

A trans linguistic perspective on multiple pronoun use in English

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Abstract. This paper examines language ideologies surrounding the perceived indexicality of gendered pronouns among speakers who use multiple pronoun sets. Through a discourse analysis of research interviews with speakers who use multiple pronouns in English, I argue that these language ideologies must be understood as grounded in trans epistemologies—trans-affirming ways of thinking and knowing about gender that emerge from trans communities—to understand how such ideologies both resist and align with dominant understandings of the exclusive and constitutive relationship between pronouns and gender. The analysis not only expands our understanding of multiple pronoun use, but also broader gendered language practices among trans, nonbinary, and other gender-diverse speakers. In doing so, it further demonstrates the need for a trans linguistics (Zimman 2020) that highlights the relevance of trans ways of knowing to our understanding of language and gendered practice.

Keywords. queer linguistics; trans linguistics; pronouns; gender; indexicality; English

1. Introduction. Over the past few decades, work in sociocultural linguistics has fruitfully applied the concept of *indexicality*—especially as initially theorized in linguistic anthropology (Silverstein 1976, 2003) and further articulated in variationist sociolinguistics (Eckert 2008)—to examine the emergence of social meaning as tied to language. In research on language, gender, and sexuality, the more specific concept of *indirect indexicality* has been used to articulate how many of the linguistic practices that speakers understand as “gendered” are not themselves directly tied to gender: Rather, communities make use of linguistic resources that directly index different stances, acts, and activities, and these then become constitutive of gender (Ochs 1992). Though Ochs’ foundational paper on indexing gender is often cited for its demonstration of the frequently indirect relationship between gender and language, her work also offers insight into the ways that language can also *directly* index gender. Ochs argues that a limited set of linguistic features, such as personal pronouns in English, can directly and exclusively point to—and for speakers, allow the presupposition of—the gender of the referent. I have previously (Raclaw In Press) argued that this understanding of pronouns as directly and exclusively indexical of gender must be critically understood as grounded in cisnormativity: the systemic privileging of cisgender subjectivities as the norm. This involves recognizing the significant semiotic work that goes into upholding the normative understanding that pronouns such as *she/her* exclusively index that the referent is a woman. In the discussion that follows, I focus on one linguistic practice that highlights the cisnormative foundations of understanding English third-person singular pronouns as being directly and exclusively indexical of gender: the use of multiple pronoun sets.

I refer here to a broad set of person reference practices in which a single individual uses multiple pronominal forms. For third-person singular pronouns in English, this might entail specifying a pair of pronouns such as *she/they* or *he/they*, in which the ordering of those pairs—with *she*, *he*, or *they* going first—is potentially, but not necessarily, relevant to their social meaning.¹ A speaker using multiple pronoun sets might instead go by *she/he* pronouns, or a

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¹ Regarding the relevance of the ordering of multiple pronouns, one participant in this study who had formerly used *he/they* pronouns but more recently adopted *they/he* pronouns noted that this was “a conscious switch” made to

tripartite set such as *he/they/she*. The use of multiple pronouns might also entail the use of neopronouns, such as *they/xe* pronouns, or the use of a finite set of pronouns followed by the word *any* to show an acceptance of all pronouns (e.g., a speaker inviting *they/any* pronouns). Returning to the direct indexicality of such pronouns, then, it becomes challenging—at least when drawing on an understanding of language rooted in cisnormative epistemologies of gender, in which a given pronoun directly and exclusively indexes only a single gender category—to understand how the use of multiple pronouns might index an individual’s gender. In prior research, the use of multiple pronouns has been observed in scholarship looking at elements of trans and nonbinary identities (Moeder et al. 2024), and linguists have done public-facing work articulating best practices for referring to multiple pronoun users (Conrod 2021). However, little work has focused on understanding how and why such speakers use multiple pronouns, how such pronouns can be understood as indexing the referent’s gender, or how this reference practice aligns with the ways that trans people understand the relationship between language and gender.

