

Pronouns and Gender in Language

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The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality

Edited by Kira Hall and Rusty Barrett

Subject: Linguistics, Sociolinguistics Online Publication Date: Sep 2020

DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190212926.013.63

Abstract and Keywords

Pronouns are a grammatical element that take the place of full noun phrases, and in many of the world's languages, pronouns also convey social information such as the gender of a referent. This chapter surveys the literature on the linguistics of pronouns from a broad array of disciplinary perspectives, focusing on the way social categories of gender interact with linguistic factors. The first section reviews gendered pronouns through the lens of performativity and speech act theory, discussing how pronouns and misgendering can be used for impoliteness and politeness. The second section surveys some semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic analyses of pronouns, including debates on the semantic and syntactic category of pronouns in the grammar. While the bulk of this chapter focuses on gendered pronouns in English, the third section provides a cross-linguistic perspective of gendered pronouns and inflectional morphology, and more interactional data is discussed.

Keywords: pronouns, social gender, pronominal gender, gender-neutral pronouns, misgendering

Introduction

Pronouns are functional elements of language used to replace (or serve the function of) larger phrases. *Pronouns* do not necessarily replace *nouns*, but rather the entire linguistic unit associated with a noun. In formal syntactic theories, pronouns are taken to replace a whole noun phrase.

Pronouns are of interest to scholars of gender and language because for many languages, the form of a pronoun depends on the gender of the person it refers to (or the gender of the speaker or listener). Unlike gendered nouns or other gendered language, however, pronouns are functional elements—meaning they are resistant to change, and it is unusual for languages to develop new pronouns over short periods of time (Muysken 2008). The gender of pronouns can also depend on grammatical gender, which can lead to confusion or conflation—for example, in German the noun *das Mädchen* (“girl”) has a neuter grammatical gender, meaning that German speakers can use the pronoun *es* to refer to a girl if they have previously used *das Mädchen* (Corbett 2006). The complications between gram-

mathematical gender of nouns and the social gender of referents can lead to points where different forms of pronouns may be used in variation.

Pronouns can do some jobs that normal noun phrases cannot do as well. In addition to referring to a particular entity, pronouns can have a variable meaning dependent on another element of the sentence or conversation. Example (1) shows a pronoun in English being used to refer to an entity; example (2) shows a pronoun used to convey variable meaning constrained by *everyone*.

(1) **Jared_i** is Canadian. **He_i** lives in Ottawa.

(2) **Everyone_i** should respect **his_i** mother.

The use in (2) is an epicene pronoun; in English, there is a long history of debate about the most appropriate epicene form to use. Here, the pronoun *his* suggests (to many English speakers) that we are only discussing males; an alternative, in example (3), is gender neutral but argued by some prescriptive grammarians to constitute a mismatch between singular *everyone* and (apparently) plural *their*.

(3) **Everyone_i** should respect **their_i** mother.

The use of pronouns for both specific and for generic reference is heavily tied to the social categories that pronouns encode. This chapter reviews discussions of pronouns and gender from several different perspectives in the field of linguistics. In the first section I discuss how epicene and gender-neutral pronouns fit into a larger picture of a theory of gender performativity and speech-act theory, as well as examine how pronouns and misgendering can be analyzed through theories of linguistic im/politeness. The second section surveys the formal syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic analyses of pronouns (gendered and otherwise). The third section introduces interactional views of pronoun use, and incorporates insights from cross-linguistic innovations in gender-neutral and nonbinary language.

The Problem of Gendered Pronouns: Performativity, Misgendering, and Politeness

As with any form of language that introduces information about gender or sex into a conversation, pronouns have been the focus of discussions of implicit sexism and bias in language. Epicene or generic uses of *he* have been the focus of many such discussions in English. Anne Curzan (2003) traces indefinite uses of *he* and *they* (singular) as far back as the 15th century; for several hundred years, these forms co-existed in apparently free variation, meaning that writers used either *he* or *they* (or other forms like *he or she*) variably when referring to singular indefinite gender-neutral antecedents like *anyone*. In the 18th century and onward, a trend emerged in prescriptive grammars of English forbidding the use of *they* in these contexts, suggesting instead that *he* was sufficiently generic. Some of these grammars explicitly advocated for *he* due to a hierarchy of the sexes (like

Harvey in 1878), others based their arguments purely in terms of number agreement (as did Brown in 1828), and others (such as Hooks and Mathews in 1956) simply acknowledge that generic singular *they* is common in colloquial English but inappropriate for formal writing (Curzan 2003; Newman 1997). The prescriptive grammarian commentary from the 18th and 19th centuries was therefore an attempt to reign in already-existing variation, rather than to replace one settled form with another. (See Hernandez 2020 for more on the relationship between prescriptivism and nonbinary and transgender identities.)

Descriptive linguists in the 20th century sought to question assertions that *he* was truly generic when used indefinitely. Studies that asked participants to “fill in the blank” using pronouns to describe generic indefinite terms (like *a teacher, a student, or anyone*) showed that pronoun use was influenced by real-world gender stereotypes, meaning that *he* was not a one-size-fits-all pronoun (Hughes and Casey 1986; Hyde 1984). Other studies tested the opposite direction: when given a prompt that included a pronoun, experimenters tested whether pronouns like *he* or *they* had different impacts on what sort of gender the participants imagined. These studies also found that *he* was not reliably gender-neutral when compared with *he or she* or *they* (Moulton, Robinson, and Elias 1978; Hyde 1984; Gastil 1990).

Work in the 20th and 21st centuries by feminist scholars and linguists has framed the (prescribed-for) use of generic *he* as a reflection of (perhaps unconscious) sexism (Moulton et al. 1978; Boroditsky, Schmidt, and Phillips 2003; Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, and Laakso 2012). They argue that using *he* to encompass antecedents that “should” be gender-neutral instills the sexist assumption in English speakers that women constitute a marked gender, compared to men who exist as a default gender. The experimental examinations of generic pronouns support the assertion that *he* does in fact suggest male (not gender-neutral) mental images to the reader/hearer, which further contributes to the misogynist convention where women are excluded from discussions of people in general (unless specified otherwise).

One difficulty of studying pronouns from a linguistic perspective is that, although they are grammatical elements, they are also related to social relations between people. Thus, when a speaker is calculating what pronoun to use about someone, part of that calculation is necessarily social and relational. While some languages (like Thai, Japanese, or many Romance languages) have an obvious connection between pronominal form and social relation, English is tricky because the social relation being indicated is gender. Most linguistics literature, until quite recently, describes gender marking in Modern English as reflecting “natural sex”—a concept not often critiqued by linguists (for an important exception, see McConnell-Ginet 2014). When earlier work (even by feminist and progressive authors) describes the English pronominal system, little attention is paid to the arbitrary or discursively constructed nature of the “natural sex” categories themselves (Curzan 2003, for example, discusses singular *they* extensively yet never discusses the possibility of referring to genderqueer referents, outside of a single footnote).

