

How to Do Things with Gendered Words

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Abstract: With increased visibility of trans people comes increased philosophical interest in gendered language. This chapter aims to look at the research on gendered language in analytic philosophy of language so far, which has focused on two concerns: (1) determining how to define gender terms like 'man' and 'woman' such that they are trans inclusive and (2) if, or to what extent, we should use gendered language at all. We argue that the literature has focused too heavily on how gendered language can harm trans people, and has not considered how trans people use gendered language to create meaning and joy for ourselves. Pulling from the literature in sociolinguistics, we look at examples of how trans people use language to make their lives better by gaining recognition, playing with gendered language, finding joy in gendered language, and taking control of definitional power, concluding that debates about gendered language need to consider not only how such language harms trans people but also how trans people use it for our own liberation.

"Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?"

- Gertrude Stein

Introduction

Languages are like gardens. They are simultaneously cultivated and wild. We make decisions about how they are shaped, but they go in their own direction just as naturally. Gardens may cross-pollinate, invasive species may enter and take over, and we can transplant cuttings or full plants from one garden to another. It is through these cycles of contingencies and change that they seemingly develop both in our control

while still wildly out of our control. We have the power to intervene in their natural growth, but it can be difficult and come at a cost.

One such intervention into language has been the feminist intervention. In her survey of feminist philosophy of language, Mary Kate McGowan (2021) argues that one of the primary concerns has been feminist criticisms of language, such as the gender neutral use of terms like 'man' and 'men'. Some feminists, according to McGowan, argue that terms like 'man' can't be gender neutral while others contend that there is ambiguity between both a gender specific and gender neutral form of 'man', but that this ambiguity is one shaped by sexism. Such criticism leads to suggestions of how to alter our language, either through creating new terminology or through using our pre-existing linguistic tools in different ways, such as substituting 'human' for 'man'. Altering our language to make it less sexist is often part of the feminist project.

Philosophers' investigation into gendered language has been firmly rooted in this feminist tradition. As McGowan (2021) argues, feminist philosophers have put philosophy of language to use in understanding gendered slurs, generics, forms of silencing, subordinating speech, and hate speech. However, the literatures on slurs, generics, silencing, subordinating speech, and hate speech are so broad and significant that they warrant more attention than we can give them here. The focus of this chapter is on *other* forms of gendered language, specifically as it relates to transfeminist issues. We look at two growing areas of research in analytic philosophy that specifically concern trans people: (1) determining how to define gender terms like 'man' and 'woman' such that they are trans inclusive and (2) if, or to what extent, we should use gendered language at all, given the harm of misgendering.

But, one may wonder, what about other ways gendered language is used? How do trans people, ourselves, use gendered language to convey meaning, and is that all we do with it? Trans people are often incredibly creative with the terminology we use, coining new terms like 'mapa', 'dic-clit', and 'titty skittles'. Gendered language is often a tool of self-determination for trans people, and we find inventive ways to use not only our terminology, but our voices, grammar, and discursive styles to communicate and play with gender. Insofar as new literatures on gendered language are concerned with trans people, we find there is something missing from philosophers' scope of analysis.

This chapter begins by looking at the two aforementioned areas of research on gendered language. We argue that the literature has focused too heavily on how gendered language can harm trans people, and has not considered how trans people use gendered language to create meaning and joy for ourselves. Pulling from the literature in sociolinguistics, we look at examples of how trans people use language to make our lives better by gaining recognition, playing with gendered language, finding joy in gendered language, and taking control of definitional power. Philosophical debates about gendered language need to consider not only how such language harms trans people but also how trans people use it for our own liberation. We conclude by re-examining these two debates in light of the way trans people use language and suggest new areas of research.

The Story So Far

In her landmark article "Sexism," Marilyn Frye (1983) draws our attention to how deeply gender is encoded in English (17-40). The gendered aspects of many languages force us to constantly communicate what gender/sex we and others are, making gender/sex appear far more relevant than necessary. On Frye's view, sexism involves marking everyone in one (and only one) of "the two sexes," so it is of vital importance that we can tell who is who, and clearly communicate that with our language. Both of the literatures on gendered language that we are looking at are rooted in these observations. The first primarily concerns how we fit people into the definitions of 'woman' and 'man', and the second concerns how to respond to the overwhelmingly gendered aspects of language.

The first literature finds its contemporary form in Jennifer Saul's (2012) observation that terms like 'woman' serve as both sex terms and gender terms. That is, 'woman' functions in some contexts as a biological term picking out things like certain hormone levels, XX chromosomes, and vaginas and in other contexts picking out social roles in a hierarchical society. In response, Saul suggests a contextualist analysis of the term

'woman' (201).¹ Unfortunately, Saul argues that her analysis excludes trans women. Take, for example, a trans woman, call her Carla, who has not had vaginoplasty. On Saul's contextualist analysis, if Carla is in a social context where she needs to use a changing room, then the relevant standard is her self-identification as a woman and thus the sentence "Carla is a woman" is true. However, if Carla is in a medical context where she may need a pap smear or to be screened for testicular cancer, the sentence "Carla is a woman" is false. In this case, Carla is not "relevantly similar" to cisgender women since the presence of a cervix is the relevant standard. This is a problem because it trivializes trans women's claim to being women (213).

Importantly, Saul believes this definition fails on moral and political grounds and not on *semantic* grounds (204). The definition does not fail because it fails to track the difference in 'woman' as a sex term and gender term, but because of moral and political reasons to not marginalize trans women. Therefore, Saul concludes terms like 'woman' and 'man' are *politically significant terms* because understanding their proper use involves not just a semantic analysis but a political one as well. This problem raises a methodological issue for analytic philosophy of language since it treats semantic analysis as distinct from these other concerns. For this reason, Saul does not believe contextualism can solve this issue because what we need is a way to account for how political concerns affect the semantics.

Talia Mae Bettcher (2013a) offers one solution to this problem: the multiple-meaning view. According to Bettcher, we need a definition of 'woman' that both includes trans women and does not trivialize their standing as women. Her solution is to say that there are two definitions of 'woman' at play, and importantly, they're rooted in different communities (240). First, there's the dominant definition of 'woman' which tracks how the term is used in dominant communities, which are often oppressive to trans women. Second, there's what she calls the resistant definition of 'woman' which follows from how trans women have redefined the term in trans subcultures. Both definitions are rooted in differing metaphysics, with the dominant definition rooted in a (false) view of gender (i.e., gender is dimorphic and tracks genitalia) that is harmful and oppressive to

¹ Saul's contextualist analysis is: "'X is a woman" is true in a context C iff X is a human and relevantly similar (according to the standards at work in C) to most of those possessing all of the biological markers of female sex" (2012, 201).

trans people (243). Therefore, we can say that the resistant definition is the better, more accurate definition. This helps explain how the term 'woman' may function as a sex term in specific contexts, but also why trans women can reject that definition of 'woman' as it is founded on misconceptions about gender and sex in dominant society. Bettcher's solution, then, takes on Saul's suggestion to look beyond the contextualist project to get us out of the methodological problem.

