



PRONOUNS IN MOTION:

A TYPOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY FOR EXAMINING DYNAMIC VARIATION

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OUTLINE

- INTRODUCTION: what are pronouns (doing) in English?
- BACKGROUND: some more social ways of thinking about pronouns
- PHENOMENA: some ways that pronouns can behave
- METHODOLOGY: how to catch pronouns doing what they do
- CONCLUSION: a call to action

INTRODUCTION

- Research question (broadly put): *How do English speakers decide what 3rd person pronoun to use?*
- Optionality: *he, she, they*
- Goal of the talk: outline possible phenomena and how to capture them in the wild

BACKGROUND

- Grammatical gender → “natural gender” (Curzan 2003)
- Problematizing “natural gender” (Hall 2003)
 - Is “natural gender” a straightforward grammaticalization of assigned sex at birth?
 - How can “natural gender” present for nonbinary genders?
- More social ways to think about pronouns:
 - Honorifics/terms of address (Brown and Gilman 1960 , Raymond 2016)
 - Complex relationships, kinship terms, etc (Simpson 1997)



PRONOUN PHENOMENA

A TYPOLOGY OF THINGS WE (MIGHT) FIND

PHENOMENON I: KNOWN/UNKNOWN PRONOUNS

- Singular *they* adds optionality: you can be more vague or more specific
- Gricean Maxim(s) of Quantity:
 - Be as vague as you can / say as little as you can
 - Be as specific as you must / don't obfuscate or leave things out
- *They vs. he/she* can:
 - Prioritize relevance (be more vague when the gender isn't important to the conversation)
 - Flout Quantity (intentionally obfuscate or give less information)
 - Obey Quality (avoid guessing when you risk guessing wrong)
- Known/unknown alternations – highly related to generic use of singular *they*

KNOWN/UNKNOWN PRONOUNS: EXAMPLES

- “We use all the information we have to make the best [sex] assignment at birth, and that child grows up and, once they can express themselves, **they** may say, 'That’s not how I feel.’” (<http://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2017/11/24/gender-reveal-overemphasis>)
- **Is it rude to ask someone if they're male or female? If so, what are some alternative ways of finding out someone's gender?** (<https://www.quora.com/Is-it-rude-to-ask-someone-if-theyre-male-or-female-If-so-what-are-some-alternative-ways-of-finding-out-someones-gender>)

I think it depends on the situation and one's relationship with **them**.

I answered a similar question where I had a client that I didn't know **their** gender. I wanted to take **him/her** on a business lunch but was afraid to not knowing **their** gender. And didn't feel comfortable asking.

Finally I asked another employee that worked for this person. She said nobody else knew either. Being a small business they only had one employee restroom. And **he/she** had a first name that could have meant either.

Six months later this person got transferred without anybody knowing. Weird.

PHENOMENON 2: FRIENDLY/HOSTILE PRONOUNS

- Using certain pronouns can be related to your attitude about the referent
- **Misgendering** has a negative psychological effect on trans people (McLemore 2013)
- Intentionally misgendering someone can relay affective information:
 - Prejudice against transgender identities
 - Disapproval of gender presentation (especially for gender-nonconformity)
 - Degendering (e.g. using *they* for trans women → being intentionally more vague than is appropriate)
 - Related to the “realness” (or speaker’s belief in) the referent’s gender identity and presentation

FRIENDLY/HOSTILE PRONOUNS: EXAMPLES

- Tweets from corpus study on names and pronouns (and misgendering) (Conrod 2017)
 - *Bradley Manning is NOT a “her”. Don’t believe me? Check **his** DNA. It’s right there in “X & Y”*
 - Notice: depronominization, scare quotes
 - *Chelsea Manning can change **her** name legally but **he** is still a man*
 - Notice: mixed use, using preferred name (Chelsea) and one instance of *her* but still using *he*

PHENOMENON 3: PRIVATE/PUBLIC PRONOUNS

- People on the margins of mainstream gender categories may use different pronouns with different people
- Transgender people who are not out may be called different pronouns depending on who knows what about their gender identity
- Nonbinary people may use certain pronouns in social situations where they are more likely to be respected (sg *they* but also any neologistic pronouns)

PHENOMENON 4: “REAL”/FANCIFUL PRONOUNS

- (Glib title)
- “The Gay *She*” – cisgender identified gay men who use *she* within gay spaces as a form of gender-nonconformity and gay identification
- Drag queens – pronouns are contingent on performance of drag/femininity within the drag space
- “*He/him* lesbians” – I need more data on this one (email me!)

