WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

Because Trans Activism Can Change How We Understand Language

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If you're reading this, you've probably already encountered transgender linguistic activism. When people introduce themselves, for example, it's increasingly common to share pronouns and ask what others use, instead of assuming the best way to refer to them based on appearance. Making self-identification an everyday practice is one of trans activism's most visible recent victories, particularly on campuses, and language is at the center of that change.

As linguists, we are particularly well placed to support the ongoing movement for trans rights. This is a brief survey of some current linguistics research that engages with transgender activism. There are all kinds of interactions between academia and activism: some document trans linguistic activism, others draw on linguistic expertise to inform activist discourse, and still others apply linguistics to develop practical interventions. Many also engage with trans activism to advance the state of linguistic knowledge. From syntax to sociolinguistics, and corpus linguistics to phonetics, scholars draw on trans discourse and experience to challenge our understanding of how language works.

Linguists studying trans people isn't new, but what's new and growing is the number of trans linguists studying ourselves. That's important, because cisgender linguists have long imposed their own biases onto trans communities, resulting in misinterpretation (at best) and harmful

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transphobic discourse posing as linguistic findings at worst. One recent example is Kulick's description (footnote:) of "transpeople as the self-appointed arbiters of gendered language", causing everyone to "not laugh as much" as before (1).[1] He argues that trans linguistic activism results from trans people needing to pay "meticulous attention […] to their language, so that they might receive confirmation of their gendered identity from others" (2). Not misgendering ourselves, he writes, is a "precious achievement" (2). This is far from the experience of most trans people. Moreover, it misses the point: trans linguistic activism isn't about monitoring our own language, it's about asking for basic respect from others. His characterization of trans people as humorless and uptight is demeaning, but nothing new: just another person punching down by accusing others of being too politically correct.

Linguists have long been uneasy about linguistic reform. From the beginning, our field has been shaped by a desire to be respected as a science. Based on a misconception of scientific fields as politically and culturally neutral, many have wished the same neutrality onto linguistics. However, linguistics has never been neutral. Increasingly, scholars are recognizing the effects of our own cultural situatedness and that of our predecessors in the field. The Natives4Linguistics project, for example, places the values and methods of contemporary linguistics in comparison with Native American understandings of language, revealing fundamental differences based on culture.

Another source of resistance is the equation of linguistic reform to oppression. Recently, some linguists have described the trans activist promotion of singular "they" as oppressive linguistic reform. However, not all linguistic reform is inherently oppressive. "Ms.", for example, was successfully introduced as an alternative to "Miss" and "Mrs." that did not

reveal a person's marital status. Others have deemed requests to use singular "they" a kind of prescriptivism. However, what is the real prescriptivism? Many people use "singular they" to communicate every day. To argue against it on the basis of grammatical purity is perhaps the real prescriptivism.

Often, arguments against singular "they" are simply dressed-up transphobia. Recent research shows that a person's attitude to singular "they" is correlated to their overall attitudes towards trans people.[2] Age is a large factor: younger people are [more likely](#) to use singular "they" and to accept it as sounding grammatical.

Many trans people draw on popular linguistic ideologies in response to transphobic discourse. For example, many non-binary people draw on historical use (singular "they" has been used for centuries) and lexical definition (the dictionary says that "they" can be singular) to legitimize their pronoun choice.[3] **As linguists, we are in a unique position of power to guide the discourse** (cf [Konnelly and Cowper 2020](#)). Singular "they" is more than a linguistic curiosity: pronouncements on its grammaticality have [consequences](#) for trans and non-binary lives.

Linguists are also documenting trans and non-binary innovations in languages beyond English. In Spanish, singular "they" is [best translated](#) with innovative [affixes](#): "elle" (/eɟe/) or "ellx" (/eɟeks/). In Québec and France, the non-binary pronoun "iel" /jɛl/ (a blend of "il" and "elle") has [soared](#) in popularity, as well as blends like "cellui" (a blend of feminine demonstrative pronoun "celle" and the masculine "celui"). In written language, which is often more gendered than spoken, many use "." to create gender-neutral forms (e.g. "mon ami.e", "je suis chanceux.se"). [German speakers](#) have a diversity of [strategies](#) including the innovative pronouns "xier" and simply "x". Others use borrowed English "they" pronouns while speaking German.

