

FORMALIZING PRONOUNS

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ABOUT PRONOUNS

PRONOUNS

- **What are pronouns?**
- Content vs Function Words
- Features of pronouns

PRONOUNS

- **Pronouns are replacements** for longer words or phrases
- **Replace a whole phrase**, not just individual words
 - The mayor of San Francisco in 1998 said... → He said ...
*He of San Francisco said...
 - I like that person over there with the yellow hat → I like them ...
*I like that them
- Different phrases can all be replaced by pronouns:
 - Chelsea Manning, my amazing spouse, a student in my class, every student in the college, anyone on Earth...

PRONOUNS

- **Content vs function** words behave slightly differently
- **Content words** include almost all nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.
 - *Retractable, transparency, glaze, foliage, sheep*
 - You can learn new ones more easily
 - They change more quickly over time (both in meaning and how they are used)
- **Function words** include articles, modals, subordinating conjunctions...
 - *and, the, each, would, all, can, not*
 - Harder to learn new ones; more resistant to change over time
 - Glue that holds the sentence together

PRONOUNS AS FUNCTION WORDS

- Are pronouns content or function words?
 - *I, you, we, he, she, they, it*
 - ✓ Resistant to (rapid) change
 - ✓ Harder to learn new ones
 - ✓ Don't have a lot of independent meaning – mostly placeholders
- **But...** there's still SOME meaning there, right?
 - Difference between *he* and *she* and *it* and *they*

PRONOUNS AS “BUNDLES OF FEATURES”

- Linguists analyze pronouns as having “features” – each different pronoun form is due to different sets of features
 - **Number:** singular or plural?
 - **Person:** including the speaker, or the addressee, or neither?
 - ***Gender:** “male” or “female” or “not a person” (this is simplified)
 - ***Formality:** “formal” or “informal” (also simplified)

Ex. *You* vs *y’all*

Ex. *I* vs *you*

Ex. *He* vs *she*

Ex. *Thou* vs *you*

FEATURES OF INTEREST

(THE COMPLICATED ONES)

- Pronoun features can include more than the features included here (gender, number, person, formality) but I'm focusing on **gender** and **formality**
- **The main idea:** pronoun features like gender and formality show similar properties, and their similarities can help us understand how language works
 - **Both depend on social factors** – there's no objective measure of gender or formality, they're social concepts (and don't mean anything in a vacuum outside of their social context)
 - **Both depend on context** – the meaning of a gendered or formal pronoun comes not just from which pronoun you used, but who you're talking TO, who you're talking ABOUT, and other factors
 - **Both can shift in the middle of a conversation to add more meaning**

SHIFTS IN PRONOUN USE

PRONOUN SHIFTS

- **Examples showing shifts in formality**
 - Spanish *tu* and *Usted* (like French *tu* and *Vous*) examples
 - English *thou* and *you* (historical – modern English doesn't use this distinction the same way)
- **Examples showing shifts in gender**
 - *He* vs *she* (misgendering, gender performance)
 - *They* vs *he/she* (relevance, specificity, social distance)
- Comparison between gender shifts and formality shifts

FORMALITY SHIFTS IN SPANISH

Bueno mirá: e- Yo te e- Yo: te digo:. (.)

good look.imp.vos um I you.vos um I
you.vos tell. Isg

‘Okay **loo:k(VOS)** um- I’ll **you.VOS** um-
I:’ll te:ll **you.VOS.**’

Mire: (.) en este papel (0.5) yo lo saqué del
internet

look.imp.usted on this paper I it took. Isg
of.the internet

‘**Loo:k(USTED)** (.) on this paper (0.5) I
got it off the internet’

FORMALITY SHIFTS IN ENGLISH

TAMBURLAINE: Here Turk, wilt **thou** have a clean trencher?

BAJAZETH: Ay, tyrant, and more meat.

TAMBURLAINE: Soft, Sir, **you** must be dietee, too much eating will make you surfeit.