When linguists have disambiguated sex and gender, they have often still relied on fallacies of pre-discursive, inherent, binary sex categories.¹ As linguists move toward a view of sex and gender more compatible with performative theories (Butler 2013), it is becoming more clear that embodied sex characteristics are only one among several factors that control gender morphology—gender identity, gender relations, and other factors are clearly equally important. Lauren Ackerman (2019) provides a thorough framework for understanding these factors; for the purposes of this chapter, I use *sex* to refer to a system of categorizing bodies, and *gender* to refer to a system of social organization.

With these terms in mind, it is important to clarify whether English pronouns (or any type of grammatical marking of this type) depend more on sex or on gender. One way to triangulate whether something is predicated on sex or gender is to examine instances in which peoples' gender (presentation, identity, social positioning) does not align with their sex (assignment at birth based on interpretation of infant bodies). The other way to figure out that the notion in question is in fact gender (and not sex) is to look at uses of pronouns that are inexplicable otherwise. Sally McConnell-Ginet (2014; see also this volume) raises some problems with attributing pronominal form to sex by highlighting a few conflicts: the oft-cited phenomenon of using *she* to refer to ocean vessels, usually attributed to gender ideology, and the use of gender agreement by hijras speaking Hindi. She cites Kira Hall (2003) here: the Hijra identity, which is a long-standing gender identity in India that does not map neatly into western ideas of male and female, is at least partially constructed using gender morphology—including expressive shifts within a single conversation. What McConnell-Ginet proposes as an alternative to “natural” gender is instead *notional* gender, which encodes not a clear-cut biological distinction but instead the socioculturally constructed groups of men, women, and those who are neither. McConnell-Ginet applies her use of notional gender to alternations that we see in English, including expressive uses (such as the use of *she* among groups of gay men), presumptive leaps (in which a speaker uses *he* or *she* to refer to a referent of unknown gender, often informed by stereotypes or gender ideology), and misgendering (in which a speaker may intentionally or unconsciously use the “wrong” pronoun for affective reasons).

With this analysis, McConnell-Ginet extends her earlier observations about English pronouns (McConnell-Ginet 1979), wherein she expounds instances in which *he*, *she*, *he or she*, and *they* can be variably used to refer to either hypothetical or actual people. In that work, she concludes that the use of *he* and *she* predominate (at the time of writing) primarily due to the psychological conception of gender categories: “Pronouns can refer to real people or fictive prototypes. So long as most of us believe that women and men are what really exist, that androgynes are simply abstract entities, we will tend to sexualize our prototypes as we personalize them” (McConnell-Ginet 1979: 80). In a later section on singular *they*, I show how McConnell-Ginet's observation that the use of binary gendered pronouns depends on a conception of binary gendered categories seems to be borne out: as attitudes about gender and transgenderism change, so does the use of pronouns.

Many dominant assumptions in the linguistic study of gender and pronouns are lately being challenged, due in part to the increased visibility and participation of transgender people in the field of linguistics. In instances in which pronouns (or any “natural” gendered language) are said to refer to the “sex” of a referent, this assumes that the “sex” of any given person is obvious from their appearance, does not change over the course of their lifespan, and is in a stable, parallel relationship with their social gender. None of these assumptions hold, however, when accounting for transgender referents. Additionally, transgender people are particularly prone to misgendering, due either to a conflict in the understanding of what constitutes their gender (between the referent and the speaker) or due to a conflict in the understanding of what constitutes gender in general.

In her theory of performativity, Judith Butler (2013) builds on the work of J. L. Austin’s speech-act theory to inscribe a socially generative power into speech acts: not only do words “reflect” (or refer to) reality, but words and speech acts are in part responsible for the formation of the social and metaphysical world in which individuals exist (Austin 1975; see also Milani, this volume). As it pertains to gender, Butler’s performativity is a way of inverting the causal relationship between gendered life experiences and gendered language/speech acts. Thus, the speech acts that we use to describe, differentiate, claim, and identify bodies are part of the social practice of how we create sexed categories and, at another level of abstraction, gendered subjects. Language is a social practice, so language is how we come to social consensus about categories and membership therein.

When looking at gender and its instantiation in pronouns, it is therefore instructive to think of (third person, referential) pronouns as part of the way that a collective society decides and creates the social gender of an individual referent. It follows, then, that misgendering is a kind of speech act that effects a feeling (in either the referent or others) of discontinuity, fragmentation, or conflict. This conflict occurs primarily when the linguistic practices creating social gender fail to align with a person’s internal sense of self or identity. For this reason, misgendering may be viewed as a form of impoliteness. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987) outline *positive face* as an individual’s social need to be well-thought-of, or to maintain a positive consistent self-image; and *negative face* as an individual’s need to be free from obligations and impositions upon their will. Their theory of politeness is set up as a cooperative system in which all participants should, in general, endeavor to serve the needs of both their own and their interlocutor’s positive and negative face. It is assumed that it is generally beneficial to an individual to satisfy a conversational partner’s desires, but not required to serve *all* desires of a conversational partner. This builds on Erving Goffman’s (1967) conception of politeness in terms of face. What is important to both theories of politeness is that a conception of the *self* of a speaker is mediated through discourse and is relational. Choosing a gendered (third person) pronoun is therefore subject to (at least) two constraints:

- (4) Failing to attribute a person’s gender to them is an imposition on their positive face.

(5) Asserting an incorrect gender for a person is an imposition on their positive face.

For speakers who rank (4) higher than (5), they are more likely to “guess” at a pronoun—even if they are not sure; for speakers who rank (5) higher than (4), they are more likely to avoid pronouns or use gender-neutral pronouns.

Additionally, speakers can deliberately be impolite to each other. Work on *impoliteness* also provides a model for understanding misgendering; as an example, Jonathon Culpepper suggests that intentional threats to the positive face needs of an interlocutor may be used to convey impoliteness, specifically giving the example of inappropriate forms of address (1996: 357). Thus, violating either (4) or (5) provides a method for speakers to show aggression or dislike through linguistic impoliteness, which is an available force for speakers to convey negative social meaning. Crucially, obeying or failing to obey either (4) or (5) may be an attempt at politeness or impoliteness depending on context. Culpepper and others (e.g., Leech 1983; Fraser and Nolan 1981) note that politeness and impoliteness are predominantly contextually determined, and very few acts are inherently impolite.