REAL/FANCIFUL PRONOUNS: EXAMPLES

- - We are actually rooting for Jaymes and want **him** to shine, but he's gonna have to believe in **himself** to really sell this challenge.
- - Listen, you got a name like Jaymes Mansfield, you better deliver.
- - I used to watch "The Match Game," and Jayne Mansfield would come on every so often and had a wiggle in her walk. Jaymes needs more voom in **his** vah-vah.
- - **She** wants to portray **herself** as this comedic character, when I don't think that character's completely realized yet.
- - Jaymes' audition tape was so funny, I got it. I understood the shtick. But I think that since she's been in this competition with the other girls, **she's** thrown off.

Transcript source: https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/view_episode_scripts.php?tv-show=rupauls-drag-race-2009&episode=s09e02

REAL/FANCIFUL PRONOUNS: EXAMPLES

- Character vs performer



RuPaul's Drag Race Wiki

SEASONS ▾ QUEENS ▾ JUDGES ▾ COMMUNITY ▾ EXPLORE ▾

in: *Queens, Season 9 Queens, Season 9, and 8 more*

Charlie Hides

Charlie Hides is a drag performer from Boston, Massachusetts and one of the 14 queens to compete on the *ninth season* of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. She was the third queen to be eliminated and ended up finishing in 12th place. At age 53, she is the oldest queen to compete on the show.

Hides is also well known for his YouTube channel, which features hundreds of parody videos, and sketches where he impersonates celebrities. He has also done interviews with queens such as Bianca Del Rio and Courtney Act.

Charlie Hides





METHODOLOGY FOR ELICITATION

FOR WHEN CORPORA LET US DOWN

METHODOLOGY: DYADIC AND SOLO INTERVIEW

- **Goal:** get people to use third person pronouns about a particular referent in natural conversation
- **Participants:** paired into dyads, can be strangers or acquaintances
- **Dyadic interview:**
 - How do you know each other? / What's your first impression of each other?
 - Who do you remind each other of?
- **Solo interview:**
 - What do you like about NAME? What don't you like?

DYAD-SOLO INTERVIEW METHOD: ADVANTAGES

- Controls (roughly) for what referent will be featured in conversation – can specifically target pronouns about particular types of people by the way you recruit and pair subjects
- De-focuses pronouns – none of my subjects knew what I was looking for, and weren't thinking consciously about pronoun choice and trying to be “correct.” Important for variable with lots of metalinguistic commentary/attitudes
- Can be adapted – similar interview questions can be used about fictional characters, as response to film clips, done in online written form

CALL TO ACTION: TARGETS OF STUDY

- Natural use of third person pronouns in English are understudied (due to assumption of “natural gender”)
- In particular, we need to engage in sociolinguistic studies in and around queer language spaces:
 - Communities of practice (your gay friends’ D&D groups, stitch ‘n’ bitch knitting circles, vegan co-ops, etc.)
 - Social networks (use dyads and solo interviews to find how the social network of a particular person uses different pronouns)
 - Content Consumption Communities (online spaces like fandoms, hashtags, followers of certain feeds) (Tatman 2016)
 - Dialogic media (reality television, podcasts)

SUMMARY

- English 3rd person pronouns have space for variation; choices are not obvious or static
- Types of variation:
 - Known/unknown (pragmatic differences, relevance and quantity)
 - Friendly/hostile (affective uses)
 - Private/public (differences in social relationships)
 - Real/fanciful (uses of in-group identity and solidarity)
- How to elicit pronouns:
 - Get people to talk about each other on tape

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