

Pronouns and possibilities: Transgender language activism and reform

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Introduction

Over the last decade, there has been enormous growth in the American public's awareness of and interest in transgender people and the social marginalization they face. This change is due not only to the growing number of publicly trans figures such as actress Laverne Cox, athlete and media figure Caitlin Jenner, and filmmakers Lana and Lilly Wachowski, but also crucially to decades of trans activism happening outside the spotlight that made it possible for celebrities to be openly trans today. Language always seems to figure prominently in discussions of trans issues, and for good reason. In a fundamental sense, being transgender isn't just about expressing a gender identity by dressing certain way or modifying one's body; it is also about the crucial role that language plays in creating our identities.

The language used to talk about trans people has become a hot-button issue on many college campuses in particular as some universities are investing in trans-inclusive language practices by, for instance, creating ways for class rosters to indicate whether students should be referred to as *she*, *he*, *they*, or some other pronoun, while others affiliated with the academy have expressed resistance to what they see as an imposition of leftist ideology. In fact, transgender activism has often centered around local interventions in language. One recent success has been the introduction of the word *cisgender* or *cis* as a term to refer to people who are not transgender.

The promotion of *cisgender* is not just about the need to have a word to talk about non-trans people, but also the need to call attention to *cissexism* or *cisnormativity*, which both refer to the idea that cisgender identities are “normal,” “natural,” and “factual,” while transgender identities are “abnormal,” “unnatural,” and “fictional.”

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 socialization (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 trans allies, but linguistic analysis offers tools for understanding the linguistic strategies trans people themselves have developed for subverting cisnormativity and the gender binary (i.e., the idea that there are only two genders, which exist in opposition to one another). After all, trans people, too, have needed to develop ways of thinking and talking about gender that affirm their own and one another’s identities.

This case study focuses on three challenges for trans-inclusive language: how to select gendered labels and pronouns, how to make language more gender-neutral when gender isn’t relevant, and how to talk about gender more precisely when it is relevant, such as in discussions of identity, social inequality, physiology, or socialization. Each challenge is accompanied by linguistic strategies promoted in language activism occurring in trans communities across the United States and many other parts of the English-speaking world. Before approaching these challenges,

however, some background about the social context of transgender language activism is important.

Why trans language reform matters

It is worth addressing why language reform is of such central importance to trans people and why cisgender people should take it seriously, particularly at a time when “political correctness” is often framed as a form of censorship or even oppression. Despite growing awareness and acceptance of trans identities, trans people remain enormously vulnerable to verbal harassment, physical, sexual, and state-sanctioned violence, and discrimination in the realms of healthcare, employment, and housing. A major survey of 6,450 trans Americans (Grant et al. 2012) paints a stark picture of the injustices trans people face in the forms of poverty, harassment, abuse, and suicide. Respondents had nearly universally been mistreated at work, experienced poverty rates almost four times the general public, and reported astronomical rates of attempted suicide (41%, compared to 1.6% of the general population). Trans youth were particularly vulnerable. Respondents who came out as trans during their K-12 education reported being harassed (78%) and assaulted (35%) by other students and even by teachers and staff. 15% dropped out of school as a result. Suicide attempt rates were even higher among respondents who reported being verbally harassed (51%) and higher still for those who had been assaulted (64%). Students in higher education fared better on these measures, but it is not exactly heartening to learn that 35% of trans college students experienced verbal harassment for their gender and that 5% had been assaulted on campus for being trans.

Transphobic harassment includes slurs and deliberate rejections of trans people's gender identities, but even subtly cissexist language negatively affects trans people's wellbeing. Recent research indicates that trans people whose communities support them have lower rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality. What constitutes support for trans people is not merely tolerance of non-normative gender presentations, but the social and linguistic validation of their gender identities. The language used to talk about trans people is not just a matter of political difference, but one of survival.

Transgender language reform

The study of language and gender was founded in part on the so-called second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. The groundbreaking work of feminist linguists like Robin Lakoff, Anne Bodine, and Sally McConnell-Ginet, among others, brought unprecedented attention to linguistic misogyny (i.e., oppression of women) and androcentrism (i.e., treatment of maleness as default). In the 1990s, *queer linguistics* expanded the field's engagement with language activism by addressing homophobic and heteronormative language that assumes heterosexuality and stigmatizes other forms of desire. There is now a sizeable body of literature both on feminist language reform (e.g., Cameron 1998) and gay and lesbian challenges to heteronormative language (e.g., Livia & Hall 1997). However, the linguistic interventions pursued by transgender communities have received relatively little attention from linguists. In what follows, I offer a brief discussion of three major issues in the adoption of trans-inclusive language and some of the strategies trans people use to address them. These reflections are synthesized from over ten years of ethnographic and sociolinguistic research in transgender communities in the United States and English-dominant online spaces and nearly two decades as an activist for trans-affirming

language change. The examples provided below, however, are either constructed or modified versions of utterances collected from a range of online sources.

