often challenging and always open to change as trans activists refine their perspectives on cissexism and language. However difficult some of these strategies may seem, they are all possible: a fact made plain by trans people's own success at reformulating the way they talk about gender. As Ehrlich and King (1992) emphasise, social justice-focused language reforms will always be facilitated – or inhibited – by the political commitments of speakers. Although transphobia and cissexism may not be eliminated through changes to language alone, identifying cissexist language patterns is a critical step towards dismantling the oppression trans people experience. Furthermore, careful analysis of cissexist language reveals some of the sociocultural barriers trans people face when it comes to gender recognition and validation. And for those who are motivated to reshape their linguistic usage to enhance trans people's sense of dignity and affirmation, trans-inclusive language reform may require practice, but it requires no special cognitive or linguistic aptitudes. To the extent that cis people have trouble with trans-inclusive language, this trouble should be understood not as a natural limitation, but as a product of a culture in which the ability

to talk about trans people respectfully is not seen as an important linguistic skill.

The ideas presented in this article are not only of relevance to sociocultural linguists and others interested in the relationship between language and oppression. Trans-affirming language is realised first and foremost in the everyday activism of trans communities, and as such can be easily transported to contexts beyond an academic journal article. The principles presented here have been culled in part from material I have developed for trans-inclusive language trainings at the institutions where I have taught and occasionally for organisations and companies in the private sector. They have also been put in focus by a variety of social media produced by trans people, such as podcasts, blogs and other kinds of digital spaces where trans people seek out and offer support, camaraderie or political action. Thanks to these efforts, discussions of language and trans inclusion are increasingly found in more mainstream news outlets, radio programs and fictional genres. For instance, the popular Showtime series, *Billions* (Koppelman, Levien and Sorkin 2017), is a drama focused on legal and moral battles between a federal prosecutor and a hedge-fund director; it has also been lauded as the first television show to feature a non-binary character (Hibbard 2017), played by non-binary actor Asia Kate Dillon (both of whom use *they/them/theirs* pronouns). Taylor, the character, demonstrates how non-binary pronouns can be shared during introductions and how cissexist assumptions about pronouns can be corrected. Notably, Dillon reports that they were regularly consulted, as a non-binary person, about whether they felt Taylor was being represented with accuracy and sensitivity (ibid.). In this way, the linguistic transformations promoted by trans people come to public attention, gradually, each time trans people are given space to speak about their own experiences and an audience to take heed of those insights.

Transgender experience is fundamentally grounded in language, and no account of contemporary trans politics would be complete without attention to the ways gender is constructed through language. As social scientists have long recognised (e.g. Garfinkel 1967), trans people's lives often reveal the contingent, performative, discursive basis of gender in ways that can be invisible as practised by normatively gendered subjects. But this observation is not simply a theoretical insight; the instability of trans people's gender identities has a political context, which is the regular and overt delegitimation and stigmatisation of trans identities. Though the threat of physical violence looms large, it is language that serves as the most pervasive ground on which trans identities are delegitimised and transphobic

violence is perpetuated. By the same token, it is also the ground on which trans identities can be affirmed, reclaimed and celebrated.

About the author

Lal Zimman is assistant professor in the Department of Linguistics at the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA.

Notes

- 1 Providing a comprehensive definition of transgender – or any gender category – is always a challenge in that it inevitably fails to capture the full range of trans experience. Many trans people define the term with respect to self-identification, i.e. a transperson is a person who self-identifies as trans. However, this is neither particularly useful for unfamiliar readers nor in alignment with how the term is actually used in many trans communities in the United States. I use the words *transgender* and *trans* interchangeably to refer to individuals who do not identify with the sex assigned to them at birth. This includes individuals who identify as non-binary (neither exclusively female nor exclusively male), those who identify as trans women or trans men, and those who identify simply as women or men (or women/men of trans experience), but who were not assigned to that category at birth.
- 2 Of course, this pattern is not without exception, as when gay men call each other ‘she’ as a sign of identity and solidarity or when sports coaches denigrate their players by referring to them as ‘girls’ and ‘she’.
- 3 I follow the practice of using singular *they* in reference to someone whose gender identity or pronouns are unknown.
- 4 This is part of why trans people often avoid referring to ‘(fe)male pronouns’ or ‘feminine/masculine pronouns’ and instead often refer to them as ‘he/him/his pronouns’, ‘she/her/hers pronouns’, ‘they/them/theirs pronouns’, etc.
- 5 Of course, the equation of womanhood with reproductive capacity is a much older discourse that has long affected cisgender women, particularly in intersection with age and disability.

