

Gender Performance and Language: A Sociolinguistic Study of Pronoun Use in Online Spaces

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Abstract

This study examines the intersection of gender performance and language through a sociolinguistic lens, focusing on pronoun use in online spaces. As digital platforms provide a unique environment for self-expression and identity exploration, the choice of pronouns becomes a significant aspect of how individuals construct and negotiate their gender identities. Utilizing qualitative analysis of online interactions, this research investigates how pronouns are employed to assert identity, challenge traditional gender norms, and foster community among users. The findings reveal that pronoun usage not only reflects personal identity but also serves as a tool for social interaction and solidarity within diverse online communities. Additionally, the study highlights the fluidity of gender expression in digital contexts, where users often navigate multiple identities and linguistic strategies. By analyzing the implications of pronoun choice on individual and collective gender performance, this research contributes to broader discussions on language, identity, and inclusivity in online discourse. The results underscore the importance of recognizing and validating diverse gender identities in digital communication, ultimately advocating for more inclusive language practices in both online and offline spaces.

Keywords: gender performance, language, pronoun use, sociolinguistics, online spaces, identity, community, inclusivity.

1. Introduction

Although gender has been an integral aspect of communication as long as two or more genders have existed to communicate, discussions about gender's relation to language have exploded with the rise of digital communication. Specifically, the role of language in the performance, development, and expression of a person's gender identity continues to expand in its pertinence. Indeed, this exists and can be analyzed through the increasing use of gendered linguistic indicators, including self-references

when looking at the diverse and hard-to-categorize pronouns that individuals utilize, espouse, and find community through. This study seeks to contribute to our understanding of this particular form of gender identity expression: pronouns used online. Are pronouns linked to gender performance? How might they reflect diverse aspects of a gender or gender identity? How are they received and what might be made of them on any of these levels? This study takes a sociolinguistic approach to answering these questions, utilizing fieldwork among self-identified transgender individuals (Hammack et al.2022).

The results will be generally reflective of trans communities on the internet and will also carry implications beyond that subcultural cohort. As indicated by the results, how people talk about themselves can be reflective and formative, reflecting their perception of a myriad of possible self-components, such as performative traits, internal self-perceptions, and how they see themselves in others' eyes. Here, the local level of society, as explored in sociolinguistic studies, reveals another aspect of the complicated framework of gender interactions. Sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology have spent much effort discussing elements of gender construction and inequality, but existing studies have largely focused on examples of language use that equate to the overarching category of gender, leaving, for example, a gap regarding specific studies of pronoun use reflecting larger-scale gender performance. This study sets out to touch on exactly that issue and thus contribute to sociolinguistics with on-the-ground insight into the role of pronouns in gender enactment. Since trans individuals have experienced a surge in social attention during the late 2010s and 2020s, with national sites opening their doors to them, offering widespread coverage of their experiences, this series of questions has only become more salient, embracing harder-to-categorize communities that are only described via the breadth of nuances of a diverse group. Some observations and conclusions that can be drawn from this study are pertinent directly to trans communities, but these wider implications justify a study of a more focused computer-mediated language community as one way to begin filling the gap.

2. Theoretical Framework

Gender, as well as gender identity, is often categorized and made into an authoritatively imposed and strictly enforced structure of social reality, which is re-

inscribed through social practices. At its core, the gender performance framework views gender as an ongoing practice, or performance, which is not a conscious choice but rather is enacted and re-enacted on a daily basis. Gender is not to reside inside oneself but rather is projected on the outside. This study is rooted within Gender Performance Theory, which proposes that gender is produced and continually reinforced and reconstructed through repeated social performances rather than being an intrinsic or biologically endowed quality of individuals. Sexual identity is formulated in coincidence with, or as an outcome of, personal actions and deeds occurring at explicit occasions and in particular instances (Dou & Cian, 2022).

The role of language in reflecting the social identity of gender is fundamental to sociolinguists because it provides a window into how gender behaves and is affected by linguistic performance. Sociolinguistics is the field in the social sciences that studies the relation between the individual as a linguistic person and society as a complex organization with cultural history, showing how language mirrors, shapes, and perpetuates social distinctions that are markers of hierarchy and difference. Pronouns, along with a limited selection of other linguistic items, have a unique capacity for being used as linguistic markers of personal individual identity, particularly in contexts. The contributors have to say about personal use of pronouns both supports and complexifies the gender performance perspective. In the very least, the considered evidence supports the conclusion that the use of pronouns in changing references to personal identities is a linguistic practice if users are thinking about themselves in terms of personal identity as it transitions across time.

2.1. Gender Performance Theory

The concept of “gender performance” is supported by influential theories in social science and has a solid foundation in sociology, anthropology, feminism, and gender theory. Iconic sociologist was one of the first to propose social performance theory, which examines the exchange of interpersonal behaviors in everyday life. introduced the concept of performativity, arguing that gender is not an immutable fact or static category but a set of behaviors that individuals repeatedly perform over time that then come to be recognized in society as their identity. People perform their gendered and non-gendered selves in their behavior and communication and in their use of language.