This section has presented background in the theory on gender performativity, social relationships, and politeness theory in linguistics as they pertain especially to the use of pronouns and gender features. The next section turns toward formal theories of linguistics; my overview of the syntax and semantics literature is intended to give interdisciplinary perspective on the great breadth of research that has been done on pronouns and gender in grammar.

Pronouns in Semantic, Syntactic, and Pragmatic Perspective

This section is split into three subparts, focusing first on formal semantic analyses of gender and pronouns, then on formal syntactic analyses; the final subsection on pragmatics includes proposals intended to incorporate pragmatic concerns into the grammar proper, as part of the generative project in linguistics.

Semantics: Referential Pronouns

In their most well-known use, pronouns refer directly to entities in the world. In more technical terms, pronouns act as a placeholder for extremely specific NPs (like proper names) where the meaning is an exact set of entities (sometimes exactly one). In (6), the pronoun *she* is acting as a placeholder for *Juniper*, which relieves speakers from saying the same name repeatedly.

(6) Juniper_i is such a clever artist. Today she_i drew a very funny comic.

Conventionally, the subscripted index “i” is notation that links *she* with *Juniper*, denoting coreference (i.e., elements referring to the same entity). In (6), the name *Juniper* acts as a linguistic antecedent; the reason a listener knows who is being talked about is because the speaker used a name, and context determines how to match names to pronouns. For referential pronouns, an antecedent can also be unspoken, instead indicated only by non-linguistic information. Example (7) shows a nonlinguistic antecedent, which is still sufficiently informative for a listener to interpret the pronoun.

(7) (*Pointing at someone with a large hat*) Where do you think she_i bought that hat?

In (7) the subscript is not a letter but a number; this notation is used to differentiate reference supported by nonlinguistic context from coreference with a linguistic antecedent. In the former, the speaker may not have talked about the referent previously in the conversation, so the pronoun is not “coreferent” with the antecedent. The antecedent is, instead, the actual person wearing the large hat.

Semantics: Anaphors

Anaphors are a subclass of pronouns that are dependent on linguistic antecedents for meaning; if the antecedent is not close enough to the anaphor, the anaphor will be nonsensical or ungrammatical. In English most anaphors are *-self* compounds, as in example (8). The contrast between (8a) and (8b) shows that even if the antecedent is in the same sentence, it may not be close enough to give the anaphor meaning. This relationship is commonly referred to as binding (cf. Lees and Klima 1963; Chomsky 1981).

(8)

- a. Cody_i likes to talk about himself_i.
- b. *Cody_i thinks that everyone likes to talk about himself_i.

Many syntactic and semantic theories attempt to explain when and why anaphors can or cannot be bound by antecedents. Binding theory (Chomsky 1981, *inter alia*) is a model in which principles of syntactic closeness dictate the requirements on pronouns, anaphors, and other noun phrases. Binding Principle A, loosely stated in (10), formalizes the requirement that anaphors must be close enough to their antecedent to be meaningful and grammatical (as the contrast in example 6 shows). Binding Principle B accounts for the complementary distribution between pronouns and anaphors; this contrast is shown in (9).

(9)

- a. Cody_i really likes to talk about himself_i.
- b. Cody_i really likes to talk about him_i.

(10) **Principle A:** anaphors must be bound (by an antecedent) within their binding domain (roughly, within the same finite clause)

Principle B: pronouns must be free (not bound) within their binding domain

There are a few apparent exceptions to the binding principles (see Maling 1984; Thrainsson 1976). Exceptions to Principle A may be related to certain semantic constraints such as the animacy of the entity being referred to; sentient entities (especially humans) may bind anaphors even outside their own clause (see also Reuland 2001; Reuland and Sigurjónsdóttir 1997; on animacy, see Chen, this volume).

Semantics: Variable Pronouns

Both referential pronouns and anaphors denote specific entities, although the restrictions on how they get their meaning are slightly different. Variable pronouns are a third subclass of pronoun in which the semantic content is not an exact entity (or set), but instead variable depending on a quantified restriction. Example (11) shows a bound variable pronoun anteceded by an indefinite pronoun (*anyone*) and a quantified NP (*each of my students*).

(11)

a. **Anyone_i** who saw the play is sure to tell {**his_i/their_i/her_i**} friends.

b. **Each of my students_i** should do {**his_i/their_i/her_i**} best work.

I include *his*, *their*, and *her* as bound variables in (11) because all are attested; however *his* and *their* are the most common forms used by English speakers, as well as disjunctions or coordinations like *his or her* or *his/her*. In (11a) the “meaning” of *his* is not “some particular person, coreferential with specific antecedent”; instead, *his* means “any person *x* such that *x* saw the play.” Thus, if many people saw the play, then the pronoun *his* may in fact be true for many entities, even though it is singular. Likewise, *his* in (11b) means “each person *x* such that *x* is one of my students.” Variable pronouns are marked by this contingent meaning.

Formal semantic accounts of pronouns have not previously engaged deeply with the complexity of social gender, except to suggest that pronouns should match their antecedents (with certain restrictions). However, recent work on pronoun gender has begun to grapple with the ways in which gender can be highly context-dependent (e.g., Kučerová 2018; Sigurðsson 2019, Hilmisdóttir 2020; Conrod 2019). In the following sections, I show more complicated issues around gendered pronouns that problematize an exclusively formal account of pronoun gender matching.

Syntax: Functional categories and universals

Pronouns are frequently taken to be functional categories. Functional categories are classes of words that are more structural or grammatical, carry less semantic information, and do not frequently change or add new words. In syntactic accounts of pronouns in the grammar, the grammatical/functional nature of pronouns is often reflected in proposals that pronouns are a sub-type of determiner (like articles or demonstratives—e.g. *the, this*), rather than a sub-type of noun. Paul Postal (1966) first proposed the possibility that pronouns were determiners, not nouns. Steven Abney (1987) outlined several points in favor of analyzing pronouns as determiners as part of a larger proposal that noun phrases included functional material that paralleled clause structure.

Abney proposed specific criteria for differentiating functional categories from lexical ones; in the case of pronouns, the most apparent of these are that pronouns constitute a closed class and that pronouns lack descriptive content. A closed class is a category of words that typically does not permit neologisms, productive morphological composition, and borrowings. The closed-class nature of English pronouns has been the basis for much of the debate on the introduction of gender-neutral pronouns. Abney (1987), Curzan (2003), and Pieter Muysken (2008) all point out the resistance of mainstream English speakers in adopting neologistic gender-neutral pronouns like *ze, hir*, etc.

