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Binary Gendered Language: A Qualitative Study of PSU Students

Dakota Abercrombie
Portland State University

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by Dakota Abercrombie

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ABSTRACT

This study explores experiences of gendered language in use in academia among two marginalized groups: women and those identifying beyond the gender binary. Guided by the theory of linguistic relativity, this study attempts to understand specific ways in which gendered language, including generic language may show up and contrasted within these groups. While this data is not generalizable, the findings indicate that both women and nonbinary students experience binary pronoun use in written formats such as syllabi. However, nonbinary students describe more negative feelings associated with this experience. We also noted participants' gender identities intersecting with other identities, leading to a need for further research into how intersecting identities could change how these groups experience language within academic spaces.

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Introduction

Understanding impacts associated with language is vital due to the significant role it takes in how we communicate. Language itself is argued to echo largely held societal beliefs (Bigler & Leaper, 2015). While language can embody cultural cohesiveness, exclusive language can contribute to the harm of marginalized groups within societies. “Marginalized” is a term first coined by Charles M. Pierce (1989) to describe racial prejudice and its impact on the health of Black individuals, communities and student’s. Pierce described these impacts as associated with existence in a society where Black people “must bring together or unify countless diversions that accompany being both marginal to the society and fractionated across the society” (1989, p.298). The idea of being marginal has been expanded upon in studies of critical race theory (Crenshaw,

1991), as well as feminist studies (Crenshaw, 1991; Jean-Marie et al., 2016) and queer studies (Scharrón-Del Río, 2020) to discuss identity-based discrimination.

Invisibility and negotiation of oneself can be seen as inescapable for those with marginalized identities. Research shows that those experiencing gender and/or racially marginalized identities may have to negotiate parts of themselves in workplaces and other leadership positions (Jean-Marie et al., 2016). In discussions of academic spaces, those who identify within marginalized identities including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) folks and racial minorities, have urged for "center(ing) the margins" arguing that in academic spaces they face invisibility both in person and within literature they engage with which makes "these spaces feel unsafe, and can push marginalized people into academic closets." (Scharrón-Del Río, 2020, p.296).

Arguments extend beyond invisibility in the classroom to claims of invisibility in overall fields of research attributed to a relatively new interest in marginalized communities' experiences. Research on the LGBT, much like other marginalized groups including communities of color and women, has been argued to have only expanded since the 1970s alongside activist efforts leaving large gaps in the literature prior (Renn, 2010). This remains especially true for transgender folks in academia, despite the work to contextualize the experiences of transgender individuals in contexts including negotiating identity (Catalano, 2015), resistance (Catalano, 2017), romance (Jourian, 2018), and student housing (Nicolazzo et. al., 2018). Regardless of these inquiries and noteworthy contributions within the last decade by Dr. Z Nicolazzo (2017), research on nonbinary students remains menial compared to the rest of the LGBT.

This study focuses on the impact of language usage with specific emphasis on understanding the impact gendered language may have on individuals identifying as women or nonbinary within academic spaces. It does so by implementing a revitalized version of the theory of linguistic relativity in a study of Portland State University students. If language is argued to echo our societal beliefs, marginalization of gendered communities may very much show up in our use of language. Because of this, academia which produces research and acts as a "guardian of grammar" should be considered a foundation for understanding such a phenomenon (Pauwels & Winter, 2006). While both women and transgender communities have experienced notable marginalization within the historical context of the U.S., understanding how this marginalization may vary at the linguistic level could be informative in combating harm and inequity within the academic setting.

Granted the United States does not have a federally recognized language, academia within the U.S. is predominantly taught in English. The history of language in the United States is complex and has shifted over time due to policy that has been argued to take on two discursive frames: assimilationist, simply defined as pushing for English as the dominant language needed to unify a nation-state and the pluralist frame which argues a dynamic value in language diversity such as group and individual cohesion as well as economic competitiveness (De Jong, 2013). Using these frames, it is argued that we are predominantly in a time of assimilation (De Jong, 2013), which has been largely attributed to policies such as the passage of the No Child Left Behind law (De Jong, 2013; Menken, 2013). With this and other factors explored later in mind, this study focuses on experiences of gendered language in English specifically.

Review of the Literature

Feminist linguistics argues that women face linguistic barriers in many contexts, including academia due to generic or 'dominant' language and in response have pushed for linguistic reforms (Pauwels, 2003). Early research on what was at the time referred to as "cross-sex" conversations, has identified that boys learn to use language to both create and maintain dominance hierarchies (Maltz & Borkwr, 1982). Girls instead learn to maintain cross-sex interactions by asking questions more often, giving small positive responses and only engaging in "silent protest" when interrupted (Maltz & Borkwr, 1982, p.197). These behaviors can be seen to construct further social relations and express attitudes (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). What is often referred to as "dominant language" has been used as one argument that language can mirror societally identified issues of gender discrimination.

Studies which have used linguistic relativity, also at times referred to as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, position gendered language to impact the way we perceive and think about the world around us. Grammatically gendered languages are notably more discussed in regard to linguistic sexism in academia, likely due to the prominence of gendered nouns. It has been argued that languages with two sex-based noun classes are strongly associated with larger gaps in academic achievement for women (Davis, & Reynolds, 2018). This has been reflected in women spending less years overall in academia, as well as completing secondary education less often than men (Davis, & Reynolds, 2018). While these studies show notable impacts associated with gendered language, they primarily focus on minority languages[1] with binary gendered nouns excluding languages like English.

[1] These languages included Amharic, Armenian, Berber, Cantonese, Ewe, Finnish, French, Georgian, German, Hausa, Hindi, Hungarian, Igbo, Indonesian, Kannada, Kirghiz, Latvian, Mandarin, Marathi, Persian, Shona, Swahili, Tagalog, Tamil, Thai, Turkish, Ukrainian, Uzbek, Yoruba, and Zulu.

Gendered language also occurs outside grammatically gendered languages. It has been argued that in English it is “nearly impossible to talk or write about other individuals without indicating their gender and, simultaneously, without forcing them into the category of male or female” (Bigler & Leaper, 2015, p.188). This is argued to be a result of English being categorized as a naturally gendered language in regards to the use of singular third-person pronouns, such as “she” and “he” (Gygax, et.al, 2019; Bigler & Leaper, 2015). In English, “he” as a generic is argued as reflecting societal dominance by excluding or making women appear invisible in the discussion of “everyone” (Pauwels, 2003). Research done with undergraduate college students has shown that women’s experience with gender-exclusive language in a professional context resulted in more negative emotions than gender neutral language, including feelings of ostracization indicated by reduced motivation, lack of belonging and a lack of identification within their profession (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). It is argued that these feelings of ostracization can lead to avoidance of these spaces altogether (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). It is also argued that when students engage with gendered language, they are likely to replicate it, while students who read more non-sexist language are more likely to later use non-sexist language themselves (Cronin & Jreisat, 1995).

Studies have also shown differences in how gender perception itself may impact academic success across various subjects in junior high (Burke, 1989). This is reflected in those with feminine identities having higher grade point averages in math, science, social studies, language arts, and foreign language “than those identifying with more masculine identities” (Burke,1989, p.164). The same study found that students with gender identities described as “cross-sex” faced backlash including being cautioned about “inappropriate gender roles” and reported being called names like “sissy”, “homo”, or “tomboy” by peers (Burke,1989, p.162).

While the section discusses those who may seem closer to the opposite sex, it was not stated in the study that these students identified as nonbinary. However, this does spark a place to question differences in how gendered language may impact women in academic spaces when compared to those who identify outside the gender binary. As generic “he” being reformed to “he or she” in academia could potentially still isolate those who would not ascribe themselves this way.