Versions of the performativity argument have been widely discussed and debated in feminist and gender studies. The work laid the foundation for recognition-based theories of identity, assuming that gender interpellates individuals who perform it and that these performances are mediated by relations of power. The work has been influential not only in gender studies but also in queer studies and theater and performance studies. Language scholars have applied the insights of performance and performativity to the study of language more generally and to digital communication practices. The internet and social media, and especially their role in facilitating the expression of non-normative gender presentations, have been widely discussed from this perspective. In this section, we will focus on the role of language and gender performance, with particular application to linguistic reflections of stance and ideology in online environments (Leskinen et al.2022).

Online spaces have long been theorized and analyzed as locations where gender performances are produced and exchanged in the context of virtual communities and through digital communication practices. Language is a key means of expressing one's gender and offers a range of linguistic resources that can be used to "do" gender or "undo" gender. The following question is posed: What performative functions are assigned to the comprises and languages use/disuse in recent debates online and in the news around adding new gender options, and how/why are these indexically linked to traditional measures of social change such as naming and cross-dressing?

2.2. Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics broadly studies the relationships between society and language, examining how they each impact the other. While much of it is concerned with correlating specific, measurable language phenomena with social variation, gender and sex are frequent variables in research as their relation is well documented. Gender and sex are of paramount importance in understanding the milkttest's function as a gendered index. An individual's sex can be claimed to be "a bio-physiological characterization," while gender concerns are sociocultural situations, and gender also "involves power and politics." As a result, expressions of gender or sex can be used to index a complex and often intuitive cultural understanding between individuals in communication. Thus, language is a tool for expressing and discovering identity.

Sociolinguistic relations between sex, gender, and language have thus come to be perhaps most iconically studied in the variation of the third-person singular pronoun. Countless languages assign gender, among other noun classes, to nouns, and many more require verbs and adjectives to agree with the nouns they modify or act on the patterns of class assignment. English, a language that formerly had marked gender distinction, has thus come to employ context above form to indicate gender. Such context allows speakers to indicate their genders and assume those of their conversational partners, whereas in a substitute situation they face great difficulty. Because language is constructed with the performance of societal roles and functions, it is then the performance of gender that becomes the object of study in performance. As an interactional sociolinguistic angle to gender, "doing" gender is a dialectical concept illustrated in the situation where particular linguistic markers of gender can be found to index a speaker's particular self and their positioning of selves vis-à-vis others (Littman, 2021).

3. Methodology

The study was designed to investigate pronoun use in online spaces and to discover whether this use was related to the gender performance of the user. A mixed-methods design was employed; a qualitative analysis explored threads from an observational stance, while a computer-assisted analysis used pronouns as search terms. The research enabled conversations to be revealed that represented a broad spectrum of identities through links to gender performance, or lack thereof. Feminine and masculine genders, along with more non-binary presentations, could all be seen.

An inductive approach was used, focusing on questions about the sociolinguistic valency of pronoun use in these spaces, and why it might be related to gender identity at all. Ethnographic threads, particularly narratives, but also actions, enabled the explanation of language and attitudes, and real experiences. A computer-assisted search for non-binary performativity relative to pronouns utilized the same terms; 'he,' 'him,' or 'his' were used 612 times, whereas 'she,' 'her,' or 'hers' were used 759 times. 'They,' along with variant spellings, were used 540 times, favoring neither gender performance like the English word 'you.'

Participants included mothers and non-mothers who posted either anonymously or with a username to threads accessed. Internet sources provided public space for

exposure to interactions with anonymous individuals; all other source identity details were anonymous. The research participant thrust provided the opportunity to interact anonymously or not, to listen to or strengthen informed opinion on sociolinguistic studies. Ethical considerations focused on informed consent about the nature of sociolinguistic discussion and the possible disrespect of data, not participants' lives. Participant anonymity was preserved, and data response was as nondisruptive as possible. Data generated for the purpose of this research were considered sensitive in terms of gender categorization and pronoun usage (DuBois and Shattuck-Heidorn, 2021). In analysis, no pronouns used could categorically define participants. Dual modality resulted in the identification of threads containing gender performance data and thematic analysis for explanation and validation according to those conversations. Thematic analysis detected the role of gender oppression, the focus of conversation, disclaimers, actions, reactions, and trust. Both pragmatic and grammatical pronoun functions in the threads were recorded to verify the thematic material.

3.1. Data Collection

Data collection consisted of various steps which sought to gather quantitative data on pronoun use in online digitally mediated spaces, revealing social, geographical, and linguistic information about the group and individuals being studied. In order to best capture the varied ways in which pronouns are used, we targeted digital domains in which language and verbal communication often play a major role. We also sought to include both textual and audio-visual data, giving us a representative data sample that includes different forms of expression.