References

- Armstrong, J. D. (1997) Homophobic slang as coercive discourse among college students. In A. Livia and K. Hall (eds) *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality* 326–34. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Associated Press (2016) ‘She her hers’: pronoun pins handed out at University of Kansas. *NBC News*, 28 December. Retrieved on 1 February 2017 from <http://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/she-her-hers-pronoun-pins-handed-out-university-kansas-n700971>.
- Bershtling, O. (2014) ‘Speech creates a kind of commitment’: queering Hebrew. In L. Zimman, J. Davis and J. Raclaw (eds) *Queer Excursions: Rethorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality* 35–61. New York and London: Oxford University Press.
- Bing, J. M. and Bergvall, V. L. (1998) The question of questions: beyond binary thinking.

- In J. Coates (ed.) *Language and Gender: A Reader* 495–510. Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Bodine, A. (1975) Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: singular ‘they’, sex-indefinite ‘he’, and ‘he or she’. *Language in Society* 4(2): 129–46. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500004607>
- Borba, R. (2015) How an individual becomes a subject: discourse, interaction and subjectification at a Brazilian gender identity clinic. *Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies* 163.
- Brontsema, R. (2004) A queer revolution: reconceptualizing the debate over linguistic reclamation. *Colorado Research in Linguistics* 17(1): 1–17.
- Cameron, D. (ed.) (1998) *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Chen, M. Y.-C. (1998) ‘I am an animal!’: lexical reappropriation, performativity, and queer. In S. Wertheim, A. C. Bailey and M. Corston-Oliver (eds) *Engendering Communication: Proceedings of the Fifth Berkeley Women and Language Conference* 129–40. Berkeley, CA: BWLG.
- Craig, S. (2016) U of T professor attacks political correctness, says he refuses to use genderless pronouns. *National Post*, 28 September. Retrieved 1 February 2017 from <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/u-of-t-professor-attacks-political-correctness-in-video-refuses-to-use-genderless-pronouns>.
- Eckert, P. and McConnell-Ginet, S. (2013) *Language and Gender* (2nd edn). New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139245883>
- Edelman, E. A. (2009) The power of stealth: (in)visible sites of female-to-male transsexual resistance. In W. L. Leap and E. Lewin (eds) *Out in Public: Reinventing Lesbian/Gay Anthropology in a Globalizing World* 164–79. Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444310689.ch9>
- Edelman, E. A. and Zimman, L. (2014) *Boycunts and bonus holes*: discourses about transmasculine bodies and the sexual productivity of genitals. *Journal of Homosexuality* 61(5): 673–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2014.870438>
- Ehrlich, S. and King, R. (1992) Gender-based language reform and the social construction of meaning. *Discourse and Society* 3(2): 151–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926592003002002>
- Fishman, P. (1978) Interaction: the work women do. *Social Problems* 25(4): 397–406. <https://doi.org/10.2307/800492>
- Garfinkel, H. (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Gratton, C. (2016) Resisting the gender binary: the use of (ING) in the construction of non-binary transgender identities. *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 22(2): article 7.
- Hausman, B. L. (1995) *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hazenbergh, E. (2016) Walking the straight and narrow: linguistic choice and gendered presentation. *Gender & Language* 10(2): 270–94. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.v10i2.19812>
- Kitzinger, C. (2005) ‘Speaking as a heterosexual’: (how) does sexuality matter for talk-in-interaction? *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 38(3): 221–65. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327973rlsi3803_2
- Koppelman, B., Levien, D. and Sorkin, A. R. (creators) (2017) *Billions* (television series, season 2). USA: Showtime.

