Vignette 3b   Working With Transgender Communities

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Language plays a central role in trans lives; it comes up when trans people make changes to their personal pronouns, when the gendered qualities of their voices are scrutinized, when lovers or doctors select terms to talk about their sexed bodies, and when they face transphobic harassment on the street. It is a primary site for the validation or delegitimation of trans identities. The primacy of language in trans experience creates no shortage of topics for sociolinguists to explore, but it also creates potential challenges, particularly for researchers without much prior contact with trans communities. Trans people are highly aware of the ways they have been represented by both the general public and academics. As a result, many are wary about working with a researcher—especially one with no personal connection to their community. Sociolinguists making first contact with trans speakers will find that it is *their* language use that is subjected to sociopolitical analysis, which requires a highly reflexive approach to interactions with participants. This vignette highlights three steps for forming productive and ethically responsible research relationships with trans communities. To reach this goal, sociolinguists must understand their own trans politics, educate themselves on trans critiques, and examine the political implications of their words and actions. This vignette is written primarily with cisgender (i.e., non-transgender) researchers in mind, but the diversity of trans experience means that trans researchers will also benefit from this approach.

Understand Your Own (Trans)Gender Politics

Until recently, research published on language in transgender communities has been done primarily by cisgender scholars. An "outsider" point of view can be a source of insight, but it can also create problems when researchers come from more normative social groups than their subjects. Specifically, cisgender people may be unaware of the ways trans people already figure into their ideas about gender; they may even see themselves as having no preconceptions about trans people whatsoever. But this is possible only because the beliefs of more privileged groups are often treated as unbiased, neutral, and objectively true. The first step for sociolinguists who hope to work with trans communities is to recognize that there is already a place for trans people in their gender politics and that trans participants will pick up on those politics whether they are overtly expressed or not.

   Even for individuals who haven't thought deeply about trans identity, the ways we talk about gender always have implications for trans identities. For instance, if gender is seen as a natural outgrowth of biological sex, cis identities are "natural" while trans identities defy nature. When cis people are described as having been "born (fe)male," trans people become those whose gender identities are not inborn. Even contrasting the common acronym "LGBT" with "straight people" suggests that trans people cannot be

heterosexual, no matter how they identify. These linguistic choices perpetuate ideologies that researchers may not be consciously aware of, but to which trans participants are highly attuned. To maintain their own safety, trans people must learn to deduce people's ideas about gender from subtle cues, which then influence decisions like whether to participate in a research study. Sociolinguists must therefore interrogate their unspoken assumptions and be prepared to discuss their reasons for studying trans people as well as the political implications of their work.

Make Use of Trans Resources

It is important not to confuse having positive feelings toward trans people with being well prepared to engage in research with trans communities. Transphobia is so pervasive that escaping its influence requires sustained engagement with trans critiques of sex, gender, and sexuality. Because developing a gender politics that intentionally creates room for trans people presents many challenges, researchers must go beyond their existing knowledge bases and educate themselves before beginning data collection.

Nothing can replace the specificity of an ethnographic account of the particular community being studied, but familiarity with basic terminology and standards of respectful interaction is a necessary prerequisite for successful trans-focused research. Many "Trans 101" guides with tips for being a trans ally are available online or through trans advocacy organizations, campus LGBTQ groups, and the like. Texts from traditional presses can be helpful, but should always be supplemented with more widely accessible media such as blogs, YouTube videos, and other social media venues, which are more likely to feature recent developments in trans people's own ideas about gender. It is equally important to speak directly with trans people who are willing to give feedback on your research plans, whether they are professional colleagues, employees of trans-focused organizations, or community members who are willing to take on this labor. Your participants should never be the first trans people you speak to about the topics you hope to explore. When making use of these resources, however, researchers should consider what they are taking and what they can offer in return.

