

International interdisciplinary conference

What are your pronouns? And why does it matter?

17-18 October 2024

It is almost a platitude today to say that pronouns are political. Recently, however, they seem to have become more political than ever. Putting pronouns on a social network bio, in an email signature, on badges at conferences, or disclosing them during a pronoun round, i.e., introducing oneself with the formula “Hi my name is X and my pronouns are *she/her*; *he/him*, *they/them*...” is more than simply stating a fact, it is an intrinsically political act. These practices reveal much more than someone’s gender, they also indicate their stance on gender politics, and potentially much wider political issues.

However, as these pronoun sharing practices have gained momentum and become more popular, they have also provoked backlash from certain quarters: in March 2023 Ron DeSantis, governor of Florida, signed a new state law against what he dubbed “the pronoun olympics”. It is now illegal in K12 educational institutions in Florida to refer to someone, or to ask to be referred to, with a pronoun that does not correspond to the sex assigned at birth, demonstrating just how politically charged pronouns have become.

This two-day hybrid interdisciplinary conference will focus on these recent pronoun sharing practices, covering all forms of disclosing one’s pronouns including name badges, the pronoun round, putting pronouns in an email signature, Zoom profile, etc. What theories, methodologies and approaches can be mobilised to explain these new phenomena, as well as the backlash against them? What is the genealogy of these practices: how do they fit in with, or diverge from previous debates about pronouns?

Some argue (Baron 2020; Cameron 2016) that debates over pronouns in the 1960s and 70s focused on *reducing* the relevance of gender and imagining a world *without* gender. However, today gender is envisaged by many as a vital part of one’s identity. If second wave feminists conceptualised gender as a system of oppression, could asking, expecting or even obliging (Thomas-Hébert 2022) people to disclose their pronouns be considered “just another way queer people are being pushed to perform their queerness” (De Freitas 2021), a compulsory “pronominal coming out”? Even if the objective of these practices is to question the stability, universality, and binarity of gender (Thomas-Hébert 2022), is there nonetheless an inherent paradox in wanting to question gender binaries, wanting to avoid pigeonholing people, and yet at the same time asking them to put a label on themselves? Have these practices unwittingly amplified gender binaries, simply creating a new gender binary of transgender/cisgender, rather than challenging the binary system per se (Manion 2018)? What light can feminist and/or Queer theory shed on these issues?

The practice of disclosing one’s pronouns originated in trans communities as a way to inform others about how to refer to them appropriately, but quickly spread to the mainstream. If the risk of being misgendered is much less present for cis people, why do they do it? Do these pronoun sharing practices mean different things for different people?

From a sociolinguistics perspective, *who* is using these new practices and *why*? Thomas-Hébert (2022) found that cis women declared their pronouns more often than cis men and Tucker and Jones (2023) found that the most widely used pronouns on Twitter were *she/her*. What does this indicate? That cis women are more likely to be allies than cis men? That more trans women disclose their pronouns than trans men? How do we explain these differences?

Alternatively, these practices are perhaps not to be associated with *categories* of people (trans, cis, non-binary, gender non-conforming, etc.), so much as with the *stances* that they index (Eckert 2008). Are they a way for cis people to show allyship, a way of indicating their stance and alignment (Du Bois 2007; Kiesling 2022) on trans issues, or even a way of signalling

wider political allegiances? If so, what are these stances and how have these new pronoun sharing practices changed the indexical value of pronouns over recent years? Stating one's pronouns seems to be increasingly tied to, not only gender issues, but a liberal/left-wing ideological position.

What does it mean when the practice is taken up by high profile politicians like Elizabeth Warren (Democrat Senator for Massachusetts) and Kamala Harris (Democrat Vice President of the USA) (King and Crowley 2023)? What stance is being taken in these cases? Is this real allyship or simply "virtue-signalling", a *performance* of transgender inclusion that does little to advance transgender rights (Manion 2018)?

