



PRONOUNS, POSITIONALITY, AND POWER: INSTITUTIONALIZED TRANSPHOBIA, INTERSECTIONALITY AND TRANS-AFFIRMING LANGUAGE

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Introduction

- My context in trans linguistics (Zimman 2020)
 - *How trans people contribute to our understanding of language*
 - *How linguists can support the language needs of trans people*
- Currently, huge attention to language as central to trans political activism
 - *“Pronouns” as emblem of contemporary gender politics*

Pronouns as a social construct

- When people talk about “pronouns,” they aren’t necessarily talking about the same thing linguists are
- Sometimes more narrow:
 - About singular third person pronouns
 - Pronouns that directly index gender (Ochs 1992) – or don’t
- Sometimes more broad:
 - Any type of gender-indexing language can be described as “pronouns” (ID labels, titles, grammatical gender, etc.)

“I’m not dating a girl with pronouns”

- Connecting pronouns to politics
- “A girl with Pronouns” stands in for “a girl with a certain attitude / practices related to pronouns”



“I want a man. Not a he/him.”

- Another dating-related post
- Contrasts “a man” with “a he/him”
- Rejects the idea of equivalence
- Unclear what it means to “use pronouns”
 - But being a man and using pronouns are irreconcilable
- “Having” or “using” pronouns as political stance & identity work



The names and handles are pseudonyms.

Outline

- Section 1: Trans interventions into pronoun systems
 - Taxonomy of strategies
- Section 2: Governmental interventions into affirming pronouns
 - The US state of Florida's Subsection 3
- Section 3: The need for intersectional coalitions around trans-affirming language
 - Trans linguistic justice is inseparable from other kinds of linguistic justice

PRONOUNS IN TRANS COMMUNITIES



Trans vulnerability & the impact of pronouns

- Trans people face systemic discrimination, exclusion, harassment, violence, and the associated impacts (i.e., minority stress)
 - But unevenly
 - Perhaps except mental health impacts
- Better outcomes for trans people whose identities are affirmed, specifically including by pronoun usage (e.g. McLemore 2015, Ross et al. 2022, Sevelius et al. 2020):
 - Less internalized transphobia
 - More internalized sense of authenticity
 - Higher self-esteem around appearance
 - Less overall negative affect

Central principles of trans language activism (TLA)

- Avoiding misgendering
- Greater use of gender-neutral language
 - *Particularly prior to...*
- Metalinguistic communication
 - *Asking or sharing preemptively*
- Self-determination
- Embracing linguistic creativity

Pronominal strategies

- Grammatical repurposing
- Innovating (or reviving) novel forms
- Borrowing and translanguaging
 - Coming from work for *An Introduction to Transgender Linguistics* (Crowley, Calder & Zimman)

Strategy 1: Grammatical repurposing

- Taking a pronoun from one category and moving it into another.
- Most obviously: Singular *they*'s shift from 3P plural to 3P singular or plural
 - *Part of a long trajectory from canonical singular they to non-binary usage*
- Synthesizing previous research, Konnelly, Conrod & Bradley (2024) discuss a 3 phase process of change
 - Epicene (generic/indefinite) singular *they* (esT)
 - Definite specific *they* (dsT)
 - Non-binary *they* (nbT)
- I'll share some of my own data, collected informally since ~2007

Changes in singular *they* (1/

- Canonical singular *they*:

- Generic referent / indefinite form, gender unspecified
- Specific referent / definite form, gender unknown

(1) “There is not **one**_i in a hundred of either sex who is not taken in when **they**_i marry.”

1914: Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

(2) “**The dean**_i will let you in when **they**_i’re ready.”

2015: Jocular interjection while listening to a story (gender of dean not yet established)

Changes in singular *they* (2/)

- Expanded generic / indefinite singular *they*:

- Generic referent / indefinite form, gender specified

(3) “The ultimate bond, in my eyes, is between a woman_i and **their**_i child.”

2011: Jeanna, *Intervention* (S10, E12)

(4) “But at that time in the United States, no one would allow a **Black** man_i to ... get **their**_i PhD.”

2014: *Drunk History* (S2E1)

(5) “**This** mother_i may not have accepted that **their**_i child is queer.”

