

# Linguistics of Gender-Neutral Language

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This program is designed to help navigate the often-complicated world of gender-neutral language, especially pertaining to non-binary people, and to make both allies and trans\* individuals comfortable with using language that accurately reflects gender identity. This topic will be approached in a neutral point of view, and is based on actual usage and patterns of language rather than arbitrary, cis-het-normative ideas of "proper" and "improper" usage. The first part of the workshop will provide an overview of gender and language, during which we will discuss the differences between natural gender and grammatical gender, and the implications that arise from languages with these different systems. The second part will then discuss applications of gender-neutral language in English, including the usage of singular they and neologisms, or newly-coined words. This will include resources to help the audience sound more natural when using gender-neutral language in everyday speech.

## Language & Gender

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中文

Español  
English

हिंदी

العربية

Português

বাংলা

русский

日本語

ગુજરાતી

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- What is language?
  - We really don't know
  - Has meaning that is systematic, shared, ?
  - We have examples of things that we think are languages.
- What is linguistics?
  - The field of science that studies language
  - Philosophy of language tries to define linguistic meaning, linguistics tries to define language and language use
  - Not the study of grammar

### 1. Mandarin

## A Quick and Dirty Introduction to Linguistics

### Theoretical Linguistics

- *Sound-Based*
  - Phonology
  - Phonetics
- *Word-Based*
  - Morphology
  - Syntax
  - Lexis
- *Meaning-Based*
  - Semantics
  - Pragmatics
- *Other Approaches*
  - Orthography
  - Morphophonology
  - Semiotics
  - Cognitive

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### Applied Linguistics

- *Language Acquisition*
  - Pedagogy
  - Multilingualism
  - Literacy
- *Language Interaction*
  - Sociolinguistics
  - Conversational analysis
  - Language policy and planning
- *Other Approaches*
  - Translation
  - Stylistics
  - Forensic linguistics
  - Internet linguistics

- Theoretical linguistics - nature of language
- Phonology - study of individual sounds/phonemes
- Phonetics - isolated strings of sounds
- Morphology - word formation
- Syntax - word order
- Lexis - words themselves
- Semantics - “inherent” meaning
- Pragmatics - contextual meaning
- Orthography - writing systems
- Morphophonology - exactly what it says on the tin

## Descriptivism vs. Prescriptivism

- |                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| • How language <i>is</i> used | • How language <i>ought to be</i> used |
| • Describes                   | • Prescribes                           |
| • Objective                   | • Subjective                           |
| • Consistent with usage       | • Arbitrarily assigned                 |
| • Not binary                  | • Typically binary                     |

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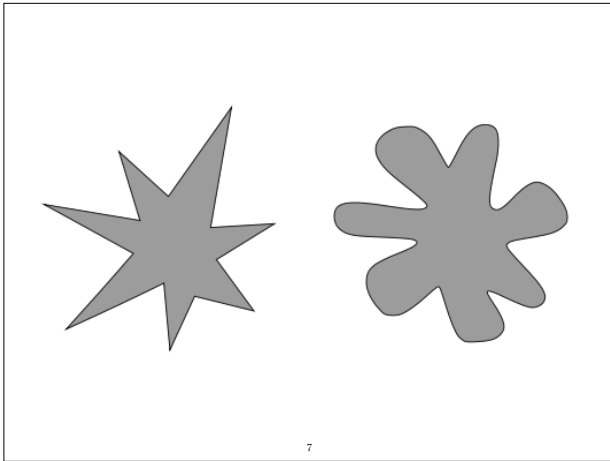
- Descriptivism is scientific, inclusive, and is the point of view for the vast majority of linguists
- Prescriptivism is unscientific, exclusive, and is held by only a small fraction of linguists
- Not all descriptivism is conservative: see Orwell
- In Politics and the English Language Orwell prescribes various stylistic points; they have nothing to do with actual usage of language, merely his perception of it

## Language and Thought

- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, or why *Arrival* wouldn't work
- Linguistic determinism versus linguistic relativity
- Pragmatic baggage
- Meaning versus intention
- Bouba/kiki effect

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- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis explains the relation between language and thought
- A misnomer; neither Sapir nor Whorf developed the hypothesis
- Strong version: linguistic determinism
- LD holds that language determines thought
- No empirical evidence for determinism
- One of the reasons Newspeak in 1984 wouldn't work; the second is that language is too hard to control, and if you have the power to control it then you don't need to.
- Weak version: linguistic relativity



- One of these shapes has the name “bouba”, and the other has the name “kiki”. Which is which?
- Across languages, 88-98% of speakers identify the one on the left as “kiki” and the one on the right as “bouba”

## Noun Cases & Classes

- Case: inflection (conjugation) of nouns that reflect their grammatical role in the sentence
- Class: type of noun (e.g. person, place, thing, idea)

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- Purpose behind grammatical gender
- Grammatical gender: doesn't necessarily gender objects

## Gendered Language

- Grammatical gender (25%): noun-class, grammatical case matching to other words
- Morphological; nouns change forms based on gender
- Sometimes relies on metaphysical properties including humanness, sex, gender, animacy, etc.
- Influences the way a culture thinks
- Example languages: French & Spanish (2), German (3), Old English (3), Czech and Slovak (4)

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- Most Indo-European languages have grammatical gender
- Not always consistently related to anything
- Bridge example

*Brücke (f)*

- beautiful
- elegant
- fragile
- peaceful
- pretty
- slender

*punte (m)*

- big
- dangerous
- long
- strong
- sturdy
- towering

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- Left: German
- Right: Spanish
- German speakers ID a masc word with typically masc adjectives
- Spanish speakers ID a fem word with typically fem adjectives

- Genderless language: language with no grammatical gender
- Example languages: Japanese (sort of), Chinese, Korean, Bengali, Lao, Thai, etc.