While we were unable to identify research that contrasted women and nonbinary individuals' experiences specifically, research regarding transgender students displays differences between binary trans students & nonbinary individuals. Granted research overall on transgender individuals let alone students is minimal (Dugan et al., 2012), it is important to this study and the overall literature to better include individuals who fall outside the traditional gender binary. While not directly relating to linguistic relativity in its methods, misgendering may be one way in which language use can impact transgender students. Recent survey responses from graduate aged students show that 78.1% of nonbinary students reported being misgendered by other students often compared to only 14.8% of binary transgender students. Additionally, nonbinary students report they were also misgendered more often by faculty when asked compared to binary transgender participants (Goldberg et al., 2019).

The referenced studies have shown the way language, specifically gendered language may impact women both in academia, as well as in the broader context of professionalism. These studies, while insightful, leave questions unanswered regarding the specific experiences of impacted individuals. Many of these studies also identify a male-female binary within the use of gendered language but fail to adequately discuss communities who identify outside this binary. We also must wonder how studies referring to impacts on academic achievement may conclude if they centered on natural languages like English. We value the prior research on transgender

students available and hope this study will expand on the way binary gendered language may impact nonbinary students.

Theory Review

Linguistic relativity can be argued simply as a hypothesis about meanings within a language and how these meanings affect our worldview (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991; Prinz & Reines, 2009). Based on prior research, linguistic relativity appeared to be an applicable theory for understanding the ways in which binary gendered language could potentially impact the experiences of women and nonbinary students. We acknowledge linguistic relativity does not come without its flaws. The theory has arguably problematic roots, as well as what is often simplified down to "weak" and "strong" arguments. As many theories can be interpreted differently, especially in various applications, it is important that these interpretations are explored in response to the original theorists.

The idea that language plays a role in thought can be traced back much further than linguistic relativity, within the fields of philosophy and psychology (Locke, 1849; Fodor, 1975). However, the role of syntactical meaning and linguistic expressions was refashioned in the 1950's starting with anthropological linguist, Edward Sapir and was expanded upon by his student, Benjamin Lee Whorf (Prinz & Reines, 2009). Due to this linguistic relativity is also commonly referred to as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis or "Whorfianism". In one interpretation of the theory, it is broken down into three main ideas; (1) that the words and syntax of a language can differ from another, (2) that these semantic differences can affect the way we perceive and conceptualize the world, and therefore (3) that thinkers of different languages think differently (Lucy, 1997; Wolff & Holmes, 2010). In its early development the theory was popularized

further by the fields of linguistics, psychology and notably anthropology, which led to questions around the complexities of translation (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991). Despite its popularity at the time, it is argued that the expanding research of cognitive sciences alongside other critiques led to a declining interest in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991).

John Lucy has maintained over the decades that Whorf's theory does not not need to be redeveloped, but instead that it has had been largely misunderstood and urges against semantic testing in favor of grammatical features (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991). Lucy (1997) also argues that for research to occur that is truly in line with Whorf's theory, it must follow what he regards as the theory's three key understandings. These key understandings include being able to clearly distinguish between language and thought, describe the specifics of how influence is occurring from language to thought and acknowledge as well as explain any additional factors which may impact these influences (Lucy,1997).

Most critiques come in response to weak and strong representations of the hypothesis. The weak argument, also described as language-of-thought (Wolff & Holmes, 2010), aligns more so with Sapir's original ideas and states simply that language can influence, push forward and be used to express thought (Langacker, 1976). This idea within itself is not seen as a full-fledged hypothesis as it does not sternly state the relationship that must exist between language and thought or their supposed interaction (Langacker, 1976). Langacker (1976), argues that there are a variety of things we can conceptualize such as music, feelings and visual art, which we may not be able to express in specific words, which is furthered in arguments that there also may be times that people have thoughts which they simply cannot find words for (Pinker, 2007). Additionally, as noted by Wolff & Holmes (2010), "if people thought entirely in words, words

expressing new concepts could never be coined because there would be no way of imagining their meanings" (p.254).

Conversely, what is often referred to as the "strong" argument or linguistic determinism has faced considerable repudiation due to the imposing prediction it makes that language determines thought (Langacker,1976; Gumperz & Levinson, 1991; Prinz & Reines, 2009 Wolff & Holmes, 2010). In this way linguistic determinism takes the stance that as humans we are crucially dependent upon language to think, as well as stating if our specific language does not have words for something that we cannot conceptualize it (Langacker, 1976). In doing so, linguistic relativity has been argued to loosen the connections we as humans have with the world in favor of our internal cognition (Wolff & Holmes, 2010) and then to externalize these understandings (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991).

Intense applications of the linguistic determinism argument may even go as far as to argue that language acts as a cognitive constraint which restricts people to a "cultural-specific world view" (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991). This can be seen as a slippery slope into ideas of moral relativism. One frequently referenced example of linguistic determinism is the discussion of the Hopi people, a tribal community of Indigenous people native to what is currently regarded as Arizona who Whorf observed did not have a "fixed linguistic concept of "time"" as identified within English (Engle, 2016). Because of this, Whorf concluded time does not exist for the Hopi, an idea which has been met with substantial critical backlash including an entire book by Ekkehart Malotki entitled, Hopi Time (Engle, 2016).

Such critiques have led to apprehensive shifts away from linguistic relativity in favor of other explanations. Cognitive sciences have found a large amount of evidence that our thoughts

are more connected to the world around us than the language we use to conceptualize the world (Wolff & Holmes, 2010). It appears that there may be a stronger correlation in experiences of people who speak different languages, than in the words they use to describe the experience (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991). Linguists like Paul Kay have remained wary of linguistic relativism, reasoning that even those in one language can hold multiple incompatible ideas of an experience when choosing words to describe an experience (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991). He explains the example that in English when purchasing an item, we can refer to it in a variety of ways including "buy, sell, pay, etc." (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991, p.616). This is one reason it is believed that linguists have rejected linguistic relativity, as their interests align more with the syntactical arrangement of words to express, than the lexicon itself (Langacker, 1976).

Despite these critiques linguistic relativity has maintained a discursive level of attention for researchers. In the 1990s we began to see a shifting of the theory which has led to a reemerging understanding that interpretive differences can come from language use, as much as in its actual structure (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991). Many of these reemerging ideas came from the 1991 "Rethinking Linguistic Relativity" symposium, where the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Studies hoped to reexamine the theory in a broader socio-historical context spark debates about language use across a wide range of departmental and cultural perspectives (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991).

Due to underlying disagreements between cognitive scientists, linguists and anthropologists the conference resulted in various arguments. It was at this conference that Dan Slobin (1987) proposed the cognitive psychology reformation of linguistic determinism arguing instead that language does not determine thinking, but instead forces us to think a certain way w*hile* we speak (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991). Other researchers offered opinions on how to best

establish the methods used when testing the original theory such as John Lucy proposing a focus on grammatical variations and contrasts across two languages (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991). Janet Keller argued to move from language entirely to other forms of thought such as image-based conceptualizations (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991). Additionally, the influence of culture and knowledge were discussed in detail with Herb Clark sparking a discussion on linguistic knowledge division that may occur in a community (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991). As were the notions of what a language community itself might entail for those living in cross-linguistic relations, which was heavily discussed by Elsa Gomez (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991).

Since the symposium, some additional researchers have built upon these arguments to express the need for the return or revitalization of linguistic relativity (Reines & Prinz, 2009; Wolff & Holmes, 2010). Reines and Prinz (2009), much like those at the symposium proposed that Sapir and Whorf may have failed to justify the theory in prior research by disregarding culture as a factor, and referenced several other studies which had used linguistic relativity successfully in their understandings of grammatical gender (Boroditsky & Schmidt, 2000), frames of reference (Pederson et al.,1998), spatial categories (Bowerman & Choi, 2001) and noun type (Lucy, 1992; Lucy & Gaskins, 2001, 2003). To explain these results, Reines and Prinz (2009) categorized the explanations into four types of 'whorfianism': radical, trivial, habitual and ontological. They discard radical whorfianism to be much like linguistic determinism and trivial whorfianism to be "boring" as it argues that words draw attention to things we might otherwise miss. However, they bolster Lucy's standpoint, questioning if language could create habits of thought leading to people who speak different languages to think differently, deeming this understanding as habitual whorfianism (Reines &Prinz, 2009, p.1028). Lastly, they argue that

ontological whorfianism may be most plausible in the results of these studies as it argues that language does not create our worldview, but instead creates the potential boundaries which can shape our idea of what types of things are able to exist within a given culture (Reines &Prinz, 2009).