Esa Díaz-León (2016), however, is concerned that the multiple-meaning view accepts the existence of exclusionary concepts, namely the dominant definition of 'woman'. Díaz-León believes that in order to resolve the concern about politically significant terms we need to rid ourselves of exclusionary concepts. Toward that end, she argues for a revised version of Saul's contextualism that gets rid of these concepts. According to Saul's contextualism, what will determine if 'X is a woman' is true are "the standards that are relevant in that context" (2016, 249). Examples of such standards are what genitalia someone has (for medical contexts) or what someone's gender identity is (for other social contexts). Díaz-León claims that this is where political and moral concerns become relevant for the meaning of terms like 'woman', since there may be differing views on what standards are relevant in any particular context.² Questions about which standards are relevant for the context will become crucial, and the moral and political considerations will determine, in part, how to adjudicate which standards to take up. On this view, political considerations, such as trans women's legitimate claim to womanhood, can affect the truth conditions of a sentence because those political considerations count as the "objective" features of X's context. In all cases where a trans woman makes the claim "I am a woman", then the fact that she identifies as a woman will be relevant for determining the standards relevant to her context, making the sentence true.

A number of philosophers, including Bettcher (2017), Laskowski (2020), and Chen (2021), argue that Díaz-León's (2016) contextualism is actually a form of invariantism where the definition does not actually shift from context to context. As Hsiang-Yun Chen (2021) puts it, "one might claim that misgendering can never be accepted in any context and

² Díaz-León's revised contextualist analysis is: "'X is a woman' is true iff X is human and relevantly similar to most females, where what counts as relevantly similar to most females depends on "objective" features of X's context, including instrumental, moral, and political considerations having to do with how X should be treated (regardless of who utters the sentence or what their beliefs are)" (2016, 251).

that genuine self-identification is the most valuable consideration in all contexts” making it such that the definition of ‘woman’ never shifts (584). If there is no context where “Carla is a woman” is false, then the view collapses into invariantism.

The literature on politically significant terms is a debate over how to render gender terms trans-inclusive. While the contemporary literature begins with Saul, Bettcher, and Díaz-León, many other philosophers have weighed in on how to resolve this problem.³ The common theme that runs through this literature is that philosophers find it important to *include* trans people and *avoid* harming us when defining gender terms. The *political project* of resolving the problem of politically significant terms is one of mainstream, or dominant, definitions accepting and including trans people, and trying to prevent further marginalization.

This brings us to the second literature on gendered language which focuses on *how* gendered our language should be. One key to this debate is understanding how gendered language can harm trans people. Stephanie Kapusta (2016) argues that trans people are vulnerable to a linguistic form of moral harm via gender term deployments, what is known more broadly as *misgendering* (502). According to Kapusta, misgendering involves using “gender terms that exclude transgender women from the category woman, or that hierarchize that category in a way that marginalizes transgender women” (503). A trans woman, for example, can be misgendered when someone uses ‘he/him/his’ pronouns for her and by theories (like Saul’s contextualist analysis) that marginalize trans women. In recognizing how gender term deployments can cause moral harm, the ethics of using gendered language has become a major focus.

³ N. G. Laskowski (2020) argues that gender terms are *polysemous*, with the aim of severing the political significance from the semantics, instead opting to say that whatever is wrong with our semantics should then be criticized as a project of ethics.

Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa (2020) argues that since contexts can often be manipulated by power and create what he terms contextual injustice, if we do have a context where “Carla is not a woman” is true, that context is an unjust one and therefore worse than the trans-inclusive context. So, while the truth conditions of “X is a woman” may change from context to context, we have the standing to argue that some contexts are unjust contexts that should be altered.

Hsiang-Yun Chen (2021) argues that the contextualist project is ill-fitted to resolve these debates. Instead of trying to collapse all the moral, political, and practical matters at hand into the semantics of ‘woman’, we should recognize the limitations of philosophical semantics and treat these questions head-on as the moral and political concerns that they are.

Robin Dembroff and Daniel Wodak (2018) argue that the harms of misgendering not only affect trans women and men, but also genderqueer and nonbinary people as well. Their analysis of misgendering builds on Kapusta's (2016), locating the harm of misgendering in *denying* someone's gender. On their view, it is not a moral duty to *affirm* trans people's genders but only a moral duty to *avoid* denying their gender (2018, 383-4). This distinction is important because it means using gender-neutral pronouns (like 'they/them/theirs') for someone cannot constitute misgendering. Dembroff and Wodak (2018) go on to argue that not only is it morally permissible to use gender-neutral pronouns for everyone, we have a moral duty to avoid using gender-specific pronouns for anyone. They argue that using gender-neutral pronouns for everyone is the most pragmatic solution, protects the privacy of queer and trans people, and fights gender essentialism.⁴ While they do not hold this as an exceptionless duty, they do believe the few exceptions do not defeat the moral duty (387).

This view is further developed by Dembroff and Wodak (2021), arguing that it is not only gendered pronouns that we should refrain from using, but gendered honorifics, generics, and suffixes as well. They argue that English should not be any more gendered than it currently is raced, and since English currently does not have race-specific pronouns, honorifics, generics, or suffixes, we should not have gender-specific ones either. Again, this conclusion follows from how these gendered (and raced) terms harm marginalized people. They argue that these gendered and raced terms stigmatize and stereotype social groups, exclude people who don't fit the gender binary of man/woman (and race "binary" of white/black), and present privacy issues by forcing people to disclose gender and race details about themselves or their partners.

⁴ Their arguments in more detail are as follows. First, they argue that recognizing genderqueer and nonbinary individuals puts us in a position to either have a specific "nonbinary pronoun", which is inequitable given the wide variety of nonbinary genders or have an abundance of pronouns for each gender identity, which they claim would be unmanageable by a linguistic community. Therefore, using gender-neutral pronouns for everyone is the best option (389). Second, gender-neutral pronouns help protect the privacy of trans and queer people by not forcing them to out themselves by using gendered pronouns to refer to themselves or their partners (392). Third, given how gendered language reinforces sexist oppression and gender essentialism, removing gender-specific pronouns would aid in fighting these social harms (395).

E. M. Hernandez (2021) argues that we should be skeptical of the conclusion that we ought to make English more gender-neutral. While agreeing with Dembroff and Wodak (2018) that the harm of misgendering is due to denying someone's gender rather than failing to affirm that gender, e argues gender-affirmation still has positive moral value. This positive moral value of gender-affirmation makes it so that we often have moral reasons to gender-affirm trans people. Furthermore, subversive uses of gendered language (e.g., using gender-neutral pronouns for cis people and preferred pronouns for trans people) can challenge gender essentialism just as well as using gender-neutral pronouns for everyone. Hernandez, therefore, rejects the conclusion that there is a moral duty to use gender-neutral pronouns for everyone. E remains agnostic on whether we should have the long term goal of gender-neutralizing English since what linguistic practices would be present in a society with gender equality is an open question.

Finally, Quill Kukla and Mark Norris Lance (forthcoming) argue for a pragmatics of gender ascriptions that cuts across both of these literatures. On their view, gender ascriptions like "Carla is a woman" or gendered pronouns help alter and (re)organize social space. When we call someone a woman, we are placing that person in social space to be treated as a woman. Importantly, such ascriptions don't metaphysically constitute someone's status as a particular gender. Disagreements about sentences like "Carla is a woman", then, are negotiations or disputes about how someone should fit into a normative social space, not a debate about some antecedent truth about Carla's womanhood. This view rejects the underlying semantic project that Saul (2012), Bettcher (2013a), and Diaz-Leon (2016) are engaged in by arguing that sentences like 'X is a woman' are not declaratives but primarily performative utterances, while also rejecting Dembroff's and Wodak's arguments (2018, 2021) by illustrating how using someone's self-identified gender terminology is both ethically and pragmatically correct.