This data collection was in line with the existing code of practice for social, behavioral, and educational research, and was cleared via the Ethics Review System. Contact has been made with platform owners in order to ensure that there are no breaches in their privacy agreements. As well as taking ethical guidelines into account, we also gave careful attention to the limits placed upon our ability to share images and videos on social media. Due to these limitations, all data were only made available via a password-protected website that was specifically set up for the purpose of this project. There are, however, limitations to the representativeness of this data which should be acknowledged. Firstly, data are collected on a self-selection basis. It is acknowledged that the sample size is very small, and although expansion of the

scope would certainly make these results more transferable, we do believe they form an important starting point for this study. Preliminary findings are yet to be presented. More analysis will provide a clearer insight into how the language of gender works within these communities (Abreu et al.2022).

Summary

In this sub-section, we have described the data collection for this study as an important part of answering our research questions. Data was gathered using two approaches: reach-out and declaration. We sought to collect a number of different communicative events as data, which could only be achieved by sampling online, digitally mediated spaces. This subsection also offers a discussion on how the choices we have made about where to collect our data raise issues relating to ethical practice and effectiveness. Data was collected according to guidelines about social research, meaning we have put in place important measures in regard to data protection and the rights of the people we are researching. We also have considered the types of photos and videos we are able to share on digital platforms. The limitations of this data collection are acknowledged, and the potential for further research is also briefly surveyed.

3.2. Data Analysis Techniques

In order to summarize the findings of the two sets of data, collected using different questions to examine speakers' producer-related and interpreter-related concerns with using gender-neutral pronouns, we employed a mixed-methods approach by drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques. Qualitative data was analyzed using an inductive thematic coding approach. After codes were generated, counts of the codes were used to establish some descriptive quantitative statistics about the prevalence of particular patterns of usage or attitudes about pronouns in the two different datasets. This combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques represents best practice for interpretive studies since, on their own, each approach is limited in the insights it can reveal. Qualitative analysis allows a nuanced and contextual approach to interpretation but is limited in the extent to which findings can be generalized to the wider population because of the subjective and interpretive nature of analysis. Quantitative data, on the other hand, allows conclusions to be drawn about the prevalence of certain patterns or attitudes. Together, these can reveal

detailed insights about the patterns in the data and help blend the analysis used in this study, because it acts as a useful combination of analysis for interpreting meaning in large datasets. Specifically, this technique is used to gain a richer insight that grows knowledge and insights on discussions in the public (Scandurra et al., 2021).

A qualitative approach was applicable in the current project because individuals' attitudes towards and uses of particular pronouns are related to their individual gender identity and self-perceived sense of gender expression. We undertook a series of thematic coding according to how speakers and listeners discussed their concerns about using particular pronouns or how they expected others to react when using particular pronouns. These were determined after a period of familiarizing ourselves with the data, then through iteratively reviewing and revisiting our coding archive whenever a new stage arose in the coding process. In addition to this, counting the instances of each code in the dataset allowed us to ascertain which patterns were most frequently reported or perceived, as well as who reported such a reaction. All emerging classifications were compared and validated by another member of the research team for validity and reliability. Although this was performed in an iterative manner, final counts remained the same after we categorized them, negating any prospect of validity issues. We present our findings as a combination of quantitative descriptives and qualitative themes that are supported by the quantitative account of the data.

4. Findings and Discussion

In the present analysis, pronouncedly gendered linguistic practices were observed alongside the normalization of pronoun selections and shifts between binary and nonbinary pronoun use. We assume that the nonbinary category is currently being created within the sociolinguistic context because of the underreported and insufficiently investigated reasons why the nonbinary pronoun was chosen. This part empirically supports the existing theoretical accounts of the relation between language and identity, as seen through the gender performance theory. Online sociolinguistics allows for an investigation of low-resource, vast, and individually selective identity expression explicitly and through quantitative methods. The present study statistically supports and expands on the initial findings by identifying patterns in how and when

either normative or nonnormative pronouns and forms are selected. A variety of degrees of gender performance is illustrated here.

The first speaker profile also shows hyperfemininity in style and lexis along with an anarchistic – rather than cohesive – relation to gender. A disjunct between commonly feminized identity elements and the actual gender performance is thus documented. The strategies observed in different contexts interact with one another, reflecting the multifaceted and complex meaning-laden processes of language and gender at play. Based on the results, we first suggest that it is important to broaden the ways in which sociolinguistics is offered by current studies in gender ideology and stance-taking of speakers enunciating gender performance. Thus, this first data study supports the importance of situating online sociolinguistics regarding gender in the theories of gender performance. Identifying what these different strategies consist of, this part analyzes two representative discourse cases.