Wolff and Holmes (2010), also move away from the weak and strong argument, to expand specifically on ways in which language can influence thought despite being structurally different. In this revitalization they first consider Slobin's thinking before language, referred to as thinking-for-speaking, before moving on to ideas of thinking with or after language. For thinking with language Wolff and Holmes identify two categories: language as augmenter and language as meddler (2010). They describe language as meddler to relate to experiences where linguistic codes may influence non-linguistic conditions, such as perception impacting decision making whereas language as augmenter occurs when both linguistic and non-linguistic codes occur together to infer decision making (Wolff & Holmes, 2010). Wolff and Holmes (2010) also identify two categories for thinking after language: language as inducer and language as spotlight. These discuss more so how language influences thought after we hear it. Language as inducer is described similarly to priming in the way that it argues language can cause us to think a certain way after using it (Wolff & Holmes, 2010). Lastly, language as spotlight describes how "after exposure to words and constructions that highlight specific properties, attention may linger on those properties" which can lead to more salience being seen in those properties than others (Wolff & Holmes, 2010, p.259). Some examples of linguistic properties that have been studied this way include spatial frames, spatial relations, certain objects, and grammatical gender.

Theory Application

While we have established that English does not have a grammatical gender, revitalized versions of linguistic relativity, specifically language as spotlight, may offer a jumping off point when discussing binary gendered language. As the definition by Wolff and Holmes (2010), states certain words and constructions may draw extra attention to certain properties. For this study, we infer that binary gendered language such as singular third-person pronouns like "he or she" may display themselves in a gender deixis that may draw extra attention to the property of gender, and in doing so may solidify it further. Unlike trivial whorfianism which may be argued similar, language as spotlight moves beyond the idea that words draw attention to claim a level of salience occurring around the property given attention.

We note past concerns to overlap the interests of gender and linguistics, due to gender often being more critically focused upon in studies than language use (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). With language as spotlight guiding this research, we endeavor to emphasize the language use itself and expand the limited research on gender marginalized groups. Acknowledging gender as a complex topic which can be considered in more than one way, we build on Eckert & McConnell-Ginet's (2003) idea that gender is "not simply a matter of individualistic characteristics such as sex, but also involves action, social relations, ideology and politics." (p.76), which includes the interactions we have within the academic setting.

Working Definitions

To best frame our research, we have used past literature to contextualize definitions used throughout our research and have highlighted them here for a clearer interpretation. We acknowledge language is always changing and emphasize that these definitions fit best into our frame of research.

Gender Binary

Gender identities have long been discussed in the context of "male" or "female" with correlations of masculine or feminine attributes both of which can be thought of as assigned at birth (Richards et. al, 2016). This definition is seen as binary and has been argued whether to be socially (by society) or biologically (by ideas of sex) determined (Lund, 2012). While the biological argument upholds that gender is associated with sex, other arguments have been made that sex itself is more complicated than binary ideas of "male" and "female" due to the identification of intersex individuals (Richards et. al, 2016). This isn't to say intersex individuals strictly identify outside the binary, as studies have shown they typically still identify as men or women (Richards & Barker, 2013) and parents of intersex children are often pressured to have cosmetic procedures done so that children appear "less ambiguous" (Lund, 2012). In the context of academia, sex differences in performance are often more attributed to the individuals' self-conception of their gender (Burke, 1989).

Looking at understandings of identity, gender has also been conceptualized as a social category separate from sex. Identity theory proposes identity as including "internalized meanings of the self in a social position or role" (Burke, 1989, p.161). These self-perceptions have been found to influence our behavior and be largely informed through the social interactions we have

within a given social structure (Burke, 1989). From this perspective, in the process of creating our gender identity we infer and learn our roles from the society that we exist within. When looking at the binary of men and women, some studies have argued that "the meaning of female lies in its contrast of male; the meaning of male lies in its contrast of female" (Burke, 1989, p.162). Definitions like this work to clearly highlight the gender binary and display a perceived difference between men and women. Additionally, the acceptance of "he" and "she" as singular third person pronouns are directly associated with construction of the binary within the English language.

Gender Binary: the idea that gender identity is confined to either man or woman

For this study we align our definitions of gender more closely with identity theory and therefore emphasize self-identification within a gender categorization over other characteristics. In this way identifying as a woman would align with identifying oneself within this social position, not with one's sex. We present the following definition for "woman".

Woman: a person who self identifies as a woman

Beyond the Binary

Arguments are on the rise for further recognition of those who do not identify within the binary (Lund, 2012; Richards et. al, 2016). These individuals are often referred to as "transgender" in the West, which can be used as an umbrella term and is notably the "T" in LGBT (Lund, 2012). Early LGBT research focused primarily on those who identify as gay or lesbian but has now expanded to include more diverse versions of sexuality and gender including bisexuality and transgender individuals (Renn, 2010). This umbrella term can be seen to

encompass those who assimilate to some position on the gender binary (Lund, 2012) as well as a wide range of gender identities including agender, bigender, pangender and genderfluid (Richards et.al,2016). “Transgender” itself is a term which is hard to define due to expanding ideas and self-proclamation of the term. However, it has been argued that adapting words like “man” and “woman” is not enough to understand this community and could lead to a misguided equation to gender play or androgyny (Lund,2012).

Lund (2012) offers ideas of transness associated with the prefix trans- being used to mean “across” such as in transcontinental or “beyond” as in transcendence. Transgender theory as noted is relatively new to research, and yet very important to this study. The idea of “across” here creates the idea that transgender refers to a movement from one part of the gender binary to the other (Lund, 2012). These individuals are argued to be able to find self-identifying roles within the gender binary and identify body dysphoria (Lund, 2012). For this study we will refer to this group as binary transgender. As noted, binary transgender individuals face less misgendering than their nonbinary counterparts in higher academia.

Binary Transgender: individuals who self-identify within the gender binary, but have moved from one part of the gender binary to the other (from man to woman, from woman to man)

For this study, nonbinary is defined more closely to Lund’s idea of “beyond the gender binary” which moves past bodily concerns around sex to more abstract ideas of transcending gender and questions of how to capture these individuals' experiences in a language confined to the binary (Lund, 2012). While we appreciate Boswell’s (1998) definition of “It more aptly refers to the transgression of gender norms, or being freely gendered, or transcending gender altogether

in order to become more fully human" (p.56), we have tried to define it in a way which allows for less ambiguous self-identification, without limiting participants ability to self-identify.

Nonbinary: a person who self identifies as neither strictly a man nor a woman

Gendered Language

For each given social structure associated language exists in which gender may or may not play a role. A 2019 study categorized structures by language into fifteen non-exhaustive gender systems to highlight the way in which gender appears within language (Gygax, et.al). This led them to five distinct categories: grammatical gender languages, languages with a combination of grammatical gender and natural gender, natural gender language, gender languages with a few traces of grammatical gender, and genderless languages (Gygax, 2019 et.al). This index classified English as a naturally gendered language due to our inanimate nouns being ungendered, but our personal pronouns distinguishing from male and female (Gygax, et.al, 2019).

Indexes like this can be useful for understanding identity formation, as a child's assigned gender and their associations with grammatical gender have been found to increase starting from age six to nine years old (Flaherty, 2001). There has also been evidence that those who speak a more grammatically gendered language often think of objects as more like a woman or a man, based on the gender within their language (Phillips & Boroditsky, 2003). While some might argue this is arbitrary, it is important to understand the risks associated. As an example, recent data showed when Covid-19 was given a feminine grammatical gender it was seen as less dangerous resulting in less precautions being taken by individuals whose languages were more gendered (Mecit, 2021). However, it has been argued that genderless languages, such as Finnish,

where nouns and pronouns are not specified through gender, may also result in undesirable effects including lexical, semantic or conceptual visibility issues when trying to emphasize women's presence (Prewitt Freilino, 2012).

