

Gender-Neutral Language: Pronouns and Beyond

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Genderqueer, gender-fluid, non-binary: these are some of the terms used in reference to those individuals who fall under the transgender umbrella, but who either do not identify themselves as male or female, or who do not identify as male or female all of the time. Using gendered words when referring to these individuals, such as the pronouns he and she, or the honorifics Mr., Mrs., or Ms., can have a harmful and invalidating effect. In modern American society where a binary gender system is the norm, it is to be expected that language follows suit and has binary elements as well. While English is not as gendered as many languages, such as Spanish, French or German, it does have many gendered words. The feminist movement can be thanked for calling attention to and changing many of these words, such as the word server being more accepted than waiter or waitress, or the use of firefighter and police officer rather than fireman and policeman. To aid in the validation of a growing population of people who identify as transgender (specifically those who identify as non-binary, gender-fluid, or genderqueer), it is necessary that gender-neutral language become the norm, a change which requires thoughtfulness and effort.

In order to determine the need for a change to the English language, it is important to first acknowledge the size and growth of the transgender population. According to the article “Transgender Population Size in the United States: A Meta-Regression of Population-Based Probability Samples,” approximately one in every 250 adults in the United States identifies as transgender. This number equates to roughly

one million transgender Americans (Meerwijk e1). Drs. Esther L. Meerwijk and Jae M. Sevelius conducted a study in the summer of 2016 to estimate the size of the transgender population in America, as well as to determine if there were any trends in the growth or decline of this population over time (Meerwijk e1). Meerwijk and Sevelius found that the number of transgender Americans was difficult to ascertain, because the US Census and records kept by other agencies such as the DMV and National Archives, reported the legal sex of an individual when reporting sex at all (Meerwijk e2). Within these records there is no acknowledgement of whether the legal sex differs from the sex assigned at birth. The records also fail to give an option to report current gender identity, i.e., if the individual identifies as a sex different than their legal sex or identifies as either neither or both sexes (Meerwijk e2).

To determine a more accurate estimate of the number of transgender Americans, the authors searched for national surveys dated between 2006 and 2016 in PubMed, Web of Science, and the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature. They also used Google to search for “gray” literature, searching for the terms “survey,” “health,” and “gender” under the internet domains of .edu, .gov, and .us (Meerwijk e2-e3). Gray literature refers to information produced by government entities, academia, or businesses whose primary intent is not for publication (University of Exeter). Surveys were excluded from the research if they were not based on national samples, if the surveys were not based on self-reported identities, if the surveys were “satisfaction surveys,” or if

the surveys were reviews or analyses of other surveys (Meerwijk e3). After excluding surveys that did not meet their criteria, Meerwijk and Sevelius were left with twenty surveys from five sources (Meerwijk e4).

Within the twenty surveys used in the author's final analysis, 65% listed transgender as gender identity, while the other 35% listed transgender as sexual orientation (Meerwijk e4). Because transgender as a sexual orientation does not reflect the current usage of transgender as a gender identity, a separate analysis was done for each of these groups (Meerwijk e4). According to their findings, "the estimated proportion of transgender individuals based on surveys that categorized transgender as gender identity was 0.39%...(where) college and university students represented the majority (58%), followed by general-population adults (24%), and adult inmates (18%)" (Meerwijk e4). Meerwijk and Sevelius's findings also showed an increase in size of population from 0.23% in 2007 to 0.45% of the population in 2015 (Meerwijk e5). The numbers for 2016 show 1.79% of the population; however, most of the computations used by the authors left out the 2016 survey from the National College Health Assessment due to it being an outlier, with the number of people identifying as transgender quadrupling in comparison to the 2015 survey (1,685 in a sample size of 94,376 in 2016 as compared to 416 in a sample size of 93,034 in 2015) (Meerwijk e4-e5). The authors conclude that their estimates are likely to be conservative, as the word transgender is used as an umbrella term, but does not always capture the gender-nonconforming and gender-variant individuals within the population, and that "the available evidence suggests that the size of the gender-nonconforming or gender-variant population may be twice as large as our best estimate for the transgender population size" (Meerwijk e6). Meerwijk and Sevelius also state that the "observed annual increase is not an increase in the true population size, but the

result of people feeling freer to report that they are or identify as transgender" (Meerwijk e5).