To illustrate this relationship, which can be subsumed under the broader category of *trans epistemologies* of gender, we can examine an excerpt from a research interview I conducted with Leah, a genderqueer person who used *she/they* pronouns. Prior to this excerpt, Leah had begun discussing representations of femininity and womanhood that made them uncomfortable. As the excerpt begins, Leah begins to articulate one of the reasons that she uses both *she/her* and *they/them* pronouns.

- (1) Leah (she/they)
- 01 Leah: I feel like one of the reasons I use she/they
 02 is because (0.6) she/her/hers has become
 03 such a like (0.5) ((laughs)) such a (1.0) uh like
 04 (0.6) gender in and of itself, like “so and so,
 05 she/her/hers,” like “she/her/hers,” “she/her/hers,”
 06 JR: Yes.
 07 Leah: and it’s like, “I don’t think about my pronouns,
 08 I don’t think about like my gender, like I’m just
 09 she/her/hers because like I’m a good (0.5) liberal
 10 cis woman, and so I use she/her/hers.”
 11 (1.0)
 12 Leah: It’s always like she/her/hers, it’s like ((laughs))
 13 JR: Yeah.
 14 Leah: Uhh you know um (0.8) so I think that like (0.4)
 15 I’m like “oh, like, I’m not (1.0) those (0.4)
 16 people.” ((laughs))
 17 JR: Right.
 18 Leah: You know and I think part of like (0.6) being like
 19 (0.6) “Leah, she/they” is like being like not “Leah,
 20 she/her/hers.”

invite interlocutors to more frequently refer to them as *they/them*, a reference practice that was gender-affirming: “I made that decision when I realized how I felt about getting *they*’d, it was like once I realized like, ‘oh...this actually like makes me feel good when people recognize that, see that, and then use that’, and so I was like, ‘okay if I switch from *he/they* to *they/he* people will see *they* first and they might be more inclined to use that rather than *he*.” But other participants noted no such preference to the ordering, as with another participant who said, “I don’t use an order now, I’m just like, you know, *she/they*, *they/she*, like please just pick between them.”

Beginning at lines 1 through 5, Leah establishes an indexical field (Eckert, 2008) for individuals who introduce their pronouns as *she/her/hers* (specifically comprising the entire declension paradigm: nominative, accusative possessive), in which this form becomes indexical of a specific type of cisgender woman who is liberal in both her political beliefs and her attitudes toward gender. As articulated in Leah’s imagined reported speech, such a woman embodies cisnormative epistemologies of gender: an understanding that our gender stems entirely from the sex we were assigned at birth, as do the pronouns that others use with us to directly index that gender.

Leah’s metacommentary about the indexicality of *she/her/hers* (lines 7-20) not only offers a critique of cisnormative epistemologies of gender, but specifically sets up that same type of cis woman as a foil against which Leah can articulate their own identity as someone who has actively questioned their gender, and who has deliberated over which forms of gendered language might cause them feelings of affirmation or unease. Leah’s metacommentary further makes the claim that part of why she uses multiple pronoun sets is to distance herself from a simple cisnormative embodiment of gender that Leah ideologically attaches to *she/her/hers*. Leah’s metacommentary about pronoun use also serves as a means of enacting their own genderqueer identity, adopting what Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 496) refer to as a tactic of distinction that highlights “the ideological construction of social difference.”

Leah uses a tactic of distinction not only to distinguish between these two different gender positionalities and these two different uses of pronouns—whether solely *she/her/hers*, or both *she/her* and *they/them*—but also to distinguish between two different epistemological orientations to gender. The first of these is grounded in cisnormative understandings of gender as binary, immutable, and only nominally distinct from the sex we are assigned at birth, while the other allows for trans-inclusive and trans-affirming understandings of gender as diverse and queer and dynamically embodied. Through a cisnormative understanding of gender, the pronoun set *she/her/hers* simply indexes that the referent is a woman. But through a trans epistemological understanding of gender, inviting *she/her/hers* pronouns can also index a particular gender modality (that is, cisgender) as well as a particular epistemological orientation to the way that gender operates. This excerpt offers just one example of the varied ideologies about pronoun use that may be held by individuals who adopt multiple pronoun set. In the sections that follow, I examine other cases of how speakers who use multiple pronoun sets articulate their understanding of the indexicality of these pronouns.