What is noticeable about these two debates is how they focus on the harm gendered language does to trans people. The first is primarily motivated by including trans women and men on the same semantic footing as cis women and men, and the second is focused on how we should use gendered language, with both projects aimed at avoiding misgendering trans people. Even Hernandez's (2021) project, while focusing on morally good ways to use gendered language, is still primarily focused on how people

talk to and about trans people as opposed to how trans people talk to others and about themselves.

This trend, we believe, mirrors one noted by Kukla (2018) about the language of sexual negotiation. Kukla argues that philosophers' focus on consent has made them miss other aspects of the ethics and pragmatics of sexual negotiation. By becoming so focused on how to avoid wronging people in sexual contexts, philosophers have failed to think about how to promote good sex. In effect, philosophers' focus on the harms of failed sexual negotiation distorts what problems are at issue. Although we do not think these two debates have distorted the issues faced by trans people, we do believe this focus has been narrow. These debates are primarily about how those in power should use linguistic resources to include trans people in their worlds. The whole study of gendered language, as it relates to trans people, becomes a study of how to *include*. While we do not think this is unimportant, it ignores how trans people use gendered language ourselves. If we flip the focus of analysis onto trans people we find that gendered language can also be a tool for *disruption*, a way to undercut the harms trans people face. Trans people do all sorts of things with gendered language, and turning our attention to how we use gendered language to make our lives better not only complicates these current debates but opens entirely new avenues of study.

Transing Language

In order to bring trans uses of gendered language into conversation with these debates, we will pull from the sociolinguistics literature which has been documenting and analyzing trans and gender-nonconforming people's linguistic practices. Emerging work within a trans linguistic framework centers the work and analytic lenses of trans researchers and fundamentally works to "uplift collective movements of transgender joy and liberation" (Konnolly, 2021: 79; see also, Zimman, 2020). We draw examples from this body of research to demonstrate the ways in which transgender and gender-nonconforming people use elements of gendered language to create moments of joy and gender-affirmation. Given that we focus on providing examples from global gender-diverse communities, our philosophical analysis of these various uses of language will be fairly cursory. Our aim is not to develop a full philosophical or

pragmatic theory of how trans people use language for their betterment, but to shine a light on areas of research that deserve more attention.

Language and gender are deeply interconnected. Every level of language is potentially filled with gendered meanings and implications, from the sounds of spoken languages, to grammatical structures, to larger stylistic features of language that communicate the speaker's gender or index gendered meanings. Philosophical debates on gendered language have primarily focused on gendered lexical items (e.g., 'man', 'woman', 'he', 'she') since philosophers of language, in the analytic tradition, are primarily interested in *referential meaning*, or how language refers to objects in the world. However, we believe philosophers should be aware of the other kinds and locations of gendered meaning in language in order to address the questions about gendered language philosophers have taken up.⁵ First, many of the ways trans people use gendered language to create understanding, recognition, joy, and affirmation occur on these other levels of language that often get overlooked by philosophers. Second, if we are concerned about language being too gendered, we shouldn't look simply at one level of analysis, but should see other ways gender is communicated—especially when it is concealed and often goes unnoticed.

Opening the scope of analysis beyond referential meaning means we're not concerned solely with terms that pick out specifically gendered referents, but with the things trans people *do* with language. Therefore, we're following a well-known intervention into philosophy of language made by J. L. Austin in his collection of lectures, *How to Do Things with Words* (1975), wherein he demonstrates that language does not just represent the world; rather, utterances can be actions that have various effects on the world. Language can be used to put people in obligations to one another, marry one another, and place one another in social positions (cf. Austin 1975, Kukla and Lance, forthcoming). Notably, Judith Butler's (1990) work on *gender performativity* draws on Austin to explore how "gender is ... instituted through a stylized repetition of [habitual] acts" (179). Gendered identities, then, are expressed and reinforced through performative acts. Like Austin, Butler stresses the ways in which performatives have

⁵ Other forms of meaning beyond referential meaning are mostly important for the debate on "how much gender is too much gender", as Dembroff and Wodak (2021) would put it, but as we will discuss in the next section, other forms of meaning raise interesting questions along the same lines as politically significant terms.

effects in the social landscape. In attempting to look beyond how gendered language can harm trans people, we explore how trans people *do things with gendered words*.

Our exploration of gendered language is therefore making two departures from the current literature on the topic. The first departure we make is to look beyond the impact of referential meaning towards how trans people *do things* with language. The second departure is that we expand beyond the gendered features of the lexical level of language to explore the other levels on which language can be used to communicate gendered identities.

Sociolinguists have explored the ways in which various levels of language have gained gendered associations through the semiotic process of *indexicality*⁶. Social indexical meaning can potentially be tied to all levels of language: the phonetic, morpho-syntactic, lexical, and discursive levels. The *phonetic level* focuses on the sounds of spoken languages (and equivalent features of signed languages). Phonetic features, such as pitch, often index the gender of the speaker. For example, in many English-speaking contexts, higher pitch voices are associated with women/femininity and lower pitch voices are associated with men/masculinity. Further, these gendered linguistic associations are why voices in the mid-range are often considered “androgynous” when perceived by listeners (Azul 2013). Gender and language are also intertwined through grammatical forms and sentence structures, on what is called the *morpho-syntactic level*. For example, the use of tag questions (‘That’s the room, *right?*, ‘You’re coming, *aren’t you?*) is often associated with women (Lakoff, 1973). In addition to these smaller units of language, there are larger units of language that are also part of how we do and communicate gender; these occur on the *discursive level*. One example is how different speech styles convey gendered identities, such as how people perceive “gossip” versus “locker room talk” as gendered styles of interaction. While both generally function to share in-group information and build camaraderie, “gossip” is typically perceived as “feminine” while “locker room talk” is perceived as “masculine.” In our examples, we draw from these various levels of language to explore how gendered linguistic features function as a resource for trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming language users.

⁶ Within sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, *indexicality* is the process through which one sign (e.g., word, sound, syntactic construction, etc) points to (or indexes) another object in the context in which it occurs (e.g., some sort of social meaning like class, gender, etc.). See Silverstein (1976).

We take the things trans people do with gendered words to fall into three overlapping (and likely not comprehensive) categories: *recognition use*, *playful use*, and *joyous use*. When we say that these are the *things* trans people do with language, we mean that these are the ways trans people use language to accomplish things for themselves. There is another sense in which trans people do things with language, such as rejecting certain terms or forms of speech (e.g., 'biologically male'), replacing old terms with new ones (e.g., replacing 'niece/nephew' with 'nibling'), and appropriating/reclaiming forms of language (e.g., creaky voice⁷ and even the term 'transgender' itself). These uses of language are often for the sake of accomplishing one or more of the other *things* we take trans people to do with language.

Recognition Use

One of the most basic things trans people do with gendered language is use it to gain recognition. It is worth noting that these are the kinds of concerns that Dembroff and Wodak (2018; 2021) count in favor of gendered language. Gendered language can be used to gain recognition for gender identification, which is necessary for naming systems of oppression but also can aid in accessing resources and making ourselves intelligible to others. As Butler (2004) notes,

To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find you to be an impossibility) is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always as if you were human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor (30).