Challenge 1: Gender labels and pronouns

The simplest level of trans-inclusive language reform deals with the use of overtly gendered language including words that function as gender labels (*woman, man, trans, non-binary*), kinship terms (*mother/father/parent, sister/brother/sibling, etc.*), certain professional roles (*waiter/waitress/server, masseuse/masseur/massage therapist, etc.*), and third person pronouns (*she/he/they/etc.*).

The key question here is who gets to determine which gender category someone belongs to. Because of the strength of the standard language ideology, which says there is only one correct way to speak English, it is unsurprising that certain definitions of words related to gender are seen as more correct, true, official, or objective than others. Genital and reproductive anatomy is usually naturalized as the factor that determines whether someone is female or male, but the most fundamental challenge trans activists put forth is that a person's body parts should not determine what kind of person they get to be. Rather than prioritizing physiological traits, trans people see gender as a matter of self-identification in which each individual is the ultimate authority on their own gender identity. At the same time, trans language reform efforts recognize that identity isn't just individual, but *intersubjective*, in that people don't construct their identities alone, but in collaboration with others. From this perspective, when I speak I am not just representing myself,

but also constructing a certain image for you that may or may not align with how you see yourself.

Perhaps because they are so frequent and, for many people, so automatic, gendered pronouns like *she*, *he*, *they*, and newer options like *ze* and *ey* probably receive more attention than any other aspect of trans-inclusive language. The solution trans people increasingly advocate for is to ask people about their pronouns rather than making assumptions based on someone's appearance or other signifiers of gender. In fact, this promotion of metalinguistic communication – that is, talking about talk – is part of a more general principle underlying trans language activism: it's better to ask than to assume.

Yet this solution brings its own anxieties for those who have been acculturated to the belief that it is deeply offensive to ask someone whether they want to be referred to as *she* or *he*. The prospect of asking someone which pronouns they use may even feel intrusive or like it involves singling out gender ambiguous individuals. These concerns, however, are based on a particular model of gender attribution that must be challenged for trans-affirming language to take hold. The idea that it is offensive to ask people how they should be gendered is grounded in the idea that a person's status as a woman or man must always be easily identifiable and that any suggestion to the contrary indicates they have failed to enact that gender correctly. But all trans people, by definition, have at some point experienced a disconnect between how they see themselves and how they are seen by others. If gender is a matter of internal self-identification, then it may not always be visible from the outside.

There are two common concerns people express when introduced to the practice of “pronoun checks,” as they are sometimes called. First, people sometimes worry that asking someone for their pronouns is akin to asking them about their gender identity or body parts – private information that shouldn’t be brought up except among intimates. But pronouns are already used publicly and on-record; unless someone goes to great lengths to avoid using a pronoun to refer to someone, they will eventually need to decide which pronouns to use. The question is whether the speaker selects pronouns based on their own perception or whether they allow the person in question to exert some agency over how they are spoken about or addressed.

A second area of worry is whether asking trans people about their pronouns singles them out or calls attention to their gender ambiguity or visibility as a trans person. And, of course, this is exactly what would happen if one only asks people who are obviously trans or gender non-conforming about their pronouns. This is why trans language activists emphasize the importance of making questions about pronouns part of our everyday interactional routines. One way to normalize pronoun checks is to offer your own pronouns when introducing yourself before or instead of asking for someone else’s. Treating pronouns more like names – terms of reference that must be asked for rather than assumed – allows us to tap into pre-existing norms that we regularly use to tell people how to refer to us.

Of course, not everyone is familiar with the practice of exchanging pronouns, and in many cases using trans-inclusive language practices requires us to tell people why we ask for or offer our own pronouns. Trans people tend to be prolific metalinguistic commentators, and trans-affirming

language reform asks cisgender people to become more conscious of the ways they use language and to be able to discuss their reasoning with others.

Challenge 2: When gender isn't known or 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. 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 is teaching statistics." Of course, such details do the work of setting the scene, and at times may be relevant to interpretation of what is said. However, gender attributions like these are built on the assumption that we know how to categorize someone's gender even if they haven't told us how they identify. Furthermore, when identifying an unknown café barista as a man or a statistics instructor as a woman is considered relevant, that relevance often derives from gender stereotypes – perhaps the idea that men are not well-suited to making coffee or that a woman teaching statistics is somehow remarkable. Trans people often employ gender neutral language when it is not feasible to ask someone what they should be called.

