Pronouns as Linguistic Care Work

Kirby Conrad (they/them)

I view it as a sort of hapless community service the amount of time I spend explaining to cis people that misgendering is bad. And that linguistic difficulty on their part doesn't actually mitigate the psychic harm of misgendering. And that misgendering hurts anyone who suffers it, but that trans people 'just so happen' to face far and away the highest rates of these constant linguistic paper cuts. It feels like picking up litter in the hot sun—I believe in the overall good of doing this outreach, or I wouldn't be doing it, but god it is not fun. It is tiring and uncomfortable and I do fantasize a lot about spending my Saturdays some other way—but then again, I do it so someone else doesn't have to.

That's fine.

Instead of doing more of that, though, it's Our Month and so I'm going to talk about Our Stuff. This is a post talking directly to you from within the family—not really public outreach, not giving guidelines or advice or prescriptions, just reporting on how it's going in here.

So, let's think of pronouns. I'm going to talk about third-person singular English pronouns – the ones with gender stuff sometimes – as a teaching example, as convenience, because this blog post is in English, not because these types of pronouns are cross-linguistically typical or more important than others. Let's think of how we use pronouns to show our care for each other. Hence the title of this very post!

What is care work?

Care work is a fairly transparent term, I feel—labor that's about taking care of people. Care work can be compensated through a capitalist system of exchange of currency for service or labor—nurses are a pretty straightforward example. Nurses provide services that are part of, but not necessarily limited to, the immediate care of bodies in a healthcare setting—there's administering meds, but there's also helping you get up and make it to the bathroom, or making sure you're at a comfortable temperature when you can't dress yourself, or making sure you're hydrated and fed. Care work in the capitalist US context is especially devalued and feminized (because more women are in the care professions, and structural misogyny is a thing).

Care work is a concept from disability justice and liberation movements; there is a large and interesting overlap between disabled people and trans people. It's almost like constant societal abuse and gaslighting hurts bodyminds long-term or something, isn't that weird? But even otherwise-nondisabled trans people have to move through the world like disabled people in certain ways. Our commonalities: we have to go to the doctor a lot; doctors tend to disbelieve our reports of our experiences and bodies; we often have to beg insurance companies to cover stuff that allows us to live our lives; our bodies are frequently paraded in normie spaces as dangerous, illogical, bad. Sometimes it is hard to move our bodies through normie spaces.

These similarities are not accidental: white supremacy and structural ableism and transphobia and heteropatriarchy are all systems of power that share weapons, and whose underlying logic is sustained through the regulation of what kinds of bodies are permitted to exist, and how. Care work is one of the many tools that can be used to defend against those weapons: it is one part of a community's refusal to be obliterated.

Outside of the strict capitalist context of exchanging labor for money, care work is a deeply important standard of mutual aid, particularly in circles with many disabled people. Mutual aid in the form of care work can be something like a group of friends getting together to cook and deliver groceries for a disabled friend when their partner is out of town. It can look like rearranging my furniture to make sure my friend who's part-time in a wheelchair can still come to events. It can look like checking the vaccination status and mask and ventilation plans before inviting our friend to a social event. It can look like my friend sharing a googledoc of our mutual friend's several complicated food allergies when I was going to host a holiday friendsgiving dinner. It can look like my friends having a specific lighting setup in their house so the lights won't make me go into sensory overload every time I come over. Care work in a community is fundamentally about knowing our friends' and family's access-needs, limits, and desires, making a space where we can do fun and joyful shit together.

Linguistic **care work**

Right, that's all super cool, but this is a linguistics blog post. I promised pronoun stuff, even! So what is *linguistic* care work? It is, essentially, the same goal and underlying mechanism: members of a community taking care of each other by way of knowing each others' needs, limits, and desires, and using that information to create joyful ways of relating to each other. Here, I'll give some numbered examples, because numbered examples can be a love language among some linguists, and I want you to feel included.

1. Lauren uses *she* or *they*. Their relationship to cis- or transness is complicated, and they feel solidly nonbinary but don't want to claim a trans or cis label. Many strangers opt for *she* upon seeing them; they're kind of short and cute in a way that gets someone *she*'d by strangers. So to balance it out, I relentlessly *they* them; I *they* them throughout a conversation where a colleague is consistently *she*ing them. Every *they* I attach to Lauren is balancing out four or five *she*s from (mostly) cis people, and *they*ing them makes me feel warm and close to them. They're a pretty similar gender to me in some ways, but different in others, and I like gathering them close to me and saying, *they are one of mine, they're on my team, you can only have them if you can abide sharing them with me and mine*. I love affirming their queerness, and pronouns are but one of the ways I like to do so.