So although this category is somewhat obvious, it is worth attending to because the importance of recognition cannot be overstated.

The most straightforward example of using gendered language for recognition use is by adding terminology to fill *hermeneutical gaps*. One form of harm trans people face is

⁷ Creaky voice, popularly called 'vocal fry', is a mode of phonation that is raspier than a typical speaking voice.

what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls hermeneutic injustice, “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experiences obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource” (155). Most of us are raised knowing only the binary genders of man and woman, as both exclusive and exhaustive, which makes up the collective hermeneutical scheme. Creating terms like ‘genderqueer’ and ‘nonbinary’ helps give people the terminology to define themselves and understand others who are outside of the gender binary. Furthermore, adjectives like ‘trans’ and ‘cis’ help delineate what we may call different *modalities* of gender (i.e., whether one’s gender identity aligns with their gender assigned at birth) (Ashley, 2022). But this is not the only way in which trans people use language to gain recognition.

The uptake of gendered forms of language for recognition use is highly apparent in communities whose languages have grammatical gender marked morphologically. Orit Bershtling’s (2014) work demonstrates the linguistic practices of a community of genderqueer speakers of Hebrew, which has a robust morpho-syntactic gender agreement system, requiring grammatical gender agreement between nouns, verbs, and adjectives via inflectional morphology. While this stricter linguistic system poses challenges for genderqueer users of Hebrew, Bershtling’s ethnographic interviews with a community of genderqueer speakers of Hebrew demonstrated how participants would selectively alternate between masculine and feminine gendered morphology to articulate their genderqueer identities as fluid, changeable, and emergent. These genderqueer individuals “[use] the available linguistic resources to lead change and instruct others in their surroundings about alternative gender possibilities” (58). Similar trends have been found in work on nonbinary French (Knisely, 2020; Tudisco, 2021). This work has traced the wide array of linguistic strategies that nonbinary French users employ to navigate gendered morphology. While the “official” French language is closely regulated by the *Académie Française*, nonbinary individuals in both online and in-person communities find ways to subvert grammatical rules, via the alternation of gendered morphology and “the nonnormative use of binary grammatical gender to index non-binary identities” (Tudisco, 2021:1). Through the strategy of using gendered morphology in nonnormative ways and flaunting expected grammatical agreement rules, nonbinary users of these languages make their identities salient to those around

them, challenging assumptions about the relationship between grammatical and social gender, and rejecting the imposition of a linguistic gender binary.

Another example of how communities take up and recontextualize terminology for recognition use is provided in Jenny Davis' (2014) research with various Two-Spirit community groups. Indigenous peoples take up localized gender terminology from their respective tribal affiliations in conjunction with terminology such as 'gay', 'queer', and 'transgender'. For example, some people use both 'transgender' or 'queer' *and* 'Two-Spirit' to describe themselves, and others use portmanteaus such as 'indigiqueer'. This functions to locate contemporary Two-Spirit communities within both local and traditional understandings of gender and sexuality. Their combination of local, tribal-specific terminology with more generalized concepts were tools that these community members used to articulate the "both/and approach to gender and sexuality, and to femaleness and maleness [of Two-Spirit people]" (63). It is noteworthy that by appropriating English gender and sexuality terms to expand their hermeneutical resources, Two-Spirit communities are creating legibility both outside *and inside* their indigenous communities (Davis, 2014).

Furthermore, gender-diverse communities are using gendered linguistic resources to construct and recognize their identities even in linguistic communities where there are no gendered pronouns. In her ethnographic interviews with Indonesian *tombois* and their girlfriends in the *lesbi* community, Evelyn Blackwood (2014) explores how community members eschew the gender-neutral pronouns of Indonesian and would instead have others refer to the *tombois* using either their name, the masculine pronoun from the Mingangkabu language (*'wa'ang'*), or refer to them as *'cowok'* ('guy'). These strategies functioned as a way to highlight the *tombois'* masculine gender. Even while using language to reinforce the *tombois'* masculinity, the *tombois* and their girlfriends subvert normative expectations that the girlfriends would partner with men with whom they could have children, thus challenging community cultural beliefs about both gender and family structure. What's particularly noteworthy about this usage is that Indonesian *tombois* are filling a hermeneutical gap in their context not by creating new terminology for unrecognized concepts, but by swapping or appropriating terms to mark unrecognized concepts.

These previous examples demonstrate how gender-diverse communities use gendered linguistic features such as labels, pronouns, and morphology to construct and express their identities to their communities as well as to challenge normative gender expectations. But using gendered linguistic features for recognition use is not limited to just taking up various gendered terms; within trans linguistic research, sociophoneticians have looked at what trans and gender-diverse people are doing creatively *with their voices*.

There are various features of the voice that have strong ties to gendered perceptions. While the most salient is typically pitch, another vocal feature, 'creaky voice', is strongly associated with young women, and a fronted pronunciation of the phoneme /s/ is often perceived as feminine (Calder, 2019; Campbell-Kibler, 2011; Zimman, 2013). Therefore, normative gender expectations might assume that there would be some sort of alignment between these gendered features. However, Lal Zimman's (2017b) research shows how some trans masculine people engage in what he calls "stylistic bricolage" whereby queer trans men use features that simultaneously index masculinity and femininity. In this example, we can see how the gendered linguistic features function together as tools through which trans individuals can creatively express their gender. Similarly, trans feminine speakers often go through voice feminization training in order not only to raise the pitch of their voices, but also to make them sound "brighter" and more stereotypically feminine, thus using gendered linguistic features as tools for social identity recognition (Clifford, 2019; English, 2021).

These various features of language serve as ways for trans people to gain recognition. But how does language accomplish this? One clue is by looking at what Kukla and Lance (forthcoming) say about gender ascriptions. They argue that gender ascriptions are illocutionary acts that place one in social space. Uttering the sentence "we are nonbinary" places us (the authors) in social space as nonbinary people, or if we say "the actress Hunter Schafer is a woman" we are placing her in social space as a woman. Notably, the felicity conditions for these two utterances are different. The first-person gender ascription that we are nonbinary functions as a request, or a demand, that we be taken as nonbinary, which then requires uptake from a second party to succeed. Third-person gender ascriptions like "Hunter Schafer is a woman" function differently, because it cannot be seen as a petition or request since Hunter herself is not making the

utterance. According to Kukla and Lance, we need Hunter's uptake in order for the ascription to succeed—and we will happily wait to hear from her—because we do not have the relevant ethical authority to place anyone other than ourselves into gendered social space.

We suggest that not only do straightforward utterances like “we are nonbinary” or “Hunter Schafer is a woman” count as illocutionary acts, but that the other features of language noted in this section may count as well. For example, selectively alternating between masculine and feminine gendered morphology in Hebrew is a way to place oneself as genderqueer in social space. Similarly, trans women raising the pitch of their voices and making themselves sound “brighter” is a way to place themselves as women in social space. What is notable about using linguistic grammar and phonetics as illocutionary acts is that they are *covert*. Kent Bach and Robert Harnish (1979) argue that some illocutionary acts are covert since the intention of the act need not be recognized by the parties perceiving the utterance. Whereas uttering “we are nonbinary” clearly communicates intention, using morpho-syntactic or phonetic aspects of language to place oneself in social space is covert because the intention not only does not need to be recognized in order to succeed, in cases like trans women feminizing their voice, the utterer may not *want* anyone to notice the intention.⁸

Recognition use is fairly broad and serves as a basis for much of what trans people do with language. Not only does it serve a role in altering referential meaning (by filling hermeneutical gaps), it can function as illocutionary acts to place oneself in social space. As we will see in the next sections, recognition use underlies a lot of the other things trans people do with language.

