"The LSA Statement Against Linguistic Misgendering": Review and Practical Applications

Committee for LGBTQ+[Z] Issues in Linguistics (COZIL)

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Accessibility housekeeping

- Slide and references can be accessed here.
- You're welcome to share on social media, but please add alt text!
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Thanks to Ártemis López for this slide concept! ❤
Hello!

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Terminology

- **Misgendering** occurs when a person is called by a pronoun, title, or gender label that they (the referent) do not use or identify with, regardless of the intent.

- **Gender-inclusive language** is language which does not impose external categories (such as a binary gender system) upon anyone who may not ascribe to that system and does not introduce presuppositions or imply inherence of those categories.

- **Identity-affirming language** is language that is might involve attributing gender to someone, but actively upholds a person’s self-identification.

Using gender-inclusive and identity-affirming language is critical both to create an inclusive environment and to avoid misgendering people.
Overview

1. Introduction to the *LSA Statement Against Linguistic Misgendering*
2. Guidelines for avoiding misgendering in professional communications
3. How to ask gender in a linguistics study
4. Pronouns in the classroom setting
5. Moving forward
6. Q&A
Introduction to the Statement Against Linguistic Misgendering

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LSA statement against linguistic misgendering

Approved by the LSA Executive Committee, May 2021

Introduction
Linguists rightly reject prescriptivism as an ideology of language concerned with determining which language variants are inherently superior to others and policing their use by speakers. However, linguists are also especially qualified to assess the effects of speech acts on communities and individuals, and to identify those which affirm or impede the ability of linguists and students to live and work safely. As a professional organization, the Linguistic Society of America works to establish and promote ethical norms of appropriate treatment in professional and academic environments, respecting and affirming the gender and other aspects of identity of the members of our community is one of those norms. This document provides a statement of LSA values which recognizes the role
Why this statement?

- What is misgendering and why is it harmful?
- Why should linguists care about misgendering?
- Why should linguists – and more specifically, the LSA as an organization – advocate for gender-affirming linguistic practices?
Why is misgendering harmful?

- **Misgendering harms people because it is a refusal to recognize and respect a person’s identity.**
- Misgendering disproportionately harms transgender people (Conrod, 2018c), who are an extreme minority in the linguistics community (LSA Annual Report, 2017).
- Trans and non-binary people already face high rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality, as well as related life outcomes such as poverty, homelessness, and unemployment (Grant et al., 2011).
- Social psychological research has demonstrated that trans individuals have significantly better mental health when they are supported by their communities (ibid.).
What does misgendering look like?

- One of the primary ways that misgendering happens in English is when someone *uses the wrong pronouns to refer to another person*.

- Misgendering can also occur through other gendered linguistic forms:
  - Grammatical gender agreement morphology
  - Gender labels and categories
  - Address terms
  - Occupational terms

- Deadnaming is also a form of misgendering.
  - Important to consider for colleagues who may have changed their name.
Pronouns and misgendering

● Many trans and nonbinary individuals use the singular *they* as their pronoun of reference, and it is important to use these pronouns appropriately.
  ○ Singular *they* can be useful as an ungendered pronoun, but it can still be used to implicitly misgender (or degender) people inappropriately.

● While many trans and nonbinary people do use *they* as their pronoun, many use *he* or *she* pronouns, other pronoun sets (often called *neopronouns*, such as *ze/hir* or *fae/faer*), or some combination of each.
  ○ If someone you know does use **multiple pronoun sets** and you feel uncertain about which ones you should use, it's good to ask for clarification as to how someone would like pronouns to be used for them (interchangeably, in different contexts, etc.).
Other types of misgendering

- Morphosyntactic gender agreement that genders the speaker, addressee, or third persons should be treated similarly to any other gendered linguistic feature.
  - Using **inappropriate gender agreement or morphology** can constitute misgendering, and can disproportionately harm and alienate transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people.

- When working with languages that exhibit gendered morphosyntactic paradigms, look to what trans and nonbinary people are doing with respect to creating and advancing affirming language.
  - Spanish (-e, -i); French (iel, “dot” e); Swedish (hen); Hebrew, etc.; all have robust nonbinary communities of speakers.
  - Gender in Language Project: [https://www.genderinlanguage.com](https://www.genderinlanguage.com)
Other types of misgendering

- Misgendering can also occur with terms for **gender labels and categories**.
  - Phrases such as “men and women” or “ladies and gentlemen” presume and reinforce a gender binary and exclude nonbinary people, and there are a wide array of inclusive alternatives depending on the audience and formality (more on this in the next presentation!)

- Likewise for **occupational terms** (actress, waitress) and other **terms of address** (sir, ma’am), and should be used with care.
  - For additional information see the [LSA Guidelines on Inclusive Language](https://www.lsa-sscl.org/guidelines) written by the Committee for the Status of Women in Linguistics (COSWL; now the Committee on Gender Equity in Linguistics (COGEL)).
Why should it matter to linguists?

- Linguists are people and people should endeavour to be kind!
- Linguists are uniquely positioned to advocate for gender-affirming linguistic practices, and have a responsibility to bring their professional insights to bear on creating more just worlds for trans people.
  - Avoiding misgendering is a basic, ground-floor level way to do this.
- As a professional organization that represents linguists in North America as a disciplinary body, the stance of the LSA matters.
Essence of the statement

The LSA recognizes that identity-affirming and gender-inclusive language is important in cultivating affirming environments for trans people. As linguists, it is crucial that we avoid doing harm through language and avoid misgendering people. **COZIL and the LSA affirm the right of transgender people to participate in linguistics, both as a science and as a professional field, free from harassment or microaggressions.**
Moving Forward

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Towards Trans Justice in Linguistics

- Ultimately, avoiding misgendering is only one part of trans affirming practices.
- Read, assign, cite, hire trans linguists!
- Advocate for trans students and colleagues.
- Materially invest in trans people and their safety and wellbeing.
Further resources

- **Academic work**
  - Lal Zimman has a great bibliography on trans linguistics!

- **Books**
  - *Queer excursions: Retheorizing binaries in language, gender, and sexuality* edited by Lal Zimman, Jenny Davis, and Joshua Raclaw
  - *Gender: Your Guide: A Gender-Friendly Primer on What to Know, What to Say, and What to Do in the New Gender Culture* by Lee Airton
  - *What's Your Pronoun?: Beyond He and She* by Dennis Baron

- **Blogs**
  - Lal Zimman’s blog posts
  - Kirby Conrod’s blog posts

- **Other**
  - Vocal Fries Podcast episode with Kirby Conrod

- **Get involved with COZIL!**
  - Email Archie (acrowley@sc.edu) if you would like to get involved with COZIL!
Things to think about

- What areas do you think you have most room to improve?
- What is one thing from each of the talks that you want to implement?
- What is one thing you could share with your department from this webinar?
Thank you!

Q&A
References


Conrod, K. (2018a). *Changes in singular they* [Conference presentation]. The Cascadia Workshop in Sociolinguistics, Reed College, Portland, OR.


References