Recognition of the size and growth of the transgender population in America is important to realizing a need for gender-neutral language. In their 2016 article "Pronouns and Thoughts on Neutrality: Gender Concerns in Modern Grammar," authors Brandon Darr and Tyler Kibbey state that "slightly more than 1 percent of the 4,000 students" at Harvard University "have indicated a preference for gender-neutral pronouns through the university's registrar system" (Darr 72). Darr and Kibbey's article relies on research of literature in the field of linguistics to give an overview of how language plays an important role in how an individual's gender is identified, as well as delving into the historical aspects of linguistics that surround this issue in a social context (Darr 72). Although much of this article focuses on the etymology of pronouns which is not relevant to the topic of this literature review paper, the authors posit that "the English language must reflect societal awareness of linguistic representation" (Darr 74).

Darr and Kibbey's article explains that pronouns are used to avoid redundancy, giving the example of "Janet reviewed the syllabi for Janet's classes. Then, Janet bought textbooks" being simplified to "Janet reviewed the syllabi for her class. Then, she bought textbooks" to point out the repetition of the subject's name. The second statement is based on multiple assumptions: a) that based on appearance, or the name Janet, that Janet is a woman b) the pronoun she is used for women, and c) Janet identifies as a woman and thus prefers the pronoun she (Darr 74). The authors state that "these assumptions are based off mainstream English prescriptions that do not reflect all individual identities" (Darr 74). They go on to say that a common solution to avoiding misgendering due to these assumptions is to integrate pronoun preferences into introductions but point out that such introductions can be uncomfort-

able for students “whose preferred pronouns may not match their gender presentation and could expose their gender identity” (Darr 75). Darr and Kibbey conclude their article with a call for professors and students to use the singular ‘they’ as a way to not only avoid misgendering, but also to be inclusive of transgender and genderqueer individuals (Darr 82).

Lal Zimman, who is also a linguist, approaches the issue in a different way. In his article “Trans Self-Identification and the Language of Neoliberal Selfhood: Agency, Power, and the Limits of Monologic Discourse”, he states that:

Though linguists situate meaning as distributed across a (generally undefined) group of language users, trans people place definitional authority in each individual, at least when it comes to gender. From this perspective, each person determines how their identity should be spoken about and understood (Zimman 148).

Zimman’s observations are based on a series of ethnographic projects he conducted in online spaces frequented by trans people, as well as trans communities in metropolitan areas of the United States, including Portland, Oregon, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Denver, Colorado. Zimman’s projects were carried out between 2006 and 2016 (Zimman 149). Using the subjects of gendered identity labels, body part terminology, and third person pronouns, Zimman’s research “frames gender self-identification as an enactment of neoliberal personhood, in which individuals are framed as the driver of their destiny” (Zimman 147). According to Zimman, “identification as trans... does not require identification with a particular gender identity, but it does require some form of disidentification from one’s assigned sex” (Zimman 150). Like Darr and Kibbey, Zimman’s research finds that gender attributions often derive from assumptions made from a person’s appearance but goes further to say that this assumption is based on the idea that there can be only one “correct” gendered form for any given individual (Zimman 152-153).

Zimman finds that in the trans community, the individual is the ultimate source of authority about their own gender, which is why the presupposition of others portrayed through their use of gendered words, can be seen as a rejection of a trans person’s identity (Zimman 155).

Through interviews with approximately 100 people over a ten-year period, Zimman would ask interviewees to define words like man, woman, masculine and feminine. The typical response within the trans community is that a man is someone who self-identifies as a man, a woman is someone who self-identifies as a woman, etc. (Zimman 157). Here again it can be seen that applying gender neutral terms such as person rather than man or woman can help avoid the possibilities of accidentally misgendering someone whose self-identified gender has not been specified.

