



Linguistic Society of America

LSA Statement on Legislating Pronouns

November 2023

Whereas:

1. LSA values inclusiveness in the profession of linguistics.¹
2. LSA promotes sound policies informed by linguistic evidence.²
3. Several legislatures have enacted laws or introduced bills which would enshrine discrimination targeting transgender, nonbinary, and other gender-diverse individuals, especially in educational settings.³
4. These bills regulate language use, especially regarding names and pronouns of students and school employees, including:
 - a. Banning teachers from asking others about their pronouns.⁴
 - b. Banning teachers from sharing their own pronouns.⁵
 - c. Banning teachers from using students' pronouns if those pronouns don't match the student's sex assigned at birth, enrollment documents, or birth certificates.⁶
 - d. Refusing to acknowledge birth certificates which have been amended, thereby undermining rights gained in other jurisdictions.⁷
 - e. Requiring parental permission before allowing teachers to use students' pronouns if they change or don't match their documents.⁸
 - f. Requiring parental notification if students request a change of pronouns.⁹
 - g. Exempting school employees from any preexisting expectation to respect the pronouns of students and colleagues.¹⁰

¹ LSA Strategic Plan, Values

² LSA Strategic Plan, Goals and Objectives V.C

³ <https://www.advocate.com/politics/transgender-outing-pronoun-ban>

⁴ Florida HB 1223 §2(4)

⁵ Florida HB 1223 §2(3)

⁶ US HR 1585 §3 (a)(1), Arizona SB 1001 §A, Arkansas HB 1468 §1(3)(d)(1), Iowa SB 1145 §16.5

⁷ Kentucky SB 150 §1(5)(b)

⁸ US HR 1585 §3 (a)(1), Arizona SB 1001 §A, Arkansas HB 1468 §1(3)(d)(1), New Hampshire SB 272 §I(t-v), Iowa SB 1145 §16.5

⁹ Indiana SB 354 §6§2(a)(1-2)

¹⁰ Florida HB 1223 §2(2), Kentucky SB 150 §1(5)(b-c), Arizona SB 1001 §B, Arkansas HB 1468 §1(3)(d)(2), Tennessee HB 1269 §1(b-c)

- h. Protecting the right of students to misgender one another, while failing to protect a corresponding right to avoid being misgendered.¹¹
5. LSA has a duty to educate the public and lawmakers on the linguistic facts relevant to these policies and their potential effects.

The LSA affirms the following, based on its stated values and the preponderance of linguistic scholarship:

- Linguistic gender is a broad category of features distinct from biological sex and social gender. Some languages mark gender extensively and others do not, but this difference does not determine whether gender is important to the speakers of those languages.¹²
- Linguistic categories do not map uniformly onto cultural ones, and such mappings are neither uniform across languages nor stable over time. For example, some languages have two grammatical gender categories, some have three or more, and some have none.¹³
- Pronouns are not determined by biological characteristics, but by social and linguistic norms, which change over time.¹⁴
- The use of *they*, *them* or *their* to refer to a single person has been part of English for centuries and is widely used by English users today, both in reference to an unknown, theoretical, or generic person and for specific individuals.¹⁵
- People may request that others refer to them with singular *they* pronouns, rather than *she* or *he*, for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to an expression of their gender or other identities.¹⁶
- Regulating language has consequences for those regulated by it. Regulating language such that some identities cannot legally be fully expressed has negative effects on individuals and society; in this case, the mental health of trans and gender non-conforming youth is especially negatively impacted.¹⁷

¹¹ Arkansas HB 1468 §1(3)(e), Montana HB 361 §2(2)

¹² Ackerman, L. (2019). Syntactic and cognitive issues in investigating gendered coreference. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics*, 4(1): 117.

¹³ Corbett, G. (1991). Gender Agreement. In *Gender* (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics, pp. 105-144). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Conrod, K. (2018). 'Pronouns and Gender in Language. In Kira Hall, and Rusty Barrett (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 10 July 2018).

¹⁵ Balhorn, M. (2004). The rise of epicene *they*. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 32(2), 79–104.

¹⁶ Konnelly, L., & Cowper, E. (2020). Gender diversity and morphosyntax: An account of singular *they*. *Glossa*, 5(1).

¹⁷ Ross, L. E., Kinitz, D. J., & Kia, H. (2022). Pronouns are a public health issue. *American Journal of Public Health*, 112(3), 360–362.

- Allowing or requiring misgendering creates a hostile environment that specifically targets trans people; conversely, encouraging communication about pronoun practices creates a welcoming environment and proactively discourages bullying and other harmful behaviors.¹⁸
- Minors are as equally deserving of the protection of their rights as adults, including being the arbiters of their own (linguistic and gender) identities and pronouns.¹⁹
- Informing parents of students' pronoun changes endangers students by putting them at risk of physical, verbal, and emotional abuse from family (including conversion therapy, which has been banned in much of the US).²⁰

THEREFORE BE IT STATED THAT THE LINGUISTIC SOCIETY OF AMERICA rejects and calls for an end to laws that restrict educators, school employees, and students from expressing their identities and/or from showing respect for others through the use of names, pronouns, and other language consistent with that person's self-identified gender.

¹⁸ Olson, K. R., Durwood, L., DeMeules, M., & McLaughlin, K. A. (2016). Mental health of transgender children who are supported in their identities. *Pediatrics*, 137(3).

¹⁹ Brown, C., Frohard-Dourlent, H., Wood, B. A., Saewyc, E., Eisenberg, M. E., & Porta, C. M. (2020). "It makes such a difference": An examination of how LGBTQ youth talk about personal gender pronouns. *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners*, 32(1), 70–80.

²⁰ Meyer, E. J., & Leonardi, B. (2020). Teachers' professional learning to affirm transgender, non-binary, and gender-creative youth: Experiences and recommendations from the field. In *Trans Youth in Education* (pp. 129–143). Routledge.