The observation that speakers resist neologisms in functional categories is also occasionally deployed in debates about singular uses of *they*. Commentators have argued that because pronouns are a functional category, English speakers cannot be realistically expected to adopt a new use of a pronoun for gender-neutral reference. However, a new use of singular *they* is already in use and accepted by a majority of the population (Conrod 2019). It is important to note that functional categories *do* undergo change, but that change is frequently slower and less noticed by speakers. Curzan (2003) includes a history of changes in English pronouns that serve as a comparison, detailing the way that Old and Middle English shifted from a grammatical gender system to a semantic or notional gender system.

Another important factor in determining whether pronouns are functional categories is that pronouns are not cross-linguistically universally homogenous, and many languages can and do have pronominal systems that are more lexical. Lexical pronoun systems are marked by a larger pronoun inventory (Thai, Vietnamese, and Burmese, for example, use many kinship terms like *elder brother* as pronouns; Cooke 1968) and much more flexibility in how speakers use these pronouns.² The status of pronouns as functional or lexical is of interest to scholars of gender primarily due to implications for how speakers encode social information in the grammar and what kinds of change or variation can be expected.

Pragmatics: Gender, Honorifics, and Pronoun Shifting

While this chapter focuses on gender and pronouns, pronouns also express another social dimension that will be useful for comparison. Honorific pronouns include pronouns that encode interpersonal relationship elements such as respect, authority, familiarity, and kin-

ship. English no longer retains the honorific distinction in its pronouns, but the distinction between *thou/you* was historically a part of a larger cross-linguistic pattern in which pronouns included a formal and informal second person pronoun.

Roger Brown and Albert Gilman (1960) analyzed this alternation across Italian, French, Latin, Spanish, and English, generalizing the forms into “T” forms (such as *thou* and *tu*) and “V” forms (such as *you* and *Vous*). Historically, the social dimension along which the T/V distinction was decided was power—as in relationships of employment or nobility. However, over time and in some social contexts the T/V alternation gained another social dimension, which was social closeness or solidarity—friends who wanted to signal familiarity could use the T form to accomplish this (without implying a power differential). Chase Wesley Raymond (2016) examined the T/V alternation in contemporary Spanish in several settings, and highlighted not only instances of speakers invoking the dimensions of power and solidarity through their use of T/V forms, but also instances of speakers alternating these forms mid-conversation to accomplish pragmatic goals. By momentarily invoking either authority or familiarity, speakers could use pronouns to demonstrate affect (friendly, angry, contrite) in a way that was complementary with the content of the conversation itself.

Because these pronouns are pragmatically interpreted (i.e., not based on absolute semantic values), the sociopragmatic meaning of any honorific or (in)formal pronoun is highly context dependent. This context includes not only the social relationship between the speaker and addressee, but also cultural contexts—for example, Rusty Barrett (p.c.) notes that there are interlocutors for whom he would use the formal form when speaking Ki’che’ Maya, but the informal form when speaking Spanish. These contextual dependencies further demonstrate the flexibility and relativity by which pronouns gain their social meaning.

One other example of pronouns encoding other social dimensions exists in Thai. Thai pronouns are an open class, and the pronominal paradigm includes at least 30 different pronouns, as well as many nouns that are readily pronominalized (Palakornkul 1975). Like the inventories in Vietnamese and Burmese (Cooke 1968), Thai pronouns include kin terms, pseudo-kin terms, personal names, friendship nouns, occupations, titles, and loanwords from foreign languages. Pronouns depend on unique social relationships between interlocutors, and there are some general rules for how any given pair of speakers selects pronouns for themselves and others (Palakornkul 1975). Thai pronouns can also be changed mid-discourse to accomplish pragmatic goals, including both affective reasons (shock, teasing, sarcasm, emphasis) and discourse features (changes in footing or voice) (Simpson 1997). A similar example of a highly sociopragmatic pronominal system is Japanese; Japanese has a relatively large inventory, including eight first-person pronouns that are used differently by different speakers; in addition to honorific marking, Japanese pronoun use is sensitive to gender, age, and status (for further reading see Potts and Kawahara 2004; Ueno and Kehler 2016; McCready 2019).³ The social relationships encoded in the pronouns of Japanese, Thai, or Spanish all intersect and interact with gender, which is itself a dimension of social relation; my own research (Conrod 2019) has also

shown that these same kinds of shifts in formality can be directly compared to existing shifts in gendered pronoun use.

In the next section I turn to how gender interacts with the discursive and pragmatic goals mentioned here. After discussing innovations in some languages to introduce gender-neutral pronouns, I review instances in which pronouns can be taken up by speakers to convey affect or stance through the invocation of gender ideology.

Gendered Pronouns in Cross-linguistic and Interactional Perspective

Less than a third of the world's languages have "natural" gender marking on pronouns (Corbett 1979; Siewierska 2013). Natural gender marking has previously been defined by pronouns (or other morphology or lexical items) aligning with the sex of the referent; however, as I will discuss in this section, gender of referents is more complicated than binary sex categories.

Gender-neutral pronoun innovations

Earlier, I cited resistance to neologisms and to change over time as evidence that pronouns are a grammatical category rather than a lexical one. However, resistance to neologism in pronouns has not stopped English speakers from innovating a third person singular gender-neutral pronoun; in this case, the emergence of this form has come from a change over time in the underlying morpho-syntactic structure of already-existent forms. Singular *they* has been used since at least the 15th century to refer to generic singular antecedents; within the last few decades, however, more English speakers have adopted singular *they* to refer to specific, definite singular antecedents as well. Not all contemporary speakers of English find this grammatical, however. In Examples (12)-(15) below, I show differing uses of singular *they*, ranging from the least specific (12) to the most specific (15). The scale of specificity from (12) to (15) also aligns roughly with the acceptability by English speakers: almost all speakers will accept (12) (and often 13) as grammatical, and fewer will accept or produce the sentence in (14), and again fewer accepting sentences like (15).

(12) **Someone** ran out of the classroom, but **they** forgot **their** backpack.

Generic, indefinite antecedent

(13) **The ideal student** completes the homework, but not if **they** have an emergency.

Generic, definite antecedent

(14) **The math teacher at my school** is talented, but **they** often hand back grades late.

Specific, definite (ungendered/distal⁴) antecedent

(15) **James** is great at laundry, but **they** never wash **their** dishes.

Specific, definite (gendered?) name antecedent

(Conrod 2019)

Much work prior to 1990 looking at singular *they* focused on generic or epicene uses, as in (12) and (13). However, recent studies (including Sanford and Filik 2007; Foertsch and Gernsbacher 1997; Doherty and Conklin 2017; Ackerman 2018) examine singular *they* from a processing (rather than sociolinguistic) perspective, aiming to find whether English speakers find *they* more costly to resolve when used with singular antecedents. Processing cost can be a proxy for grammaticality, but these studies were not aimed at uncovering variation between potentially different underlying grammars. Some studies have demonstrated that singular *they* is variably acceptable but a dispreferred option when a gendered pronoun would be available (e.g. Sanford and Filik 2007; Foertsch and Gernsbacher 1997). The stimuli used are analogous to the example in (14)—definite (specific) antecedent NPs, but not proper names.