Playful Use

Trans people often use gendered language in *playful* ways. Playfulness, as an attitude, is an important part of decolonial feminist practices. María Lugones (2003) characterizes playfulness as an “attitude that carries us through [an] activity... [and] turns that activity

⁸ That other aspects of language beyond words can have illocutionary force is a suggestion that requires more defense, but which goes beyond the scope of this current chapter. In mentioning it here, we just mean to suggest that the pragmatics that Kukla and Lance (forthcoming) are noting could likely be applied to the other examples of trans language use we discuss in this section.

into play," involves an openness to surprise, and doesn't presuppose rules for how to play (95-96). For Lugones, this attitude of playfulness is important in part because of how it helps marginalized people explore the worlds of others who have power over them without being "taken in" by those perspectives. When you face marginalization, it is too easy to be in a context where someone else's perception of you becomes how you perceive yourself. Being playful, for Lugones, involves not placing yourself firmly in any one world or context, and leaves you open for self-construction, a lightheartedness to create opportunities for growth without becoming trapped (96). This attitude is protective because keeping yourself from being rooted in a dominant world or context helps you maintain a part of yourself that is more authentic while also exploring how you're perceived in these more hostile worlds. This aids in self-construction by allowing you to learn things about yourself, that is, how your attributes even in resistant worlds are born out of experiences in the dominant world. Engaging in this reflective work with a playful attitude can help create the space necessary to understand the dominant world without being taken in by it.

Playful language can involve (a) taking up this attitude when defining and creating terminology or (b) using creative terminology to cultivate this attitude. What makes (a) valuable is how the playful space allows for altering language in a way that can subvert gendered norms and expectations. The ways in which trans people often use gendered language exist in this playful space where things are not taken so seriously as to inform official policy proposals while still having the language affect the linguistic landscape in trans communities. Whereas what makes (b) valuable are the ways in which it helps foster playfulness, as Lugones explores. Ultimately, navigating dominant institutions and contexts can be stressful and even harmful for trans people, so having ways to cultivate playfulness can ease the difficulty of engaging in these worlds and create the necessary space to protect oneself from various forms of psychological harm.

One context in which the playful use of language can be seen is the terminology that trans people use to talk about our bodies. While some trans people choose to use gender-neutral terms for body parts, such as 'genitals' or 'chest', others take up typically gendered terms for body parts in ways that challenge the essentialist linking between physiological traits and certain gendered identities, a practice which serves to highlight the discursive construction of sex (Zimman, 2014). This primarily happens through the

recontextualization of typically gendered/sexed body parts (e.g., 'dick', 'clit', 'cock'). For example, despite not going through any plastic surgery to alter their genitals, some trans masculine people refer to their genitals as 'dicks' and 'cocks' while some trans feminine people refer to their genitals as 'clits'. Beyond recontextualizing existing terminology for body parts, a common playful move within trans communities is to create portmanteaus of gendered terms to develop new words to refer to genitals. One newer innovation is the creation of the suffix '-pussy': with trans masculine people saying they have a 'boypussy' (Zimman, 2014) or trans feminine people referring to surgically enhanced genitals as their 'robopussy'. In the 1990s within trans masculine communities, the term 'dic-clit' was in wide circulation, a portmanteau of dick and clitoris, though it has generally declined in circulation (Zimman, 2014). Furthermore, as Elijah Edelman and Lal Zimman (2014) explore, trans men looking to have sex with men use a wide array of body part terminology—among which was the term 'bonus hole' to refer to their genitals. This naming frames the trans body as extra desirable because of this "bonus" which "offer[ed] sexual value not otherwise provided in a typical homoerotic exchange between men" (686). This insight has also been explored by Talia Mae Bettcher (2013b) in her work on interpretive intimacy about how trans women can alter the social meaning of their bodies during sex. It is noteworthy that Bettcher considers such activities as *playful*, stating that "within a sexual context, there is an element of *playfulness* that opens the doors of possibility, paying less attention to the constraints of social reality" (55). Ultimately, all of these examples of language play give trans people discursive agency over their bodies, with which many trans people often have a fraught relationship with. Thus this kind of language play allows new and creative ways for trans people to connect to their bodies.

This form of playful use is also accomplished by appropriating/reclaiming various gender terms. For example, the terms 'transsexual', 'biological woman', and 'autogynephile' have all been used in various ways to marginalize and oppress trans women (Serano, 2020). All of these terms have been appropriated by trans people, using them as playful in-community jokes to reveal how shallow trans-exclusionary positions are. One famous example of this is how Natalie Wynn, a trans woman YouTuber who goes by 'Contrapoints', regularly calls herself a "biological woman" to poke fun at trans-exclusionary arguments she encounters. Part of the appropriation rests on the fact that many trans people, through medical interventions like hormone replacement, actually

do fit some biological definitions of 'woman' and 'man', undermining trans exclusionary arguments that trans women are different from "real," biological women.

Another way trans people play with language is in how we play with medicalized terminology. Many trans people spend a significant amount of time navigating medical institutions in order to alleviate gender dysphoria and promote gender euphoria⁹. Such institutions are sites of stress and even harm for trans people, and through playing with language, trans people cultivate the playful attitude that makes navigating these spaces manageable. One example of how they do this is through the way they describe and define various forms of medical interventions. Florence Ashley (2020) notes the variety of names trans feminine people use to refer to hormone replacement therapy, including "titty pills, titty skittles, smartitties, chicklets, anticistamines, mammary mints, life savers, tit tacs, breast mints, femme&m's, antiboyotics, trans-mission fluid, and the Notorious H.R.T." (75). Similarly, trans masculine people often refer to top surgery as 'titty chop'. And both trans feminine and trans masculine people refer to post-surgery bodies as being 'designer', for example, as having 'designer nipples' or a 'designer vagina' and may refer to their surgeon as the designer. This playful language shifts the doctor/patient roles to one of designer/client, providing trans people with a way of conceptualizing gender affirmative care as non-pathologized.

When someone uses language with a playful attitude, the attitude aids in executing speech acts that do not require the speaker to have any particular authority, what Mary Kate McGowan (2019) calls *covert exercitives*. Standard exercitives require the utterer to have the relevant authority to enact the speech act (e.g., a baseball umpire having the authority to call a runner "out"). McGowan argues that there are also exercitives that don't require this authority; instead, such exercitives are moves within a game that enact permissibility facts, a kind of norm, that dictate what one can then go on to do in some norm-governed activity. For example, a speaker may say something insulting about a mutual acquaintance in a conversation, enacting a permissibility fact that it is okay to speak negatively about that mutual acquaintance in that conversation (of course, a second speaker may disagree with the initial insult, thereby canceling the covert

⁹ Gender euphoria is "a distinct enjoyment or satisfaction caused by the correspondence between the person's gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth" (Ashley and Ells, 2018).

exercitive and making it impermissible to continue speaking negatively about the mutual acquaintance).

