

Queering communication:

How nonbinary gender is changing our language

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## Abstract

More and more people identify with genders outside the female/male binary and identify using terms such as *nonbinary* and *genderqueer* (Steinmetz, 2017). The central tool of language can be used as a lens with which to explore how changing understanding about the array of gender identities has expanded our ways of thinking about gender and sexuality. Traditional English pronouns and titles are contrasted with their modern nonbinary challenges, and the past and potential future contributions of fields such as linguistics and cognitive neuroscience to the understanding of gender through language are explored. Marginalized communities taking control of their own stories is central for future acceptance by society, which is emphasized in considerations of claiming identity and the ways in which wording in policies and laws hurt or help nonbinary individuals.

## Preface

When I first thought of this thesis topic of queer language, I didn't imagine our world would be as dysfunctional and absurd as it is now. Over the past few years I'd gradually become more interested in genderfluidity and its interplay with gender expression, but society has changed far more rapidly during the past few months. Hate crimes rates have rapidly increased, and the new administration has begun stripping away Obama-era protections, such as the federal guidance for equal treatment of transgender students in all schools receiving federal funding (Levi, 2017). Faced with this tension between self-identity and the dangerous direction our society is turning, I find that delving deeply into the very language we speak bridges the labels we use to identify ourselves and to classify others. To understand how it is so simple to turn our backs on certain groups,<sup>1</sup> we have to look closely at how our words affect our ways of thinking. Unity can be achieved through mutual understanding, but that understanding can't be realized if people have conflicting vocabularies and ways of describing and thinking about the world around them. Because language touches everyone, it is a useful lens through which we can interrogate the very ways we consciously and unconsciously think about central topics like gender identity and queer issues in order to start building bridges between different people.

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<sup>1</sup> While many marginalized groups such as racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, disabled individuals, low-income people, and more are affected by the changing social and political climate in the U.S., this thesis focuses on queer and gender identities, occasionally touching upon the interactions with these other marginalized identities.



## 1 Introduction

The interactions between language and gender have been studied ever since the early 1970s during the second wave feminism when it was proposed that women speak differently than men (McConnell & Ginet, 2002). Language is a unique battlefield upon which the arguments between essentialism and socialization of gender can occur, as children learn their first languages organically and the gendered linguistic habits with which they're socialized are difficult to pinpoint. As our understanding of gender has expanded to include gender identities beyond the binary, so too should our study of language as it interacts with gender. Our language, however, was built on the gender binary and now has to catch up to the growth of concepts such as gender identity which inherently challenges the binary. New words and methods of using language are constantly emerging to correctly encapsulate the great variety of gender identities experienced by people. We often don't think about the words we use; when discussing topics such as gender that are often very central to people's identities, however, context and choice of language can drastically change the tone of a message. We must understand and use the power of how words shape our minds and our society in order to respect and value the diversity of identities around us.

### 1.1 Language acquisition

Using language to communicate is often considered the most obvious ability that sets us humans apart from other animals. Verbal human languages have grammar that is used to convey meanings that are far too complex or abstract to be communicated without our system of vocalizations that has evolved into over six thousand languages. We use our language as a critical social tool to create and maintain human societies. Infants acquire language in large part through relying on interactions with other people already fluent in the language. We first learn to distinguish individual sounds known as morphemes and eventually become able to express

complex thoughts with an unconscious understanding of the nuances of language and understanding the meaning of words in specific contextual uses, the study of which is called pragmatics.

Language acquisition happens mostly unconsciously, similar to many other skills learned in childhood, like walking or social interaction. Because learning a language seems like such an innate, undirected process, it is easy to consider the language we use to be “natural,” never pausing to analyze our language or question our words. Yet an individual’s acquisition of words and language is highly dependent upon the language that is used by those whom they emulate. If a child lives in a suburb of Boston and most people they interact with at home, at school, and elsewhere speak with a Boston accent, then that child will pick up the same accent. Specific words are just the same—a child will add the words that they hear to their mental lexicon and use that same vocabulary unquestioningly. In this manner, connotations of certain terms are passed down from generation to generation, hiding hints of deep-rooted social beliefs within.

Different fields hold occasionally conflicting views on how gender and language work in the mind, and to what extent they shape the world around us. Psycholinguistics and cognitive science in general presupposes a binary and fails to distinguish between sex and gender when considering the identities of subjects and how people behave. Because cognitive science and neuroscience are tied tightly to biology and the body, it is simple for scientists to assume sex and gender differences, which inherently influences the studies that are conducted and the conclusions drawn from them. Linguists understand the power of normalizing the connection between certain attributes and certain genders and consciously work to not uphold gender stereotypes, but still presume the binary (“Guidelines for Inclusive Language,” n.d.). While feminist studies acknowledge genders beyond female and male, discourse about language is still



often about genderlect—the “women’s language” and “men’s language” spoken by different genders due to socialization—or other binary considerations (Motschenbacher, 2010). Queer linguistics is attempting to bridge the gap between feminist studies, linguistics, and psycholinguistics by combining understanding about linguistics, gender identity and sexual orientation, and psycholinguistics. This burgeoning field, however, still has a ways to go before it can reconcile those topics with how the human mind understands gender, as the entire field of cognitive science first has to treat sex and gender as separate while also acknowledging and studying nonbinary gender. To start, we can take a look at a simple microcosm of our gendered society by looking at binary language that feminist linguists have undoubtedly analyzed uncountable times.

### 1.2 An example of gendered words

Take, for example, the simple words of *girl* and *boy*. Our western society teaches us to value these categories from before an individual is even born, with finding out the sex of a baby considered one of the most exciting parts of pregnancy. This sex determination and assignment is traditionally conducted by noting the presence or lack of a penis on an ultrasound or upon birth, and at that point the infant is immediately deemed a girl or boy, even if that designation has to wait until after an infant is forced into surgery to “normalize” their genitalia, as with some of the 1 in 1500-2000 people born with ambiguous genitalia (“How common is intersex,” n.d.). Once that infant is assigned a sex, everyone around them shapes the rest of their life in terms of the qualities stereotypically attached to that gender in society—girls are swaddled in pink blankets upon birth at a hospital and given dolls, while boys are wrapped in blue and given trucks. Obviously this is a generalization, but this is the average to which most individuals’ lives collapse and highlights the absurdity of determining a child’s future based on just one small

aspect of their biology. The socialization that girls undergo to be meeker, dependent, and nicer and that boys undergo to be emotionless, independent, and face problems alone—this is a very real result of splitting society into two groups from before birth, and it has very real and often dangerous psychological effects (Pollack, 1999).

Many other words that have to do with gender shape how we engage with the world. Words like *feminine* and *masculine*, *lesbian* and *gay* are descriptors and identities associated with certain traits. Oftentimes people can use these words to empower themselves through self-identification; other times, these labels and their associated stereotypes are forced onto unwilling individuals. More words like these and their effects on how society views individuals will be considered.

### 1.3 Nonbinary gender

A specific case in which language about gender is continuously changing is in regards to people who do not fall along the gender binary. Standard English used to be particularly constricting when it came to boxing people into binary identities. Now, more words have been created and adopted in English such that people can use many different labels to indicate their nonbinary gender including *genderqueer* and *agender*. Traditional English uses strictly male or female singular third-person pronouns, i.e. *he him his* and *she her hers*, with no gender neutral way of referring to a person. While some languages have embedded gender more deeply as with gendered nouns and adjectives in Spanish, others such as German are less restrictive and have neuter pronouns that are commonly used. Because of the lack of any traditionally grammatical singular third-person pronoun in English, many nonbinary people have instead co-opted the plural third-person pronoun *they* to use as a singular pronoun. With still only a small proportion of the population acknowledging nonbinary identities, terms such as *genderqueer* are rare to



come across (Corwin, 2009). Being able to take charge of their own identities by choosing new pronouns such as the singular they allows nonbinary individuals to control part of how they are viewed in society in protest of the usual restrictions of our language.

Studying the use of language in regards to nonbinary gender is important because of the effect it has on the lives of people who subvert the gender binary. Whether an individual transitions from one binary gender to the other, or lives as neither one nor the other, having the vocabulary and understanding to describe these identities is central to acknowledging the existence of those who do not conform to the traditional binary upon which human society was built.

#### 1.4 Slurs and reclaiming language

Language can be wielded with the power to strike down and demean, but also with the power to lift up and empower. Marginalized groups have often borne the brunt of slurs and epithets used to hurt, for example *bitch*, *faggot*, or *dyke*. While some people in these groups have individually turned these words into positive terms of identity on a small scale and embrace the terms for themselves, other words have been almost completely reclaimed within an entire community. Take, for example, *queer* which on top of its long denotation of “strange, abnormal,” became used in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to refer to people who deviated from norms of heterosexuality. (“queer,” n.d.). By the 1990s, LGBTQ activists were using *queer* as a rallying cry, as the organization Queer Nation coined the chant “We’re here! We’re Queer! Get used to it” (“Queer Nation NY History,” 2016)! And now in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *queer* is mostly synonymous with LGBTQ, with the added benefit of not limiting people to more limiting labels such as those denoted in the LGBTQ acronym. Reclaiming words once used to demean

and turning them into positive signifiers around which a community can gather and rally is central to changing perceptions of marginalized groups in the wider society.

### 1.5 Roadmap

Here we will explore the importance of supporting and pushing language evolution forward. Chapter 2 considers the etymology and connotations of words central to both everyday and academic discussions of gender, such as *feminine* and *female*, and discusses the lack of non-gendered vocabulary for honorifics, titles, and salutations. Chapter 3 introduces queer theory and considers how gender is conceptualized across a few related fields such as psycholinguistics and linguistics. Chapter 4 delves more deeply into the use of language with regards to trans and nonbinary gender identity, focusing on the reclaiming of *queer* and the far-reaching effects of word choice in policy.

## 2 Traditional studies of language and gender

Gender studies has transitioned from the traditional name of women's studies, to women's and gender studies, to women's, gender, and sexuality studies and its variants in universities across the country. The common shift in names mirrors the shifting dialogue within these departments from studying systems of female oppression to recognizing their intersections with other aspects of identity including those not incorporated into the department names, such as race and socio-economic status. In practice, many aspects of an individual's identity influence the language they are exposed to and thus learn to use, but none are so tightly intertwined into the very words in our language as gender. In this chapter we will focus on language that connotes a binary of female and male but also explore nonbinary challenges to traditional terminology.

Each human language consists of a lexicon, an entire vocabulary, which is learned by each speaker of a language and interpreted by each in slightly different ways. Despite what a dictionary may record as the plain definition of a word, its connotation is arguably even more important as it attaches emotions and extra meanings to its use. Each person speaks their own version of a language, and interprets another's usage of that same language from their own perspective. What one person understands based on their experiences with and their connotation of a word may be different from what another person understands, and thus specific words have different meanings for different people. Navigating communications with others becomes difficult because we think we're speaking the same language when in fact we're not. One universal to look at first, then, is words that unconsciously shape our thoughts about the world through not only their connotations that may indeed differ, but their very origins and prevalence in usage which are generally the same across people. Considering first the universal



androcentrism of our language will give us a basic shape of the world unto which our personal connotations of words then factor.