- Context: Act IV of *Tamburlaine the Great* by Marlowe (1587)
- Tamburlaine has the Turkish emperor Bajazeth captive; captor -> captive expected to be 'thou,' 'you' is mockery (ironic, not respectful - playing on the lost power of the king)

GENDER SHIFTS (*HE VS SHE*)

Content warning: the next slide includes intentional misgendering of an incarcerated trans woman. This slide is included to demonstrate how misgendering is directly associated with conveying negative attitudes about a specific person

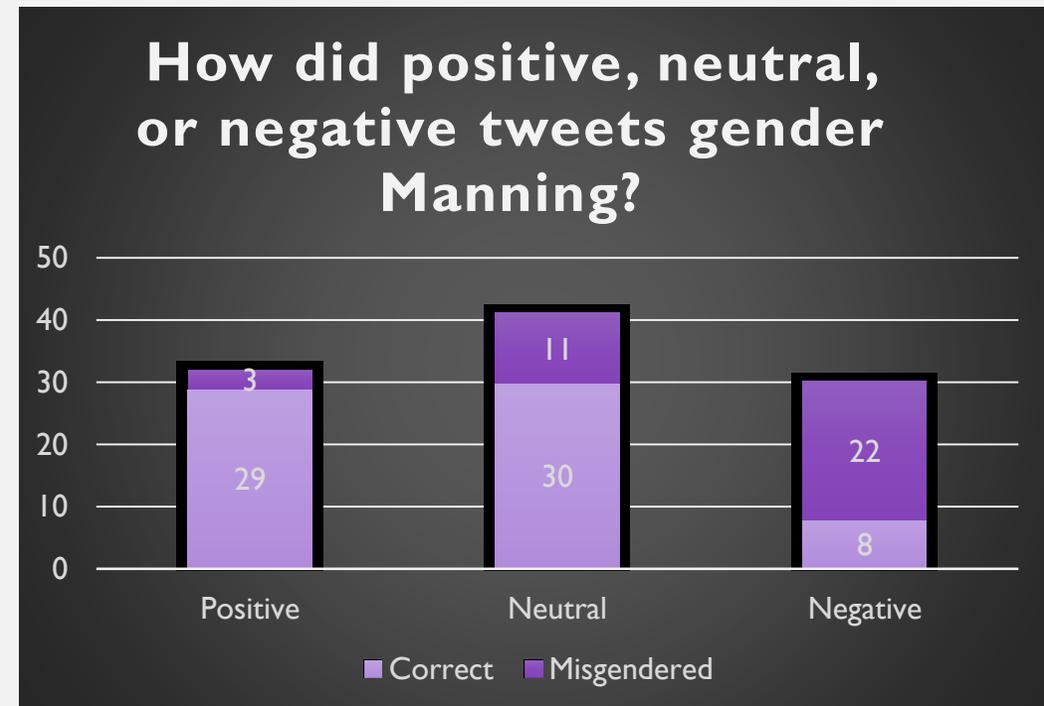
- **Misgendering** is the misattribution of gender to a person
 - **When transgender people get misgendered**, it is frequently but not always a misattribution of their *assigned sex at birth* (as opposed to their self-identified and social-relational gender)
 - **Misgendering harms trans people**, results in psychological stress and distress, and predicts worse health/mental health outcomes (McLemore 2015, 2017, a.o.)
 - **Linguistic misgendering** is one (very common) form of misgendering – but it isn't the only way people get misgendered.

CHELSEA MANNING

- People tweeting about Manning use *he* when expressing negative content about her, and *she* when expressing positive content about her:

(1) Can this Bradley Manning commutation by Obama be reversed? R there other charges *he* can face? This is a HUGE miscarriage of #justice!

(2) What Chelsea Manning did was heroic. *She* exposed unethical actions in government. *She* is a hero.



GENDER SHIFTS (*HE VS SHE*)

- In some instances, using different gender features is not about the actual gender (or arguments about the actual gender) of the person – **the gender features can stand in for other meanings**
- Meanings in the context of drag performance: *Ru Paul's Drag Race*
 - Aimed at popular/mainstream audiences (not completely intra-LGBTQ+ community norms)
 - Competition format (elimination-based) linked with art/craft of drag performance (including costume, makeup, acting, choreography, all the good performing art stuff)
 - Heterogenous group of competitors: cis (gay) men, trans women, and nonbinary people have all been competitors

THE CASE OF LAST PLACE QUEENS

Context: Season 9 of *Ru Paul's Drag Race*; Jaymes Mansfield isn't doing great. First contestant eliminated; judges use *he* and *she* at different points when talking about Jaymes's performance



