

1-14-2019

Gender-Neutral Language in Christian Universities

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Recommended Citation

McNally, Adi F. (2018) "Gender-Neutral Language in Christian Universities," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 10, Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7710/2168-0620.1124>

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

Award for Best Conference Paper

2018 Northwest Undergraduate Conference in the Humanities

This paper provides brief summation of the methods transphobia are embodied through language and what the logical, moral, and business implications would be for a Christian University. In this paper, Adi McNally (who uses they/them pronouns) explores whether there is both scientific and theological weight behind transphobic and gendered language choices. They connect the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity to discussions around epicene pronouns and English grammatical development. Their argument explores writings from Doctors Lawrence Mayer and Paul McHugh, and its impact on traditionally conservative Christian thought. Further, they discuss alternative Christian viewpoints and how the core tenets of the Christian argue the necessity of gender-neutral and gender-conscious language.

Keywords

LGBTQIA+, transgender, Christian universities, Sapir Whorf Hypothesis, linguistic relativity, non-binary

In *Gender Revolution*, a film on the streaming service Netflix, Brian Douglas tells his story. From a casual observer's point of view, he is a normal male; however, Brian was not born male, nor female. He was born an intersex person. His doctors had decided, in infancy, that he did not fit the genital requirements to be considered a male, thus he was assigned the female gender and lived as a woman for fifty years. After undergoing a difficult transition, he is happy and comfortable as a male, but the results of his forced gender façade have left a permanent impact on his life. According to a recent study, eighty-four percent of transgender women have been verbally harassed and sixty-three percent have been physically assaulted (Klemmer et al 12). If the lives and stories of Brian and many other queer persons are no irregularity, it is a surety that to live as an exception to gender normality is to live as a walking target for discrimination, violence and hardship.

According to a probability study on household populations, transgender individuals are more likely to be below the poverty line and not graduate college due to discrimination and bullying (Crissman et al 215). The conclusion of their research was that socioeconomic disadvantage is the culprit of transgender mental health problems. In a study by The Williams Institute, suicide rates among the transgender and gender non-conforming population are found to be most highly correlated with "rejection, discrimination, victimization, and violence related to [being] anti-transgender" (Haas et al 16). Another study shows a statistically significant correlation between mental health of transgender and gender non-conforming youth (ages sixteen to twenty-four) and familial support. Transgender and gender non-conforming youth who have little to no support show suicide rates fifty-three percent higher than supported transgender

youth (Travers et al 2). The common correlation between suicide and simply being transgender or gender non-conforming is a fallacy that fails to consider all the variables involved in minority stress. Rather, this research demonstrates how large of an impact social influences have on the well-being of transgender individuals.

When on Christian campuses, transgender persons are not always facing outright discrimination, but they certainly lack support and affirmation. This can be attributed less to hatred and far more to a lack of education. In the Christian faiths, many firmly believe in the equality of all people under God; because they believe that humans were made after God's own image, which creates a disparity between these ideals and the implementation of gender equality in Christian communities. Queer Christians and cis-gender Christians have more in common than is widely assumed and it is through these similarities progress can be made. All participants in a university's community are affected by language, ranging from genderqueer students and feminist faculty to cis-gender youth and conservative staff. Because these groups share both the ideals of respect and love, and value for academic thought it is both plausible and profitable to find a place of mutual respect and understanding through language.

Sexist and androcentric language is far more complex than speaking about non-masculine people negatively. It is the stereotypes, microaggressions, and minute details of language that create a negative stigma around people of all genders. Take, for example, the sentence, "The President holds the highest office in the US; he has a large amount of power." This sentence implies that the President of the United States has and always will be male. Simply replacing the "he" pronoun with "he or she"

would drastically change any negative implications.

“He or she” would be an appropriate use of pronouns from a binary standpoint. The gender binary is the concept that only two genders exist, male and female. Any deviations therefore must be deformities or a result of mental illness in the case of transgender and genderqueer persons. The gender binary is often focused on physical sex and tends to stereotype each gender so that men and women can properly perform their assigned cultural roles. Ideas such as seeing all men as strong, emotionless protectors and women as emotional, compassionate, and domestic creatures psychologically reinforces the gender binary.