Trans people often do not have the relevant kind of authority to initiate changes to norms in dominant society, and furthermore, in many cases of playful use of gendered language, they *do not want* to alter certain permissibility facts (e.g., implement policy or make it permissible for cis people to call someone a 'transsexual' or talk about our *boypussies*). Covert exercitives therefore function to change permissibility facts within our own subcommunities, altering how we talk about and understand gender. Rowan Bell (forthcoming), for example, analyzes how members of U.S. Ballroom culture (a community of trans people of color) re-purpose and create gender norms to be legible to one another and foster a safe space for them to be openly queer. This is a more general phenomenon in all trans subcommunities, and it is often accomplished through the playful use of gendered language. Something notable about these covert exercitives is that they do require some level of uptake from community members. That's because the norm-governed activity they are altering is a playful one that involves acceptance from community members. For example, if someone does not understand that play is occurring it will lead to the use being misunderstood and canceled, in a similar way that the second speaker in the above example cancels the covert exercitive of insulting the mutual acquaintance.

What is interesting about these playful language games is that they are structured differently from the norm-governed activities that McGowan (2019) covers. McGowan argues that norm-governed activities have two sets of norms: the norms that govern the activity which do not change, or *g-norms*, and the norms that are enacted by covert exercitives, which alter what moves one makes in the activity, or *s-norms*. Playful language games, though, may also alter *g-norms*. Lugones (2003) argues that playful activities do not presuppose specific rules (95). Following Lugones, we want to suggest that the governing norms for the activity can alter based on moves within the game itself. G-norms to declare that certain moves are not acceptable can similarly be altered, reconstituting the activity itself, which importantly leaves one open to surprise, which allows us, as Lugones has argued, to remain lighthearted and open to self-construction.

There are interesting overlaps between recognition use and playful use. All of the examples explored so far have a playful quality to them either by being rooted in a playful attitude or as a way to cultivate a playful attitude. But many of these playful uses are also recognition uses. In using language to gain better recognition and legibility, invented terms like 'bonus hole' create legibility for trans men in homoerotic exchanges with other men.¹⁰ Appropriations of terms like 'biological woman' by trans women also help draw attention to how the sex/gender distinction presupposed by trans-exclusionary writers is rejected by feminists after the second-wave (Fausto-Sterling, 2008; Stryker, 2008). Furthermore, mixing gendered morphology as in the examples of genderqueer Hebrew and nonbinary French is often also a playful activity for trans people who want to disrupt gendered language.

There is an important difficulty to note with playful use. There is not one resistant world, or trans community, and there are many trans people who exist outside of such trans communities. These playful forms of language use often succeed given how they are understood or taken up in trans communities. For those who exist outside of a trans community, it will be difficult to play with language since it will often fail to be recognized as playful in the dominant world. (We will say more about the interplay between the dominant world and resistant worlds in the section on definitional power.) As Lugones (2003) mentions, in the dominant world, specifically white-anglo feminist spaces, people take her to be extremely serious, not because she acts differently but because that world does not allow for a Latina to be anything but serious (93). Lugones refers to this position as lacking *health* in those worlds, and it is this same lack of health that interrupts a trans person's attempts to playfully engage with language outside of trans communities.

Playful use is also not a valuable tool for those trans people who are primarily concerned with making themselves legible to mainstream society, which is sometimes true for trans women and men. For some trans people, there is so much distress centered around their gender ascription being taken up that playful use of gendered language runs the risk of not being taken seriously in mainstream society *as* a woman or

¹⁰ There is a tangentially interesting way that using 'bonus hole' serves as a kind of speech act, because it can serve as what Kukla (2018) calls an *invitation* for what forms of sex may be explored in a particular encounter. While outside the scope of this current paper, there are interesting ways in which the terms trans people use for our bodies orient others to engage with our bodies.

a man. This is notably not a problem with gendered language but a problem with the world itself. Trans people have to navigate pre-existing tensions in the world in order to survive, and it differs for different trans people based on our connection to community, economic and social resources, and preferences. It is a tension worth recognizing because it does limit playful use, but the limitation doesn't come from gendered language, but gendered oppression more directly.

Joyous Use

While *playful use* of language provides an opportunity for trans people to playfully reconfigure binary categories and medical structures, gendered language can also be used to create *trans joy* and other positive affect that help trans people fight against our marginalization. What makes this joy significant, in part, are the conditions in which trans people find joy. As Talia Mae Bettcher (2019) puts it, "We trans people live an "everyday" shot through with perplexity, shot through with WTF questions. We *live* in the WTF" (651, emphasis Bettcher's). She elaborates,

What does it mean to say that I'm a woman, I've wondered? And why does *so much* appear to hinge on it? How do I make sense, for example, of being assaulted in the middle of Santa Monica Boulevard by someone who wanted to prove I was really a man? Why do people want to kills us? WTF? ...the WTF is so all-embracing, so personal, indeed, existential in nature." (651-2, emphasis Bettcher's)

The WTF is practically the trans condition. Trans journeys are guided by the pursuit of making sense of how to fit into a world that not only doesn't understand us, but actively, violently tries to keep us from living in it.

The WTF can be taken as an example of what Sandra Bartky (1990) calls *psychological oppression*, an instance not of social barriers inhibiting people's movement in the world but psychological barriers that "weigh" one down and promote feelings of inferiority (11). Staggering rates of depression and suicide among trans people speaks to how significantly the WTF questions weigh us down (Toomey et al., 2018). Finding joy under

such conditions is significant because the joy keeps us alive. One of the ways trans people find joy is in finding gendered language that resonates with us.

Part of the trans journey is finding the language that accurately describes how a trans person experiences gender. Often for trans and gender-diverse people, one part of the process of gender discovery is coming to find what language “feels good.” For many people, finding the “right” words that affirm an individual’s gender is an exciting process that can be coupled with experiences of “gender euphoria.” While gender euphoria is often related to physical experiences, it can also come from being referred to by one’s proper name, pronouns, or terminology (Beishcel et al 2021; Hernandez 2021). Furthermore, experiencing gender euphoria from stereotypical gendered linguistic features is not limited to trans men and trans women. For example, some nonbinary people feel gender euphoria when using/playing off “gendered” terms. For example, some nonbinary people might use ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’ or feel affirmed when they are called ‘sir’ or ‘ma’am’. For many, this experience occurs when this language challenges the typical gendered language they might be ascribed.¹¹

Unlike recognition use, which often involves illocutionary speech acts, and playful use, which often involves covert exercitives, joyous use is not accomplished through a particular set of speech acts. Whether a language user experiences joy in gendered language largely depends on their own history with, and exploration of, gendered language. To extend an analogy David Lewis (1983) makes between conversations and baseball games, there is nothing about the various moves in baseball that necessarily create joy in players’ experience of it. It’s easy to imagine a child who *hates* baseball, but whose parent forces them to play because it is the parent’s favorite sport, so every time the child is in the outfield they’re excruciatingly bored and annoyed.¹² The joy some of us feel in engaging in baseball (or any other sport) comes from the joy that one takes in the activity; it is in one sense a side effect of the various actions that involve playing the sport. But notice also that the fun derived from playing sports is also a sufficient reason *to play the sport in the first place*. Such is the same with joyous use of gendered language. Joy is not an action accomplished by speech, but it is a result of certain

¹¹ How trans joy is created with language is one of the phenomena that the linguist among our authorial pair is currently researching using ethnographic group interviews with trans communities in the US South.