### 2.1 Androcentric word origins

Many of the words and phrases we use have long histories of relations with gender through etymology. Regardless of whether the original gendered etymological roots of words and phrases are forgotten, continued unquestioning utilization of those phrases remains harmful due to the unconscious perpetuation of their gendered connotations. Consider the derivatives of the word *man*, meaning a male person. *Woman* comes from *wifman*, meaning wife and man, so a woman is by denotation nothing more than an appendage to a man just as in the traditional phrase *man and wife* (“woman,” n.d.). *Mankind* supposedly encompasses all humans, not just men. *Humankind*, then, is increasingly being used, and yet *human* itself comes from the Old French *humain*, which some translate as “of man” while others translate it as “of human” (“human,” National Center for Textual and Lexical Resources). Perhaps it doesn’t matter who is correct, but that *man* and *human* are still so easily interchangeable. This phenomenon leaves the status of being male as linguistically unmarked, meaning it is considered default, and makes any other gender instead linguistically marked and thus abnormal. No matter if people rarely think about etymology, we will still unconsciously recognize that a root of a word is male, and that female counterparts to those words simply have added affixes. Even without consciously acknowledging this, we unconsciously learn and perpetuate the belief of masculine as default and feminine as additional.

Traditionally, the field of gender studies has been concerned with the inequality between women and men. We have picked apart the male-female divide, pushing for equality regardless of differences in gender, race, socio-economic status, and other intersecting facets of identity.



We have left behind the essentialist perspective of embracing only a femininity that developed within and because of a patriarchal society, instead learning to celebrate and defend an individual's right to choose how they express themselves however they wish. But during its second wave, the feminist movement particularly struggled with accepting lesbian women and transgender women, under the rationale that they weren't "real women," upholding the long-allowed norms of heterosexism and cisgenderism. The group Radicalesbians wrote "The Woman Identified Woman" and interjected during a 1970 gathering of women in order to call attention to the purposeful rejection of lesbians from the movement and the need for increased inclusiveness. They put forth that "It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution...we confirm in each other that struggling, incipient sense of pride and strength, the divisive barriers begin to melt, we feel this growing solidarity with our sisters" (p. 4). This connectedness was often withheld from trans women who, having been assigned male at birth and raised treated as a male, had had experiences that some feminists claimed were contrary to what true women experienced. While by now most conflicts regarding sexuality have been overcome, the concept of trans women raises more questions within both the feminist movement and the academia of gender studies.

The important and ever-increasing respect for the whole range of gender expressions and gender identities opens avenues for questions about the very nature of gender itself. What does it mean to be a woman? To be a man? To be feminine? To be masculine? We ponder these questions not only in regards to the direction in which the field of gender studies is moving, but also as probes into our own identities. For example, does one have to be able to define the word *woman* in order to identify as one? Arguably, no, because the more and more feminist scholars

delve into gender, the more convoluted the definitions become. And yet, most people still identify on the gender binary despite conflicting ideas of what gender actually means. Indeed, Butler believes that both gender and sex are socially constructed and are thus two facets of the same concept, such that “the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (1999, p. 10-11). In much of non-academic, mainstream society, however, people see no distinction between sex and gender for exactly the opposite reason—thinking that the biology is destiny and thus gender is natural, not socialized (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). Indeed, the distinction between sex as a biological concept and gender as a social construct was rarely discussed or considered even before the 1960s when *gender* began to be used to describe a person’s femininity or masculinity in relation to those traits not fitting with an individual’s sex-assigned-at-birth (“Feminist Perspectives,” 2016). In this paper, we’ll take *sex* to refer to what has traditionally been split based on biology or chromosomes, and gender will refer to one’s state of being or classification based on the masculine-feminine space. Despite these definitions being so complex in general but especially within gender studies, we can still discuss and explore how people perform and play out gender in real life.

Our discussions about these issues of gender identity and gender definitions have always centered on vocabulary that evolved in a system and society built to oppress women. For years we have used *feminine* to define stereotypical female, and *masculine* to define the stereotypical male, but now the words *feminine* and *masculine* are themselves imbued with these stereotypes. Our definitions have become circular (e.g. a stereotypical woman is feminine, and to be feminine is to exhibit the characteristics of a woman) and say little about the mysterious core of gender identity. It is difficult to know what about femininity is performance, perpetuated through generations until we all think that that is what the core of being female is. Because of the



universality of socialization, it is impossible to tell what about behavior is inherent and what is learned, so our definitions are based on a faulty presupposition that what currently exists is natural. By continuing to define a certain subset of traits as feminine and another as masculine subtly perpetuates the stereotypes about women and men in part because of the obviously similar etymologies of *feminine* with *female* and *masculine* with *male*. Continuing this binary categorization causes us to think in terms of a binary with femininity on one end and masculinity on the other, and for us to place people along this continuum, clustering near one end or the other.

By framing gender identity this way, we assume a two-dimensional continuum and not a three-dimensional space, forcing people to identify using a language system that was not built to express the true range of human traits. There is a beauty in not having to be able to define gender identity and yet still being able to respect and celebrate it. Language constrains our thoughts, and in a society with a language that has never had the terms to describe gender identity, our thoughts have always been focused on the binary. But in recognizing the greater and greater number of people who identify as not male and not female, we should also consider that continuing to think in terms of vocabulary that has enforced this binary, such as the terms *feminine* versus *masculine*, constrain how free we can become from expectations forced upon us. Tying a specific gender identity to a specific set of attributes, characteristics, and allowed personality types is inherently and dangerously constrictive of personal expression and freedom to be oneself. Even in academic studies of gender, we should be wary of the consequences of using the terminology we've been using for so many years. Despite their practicality, their usage unconsciously strengthens the patriarchy and heterosexist default in our minds.

## 2.2 Titles and honorifics

### 2.2.1 Binary history

Few gender-neutral titles or honorifics exist in English. We have the common prefixes *Miss*, *Ms.*, *Mrs.*, and *Mr.* Of course there's also *Dr.* and *Professor*, but those are earned titles that can only be used when a person's educational history is known, not to mention that people who use those titles are often assumed to be male, given our stereotypes about what females can accomplish. Within the gendered prefixes, then, exists an inherent imbalance in value. With only honorific in existence that can refer to a male, any male, whether a child, unmarried adult, or married man, is addressed as *Mr.* *Miss* is only used to refer to young, unmarried women. *Mrs.* refers only to married women, most often followed by the husband's last name that the woman has adopted. With prefixes that depend upon marital status, women's independence is often minimized. Letters may still be addressed to 'Mr. and Mrs. John Smith,' relegating a woman to nothing more than an extra three letters attached to her husband, negating her entire existence as an individual.

The *Ms.* prefix, supposedly pronounced *mizz* but often pronounced equivalently to *Miss* in practice, has a more modern, unique history. The earliest American usage is from 1901, when a Springfield, Massachusetts newspaper suggested it as a combination of *Miss* and *Mrs.*, to be used without regard to a woman's marital status. However, the next known published use was thirty years later in the *New York Times*, and *Ms.* didn't come into common use until the 1970s after Gloria Steinem's *Ms. Magazine* started circulation in 1971, its title reflecting the feminist movement's desire for female independence. In 1974, *Ms.* became legally recognized as a prefix in the UK and could be used on official government documents such as passports ('Ms.', 2003).



With its creation and increasing usage, *Ms.* offers a long-overdue alternative to naming and thus valuing a woman based on her marital status.

Having taken a step away from language that depends upon marital status, the next issue of gender in titles to consider is the necessity to refer to gender at all. Like prefixes, more formal titles like *Sir* and *Ma'am* are gendered. The propagation of binary titles throughout all the years of English language use attests to the long-standing assumption that gender was an important distinction to pick out and confirm in everyday interactions. The still-used term 'Ladies and Gentlemen' is used in many environments of culture and the arts, for example as part of announcements in theaters to express respect for the audience, but the gender of each individual in the audience is irrelevant to the performance. *Mr.* and all the female prefixes or *Sir* and *Ma'am* are used in many customer service situations when addressing an individual directly, and yet in an overwhelming majority of cases, the individual's gender again should have no bearing on the interaction. Using gendered titles and honorifics when unnecessary makes stereotypes associated with gender salient in normal interactions, causing us to be more likely to expect someone to fit a gender stereotype than we would expect if we stopped using gendered titles. In that situation, the gender facet of identity could again fade to the background in situations when it is not actually relevant, and we could have more genuine interactions not overshadowed by the history of power relations and expectations between genders.

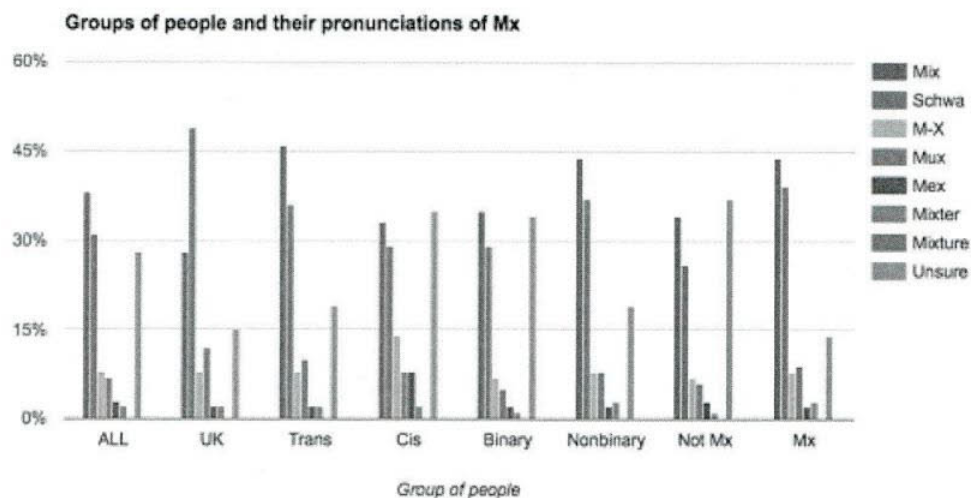
### 2.2.2 Nonbinary challenges to traditional titles

The danger of these binary titles and prefixes lies in making assumptions. Before addressing anyone, one must first attempt to determine their gender, and in doing so, make salient all the assumptions and stereotypes associated with that gender. First, gender is not always visible and the title or prefix you choose to use may not match the person's gender

identity. If their gender identity is important to them, then using the wrong title can range from disappointing to insulting and bring back a sense of dysphoria. Secondly, because gender, especially the binary male and female, are still very closely tied with certain proscriptive stereotypes, referring to someone else with a binary title brings assumptions about characteristics tied gender to the forefront. Both for the speaker and the person being referred to, this usage will allow beliefs about how the person should act and be to seep into the interaction, as all involved are reminded of traditional gender roles and gender performance. In order to rid everyday interactions of such gendered overtones, an alternative prefix has been created.

One of the first uses of the gender neutral alternative *Mx.*, most often pronounced *mix*, was in 1977 in a parenting magazine (OED, 2016). As a hybrid of the traditional prefixes' *M* and the most common mathematic variable *x*, *Mx.* directly refers to neither a person's marital status nor their gender, though it could potentially be a marker for a nonbinary gender identity. Much of the conversation about alternative gender-neutral words takes place among the younger generation on the internet, and that is the location of what is called the "annual survey of nonbinary, genderqueer, gender-variant and gender-nonconforming humans worldwide," publicized via Tumblr and Twitter with the handle *@nonbinarystats*. In April of 2016, the UK-based blogger ran a smaller eight-day survey to specifically find out how people pronounce *Mx.*, publicizing also through Reddit and ending up with 505 usable responses. While the survey is definitely not a random sample due to the very specific populations who would come across the survey access link and also care enough to take the time to complete the survey, the underlying finding remains the same. People pronounce *Mx.* in many different ways, and even those who use the honorific for themselves differ in how they pronounce it (Nonbinary Stats, 2016). This is one of the struggles but also intriguing sides of creating words to describe identity. Many created

words, including the English gender-neutral third-person alternative pronouns discussed in the next section, have to go through a stage of publicity, uptake, and consolidation in which the words become recognized and widespread and people slowly move towards a shared pronunciation. Some of the surface pushback against these new words is that people claim they are difficult to learn and get used to using, which is often a cover for transphobia or lack of understanding of the importance of others' identities. While the differences in pronunciation may be at first confusing, the existence of *Mx.* is important to the visibility of nonbinary gender, and the complexity around its pronunciation is one small sacrifice to make for the validation of a whole group of people's identities.