In his research Zimman, like Darr and Kibbey, discusses the third person pronouns he/him/his and she/her/hers. Zimman states that these pronouns are “the most frequently occurring linguistic clues about how speakers perceive one another’s genders” (Zimman 159). Zimman argues that it is this frequency of use, along with the lack of conscious thought in using a pronoun, which makes correct pronoun usage a key component in trans validation. “Someone might be saying all the right things to affirm trans identities when they are putting thought into their language, but the pronouns they use have the potential to reveal more deeply ingrained patterns of thought; simply put, pronouns can reveal what you really think about someone’s gender” (Zimman 160). In his article, Zimman concludes that gender self-identification is indeed a form of neoliberal personhood, a state where each individual is both an agency and driver of their own destiny (Zimman 170-172).

Using pronouns in a new way or taking the time to use the correct pronoun when speaking to or about someone requires effort. This effort is the focus of Lee Airton’s article “The de/Po-

liticization of Pronouns: Implications of the No Big Deal Campaign for Gender-Expansive Educational Policy and Practice” (Airton, *The de/Politicization of Pronouns: Implications of the No Big Deal Campaign for Gender-Expansive Educational Policy and Practice* 790). Airton’s article seeks to prove that though using someone’s preferred pronouns takes extra effort, it does not take excessive effort, and it therefore does not pose a threat to free speech (Airton, *The de/Politicization of Pronouns: Implications of the No Big Deal Campaign for Gender-Expansive Educational Policy and Practice* 790). In their research (Airton identifies as non-binary and uses they/them pronouns), Airton begins with a review of relevant literature on the experiences of non-binary people in Canada. Airton found that there was insufficient literature on the use of gender-neutral pronouns, or on the “micropolitical negotiation of gender neutral pronouns in everyday interactions” (Airton, *The de/Politicization of Pronouns: Implications of the No Big Deal Campaign for Gender-Expansive Educational Policy and Practice* 791-792). Using queer theory, affect theory, and Deleuzo-Guattarian assemblage theory, Airton developed a theoretical framework to determine what would qualify as extra effort versus excessive effort, and then applies this framework to the use of gender-neutral pronouns (Airton, *The de/Politicization of Pronouns: Implications of the No Big Deal Campaign for Gender-Expansive Educational Policy and Practice* 792-795). Airton defines extra effort as “labour that is felt to be unremarkable and justifiable by the subject” and excessive effort to be “labour that is found to be remarkable and unjustifiable by the subject” (Airton, *The de/Politicization of Pronouns: Implications of the No Big Deal Campaign for Gender-Expansive Educational Policy and Practice* 795). They continue to say that:

The distinction rests on whether I can narrate a demand for effort as an unjust demand on my time and energy, and whether

my narration will normalize my own refusal to meet the demand. If yes, the effort is ‘excessive’ and I receive no sanction for non-accommodation; indeed, if I am successful, the sanction itself and not my refusal become the event of ‘injustice’, for example. If I cannot narrate a demand as unjust, the requisite effort is merely ‘extra’, and I am liable to receive a sanction that others find justifiable (Airton, *The de/Politicization of Pronouns: Implications of the No Big Deal Campaign for Gender-Expansive Educational Policy and Practice* 795).

Airton demonstrates that it is the combination of the demand and the sanction received for nonadherence that determines whether something requires extra effort or excessive effort (Airton, *The de/Politicization of Pronouns: Implications of the No Big Deal Campaign for Gender-Expansive Educational Policy and Practice* 175).

In their article Airton goes on to describe the political backlash within Canada regarding Bill C-16’s legal protection of gender pronouns (Airton, *The de/Politicization of Pronouns: Implications of the No Big Deal Campaign for Gender-Expansive Educational Policy and Practice* 795-796). Airton describes a video posted by University of Toronto Psychology professor Jordan Peterson, which claims that the protection of gender-neutral pronouns “amounts to ‘compelled speech’, and therefore risks violating the right to freedom of expression enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms” (Airton, *The de/Politicization of Pronouns: Implications of the No Big Deal Campaign for Gender-Expansive Educational Policy and Practice*). Peterson’s speech implies that “pronoun protections would require one to say things with which one disagrees, under threat of sanction” (Airton, *The de/Politicization of Pronouns: Implications of the No Big Deal Campaign for Gender-Expansive Educational Policy and Practice* 796-797). While this argument over the legal protection of gender pronouns took place in Canada, it is indicative of

reactions to the use of gender-neutral language in the United States.