An opposing view to the gender binary model is a model of gender fluidity. Sam Killermann, an activist, educator, and artist portrays this fluid model of gender identity/expression, sexuality, and sex with his illustration “The Genderbread Person.” One’s gender identity, expression, and sex all exist on a spectrum. The existence of intersex persons provides proof that physical sex is not limited to two strict types of genitalia. To be genderqueer then is to be “a person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identifies with neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders” (OED).

Being genderqueer is not a new concept nor found only in Western culture. Within many different cultures and societies, a neuter, third, or other gender is recognized through the usage of epicene pronouns. In his article “Gender, pronouns, and thought,” Caleb Everett, doctor of anthropological linguistics, gives this definition: “Epicene pronouns denote particular referents without indexing the gender of those referents” (134). English is a language that lacks a

specific and widely accepted epicene pronoun.

One major reason why gendered language is so impactful on a society is because of an idea proposed in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of Linguistic Relativity. A core idea in Linguistic Relativity is how the language one speaks effects the way one thinks. For example, in French there is no word for “pet.” There are words for dogs (*les chiens*) and cats (*les chats*) but there is no specific word that describes domestic animal companions. When a concept lacks a descriptive word, it is hard or even impossible for a language speaker to conceive of it. Therefore language-speakers without epicene pronouns are more likely to have a more gendered view of the world.

Since English does not use an epicene pronoun, one cannot study how epicene pronouns affect English speakers. Thus, Everett related the epicene pronoun discussion to androcentric language and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis of Linguistic Relativity and implemented a study in which gender-ambiguous figures are shown to English speakers and Karitiãna speakers. Karitiãna is a language spoken in northern Brazil that uses epicene pronouns. In Everett’s study, a male bias appeared in the naming of all the gender-ambiguous figures no matter the language spoken; however, the English speakers used male names far more often, indicating a stronger androcentric bias. Despite the Karitiãna speakers’ lack of an egalitarian society, they have a more gender-neutral perception of intentionally ambiguous figures simply because they have an epicene pronoun. Everett concludes that, were English to systematically accept an epicene pronoun, “it will actually result in a more gender-neutral perception of certain stimuli by English speakers” (149). This practical application of the Sapir-Whorf theory of linguistic relativity establishes how deeply gender roles are ingrained in

society, and not biology. One must then consider whether a shift in the English language is necessary and whether it will be effective.

The perception of gender roles, in line with Sapir-Whorf logic, is both influenced by and influences language choice. The consequences of this linguistically-enforced stigma is often ostracization, something a university that claims to be inclusive and open-minded should be concerned with. Jane G. Stout and Nilanjana Dasgupta overview the effects of sexist language in their 2011 article, “When *He* Doesn’t Mean *You*,” in the context of college students seeking employment. In their research, they found that not only does sexist language result in a sense of ostracism, but it also results in action on the part of the ostracized. The women who read job descriptions that were male biased were far less likely to apply to the position, especially if the position was a stereotypically male position. Thus, one can infer even the smallest linguistic factors could affect application rates, something that could potentially harm universities.

A notable conflict that many conservative persons have about using gender-neutral language is whether it is, in practice, good for the people who are asking for it. Lawrence Mayer and Paul McHugh would say “no.” Their essay, “Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences,” argues studies of gender identity are so variant and inconclusive that there is no way to argue for the fluid model of gender or for the effectiveness of gender confirming treatment. They correlate the high suicide rates post-transition with simply being transgender or gender non-conforming. Thus, Mayer and McHugh claim that experiencing gender dysphoria is a mental illness (like body dysmorphia for a person

with an eating disorder) and should be treated as such.

An interesting aspect of Mayer and McHugh’s report is that it was not peer reviewed and it was denounced by the very university it was born from: Johns Hopkins University. The group of faculties who denounced the “Sexuality and Gender” article point out many flaws in Mayer and McHugh’s methodology, including but not limited to ignoring studies on the psychological effects of stigma and discrimination. Representative faculty stated in a *The Baltimore Sun* op-ed:

As faculty at Johns Hopkins, we are committed to serving the health needs of the LGBTQ community in a manner that is informed by the best available science...The report...was not published in the scientific literature, where it would have been subject to rigorous peer review prior to publication. (Beyrer et al)

Considering the controversy over the validity of this article, it is a bit concerning that many conservative and Christian groups would be so quick to cite Mayer and McHugh. While some conservative groups have small amounts of influence on the matter, *Premier Christianity* with their twelve thousand subscribers on YouTube, more than twenty thousand followers on Twitter, and nearly thirty-five thousand likes on Facebook certainly have a decent amount of influence on Christian thinking.

