

Language, Gender, and Harm

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***"Language lives in society, and
so must we."***

(Rickford & King 2016)

How you design your science has the power to help or harm

A call to linguists

If we believe that:

Gender is a site of violence for many, as is sex.

Gender and sex can be different in single individuals

Gender and sex are separately but collaboratively constructed through social mechanisms such as speech acts,

The language of an individual or a group holds social significance both in content and in form,

Then we must act on it:

Linguists stop conflating sex and gender (we are doing better on this one)

Linguists actively intervene in situations where language is a weapon used to harm anyone based on gender and/or sex

Linguists do not discuss, analyze, or summarize gender and/or sex in a way that supports, enables, or allows harm

Sex and gender

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

"We have been examining the interaction between gender and variation by correlating variables with sex rather than gender differences. This has been done because although an individual's gender-related place in society is a multidimensional complex that can only be characterized through careful analysis, his or her sex is generally a readily observable binary variable..." (Eckert 1989)

Gender: a run-down

- Social groups, very roughly correlated to commonalities in identity filtered into legible categories (Eckert 1989, Cheshire 2002)
- E-gender and i-gender: expression vs identity
- A spectrum, not from black to white, but a spectrum like visible light
- At least partially constituted from speech acts / language (Tannen 1990, Butler 1990)

Sex: also complicated

“...sex is generally a readily observable binary variable”
(Eckert 1989)

- Socially constructed categories of types of bodies/lives, made out of bits and bobs, very roughly correlated to common groupings of disparate traits
- Things that are taken to “mean” sex (not all causally linked or even correlated):
 - Chromosomal makeup
 - Hormone levels
 - Genital configuration
 - Body morphology
 - Assignment at birth*
- **Also made out of speech acts**

My gf is an actual amab cis girl. They wrote male on her birth certificate by mistake

— sent by Anonymous

nest:

nest-deactivated20181209:

holy shit tell your girlfriend congrats on the fun gender



fortidogi

kinda just speedran the entire transition there

In linguistics (research and pedagogy)

- **Formal treatment of gendered language**

- You need to stop saying wrong stuff about pronouns in your intro classes
- Grammatical gender interacts with social gender in some ways but is separate from it in other ways
- Trying to put a formal morphosyntactic feature on a determiner needs to have some way of interfacing with world knowledge, conversational goals, etc.

- **Sociolinguistics (all of it)**

- If you say men and women do things at different rates (variationist) but you didn't include any trans people in your study, you have no way of knowing how much sex and gender play a role
- If you did include trans people in your study, you still need to build an adequate theoretical frame around your conclusions

Variationist sociolinguistics (cont'd)

I have reason to think gender (and not sex) is correlated with my variable

- Speakers have some level of control (conscious or not) over the variable
- The variable is at least somewhat related to speakers' own conceptions of gender identity and expression*
- Transgender speakers pattern more like cisgender speakers of their same gender identity (trans and cis women pattern together)
- If transgender speakers change the behavior over the course of their transition, it is not necessarily related to biomedical aspects*
- Nonbinary people are going to be doing SOMETHING interesting

I have reason to think sex (and not gender) is correlated with my variable*

- Speakers can't control this variable even if they're trying really hard*
- There doesn't appear to be a clear pattern with measures of speakers' gender ideas
- Transgender speakers pattern more like cisgender speakers of the OPPOSITE gender identity* (trans men and cis women pattern together) *
- Transgender speakers undergoing biomedical transition show effects*
- Nonbinary people are probably also doing something weird but this time it's because that's not a coherent category w/r/t sex**

(smaller) CAUTIONS AND PITFALLS

- *The variable is at least somewhat related to speakers' own conceptions of gender identity and expression**
 - ➔ **That means you need to try and measure speakers' gender thoughts/ideas**
- *If transgender speakers change the behavior over the course of their transition, it is not necessarily related to biomedical aspects* / Transgender speakers undergoing biomedical transition show effects**
 - ➔ **You might want to talk with your subjects about their experiences with social and biomedical transition**
- *Speakers can't control this variable even if they're trying really hard**
 - ➔ **You probably need to control for what "trying really hard" means**

(serious) CAUTIONS AND PITFALLS

- I have reason to think sex (and not gender) is correlated with my variable*
 - ➔ You need to have a reasonable understanding of what ASPECT of “sex” (a constellation of traits and experiences) might be relevant
- Transgender speakers pattern more like cisgender speakers of the OPPOSITE gender identity****
 - ➔ You really need to have an idea of why that might be before you present those results
- (trans men and cis women pattern together) *****
 - ➔ If you present these results in a way that misgenders your subjects then your subjects can and should rescind permission to use their data

Follow-up: what does sex mean in sociolinguistics?

I think my variable might be related to sex and not gender

→ Okay. What aspect of sex?

Well men and women have different vocal tract size.

→ Find a way to measure or learn about their vocal tract size then.

Well men and women have different hormone levels.

→ Option 1: get IRB permission to do blood tests and get their hormone levels

→ Option 2: use populations with known differences in hormone levels (people post-menopause, pre-puberty, etc)

→ Option 3: god gave you trans people so you could control for this. Get some trans men who are on T and some who aren't (Zimman 2012)

(What does sex mean? Continued)

Well men and women are socialized differently in childhood

- Did you ask your subjects any questions about their childhood? Two important angles to investigate here:
 - What kind of gender expression did they have in childhood? You can ask them who their childhood friends were, what their favorite games were, what kind of traits they valued in themselves as a child
 - What kind of gender socialization was being imposed on them in childhood? You need to ask how gender non-conformity was policed by adults. You need to ask them if they knew any LGBT+ people as a child, and what opinions adults expressed in front of them, and whether they saw their peers bullied for gender transgression. **You also need to be aware that you are opening a can of PTSD worms when you do this, for cis and trans adults.** Gender is a site of trauma for many children

(What does sex mean? Continued)

I don't know, I just asked them their assigned sex at birth and then there was a correlation.

→ *This tells you nothing and you cannot report these results without more investigation. What you've done is called a pilot study.*

I don't know, Kirby, I think you're trying to be too politically correct. If there was a correlation, then there was a correlation, I'm a scientist, I know what I'm doing

→ *Is that why you think easily-misinterpreted baby genitals have an impact on the speech habits of adults? I'm excited for your upcoming paper on How That Works Exactly*

→ I hearken back to the Tumblr AMAB Cis Girl GF

If you don't study gender/sex specifically:

- **Don't make statements that you don't have the data to support**
- **Don't speculate** when you find a correlation
 - Example: *There was a correlation between frequency of raspberry-blowing and gender (self-reported fill-in-the-blank, analyzed as 2-factor) ($p < 0.005$). Because this study did not probe gender and sex closely, future work should target this correlation to discover explanatory factors.*
- Pay attention to what you read, cite, assign to your students, review, collaborate on, etc. – you have the ability and responsibility to hold your peers accountable

What do you want us to do with this?

- **Design your studies better**
- **Report your research better**
 - Don't report correlations unless you have EVEN SOME CLUE why they might have happened. If you did not collect data on (*childhood socialization, hormone exposure, vocal tract length*) then you cannot blame correlations on (*that stuff*)
 - When you do report correlations, do so in a way that is scaffolded with supporting (EXPLANATORY) theory.
- **Don't throw out all the literature** – but in reading/citing/assigning work that doesn't control for this variable, think and discuss critically
- **Large scale replications** are the best way of validating existing research and picking apart confounded variables
- If your research is potentially useful to transphobic bad faith actors, you either designed it wrong or communicated it wrong

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