*Figure 1. Groups of people and their pronunciations of Mx. Nonbinary Stats, 2016. Retrieved from [http://68.media.tumblr.com/0b3c64a00a182a1d4b9e22cc994de16b/tumblr\\_inline\\_o6769vfbby1qesqi5\\_500.png](http://68.media.tumblr.com/0b3c64a00a182a1d4b9e22cc994de16b/tumblr_inline_o6769vfbby1qesqi5_500.png)*

*Time* Magazine ran an article in 2015 about the potential uptake of the use of *Mx.* also by those who identify on the gender binary but don't find their gender relevant to their current situation (Steinmeyer). *Mx.* can also be used to refer to those who don't identify as either the male or female genders and may identify as nonbinary. Having a way to refer to oneself that is



true to one's identity and does not attach unnecessary extra meanings and assumptions such as gender identity allows more freedom in interactions with others. And a positive side-effect of having these terms for nonbinary individuals is decreasing the salience of gender overall, allowing cisgender people to potentially also experience less gender stereotyping.

### 2.3 Third-person English pronouns

#### 2.3.1 Traditional binary pronouns

English is a West Germanic language, not a Romance language as are French and Spanish. A feature of German that also exists in French and Spanish but not in English is grammatical gender, in which almost every noun has an assigned gender that also affects the make-up of words around it such as referring adjectives. In Spanish, a chair (*la silla*) is feminine; in French, a book (*le livre*) is masculine. While Old English originally also used grammatical gender, that feature slowly declined along with the rise of the definite article *þe/the* and disappeared by the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Kastovsky, 2000). The biggest holdout in terms of gender in modern English grammar, then, is the existence of gendered pronouns.

Modern English is often taught with only two third-person singular pronouns: *he* and *she*. Our first-person pronoun *I* denotes no gender; neither does the second-person *you* or the third-person plural pronoun *they*. Other languages without a neuter or gender-neutral form, such as Spanish, use a masculine pronoun to encompass groups of both males and females: *amigos* can be a group of only males or a group of people of multiple genders. *Amigas* refers only to a group consisting fully of females. While English doesn't have that particular third-person plural gendered pronoun, our grammar is androcentric in other ways. When referencing a single person, the traditional default is to use *he* even if the gender of the person is unknown (Motschenbacher, 2011). In situations that are associated with females, however, the pronoun *she* will often instead



be used as the default, for example when talking about nursing, as nursing is considered a traditionally female career. An increasingly common practice is switch back and forth between *he* and *she*. For example, a list of instructions may have all even numbered instructions use the pronoun *she* and each odd instruction use the pronoun *he*. Using *he* as the default falls into our history of androcentrism and assuming a masculine default, but switching back and forth instead evokes the traditional binarism of gender and explicitly excludes, no matter how unknowingly, those who use neither the *he* nor *she* pronoun.

English suffers from a tendency to default to androcentrism, as do most other known languages. Almost all other languages that don't have neuter forms also use masculine by default. A few exceptions that instead use the feminine as the default unmarked version are Mohawk in North America, Welsh in the UK, and Maasai in Kenya and Tanzania (Newell, 2005). Kala Lagaw Ya, a Pama-Nyugan indigenous language of the Torres Strait Islands, has only masculine and feminine grammatical gender. All nouns are feminine, except those that specifically denote the moon or male humans and animals; for example, even a group consisting solely of men would be indicated using a grammatically feminine form (Motschenbacher, 2011). Most languages which exhibit some form of feminine generic, however, still do not mark masculine versions the same way as languages with masculine generics make feminine words marked. Because these feminine generics don't have corresponding masculine forms that require a change or addition to the feminine root, they are not as powerfully default as compared to masculine generics in most languages including English (Motschenbacher, 2011). Chapter 4 will delve deeper into modern usage of the increasingly popular and accepted singular *they* that, while not in use in past standard American vernacular, molds our language in subtle ways to not only

undermine the masculine default, but also to correctly represent gender identities that are only newly publicly recognized.

### 2.3.2 Alternative pronouns

Alternatives to the binary *he/she* weren't just thought up in response to nonbinary gender, though that, in addition to indeterminate gender, is what they are often used for now. Even back in 1792 grammarians offered up alternatives, even going so far as to say there should be thirteen different genders for pronouns, including masculine imperfect and mixt imperfect (Baron, 2014). Some other languages such as German have always have neuter pronouns, while other languages such as Swedish are adding gender-neutral pronouns. The Swedish Academy's official dictionary was updated in 2015 with the third-person gender-neutral pronoun *hen*, in contrast with the masculine *han* and the feminine *hon* (Noack, 2015). Indeed, even a preschool in Sweden has adopted the practice of referring to the students only with gender-neutral words in the hopes of reducing their exposure to the pressures of gender socialization (Hebblethwaite, 2011). While the American public has yet to officially add any gender-neutral third-person pronoun to the dictionary, gender non-conforming individuals have been trying out the singular *they/them/theirs* and *ze/zir/zirs* in personal spheres for years. Table 1 below compiles the different forms of a few other proposed alternative pronouns which are all used in varying proportions by nonbinary people who want to eschew the *he/him/his* and *she/her/hers* binary.

Table 1  
Traditional and Invented Pronouns (Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog, 2010)

	Nominative (subject)	Objective (object)	Possessive determiner	Possessive Pronoun	Reflexive
<b>Traditional pronouns</b>					
He	<i>He</i> laughed	I called <i>him</i>	<i>His</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>his</i>	He likes <i>himself</i>
She	<i>She</i> laughed	I called <i>her</i>	<i>Her</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>hers</i>	She likes <i>herself</i>
It	<i>It</i> laughed	I called <i>it</i>	<i>Its</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>its</i>	It likes <i>itself</i>
They	<i>They</i> laughed	I called <i>them</i>	<i>Their</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>theirs</i>	They like <i>themselves</i>
<b>Invented pronouns</b>					
Ne	<i>Ne</i> laughed	I called <i>nem</i>	<i>Nir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>nirs</i>	Ne likes <i>nemself</i>
Ve	<i>Ve</i> laughed	I called <i>ver</i>	<i>Vis</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>vis</i>	Ve likes <i>verself</i>
Spivak	<i>Ey</i> laughed	I called <i>em</i>	<i>Eir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>eirs</i>	Ey likes <i>emself</i>
Ze (or zie) and hir	<i>Ze</i> laughed	I called <i>hir</i>	<i>Hir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>hirs</i>	Ze likes <i>hirself</i>
Ze (or zie) and zir	<i>Ze</i> laughed	I called <i>zir</i>	<i>Zir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>zirs</i>	Ze likes <i>zirself</i>
Xe	<i>Xe</i> laughed	I called <i>xem</i>	<i>Xyr</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>xyr</i> s	Xe likes <i>xemself</i>

### 2.3.3 Evolution of the singular *they*

In order to not upset the dedication to the plural *they*, English users have been trying to use alternatives to the masculine default for years. Sometimes it's *he/she*, *s(he)*, or *he or she*. Other times, a person will use *she* on purpose, but the word will draw attention because it is grammatically marked, defying the masculine default, and may even seem patronizing (Walsh, 2015). Using *he/she* or any of the other alternatives every time that a singular pronoun of a person with unknown gender comes up is unreasonable. In writing, it looks clunky and repetitive. And while these phrases make sense in writing, they sound unnatural in speech and thus often the attempt at gender-neutrality disappears and the default *he* returns.

Another gender-neutral alternative that subtly rejects the gender binary and simply co-opts a system already present in modern English is the singular *they*. It comes with predetermined variants—*them*, *theirs*, *themselves*—that all English speakers already automatically



know, although the singular *themselves* may take a while to seem natural in opposition to the plural *themselves*. The singular *they*, however, is not often taught in formal primary or secondary education, since it's often seen as ungrammatical by sticklers for only its plural usage.

Languages, however, evolve, and are rarely meant to be proscriptive. Their purpose is to be for communication, and often new words or new uses of words evolve in order to better describe our changing world.

The third-person singular *they* actually has a long, supported history in English. Geoffrey Chaucer included the use of singular *they* in his famous *Canterbury Tales* around 1400, often considered one of the most important pieces of English writing (Doyle, 2009). The evolution of singular *they* from plural *they* is similar to the change to the singular *you* from the plural *you*, both occurring around the late 1300s ("Singular 'They'"). That *you* was once the plural form of the singular *thee* is relatively unknown and no one contests its modern usage as a singular pronoun. Singular *they* is moving in the same direction and should be accepted as a natural step in the evolution of English.

Around 2015, the singular *they* became more widely accepted in both linguistic and news spheres. In December of that year, the Washington Post updated its styleguide to include singular *they* as grammatical, citing news articles they had written about gender-neutral people as opening their eyes to the importance of *they* as a gender-neutral alternative (Walsh, 2015). Over two hundred linguists in the American Dialect Society voted for the singular *they* to make it the 2015 Word of the Year. The organization specified that the singular *they* was not just to eliminate the *he/she* clunkiness, but also "to refer to a known person, often as a conscious choice by a person rejecting the traditional gender binary of *he* and *she*" ("2015 Word of the Year"). BBC ran a news article in late 2015 titled "Beyond 'he' and 'she': The rise of nonbinary pronouns," another

indicator of the singular *they* and other options such as *ze* and *xe* coming into more mainstream usage (Chak, 2015).

Of course the singular *they* has been used by some people and communities far earlier than 2015. Genderqueer and gender-neutral people have had to find or create pronouns that can correctly represent who they are. Many options exist such as the following pronouns that were created to fill this need inherent for a singular gender-neutral pronoun in English: *per* (*per*, *pers*), *ve* (*ver*, *vis*), and *xe* (*xem*, *xyr*). While all these are pronouns that people can choose to use for themselves, in recent years many nonbinary people have settled on the singular *they*, likely because its conjugations to *them* and *theirs* are already natural and easy for others to pick up. Some people experience pushback in which others disparage their use of singular *they*, calling it a burden to remember someone's pronouns as an excuse to disrespect an individual's identity. Singular *they* and other gender-neutral pronouns are extremely important to some nonbinary individuals' sense of self, as genderqueer Eloise LeBel writes: "an unexpected and thrilling flutter ran through my heart. Friends and family might be annoyed or confused, fascists and monsters will try to terrorize, destroy, and deny, but I will not trade an honest life for safety and convenience" (2017).

#### 2.4 Derogatory meaning through invoking gender

While many words in addition to all the derivatives of *man* have evolved from roots that specify a particular gender (e.g. *femme* in the sense of lesbian butch/femme identity, from the French *femme* for "woman, wife"), other words have gained a gender bent through how society has come to use that word ("femme," n.d.). *Asshole*, for example, is most used in specific reference to while the preferred derogatory phrase for females is *bitch*, which is rarely used for males. *Asshole* isn't linguistically tied to a specific gender, and yet its usage has shifted almost



always in one direction instead of another. While both *asshole* and *bitch* have specific connotations, *bitch* and many of the gendered phrases we use to characterize women serve to unconsciously further a particular negative image of women as a whole. Hearing the word *bitch* brings to mind a cold, holier-than-thou attitude. Instead, women who are not bitches, meaning real women, are quiet and docile, warm and comforting. Our slurs reveal what we unconsciously think a woman should be, and how that differs in power from what men are and are allowed to be.