Very recent work begins to look at the use of singular *they* when referring to definite (and sometimes specific) antecedents. Bronwyn Bjorkman (2017) offers a syntactic analysis of a possible diachronic change in the morphosyntactic features of pronouns that have shifted to allow for definite antecedents of singular *they*. The old system of morphosyntactic gender for Bjorkman was privative, binary features that differentiated *he* and *she*, so that any definite antecedent would be referred to with either of these choices. Bjorkman proposes a change in the nature of features: rather than a forced choice, she suggests that gender features in English pronouns have shifted to optional adjunct features. That is, a pronoun may be marked as either masculine or feminine, but it also may be marked for neither gender. This forces a reorganization of the pronominal paradigm in English to allow for a gender-neutral singular pronoun, which has surfaced as *they*.

Another work that addresses the question of singular *they* specifically in the context of nonbinary definite specific antecedents is by Ackerman (2018). In a study of the acceptability of singular *they* co-referenced with names and indefinite antecedents, Ackerman found that the anaphor *themselves* was about equally acceptable as *themselves* when paired with a proper name (of any gender), and only slightly less acceptable than *themselves* when paired with an indefinite antecedent.

In my own work, I have probed the variation in both acceptability and production of singular *they* through two experiments, both of which focus primarily on specific, definite uses like the one in example (15) in which the antecedent is a proper name. The data from both experiments show that age is a contributing factor to production and acceptability of definite singular *they*, suggesting that there is an ongoing language change occurring in English.

Pronouns and Gender in Language

The first experiment consisted of sociolinguistic interviews of paired participants, with an aim toward eliciting third person pronoun. Each participant also filled out a demographic survey, including information about their age, gender identity, and other social variables (see Conrod 2019 for full discussion).

This experiment included 22 participants matched into 11 pairs. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 71. Participant gender fell into three groups: 6 were masculine-aligned, 11 were feminine-aligned, and 5 were other/neutral. I analyzed the production of singular *they* by each participant, measuring both the token count (how many times a speaker actually said *they/them/their* about a singular referent) and by proportional rate (the percentage of all pronouns that the speaker used). Figure 1 shows the relationship between speaker age and production of singular *they*.

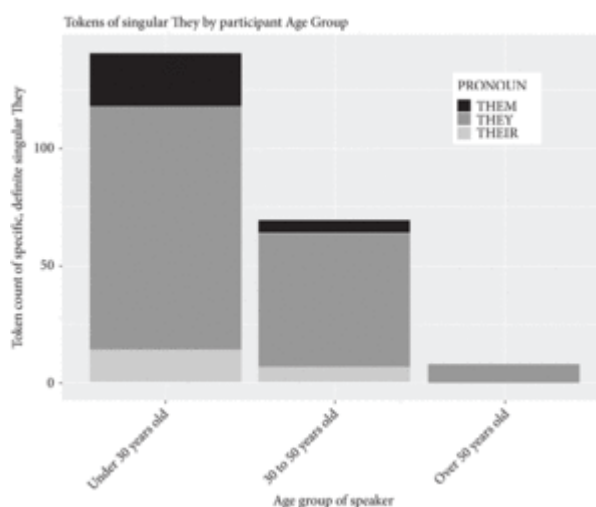


Figure 1: Participant age influences use of singular “they.”

The second experiment was an online survey of acceptability, aimed at testing the relative acceptability of singular pronouns with the different types of antecedents shown in (12)–(15). This experiment included demographic questions with the intention of examining interspeaker variation in acceptability of singular *they*.

The experiment stimuli each consisted of two sentences, containing an antecedent and a singular pronoun. The conditions for test stimuli included what type of antecedent (quantificational, generic definite, feminine name, masculine name, or gender-neutral name) and what pronoun was used (*he*, *she*, or *they*). Examples of the two-sentence stimuli are given in (16)–(18).

(16) **John** is very forgetful. **He (/she/they)** never remember(s) library due dates.

(Name + *he/she/they*)

(17) Students are very ambitious. **Every student** tries to write **his/her/their** essay perfectly.

(Quantified NP + *he/she/they*)

(18) **The perfect spouse** is very thoughtful. **He/she/they** will always try to remember anniversaries.

(Generic definite + *he/she/they*)

Participants were asked to rate sentences for “naturalness,” with a rating of 1 being the least natural and 7 being the most natural. They were then asked to comment on what factors influenced their sentence ratings, followed by a demographics survey.

The full results of this experiment are discussed in Conrod (2019). Looking only at the ratings of *they*, the effect of antecedent on ratings was most clear: generic antecedents led to *they* being rated quite highly, while there was more variability for proper names (of all genders) and quantified NPs.

Participant age showed a similar pattern in the acceptability task as it did in the previous experiment for ratings of *they*, primarily for proper names. Figure 2 shows the acceptability ratings for all sentences including singular *they* by age group, and demonstrates the difference in ratings by speaker age. There was no such effect for *he* or *she*, only *they*.

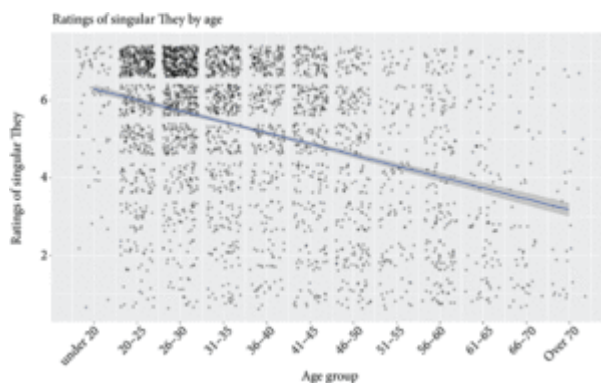


Figure 2: Ratings of singular “they” by age.

The drop-off in ratings for older participants is much more pronounced for (any gender) proper names, and much less so for generic and quantified NPs. Figure 3 shows the age effect for antecedents that were proper names; there was not an age-effect for other types of antecedents.