2. Kate uses *she* or *they*. She has a very particular relationship to womanhood that many butches have; hers is from the trans woman direction, but I find a lot of love and warm fuzzy feelings at seeing how butches converge on a no-man's-land from many directions. She's very close to the same gender as me in some ways; a ring-of-keys on the belt loop gender. Tattoos, short hair, sometimes tucks a shirt into jeans gender. I relentlessly use *she* when talking to cis people; they only allow her any adjacency to womanhood contingently, and try to confiscate it constantly. So I will give it back to her constantly, over and over, whenever I

am talking to someone who is trying to kick her out of the big tent of womanhood. Women who don't shave their body hair and who like to hold doors open for people and who are really into being union members are women; moreover they are beloved and handsome and desirable as women. I would be able to instantly tell if someone *they*ed Kate out of a desire to cut her out of that space, rather than *they*ing her as a way of embracing and praising her butchness—it's extremely easy to tell which one you're trying to do.

3. Vagrant uses *xe/xem/xyrs—they* only if xe is truly not possible. Xe has a really cool gender that I admire; xe's younger than me, and is figuring out a bunch of gender and neurotype and related stuff all at once. Xe's really into birds (xyr name is a birding term) and very particular kinds of math and likes prime numbers a lot. I think of xyr pronouns as kind of like a prime number, in a way that gives me brain spikes. I find brain spikes (like N400 and P600) pleasurable, like how a child enjoys giving themself static shocks when they discover balloons. Vagrant's pronouns are ones that no one else I'm close with uses, and for some reason my brain really wants to give this set of pronouns plural agreement, like "*xe are*" instead of "*xe is*." My current theory is that I've essentially internalized the *xe* series as a very specific phonological filter on the *they* series, and also I think this is probably an interim state and that my grammar is going to keep evolving past this. *Xe*ing Vagrant feels ecstatic because xe loves brain spikes, loves the feeling of zappy surprisal the same way I do, to the point where I'm honestly constantly baffled that xe's not a syntactician. *Xe*ing xem is a way of saying, *I will play this joyous game with you, that we both adore, that we have both oriented our entire lives around, because being trans and queer is part of the same thing we're doing when we get a syntax PhD or look at a bird with binoculars*. It feels good similarly on our brains, and I love sharing that feeling with xem in a way that's tied deeply to our shared membership in the gender squad.

Okay, there are your numbered examples. What I want you to notice:

- the motivation of each of these is that I love these people; the way I like to show my love is by knowing my people closely, and knowing their needs and desires

- I care about how other people relate to my people as well; I am not only trying to anticipate what they need from me, but what they might not be getting from someone else

None of this is predicated on "trying not to misgender someone" or even "trying not to mess up pronouns accidentally and get yelled at." Linguistic care work, like any care work truly based in principles of a loving community, cannot run on shame-based fuel. Avoiding shame and harm are only the barest, most basic bar to clear—they do not constitute showing affection. Failing to abuse someone isn't the same as loving them.

So, to you, my linguists—you are also my loving community! I also do linguistic care work that might be for the benefit of even cishet linguists! I am not prescribing a damn thing. I am not correcting you, I am not giving advice, I am not suggesting that you should try harder to do a thing if you find it difficult or uncomfortable or distasteful in any way. I am doing what a social scientist does: I am reporting on the way we are doing things. I'm just letting you know what's up. Genderweird communities are loving families who take care of each other, and linguistic care work is one of the many ways we show that love.

COZIL's 2nd Annual Pride Month Wikipedia Edit-a-thon

Sunny Ananthanarayan (all pronouns)
Archie Crowley (they/them)

LSA and Wikipedia Edit-a-thons

If someone is interested in learning about a linguistics topic, often the first step is a Google search, and often the first search result is a Wikipedia page. While many academics and professors have historically had an adversarial relationship with Wikipedia, as linguists who care about providing accurate, up-to-date information about language to a broader public, we think that editing Wikipedia is an important way to engage in science communication (SciComm). Further, part of the Linguistic Society of America's mission is to provide better public education and raise awareness of linguistics in the general public, and Wikipedia Edit-a-thons are one way to do this!

The Committee for LGBTQ+[Z] Issues in Linguistics (COZIL) is following in the footsteps of many other groups working to host linguistics-themed Wikipedia Edit-a-thons – #LingWiki events. Gretchen McCulloch started organizing Wikipedia Edit-a-thons at the LSA 2015 Annual Meeting and 2015 Linguistic Institute, and has continued to host Edit-a-thons since. The Committee for Gender Equity in Linguistics has hosted several Edit-a-thons for International Women's Day, and several #LingWikis were hosted for the International Year of Indigenous Languages!