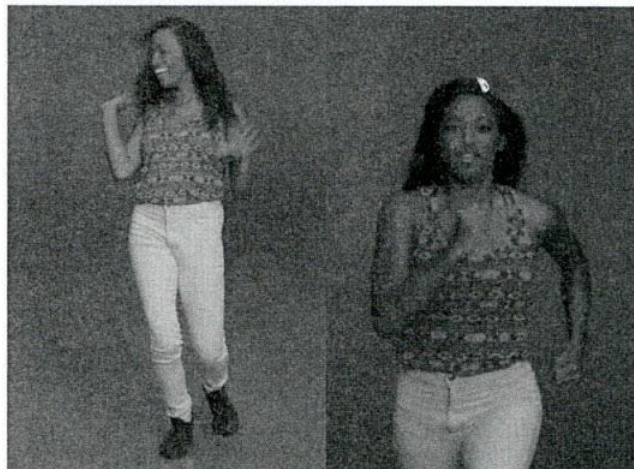
When specifically considering language as it relates to gender, our language is far from free of old-fashioned and traditional beliefs about gender. Words and phrases, their connotations, and even their uses can each propagate certain insidious perspectives on gender without a speaker of that language ever realizing. Take, for example, the word *bossy*. Merriam Webster's definition for it is "inclined to domineer." The word brings to mind a young child on a playground ordering others around, and the connotation is that the child is haughty and shrill. *Bossy* is rarely used when talking about boys or men, who are instead considered confident or ambitious. It is reserved for talking disparagingly about girls and women who dare to direct others or exhibit leadership. The usage and connotation of *bossy* work together to perpetuate the idea that women should not or cannot be leaders, and that belief continues unconsciously whenever one uses or hears the word in this context. As the language continues to be used, so too does the biased perspective on gender. A similar phrase surrounded by a history of sexism is the phrase *x sucks*. When something sucks, it is known to be bad and disappointing; "that sucks" is often used to express sympathy for someone else's situation. While people argue over whether this meaning of the phrase does or does not come from the slang definition in which *sucking* refers to fellatio, the modern prevalence of *suck* in its slang usage means the slang and the phrase denoting a disappointing situation are definitely unconsciously connected in our minds (Barder,



2016). Indeed, when emphasizing great upset over a situation, some people add to the phrase and say “that sucks dick,” demonstrating that we do connect the phrase and the slang. The use of the phrase, then, is inherently both sexist and homophobic, as it implies that a person performing oral sex is lesser and pitiable. Because our society assumes heterosexuality, the woman would be the actor who is *sucking* and thus lesser, and if we weren’t assuming heterosexuality, then we are condemning a male in a male-male relationship simply for having sex. The phrase *x sucks* implicitly upholds a power hierarchy in which men are better than women and in which same-gender relationships need to follow a heterosexual model in which one individual acts as the male and the other takes the role of the female. While some condemn the phrase for its vulgarity, many other modern slang terms also refer to sexual acts which seems to simply be a sign of our society (Stevenson, 2006). Instead, we should carefully consider our widespread usage of the phrase *x sucks*. For children who pick up the phrase *x sucks* before knowing the slang, learning the slang will strengthen even more the negative implications about those who perform the sex act, causing these children to assume that heterosexist norms of power relations within sexual relationships are correct. When our language evolved in a sexist society, our continued usage of words and phrases deeply entrenched in that sexism serves to strongly perpetuate that type of society.

Even considering terms that are synonymous with our binary gender categories of male and female hold within them power differences. The term *guys*, for example, is often used to refer to a group regardless of its gender make-up. The parallel term *gals* remains only in antiquity, and is rarely used in standard American English. In the few instances when the word *gals* is used, it never refers to a group that includes males, because that would be considered rude or insulting. In fact, the term *boys* shifts into *guys* as males pass puberty, but in concordance with

our society's tendency to infantilize females, girls remain *girls* well into adulthood. For words such as these that are so prevalent, personally claiming a word as an identity of power isn't sufficient to changing its power in society in general. For example, a high school Girl Scouts robotics team I was involved with considered being an all-girls team that was defying stereotypes about women in STEM to be a source of pride. That pride in our identity failed to negate any of the pain of the disparaging remark one competition announcer made: "their robot throws like a girl." Just one instance in which someone perpetuates a stereotype or demeans a woman makes that stereotype once again salient to both those to whom it was applied, and to those who heard the comment. Sometimes the more that an individual identifies with a label, the harder the fall is when someone twists that label into a negative and insults the pride that was taken in that identity. Some groups such as the brand Always have tried to reclaim the phrase "like a girl" to be a source of pride and power. Their 2014 television advertisement "Always #LikeAGirl" demonstrated the stereotypes of weakness and non-athleticism about girls that many, including women, hold. The young girls who were asked to run, throw, or fight "like a girl," however, did those activities as they would normally, since they were girls and thus throwing like a girl meant throwing like themselves, at least before too many gender stereotypes affected them. (Always, 2014).





*Figure 2. Always' #LikeAGirl campaign. The left image is of a woman asked to "run like a girl;" the right image is her new interpretation of the phrase after a discussion about female self-image and confidence.*

Always' advertisement copy stated that they wanted girls to retain their confidence through puberty and beyond; their commercial motives, however, being a brand marketed to girls just entering puberty and through the next few decades of their lives, are still very clear. In our current society, public announcements cannot be made without resources, so companies with ulterior motives often shape the media that we see. Despite the commercialization of the message, Always is working to break the stereotypes embedded in dangerously gendered phrases and brings belief in female strength and confidence to young girls during a vulnerable period of their lives.

## 2.5 Changes towards gender-neutrality

Single-gender organizations are steeped in traditions that highlight society's attitudes towards different genders and the power hierarchies among them. In December of 2015, Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced that the military would open up all combat roles to women, after centuries of women allowed only to serve in a subset of military roles, often as nurses or other positions off the frontlines. Some branches of the military, notably the Marine Corps, resisted the opening of ranks and wanted to keep positions such as reconnaissance and fire support closed to women. (Bradner, 2015). However, the changes apply to all branches of the military, and the effects of the change in policy on the interactions among those serving in the military is still being explored.

Partially in response to the opening of all roles to women, U.S. Navy. Navy Secretary Ray Mabus led the charge in both the Navy and the Marine Corps to change rating titles that included the word *man* in them to a gender-neutral alternative by April 1, 2016 (Faram, 2016).



For example, *reconnaissance man* and *fire support man* could be changed to simply *reconnaissance* and *fire support*, or *officer* could be added to the end (Harkins, 2016). The change was ostensibly to create a more welcoming atmosphere in which women are equally respected in whichever roles they take in the military and in doing so, move away from the androcentrism of the military and the ability to serve the country. However, the change has been overrun with pushback from those who believe the continuation of tradition is more important than a symbolic gesture in opening ranks to women. The Navy in particular has faced disagreement within its ranks because of the unique system of ratings that differed from the other branches' common titles such as *Petty Officer*. In late 2016, however, instead of simply making rating titles gender-neutral, the Navy stopped using the ratings titles and in theory now refers to its members by rank, in alignment with the other branches (Faram & Fellman, 2016). Ironically, commenter Jeff Spehar responded to an article on *Navy Times* about the changes in rating title naming convention simply to say, "BM2 Svenson needs to be put on weight control," wherein Svenson is a female boatswain's mate and wanted to keep that title herself (2016). Although not enough time has passed to draw conclusions about whether the change to gender-neutral titles has had the effect of subverting some of the power hierarchy that has always valued men over women in the military, this comment which devalues a soldier simply for being female demonstrates exactly why such changes are necessary. Though traditions are important, and indeed these gendered titles are quite central to some service members' identities, creating a safe and welcoming service for future members is key to building a more equitable military and country. Herein lies a tension between removing gendered words to create a welcoming environment but also not forcing labels or identities onto others, a sentiment central to LGBTQ issues. A compromise that they keep identifying with whatever they like now, but newer

members will use the gender-neutral ranks and those will become as central to their identity as the traditional, gendered rating titles were for past members.

Another area of gender-imbalance in the U.S. military is in regards to the draft. The Selective Service System runs the U.S. draft system, which keeps records of those who can be conscripted into service but which hasn't been used since the middle of the Vietnam War in 1973. The wording of the U.S. Code Chapter 49, Section 3802 maintains that registration for the draft must be completed by "Male citizens of the United States and other males residing in the United States" ("Military Selective Service Act," 1980). In 1981 Just last summer there was a push to require women to register for selective service, which President Obama supported and which was discussed in the U.S. Senate. The Senate passed the change 83-15, but the House voted 217-203 to remove the wording that would require women's draft registration from their version of the defense policy bill (Korte & Brook, 2016). The Selective Service System website points back to the exact wording of the law when explaining why women are not required to register instead of exploring the historical reasons why women were left out of the military. The draft of only males is one example of falsely benevolent sexism, similar to traditions in which women and children are kept safe or evacuated first, putting women on pedestals for their ability to bear children and their role of child-rearing while considering them weaker and less deserving of rights.

From all these examples of the androcentrism and sexism, we can see that the power imbalances between genders is written into our very language and unconsciously perpetuated by all speakers of the language. The phrases we use have become so commonplace that we don't even question them, regardless of their history or original meaning. And even if we do question the language and identify these very points of gender and power imbalance, we continue the imbalance because it is near impossible to convey meaning *without* using these words that are so

central to our thought and societal organization. While I am not advocating for an immediate rejection of these words, I do hope we can foment a more conscious awareness and discussion of them within and without gender studies, to slowly build a less biased future.



### 3 Reconciling disparate fields of study on gender

Many different fields consider the interplay between gender, language, and society. Linguists, cognitive scientists, feminist scholars, and many others both in academia and not, all study these topics from varying perspectives. Each of their fields has shifted its view on that interplay over the past century as understanding of gender's vastness, language's nuances, and society's power have evolved. While conversations about queerness and nonbinary gender, however, have been very prevalent amongst young people trying to figure out their own identities, these academic fields have lagged behind in theorizing and understanding how their topics intertwine with our new explorations of gender.

#### 3.1 Queer theory

The small field of queer linguistics is based on the subversive nature of queer theory and specifically works “not to further entrench essentialist discourses of gender and sexual identity...[but instead] contrast with approaches in the field of language and gender that take gender binarism as a starting point for their research” (Motschenbacher, 2011, p. 7). Foucault, in his writings on sexuality which have influenced queer studies for the past half century, emphasizes the connection between discourse, power, and knowledge. When discourse occurs and is had between people on the same topic, more knowledge is produced and distributed, which can then be used as power to bring a marginalized topic into the light of more mainstream studies. So can it be with queer linguistics, which bridges the gap between traditional gender studies, linguistics, and queer theory.<sup>2</sup> With “an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken

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<sup>2</sup> Another field that bridges gender studies and language is feminist philosophy of language, which is similar to queer linguistics but still originates from an assumption of the binary. See “Feminist Philosophy of Language” (2010)

about, and to cause *it* to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail,” looking at language from a perspective that does not rely upon or fall back on the binary as assumed and real is indeed possible (Foucault, 1990, p. 18). The necessity of this discourse comes from the power of language, both in its presence and in its silencing. Governments and other entities of power often control people through what they’re allowed to say, or think, or exist as: “in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present” (Foucault, 1990, p. 17). Since queer identities are often hidden and not immediately visible, communication becomes ever more important in the struggle towards building communities and coalitions. In this manner, definitions of identity come into the hands of the individuals in those communities rather than in just academic discourse, and knowledge parallels better the lived experiences of these communities.

