Transforming a discipline: Why we need a trans linguistics

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The context that brings us here

- Queer linguistics entered the scene in the 1990s as a critique of both heterosexism and the colonial perspective on gender and sexuality globally
    - E.g. Leap 1995, Livia & Hall 1997
- Queer Linguistics incorporated both gender and sexuality
    - At times studying communities that call themselves trans (e.g. Livia 2000), at other times insisting they shouldn't be called trans (e.g. Besnier 2003, Gaudio 1997, 2009; Kulick 1998)
- I argue that queer linguistics, as it has been conceptualized in the past, does not provide all of the necessary tools to study gender non-normativity
- I also argue that a trans linguistics provides particular insights on language that are valuable to the field
- Transphobia in our discipline - and the world - creates a moral imperative to transform the discipline (more during discussion)

Outline

- A bit of background on queer → trans linguistics
- Focused discussion on two closely related issues in trans linguistics:
  - The discursive construction of biological sex (see Zimman 2014)
  - The sexing of the voice (Zimman 2018)
- Characterization of trans linguistics
- Another reason we need a trans-centering framework:
  - Transphobia in linguistics (how does our field theorize language? How do we treat trans students and colleagues?)
    - How will linguistics attract trans scholars?
  - Transphobia in society (How is language mobilized to enact and resist transphobia? E.g., what pronouns are "valid"? How are trans people impacted by transphobia?)
    - How will linguists address transphobia in language?

Queer vs. trans linguistics

- Queer linguistics' incorporation of both gender & sexual non-normativity was revolutionary
  - And mirrored developments in queer theory
- Influence from linguistic anthropology further blurred this line
  - Some queer linguists employed Western terms like *trans* or *gay*, while others used local terms and may or may not have attempted a direct translation
  - For example, are Hindi-speaking hijras (Hall 2002) to be described in terms of their sexuality or their gender? Hausa-speaking Nigerian 'yan daudu (Gaudio 2009)? Tongan fakaleiti (Besnier 2003)?
- However, there were problems
- Note: trans linguistics is neither entirely separate from nor a replacement for queer linguistics

Shortcomings of trans research in queer linguistics

- Livia (2000), Moriel (1998), White (1998), Kulick (1998), among others
- What is the definition of *trans* in the Global North?
  - Often equated with a desire for genital surgery
- Who is the imagined audience?
  - Cis people; e.g. White (1998) explains why he uses she pronouns for his trans woman participant even though readers "may be uncomfortable" with that choice (223, fn3)
- What is the function of trans people in the research?
  - As objects of study, as tools for theory; not collaborators, not experts to learn from, not marginalized and oppressed individuals who deserve our protection
- Who is doing the research?
  - I know of no openly trans linguists prior to joining the field in 2003/4
- What kind of interpretive lens(es) is/are used?
  - Queer, not trans

Some examples (1 of 2)

- Much of the early research on trans-identifying individuals focused on the legitimacy and authenticity of trans people's genders
- White's (1998) analysis of stereotyped gendered language in one trans woman's talk at work characterizes her as "distinctly unladylike" (221) and failing to "maintain the illusion of femininity" (215).
- Moriel (1998) puts a great deal of focus on the fact that, in her view, trans women like Israeli pop star Dana International will never achieve the status of a "real woman" (226)
- Both share salacious details about their participants bodies

Some examples (2 of 2)

- Livia (2001) describes trans identities as a "belief," "insistence," and "claim" (161, 172), while no such language is used to describe cisgender people
- In trans woman Georgine Noël's autobiography, Livia focuses on cases where Noël does not follow the expected pattern WRT grammatical gender
  - Expected pattern: masculine forms before transition, feminine forms after
  - Here we can really see how a trans interpretive lens may be different
- In one example, Noël refers to herself in the feminine when describing the romantic feelings she had in her youth for a young man
  - Livia's interpretation: homophobia; mine: gender is a crucial part of sexual dynamics
- Livia distinguishes between "women" as those "on the losing side of the gender binary," and "male-to-female transsexuals" as individuals who are "invisible to [that binary]" (161)

Biological sex

What is "biological sex"?

- A socially constructed system for categorizing bodies
- How is it constructed?
  - As a binary (recognition of exceptions, but they're still erased)
  - As a natural, universal, undeniable fact about all bodies
  - Through erasure of variation within sex categories as well as across them
- What do we mean when we say it's socially constructed?
  - That the way we categorize bodies is not derived directly from physiological form
  - There is more than one way of thinking about sex
  - What we're not saying: sex isn't real, no biological difference exists, bodies don't matter
- How do trans bodies fit into this construct?

Evidence that sex is constructed

- Only two categories are recognized
- Different cultures understand the sexed body in different ways
  - Different numbers of recognized categories
  - Variation in how intersex bodies are seen
    - E.g. Herdt (1990) on intersex embodiment in Papua New Guinea vs. Dominican Republic
- Bodies can change, but these changes may/may not be recognized
- Historically, the 2 sex system is relatively new (Laqueur 1990)
  - Previously, "female" and "male" bodies seen as on a continuum
  - Lack of consistently distinct medical terminology
  - Much like girls/women or boys/men
  - The old system is misogynistic, but shows that there are different ways to think about sex
- In any case, the sexed body isn't a single characteristic, but a set of them

The construction of sex in trans communities

- Cis people increasingly recognize self-identification (of gender, not sex)
- In many trans communities, sex is also seen as self identified
  - What is a male body? The body of a male-identified person, regardless of form
- In an online community for trans men (Zimman 2014), in which few had had genital surgery, talked about their own genitals in the following way:
  - Canonically "male" terms were the most common (applied to external genitals)
  - Canonically "female" terms also showed up, specifically in contexts of:
    - Sharing technical information
    - Expressing dysphoria
    - Discussing (positive) sexual experiences
- Overall, any terminology is available if it helps express someone's identity, regardless of their fleshy body

The sexed voice

Questions to consider

- How can we reimagine (socio)phonetics as a trans-inclusive and affirming area of study?

