

Misgendering Is Related to Attitudes about Transgender Identities

Introduction. Misgendering is the practice of misidentifying or misattributing the gender identity of another person. In languages like English with grammaticalized reflexes of social gender such as pronouns, misgendering is a sociolinguistic behavior. This study looks at misgendering of transgender people with dispreferred pronouns by conversational partners. The goal of the study is to investigate from a sociolinguistic perspective the connection between misgendering of transgender people through pronouns, and attitudes towards transgender identities.

I employ politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987) to explain patterns of misgendering found in this study. Previous pronoun studies have investigated generic or 2nd person pronouns, not misgendering (e.g. Hyde 1984, Brown and Gilman 1960). I expand politeness theory to cover saving the face not only of interlocutors, but of (potentially absent) referents. I propose two constraints on (mis)gendering: differing systems of politeness rank constraints differently, accounting for variation.

Methods. I developed a sociolinguistic interview method to elicit natural pronoun use about transgender referents. I used social psychological methods to determine conscious and unconscious attitudes towards transgender identities. I hypothesize that speakers with more negative attitudes towards transgender identities will misgender transgender people more.

The participants were 11 self-identified transgender English speakers, each paired to either an acquaintance (whom they brought to the interview) or a stranger (recruited separately), for a total of 22 participants, a 9-hour corpus of conversations. To elicit pronouns, I used two-part interviews: dyadic, then solo interviews about the conversational partner. To measure attitudes towards transgender identities I used a film clip response task with free response and Likert-style questions, and a written survey with a feelings thermometer. The film clip response elicited feelings on “Ricky,” a fictional transgender woman, including rating her friendliness, attractiveness, and other qualities.

Results. By qualitative and quantitative measures, the results of these data support the hypothesis that there *is* a relationship between misgendering and attitudes towards transgender identities.

In the film clip task, participants who rated “Ricky” more negatively were more likely to misgender both the character and their interview partner. The dependent variable for my quantitative analysis was the proportion of all pronouns used by any given speaker which matched the preferred pronouns of the referent. In ANOVA tests no demographic variables were significant. In linear correlation tests, two attitudinal measures—ratings of “Ricky” and ratings of transgender women in the feelings thermometer—were significant ($p < 0.05$).

Discussion. The constraints I propose in (1)-(2) for preserving a referent’s face can vary in their relative ordering and determine pronouns when the speaker must ‘guess’.

(1) Do not fail to attribute a person’s gender to them

(2) Do not assert an incorrect gender for a person

Most cases of misgendering in this study were a reflex of either “guessing wrong” (1>2) or “avoiding a guess” (2>1).

These constraints account for cases where speakers *unknowingly* misgender referents; for instances of misgendering that are not ‘guessing,’ I instead suggest that attitudinal measures indicate unconscious bias that affects the weight with which a speaker handles the positive face of their referent.

Works Cited

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