### 3.2 Linguistics & sociolinguistics

While people have been studying language and linguistics probably as long as we have used language to communicate, modern sociolinguistics only emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with the term being proposed in 1952 and accepted in reference to the study of society’s effects on language in the 1960s (Koerner, 1991). Sociolinguistics is central to looking beyond just the traditional components of language such as syntax and phonology, and instead also considering the importance of society and environment in shaping how a person moves through the world. By pushing for a deeper consideration of the social context and its effects on how language is produced and understood, sociolinguists are emphasizing factors that have traditionally been undervalued and disregarded as additional but not central to language. Because society is the



entire environment in which language is learned and evolves, its importance to the practicalities of language usage cannot be overstated. Now, linguistic anthropologists such as UCLA professor Elinor Ochs emphasize the codependent nature of language acquisition and social competence: “the two processes are intertwined from the moment a human being enters society...each process facilitates the other, as children and other novices come to a perspective on social life in part through signs and come to understand signs in part through social experience” (1996, p. 407). It is now commonly agreed upon that society does indeed have an impact on language, but the extent to which the opposite is true—language having an effect on society—is still debated.

Two linguistic theories that have bearing on whether the specific language we speak affects the topics about which our society is concerned are linguistic relativity and universal grammar. Linguistic relativity is the belief that the structure and words of a language influence the ways in which we are able to think about the world. It maintains that while we use language to express our thoughts, the very limits of our language constrain the ways in which we can even think. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity leans towards the stronger version called linguistic determinism, which maintains that not only does language limit how we think about the world, it in fact determines it (“Language and Thought,” n.d.). Sapir said that “Human beings...are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. ...The fact of the matter is that the “real world” is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group (as cited in “Language and Thought,” n.d.). Universal Grammar, first proposed by Noam Chomsky, is concerned more with the structure of language itself instead of its interplay with society and posits that there exist certain qualities that exist in all human languages, hence the *universal* (Hauser et al., 2002).



One example in which these two theories coincide is with regards to the Pirahã language of an indigenous culture in the Amazon rainforest in western Brazil. One of the qualities supposedly universal in all languages, according to Universal Grammar, is the ability to use numbers to discretely and quantitatively count items. What has been found is that the Pirahã language doesn't have words for specific numbers. They have words for quantities, but not even words for *one* (Frank et al., 2008). The closest word for *one* would be something meaning "few." This has been supported by psycholinguists like Ted Gibson, of BCS. And yet other linguists here at MIT like David Pesetsky have exactly the opposite view—that the interpretations of the corpora that have been collected of the Pirahã language does not fully encapsulate the abilities of the language. There's not enough data in the corpora to conclusively say that this language doesn't have terms for discrete quantities (Nevins et al., 2009). So that's the Universal Grammar part of it. The linguistic relativity part of it is that because the Pirahã language doesn't have any words for specific numbers, the way that this culture thinks about sums and amounts isn't as discrete as it is for culture that use languages that have numbers like English, where we can say things like "there are six pencils." For the Pirahã, they can match numbers, for example if you put out six pencils on a table, they will line up six pencils underneath. But if you line up six pencils and take them away, asking the Pirahã to recreate that scheme on the table from memory, they won't match the exact number of six pencils, due to their language lacking terms for specific numbers (Gibson, 2016). Pirahã is an example of a culture and language which does not emphasize discrete numbers and thus does not think in the same ways as our western industrialized cultures do. The controversy over this ongoing research is just one example of how academics in the linguistics field and the psycholinguistics field disagree about the strength and truth of both linguistic relativity and Universal Grammar.

Linguistic relativity is a theory that can be extended to gender, and which ties in greatly with how the English language is changing to accommodate increasingly popular ideas about gender. For most of mainstream culture, English words about gender are simple and binary: male sex is equivalent to male gender, and female sex to female gender. If we didn't have words to describe gender that escaped the binary and are only now evolving and emerging into our society, then how would we even be able to think about such concepts? Just because our language is currently a certain way does not mean it always has to remain that same way since language is ever-evolving. Once we realize that and indeed proactively create words to describe new concepts, and once those who may currently be reticent to adopt new terms realize that a changing language doesn't mean turning our backs on tradition but instead building a better future, then both our language and society can expand to correctly communicate and understand nonbinary gender.

Looking back at history, we can see the tragic opposite play out. Before Europeans arrived on the North American continent, indigenous tribes recognized and even revered a third gender which they call *two-spirit*. The Cree word for "neither man nor woman" is *Aayahkwew*; the Navajo word for "one in a constant state of change" is *nadleehi* ("Two Spirit Terms," n.d.). These unique individuals expressed their gender differently than cisgender people and were allowed to cross social gender roles and express sexual orientations other than heterosexuality. Their roles in their tribes were often important and central to the culture, for example as name givers or warriors. When the Europeans invaded, however, this third gender quickly faded from visibility because the colonizers recognized and respected only two genders. This additional identity was only reclaimed under the term *two-spirit* as an identity of pride in 1990 to finally replace the derogatory word *berdache* ("Two Spirit 101," n.d.). From colonization until the 20<sup>th</sup>

century, however, generations of two-spirit people were hidden and forgotten because an invading culture lacked the language and the concepts of a third gender that already existed in the native tongues.

### 3.3 Psycholinguistics and cognitive neuroscience

As described in the previous section, psycholinguists study the connection between language and the mind using a variety of tools. Some methods include engaging in simple tasks with specific culture and languages, as with the Pirahã, while other studies involve tasks that measure the speed of mental processing and those that measure activation in the brain.

Psycholinguistics is a branch of cognitive science, and the larger field can also look at how gender is specifically processed in the brain through methods such as fMRI scans that detail specific regions of brain activation. Psycholinguistics specializes in studying the fine details of how language affects our thoughts and yields biological insights into how our minds process the world around us.

Grammatical gender is a concept often studied in other languages by linguists. English lacks grammatical gender, which is the system through which each noun is classified with a particular gender—feminine, masculine, and in some languages, neuter. Many of these genders were assigned randomly to nouns and require an individual to memorize which gender category a noun is in. It would then follow that having gender so prevalent yet random in language would render the specific gender of a noun cognitively meaningless and have no bearing on the representation of that noun in the mind. Yet psycholinguists have found that even such a system as simple and random as grammatical gender influences the inferences that individuals make about nouns and how we think about the world.



German has three gender classifications in its grammar—masculine, feminine, and neuter—while Japanese, like English, has none. 5-year-old native German speakers are more likely than Japanese-speaking children to make gender-based inferences about animals because of grammatical gender. A German child who is told that all male penguins have *broma*, a made-up word, and then asked if a penguin, the term for which has masculine gender, has *broma* answers affirmatively at a rate higher than chance. Japanese-speaking children answer at chance because there is not enough information given to know one way or another, because the penguin's gender hasn't been specified (Saalbach et al., 2012). The German-speaking children incorrectly mix together grammatical gender and biological sex for animals, likely extending to social gender for humans. As the conductors of this study Saalbach et al. explain, “Young children build their knowledge, including biological concepts, largely through spontaneous inferences and in doing so, they recruit a variety of cues, including perceptual and taxonomic similarity, as well as linguistic cues” (2012, p. 1263). When gender is built into the very grammar of language, it has unconscious and potentially dangerous cognitive effects on how individuals interpret the world around them. Stereotypes about gender can easily be reinforced in a similar manner to what was demonstrated in this study through every sentence an individual reads or produces, regardless of whether a language has grammatical gender.

Although Japanese and English lack grammatical gender, our languages are not free from other influences of gender such as which words are used to describe females versus males and what stereotypes and manners of speaking are embedded into how we use language. While these effects are harder to quantify than those of grammatical gender, researchers have found other methods of recording the effects of gender in language on the mind. Since English lack grammatical gender, psycholinguists instead study the effect of pronouns. The importance of a

pronoun depends on the frequency of the antecedent to which it is referring, which has broad implications in respect to gendered pronouns such as *he* and *she*. People who are asked to read pairs of sentences, the first containing the antecedent and the second containing the pronoun, show patterns of brain activity that differ based on the relative frequency of the antecedent in general conversation. For antecedents that are more frequent, individuals exhibit smaller Event-Related Potentials (ERPs) when they read the related pronoun; for antecedents that are less frequent, individuals exhibit ERPs of greater amplitude. The ERPs exhibited when reading the antecedent are approximately the same no matter the word's frequency (Heine et al., 2006). The height of the ERPs indicate how cognitively salient each piece of information is, meaning that when antecedents are less frequent in conversation, their pronouns takes up more cognitive significance.

Thus, using gendered pronouns when referring to individuals has the potential to be of great significance to how we view those people, especially when their name is used less often than the pronoun, which is common in English. Similarly, a masculine default can have undesired effects on priming the brain to expect a certain gender to be associated with a description. For example, if we describe a hypothetical executive and continuously refer to them as *he*, then a listener would unconsciously tie this occupation with the male gender whether or not an executive they know is male. Learning that the executive is actually female will be surprising and cognitively dissonant, perpetuating stereotypes about which genders can be associated with which positions in society.

Lastly, two gaps in cognitive science research are that of research that does not conflate sex and gender, and research that does not rely upon a binary view of gender. Cognitive scientists often ask people to indicate either their sex or their gender before participation, with

the wording often imprecise and only offering binary options. Because cognitive science research has to do with biology, it is easy for subjects to assume that researchers want them to indicate sex-based biology instead of gender identity, but the two probably affect people's thoughts and cognitive processes in different ways. Most people and thus most cognitive scientists likely don't realize the importance of the difference between sex-based biology and gender identity and have been relying upon an outdated belief that the two are interchangeable. Because the presumption is that sex-based biology yields differences, generations of scientists have run experiments to purposefully find differences between the brains of men and women. Yet instead of assuming a binary and analyzing data based upon it, we should be searching for where and how gender is truly conceptualized in the brain, as that can yield much more information about the differences between sex-based biology and gender identity in ways that will help us continue to separate and define the two topics.



## 4 Queer language in practice

The concept on nonbinary gender is a unique lens through which to study the evolution of the English language as it is embedded in society, has not been expressed through language before, and encounters large amounts of pushback. New words are constantly being created and spread to others, with some such as *nonbinary* becoming widespread while others like the pronouns *xe/xem/xyr* fading out of usage. In recent years, many more words have been created or been made popular when talking about LGBTQ topics. For example, the acronym LGBT was created during the civil rights movement by a community of people who needed a term to describe themselves. Google Ngram Viewer, a tool that reports the relative frequency of words used in books up until 2008, finds the first usage of *LGBT* in 1975. *LGBTQ* isn't printed until eight years later in 1983 ("LGBT, LGBTQ" n.d.). These queer communities get to create words and imbue them with connotations not tied to traditional perspectives about gender, which is essential for communicating and being afforded respect for their true identities.

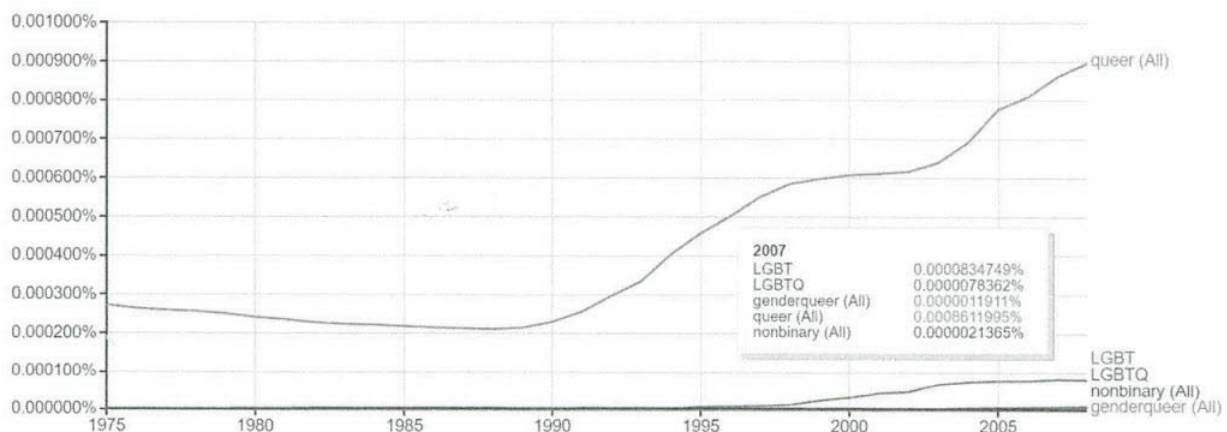


Figure 3. Relative frequency of queer-related words in books, 1975-2008. Genderqueer, nonbinary, and LGBTQ were still barely in print by 2008.