- What can (socio)phonetics learn from the study of trans voices?

- What are some ways we can do better at analyzing trans voices?
  - And make linguistics more appealing to trans people in the process

- How can our theories of gender work for all voices?

Evidence that vocal sex/gender is constructed

- Different languages and cultures have different norms for women's & men's voices, even when it comes to pitch/F0
- Children learn to produce gendered speech before differentiation in the vocal tract occurs (e.g. Sachs 1975; Fitch & Giedd 1999)
- There is a great deal of variation in the gendered voice among speakers of "the same language"
  - Think intersectionality!
  - E.g. class (Stuart-Smith 2007), sexuality (Munson 2007), race (Ryalls et al. 1997; CW: racism)

What can we learn from the study of trans voices?

Lessons

1. **We have not sufficiently theorized the concept of vocal sex/gender**
   a. Not much has changed in the way we understand vocal sex/gender in the past 30+ years
   b. The traditional method: observe speaker, classify their sex, classify their voice to match

Questions introduced by trans voices

- We readily classify voices as "female" or "male", but what does this mean?
  - Most often: A "female voice" is the voice of a "female person"
  - The question: Who counts as a female person?
  - Alternatives may not be much better (perception? acoustic thresholds?)
- Do all speakers have either a "female" or "male" voice?
- How do we know whether a given speaker's voice is "female" or "male"?
- Does having a "(fe)male voice" always correspond with having a "(fe)male body" or identity?
- What happens when we encounter a voice, body, or identity that is not so easily classified within a normative binary?
- How will the next generation of scholars approach these questions?

Lessons

1. We have not sufficiently theorized the concept of vocal sex/gender
2. **The body is important, but it is also both social and malleable (as is the voice)**

#2: The body is social and malleable

- Zimman (2017) documents changes in F0 among 10 trans masculine speakers during their first 1-2 years on testosterone
- All experienced F0 lowering during year 1, usually into a normative male range
    - However, the social and biological blend together for these speakers; some were more comfortable using their new pitch range than others
    - The choice to go on hormones is itself a social one (as is choosing not to take hormones)
    - (Incidentally, do these speakers have "male" voices? If so, when did they become male?)
- Trans speakers are not the only ones with socially constructed bodies
- We know little about sexual diversity & voice, esp. WRT trans & intersex bodies

Lessons

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3. **The sex/gender of a voice is not a unitary trait**

#3: Vocal sex/gender isn't a unitary trait

- Speech pathologists attempts to find an F0 "crossover point" that could be targeted by voice therapists working w/ trans clients have had limited success
  - Some suggest 150-165 Hz (Spencer 1988, Wolfe et al. 1990, Gelfer & Schofield 2005)
- However:
  - Gelfer & Schofield (2000): Trans woman perceived as male w/ mean F0 >180 Hz
  - Günzburger (1993): Trans woman perceived as female w/ mean F0 <130 Hz
  - Zimman (2017): Speakers with the lowest F0 had the highest frequency /s/
- So...
  - Features other than mean F0 must matter
  - There are far more than 2 ways for these features to cluster together
  - In other words, gender operates like other kinds of sociolinguistic styles (per Zimman 2017)
- We need a lot more information to inclusively model vocal sex/gender

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4. **The voice is impacted by ideology**

#4: Vocal sex/gender is ideological

- Ambiguous sounds categorized differently based on:
  - Gender category listener believes the speaker belongs to (Johnson, Strand & D'Imperio 1999)
  - How gender normative they believe the speaker to be (Strand 1999)
- Ideology may be especially important for ambiguous voices:
  - Hancock, Colton & Douglas (2014): perceived gender among trans women, cis women, cis men
  - Compared use of upward intonational contours of 2+ ST
  - Trans women w more of these contours were more likely to be perceived as female
  - But there was no difference between the cis women and cis men
- Zimman (2016) on ideologies within trans communities that result in different types of vocal normativity for trans women and trans men
- How do linguists' ideologies impact their perceptions of speakers?
- How might counter-hegemonic gender ideologies impact perception?

Lessons

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And some yet to be explored systematically:

5. Experience with (non-)normative voices is important
6. The abstraction of the gendered voice fades over time (on an individual level)
7. The perception of gender intersects with the perception of other identities

So what is trans linguistics?

- Dynamic: change and transformation are recognized as essential parts of life
- Denaturalizing: simple, ideologically convenient accounts of gender can't hold
- Recentering: trans people don't exist just to be compared to cis people
- Unavoidably political: e.g. how could prescriptivism be seen differently?
- Imaginative: a focus on what is possible, and exceptional, not just generalizable norms
- Empowering: connections between research and community action are prioritized & trans people are always (agentively) involved

- Note: not to be confused by Lee & Dovchin's (2019) *translinguistics*

Conclusions

- We need to do better in our theorization and implementation of sex and gender; let's cover strategies in the discussion
- How we can do better:
  - We can ask better questions;
  - We can model gender in a variety of ways rather than assuming a normative binary is the best way to explain gender variation;
  - We can be more cautious and do our homework before advocating for binary- and biology-driven gender explanations;
  - We can cultivate relationships with trans collaborators;
  - We can ask, at every turn, how we can learn from the insights and wisdom of trans experience

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Thank you!

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