The primary tactic of gender-neutral language use is to seek out epicene, or non-gendered, versions of words that are usually gendered. Some examples of this approach have already been mentioned: *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 the same argument was made against using *he or she*, which is now commonplace, as an alternative to *he* as a generic pronoun. Importantly, the perception of speech

as sounding natural, articulate, or aesthetically pleasing derives from a long history of socially-informed norms of use. Referring to people's *spouses* rather than their *husbands and wives* may sound less elegant precisely **because** it challenges social and linguistic norms.

Gender neutrality is especially important as a resource for affirming non-binary gender identities. For instance, groups of people are often addressed as *ladies and gentlemen* when one might call them *honored guests* (or simply *everyone*) while children are frequently 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. Closely related to the concept of *gender neutrality* is *gender inclusivity*. While gender neutrality avoids marking gender at all, gender inclusive language recognizes that there are more than two genders. Most conventional attempts at gender inclusivity actually reinforce the binary, 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 problematizes phrasing like "the other sex" (a feminist alternative to "the opposite sex") and offers in its place phrasing like "another sex."

Of course, gender neutral and gender inclusive language of this sort only works when the intended meaning is in fact gender neutral or inclusive. Though we might disagree with the sentiment, for someone who believes non-binary individuals should not compete in collegiate sports, "both women and men" is presumably a more accurate wording. This brings us to the

final challenge: how to talk about gender when one's intended meaning is **not** gender neutral or gender inclusive.

Challenge 3: When gender is relevant

The final challenge for addressing cissexist language discussed in this essay is more nuanced than the first two. The problem here is the assumption that someone's physiology, gender socialization 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 not be the same. For example, each of the following sentences uses the word *women* to refer to different aspects of gender or 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 (1), *women* refers to people who were raised in a female gender role. In addition to being an essentializing 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 people who were assigned to a female gender role at birth. Such an equation implies that trans women are not women because they were not raised as girls and that trans men are women because they were socialized as such. Example 2 uses the word *women* to refer 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, or was raised as such, so a trans man or non-binary person who is perceived as female may be subjected to the same treatment as cisgender and transgender women who are perceived as female. To equate this category with “women” erases women who do not experience this form of misogyny because they are not recognized as women and men and non-binary people who do experience it. Example (3) uses the word *women* in reference to people with a particular body part. The final case is often the most difficult one to absorb as problematic because there is such a tight ideological connection between physiology and gender. But to refer to cervical cancer screening as something that all women need is to define womanhood by the presence or absence of a cervix.

There are two primary strategies for addressing the conflation of different aspects of gender and sex. The simpler strategy is to hedge all generalizations about gender. This would allow us to turn examples (1)-(3) above into utterances like (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 recognize 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 incompetent in every professional context, and not all cisgender women have cervixes.

The other strategy for making utterances like examples (1)-(3) trans-inclusive involves being more specific about which aspects of gender or sex are relevant. This approach requires deeper thought than simply hedging a generalization, but this may be required if one wants to be precise about exactly which genders are being referred to. Because the normative gender system does not provide the vocabulary to make these distinctions, trans people have developed an expanded lexicon for gender that overlaps with terminology used by some academic researchers. In addition to distinguishing between *sex*, in reference to the body, and *gender identity*, in reference to the categories individuals claim for themselves, many trans people differentiate *gender assignment*, in reference to the category a person is placed in at birth, and *perceived gender*, in reference to how other people see someone's gender. This vocabulary would transform examples (1) through (3) into the utterances in (7) through (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. Yet each of these statements manages to express normative expectations about gender without delegitimizing or erasing trans individuals. This approach requires a rehauling not only of the lexicon, but of the way one thinks about gender. It requires more reflection about which aspects of gender really are relevant when we talk about the experiences of women, men, and non-binary people. 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 above are at times complex, often challenging, and always subject 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 ways they talk about gender. Although transphobia and cissexism may not be eliminated through changes to language alone, identifying cissexist language patterns is a critical step toward dismantling the oppression trans people experience. 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. Though the threat of physical violence always looms large, it is language that serves as the most pervasive ground on which trans identities are delegitimized and transphobic violence is perpetuated. By the same token, it is also the ground on which trans identities can be affirmed, reclaimed, and celebrated.

References

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