2018: Sal Tran, director of *Xanh* in post-screening Q&A

Changes in singular *they* (3/)

- Expanded definite singular *they*:

- Specific referent / definite form, gender known but irrelevant

(6) "Not having utensils to serve **the judge**_i **their**_i food [is a problem.]"

2013: *Cutthroat Kitchen* (S1E6)

(7) "Unfortunately **the person**_i you've been talking to has not told you a lot of truth about **their**_i life."

2012: *Catfish* (S1E2)

(8) "**They** really just got lost. **They** shoulda turned right a little bit earlier."

2016: *Border Security: America's Front Line* (S1E5)

Changes in singular *they* (4/)

- Further expanded definite singular *they*:
 - Specific referent / definite form, gender known and relevant

(9) “**This mother_i** may not have accepted that **their**_i child is queer.”

2018: Sal Tran, director of *Xanh* in post-screening Q&A

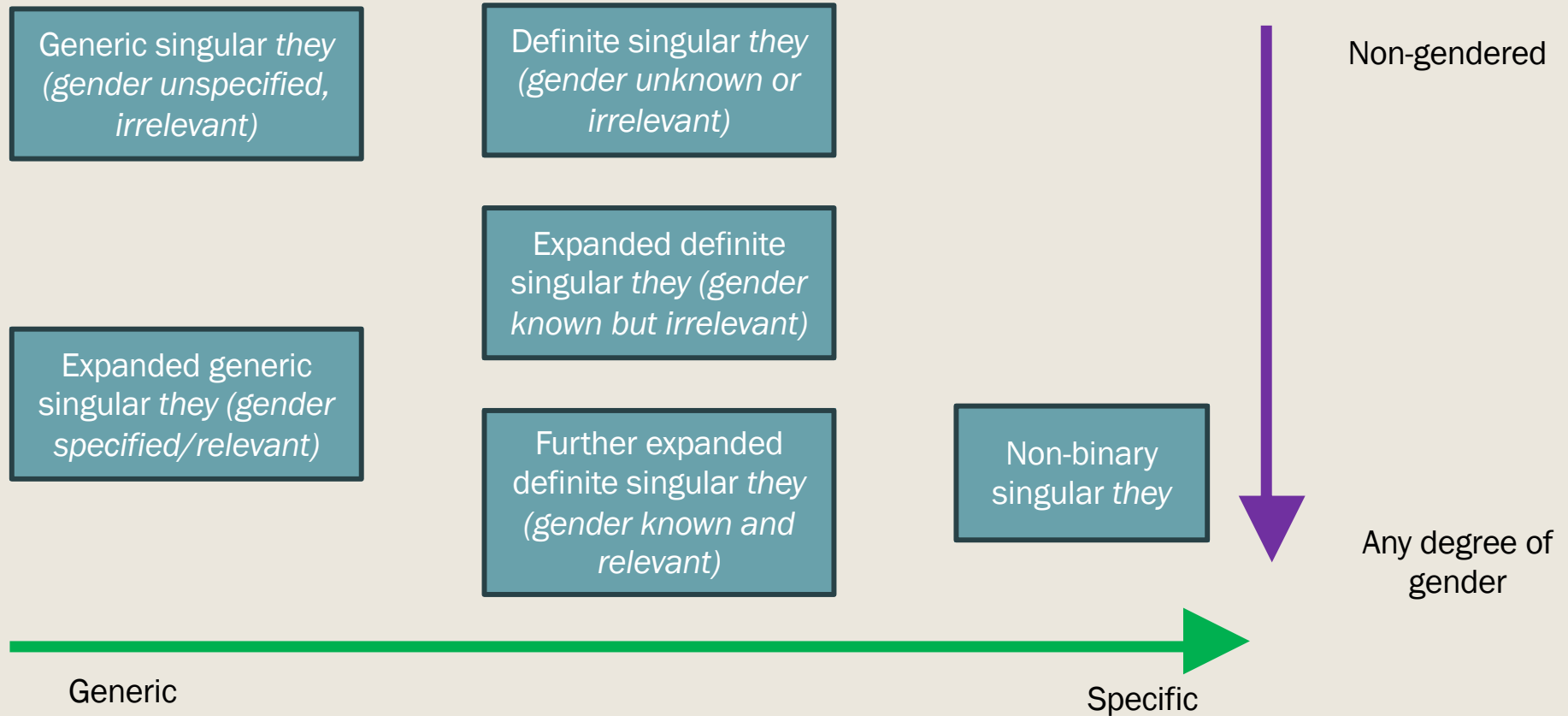
(10) “And **the boy** has, you know, gained **their** majority, they're over eighteen.”