Common identity terms can be a source of strength and community. Indeed, as Dean Spade explains, we must consider all of “how identity terms are fundamentally strategic, how we

can use them to define opposition at any given moment, but how they also include policing powers that are painful and displacing” (2001-2). While for some, these identity terms may feel validating and give people a sense of connection to others, those same terms can cause others to feel that they don’t fit into the community, for example, feeling not “queer enough” because of a certain mode of presentation that may not be as outspokenly subversive as another’s expression (Hardy, 2017).

We have explored, through certain examples, the power of language and identity labels to make people feel seen, heard, and understood. We now look at specific cases in which terms were used to denigrate and demean certain communities, then reclaimed by those communities into words of power. While the road to reclamation of words may be long and uncomfortable, especially in the middle when some laud its use yet the negative connotation is still evoked for others, the end result of reclamation is arguably more powerful than the creation of new words with less of a history of struggle and victory.

#### 4.1 Language power dynamics

In gender studies, we often discuss subverting the dominant narrative that was built to uphold a patriarchal system and society. We come up with plays on words like *history* versus *herstory* to emphasize the erasure of women’s contributions to society and the need for more representation. But when we refer to this ‘narrative,’ we mean the lives and perspectives that are elevated; we rarely think about the words used to tell that story. Because language evolves within societies, with dialects differing across the country based on many factors including history and immigration, the chosen narrative dominates not just due to its content, but due to the language that has been shaped and molded to empower one group while disempowering others. It is time to question more than the narrative, because “[w]ho is master matters much more, however,

when we turn to words and concepts that play a more central role in our informal, everyday theories of ourselves and our social worlds, our cultural values and ideologies” (McConnell-Ginet, 2002, p. 152).

Power hierarchies exist even between dialects of American English. People grow up to speak the dialect used in their region, and a person’s own variety of English may change over their lifetime, for example if they attend college in a different part of the country. African American English is a dialect named for its cultural history within the U.S. and has unique linguistic features such as the habitual *be*. Yet sometimes putting a label on a language essentializes it, in this case formalizing the connection between blackness and a certain set of linguistic rules.<sup>3</sup> Because we are not nearly a post-racial society, blackness is still sometimes considered lesser, and skin color is a marker for discrimination. Racism has caused some people to consider AAE to be ‘broken English’ despite its normal grammatical rules, resulting in speakers of AAE to be profiled as unintelligent and untrustworthy no matter who they are. Our former president Barack Obama is an example of someone fluent in multiple varieties of English, being able to speak both a more standard variety of American English as well as AAE. He participates in what is called code-switching or styleshifting—changing the version of English he speaks in order to best relate to his audience—using AAE phrases such as “Nah, we straight” when speaking to a Black employee at Ben’s Chili Bowl (Alim & Smitherman, 2012). Obama is considered ‘too black’ by his critics, who disvalue and actively dislike his ability to connect with others through his skillful use of dialects. Racial and other types of discrimination continue in many forms, one of which is today’s phenomenon of linguistic profiling due to hierarchies of languages.

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<sup>3</sup> While we look at AAE and reclamation of the term *nigger* in this chapter, discourse about race and language involves much more that are not covered in this thesis. See Rickford (2016) to read about the growing field of raciolinguistics.



Less easily demonstrable, however, are the power dynamics perpetuated within each dialect of American English because they suffuse the very words that we use. When one group has constantly dominated a civilization, they have kept control over what topics are deemed important enough to even talk about and have also shaped the ways in which those topics are discussed. A quick case study is of the term *boy*, which is used very commonly in normal modern conversation to refer to a young male child. As far back as the 1300s, but more importantly during the eras of slavery and segregation in the United States and as recently as the mid-1900s, the term *boy* was used by white people to refer to slaves and servants of color (“*Boy*,” n.d.). *Boy* was used to continuously cement the power hierarchy between those in charge—middle and upper-class whites—and the powerless—laborers of color, who were viewed as worth less than others. The modern usage of *boy* to refer to any male child lacks the offensiveness of past usages, but retains the hierarchy of power. Boys are allowed to grow up and around puberty change from *boys* to *guys* or *men*, at which point they are treated as adults with increasing independence. Girls, however, remain *girls* who are not allowed the power of respect and independence they deserve, implications of which were discussed in the previous chapter.

Our language is reliant upon our history, and as such American English is tied to the power hierarchies between people of different genders, sexual orientations, races, and other facets of identity from the forceful colonization of the continent to the modern day. The dominant group has over the centuries reinforced one narrative in which being male, white, and heterosexual are normal, and then perpetuated the use of specific words that connote and cement that power imbalance in place. One such case is with the term *queer*, which was used by the

dominant group to demean those they saw as different and perverted due to their sexual orientation, but which has since been reclaimed into an identity of pride.

#### 4.1.1 Reclamation of *queer*

The term *queer* used to simply mean “strange, weird, abnormal.” Now it is claimed proudly as a descriptor of one’s identity, used as the umbrella term for those who challenge heteronormativity with non-heterosexual sexual orientations and non-cisgender gender identities. Unlike the original acronym LGBT which denotes specific identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, the added Q for queer allows people to self-define beyond the listed four categories or not define themselves at all. McConnell-Ginnet emphasizes that *queer* “does not draw definitive boundaries. It leaves room to welcome those who identify with none of the standard categories of sexual minorities but nonetheless feel excluded by dominant heterosexual norms” (2002, p. 232).

*Queer*, of course, hasn’t always had a positive meaning. For decades it was used as an epithet, a slur against gay people who were seen as abnormal and perverting the common mores of a society that valued heterosexuality and equated biological sex with gender. Only in the 1990s did some LGBTQ people reclaim the word *queer* and use it to define their own identity. The reappropriation of language allows people to navigate a power hierarchy and claim back power that has been previously used to oppress them. According to Galinsky et al., “by reclaiming names formerly soaked in derision, an individual exerts his or her agency and proclaims his or her rejection of the presumed moral order” (2003, p. 232). Reclaiming language never means just taking back a term, but also necessitates reinterpreting its definition and the contexts in which it is used. *Queer* was used to make people feel as though they were abnormal in a negative sense. Part of its journey to reappropriation was making people understand that

“deviance or abnormality is itself not necessarily a bad thing, thereby promoting a celebration of diversity” (Galinsky et al., 2003, p. 232). The value of the term has changed, but the origins of the word remain.

To consider the difference in how different words can be and are reclaimed by their communities, we can look at the reclamation of the term *nigger* and its derivative *nigga* in reference to black people. In certain communities, the term is used as a sign of affection, familiarity, and solidarity instead of the earlier derogatory connotation. *Nigger* is most commonly used within a subset of black people and not used by others because it is considered a racial slur closely tied to the dark history of slavery. Social psychologist Adam Galinsky and others contrast *queer* with *nigger* by noting that “[w]hereas ‘queer’ was meant to highlight not only positive distinctiveness but also inclusiveness, ‘nigger’ has been used for the purposes of exclusiveness” (2003, p. 233). This phrasing seems to support one word’s journey to reclamation over another, but how a word is used or reclaimed should always be the marginalized community’s choice.

While we may not be able to know conclusively why these reclaimed words differ in usage, we can posit a few reasons. Blackness is more visible than queerness and thus attaching the word *queer* to an LGBTQ person makes them and their identity visible, but attaching the word *nigger* to a black person adds an unnecessary layer of connotation to that person’s race. *Queer* is also used almost exclusively as an adjective as opposed to a noun, making it an important part of a person’s identity but leaving room to acknowledge a shared humanity that is forgotten when a white person evokes the racial power hierarchies in our nation and calls a person a noun like *nigger*. Also, words that are taken on by individuals as identity labels open up space for others to also identify those individuals with their chosen labels, while some other



words are used to describe a person, but are not used for self-identification. People self-identify as *queer*, but rarely does anyone say “I am a *nigger*.” These differences in visibility, part of speech, and connection with identity vary for *queer*, *nigger*, and a variety of other words such as *bitch* which are somewhere along the process of being reclaimed.

The colloquial verb form *queering* nowadays means upsetting the status quo of heteronormativity and elevating LGBTQ stories as important contributors to the human experience. “To make things queer” no longer just means to make things strange, but always carries the undertone of challenging the current power structures of our society. We can queer office spaces by adding rainbow accessories, we can queer, and we can queer linguistics by making sure to question our underlying assumptions about how sexuality and gender function and are presented in society before even considering specific language use.

One issue with the terms *queer* and *gay* is that they retain the androcentrism of the society in which they were created. Even when reappropriation of a term occurs and a marginalized population flips a derogatory term to become one of identity and power, its newly positive connotation still brings along with it the term’s history. From a survey of many definitions of *queer*, McConnell-Ginet finds that the term used to usually refer to men (2002). While *queer* now encompasses all non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities, the androcentrism of the surrounding society can’t be forgotten. An issue within the queer community is the continued focus on the stories of white gay men at the expense of doubly marginalized members of the community. Other LGBTQ people who are non-cisgender male or are people of color must constantly compare their queer identities to those white gay males with whom they may share neither a sexual nor gender identity. The power hierarchies within western

society are not gone simply because the LGBTQ community by nature challenges normative views on identity—they still must be constantly and consciously dismantled.

Indeed, context of word usage is incredibly important. Words can only be reappropriated if they were appropriated by a dominant group first, and connotations differ between people who use them. Especially when the timeline of reappropriation is not well-defined, a word can still hold a negative connotation for one person while having a positive bent for another. Words that are related to a certain group mean one thing to the in-group and another to the out-group. The difference in meaning is how slurs are created and used to demean specific groups, highlighting the importance for groups to have their own terms that they claim and use. Reclaiming terms often takes many years and is difficult since it requires an organic shift of culture and language. Despite the difficulty, it has had some successes as described above, and the power found in claiming terms to describe what an individual or community experiences and feels is central to a community's progression towards visibility and freedom.

#### 4.2 Claiming identity

One of the most nerve-wracking decisions for anyone who identifies as LGBTQ is whether and when to disclose their sexual and gender identities, be that to close friends and family or to the general public. Because gender identity and sexual orientation are not automatically visible, for example compared to skin color, a person may feel safer and less exposed if their true identity remains unknown in communities less accepting of LGBTQ identities. Being out has been linked with increased rates of victimization, especially for youth in schools (Kosciw, 2015). Bullying and cyberbullying still plague schools, with children's identities being thrown back in their faces through slurs such as *faggot* or *that's so gay*. Each individual has to weigh for themselves the possibility of targeted victimization against the potential



benefits of acceptance and increased confidence depending on the specifics of their own societal microcosm and experiences. For some individuals, the people in their lives would eagerly adopt new identity labels or pronouns. But for others, those around them could purposefully misgender them and use incorrect pronouns or their deadname, the birth name they choose to no longer use, and coming out would instead have the effect of handing others the power to use language to demean them. Even if such missteps are not made on purpose, many microaggressions occur via language—not saying anything can erase someone’s gender identity just as much as making a negative statement—and many genderqueer people have to face at least a short but stressful period of adjustment in which they are misgendered and have to constantly choose whether to come out to new people or correct others’ use of their pronouns and name.