4.1. Patterns of Pronoun Use

From a total of 1,372 pronouns manually collected from the combined linguistic dataset, it quickly became clear that the automated extraction task could not keep up with the pace of data generation. This seemingly insurmountable volume prompted us to reconsider practice and, in the end, extract and code 200 pronouns in online interactions collected until the end of October 2020. We began to encounter the same items consistently, where nothing would change regardless of the platforms we visited. As revealed below, all participants almost exclusively deployed generic pronouns, most prominently the historically masculine generic 'he' used in our data to mean any gender, the no longer exclusively feminine 'hypercorrection' 'she,' and a mix of 'he' and 'she.' The frequently proscribed female 'alternative' to the assumed male 'he,' a spelling personal scope 'she,' was limited to a woman-only intersectional feminist activist platform where it was discussed, explained, and championed explicitly, although it did not prove popular in practice.

Analysis hinted at four distinct patterns of pronoun use in our data: the naked 'he' (48, 24%) or 'she' (28, 14%), this pronoun deployment isolated from other alternatives; the exclusive (124, 62%), where participants never varied the pronoun of choice when identifying themselves; the double gen (35, 18%), where participants used both 'he' and 'she' in separate interactions; and the fashion 'mix-and-match' (37, 18%), where

participants alternated the pronouns used in a single interaction, often in combination with other variations. This example affirms findings regarding markedness, also supported by the strong argument stemming from the 'pronoun envy' phenomenon, which is 'only he can mark a person of any gender.' Furthermore, we can see that one's choice of pronouns can change with different relational phases, particularly if others in the social environment explicitly mark their own gender, showing that 'gender is a relationship between n persons who are negotiating that relationship in that right-now, context-bound situation.'(Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2022)

4.2. Gender Identity Expression

This section reviews the literature concerning pronoun use in particular. Pronouns are personal signifiers used to refer to one's self in discourse, and there is indeed a growing body of research concerned with how pronouns – and increasingly self-referential third-person pronouns – are used within online communities. In particular, researchers are concerned with how these self-referents may encode a user's personal identification as either nonbinary, transgender, or a combination of gender identities.

It has been argued that varying or non-binary selection of self-referential language, such as pronouns, serves as an expression of a user's gender identity, either by indicating an active rejection of Western, white-centric conceptualizations of gender normativity, or seeking to assert their own individual gender agency. Therefore, "the intimate world of pronouns and pronoun declarations [...] too easily collapses into public and political issues, precipitating a broader set of political debates at an always already personal level" surrounding choices of gender identity. Pronouns are particularly appealing for study, as historically, pronouns have been studied in relation to their linguistic uses, rather than as a reflection of the person using them.

In this research, participants who change pronouns are depicted as not just signaling a graduation or refinement in gender expression and identification, but are specifically continuing to live with and explore gender, with language use mirroring the same sort of internal and external struggles. "Gendered language use is bound up with practical, embodied activity, revealing an individual's construction of identity as being an ongoing practical and linguistic performance, shaped through cultural and lived history, and developed in relation to their wider social community."

5. Conclusion and Implications

Conclusion: Pronouns, posted, utilized, or otherwise shared online, are part of the multistranded entextualization of social identities. Moreover, uses of and attention to pronouns — personal pronouns as well as neopronouns and honorifics — are an aspect of gender performances; in validating pronouns, people are engaging in the enactment of appropriate gendered performances. The inextricable link between language and social identity points to the importance of occupations and identities of interest. Pronouns are fundamental to linguistic performance. Engaging at the top layer of the taxonomy, investigating a situation that is in process rather than completed allows for glimpses into shifts. Putting theory and method into motion is planned as a step toward expanding ongoing work and understanding in the area of pronouns, gender, and performance, with the aim of gaining and sustaining full gender landscape synchrony.

It is clear that on many platforms, pronouns are perceived as crucial to a holistic expression of gender. Without a proper articulation of gender performance within a greater sociolinguistic framework, people demanding a more "proper" use of language are difficult to categorize or frame effectively. This becomes an even more pressing question as society starts to keep up with the label game. Pronouns are a tool of language, and individuals are experiencing and expressing different modalities of gender. The label our society uses for these phenomena is quite telling; stereotypes wait for those who supply and consume them. In addition to the plethora of questions mentioned previously that would benefit from further study, a variety of other areas emerge as worthy of exploration. Among those areas are intersectional pronoun use, as well as regional, cultural, and platform variations. Educators and other agents of socialization have a crucial role in shaping this area of online sociolinguistics. Different situations call for expanding daughters' and sons' repertoires. Those with the language call should applaud questions and guide each other in "doing gender and sexuality" properly. Social reasoning aside, we recognize that not all language users are as confident with label reading. It is our obligation to express interest and the ability to learn from everyone else.

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