- Kulick, D. (1999) Transgender and language. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5(4): 605–22.
- Lakoff, R. (1973) Language and woman's place. *Language in Society* 2(1): 45–80. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500000051>
- Lippi-Green, R. (1997) *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*. New York: Routledge.
- Livia, A. (2000) *Pronoun Envy: Literary Uses of Linguistic Gender*. New York and London: Oxford University Press.
- Livia, A. and Hall, K. (eds) (1997a) *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality*. Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Livia, A. and Hall, K. (1997b) 'It's a girl!' Bringing performativity back to linguistics. In A. Livia and K. Hall (eds) *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality* 3–18. Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lorber, J. (1994) *Paradoxes of Gender*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- McConnell-Ginet, S. (1978) Intonation in a man's world. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3(3): 541–59. <https://doi.org/10.1086/493501>
- McConnell-Ginet, S. (2002) 'Queering' semantics: definitional struggles. In K. Campbell-Kibler, R. J. Podesva, S. J. Roberts and A. Wong (eds) *Language and Sexuality: Contesting Meaning in Theory and Practice* 137–60. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- Murphy, M. L. (1997) The elusive bisexual: social categorization and lexico-semantic change. In A. Livia and K. Hall (eds) *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality* 35–57. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ochs, E. (1992) Indexing gender. In A. Duranti and C. Goodwin (eds) *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon* 335–58. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Pastre, G. (1997) Linguistic gender play among French gays and lesbians. In A. Livia and K. Hall (eds) *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality* 369–79. Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Penelope, J. (1990) *Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Fathers' Tongues*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Peters, M. (2017) Womyn, wimmin, and other folx. *Boston Globe*, 9 May. Retrieved from <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2017/05/09/womyn-wimmin-and-other-folx/vjhPn82ITGgCCbE12iNn1N/story.html>.
- Pflum, S. R., Testa, R. J., Balsam, K. F., Goldblum, P. B. and Bongar, B. (2015) Social support, trans community connectedness, and mental health symptoms among transgender and gender nonconforming adults. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* 2(3): 281–6. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000122>
- Queen, R. M. (1997) 'I don't speech spritch': locating lesbian language. In A. Livia and K. Hall (eds) *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality* 233–56. Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sattel, J. (1983) Men, inexpressiveness and power. In B. Thorne, C. Kramarae and N. Henley (eds) *Language, Gender and Society* 118–24. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Schultz, M. (1975) The semantic derogation of women. In B. Thorne and N. Henley (eds) *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance* 64–75. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Serano, J. (2007) *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating*

- of Femininity*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.
- Shapiro, J. (1992) Transsexualism: reflections on the persistence of gender and the mutability of sex. In J. Epstein and K. Straub (eds) *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* 248–79. New York: Routledge.
- Silverstein, M. (1981) The limits of awareness. *Sociolinguistic Working Paper* 84: 1–30.
- Speer, S. A. (2005) The interactional organization of the gender attribution process. *Sociology* 39(1): 67–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038505049002>
- Spender, D. (1980) *Man Made Language*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Books.
- Stanley, E. A. (2014) Gender self-determination. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1(1-2): 89–91. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399695>
- Valentine, D. (2003) 'I went to bed with my own kind once': the erasure of desire in the name of identity. *Language and Communication* 23(2): 123–38. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309\(02\)00045-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309(02)00045-9)
- Valentine, D. (2007) *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822390213>
- Wong, A. D. (2005) The reappropriation of tongzhi. *Language in Society* 34(5): 763–93. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404505050281>
- Zimman, L. (2014) The discursive construction of sex: remaking and reclaiming the gendered body in talk about genitals among trans men. In L. Zimman, J. L. Davis and J. Raclaw (eds) *Queer Excursions: Retheorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality* 13–34. Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zimman, L. (forthcoming) Trans self-identification and the language of neoliberal selfhood: agency, power, and the limits of monologic discourse. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*.
- Zimman, L. and Hall, K. (2009) Language, embodiment, and the 'third sex'. In D. Watt and C. Llamas (eds) *Language and Identities* 166–78. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.