Sexual identity and gender identity development are generally thought to progress through three steps. First, an individual becomes aware that their sexual orientation or gender identity differs from normative identities, then they label themselves as LGBTQ, and then they disclose their LGBTQ identity to others. The second and third steps rely upon having the language to find a label that feels correct for an individual, and many people often proclaim a feeling of relief once they hear via media or some other method a label such as *transgender* that resonates with them. Some, however, may never disclose their identity to others for fear of judgment or other personal reasons. And of course one’s identity development is not over once one discloses to others their personal identity; while openness and outness are correlated with better health outcomes, disclosing is not a perfect indicator of personal contentedness. Either way, it is thought that the more youth are able to understand their intersecting identities and integrate them together, the better their health will be (Kosciw, 2015). And with more and more people identifying as non-heterosexual or non-cisgender, up to 20% of millennials from 7% of



baby boomers, according to a recent survey by the media organization Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), making sure supportive and correct terminology is available for self-identification is more important than ever (Steinmetz, 2017).

Claiming identity is important on both the personal and community levels. In the 1980s, Gayle Rubin wrote about the dangerous public discourse about sexualities deemed abnormal and how people passed value judgments on others' lives based on faulty assumptions of what is normal versus abnormal and thus unacceptable (1984). She spoke of how homosexuality was demonized, and how allowing others to tell your story can lead to drastic misrepresentation in public media and discourse. So, too, do the dangers extend to gender identity. Claiming a nonbinary gender identity allows one to shape their own story, share their own narrative, and tell their own truth instead of letting cisgender people speak over their silence. Indeed, this bolsters not only one's own self-confidence and self-worth, but that of the entire community, as the more positive stories of nonbinary people that are distributed, the more acceptance the community as a whole will encounter.

#### 4.3 Non-discrimination laws

Discrimination based on gender identity has yet to be prohibited on a federal level. Only eighteen states and Washington D.C. have protections based on both sexual orientation and gender identity; an additional three states protect individuals on the basis of only sexual orientation ("Non-Discrimination Laws"). These protections only cover interactions in cases of housing, employment, and public accommodations, meaning that an individual has no legal recourse if they are worried about discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in private relationships such as with family members, where rejection often hurts the most.

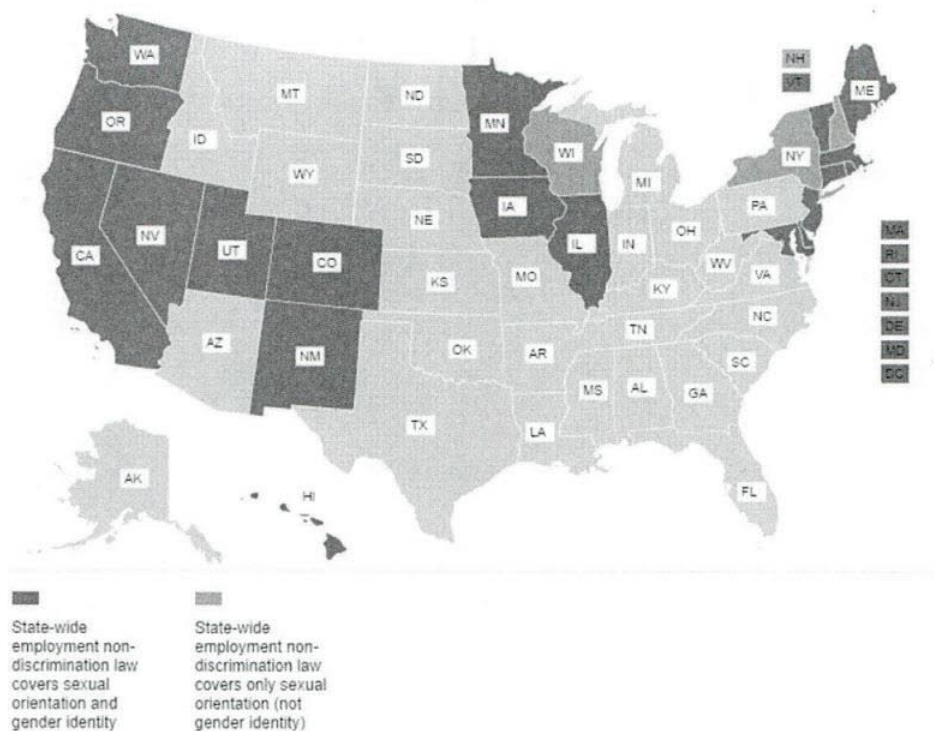


Figure 4. *Non-Discrimination Laws: State by State Information, n.d.* Retrieved from <https://www.aclu.org/map/non-discrimination-laws-state-state-information-map>

Laws such as Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Law, Title IX of 1972, and the 2013 reauthorization of the 1994 Violence Against Women Act have been interpreted by certain courts and agencies as protecting people on the basis of gender identity, but opposing courts and agencies have interpreted the same laws as not protective of transgender or gender non-conforming individuals (Denniston, 2016). The nuances of what is considered “sex discrimination” and what “sex” really means in these laws written before society as a whole had a more correct understanding of sex versus gender are points of contention across the country. For LGBTQ supporters and activists, interpretations of the law that extend to gender identity are necessary for trans and nonbinary people to be protected. At the same time, however, classifying *gender identity* under or as equivalent to *sex* is contrary to the understanding of what gender identity truly is, and why trans and nonbinary people feel different from their sex-assigned-at-

birth. Activists face a catch-22 in which to guarantee protections under the law for non-cisgender people, they have to incorrectly define the terms in law.

A similar situation occurred in 2005 when Maine's Human Rights Act defined sexual orientation as "a person's actual or perceived heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality or gender identity or expression" ("Human Rights Act," 2005). While this act is positive in that it protects people from discrimination based on their gender identity, it leaves written in law a blatantly incorrect definition of gender identity falling under sexual orientation, concepts that get conflated enough in society. Now that the rights are afforded, however, less motivation to change the wording of the law exists because the effect of the law on protections from discrimination is the same; the effect on people's understanding of gender identity, however, remains disappointing.

In the past few years, many states have proposed and pushed forwards bills that restrict trans people's use of bathrooms, and thus ability to exist in public spaces. First, it's important to remember that these bills are not about bathrooms—the topic of the bills is simply one way to attack human rights under the guise of protecting children from sexual predators which is based off of unsubstantiated accusations. House Bill 2 in North Carolina, officially titled the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act, intended to prohibit cities from passing laws to allow transgender people to use the bathrooms that matched their gender identity (Gordon et al., 2016). Texas' current SB6 follows in the same vein and would ban cities from enacting non-discrimination laws while also barring transgender people from accessing the bathrooms consistent with their gender identities (Bolles, 2017). Students are facing these same issues of access from as young as elementary school. Gavin Grimm, a high schooler in Virginia, has been fighting since 2015 to be able to use the boys' restroom at his school in Gloucester County. His



case was finally supposed to be heard by the Supreme Court on March 28, 2017, but in early March the Court took his case off their calendar, citing that Trump had repealed the Obama-era protections of transgender students' access to bathrooms and other gendered facilities in all schools receiving federal funding (Williams, 2017). The 4<sup>th</sup> Circuit court, which had ruled in Grimm's favor, recently released a statement in continued support, making clear that some people in the legal system understand the real implications these "bathroom bills" have on the lived experiences of trans people: "It's about protecting the rights of transgender people in public spaces and not forcing them to exist on the margins. It's about governmental validation of the existence and experiences of transgender people, as well as the simple recognition of their humanity" (Kenney, 2017).

By couching these bills in terms of "protecting the vulnerable," those who support them are in fact doing the exact opposite, as 30% of trans individuals have been or are homeless and one in four K-12 students who have been out or perceived as out while in school have been physically assaulted (Herman et al., 2016). Trans individuals, especially those of color, are the most victimized and vulnerable group in the U.S., but using the euphemism of whether or not trans people are allowed to use bathrooms to actually mean whether or not they're allowed to exist in public spaces instead of being relegated to private spaces where they can live safely is a twisting of language used to demean and discriminate. With no conclusive decisions about bathroom access having yet been made on a federal level, non-cisgender people and their allies are waiting for one such case to reach the U.S. Supreme Court and be given a final decision, hopefully codifying gender identity as a protected class while correctly defining in law and in society the term *gender identity*.

#### 4.4 Government-issued identity documents

Identity documents are of deep importance to many transgender and nonbinary individuals, as they are legal documents that can be used to defend against discrimination. Take, for example, HB2 which would have required individuals to use the bathroom that matched the gender marker on an individual's birth certificate. A trans individual who had gone through all the steps necessary to update their gender marker on their birth certificate would, under HB2, be allowed to use the restroom matching their gender identity. But all other trans people who hadn't yet been able to update their birth certificate or who didn't want to make the legal change, would instead legally be required to use the bathroom that didn't match their gender identity. Thus, having identity documents that match one's gender identity provides at least one extra layer of protection from discriminatory laws and practices, although it doesn't protect against everything.

Amending identity documents can be cost-prohibitive, not to mention intensely legally confusing. In many states, name changes have to be court-ordered and approved, with some states still requiring people to publish their name change in a local newspaper, an antiquated practice that puts trans people in danger by exposing their personal choices and gender identity to many who may be transphobic. Gender markers are even more difficult to change, as that requires a physician to submit an affidavit stating at least that an individual "has completed medical intervention, appropriate for that individual, for the purpose of permanent sex reassignment and is not of the sex recorded on the record" (Registry of Vital Records and Statistics, n.d.). While Massachusetts uses the above wording and allows gender marker amendments for those who have not undergone surgical treatment, some states are more strict. Many states still require that an individual has had some type of surgery related to their gender before their gender markers can be changed on legal documents, which is a severely prohibitive



requirement due not only to the cost of gender confirmation surgeries, but also because not all trans people want surgery. The laws, as they are worded, assume that gender must be related to the structure of one's genitalia, which is counter to our understanding of how gender identity differs based on the individual, and some trans people want to change their bodies while others don't. These outdated surgical requirements pit one's legal rights against their bodily autonomy, pushing some trans people to undergo physical changes they'd rather not simply in order to be afforded slightly more legal protection and legal validation of their gender identity. All these issues of cost, access, desire, and more affect transgender people's ability to amend their name or gender on their identity documents, and less than half of those who want to amend their documents have been able to do so, as seen in Figure 5.