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

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

Transcript source: https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/view_episode_scripts.php?tv-show=rupauls-drag-race-2009&episode=s09e02

Image source: https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/Jaymes_Mansfield

THE CASE OF LAST PLACE QUEENS

Maybe *he* means the performer and *she* means the character? Not in these data – both are about Jaymes's performance in the competition. *He* connected more to judgment/doubt, *she* connected to sympathy/rooting for an underdog



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GENDER SHIFTS (*THEY* VS OTHERS)

- Singular *they* has no gender features – so it allows more flexibility
- Considerations:
 - How much information you want to give out → Be concise or be specific?
 - What information is relevant to the conversation
 - How you feel about guessing when you don't know → try not to lie or guess wrong
 - What you think is polite (and who you're trying to be polite to)
 - How you feel about a person
 - How others feel about that person

THEY AS ONE OF THE OPTIONS

- (1) Did that person forget **their** coat? ← No information = unknown
- (2) Did your student finish **their** exam? ← No information = irrelevant
- (3) Did your partner get **their** tax return? ← No information = privacy

The neutral option lets you decide how much information to give – for a variety of reasons

THEY AS ONE OF THE OPTIONS

Laurel_i told me that _____i got a job in San Francisco.

Considerations	More information	Only relevant info
<i>They</i>	*! (less specific)	
 <i>She</i>		* (gender is not relevant)

Considerations	Only relevant info	Be concise
<i>They</i>	*! (withholding relevant info)	
 <i>She</i>		* (gives less information)

GENDER SHIFTS (*THEY* VS OTHERS)

- Relevance and social distance: **if someone is closer to you (socially) it is strange to use less social information**

“So the last time I saw my parents, I noticed something odd. When I talk about nonbinary friends using singular “they,” they don’t bat an eye. Total comprehension, no complaints. When I talk about my nonbinary spouse using singular “they,” they get CONFUSED. [...] Well, here’s another difference that sometimes matters. A lot of people can use singular “they” for a specific person SO LONG AS THAT PERSON IS NOT VERY IMPORTANT TO THEM. [...] So here’s my theory. My parents have distal singular “they.” When I use “they” to talk about a friend, they accept the distal stuff. “Leah is marking that friend as unimportant. I guess she must feel kinda distant from them.” BUT THEY CAN’T DO THAT FOR MY SPOUSE”

Source: Leah Velleman on twitter: <https://twitter.com/leahvelleman/status/1082340754910003202>

TAKEAWAYS

- Formality features switch and shift in the middle of a conversation because of what speakers are trying to do in context
- So do gender features
- Gender features carry social information that is *mostly* but not *only* about the actual gender of the person you're talking about – these features can also stand in for other meanings:
 - How you feel about that person
 - What information is important to include

SIGNIFICANCE

FEATURES OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

- Welcome “gender” into the club of formal features that are highly sensitive to social factors
- Confusing facts of “gendered” language disappear when we analyze gender the same way we analyze other social-relational features
 - Can’t totally predict it based on coarse social categories – individual identities and relationships matter
 - Changing in the middle of a conversation makes sense – invoking different aspects/kinds of relationships is a way we accomplish certain goals

OVER-RULED

- Language teaching (to native speakers and second language learners) needs to change
 - **Give tendencies and factors, rather than “rules”**
 - **Prepare learners for variability**
 - **Give learners a vocabulary for discussing what’s going on**

FACTORS, NOT RULES

- Factors influencing gender features in pronouns:
 - How much information do you want to share? Is it appropriate to give more detail or less?
 - How relevant is the information you're including? How does it fit into the main idea of what you're talking about?
 - **How do other peoples' feelings factor into what you're saying?**

MISGENDERING

- **Misgendering causes significant distress for transgender people** (McLemore 2015, 2017) (Cis people also don't feel great about it! It just happens to them less often)
- Misgendering can be accidental or intentional – intent doesn't mitigate impact
- Teaching language learners (in their native language or not) about gendered language needs to include specific discussion of the **impact you can have on people**

OVERALL

- Grammatical concerns and social norms are part of a single interrelated system
- Talking about language (even functional words!) is always going to bump up against social concerns
- When deciding how to use, teach, and discuss language, we can do our best to be excellent to one another

THANK YOU!