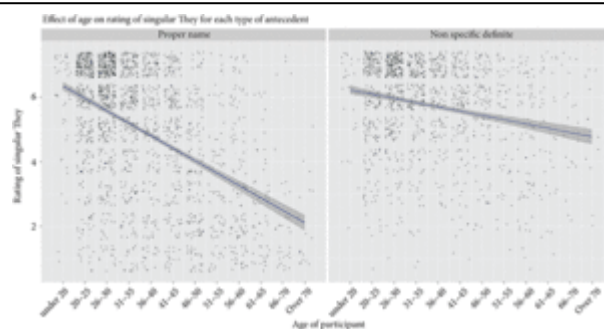


Figure 3: The influence of age on ratings of singular “they” depends on antecedent type.

While Experiment One had few young participants (only 4 were born after 1992), Experiment Two had many more young adults (137 were born after 1992). Thus, while Experiment One gives little clear data into the use of the most recent generation of speakers, Experiment Two suggests that these young speakers accept singular *they* more readily even when it is used with proper names. The data in both of the experiments shown here are compatible with an apparent time analysis (of the type discussed in Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog 1968), meaning that interspeaker variation dependent upon age is indicative of an on-going language change in real time.

These experiments also showed that participants who identified themselves as nonbinary and/or transgender used singular *they* much more (as seen in Experiment One) and rate it much higher regardless of antecedent (as seen in Experiment Two). In both experiments there was not a significant difference between men and women, only between men/women and “other” genders. In Experiment Two I also found that the difference for antecedents found in the general study population did not apply to either transgender or nonbinary gender participants.

Another important finding from Experiment Two comes from a free-response question in the post-ratings survey, which asked participants what factors influenced their decisions when rating sentences. The responses to this question included many metalinguistic comments that specifically targeted pronouns, especially singular *they*. Of comments about the acceptability, 37% included the word “gender,” 20% included the word “singular,” 6% included the words “singular they” (only 3.6% included the word “trans”). Below are examples of comments in answer to the question asking respondents why they picked certain ratings for different sentences:

(19)

- a. Some of them had unusual pronouns which **sound slightly unnatural but are gradually becoming more acceptable.**
- b. I still find unexpected uses of he/she/they weird but gave them a middle 4 because **I know the rules are changing and why** [emph added]

c. Whilst I know **the use of *they* as, a pronoun is growing**, I find it doesn't sound right.

Respondents who commented about singular *they* made various comments about its grammaticality (both for and against), suggesting that as a variable undergoing change singular *they* is salient and its users are aware of their use of it. Examples (19b) and (19c), for instance, show explicit comments on the respondents' awareness of ongoing linguistic change.

Other comments particularly noted the use of generic *he* as less acceptable and *they* as the preferred generic pronoun:

(20) Sometimes the pronouns felt forced. For example, when a genderless subject was introduced in the first sentence it felt unnatural to assign a gendered pronoun (he or she) to the subject in the second sentence. Most people I know use 'they' if they don't know the gender of the person they are referring to or if they are talking hypothetically about a generic person.

(21) I mostly rated sentences lower if there was no specific gender implied but a "'he'" or "'she'" (*sic*) was used as a generic pronoun. "Their" as a generic pronoun is preferred.

That respondents are aware of an ongoing change, and that they notice generic versus specific uses of singular *they*, again suggests that the change is salient and conscious. In the cases of comments on generic *he*, many commented that they found the construction unnecessarily gendered. This speaks to the older origins of singular *they* before the widespread use of its definite, specific use; as a generic pronoun, it is the only truly gender-neutral pronoun to use with non-gendered antecedents. Popular use of generic singular *they* with its surrounding discourse of gender neutrality makes it ripe for re-analysis as a gender-neutral *specific* pronoun—what had to change, then, was the conception of individuals being able to be gender-neutral.

In cases where respondents commented specifically on singular *they*, many referred to their own queer/transgender identity, or the presence of LGBT+ people in their close social network. This was often in support of the newer use of singular *they*:

(22) I heartily support "'they'" (*sic*) pronouns for individuals, and not assuming gender based on names. I'm queer. I'm good at spelling and grammar.

(23) Some questions used names and pronouns that are not commonly used together, and referred to people with a singular 'they' which may only have been noticeable to me because I am transgender

(24) I've spent enough time in queer/trans/non-binary social contexts at this point that that stuff is natural for me now and remarkable only to the extent that I'd expect some other folks to take exception.

(25) My answers to they/them for a specific person have shifted much more positive in the last few years, thanks to nonbinary friends.

This explicit association between specific singular *they* and gender/queer identity suggests that a driving force behind singular *they* is indeed the association with individuals who have intentionally made an effort to carve out a space for identity outside binary gender. These comments strongly point toward the social meaning of specific singular *they*; namely, in order to use singular *they* for a specific (named) antecedent, a speaker must believe it is possible for a particular (named, human) person to be neither male nor female. In other words, speakers will use *they* when neither *he* nor *she* will do. This is consistent with Ackerman's (2018) findings that acceptance of singular *they* with a proper name is correlated with having nonbinary acquaintances.

In sum, singular *they* is an example of a grammatical innovation that has happened in concert with (and perhaps due to) significant social-cultural changes that are underway; but it is also an example of grammatical change seizing on the most exploitable linguistic resource available. While English pronouns have long resisted widespread use of neologisms to denote a gender-neutral specific referent, the extension by analogy of an already-existing element (epicene singular *they*) has proven much more readily adopted.

In the next two subsections, I compare how English speakers have adapted to the “problem” of shifts in the gender landscape with how certain other languages have worked out their own solutions—for instance, by a loan word (in Swedish) or by morphophonological analogy (in Spanish). Languages with morphological gender marking have been studied in this regard to varying degrees: Orit Bershtling (2014) has described pragmatic strategies undertaken by Hebrew speakers, and a special issue of *H-France Salon* edited by Vinay Swamy and Louisa Mackenzie (2019) includes more extensive discussion of the nonbinary pronoun *iel* in French. My focus is on Swedish and Spanish. While Swedish has a relatively similar situation to English (where gender is marked mainly on pronouns), languages like Spanish face additional challenges of gender marking on articles and common nouns.

Swedish *hen*

Swedish singular third person pronouns, like English ones, are gendered, which poses a similar problem for erasing sexist bias from the language and for referring to nonbinary referents. However, rather than reorganize the pronominal paradigm as English is doing, Swedish speakers have taken up a third, gender-neutral pronoun *hen*. Not only does *hen* pattern well with already-existing Swedish words *han* and *hon*, but it has been loaned into Swedish from the Finnish *hän*, which already had no pronominal gender marking to begin with (Stahlberg et al. 2007; Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, and Laakso 2012).