There are trans and gender non-conforming people speaking every living language. The fact that linguists have focused predominantly on English and a sampling of European languages is more evidence for the cultural situatedness of linguistics as a field. Do we need more research on innovations in less studied languages? Yes, but we must also recognize that trans people worldwide have different relationships to language. Even among English speakers, pronouns are not always equally important to everyone, based on class, race, education, and individual preference. Any study of asking pronouns, for example, should recognize that the practice is often restricted to university campuses and radical spaces, which are not equally accessible to everyone.

Linguists can draw on our expertise to guide and support trans activist discourse. For example, Lal Zimman ([2017](#)) brings self-identification together with the sociolinguistic concept of intersubjectivity. In addition to the way that someone identifies their own gender, the way that people perceive and interact with that individual is also important. Moreover, the way that others accept a trans person's self-identified gender is deeply affected by their class, visible (non-) conformity, and other factors. Trans people know this, but it isn't always reflected in our public discourse.

Bodies and gender are often naturalized in ways that trans people challenge by our existence. The way that we name ourselves and our [bodies](#) can challenge normative links between body parts and gender identity, building coherence and desirability.[4]

> *"Linguists can draw on our expertise to guide and support trans activist discourse."*

Within linguistics, scholars often ascribe gender differences in the voice to biological variation. However, these differences are sometimes created by our own tools: changing the settings from "male" to "female" on automatic formant analysis, for example, sometimes produces different results for the same audio.[5] Many researchers are turning their attention to voices which challenge simplistic categorization. Lily Clifford is currently building a [corpus](#) of transfeminine people's voices over the course of the voice feminization process. Others have examined non-binary voices: how speakers [alter](#) their voice depending on their environment, and how people combine linguistic features with clothing to create non-binary gendered [styles](#).

The need to address race in language, gender, and sexuality is becoming more pressing, as articulated by Trechter ([2003](#)) and others. As Trechter notes, race is rarely mentioned in analyses (or even the titles of papers) unless the participants are of a marked category. Nearly all the studies mentioned here focus on white trans communities, but do not critically examine race. If the growing field of trans linguistics aims to unsettle oppressive systems of power, rather than uphold them, then race must become more central in our analyses.

Many of the rights promoted by trans activists actually benefit everyone, not just trans people. For example, trans activists have drawn wider attention to the importance of respecting a person's name and pronouns. This has encouraged native English speakers to be more respectful of how to pronounce names with non-English linguistic origins. It has also highlighted the need to respect the pronouns of gender non-conforming people who often get misgendered, without necessarily identifying as transgender, such as butch lesbians.

"Gender, along with other systems of human identity and power, is inextricable from language."

Likewise, **linguists of all fields can benefit from engaging with trans activism**. Language is complex, systematic, and uniquely human; and the beauty of that is what draws many linguists to the field. In order to understand language, we must at some level understand humans. Trans communities have developed precise and productive ways to think about gender, which structures human societies and shapes our individual lives. Gender, along with other systems of human identity and power, is inextricable from language. Engaging with activist knowledge production is, therefore, an invaluable way to advance linguistic research.

To read more about LGBTQ+ linguistics from LGBTQ+ linguists, check out all of the Committee on LGBTQ+[Z] Issues in Linguistics (COZIL) Blog posts here.

[1] Kulick, Don. "Foreword." International Journal of the Sociology of Language 2019, no. 256 (February 25, 2019): 1–3.

[2] Hernandez, Ellis, Ash Shukla & Shannon Bischoff. 2018. They as a window into ideology: Prescriptivism, gender neutrality, and LGBTQ+ people. Paper presented at Lavender Languages and Linguistics 25. Providence, RI: Rhode Island College.

[3] Crowley, A. (January 2020) "Non-binary YouTubers, Language Ideologies, and Legitimizing Discourses" Linguistics Society of America. New Orleans, Louisiana.

[4] Lischinsky, Alon & Kat Gupta. 2020. Transgressive Pleasures: Identity and desire in the discursive construction of gender-nonconforming characters in porn. Presentation at Corpora and Discourse International Conference 2020. Sussex, UK: University of Sussex

[5] miles, deandre, & Lal Zimman. 2019. Normativity in normalization: Methodological challenges in the (automated) analysis of vowels among non-binary speakers. Presentation at NWAV 48. Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon.

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