Gendered Language: any form of language which implies the gender identity of the person it is referring to

Third Person Pronouns. Pronouns are one common signifier for identifying gender within the English language. Third person pronouns like "he" and "she" are often associated with those who identify within the gender binary. As noted earlier, argued dominance can be seen in the dual function of the pronoun 'he' as both a generic and masculine-specific pronoun (Pauwels &Winter, 2006). This is not an issue specific to the United States as it can be traced back through a variety of languages and cultures. French 17th century grammarians decided it was important to set masculine terms as generic due to their societally held belief that men were more noble than women (Pauwels&Winter, 2006). One argued combatant to these male generics has been the use of the singular "they" as the generic instead of "he". Feminist linguistic forms have been largely pushed back against as gender has been argued to be unrelated to studies of formal grammar and its systematic function versus the use of language itself (Eckert &McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

They/Them Pronouns. We also consider that some non-binary people use they/their/them/themselves or explicitly developed pronouns also referred to as "neo-pronouns", such as "xe" rather than "he" or "she", while some non-binary individuals use a combination such as "she/they" (Richards et. al, 2016). Singular usage of they is often critiqued as it is argued to violate the rule of number agreement and is negatively associated with feminist radicalism

(Pauwels & Winter, 2006). In an Australian study, professors reported using singular "they" overall more often as a generic than "he or she" (Pauwels & Winters, 2006). Reasons for for reform varied by gender, with male professors viewing it as a simple way to neutralize the language or "take sex out of the debate" and female professors doing it more so in a "radical" way to draw direct attention to gender norms (Pauwels & Winters, 2006, p.133). This brings in the intention associated with pronoun use potentially being different than the language use itself.

They/Them Pronouns: a singular manor to describe a person in third person who does not identify within the gender binary

Self-Identify

In continuation of our focus on gender as a social identity, we use both the theory of identity and the theory of social identity to ground our idea of what it means to self-identify. From the perspective of identity theory, we can think of the self as capable of self-categorization and identity itself being solidified through this categorization (Stets & Burke, 2000). Social identity theory highlights that the categories we can identify ourselves in are structured in our society and can emphasize our recognized role within society, as well as how we are expected to perform within it (Burke & Tully, 1977). This can lead to ideas of in-group and out-group thinking that shape how we interact with those we see as alike or different from us (Stets & Burke, 2000). Gender being one of these constructed roles was long seen as binary and now with terminology a new categorization is evolving to encapture those beyond the binary. Borrowing from these theories we conceptualize self-identification as an active emergence into a group.

Self-Identity: identifying oneself within a predetermined social category and engaging in the roles and expectations of that social categorization

Research Questions and Hypotheses

As argued by Pauwels and Winters (2006), academia is a particularly fascinating space to look at shifts in gendered language, such as singular "they" due to it acting as a space which both upholds grammatical rules, as well as a common sight for change. In developing this research question, we considered the existing literature on how gendered language impacts women globally including gender gaps, completion of school and GPA. Viewing academia as a common indicative space, we wondered about more specific interactions with gendered language. To gauge these, we turned to a qualitative frame. We also wondered how these results may differ outside a grammatically gendered space, in a more naturally gendered language such as English. Then looked at the binary measurements of impact, and considered what the specific impacts may be for those outside the binary.

The subtopics we considered were *specific* times in which these students experienced gendered language at Portland State University, as well as potential feelings associated with these experiences. Noting the specific experiences would help us gauge if gendered language was recognizable to students in higher education in a way that may spotlight gender. It would also help to discuss if there was an impact associated, such a feeling of discouragement in the academic space.

As previously highlighted, data on nonbinary students was unidentifiable within this capacity compared to the impacts associated with women, it felt important to contrast the demographics. Prior research shows nonbinary students primarily noted being misgendered as a way in which gender might show up in academia. However, those with feminine identities reported higher GPA's. One argument for this could be that academia has been correlated with a

feminine gender (Burke, 1989). This data alone does not mean that women will report less impact, it seems that differences may exist between the experiences of women in contrast to those identifying as nonbinary. As women's noted impacts have aligned more with the dominance of male generics, whereas nonbinary individuals are not reflected with either "he" or "she" (Pauwels, 2003).

With the above considerations, we developed the following Research Question and Hypotheses:

H1: I hypothesize that women and those outside of the gender binary will have *specific* experiences with gendered language at Portland State University.

H2: I hypothesize that the specific impacts will be different for women from those outside of the gender binary.

RQ: How do women and those outside of the gender binary experience gendered language at Portland State University?

If these hypotheses are confirmed it could give insight into how gendered language may potentially impact women and nonbinary individuals specifically within academia which could lead to academic policy shifts to better linguistically include women and nonbinary students. Notably, universities like the University of Wisconsin, alongside other colleges have implemented a policy using a list of nonsexist linguistic suggestions including avoiding generic "he" as well as the alternative "they", s/he and he or she, after gauging students had firsthand experience with "sexist language" use on campus (Benson, et.al, 2013). Our findings could also potentially expand to a broader language reform around gender-based exclusion within academic spaces.

In coding the data, H1 would be confirmed if the data results showed participants had discussed specific experiences with gendered language at Portland State University. Additionally,

H2 would be confirmed if the perceived impact of gendered language was different in the experiences for those who self-identified as women in comparison to those who identified as nonbinary students. This could potentially be reflected in the experiences with gendered language mentioned, as well as in the words used to describe the feelings associated with any of these potential experiences.

Methods

All methodology was created in accordance and approved by the Portland State University Independent Research Board (IRB). We collected qualitative data from in person semi-structured interviews for a few reasons. Interviews provide better data on *specific* impacts of gendered language that may not be able to be accessed through more structured or limited interviews. Additionally, participants were able to self-describe their gender instead of being categorized in a way that could be limiting, such as a fill in the box answer. It also allowed for the data to be coded to see if there were any overlapping patterns within the individual's experiences. Lastly, the in-person environment allowed us to create a comforting secure space to best support participants' needs.

Participants

Portland State University students were chosen for this study due to the academic space being accessible to the researcher and acting as a site for higher education catering to both undergraduate and graduate students. A convenience sample chosen to allow for anyone within the student status identifying within our definitions as either a woman or nonbinary to engage.

To gauge an appropriate sample size, we used publicly available data sourced from the Queer Resource Center (QRC) as well as Portland State University student housing. Based on a

Spring 2023 poll conducted through the QRC, 42.39% identified as women and 30.8% identified as nonbinary. This poll also showed that another 9.78% identify as "other than man, women, or non-binary. Overall, 33.33% of poll respondents identified as transgender with another 15.38% responding as “questioning”. Portland State University Housing provided their Fall 2022 Fact-Book which stated that among students in university housing 36% were Male, 51% were Female, and 13% were Self-Identified. While "Self Identified" could be categorized as encompassing those outside of the gender binary, this is inconclusive. Using this data, we determined a sample size of thirty participants, later reframing to fifteen participants given resources.

Promotion

This study was promoted on the Portland State University campus by pinning up flyers starting in late February 2024 that gave a brief overview of the study objectives and a QR code that linked to a prescreening survey. These flyers were strategically posted in community frequented spaces where women and nonbinary students may be more likely to see them including the Women’s Resource Center (WRC), the Queer Resource Center (QRC), and the Parkmill building which is home to the School of Gender, Race, and Nations department as well as the department of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies. Flyers were also distributed in both Cramer Hall and Fariborz Maseeh Hall due to their frequent foot traffic.

Pre-Screening

The pre-screening survey was hosted using a Google Form on Portland State University’s secure browser and included three required questions:

1)What is your email? (textbox option)

2) Are you a current Portland State University student? (yes or no)

3) What gender do you most align with? (multiple choice, with a write in other option).

The survey also included two optional questions that allowed for the participants to ask any questions about the research and to respond how they had heard about this study.