In Peter Saunders magazine op-ed for *Premier Christianity*, “Refusing to identify your baby as a boy or a girl is a new low in the upside-down world of gender ideology,” he offers the following theological points. First, the original model of creation should be a framework for viewing gender ideology. If the first people were created male and female, that is what God’s plan was and it should not be deviated from. Secondly, one must view gender

issues knowing that the world has “fallen.” Being intersex or transgender, fitting outside the gender binary: these are mental and physical conditions and distortions of what God intended humanity to be. Citing Mayer and McHugh, they claim that science supports this idea. Then, they argue how necessary it is to not “capitulate to transgender ideology (“Refusing to identify...”). Calling a person by their chosen name and pronouns and allowing them gender-neutral bathrooms is not loving, it is abusive. They then underline how “the transgender condition” is an opportunity to spread the gospel as Jesus does not call people to come as they are but rather, to come, repent, and live according to God’s will.

The line of thinking Premier Christianity proposes is contradictory in a few ways; however, the overall desire to love and support the LGBTQIA+ community that Premier Christianity proposes is valid. Karin Heller, Professor of Theology and research coordinator of Whitworth University’s Women’s and Gender Studies Program, provides many insights on how transgender people should be integrated into a faith culture. She notes that transgender individuals experiencing hardship is not an indication they are inferior, in fact there is some biblical evidence otherwise. To this point, Heller quotes the Bible: “For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others--and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:12). The definition of the ancient word for “eunuch” is highly debated, but Heller defines it to be either an intersex person or a person who has been genitally mutilated for liturgical reasons. In Acts 8:26–40, Phillip meets and baptizes a eunuch. If being a eunuch was wrong or some disability, God would have

most likely healed him. The eunuch was not healed, however, because he did not need to be. He was not deformed or depraved. He was good enough simply as he was created. If God loves people as they are, why would they ask them to abandon their unique diversity simply to conform to the wishes of the majority. Asking a transgender person to be cis-gender is the moral equivalent to asking a person of color to bleach their skin. That, in no way, is love.

To make an educated decision about whether gender-neutral pronouns should be used, one must examine both theology and the sciences. There is no refuting Mayer and McHugh’s arguments that there is not enough research about the biological effects of and on gender identity. Considering the status of transgender people as a great minority, it is logical that the funding and resources for large-scale studies on transgender people are simply not available. The most problematic way to view the few studies there are on transgender individuals is to assume the status of being transgender is directly caused by mental health conditions.

If a Christian university’s goal is to implement Christ’s love in the sphere of higher education, to be inclusive and factually correct, and to increase their student body, evidence suggests that using gender-neutral language systematically could be extremely beneficial. The core ideals that Christians hold about treating people who are different is uniform overall, however the application of such ideals needs to be considered and discussed.

Changing the entire English language to include some new epicene pronoun (i.e., “ze” and “zem”) would be extremely difficult, however English has already had a form of epicene pronoun that has only over the past hundred years been controversial in the eyes of some. In *Pride and Prejudice*, one can see Jane Austen’s

use of a singular they: “everybody began to find out that *they* had always distrusted his appearance of goodness [emphasis added]” (Austen 280). Additionally, in William Shakespeare’s poem “The Rape of Lucrece”: “And every one to rest *themselves* betake [emphasis added]” (Kamm 83). The Merriam-Webster dictionary in their own public communications have stood by using “they” as a singular pronoun as a completely grammatically correct option (“They”).

In addition to implementing gender-neutral language as a normal form of speech it is important that more research is done about transgender, genderqueer, and LGBTQIA+ experiences in universities and society at large. The greatest issue here is ignorance, not hatred. All people can learn from each other and continue to change the world in positive ways.

Whether one agrees with the validity of transgender and non-binary people or not, it is necessary for an academic organization that claims to be Christian to fully consider all the facets of LGBTQIA+ issues. Not only is there significant scientific debate over the topic, but it is a topic that causes controversy on moral grounds. Political and religious leanings should, however, not interfere with how one treats others. Differences in belief and opinion in a religious community are impossible to ignore or even to completely overcome, however since being rational, respectful and loving is what matters, we can use these differences to become stronger.

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