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- Less gendered languages, not necessarily genderless
- Japanese has complex honorifics and gendered casual forms

And then there's English, which doesn't have its shit together...

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## (Binary) Natural Gender

- English used to have a noun case system, but as languages evolve they get simpler
- There was grammatical gender in English, but this disappeared with the case system
- So technically (grammatically) English is genderless
- However...

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- Like most IE languages, Old English had a noun case system and grammatical gender
- But then some shit happened in Middle English

- Widow/Widower
- Count/Countess
- Actor/Actress
- Son/daughter
- He/She
- Countries and ships: always feminine
- And others...

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- Masc/fem words and their associations

## Gender-Neutral Language Use

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## What Makes a Word Gender-Neutral, Anyway?

- Sounds: hard sounds masculine, soft sounds feminine, combinations of the two neutral
- Concepts: those least associated with gender roles

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- Sounds: final /ss/ versus strict terminal. (Prince vs princess vs princet)  
(Emperor vs empress vs emprex)
- Concepts: professor, teacher, clerk, etc

## Neutralizing a Word

- Resound: change final sound to “et” or “ex”
- Replace: use gender-neutral related word  
(chairman→chairperson)
- Retrace: find an neutral older form/related word  
(with less connotations)
- If these fail, coin a new one.

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- The three Rs of neutralization
- Resound: prince to princet
- Replace: girlfriend to partner
- Retrace: father to cennend
- Neologisms: line between prescriptivism and supplementing the lexicon
- Reclamation of a word: prescriptivist issue, plus issue of shared meaning; people need to understand
- Pragmatics can't always do the heavy lifting

## Why Use Some Words Over Others?

- Connotation: “lover” often implies an unfaithful relationship
- Malapropisms/mondegreens: “dommy” can easily turn into “Dom me”
- Awkwardness: “boygirlfriend/girlboyfriend” are a bit unwieldy (one extra syllable)
- Inclusiveness: See “boygirlfriend/girlboyfriend”

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- Pretty subjective
- Nevertheless, there are issues to think about when choosing language to use
- Connotation (remember, meaning is shared)
- Malapropisms/mondegreens
- Awkwardness
- Inclusiveness/binary gender

## Cute Gender-Neutral Things to Call Your Significant Other!

- Date
- Datefriend
- Datemate
- Lover
- Boifriend
- Girlbofriend
- Boygirlfriend
- Paramour
- Bothfriend
- Genderfriend
- Sweetie
- Sweetheart
- Cuddle Buddy
- Birfriend
- Feyfriend
- Personfriend
- Enbyfriend
- Enbae

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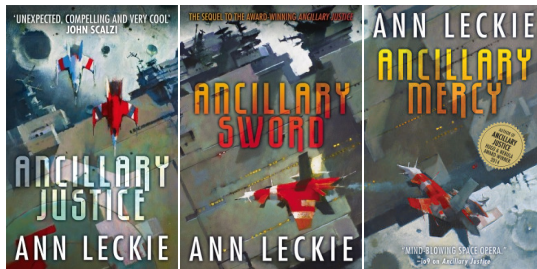
- What ones work better than others?

## Fun and Games With Pronouns

- For people of unknown gender
- For non-binary pals
- For everyone?

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- People of unknown gender: best to use singular they, since that's what it's there for
- Enby folks: whatever the hell they want
- For everyone: case study - Imperial Radch



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- In Leckie's Imperial Radch series, everyone uses she/her/hers pronouns in the language (Radchaii)
- Why not use this in English?
- For one, she/her/hers specifies gender identity; don't assume gender
- Why not they/them/theirs or another neutral pronouns then?
- Because language is hard to control and people have the right to use whatever language they want for themselves.

## Gender-Neutral References

What do you call someone other than their pronouns or name?

- Comrade (!)
- Citizen
- Individual
- Dude (?)
- Friend

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- Comrade: potential socialist implications— but that means socialism is a terrible thing
- Citizen: borrowed from Leckie, but potential nationalistic connotations
- Individual: awkward?
- Dude: gender-neutral in California English, but perhaps not in other dialects
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## How to Normalize Gender-Neutral Language

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- The very complicated process of normalization of gender-neutral language

- Use it

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- Slang and neologisms are incorporated into the standard dialect by usage
- English doesn't have a governing body for a standard dialect (nor should it, because of prescriptivism)
- Thus, the standard dialect is determined by how people use language

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- Language changes all the time
  - Things get added to the dictionaries because people figure out what words work best and use them a lot
  - **Just use it.**
  - **Use makes it natural**
  - **Use it.**
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