After individual's engaged with the pre-screening survey, those who qualified were contacted through the email they provided with specifics about potentially setting up an in-person interview using a predetermined email script. In this script, we provided locational information as well as informing participants of steps that would be taken to secure their identity. This included meeting participants outside the University Center Building and escorting them up the elevator and to the interview room through a private hallway, to avoid faculty as much as possible. As well as holding the interviews in a secure room where interruptions were unlikely. This email also informed participants of a randomized numerical and alphabetical set, for example (5Q), which would be associated with their data to further secure their identities. Respondents who did not qualify included individuals who did not identify as current Portland State University students, or who did not self-identify as women or non-binary. These respondents' data was immediately deleted, and they were not followed up with.

Interview and Questions

In-person interviews required a time commitment for participants of a maximum of two hours to allow for breaks. Consent was obtained through a physical consent form based on the Portland State University's IRB provided model. The interviews took place in a secure interview

space volunteered by the communications department. Time was given for questions to be asked by participants and introductions to occur before the recorded session began. Five pre-written questions were asked with the following rationale shown in Figure 1[2].

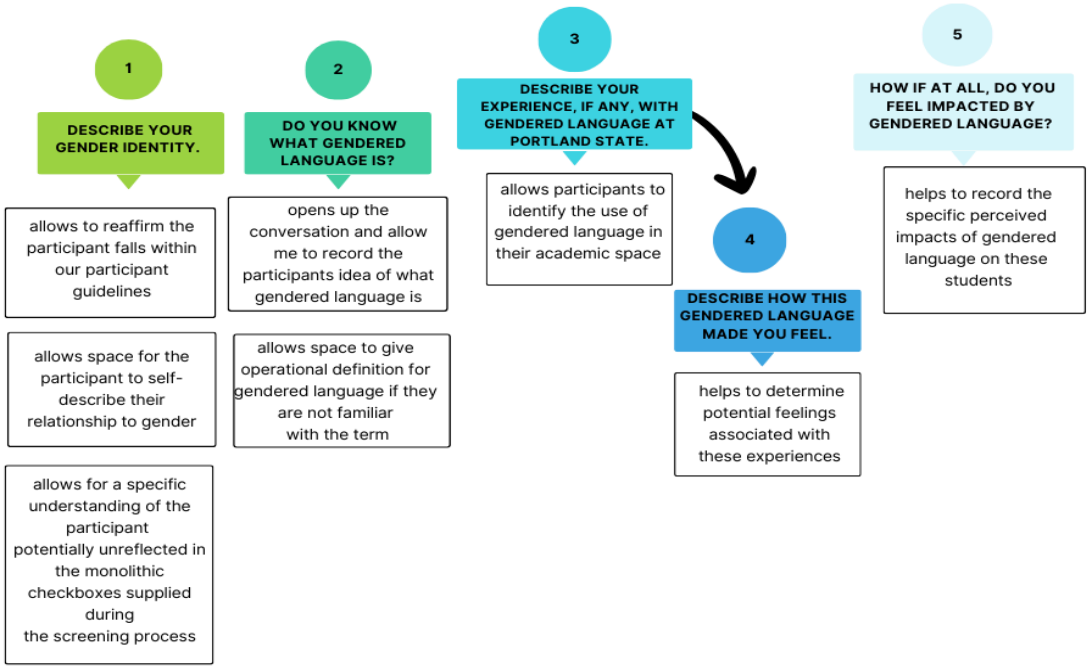

Figure 1. Questions and Rational

After the interview concluded, each participant was provided two supportive resource sheets, one of which was specific to Portland State University on-site offerings including the Student Health and Counseling office, the Queer Resource Center, and the Women's Resource Center. The second resource sheet included locally researched free support spaces catering specifically to women and/or LGBT community members. It was deemed important to have resources immediately available to mediate any potential discomforts that may surface during the interviews. It was also deemed important to have off campus resources in addition to the

[2] As seen in Figure 1, question two allowed for the researcher to provide our operational definition of gendered language if the participant felt unfamiliar with the terminology.

on-campus student resources as to mediate the tension that may come up about the university itself including their women serving and LGBT spaces.

Data Analysis

Participants were audio recorded on a physical recorder and stored in agreement with Portland State University's IRB requirements. The recording was then transcribed using a digital text subscriber. After comparing the audio to the text to be sure there were no errors in translation, the audio was promptly deleted. Introductions occurred before the recording began, and any remaining personal identifiers that may risk participant identification, were removed in the transcribed data. Handwritten notes were also briefly taken and kept privately from the digital data, as to avoid any potential identification.

After the transcriptions were accepted, we began a two-cycle coding process based largely through the lens of constructivist grounded theory which entailed mixed method coding. The development of themes led to some structural elements to test our hypothesis; however the overarching constructivist approach allowed us to infer core categories through reanalyzing our data past initial findings. Through co-collaboration we worked to interpret meanings from our participants without "trappings of objectivism and universality" employing a level of relativism vital to the concept of linguistic relativity (Charmaz, 2000, p.272). The following sections discuss why a constructivist grounded theory was necessary, as well as specific grammatical, elemental and affective methods of initial coding and the process of recoding.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Constructivist approaches to grounded theory emphasize the importance of firsthand knowledge as it views realities as subjective and multiplistic (Charmaz, 2000). As our research focuses on the first-hand experiences of women and nonbinary students, as well as their perception of that reality, a constructivist approach aligns with our interests. Applying a constructivist grounded approach arguably allows for a more centered analysis that ensures adaptability as participants co-create and clarify meaning with researchers (Charmaz, 2000). This adaptability also hinges largely on grounded theory's inductive reasoning which allows for the data to be returned to as new ideas emerge and stimulate deeper analytical inquiry (Charmaz, 2000). In our research this level of adaptability allowed for us to contrast the variations among our participants as well as identify central categories that could impact and expand upon our initial hypothetical findings. We implemented this through using a two-cycle approach to coding that expanded past initially structured themes and hypothesis coding to selective coding.

First Cycle Coding

Our first cycle of coding worked from a structural approach which aligned with our hypothesis testing goals and has been argued as an effective approach for exploring major themes and categories within semi-structured interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2009). Themes in data can be conceptualized as "a phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means (Saldaña, 2009, p. 141). To test our hypotheses, we coded for themes that aligned with our research interests including gendered language, academia, gendered pronouns (he, she, they), feelings, intentions, and experiences.

Some themes were coded more succinctly using specific grammatical, elemental and affective methods while others were coded through a researcher validated definition, however each of our themes aligned with our hypothetical inquiry. For coding gendered language, we referred to our working definition. Academia coding consisted of nouns associated with formal academia such as “professor” or “syllabus” as well as direct mentions of Portland State University by name or “PSU” abbreviation. Feelings were identified using emotion coding to illuminate “deep insight into the participants’ perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions” (Saldaña, 2013, p.263). We noted feelings as both abstract nouns such as “uncertainty” as well as adjectives like “joyful”. When coding for experiences, indicators included use of self-identifiers like first person “I” in combination with verbs. Experiences were coded only when described as external and therefore situated in the participants' reality. In contrast, internal attitudes were value coded as they emerged and emphasized intention whether attributed to the participants' self or to others. Our formal definition for coding intention centered easily pinpointed purpose as to why an action was taken. In addition to the demographic details recorded during pre-screening, we engaged in brief attribute coding primarily anticipated in response to question one, where participants had the opportunity to restate personal identifiers that aligned with their self-identified gender.

For each participant these themes were simultaneously coded as we acknowledge themes can overlap to “suggest multiple meanings that necessitate and justify more than one code” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 267). In addition to simultaneously coding, we also used analytical memos to discuss, note and process any emerging elements which may occur within or underneath our data (Charmaz, 2000; Saldaña, 2009). These memos primarily included mention of potential uncited themes or patterns that occurred and were bolded then commented on in the margins of the

shared document for future clarification. Using the constructivist grounded theory of analytical memos allowed for us to "explore our codes and expand upon the processes they identify or suggest" (Charmaz, 2000, p.261). It also allowed for a dialogue to open amongst the researchers when questioning the validity of the data and the potential of additional findings.