2. Data and Methods. The analysis that follows draws on a collection of 26 research interviews conducted between 2021-2022 with individuals who use multiple pronouns in English. As seen in Table 1, this comprised a varied group who used numerous different pronoun sets. These interviews were part of a larger study of individuals who used non-binary pronouns (e.g., *they/them*) in English, and so recruitment was not focused on multiple pronoun users, nor conducted with an eye towards ensuring parity among users of specific pronouns. As an ethnographic note, at the time of each of these interviews I was using *they/he* pronouns, something each interviewee was aware of: These pronouns were present in the email signature of all communications sent to study participants, as well as visible on-screen during the research interviews themselves, which were conducted over the Zoom teleconferencing platform.

Pronoun set	Number of participants
<i>She/they</i>	13
<i>He/they</i>	4

<i>They/he</i>	3
<i>They/she</i>	2
<i>Xe/they</i>	1
<i>He/they/she</i>	1
<i>She/any</i>	1
<i>They/any</i>	1

Table 1. Pronoun sets used by participants in this study

Because the recruitment criteria focused on pronoun use, participants similarly embodied a range of different gender identities. As seen in Table 2, the pronouns an individual used were in no way a predictor of their gender, and so participant demographics alone problematize a dominant understanding of the direct and exclusive indexicality of pronouns and gender. For example, the individuals in this study who used *she/they* pronouns included women, nonbinary people, nonbinary women and genderqueer women who aligned with multiple gender categories, and individuals who chose not to align with any gender category and simply identified as a *person*. Through a discourse analysis of these interviews, I examine metacommentary—that is, explicit talk about language use—focused on how these speakers understand the indexicality of the pronouns they use.

Pronoun set	Number of participants in each gender category
<i>She/they</i>	woman (4); nonbinary (2); nonbinary woman (2); genderqueer woman (2); person (2); questioning woman (1)
<i>He/they</i>	man (2); genderqueer (1); person (1)
<i>They/he</i>	nonbinary (2); nonbinary genderqueer (1)
<i>They/she</i>	queer (1); genderfluid lesbian (1)

Table 2. Self-selected gender categories used by participants, separated by pronouns used

3. Analysis. My second excerpt is from an interview with Evergreen, a person who used *she/they* pronouns. Prior to this excerpt I had asked if Evergreen typically shares that they use both sets of pronouns when meeting new people. At lines 1-4 Evergreen explains that she only introduces herself with both pronouns in certain settings, and at lines 7-9 Evergreen notes that they also do other self-referential practices that indicate that they probably don't use *she* very often.

- (2) Evergreen (she/they)
- 01 Ever: um meeting new people in general, not
02 really? Um tsk I think that like I have introduced
03 myself in certain social settings? with like both
04 pronouns, um
05 JR: Okay,
06 (0.8)
07 Ever: or like I will refer to like myself in a way
08 that like indicates that I probably don't use she
09 all that often
[[7 lines of talk omitted]]
17 Ever: S- so a lot of times when I talk about myself like
18 I'll use like "person"? Um so
19 JR: Oh yeah

20 Ever: this oftentimes comes up in like, thinking
 21 about like issues like we talk about like uh
 22 issues for like people of color? and like you know
 23 JR: Right
 24 Ever: especially in groups where it's like women of color,
 25 and like I'll talk about myself? like my own
 26 experiences as like a person of color rather than
 27 referring to myself as like a woman of color,
 28 JR: Yeah
 29 Ever: um you know also like in situations where
 30 I think you could use like, "woman" more naturally?
 31 I tend to like say "person"

After I ask Evergreen about which types of practices mark her as using more than just *she/her*, Evergreen describes (lines 17-31) how they frequently refer to themselves without using gendered terms—rather than describing themselves as a “woman,” Evergreen refers to herself as a “person,” a formulation that they note is especially salient in spaces where other participants refer to themselves as women of color, while Evergreen refers to herself as a person of color. For Evergreen, then, the fact that they don't identify with an explicitly gendered term positions them as using more than just *she/her* pronouns, a perspective that orients to the dominant understanding that *she/her* exclusively indexes womanhood (and vice versa).

