

Gender-Neutral/Fair/Inclusive/Nonbinary/Non-sexist languages and their dis/contents

Conference 16/17 October 2023

University of Chicago Center in Paris
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The role of language in including, excluding and (mis)representing certain groups has been foundational for the field of language and gender since the 1970s. In fact, some of the most notable contributions of this academic field to the public sphere had to do with how to represent women more equally in texts through changes in the lexicon (e.g., *Ms.*, *flight attendant*, *firefighter*, etc.) and syntax (e.g., *he and she*, etc.) in what became known as non-sexist language. Attention to sexist and androcentric linguistic structures dominated the field for two decades and may be viewed as indexing the zeitgeist of the times, to different extents responding to the cultural revolution of May 68 and the political change of second-wave feminism. However, the relative institutional success of non-sexist language reforms and the discursive turn the field witnessed in the 1990s caused the public and academic attention to linguistic sexism to wane.

This scenario has been drastically changed recently. In several corners of the world, renewed interest in how linguistic structures exclude and/or misrepresent certain groups has followed in the wake of academic and political changes. As trans and nonbinary groups gain more public visibility and propose their own theories and concepts, demands for less transphobic and cisgender-centric language have arisen. Trans and nonbinary linguistic reforms are tributary of earlier feminist critiques of language and share some of their basic tenets, but several points of divergence exist. While a large range of non-sexist language practices aims for equal representation of women and men, they still keep the gender binary unscathed. Other feminist and queer linguistic practices take issue with the social and grammatical bi-categorization as the core of their critical concerns, with some of them aligning with non-binary practices. For languages with robust grammatical gender such as Portuguese, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Slovenian, Romanian, Polish, Czech, etc. the aim is to curb grammatical gender binarism by way of adding nonbinary morphemes. Because of the challenges they pose to linguistic structures and to commonly held beliefs about language, gender, and power relations, such innovations do not go unquestioned by linguists and laypeople alike who engage in heated public debates about their grammatical legitimacy, linguistic productivity, and political usefulness. The transnational resurgence of such debates at this moment is representative of the current political zeitgeist. On the one hand, following a long tradition on the antifeminist left, these practices have been viewed by some as an outcome of the “identity turn” within the left, fragmenting the field and diverting the attention from structural problems. On the other hand, they have been used by the right as a sign of increasing radicalization and detachment from real-world issues or, its opposite: as a threat to the social order. Within feminist, queer, non-binary, and trans communities, debates have also arisen about what language can and cannot do and what the political and social meanings of the various propositions are. These debates are made more convoluted by the tensions between descriptivism and prescriptivism, between what people do with language and what they

think language should be like, and between people's sociolinguistic reality and purists' idealizations.

These metalinguistic and metapragmatic rationalizations about language highlight that "gender, understood as a grammatical category, [cannot] be thought of as independent from its cultural context" (Abbou and Baider 2016:5). With the multiplication of gender-neutral/gender-fair/inclusive/nonbinary/non-sexist language forms, contexts of use and social actors using them, talk about such language has also multiplied and received renewed attention in the public sphere. Such metadiscourses offer a fruitful analytical entry-point to understand not only these practices but also, and perhaps most centrally, the social, cultural, political, and ideological contexts in which they arise. At this juncture, this conference aims to gather researchers who are interested in metadiscourse about gender-neutral/gender-fair/inclusive/nonbinary/non-sexist languages and what such metacommentary says about the actors/institutions that issue them. Topics of interest include, but are not limited to, the following:

- National and transnational contexts of emergence, circulation, appropriation, and contestation (how unique are local instantiations of the phenomenon? How and to what extent are they informed by transnational flows of actors, discourses, and militancy practices? Etc.)
- Multilingualism and translanguaging (what is the role of gender-neutral, gender-fair, inclusive, nonbinary, non-sexist language in multilingual societies? How do different languages inform one another? How do multilingual speakers speak of the various resources at their disposal? Is there a semiotic market of gender-neutral, gender-fair, inclusive, nonbinary, non-sexist practices according to different languages? Etc.)
- Genealogies and memories of the debates and how they overlap and/or contest each other (what is the local history of the phenomenon? Who gets to tell it? Are there alternative genealogies/memories? How do these stories and erasures crisscross with social and intellectual movements? Etc.)
- Political cross-fertilizations, encompassments, and fragmentations (how is gender-neutral, gender-fair, inclusive, nonbinary, non-sexist language framed within local political contexts? How does it feed political coherence and disaggregation? How is it co-opted by conspiracy theories? Etc.)
- Convergences and divergences in metadiscourses against such reforms (what do linguists, the media, politicians, citizens say about the phenomenon? How different/similar are their metacommentary? How do these views circulate nationally and transnationally? Etc.)
- Convergences and divergences in metadiscourses for such reforms (what do feminists, trans, queer, and nonbinary people say about these reforms? How do their positions differ? How do they overlap? Etc.)

- Naming practices and how they frame the phenomenon and the controversies around it (i.e., do gender-neutral, gender-fair, inclusive, nonbinary, non-sexist language refer to different instantiations of the same/different phenomena? What affordances and limits do speakers ascribe to each label? Are there conflicts about the naming of the controversy itself? Etc.)
- Uses and abuses of such innovations in the public sphere (how are gender-neutral, gender-fair, inclusive, nonbinary, non-sexist taken up by the media, governments, companies? How are these uses seen by different stakeholders? How do institutionalized uses reflect and/or disrupt grassroots uses? Etc.)
- Renewal of and challenges to experts systems about gender-neutral, gender-fair, inclusive, nonbinary, non-sexist language (What are the trajectories, experiences, actors or institutions functioning as acknowledgement processes to produce experts in this field? What previous and contemporary gender-neutral, gender-fair, inclusive, nonbinary, non-sexist language does to prescriptivism and discourse about prescriptivism? Etc.)

The conference aims to show that what is said about gender-neutral, gender-fair, inclusive, nonbinary, non-sexist language can add analytical nuance to our understanding of language and social life. Indeed, gender is a crucial node to approach this articulation, both because of its intrinsic sociolinguistic nature and because it is becoming an inevitable marker in ideological distribution. By bringing together different social, political, and linguistic contexts, the workshop will shed light on the complexity that surrounds linguistic practices at a time of global political reconfigurations.

500-word abstracts must be sent by **April 30th**, to

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Notification of acceptance/rejection will be sent out by May 30th.

The workshop will be held on the 16th and 17th October 2023.

There are no registration fees for the conference.

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