2024: Law & Crime YouTube channel

(11) “I think if **the listener's boyfriend**_i has seen the news recently, **they**_i can be pretty understanding in general.”

2018: Dear Prudence podcast

Strategy 1: Singular *they*



3P plural → 3P singular

- Danish & Norwegian: *de, dem, deres*
- Dutch: *ze, ze, hun*
- German: *sie, ihnen, ihr*
- Irish: *siad, iad, leosan*
- Russian: *они, их, им*
oni, ix, im
- Ukrainian: *вони́, їх, їм, них*
voný, jix, jim, nux

3P inanimate → 3P animate

- Danish: *den, den, dens*
- English: *it, its*
- Polish: *ono, jego*
- Russian: *ОНИ* (reportedly paired with demonstratives for other cases)
оно
- Ukrainian: *ВОНО* (reportedly paired with demonstratives for other cases)
вонo

Demonstrative → Personal

- Danish: *den, den, dens*
- Dutch: *die, diens*
- German: *die, denen, deren*
- Irish: *sin*
- Russian: *это, этого, этому*
éto, étovo, étomu
- Ukrainian: *цьогó, цьому, цього*
c'ohó, c'omu, c'oho

Another kind of repurposing

- Mohawk (Iroquoian, N. America) has two pronouns translated as *she*:
 - *akaónha* (feminine, indefinite)
 - *aónha* (feminine, 'zoic')
- Mithun (2014) notes that Mohawk speakers use *akaónha* for women seen as “refined, delicate, or lady-like,” whereas *aónha* is used for female animals and women seen as tougher, more assertive, or less refined.
 - *But argues that this doesn't mean Mohawk speakers see some the latter group as less human*
- What we don't know is how this connected to Mohawk cultural models of gender from before European contact
- Today, *aónha* is used by non-binary Mohawks and *akaónha* is used for trans women (as well as cis women)

Strategy 2: Innovating

- Neopronouns as pronouns coined as gender-neutral/-inclusive alternatives
 - Not always new! (Baron 2020)
- Neopronouns research tells us:
 - A small but notable minority of trans (mainly non-binary) people use them
 - Often in concert with others
 - People seem to accept them less readily than repurposed pronouns (at least sing. *they*)
 - But people also tend to judge them as more acceptable when:
 - used for a specific person (cf. singular *they*) (Hekanaho 2021, 2022)
 - are phonologically similar to existing pronouns (e.g. *ze* rhymes with *he* and *she* while *ey* rhymes with *they*) (Rose et al. 2020)
- Processes as well as forms, e.g. Nounself pronouns (Miltersen 2016)
 - Takes any noun as a pronominal form, e.g. *fae*, *bun*, *clown*, *void*
 - As in “fae will tell you faeself”
 - Survey of non-binary people (n=134) got 78 different pronoun sets

Some neopronouns across languages

- Catalán *elli* (sing.) / *elles* (pl.)
- French *iel* (sing.) / *iels* (pl.)
- German *xier/sier*
xien/sien
xiem/siem
- Italian *ləi*
- Irish *siú*
- Polish *onx / oni*
- Portuguese *elu / ilu / ile*
- Spanish *elle / ellx*
- Russian *оhe / hex / ем*
one / nex / em
- Chinese (written) *x也 / 无也*

Strategy 2: Challenges

- A number of challenges associated with studying neopronouns
 - Limited usage (both in terms of people and contexts)
 - Info usually collected in decontextualized ways (e.g. in surveys, on pronouns.page sites)
 - Unclear how people feel about the pronouns they report
 - Different degrees of recognizability
 - Cultural context is clearly important
- For instance, pronouns.page lists these for English:
 - A list that is both highly incomplete
 - AND contains pronouns with varying degrees of use