There are not currently large-scale experimental or corpus reviews of the use of *hen* by Swedish speakers in natural contexts; however, *hen* has had considerable uptake by print and popular media in Sweden in the 2010s, and in 2014 it was included in the Swedish Academy Glossary (SAOL). Marie Gustafsson Sendén, Emma A. Bäck, and Anna Lindqvist

(2015) review attitudes about *hen*, as well as self-reports of its use, in a cross-sectional study that sampled between 2012 and 2015. The authors found that in 2012 attitudes towards *hen* were largely negative, but that this pattern reversed by 2015; they also found that more participants reported using *hen* themselves over the course of the study time (although the pattern did not invert completely).

Swedish speakers' uptake of *hen* is unusual among the world's languages for two reasons: first, it is (as far as we know) the first language to have successfully introduced a novel gender-neutral pronoun into mainstream use; and second, it is among the relatively rare cases in which a pronoun is introduced into a language through borrowing.

Spanish elle and endings

Spanish has gendered articles and pronouns that reflect the social gender of the referent; however, the morphological marking in Spanish on common nouns has also been the subject of much debate. Feminist scholars have pointed out the apparent bias in using the masculine plural as a generic plural for mixed-gender groups since the 1980s, and have recommended linguistic practices such as conjunctions to include both genders when referring to mixed or generic groups (*los y las estudiantes*, *Latinos y Latinas*) (Lomotey 2011; Bengoechea 2014). Recently, this movement has expanded to even more gender-inclusive ways of expression, including gender-neutral neologisms and morphemes. *Lenguaje Inclusivo*, or "inclusive language," can now refer to several different strategies that speakers take to avoid misgendering or introducing bias.

In one emergent strategy, the masculine *-o* or feminine *-a* nominal endings are replaced with "placeholder" letters, including @ (symbolizing *o* and *a* together) and *-x* (pronounced */-eks/*). Words like *Latin@* and *Latinx* are more prevalent in written communication, including online communication; however, there is not an obvious (or widely accepted) pronunciation for *-@*, and the pronunciation for *-x* does not fit the phonological/phonotactic constraints of many spoken Spanishes (Hinojosa 2016). Likewise, neither *-@* nor *-x* can "solve" the problem of singular pronouns in Spanish, since the distinction between pronominal forms (*él/ella*) does not pattern with the typical *-o/-a* endings.

Another strategy that has been taken up by nonbinary Spanish speakers is to replace *-o/-a* with a singular non-gendered ending, *-e*. This was proposed by Álvaro García Meseguer (1976) as a strategy to combat sexist language, but was not broadly taken up by Spanish speakers until recently (Papadopoulos 2018). This ending is already attested in Spanish and is already understood to be gender-neutral both in the singular and the plural; words like *estudiante(s)* only show gender through agreement with articles like *los/las* or *el/la* (Papadopoulos 2018). This strategy has been taken up both in written and spoken communication; here I include some attested uses from Mary-Caitlyn Valentinsson (p.c.). The exchange reproduced in example (26) is a conversation about the *-e* ending that took place on Facebook.

(26) **Speaker A:** *Ah buen. Chau **chiques** buen viaje a **todes**.*

Oh ok. Bye folks.N.PL safe travel to all.N.PL

Me voy a seguir viendo Doctor Who sola

I will continue watching Doctor Who alone

Speaker B: *chau **chicos** no sera? bye!*

Bye **folks.M.PL** wouldn't it be? bye!!!

Speaker A: *No, es **chiques**.*

No, it's **folks.N.PL**

Speaker C: *Mmmmm, si vos querés decir así,*

Mmmmm, if you want to say it like that

es tu tema, pero me da lastima como quieren destruir el lenguaje

it's your thing, but it saddens me how you all want to destroy the language

Speaker D: *Si te importara el lenguaje, sabrías que lástima va con tilde.*

If language mattered to you, you'd know that 'saddens' has an accent.

*Además, las **lenguas vivas** se llaman así porque cambian constantemente.*

Plus, living languages.F.PL are called that because they change constantly

No se destruye jamás sino que se adapta a los nuevos tiempos

It will never be destroyed; rather it adapts to new times

y las necesidades de las hablantes

and the needs of the speakers

Speaker A uses the gender-inclusive *chiques* ("folks") in a post, and Speakers B, C, and D comment on that use. Spanish speakers who use *lenguaje inclusivo* (inclusive language) (as in this example) do not replace all grammatical gender markers with *-e*; note that while speaker D is defending the use of *chiques*, the common noun phrase *las lenguas vivas* ("living languages") still shows its grammatical gender and concord within the noun phrase.

Along with the *-e* ending (formed by morphological analogy extension), *lenguaje inclusivo* includes the option for a gender-neutral singular pronoun (*elle*). Ben Papadopoulos (2018) reports that *elle* is attested in spoken Spanish, along with a parallel *-i* form (*elli, uni personi rubi*). (For further reading on nonbinary language in Spanish, see Ojeda 2018; La Asamblea No Binaria 2018; Sánchez 2018; Gillon and Figueroa 2018.)

Pronouns and Gender in Language

The issue of gendered morphology in languages with grammatical gender is not restricted to pronouns, but gender inflection and pronouns share some common properties. Noun endings, like pronouns, are functional rather than lexical elements of the language, and as such they are resistant to change or neologism. Nevertheless, genderqueer and transgender speakers are at the forefront of grammatical innovation in these language communities. Current linguistic research on how these speakers are using and changing gender marking in language is just starting out, and future work will go further in describing and analyzing the changes that are underway.

Misgendering

Gender intersects with politeness more obviously when people use a pronoun dispreferred by the referent, also known as misgendering. Kevin McLemore (2015, 2018) has shown that transgender people suffer negative psychological effects from being misgendered by others. Misgendering is not a phenomenon exclusive to transgender people, but it is most experienced by trans people. I will review two experiments aimed at determining whether there is a correlation between misgendering and attitudes about transgender people. Both studies show evidence that speakers with negative attitudes about transgender people (conscious or subconscious) are more likely to misgender people.

My first experiment looking at misgendering is a corpus study of online comments on Twitter about prominent transgender activist Chelsea Manning. I found that tweeters were more likely to misgender Manning with pronouns than by using the wrong name; this appears to be related to the fact that pronouns are a grammatical category, while names are lexical. Misgendering through use of pronouns may therefore be more related to unconscious attitudes than to conscious ones (Conrod 2017).

The second experiment on misgendering is based on the same data as Experiment One from Section 3 earlier (which is fully described in Conrod 2017, 2019). To probe whether misgendering was related to transphobia or unconscious attitudes about trans people, I designed a sociolinguistic study to elicit pronoun use about transgender people in natural conversational contexts. To measure attitudes about transgender people, I included a measure of unconscious attitudes (responding to film clips with a transgender character) and conscious ones (participants answered questions about their attitudes and rated their feelings towards various groups of people). The results of this experiment did not show a relationship between misgendering and *explicit* attitudes toward transgender people, but there was a relationship between misgendering and *implicit* attitudes toward transgender people. Participants who rated the transgender character from the film clips more negatively in film clips about her transgender identity also had more pronouns misgendering people (including both actual referents and fictional ones in the film clips).