Equally, how far can these pronoun sharing practices be considered a form of "gender-washing" that companies and universities exploit in order to appear ethically irreproachable? In this context, do these new pronoun sharing practices risk losing their political potential and simply becoming a conformist ritual of political correctness (Jones 2022)? To what extent does pronoun sharing fit into the "political correctness" debate, if at all?

From a pragmatics perspective, what seems specific to these pronoun sharing practices is the detour taken via the 3rd person, which is not used in the *I-you* dyad. These practices thus seem to be a social ritual as well as an exchange of information, fulfilling a socio-pragmatic function, or as Cameron (2016) argues, "a symbolic affirmation of the parties' intention to conduct their subsequent dealings in good faith and with mutual respect." How then, do current practices fit into previous research on pronouns? Is disclosing one's pronouns (for a cis person) a politeness strategy (Conrod 2020; Brown and Levinson 1987), an act of solidarity/allyship, part of an ethics of care towards non-binary, gender non-conforming and trans people (Conrod 2022; Zimman 2017)?

This interdisciplinary conference welcomes proposals from a variety of disciplines including (but not restricted to) sociolinguistics, pragmatics, Critical Discourse Analysis, philosophy, cultural, civilisation or literary studies that shed light on how these new pronoun sharing practices matter. Communications can exploit various data (ethnographic data, interviews, surveys, online corpora, press articles, autobiographies, novels, TV series, films...) from any critical perspective. Comparative linguistics approaches are welcome, as long as the focus is on English.

The conference aims to answer some of (but not exclusively) the following questions:

- Who employs these new pronoun sharing practices and why?
- What do these practices index about a speaker? How does this practice relate to other political stances?
- How have these new practices changed the indexical value of pronouns over recent years?
- Do people choose different pronouns depending on the context (e.g., professional email signature, bio on dating sites, pronoun rounds...)? If so, why?
- Apart from *he/him*, *she/her* and *they/them*, what other pronouns are used and why?
- What are people's attitudes to these new practices? How are they perceived?
- If these new practices are the heir to past struggles for gender-neutral pronouns, to what extent are they the continuation of these struggles? In what ways is the debate about pronouns today different from that of the 1960s and 70s? How does the use of non-binary singular *they* impact the use and perception of singular *they* as a generic gender-neutral pronoun ("somebody called but *they* didn't leave a message")?
- How can we explain the backlash against these practices? What role do these practices play in the current climate of the culture wars and moral panic about gender?

- To what extent do these practices open up a positive space for those questioning gender norms? Is the invitation to become pronominally visible, and therefore to make public what might be private, a source of liberation or alternatively a source of potential anxiety? Does it generate opportunities for gender fluidity or simply reify gender divisions and therefore gender hierarchies?
- How does this phenomenon play out in different languages compared to English, or in different varieties of English?
- What is the future of this new phenomenon? Will it become widespread, partly also because it helps recipients of an email to identify the gender of someone whose first name might not be marked for gender?

A selection of papers will be considered for publication.

Call for Papers: What are your pronouns? And why does it matter?

Venue: University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

Date: 17-18 October 2024

Research lab: EMMA (Etudes Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone)

Conference organisers: Ann Coady & Sandrine Sorlin

Website: <https://pronouns.sciencesconf.org/>

Deadline for submission: 15th February 2024

Notification of acceptance: 15th April 2024

Proposals of around 300 words to be sent to whypronounsmatter2024@gmail.com

Language of the conference: English

Registration fees: 60€, free for students.

Guest speakers

- Laura Paterson, The Open University, UK
- Claudine Raynaud, Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3, France
- Lal Zimman, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

Scientific committee

- Julie Abbou, Università di Torino, Italy
- Dennis Baron, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
- Rodrigo Borba, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- Daniel Elmiger, Université de Genève, Switzerland
- Laure Gardelle, Université Grenoble Alpes, France
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- Éric Mélac, Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3, France
- Laura Paterson, The Open University, UK
- Charlotte Thomas-Hébert, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France
- Lal Zimman, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

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