Second Cycle Coding

In the second cycle of coding our data was more critically analyzed and refined through hypothetical and selective coding. Due to our narrowly defined working definitions we felt comfortable implementing hypothesis coding to analyze any potential explanations (intentions) associated with the experiences of gendered language at Portland State University and associated feelings (Saldaña, 2009). It was also in this cycle of coding that we expanded on our analytical memos to account for how our coding of gendered language may interact or link to any other emerging themes. This additionally helped to discuss our core category alongside all other themes.

To engage this second cycle, the primary researcher and advisor engaged in the process of proposing questions around whether certain coded phrases and words had been coded in alignment with the definitions. This also included working to determine when assumptions in the analytical memos may extend too far beyond the scope of this research and when emerging themes may be too frequently discussed to not consider. As additional findings became salient, they were integrated into the larger theoretical framework of the research.

Researcher Triangulation

To properly test this data's validity, we used the strategy of researcher triangulation. Researcher triangulation[3] refers to the process of multiple people observing the data to introduce various perspectives (Denzin, 2007). Triangulation should be done in a way where two or more individuals are interacting with the research, who come from different theoretical standpoints. For our research this included theoretical overlaps in the field of communication with differences in gender studies perspectives (Flick, 2018). Despite varied theoretical overlaps, researcher triangulation allows for confirming data is reliable, not challenging conclusions directly (Turner & Turner, 2009). In doing so, our goal was to mediate any biases that may come from the researcher themselves when coding.

To apply researcher triangulation we followed a predetermined order for our data analysis. First, the primary researcher would code for themes. After the researcher coded the data initially, this information was shared with the second party of the advisor who coded the data again allowing for a fresh and more advanced perspective. After which, the advisor and researcher met to re-engage with the data and further details.Then after co-coding the data for reliability, it was put through a secondary cycle of coding by both the primary researcher and the advisor. Then it was sent back to the participant it was associated with to clarify whether the interpretation aligned with their intended sharing of experiences. Sharing the data with the participant while not intrinsic to researcher triangulation, emphasizes the relationship with the participant and helps to facilitate "they can cast their stories in their terms" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 275). In this way the validation of the data existed between three parties: the researcher, the advisor and the participant.

[3] Also referred to as investigator triangulation.

Results

Overall, 17 respondents qualified for interviews and were reached out to through email for the in-person interviews. Of those 17 respondents, 7 responded to our initial email with interest. Unfortunately, various factors led to only 3 of these interviews being successfully completed in the time frame determined. Each participant was a currently enrolled Portland State University Student at the time of interview. Two-thirds of these participants identified within our definition of nonbinary during the prescreening, while the remaining participant identified as a woman. The interviews that were set for a two hour (120 minute) maximum time, averaged only 22 minutes. Below data is pulled from transcriptions[4] of the interviews.

When asked to describe their gender identity during the in-person interviews, the language expanded beyond the original answers given during pre-screening. As an example, one participant, D1, who initially responded as "woman" clarified:

> "I am a cis queer woman." (D1)

The same expansion of self-description occurred for another participant, C3,who had previously in the pre-screening identified as nonbinary/third-gender, but in the interview expanded to use language more specific to presentation and pronoun use:

> "I would go with non-binary if I was just like saying that. But I would also
>
> describe myself as trans masc or like, I don't know, I kind of go back and forth cause I
>
> like present kind of femme, but like I'm, I don't like she her pronouns. So like I kind of would describe myself as like femme trans masc and femme, I guess." (C3)

[4] All transcriptions are kept in the participants' literal dialogue and dialect.

Participants' expanded description of their gender highlights how gendered language can be seen in the very way they self-described. Another participant, F1, who had previously identified with non-binary in the pre-screening also expanded to discuss intentions behind why they chose this descriptor stating:

> " So I guess I started using the term gender nonbinary 'cause I saw somebody else use it in like a professional context and get away with it. But before that I think I was using terms like gender fluid or genderqueer probably more often." (F1)

This response highlights how nonbinary individuals may choose when to identify with this language compared to other terms.

Hypothesis 1

H1: I hypothesize that women and those outside of the gender binary will have specific experiences with gendered language at Portland State University.

H1 was confirmed as every participant accounted for experiencing specific gendered language at Portland State University. Third-person pronouns and generic or what one participant referred to as "default" pronoun use was discussed by every participant in some capacity. Participants notably referenced experiencing it in written texts:

> "I guess I notice it more when I'm reading something and it usually just says he, or very, like occasionally it will say he or she. And that one almost stands out to me more because that takes like more effort to type than just putting they <laugh>." (D1)

> " I feel like I've mostly noticed it like in like syllabi for classes. I think like a lot of professors have like a, just like a sheet that they, or like a, like a fill in the blank kind of like structure that they use for their syllabies. They don't necessarily like change everything every time, which is fine. But I feel like I've noticed a lot of times like using like, oh his or her or like that type of stuff in the syllabi is like where I've noticed it the most. (pause) I haven't like noticed it that much in other ways unless I'm not remembering, was the question how it has impacted me?" (C3)

This same participant expanded to explain their experience was notably in written form, but not in other spaces at Portland State University stating:

> "Yeah, it' s like kind of irksome but I feel like it's not actually that like present I guess like in the actual classes and stuff. Like it might be like in the language of like the syllabus, but like I don't usually like hear professors like saying that that much. At least at PSU I feel like it makes me think of high school." (C3)

F1 discussed experiences of gendered language when filling out a written form for a academic opportunity and being met with binary options which they felt was related to sex stating:

> "Like I didn't realize nobody ever put this option on any of the forms, you know what I mean? Like it was always, and I'm still, I had to fill out a form the other day that did not have any like other or you know, it didn't have like even a write-in option for. You, you had to pick male or female and I'm like, why are you asking me about my biological sex though? 'cause this is like not, that's not the

> con, it was like for a , for a science opportunity or something. And I'm like, do you need ovaries for it or what's, how is this relevant ?" (F1)

Other examples of gendered language were discussed beyond the written format, but varied more so, these findings are discussed in alignment with H2.

Hypothesis 2

H2: I hypothesize that the specific impacts will be different for women from those outside of the gender binary.

H2 was somewhat supported but would benefit from further examination. The experiences of those self-identified as women and those self-identified as nonbinary did differ, but the intentions and feelings attributed to the impact of this language varied from each participant. D1 who self-identified as a woman associated their experiences with gendered language in academia as feeling "outdated" and "disheartening", leading to assumptions about the writers intentions, but not inherently impacting them specifically, stating:

> " I guess when I, when I read it, I make immediate assumptions about like the views of the person who wrote it, especially if, if it's newer because I feel like if people are still doing that, then it's a conscious choice. When I read older stuff, I guess it's not affecting me personally. I just understand how it has affected women and people who don't identify within the binary historically, which is like disheartening, but it's not, it's something I've been aware of for a while." (D1)

D1 described impacts as not affecting her directly, emphasizing she is not nonbinary when describing a lack of "deep personal feelings" and acknowledging historical impacts for women and nonbinary individuals, :

> "I don't identify as non-binary, so, but I, I guess usually it's more of a, like, it just feels outdated or it feels kind of like silly when there is a more inclusive term to use. But I don't feel, I don't have a lot of like deep personal feelings that come up when I, when I hear her read that." (D1)

This discussion of intention was also mentioned by C3 when describing the impact, but they noted that the language led to feelings of "hedging up", annoyance, "uncertainty" and " extra awareness".