Reflections on #LingWiki Edit-a-thons

Sunny's start in linguistics, way back in high school, relied heavily on Wikipedia as a starting point. Even back then, Wikipedia articles for topics in linguistics were very strong and gave direct references to relevant material. Talking with young, similarly keen future linguists, Sunny has seen that many share that experience, especially as the field gains more popular recognition. The biggest lesson Sunny has taken from Wikimedia project editing–especially Wiktionary, a dictionary search that takes a string and returns definitions for languages where that string is a lexeme–is that you can spend 60 seconds to fix a typo, add a link, or even make a new entry, and make a change in the world, so answers are all the more accessible to the curious.

Despite having no previous Wikipedia editing experience, Archie attended the 2021 Edit-a-thon for International Women's Day hosted by COGEL. They were surprised how easy it was to start editing, make pages, and add citations to up-to-date linguistics research. As the then chair of COZIL, they were excited to host an Edit-a-thon focusing on LGBTQ+ Linguistics Issues, and were excited when Sunny agreed to help host the event! Archie found that many pages related to Language and Gender sometimes had outdated terminology, did not include recent work on nonbinary communities, and often just needed editing for organization. They are very excited to see the ways that COZIL members have been able to make an impact on a wide array of Wikipedia pages!

Impact of Edit-a-thons

Especially as it pertains to minoritized groups, pushing for more recognition and representation in an iconic encyclopedic resource can mean a lot. With growth in the field and a effort to democratize knowledge, major improvements have been made to pages that are important to us as queer people. For example, the page for LGBT (or Lavender) linguistics: in the year 2014, it was mostly about the speech of gay men, and there was a section on the speech of lesbian women. Now, the article contains information and references about the language of nonbinary people as well as expansions to emphasize the diversity and nuance in claims about queer language. It was good then, it's better now!

Some other highlights from the past two COZIL Edit-a-thons are the creation of pages for Lal Zimman, Gender Neutrality in Portuguese, and major edits to the page on Language and Gender. And while making new pages is exciting, small tasks as simple as adding references and pointing out which articles are "stubs" or need expansion are crucial to signal to more experienced Wikipedians where attention needs to be paid.

Check out our impact from the past two years:

12	73	218	9	10.4K	105	1.32M	2
Articles Created	Articles Edited	Total Edits	Editors	Words Added	References Added	Article Views	Commons Uploads

2021 Final Stats

3	26	120	7	9K	35	13.1K
Articles Created	Articles Edited	Total Edits	Editors	Words Added	References Added	Article Views

2022 Stats- These stats will be updated through all of June!

COZIL is proud to add to the publicly available linguistics knowledge through participating in Wikipedia editing, and we are excited to continue to host more Edit-a-thons in the years to come! If you ever find yourself with some spare time and want to edit a Wikipedia page…do it!

Gender-Inclusive Language Around the World

Ben Papadopoulos (he/they), University of California, Berkeley

June 8, 2022, 10:30 AM

I am writing this Pride Month post from Neapoli, Greece, a small town in the region of Lasithi on the island of Crete where my paternal grandmother was raised. This is my second day here—I wish my cousins would get out of bed already and come help me order another round of coffee at this café before my abysmal Greek reveals that I am indeed Greek... -*American*.

I have been forced to think about being American a lot on this trip. Nationality is one of those identities that gets assigned to you when you go abroad. I don't often identify myself as American, but when it is assigned to me, I can't deny that it is true. Along with being American comes a whole host of privileges. For instance, during a communication breakdown abroad, I can ask if my interlocutor speaks English and chances are more likely than not that they do, if even a little bit[1]. In this way, speaking English is also a privileged positionality.

I came to Europe this summer for the first time to present my research project, Gender in Language (genderinlanguage.com), publicly at Lavender Languages and Linguistics 28 in Catania, Italy. I presented an organized session of four papers with my colleague Jennifer Kaplan and eleven of my current or former mentees, many of whom use *they/them* pronouns in English. We are privileged in that we may use prescriptive forms already found in English to refer to each other in a way we feel honors and respects our unique gender identities.

We have also been speaking a great deal of Spanish on this trip—especially Sebastian, Jesus, Sol, Julie, and me—because we find that we are better received when we speak Spanish. We are privileged here, too, in that our gender-nonconforming, Spanish-speaking siblings have popularized a method of representing nonbinary gender identities that we find natural and incredibly systematic: the e gender. Yet speaking gender-inclusive Spanish is more effortful and more foreign to our non-queer, Spanish-speaking interlocutors.

More complicated is the case of Italian. I am one of the only Italian speakers in our group, so I have been responsible for directing taxis, consulting pharmacists, and ordering at restaurants. As in Spanish, it is impossible to avoid gendered personal references in Italian. Speak two sentences and you will have arrived at a site where binary gender must be assigned to the referent. This has obviously been very difficult for me to navigate with my students.