I conclude from this work that unconscious attitudes are more likely to influence gendered pronoun use; this is crucial for matters of transgender activism and equality because misgendering disproportionately affects trans people. No cisgender people were misgendered in the study, and while misgendering can affect cis people, it is frequently

related to attitudes about gender binarity and essentialism. It is also important to consider this finding in the context of social psychological research that finds that misgendering significantly impacts the mental health and well-being of transgender people (McLemore 2015, 2018). Other work (e.g. Bradley 2019) also connects pronoun use with endorsement of a binary gender system and gender ideology. The fact that *unconscious* transphobia is apparently more linked to pronoun use may further be an effect of the fact that pronouns are a functional category, not lexical, and thus speakers are not always consciously aware of what pronoun they have used.

The innovations in gender-neutral pronouns in various languages suggest that gender as a social category is undergoing some change, and the findings of my experiments around misgendering and pronouns show that gendered pronouns have a relationship to apparently unconscious ideas about gender. There are also instances in which speakers will invoke gender through pronouns intentionally to convey stance or affect, similarly to the uses of honorific pronouns.

Gender play vs misgendering

In social contexts where gender is viewed as expressive and dynamic, speakers use pronouns to convey information not directly related to the gender *identity* of a referent, but often related (and somewhat abstracted from) gender performance or expression. Blair Rudes and Bernard Healy (1979), for example, performed an ethnography of the gay subculture in Buffalo, New York. They found that the use of *she* among gay men was not a type of misgendering (i.e., not proposing that the referent was in fact a woman), but instead the word *she* was repurposed to index various intracommunity meanings relevant in that context, such as artificiality (inauthenticity) or outlandishness. These meanings were not directly predicated upon the supposition of an absolute female identity or categorization, but rather extrapolated from gendered stereotypes that could be drawn upon at will.

A more modern example of the use of *he* or *she* in gay scenes can be pulled from popular contemporary drag culture. In the ninth episode of reality television show *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, one contestant was performing poorly. Judges were questioning the contestant's performance as a drag queen, both in aspects of style and craftsmanship, and in aspects of actual staged performance. In the following examples, judges and other contestants use *him* to refer to the contestant when expressing negative or critical affect, but *her* when expressing support.⁵

(63) a. We are actually rooting for Jaymes and want **him** to shine, but he's gonna have to believe in **himself** to really sell this challenge.

b. Jaymes' audition tape was so funny, I got it. I understood the shtick. But I think that since she's been in this competition with the other girls, **she's** thrown off.

The example given here is not directly comparable to Rudes and Healy's (1979) analysis of the use of *she* because theirs is linked to a (highly abstracted) idea of femaleness. I would argue, however, that the use of *she* in the context just cited and others from the

show are *not* an abstracted version of femaleness, but rather a result of a metaphorical connection between femaleness and performance that has derived from the nature of the show as a competition in performing arts and craft (cf. Calder, this volume).

These abstracted or metaphorical uses of pronouns are not the only ways pronouns can be used in drag or gay communities for in-group meanings. Alternations between *she* and *he* may also be used in drag communities to differentiate between performers and their drag personae, or to signal in-group solidarity rooted in gender non-conformity. I include these examples as a comparison point for ways that misgendering—which is a form of linguistic harm, intentional or not—and pronoun play should not be conflated. In analyzing gendered pronouns, future work should focus particularly on these alternations as a rich source of information about the social power and significance of gender that is independent from supposedly “natural” sex categories.

Conclusion and future directions

As with many forms of language that are closely tied to identity, pronouns can be used to harm, to affirm, to build relationships, and to play among beloved friends. Scholars of language would do well to keep in mind the strong association between apparently grammatical categories and the power of words to shape peoples’ lives. Under a theory of linguistic performativity, pronouns necessarily play a role in how speech acts can create consensus reality (Butler 2013); for gendered pronouns especially, the pronouns used by and about a person are part of the complex tapestry of linguistic identity formation and performance. Just as pronouns can be used to recreate and affirm a person’s gendered location in the world, misusing pronouns intentionally or accidentally can constitute a form of symbolic violence that systematically oppresses people whose gendered existence is already marginalized (Bourdieu 1979). In investigations of the formal linguistic properties of gender features and other grammatical instances of gender, linguists should consider the close analogy between gender and honorific marking as a similarly grammaticalized form of social relationships. Elin McCready (2019) is one scholar who has taken up this project from a semantic approach, and it is my hope that other scholars will follow her lead.

This chapter has reviewed broad issues around gender and pronouns, including syntactic and semantic structural issues as well as sociopragmatic ones. In presenting work on misgendering, gender-neutral language innovation, and expressive use of gender, I hope to encourage linguists to explore more thoroughly the rich landscape of gender marking in the grammar as part of a social dimension along which language users may navigate.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Kira Hall and Rusty Barrett for including me in this volume, and for their dedicated editorial support. Barbara Citko and Alicia Beckford Wassink were wonderfully supportive during the writing of this chapter. Thank you to Lauren Ackerman, Edwin

Howard, Brooke Larson, Leah Velleman, and Elin McCready for their intellectual engagement and help in developing my thinking on these matters and others. Remaining errors are my own.

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Notes:

(1.) Here are examples of this conflation from two well-known feminist linguists:

"[...] although an individual's gender-related place in society is a multidimensional complex that can only be characterized through careful analysis, his or her sex is generally a readily observable binary variable..." (Eckert 1989).

"The term 'sex' has often been used to refer to the physiological distinction between males and females, with 'gender' referring to the social and cultural elaboration of the sex difference—a process that restricts our social roles, opportunities, and expectations. Since the process begins at birth, it could be argued that 'gender' is the more appropriate term to use for the category than 'sex'" (Cheshire 2002).

(2.) For further reading on how pronouns can be categorized while recognizing cross-linguistic differences, start with Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002), Cardinaletti (1994), and Ritter (1995).

(3.) I am not currently aware of research on the use of any pronouns or honorific marking by genderqueer or transgender speakers of the languages mentioned here (Vietnamese, Burmese, Thai, Javanese, or Japanese).

(4.) See Conrod (2019) (chapter 4) for a close investigation of what exactly a "distal" pronoun is in English, and why (14) and (15) should be different at all (considering that they are both referring to specific individuals).

(5.) Transcript source for *Ru Paul's Drag Race* season 9, episode 2: https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/view_episode_scripts.php?tv-show=rupauls-drag-race-2009&episode=s09e02.

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