> "It's interesting because I feel like it like automatically makes me like wonder if it's like intentional or not. Like it's hard to tell if like a professor is like, oh they just like don't mean for it to be like annoying or like, but they just like don't think of it rather than like if they're like doing that on purpose because they're like, you know, against they them pronouns or something. Or just like, you know, transness in general. So, it kind of makes me like, like hedge up a little bit." (C3)

They then clarified that experiences with gendered language in academic texts alone did not indicate levels of safety or potential harm using a comparison to being misgendered

> "Like, like for example if I'm like misgendered by someone, like one time I'm always a little more like careful around them and like I kind of like tend to try to like prepare myself for like if that were to happen again so it doesn't like surprise

> me or like throw me off as much as the first time. So, I feel like it's similar to that where I'm like, okay, this person could potentially be like not accepting or like not really that safe to like be around and that's like more I feel like in an intense description than I like actually feel like that's like kind of it's, I feel that way, but like kind of on like a chill level (laugh) if that makes sense? Like I, I'm like okay, that could be a possibility but probably not based on just this one thing." (C3)

F1 discussed a different range of negative impacts when experiencing "default" pronouns in classrooms including intentionally "sucking up" how they feel within the classroom setting as well as feeling "awkward" and having difficulties connecting with professors which they described as "hidden curriculum",

> "So I think I like, I mostly just like kind of suck it up or what, you know, like I don't, I try to not react and I do like a lot of sort of poker face I guess when I'm like in class. But like it's made office hours really awkward some of the times that I've gone. It's one of those things where like, I don't know if it's awkward for them. Like, I don't know, never sure if other people like to what extent they have the ability to read a room I guess. Yeah. So it's (pause) It's made it more difficult to connect with my professors on a level that it feels like I <laugh> am like literally paying for <laugh> and it really makes it difficult to do this stuff like, "oh hey I wanted to ask you about your research" or you know, like "you talked about this opportunity in class, how do I get more information?". Like all of the sort of hidden curriculum of like success in academia-" (F1)

Data showed that each participant had a varied experience, and while the self-identified nonbinary students (C3 and F1) did describe more negative feelings such as annoyance and awkwardness when compared to the participant who identified as a woman (D1), other intersections of identity could contribute to these perceived impacts. D1 discussed how what she was studying may play a role in her experiences with gendered language.

> " So there's a history of mistreatment and exclusion, but it's not affecting me personally right now. I guess because it's a progressive, claims to be a progressive university. And with what I'm studying, I'm surrounded by people who are also progressive. Yeah. <laugh>" (D1)

After our first round of coding, we noticed a significant mention of identities other than gender occurring such as with D1. We decided it was important to recode the data thoroughly for mentions of all intersecting identities. In doing so we found quite a few examples which are discussed further below.

Additional Findings

In second-cycle coding intersecting identities were determined as an emerging pattern among participants. This was determined as participants frequently mentioned their experiences within the context of not only gender, but various other forms of identification. These most included discussion of ability, age, and academic department, each of which were continuously brought up in the discussion of gendered language. These factors felt pertinent to consider as they may impact how participants experience gendered language differently. Notably, all participants discussed their departmental identity when describing their experiences at Portland State University. When discussing professors asking for pronouns on the first day of class, C3

contextualized their answer by discussing their major and the perceived influence it has on their class environment in terms of safety:

> “Yeah, I think so because also there’s usually like other trans people in my class, I’m like a creative writing major, so there’s like a lot of gay people (laugh) in the classes and like it, first of all, it helps me like feel like less like, okay, this isn’t like just something that I probably noticed too. Like there’s probably other people in the classroom like, you know, which doesn’t really have anything to do with the professor but like just makes me feel better a little bit. And I mean it does kind of have something to do with them I guess because they’re like, like allowing space for students to like say their pronouns, which also like translates to like allowing space for different identities and stuff. (pause) So yeah.” (C3)

Whereas F1 contrasted people in their department’s difficulty to understand nonbinary people to other “concepts that aren't binary” in physics:

> “ So maybe it's not like a balance thing, it's just like it would take so many “he's” to balance out all the “she’s”, and that feels like, it feels like even identifying as being non-binary. Like people don't really understand concepts that aren't binary. They have a hard time with like <laugh> we just went over the visible light spectrum and physics and people were like, “okay, so, but it's, it’s two kinds of light, right?” And it's like, no, it's a, there's a, are you aware of ombre? Can we talk about gradients? Like <laugh>, I don't know, it feels like this thing that like if people can't understand it in physical quantities or whatever, that they're not gonna understand it in identity.” (F1)

D1 noted contrasts in her experiences with gendered language as an anthropology major and German minor noting both generational age differences of professors and basis of study

> "Yeah, I'm, I'm minoring in German and the professors quite a bit older than most of the anthropology professors that I've had. And there's definitely more of like a, yeah, he uses more gendered language and more follows. He's not, he's aware of like identities outside of the binary, but I think because of his age he's still kind of defaults to using like yeah gendered language." (D1)

When asked if she felt a generational gap existed, she responded it had more to do with the departmental field of study:

> "Yeah, I think so because even, yeah, 'cause there are obviously some professors in the anthropology department who are also older, but because of their field of study and their interests , I think that like the fact that it's anthropology and gender is a big part of what people study who study anthropology usually deal with. And so I think there's like more of an awareness in within that department. But yeah " (D1)

F1 also discussed professor's age and generational gaps in the context of being a returning student stating:

> "And I guess like that's, that's like a really interesting intersection for me because like as a returning student, like I'm probably a lot closer to their age most, you know, like life stage or whatever. Like we might have more in common if that were the conversation we were having, but because of the like power dynamic of

> literally any staff member or like any professor versus a student, I, I think there's like a, it's even harder to sort of like work it into conversation at any point like that they are misgendering me or like like also the power dynamic makes it so that they do not respond well to something like, oh I'm so excited about that." (F1)

In addition to departmental identifications, we also recorded intersections of identity on the basis of ability and generation which may have influenced the experiences of individuals in combination with their gender identifications. Ability was discussed by both our nonbinary participants (C3 and F1), C3 described how being autistic made it harder for them to gauge intentions and therefore impacts when it came to professors using gendered language:

> "I feel like I mostly try to just like pay attention when the person is actually like speaking or like teaching. Maybe I'm just like going too much from the syllabus example, but I feel like that's where I've mostly seen it. So like, yeah, I, it's hard for me to like, well I'm also autistic so it's hard for me to like kind of read like intention sometimes. So especially in writing, so normally I can't really like tell in like a syllabus, but I can tell like based on how they teach stuff in a class and like address students and even if like a lot of professors like have students go around like first couple classes and be like names and pronouns and stuff." (C3)

F1 described their experiences with gendered language in more depth as in relationship with their identity as a wheelchair user noting that "PSU is like physically inaccessible." and describing their experiences with binary labeled spaces such as gendered bathrooms stating:

> "Well then I think it's incredibly jacked up that like lots of the bathrooms that are like accessible are only like the gendered bathrooms. 'cause like it obviously at

> some point is gonna get weird if I am trying to use the handicap stall in the urinal bathroom. Yeah. And I've had that happen a couple times and I'm like, yo, I had to pee so bad. Like you do not even understand. And also you care about this so much more than I do. <laugh> Yeah. So I guess like this sort of like written stuff-" (F1)

Each of these intersections of identity came up in a way which felt significant to the experiences of our participants and may play a role in how gendered language impacts their specific experiences. As intersecting identities are argued to change how power dynamics are experienced, addressing these intersections could help to better contextualize these results. Due to this we discuss the theory of intersectionality and it's application more thoroughly moving forward.

Discussion

The results of this study, while limited, display specific experiences with gendered language of Portland State University's students identifying as women, as well as nonbinary. In including nonbinary students this study works to expand upon past research of gendered language impacts beyond the traditional binary of "male" and "female". The results of this study most concretely highlight binary language in terms of the generic "he" and "he or she" as it is experienced within written contexts such as syllabi. This finding is consistent due to English being predetermined as a natural language in which third person pronouns are recognized as gendered (Gygax, 2019 et.al). However, it is notable that both women and nonbinary students referenced written texts as a source of gendered language, despite varied responses when asked about the impact of such language use. In slight contrast to prior research (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011), the woman identified participant discussed minimal impacts or feelings associated with

the binary gendered language personally, but discussed the historical impacts for women and nonbinary individuals. In bolstering this finding, we note that the study of impacts of sexist language on women in higher education should continue, but that there is potential of English-speaking women in education to illustrate less impact when terms like “he or she” are used due to prior historical awareness of linguistic inequalities with generic “he”.