Airton describes their response to Peterson's allegations, an online campaign known as the No Big Deal Campaign. The No Big Deal Campaign, or NBD, uses infographics to explain not only the implications of Bill C-16, but also to highlight that though a trans person's pronouns are a big deal to the trans person, using that person's correct pronoun should not be a big deal to someone speaking with or about them (Airton, No Big Deal Campaign; Airton, *de/Politization* 799-804). Airton concludes that "micropolitically, gender-expansive policies and practices may succeed based on whether they can change how (mostly) cis-gender institutional actors feel about and narrate their own involvement in the institutional commitments demanded by law and policy in everyday life" (Airton, *de/Politization* 806). Airton's hope is that the NBD campaign can frame the use of gender-neutral pronouns as something that while requiring extra effort, does not require extra effort (Airton, *de/Politization* 806).

In addition to effort, changing the use of an element of language as integral as pronouns takes time. In 2015 Marie Gustafsson Sendén, Emma A. Bäck, and Anna Lindqvist wrote an article examining the changes in behavior towards the introduction of the word *hen* (a gender-neutral pronoun) to the Swedish language over a three-year period (Sendén). Their article, "Introducing a Gender-Neutral Pronoun in a Natural Gender Language: The Influence of Time on Attitudes and Behavior," though pertaining to the Swedish language, and examining behavioral changes in a country other than the United States, is pertinent in that it gives an example of what attitude and behavioral changes one might expect in the United States if similar changes are made. Following an extensive review of literature related to gender, gender politics, and gendered language, the authors developed six hypotheses, which are as follows:

"H1. Attitudes towards *hen* will become

more positive over time.

H2. Self-reported use of *hen* will increase over time.

H3. Sexism and right-wing political orientation will be associated with negative attitudes, as well (as) a lower use of *hen*.

H4. Age will be related to attitudes and use, such that younger people will be more positive, and indicate more use of the word, than older people. Gender is included as a control because some studies have shown that women are more positive to gender-fair language than men.

H5. A strong gender identity (as either a man or a woman) will be associated with more negative attitudes and less use. Interest in gender issues will be associated with more positive attitudes and higher use.

H6. Time will have a significant and independent effect on attitudes and use of *hen*, also when all other variables are controlled for" (Sendén).

To prove their hypotheses, the authors collected data from various places in Sweden at six different points in time between 2012, which marked the first use of *hen*, and 2015, when their article was published (Sendén).

The first two sets of data were collected by approaching people waiting at Central Station in Stockholm, the third and fourth sets of data were collected from students at Lund University, the fifth set of data was collected by approaching people in Lund, and the final set of data was collected from people who were recruited through an online advertisement (Sendén). Using a series of questions including "What is your opinion about the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* in the Swedish language," and "Do you use *hen* yourself," ranked on a seven-point response scales with set answers for each point, the authors were able to track the changes in acceptance of and attitude towards the word *hen* over a three-year period (Sendén). This study found that by 2013, 95% of respondents were familiar with the word

hen. Usage of the word hen caught on much more slowly, with 50% of respondents in 2013 saying they “never, or almost never” used hen, and 58% of respondents in 2014 saying they “never, or almost never” use hen, while in 2015 the group who “never, or almost never” use hen had dropped to 25% (Sendén). It is interesting to note that the number of people who used the word hen “very often or always” did not change significantly, with 13% in 2013, and 10% in both 2014 and 2015 (Sendén). The findings also showed that negative attitudes towards the use of hen decreased significantly over time, with 56.5% reacting negatively in 2012, 26.1% negative reactions in 2013, 17.5% negative reactions in 2014, and only 9.6% with strong negative reactions in 2015 (Sendén). This study also found that women adapted more quickly and were more positive towards the new word

than men, and as their hypothesis suggests, that politically conservative people were slower to adapt and held more negative views of the word hen (Sendén).

Adapting to new forms of language, particularly words such as pronouns which are typically used with little conscious thought, can be difficult, and as can be seen from the studies conducted in Canada and Sweden requires both effort and time. The articles by Darr and Kibbey, Zimman, and Airton illustrate the need for gender-neutral language both to be inclusive of the trans community, as well as offering validation to their self-identification. As can be seen in the first article, the population of Americans who identify as transgender is growing, making the need for inclusivity and gender validation evident.

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