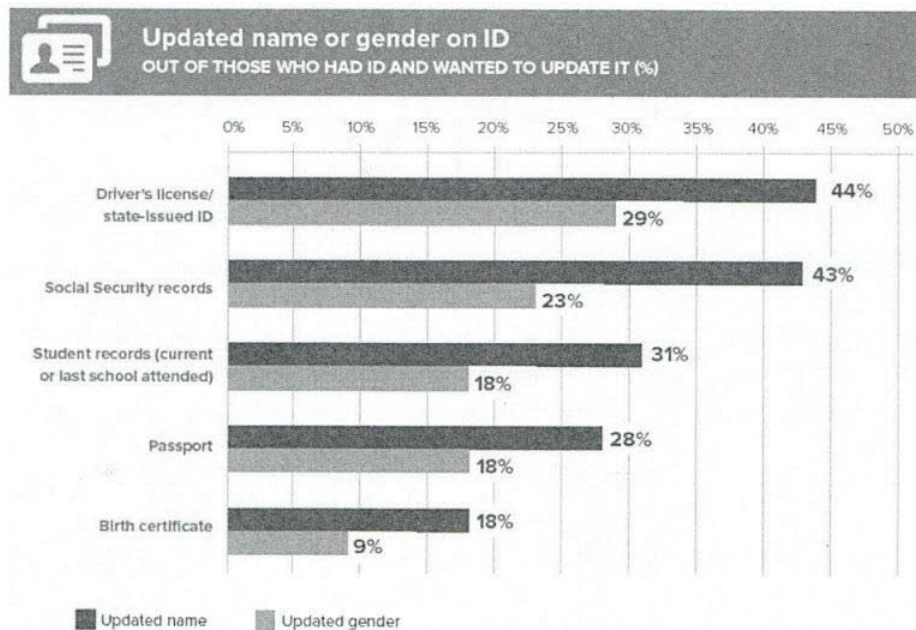


Figure 5. Updated name or gender on ID documents. Reprinted from *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*, by S.E. James, S. E., J. L. Herman, S. Rankin, M. Keisling, L. Mottet, & M. Anafi, 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS%20Full%20Report%20-%20FINAL%201.6.17.pdf>

While updating identity documents is difficult for trans people because of all the legal and financial hurdles, it's actually impossible for nonbinary people. Very few states legally



recognize genders other than male and female, although in 2016 an Oregon court allowed Jamie Shupe to change their legal gender identity to *nonbinary*. This change, however, did not affect any of the common identity documents such as their driver's license or birth certificate, as Oregon still only recognizes the binary M/F on those (Segal, 2016). In January of this year, two Democratic California state senators introduced SB179 which would create a third-gender option for California birth certificates and driver's licenses (O'Hara, 2017). Until California or another state passes a similar bill through its legislature, genderqueer people have to choose a gender marker that doesn't truthfully reflect their identity. And the possibility of marking a non-M, non-F gender on federal identity documents seems even further away.

#### 4.5 Healthcare

Healthcare is one particular field in which acknowledging and affirming transgender identities and the specific needs of this population is crucial. According to the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, one in four transgender individuals reports difficulty accessing care due to conflicts with their insurance not covering gender identity-related care. One in three transgender individuals face some sort of discrimination from a healthcare provider in their time of need, and a whole quarter of transgender people fail to seek the care that they need because of fear of being discriminated against or mistreated (Herman et al., 2016). It is no surprise that transgender people are afraid of encountering barriers when asking for help and at their most vulnerable, afraid of healthcare providers who don't validate and accept their identities. Some providers oppose the patient's need for gender-related care, and some providers continue to misgender patients by using incorrect pronouns or names that are dysphoric to the individual. These microaggressions, whether intended or not, in which a person's identity is not respected create a

barrier between patient and healthcare provider, keeping gender non-conforming people from seeking care for fear of having their identities invalidated.

Occupations that have to do with treating and caring for LGBTQ individuals have become increasingly cognizant of the importance of LGBTQ-affirmative therapy. One of the basic tenets of LGBTQ-affirmative therapy is using the correct words to refer to an individual, including words regarding their name, gender identity, and pronouns. As Davies et al. maintain, “When outer expression is congruent with an inner sense of self, transgender people may find increased comfort, confidence, and improved function in everyday life” (2015, p. 117). Practices that validate and support a person’s gender identity are paramount to increasing their self-confidence and self-image. Without the correct terminology to use for certain facets of identity, marginalized communities are increasingly delegitimized and hidden. Creating or reclaiming these words will allow trans and nonbinary people to find peace in identity, form coalitions and communities, and demand equal treatment and respect. Indeed, some targeted therapies for LGBTQ people include those for voice and communication, intended so that a trans individual can learn to speak in a manner that they themselves perceive to be congruent with their gender identity (Davies, 2015).

Mental health outcomes for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals are unsurprisingly bleak. 40% of transgender individuals have attempted suicide, according to the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey of 27,715 transgender-identifying individuals (Herman et al., 2016). Many of these are results of the larger society not understanding gender identity and othering people they see as different from themselves instead of welcoming them and attempting to understand or accept others’ lives. Trans women of color, especially black trans women, are especially in danger of physical assault. Their double-marginalized identities put them at risk of



targeted victimization. In 2016, at least twenty-three trans people were murdered in the U.S., with all but a few being women of color (“Violence Against the Transgender Community,” 2016). By late February of 2017, another seven trans women of color had been murdered (“These are the Trans People Killed,” 2017). Our culture fails to find a common language and common understanding of *gender identity* that can elicit empathy and bridge the gaps in understanding of transgender identities and issues, setting the scene for these tragic outcomes.

One specific facet of healthcare in which language is central is with respect to the diagnosis of being transgender or nonbinary. The Diagnostic Statistical Manual version 5 (DSM-V) lists a set of symptoms under the label of *Gender Dysphoria*. The DSM-IV formerly labeled it *Gender Identity Disorder*. These medical labels are necessary in order for people to get official medical diagnoses so that they can access treatment, but the words themselves often don’t resonate with individuals who see them as too medicalized, pathologizing, or not descriptive of one’s personal experience. This medical diagnoses is also tied with people’s legal right to change gender markers on identification documents such as birth certificates and passports, so the language that psychiatrists decided to use to describe and diagnose transgender and gender non-conforming people has far-reaching effects in people’s lives.

#### 4.6 Social media

Society is still working to catch up in its understanding of the complexity of gender. In the meantime, much of the talk evolving around LGBTQ communities and nonbinary gender are in online spaces. Gender identity is like any other facet of identity—many young people have not yet been explicitly or implicitly taught to discriminate against those who may express, present, or identify themselves outside of the gender binary, and thus young people are often the most likely group to be accepting of those who are exploring and learning about their gender identity. In



some communities on Tumblr, it has become to norm to list one's pronouns in the profile even if one is cisgender, as a sign of solidarity and as a statement that presentation does not equal gender—that gender identity cannot always be read just from looking at someone. Many blogs solely about gender identity exist, for example *theyismypronoun.com*, *nonbinarystats.tumblr.com*, *genderneutralpronoun.wordpress.com*, with authors sharing their own experiences and raising the experiences of other genderqueer people. This generation has an unprecedented ability to share their identity online, which adds a new medium for activism and story-sharing that people around the world have access to.

It is no wonder, then, that many people want to be able to identify as their true selves in their online presences. In February of 2014, Facebook announced that it was opening its arms to gender non-conforming individuals by offering a choice of additional gender labels in addition to the binary male and female (Molloy, 2014). Many people praised Facebook for its progressive move towards accepting, understanding, and validating its users' gender identities. President Sarah Kat Ellis joined the adulation, saying “Once again, Facebook is on the forefront of ensuring that the platform is safe and accessible to all of its LGBT users” (Ferraro, 2013).

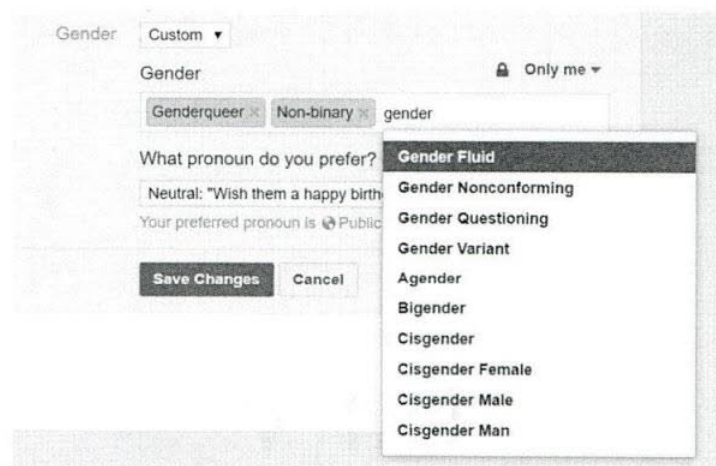


Figure 6. Gender options on Facebook. Facebook allows individuals to write in their own genders, but the subversion of the binary only exists on the surface.

And yet, as Carleton University Assistant Professor of Communication Rena Bivens points out, no matter the surface, the underlying structure of Facebook's platform remains binary (2015). Each person who signs up for an account still has to choose either female or male from the beginning, and this is what will be coded on Facebook no matter the custom gender identity a person may change on their profile. In this capitalist society, Facebook will prioritize its data collection for targeted marketing and advertisement revenue over genuine acceptance and understanding of nonbinary people who are trying to escape the binary that those marketing tactics are built off of. This is a microcosm and a metaphor for how our society works—no matter how much we preach acceptance and think we're achieving it, our minds have been taught to think in binaries and we must consciously deconstruct that within our minds and language in order to truly move forward. We must look at the underlying structures and consider our systematic binarism in order to truly challenge the erasure of transgender and nonbinary identities.

Here the tension between adding more terms to refer to a wider range of gender identities versus recognizing the array of gender identities by doing away with terms at all comes to a head. Keeping track of an ever-increasing number of gender identities is impossible both for an individual but also for companies that keep track of this data for marketing purposes. But there could theoretically be as many gender identities as there are people in the world, since each individual's definition of and experience with gender varies based on upbringing, background, and context

## 5 Conclusion

Society is fluidly ever-changing, and language is constantly evolving to reflect those societal changes, whether through new youth slang or words created to reflect the nuances of newly-unmasked gender identities. The ways in which words and categories such as *queer* are used have real effects on the everyday lives of nonbinary people. Being able to claim identity through finding those labels that correctly reflect one's identity is both relieving and validating of an individual's internal feelings, which is the first step to self-acceptance. In an era when the federal administration wants to ignore and erase the lives and experiences of LGBTQ individuals by not collecting data about LGBTQ identity on the 2020 census as had been proposed, finding other ways to use language to both recognize and assert identity is paramount (Green, 2017). Only through using a common language with terms that can be used to discuss and understand the vast array of gender identities will the rest of society be able to understand and respect our diversity of identities.

We have discussed how gender studies has traditionally centered on the binary, and we have explored the nonbinary challenges that allow individuals to choose how they present and are considered by others. Fields such as sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics demonstrate the capability to help expand our understanding of the interaction between language and gender identity as they affect society and the mind, so long as researchers in those field affirm gender identity as separate from sex and work to no longer assume a binary that biases study results towards conclusions that support binary distinctions where there may be none. Queer theory provides an intentionally subversive basis from which to explore language and its uses in society and policy without presuming that gender exists as a binary or even a continuum between two poles.



When considering the many inequalities that transgender and nonbinary people face today, the centrality of language cannot be overstated. Whether words are reclaimed or created, community-gathering terms such as *queer* and *nonbinary* are fundamental to how far the LGBTQ rights movement has reached today and the strength with which it will move forward. Word choice in federal and local policies can be used both to discriminate against and to protect nonbinary individuals. Some policies protect people based on their gender identity but demonstrate a lack of understanding of what it truly is, for example considering it a subset of sexual orientation as Maine's Human Rights Act does; other trans and nonbinary people face laws that use language to explicitly discriminate against them.

With a more expansive and inclusive language, more people will be able to empathize with gender non-conforming populations, and issues of discrimination and hatred will lessen in severity as understanding increases. But fear and misunderstanding are often the first reaction to new concepts such as nonbinary gender identity, and people use language far too often to demonize and to other groups that are different. By doing so, the power of language is corrupted for discriminatory purposes, and these othered communities must work even harder to claim affirming language for themselves. While our language continues to slowly evolve with society, we can choose to use it as a tool to spread discussions and knowledge about gender identity to the public, bridging gaps in understanding and building empathy to lead to a more inclusive future.

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