The gendered constraints of Italian are more complicated than those of Spanish. Four of the five vowels in the prescriptive inventory of the language are morphemes that simultaneously

---

[1] With this description, I do not mean to assume English to be the national language of the United States. English is not the declared national language of the United States, nor do I believe it should be, to the exclusion of other languages.

encode both gender and number (e.g. *ragazzo* 'boy', *ragazza* 'girl', *ragazzi* 'boys', *ragazze* 'girls'). In many Sicilian dialects, which we have been hearing a lot of, word-final o is realized as [u], associating this final vowel with binary gender. Apart from these linguistic challenges, the concept of nonbinary (social) gender is extremely narrow in Italian society, including popular culture. This is precisely where the trouble begins. It takes a great deal of visibility for the right direction of language change to follow.

Yet there is hope. At LavLang28, we learned about how community members are mitigating this issue in Italian from many of our colleagues. In particular, I would like to draw your attention to Federica Formato (University of Brighton) and Elena Sofia Safina's (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II) brilliant presentations. Federica foregrounded the issue by describing how gendered constraints are multiplied in masculine-feminine gender languages and presented her analysis that the development of gender-inclusive Italian does not represent a desire to collapse the extant gender system, but rather to add more options for self-identification and allyship. Elena Sofia zoomed in on the linguistics of this issue by further analyzing prescriptive constraints and linking the expansion and destruction pathways to distinct ideologies from the Italian-speaking public. She rounded out an extensive list of innovations that the two presenters co-reported, which include a number of symbolic (*, x, ', &, _) and vocalic (ə, u) innovations pioneered by online transfeminist communities. Prevalent among them is the use of the schwa (ə), a proposal that introduces a sixth vowel into the inventory of the language.

This sort of empirical research based on social activism and socially-motivated research questions is the basis of the Gender in Language Project. In short, I intend for the project to be an empirical and community resource that describes the realization of gender in the languages of the world. Along with our empirical language documents (grammars, lexicons), we intend to make or host complete sets of pedagogical materials designed to sensitize speakers towards nonbinary social gender and the use of gender-inclusive forms in different languages.

The project will soon launch a piece entitled "What We Learned in Italy," as well as a grammar and lexicon of gender in Italian. Over the course of the summer, we will also launch materials for eleven other languages we presented at the conference, including Mandarin Chinese, Tagalog, and Modern Irish. In our analyses of these languages thus far, we have already found features of gender that are not unified or even described by any extant theory of gender in language, like radical gender (e.g. 他 'he', 她 'she', 无也 'they [SG.]'), which represents the encoding of gender in Chinese orthography, and phonological mutations based on morphological gender and case in Modern Irish (e.g. *bean* 'woman', *an bhean* 'the woman [NOM.]).

My dissertation research will analyze these features and allow them to contribute to a new theory of gender in language based around the concept of social gender. This includes clearing up the notion that a language like English can be "genderless," a terminological issue that I feel is important to resolve empirically. It is precisely because of the linguistic activism promoted by our queer community members that I am able to perform this research. I feel proud while doing so.

This Pride Month, I encourage you to consider the languages you speak as well as the queer people in your life together, as a language can never be described apart from its speakers.

Consider the challenges, the victories, and the work ahead. Being sensitized to the extreme constraints of binary gender in the languages of the world is itself a form of activism, and I thank you for taking part in a global movement to protect the rights of our queer siblings. It gives me hope to know that speakers of multiple languages (e.g. English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, Mandarin Chinese, Tagalog, Hebrew, Danish, German) are innovating methods of nonbinary gender self-identification. I will continue to be behind the scenes, documenting and analyzing the solutions you attest. As I see it, this is the way forward. There is a lot of work ahead, but together we can come to express our pride in *all* languages.

References

Formato, F. (2022, May 23-25). *Inclusivity, gender and neutrality through self-representation and allyship: A linguistic overview* [Conference presentation]. Lavender Languages and Linguistics 28, Catania, Italy.

Safina, E. S. (2022, May 23-25). *I NOSTRX CORPX RESISTONO. A diachronic corpus analysis of Italian gender neutralization strategies in transfeminist online communities* [Conference presentation]. Lavender Languages and Linguistics 28, Catania, Italy.

TedX Talk: Language Around Gender and Identity Evolves (and always has)

Archie Crowley (they/them)

Dictionaries and grammar "rules" don't have the final word on language -- and believing they do can harm more than help, especially for the trans community. Sociolinguist Archie Crowley deconstructs (watch at link) three common myths around language, demonstrating how it's a fluid system that naturally evolves in the direction of inclusion. Watch the talk HERE.