- **ae/aer** – Neopronoun “ae” / “æ”
- **ey/em** – Elverson pronouns
- **fae/faer** – Neopronoun “fae/faer”
- **xe/xem** – Neopronoun “xe/xem”
- **ze/hir** – Neopronoun “ze/hir”
- **ze/zir** – Neopronoun “ze/zir”

- **co/cos** – Neopronoun “co/cos”
- **e/em/eir** – Spivak pronouns
- **e/em/es** – Neopronoun “e/em/es”
- **hu/hum** – Humanist pronouns
- **ne/nem** – Neopronoun “ne/nem”
- **ne/nir** – Neopronoun “ne/nir”
- **per/per** – Person pronouns
- **s/he/hir** – Neopronoun “s/he”
- **thon/thons** – Neopronoun “thon”
- **ve/ver** – Neopronoun “ve/ver”
- **vi/vir** – Neopronoun “vi/vir”
- **vi/vim** – Neopronoun “vi/vim”
- **zhe/zher** – Neopronoun “zhe/zher”

Strategy 3: Borrowing & translanguaging

- Borrowing not expected from pronouns, but happens with the right motivations
- The motivations can be linguistic
 - E.g., English (plural) *they* comes from borrowing Old Norse *þeir / þem* into Middle English
 - Driven by phonological change that made Old Eng. 3P sing/pl forms ambiguous
- Or social
 - E.g., when a particular language is seen as better equipped to handle non-binary pronouns

Borrowing *they*

Source language	Borrowed into	Source form(s)	Borrowed as
Old Norse	Middle English	<i>þeir</i> (3P M plural) <i>þem</i>	<i>they</i> (3P GN plural) <i>them</i>
English	Dutch	<i>they</i> (3P GN pl./sing.) <i>them</i>	<i>de</i> (3P GN sing.) <i>dem</i>
English	German	<i>they</i> (3P GN pl./sing.) <i>them</i>	<i>they / de</i> (3P GN sing.) <i>them / dem</i>

Borrowing *hän* / *hen*

Source language	Borrowed into	Source form(s)	Borrowed as
Finnish	Swedish	<i>hän</i> (3P GN sing.)	<i>hen</i> (NOM) <i>hen(nom)</i> (ACC) <i>hens</i> (POSS)
Finnish/Swedish	Dutch	Finnish <i>hän</i> / Swedish <i>hen</i>	<i>hen</i> (NOM/ACC) <i>hun</i> (POSS)
Finnish/Swedish	Danish	Finnish <i>hän</i> / Swedish <i>hen</i>	<i>hen</i> (NOM) <i>hen/hem</i> (ACC) <i>hens/hennes</i> (POSS)

Summary

- The introduction of non-binary pronouns into languages with gendered pronouns is attested across numerous languages
- Multiple distinct linguistic strategies are available
 - Which are received and assessed in a variety of ways
- But certain commonalities also emerge
- With a LOT more work to do
 - Particularly with respect to linguistic diversity & the relationship between languages

LEGAL ATTACKS ON TRANS PRONOUNS



Transphobic pronoun laws

- With the rising tide of global transphobia, trans people's pronouns are under attack
- In the US, states have been introducing laws that restrict the use or discussion of pronouns, especially in public schools. They prohibit things like:
 - *Requiring school employees or students to use trans people's pronouns*
 - **Allowing** school employees to use trans students' pronouns
 - *Allowing trans teachers to state their pronouns*
 - *Talking about trans-inclusive language or pronouns as educational material*
- My involvement working with the Linguistic Society of America:
 - *Statement against misgendering*
 - *Statement against transphobic pronoun laws*
 - *Amicus brief in a case related to Florida's laws*

Florida's Subsection 3

- In 2023, Florida passed HB 1069, which enacted Florida Statute § 1000.071
 - *Subsection 3 states that:*
“An employee or contractor of a public K-12 educational institution may not provide to a student his or her preferred personal title or pronouns if such preferred personal title or pronouns do not correspond to his or her sex.”
 - *Sex is defined as binary & fixed at birth (but with interesting exceptions)*
- A lawsuit brought by the Southern Poverty Law Center has argued that the law is a restriction on Florida teachers' right to free speech
 - Success at the first level, currently under appeal in district court
- The law's intent is clearly transphobic, but the details are instructive