¹² One half of our authorial pair however loved baseball and had a .550 batting average in little league.

engagements with language that make the engagement worth doing in the first place. The joy that a trans person derives from using gendered language may be a stronger motivator for using gendered language than to gain recognition or to play with non-normative sense of gendered speech.

Joyous use overlaps significantly with recognition use and playful use. Given the WTF, finding the terminology that accurately captures your gender experiences can pull double-duty. It not only opens up the possibility for more resources and legibility, it can bring a kind of *clarification* that promotes feelings of euphoria and joy. (A feeling of joy from clarification that probably every philosopher, and perhaps some linguists, are intimately familiar with.) While finding the right words might not create a sense of joy in every trans person, it is a way many of us find joy in gendered language.

Given that play is fun, playful use of gendered language is also fun. While the playful attitude can help a marginalized person be at ease in uncomfortable settings and find new ways to understand oneself, it also is an attitude that can create joy. The playful terminology that trans people use to describe our bodies are definite sites of joy. We often use humor to cope with our situation, and naming hormone medications things like 'titty skittles' or 'antiboyotics' are clear examples of the kind of humor we use to not only put ourselves at ease but also to find joy in the mundane and toilsome aspects of our lives like being on rigid medication schedules.

Before reconsidering the two debates we began with, we think it is important to reflect on how trans language use involves taking back *definitional power*. The uses of gendered language that we have explored so far all have to do with how various features of language, from the phonetic to the discursive, create social meaning within communities. Our focus has been on trans communities, but as Bettcher points out, trans communities are subcultures that are to some extent cut off from more dominant communities. While meaning is created socially, not all linguistic communities have the same power to influence broader trends in their language—or, like with African American English, get the credit for their influence. The problem posed by politically significant terms is an example of this—it is the differential power that makes such terms *politically* significant. If trans people had equal definitional power, the problem could not arise

since definitions of gender terms like 'man' and 'woman' would be co-defined by both cis and trans people. Part of what makes such terms politically significant is that one group with disproportionately more power is trying to solve or account for the needs of a group with less. So, where does this leave trans users of language?

Marilyn Frye (1983) drew philosophers' attention to how heavily gendered English was, but she also drew our attention to how meaning—not just of words, but social meaning—primarily came from patriarchal power (80). In order for feminists to move forward, Frye argues that we must “rely on ourselves to make meaning ...[to be] capable of weaving the web of meaning which will hold us in some kind of intelligibility” (80). When Bettcher (2013a) talks about trans subcultures and resistant definitions of 'woman', this need is what she is pointing us toward. Except instead of conceiving of the problem of patriarchal power narrowly as men vs. women, Bettcher expands the scope to include how trans people are kept from creating meaning. There is a dominant context, with dominant definitions, and what trans people are doing in their communities is resisting this web of meaning, weaving a web of our own. Whether Bettcher is right that the multiple-meaning view resolves the issue of politically significant terms, she is right that there are dominant and resistant communities which use language to develop ways of making the world intelligible.

The lesson we learn from Frye and Bettcher is that in order to survive we have to create meaning for ourselves, which is precisely what trans people do with language. Linguistic self-determination, a common value within many U.S. trans communities, is the prioritization of linguistic self-identification (Zimman, 2017a). Trans folks in these communities hold that individuals are the ones who will be the ultimate authority over their gender (and thus what language should be used to describe it). Part of this process of self-determination is the ability for trans people to find the language that they feel accurately describes their experience of gender. The underlying linguistic norms of trans communities distributes definitional power for the sake of self-determination. Notably, linguistic self-determination is exactly what Bettcher (2009) is pointing toward when talking about first-person authority of trans people, and the ethical (as opposed to epistemological) grounding of trans people defining themselves. Furthermore, Kukla and Lance (forthcoming) give us an underlying pragmatics and ethics of this self-

determination when arguing that gender ascriptions are about placing someone in social space.

Linguistic self-determination underlies what we have called self-recognition and joyous use of language by trans users. What is particularly valuable is when the terminology that was brought up in trans communities makes its way into the dominant structures of meaning. In 2019, the American Dialect Society named the locution '(my) pronouns' as word of the year, and singular 'they' (specifically for its use with nonbinary language users) as word of the decade ("2019 Word of the Year").¹³ Merriam-Webster, also in 2019, chose the nonbinary use of 'they' as word of the year ("They is Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year"). Furthermore, Ben Zimmer, Chair of the New Words Committee of the American Dialect Society, says in the announcement that,

The selection of "(my) pronouns" as Word of the Year speaks to how the personal expression of gender identity has become an increasing part of our shared discourse. That trend is also reflected in singular "they" being chosen as Word of the Decade, with a growing recognition of the use of "they" for those whose identities don't conform to the binary of he and she. ("2019 Word of the Year")

The use of 'my pronouns are...' has developed out of trans and queer communities to become a practice in far more linguistic communities. Listing one's pronouns has become so common that they are regularly listed in social media bios, leading some apps (e.g. Instagram) and websites (e.g. LinkedIn) to create a separate bio field for users to list their pronouns. This has simultaneously popularized using singular 'they' to recognize nonbinary people (Conrod, 2019; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). While 'nonbinary' hasn't been named word of the year (yet), it has also entered dominant usage beyond queer and trans communities, and has obviously influenced the way pronouns have become such a significant topic.

There is surely something politically significant when language use originating in trans communities becomes part of dominant varieties of English. Determining what and how these linguistic items are doing, politically speaking, when moving from trans subcultures to the dominant culture is a project too big for our space here. But the way

¹³ The runners up for word of the year were 'ok boomer', 'cancel', and 'Karen'.

trans people use language to claim definitional power is something significant that we do with gendered language, even if it is not a phenomenon we fully understand.

Reconsidering the Debates

Both of the philosophical debates we began the chapter discussing are motivated by not wanting to misgender trans people, whether it's through defining our terms in a way that is not exclusionary or through removing gendered language that often leads to misgendering. Our aim is not only to open up these discussions about how such gendered language may harm trans people, but also to consider how gendered language can help trans people. None of what we have explored brings decisive conclusions to the debates mentioned, nor necessarily nudges us in a particular direction. The uses of language we pull from sociolinguistics are fairly broad, and trans linguistics itself is still fairly new, with work centering trans communities increasing over the past decade and solidifying with Zimman's formulation of a "trans linguistic framework" (Zimman, 2020). While what we have done here has been very broad, we believe there are a number of interesting avenues for philosophers of language to explore.

Politically Significant Terms, Reconsidered

The problem of politically significant terms has spawned answers that both recognize the underlying issue and attempt to resolve it (Díaz-León, 2016; Ichikawa, 2020), while other answers try to draw our attention to how questions of political significance are separable from questions of semantics (Laskowski, 2020; Chen, 2021). There are also views that use the articulation of the problem to provide an account of gendered language that sidesteps or dissolves the problem (Bettcher, 2013a; Kukla and Lance, forthcoming). Which route you take seems to turn on methodological commitments (i.e., the political encroaches on the semantic vs. these items can and should be treated separately) as well as political issues (e.g., what counts as a liberatory theory for trans people?). The way trans language users define terms aligns most nicely with Bettcher's (2013a) approach to the problem, and we can see Kukla's and Lance's (forthcoming) project as articulating the underlying pragmatics of such an approach. While we are sympathetic to this way of viewing things, it remains open whether that provides us with

a solution to the problem Saul (2012) raises. It makes sense that trans people would alter language in a way to understand our experiences and build a new linguistic community around those uses. However, one may think that there is still a significant problem here: even if the on-the-ground attempts at semantic justice are approaching the problem in one way, that approach is orthogonal to the importance of politically significant terms. Such a stance is a perfectly reasonable position to hold, but we are skeptical of its value.