Researchers who are familiar with Trans 101 material, or who are trans themselves, still must acknowledge and familiarize themselves with the diversity of trans experience. Race, class, gender presentation, and citizenship status, among other factors, impact how trans identities are articulated. Hierarchies within the trans community are just as important to consider as the power disparity between trans and cis people.

Interrogate Your Language and Actions

Community resources provide general guidelines for respectful treatment, but in this space I focus on a few overarching principles that remain important even as norms for trans-affirming language shift over time.

1   *Ask about participants' identities and labels*. One of the most important things a researcher working with trans communities can do is to ask each individual what kind of language, including pronouns, should be used in reference to them. These questions can be intimidating because sociocultural norms dictate that a person's gender should be clearly legible, such that any questions imply they have failed to do gender correctly. However, trans people typically prioritize individual self-identification and recognize that a person's gender identity cannot be determined just

by looking at them. Even people who seem to have "the same" identity may prefer different labels, which can be of great analytic importance. In my sociophonetic research with transmasculine individuals, for instance, I found that the particular gender identities participants claimed—as *genderqueer*, *trans men*, or simply *men*—were crucial for explaining variation in their gendered styles. Instead of assuming identities or pronouns, asking demonstrates that you care about representing participants' gender identities appropriately. The best way to normalize this practice is by offering your own pronouns and gender identity—including whether you are trans or cis—when introducing yourself.

2   *Avoid cissexism.* Cissexism refers to a mode of thinking that treats cis identities as normal and natural while erasing or denaturalizing trans identities. Language is routinely cissexist, often in ways that speakers are unaware of. One form of cissexism is conflating different aspects of gender. For example, people often use the word *women* to refer to people who have certain body parts ("*women*'s health care"), people who were assigned female at birth ("*women* are socialized to be submissive"), people who are perceived as women ("*women* experience more sexual harassment than men"), and people who self-identify as women ("*women* often deal with internalized misogyny"). These characteristics are collapsed because they are assumed to align in normative ways, but for trans people it is vital to recognize their separation. Put simply, statements that equate womanhood or manhood with having a particular body part or set of socialization experiences suggest that trans women are not really women and trans men are not fully men.

   Three linguistic strategies commonly used in trans communities can help researchers avoid cissexist language. The first is to use gender-neutral language whenever possible (for instance, by using singular *they* as the default pronoun for someone whose self-identified gender is unknown). The second strategy is to avoid reproducing the gender binary (for instance, by saying "people of all genders" rather than "men and women" or "both genders"). This decision can also be implemented analytically by treating gender as a complex variable rather than a single binary. Finally, when gender neutrality is not possible, trans people are usually more specific about which aspect of gender is relevant. For example, a statement like "Women are raised to be submissive" would more likely be "People assigned female at birth are raised to be submissive," which recognizes that not all women are raised as girls and some men are. Where physiology is concerned, trans people do not avoid talking about bodies: statements like "All women need cervical cancer screenings" would be "Everyone with a cervix needs cancer screenings." There is no way to be apolitical in the face of these differences, and any choice sends a powerful message to participants that will inevitably shape their relationship with the researcher.

3   *Address the power dynamic.* In all work with vulnerable communities, the power imbalance between researcher and participants must be considered. Many strategies for empowering participants can be borrowed from other forms of community-driven research, like collaborating with community members, giving copies of written work to participants before publication, and figuring out how your skills can benefit the community. Another important element of the power dynamic is how participants respond when a researcher says or does something problematic. Trans people's objections to transphobic and cissexist language are typically silenced, dismissed, or mocked. Researchers who create space for participants to "call them out" can both establish trust with speakers and obtain deep insights about the meanings attached to language use for the community under study. An open discussion about this matter

is often fruitful, and setting up a system for obtaining anonymous responses, such as through an online form or survey, creates additional opportunities for feedback.

As transgender communities become increasingly visible, they will undoubtedly continue to grow in popularity as a population for sociolinguistic analysis. With this shift in the field come responsibilities not only to learn how to treat trans participants with respect, but to fully consider our influence on the quality of trans people's lives.