Interestingly, this language drew the attention of the participants in a way which led to some considering the intentions of the professor more so than solidifying ideas of the gender binary as expected. In this way, one revitalized approach of linguistic relativity such as language as spotlight may be less applicable than predetermined. Intentions associated with the terms could be an argued cultural effect more closely related to how meaning is attributed to the language, than the language use itself. As Lucy (1997) urges it is important to consider other cultural factors when testing linguistic relativity such as academic power dynamics. Students may be more likely to think about the professor's intention in the word choice as they default to the cultural roles of professor and traditional learner. In engaging with these roles undergraduates have been found to crucially consider their professors authority of knowledge which can lead to less discussion when students feel the professor may be incorrect, as well as overall higher beliefs that the professor must be more knowledgeable (Symonds, 2021).

Our data reflects students may think about professors' perceptions on gender in relation to their class behavior. Nonbinary students noted apprehension when engaging with professors who used gendered language as well as in correcting the use of “default” pronouns. This data may be important in furthering discussion of language usage within academic materials, including but not limited to the syllabi. As noted, University of Wisconsin used student data showing sexist language on campus as prevalent to push the implementation of alternatives to generic he, to they

or he or she (Benson, et.al, 2013). However, as noted here by students “he or she” could feel outdated even to those identified as women as well as potentially having an impact on nonbinary students' perception of the classroom environment. This is consistent with findings that the practice of “balancing” reforms that center the use of “he or she” can result in less representation for individuals with non-normative gender expression (Renström, et. al., 2024). If expanded upon, this data could result in applications at Portland State University on an administrative level which may influence policy changes around our own use of gendered language across departments.

Intersections of identity have been largely discussed in critical race frameworks, using the theory of intersectionality coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to center relationships of subordination and privilege, illuminating the needs of Black feminism. Yet, intersectionality has begun to expand in various fields as both an analytical frame and a methodology to understand power structures (Cho, et. al, 2013). While racial identity was not blatantly seen in our results, we acknowledge how intersectional inquiry can work to discuss the recreation of power dynamics in different structures that inherently incorporate both race and gender as they overlap with other identities (Cho, et. al, 2013).

We posit that further analysis implementing intersectional theory could help to discuss experiences of subjugation employed through binary gendered language and help clarify the relationship between student’s overlapping identities. As reflected in the results, identities such as being a wheelchair user and being nonbinary overlapped for F1 in how they experienced language use in reference to on campus bathrooms. Applying intersectionality to discussions of ability has been urged by scholars who state the very “construction of disability is shaped by intersecting systems of privilege and oppression at the personal, political, and structural levels in

educational space (Hernández-Saca et. al, 2018, p.290). H2 remained difficult to contrast in part due to the other potential overlapping identities engaged in by both women and nonbinary participants, which may cultivate broader differences in their experiences with language use as well as gender perception.

Limitations & Recommendations for Further Research

One of the largest limitations of this study revolved around the small sample size. As previously mentioned, the sample size did not allow us to compare and contrast the differences in experience between women and nonbinary students effectively. Additionally, this sample size does not allow for generalizations to be made about the broader population at Portland State University and more so can work as a discussion starter to a much bigger research endeavor. It is important to consider the limited resources of this study, including financial compensation as well as scheduling incompatibilities which may have impacted the number of participants willing to volunteer their time. We originally designed this research without compensation to avoid participants perceiving the sharing of their experiences to have an associated monetary price. Given that many college students work outside academic hours, lack of financial compensation may have contributed to difficulty to retain participants. Furthermore, our 2-hour *maximum* time frame may have appeared daunting to those with busy schedules potentially leading to the initial drop in responses after the first email.

In addition to financial compensation and scheduling incompatibilities, our study occurred from February 2024 through July 2024, when political tensions were notably high on campus. These tensions were thoroughly covered in an issue of the Portland State University student-run paper, The Vanguard (Leon,et. al, 2024). Due to the events occurring in the Millar

Library and the university's response to these events some students may have felt unsafe or uncomfortable meeting to discuss their experiences on campus in a department building. This feels especially relevant given the potential outcomes of an already sensitive topic such as marginalization. Due to this, we contribute that some participants who expressed interest earlier on may have decided otherwise given the physical environment on campus at this time.

We did try to mediate on campus discomfort by expanding measures to make the interview space on campus feel more accessible. This included sending participants an additional follow up email acknowledging campus events and safety, as well as to extend support and discuss further measures. Alongside meeting participants outside the UCB and escorting them up to the secure interview room through a private hallway. We also provided comfort items including plush toys and a mixed box of sensory items, as well as offering the option of a calming aroma diffuser which the participant could choose a scent for at the beginning of the session. However, we acknowledge that these sensory items acted only as a minimal comfort and could not fully alleviate feelings of unsafety or discomfort which may have occurred due to campus events.

There are also sections of our methodology that could be revised to better understand these communities. If this study was to be expanded upon, it may have been valuable to expand the interview process from only in person interviews to include virtual interview options, such as Zoom. This could potentially help to expand accessibility for students who are less likely to frequent the campus space and could add information on how gendered language may appear in online academic spaces versus in-person. Expanding to this setting would require taking on more cyber security initiatives to ensure individuals data is not compromised during the interview process.

This study did not account for racial identity, multilingual or international status. While mentions of languages other than English were mentioned by one participant (German), there was no clear documentation of multilingual status. While our choice to explore English was purposeful given the academic environment in the United States, students of bilingual backgrounds have been noted to default to gender attributions aligned with their first learned language (Forbes, et.al, 2008). Racial identity would have been interesting to document as it plays a foundational role in understanding intersectionality which came up naturally in the data responses. Focus on international students may also provide a unique understanding as their negotiation of cultural norms like gender roles have been found to create hybrid forms of self-identification referred to as third place identities (Le et. al., 2016). Given the emphasis on gender and student status alone, each of these identities were not previously anticipated and should be expanded upon.

Lastly, we acknowledge that despite the sample size impacting our ability to effectively contrast the experiences of women and nonbinary students, that semi-structured interviews themselves may lack standardization. A lack of standardization could contribute to difficulties comparing the data despite a larger sample size. This is likely due to the potential for different participants to have been asked different follow up questions and therefore the potential to express more about a given subject than another participant. Alternatively, open-ended online surveys where participants could engage in thick description without a need for individual interview sessions may be more ideal for a widened participant scale.

Conclusion

This research helps to identify how gendered language is experienced by women and those identifying beyond the gender binary and combate their previous invisibility in prior

research and linguistic contexts. Our research considered first hand interactions with gendered language in academia otherwise unidentified. Utilizing reformed linguistic relativity, we sought to understand how gendered language may spotlight gender and gender binaries within the experiences of these students. In our findings, we found women and those outside the binary both described specific experiences with gendered language at Portland State University.

Experiences centered the use of “he or she” primarily in the written context of syllabi and activity forms provided by faculty. These experiences reinforce how naturally gendered English generics and third person pronouns display gender. Associated impacts of this language showed to vary in part by gender identity, with women reporting less personal impacts compared to their nonbinary counterparts. Nonbinary students noted experiencing gendered language in academia more negatively citing feelings of “annoyance” and “apprehension”. This leads to questions of if reforms of generic “he” could still display shortcomings for nonbinary individuals. As language has been argued to reflect societal beliefs, including discrimination and power hierarchies, it is important that we continue to discuss more inclusive linguistic reforms and academic policy.

We also found that women and nonbinary students described their experiences in the context of their gender and other intersecting identities such as age, ability and academic department. Intersections of identity that should be considered further include multilingual status, racial identity and international student status. As intersections of identity can inform how students reflect on their experiences with gendered language, we urge future researchers towards utilizing intersectional theory. This knowledge may cultivate understanding for more broadly contrasted experiences with language use as well as gender perception overall.

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