The issue of politically significant terms arises out of a particular view of language and semantic analysis that Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009 [1953]) famously calls into question. Wittgenstein drew our attention to how the picture of language that captures the attention of analytic philosophers involves assuming that “reality *must*, and our concepts should, conform to the demands of logic” (Scheman, 2020: 1). Furthermore, Wittgenstein warns that “the *preconception* of crystalline purity can only be removed by turning our whole inquiry around. (One might say: the inquiry must be turned around, but on the pivot of our real need.)” (2009: §§ 108). Naomi Scheman (2020) argues that this logical *must* that Wittgenstein draws our attention to is particularly important when considering issues raised by oppression, of which trans exclusion and violence are certainly an instance. In our own attempt to shine light on other, more positive, uses of gendered language we have taken exactly this kind of approach. That is, we have pivoted away from our preconceptions of what our gendered terms should mean and instead focused on how trans people use gendered language in general. Importantly, the way trans people use gendered language is based in “our real need”; it is based in gaining recognition, subverting norms through play, finding ways to deal with harmful aspects of dominant culture, finding much needed joy in the face of the WTF, and redefining the landscape of the dominant culture that is trying to exclude us. While we find it is important for our language to be inclusive, there are ways trans people are doing this in our own communities, and we believe that should constitute a more significant focus of philosophers’ research. The examples we pull from sociolinguistics serve as evidence for the value of reorienting our analysis to the way gendered language is used “on the ground.”

In addition to concerns about orientation of our analysis, there are other interesting questions raised by the practices of trans language users. The debate of politically

significant terms is, obviously, about *terms*, but there is more to language than just terms. Kukla and Lance (forthcoming) arguably already draw our attention to discursive use and how the pragmatics of gender ascriptions are caught up with an ethics of gendering. But what about the other units of language? Are there politically significant phonemes? Politically significant syntax?

Well, let's consider what trans language users do with our voices. The ways in which we use language communicates gendered meaning. The clearest example is probably how trans feminine people, and particularly trans women, train their voices to be higher in pitch and brighter.¹⁴ This alteration communicates gendered meaning by conveying how they want to be read by others. Of course, many trans feminine people and trans women *do not* change their voices. In effect, those latter people are less likely to "pass as cis" and may face more misgendering. Similarly, trans masculine people taking testosterone who experience a change in their acoustic voice often have to navigate how their metaphorical voice (e.g., opinions, perspectives) is given new "weight" in social interactions (Crowley, 2021). Is the meaning attributed to higher or lower voices politically significant? How do we broaden or alter the meaning of how people speak given the political reasons? Do we simply undo the assumption that a high, "bright" voice is feminine, and lower voices are masculine? But where would that leave trans people who do alter their voice for gendered recognition?

Arguably, we already know there is politically significant syntax. Languages like Hebrew and French, which we previously discussed, have gendered features built into the grammar. We discussed how trans people in these linguistic communities have altered their language use to mismatch masculine and feminine parts of language to make the languages genderqueer. Furthermore, there have been attempts to do this in Spanish by providing gender neutral options like replacing the -o and -a suffixes with -x or -e (López, 2021). But which direction do we go in to solve the problem of politically significant syntax? Do we create gender-neutral versions of words so that the language does not have gender on the morpho-syntactic level? Or do we play with it to subvert and hopefully remove the gendered meaning? Can we even remove the gendered meaning while keeping the same words? That is, can we make a language like Hebrew,

¹⁴ The linguist among us wants to be clear that altering the pitch or brightness of one's voice is not strictly speaking a 'phoneme' even though it is part of phonetics.

with masculine and feminine nouns, more like Danish where there are gendered nouns, but they don't track masculinity/femininity, only distinguishing between which article they take?

How Much Gender?, Reconsidered

In looking at how trans people use gendered language to improve our lives, we are not denying that there are clear ways that gendered language also hurts us. There are a number of forms of gendered language use that we think should be limited or removed, especially when the use of such language involves *assuming* someone's gender. The multitude of ways that trans people use gendered language for improving their lives, however, certainly complicates this question.

In the philosophical literature, this debate began with a focus on pronouns, and then broadened to other lexical items like honorifics, suffixes, and generics (Dembroff and Wodak, 2018; 2021). Putting the question of why *these* lexical items to the side (since Dembroff and Wodak (2021) think some lexical items like 'son' and 'daughter' are perfectly fine), there can still be a question of why stop at the lexical level? The preceding discussion of the political significance of phonetic and morpho-syntactic levels can push us to question whether these aspects of language should be made gender-neutral. If we're going to gender-neutralize some parts of English, why don't we just gender-neutralize everything? Responses to Dembroff and Wodak (2018, 2021) argue that they go too far (Hernandez, 2021; Kukla and Lance, forthcoming). But what if they haven't gone far enough? Why should pitch communicate gender? Why should a fronted /s/? Why label certain nouns as feminine and others as masculine? Why have any gender at all?

However, what can we make of this project given all the good things trans people do with gendered language? The playful use of gendered language shows that removing gender from language isn't the only way to fight essentialism, as Hernandez (2021) has argued. The further joy that trans people get from playing with gendered language and finding the language that works for them is an additional reason that we might want to resist fully gender-neutralizing language. These reasons become all the more convincing when we consider how some gender-non normative language users, when presented

with a gender-neutral language like Indonesian, add gendered pronouns *into* their language. They *add* exactly what some argue we have a moral duty to *subtract*. Why should we remove resources from trans people to make their lives more enjoyable and understandable? Why remove the options to play with and subvert the language that is so often used to harm us? Can't we have a little gender, as a treat?

The ways in which trans people use gendered language does not give us answers to the question of how gendered language should be. (This is not surprising since the way people actually use language could not tell us the way people *ought* to use language.) However, it should draw our attention to many more factors that should be considered when arguing for one position over another. How are we demarcating what to neutralize and what to leave as is? What are the moral or linguistic reasons for using/keeping those particular linguistic items? In posing these questions, we mean to communicate how much more detailed and robust arguments for or against gender-neutralizing language need to be.

Conclusion

What we have aimed to accomplish is to broaden the philosophical discussion about gendered language. We believe there are a lot of exciting and interesting projects for philosophers to engage in when it comes to gendered language, and almost all of them have practical and political impact. This is not to dismiss the current debates; in fact, we think the answers to the questions we have raised may prove enlightening and insightful for the problems and puzzles that have already been recognized. However, it also appears that there are more uses of gendered language than have been dreamt of in our current philosophies.

We began by saying language is like a garden – it can be pruned and watered, but we don't have full control of where it grows. Trans people's language use is a quickly growing vine and should not be pruned too early. Over-pruning plants or overworking the soil can kill the garden, and there can be great beauty, function, and balance through happy accidents and by carefully watching as things grow. The work done by philosophers of language and linguists is valuable for understanding how things grow

and questioning how we may want to shape things in the future. But it is through our *attention* to its growth that we gain insight into all language can be.

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