The state's linguistic argument

- In their appeal, Florida argues the following:
 - *Pronouns are about biological sex, so using pronouns that do not “correspond” to biological sex is a “false claim”;*
 - *That such a use of pronouns undermines the school's interest in defining the concept of biological sex;*
 - *That students will be confused by having to remember so many pronouns;*
 - *That first amendment protections do not apply because it is not political speech.*
- Their arguments:
 - *Selective quotes from dictionaries;*
 - *One of the lawyers for the trans teachers misgendered them once;*
 - *A quote from a politician who sponsored HB 1069: “as many as 78 pronouns [...] are being used in the general public, also in the school system”*

Why this matters

- Everything the state said about language is absurd from a linguist's perspective
- Yet also difficult to refute, for this very reason
 - *Involved mining lots of research that was not really about the states argument*
- Might our research practices contribute to the ability to make ridiculous arguments?
 - *How linguists talk about “natural gender” languages*
 - Continued use of “natural” as a label, lack of larger meta-discourse about this
 - *How linguists document the linguistic creativity of trans communities*
 - Trans people use 78 different pronoun sets! How cool!
 - *How we choose our questions*
 - Do we need to start asking absurd research questions, like whether the purpose of pronouns is to index a binary model of biological sex?

A path toward linguistic justice

In addition to what linguists can do, how can our linguistic advocacy and activism better address trans people's linguistic needs?

We need intersectional coalitions for linguistic justice.

INTERSECTIONAL COALITIONS



Who sets the agenda?

- Trans vulnerabilities are intensified by interlocking forms of oppression
- Trans people who are women, non-binary, BIPOC, poor, and/or disabled bear the brunt of transphobia's effects
- Yet the most visible forms of trans activism are often driven by relatively privileged trans people
 - *Often, trans people for whom transphobia is their only direct contact with structural oppression*
- As a result, trans activist discourses do not always consider how other dimensions of oppression can be perpetuated in trans spaces / discourses

Trans language activism (TLA)

- Typically involves a series of recommendations designed to reduce misgendering
- Sometimes framed as:
 - *Easy (just a few minor changes and everything will be okay!)*
 - *Something anyone can (and should) do*
 - *Reflecting how a person really thinks*
 - E.g., all instances of misgendering are caused by transphobia
- I come to this as a person involved in this advocacy work
 - *Acknowledging the danger of critique, but also its importance*

Trans linguistic justice

- Trans linguistic justice cannot be achieved without intersectional coalitions dedicated to ending all forms of linguistic injustice.
 - *And which prioritize the needs multiply marginalized individuals*
- Some of the many branches of linguistic justice:
 - *Recognition of the equal value of all languages and varieties*
 - *Access to the language(s) of one's own community/ies*
 - *Freedom from linguistic discrimination*
 - *Communicative inclusion*
 - *Access to necessary resources*

Challenge #1: Where TLA circulates

- Changes linked to TLA remain strongly linked to limited contexts
 - *Online spaces*
 - *Certain activist communities*
 - *Higher education*
- Each of which imposes limitations:
 - *Online spaces may be less accessible than they seem*
 - *Same for activist contexts*
 - *Higher ed is structurally inequitable*

Challenge #2: “Correctness”

- Activists often strategically position trans-affirming language as “correct”
 - *“Correct pronouns” rather than “preferred pronouns”*
 - *Shifting the locus of responsibility from the trans person to the person referring to them*
- We know that “correctness” is based in oppressive language ideologies
- How does this engage with people already marginalized for their language use?

Challenge #3: Ease & consequences

- A common sales technique: avoiding misgendering is easy! It's simple!
 - *Again, a powerful counter to the ideology that “it's just too hard!”*
- But under what conditions might adopting TLA be genuinely challenging, including for some trans people?
- What are the consequences for using trans-affirming language?
- Language is easy now?

Conclusions

- What an incredible time to do research on pronouns!
 - *(Who would have thought pronouns would ever be so cool??)*
- But the time also demands things from us!
 - *What do pronouns look like on a global scale?*
 - *How can we ground pronoun research in the needs of marginalized communities?*
 - *How is our research and advocacy being applied, and what are its consequences for linguistic justice more broadly?*

THANK YOU