Following this, I asked Evergreen what both *she* and *they* signify about them. At lines 41-50 she notes that *she/her* pronouns will often represent an uncomfortable and explicit gendering of herself, at least in part because *she/her* pronouns index a strong degree of femininity. As Evergreen notes, these indices of *she/her* can also convey a false assumption about the gender that Evergreen actually embodies.

(3) Evergreen (she/they)

41 Ever: I guess for me *she/her* is kind of like (1.8) I think
 42 think maybe it's like- sometimes like it's
 43 false assumption? um
 44 JR: Okay
 45 Ever: tsk it's not always but I think sometimes
 46 in like a lot of contexts um (1.0) I don't know
 47 kind of like an uncomfortable like
 48 gendering of myself? like I don't love it, um it's
 49 JR: right
 50 Ever: like very like, feminine? I don't know.
 [[4 lines of talk omitted]]
 55 Ever: I think it's because of its attachment to like
 56 explicit like womanness? Which is like
 57 JR: right
 58 Ever: like the assumptions that like you know people
 59 who use *she/her* are women, and like that .hh.
 60 is something that it's like well I'm not, so like
 61 that is uncomfortable like the im-
 62 JR: right

63 Ever: and like not everyone who uses *she/her* obviously
 64 is a woman but like .hhh that's like something
 65 that like is (1.0) like very salient to a lot of
 66 people? and I think that can be like uncomfortable.

After I ask Evergreen to expand more about *she/her*'s ideological attachment to femininity, at lines 55-56 they explain that these indices are also in part due to assumptions about the exclusive indexicality of *she/her* as pointing to a woman. at lines 58-61, Evergreen notes that this particular understanding of *she/her* as exclusively indexical of womanness is an assumption held by others—that is, part of what I have previously referred to as cisnormative epistemologies of gender—and Evergreen notes that this cisnormative index of *she/her* is in fact the source of their discomfort with those pronouns. At lines 63-66 Evergreen then contrasts this cisnormative understanding of the indexicality of *she/her* with her own trans-inclusive understanding of gender, in which *she/her* pronouns do not exclusively index that someone is a woman. But as Evergreen notes here, a direct and exclusive indexicality of *she/her* is normative and widespread, and that knowledge contributes to Evergreen's discomfort with *she/her*.

Similar understandings of the indices of pronouns like *she/her* or *he/him* could be seen among numerous other participants. For example, Excerpt 4 is from an interview with Willow, a genderqueer woman who used *she/they* pronouns. Here Willow answers my question about how she responds to situations where people only refer to her using *she/her* pronouns, which happened frequently.

- (4) Willow (she/they)
 06 Will: ((sigh))
 07 (0.8)
 08 tsk that's a really tricky question for a lot
 09 of reasons for me. Um, I don't like
 10 ONLY just being she'd?
 12 because I think that it is missing a big part of
 13 who I am? And I think it's um,
 [[3 lines of talk omitted]
 17 .hhh um she feels right to me
 18 in a lot of ways but ONLY being she does not feel
 19 right and- that starts to feel like you're
 20 really missing something about me or you're really-
 21 you're really putting your category on me.
 [[2 lines of talk omitted]]
 24 When it's only she, then it's like your-
 25 society is putting their category on me,

At lines 6-13 Willow expressed their discomfort with only getting *she/her* pronouns because, on their own, and within a cisnormative understanding of pronouns and indexicality, they do not index the entirety of her gender. Just as Evergreen discussed how *she/her* pronouns feel like a “false assumption,” Willow understands the use of *she/her* pronouns as society “putting their own categories” on Willow and understanding her gender through a cisnormative lens.

For these reasons, some participants noted that the use of pronouns like *she/her* or *he/him* were only affirming or comfortable when used by people that were close to them. In Excerpt 5 I asked Lucy, a nonbinary person who used *she/they* pronouns, about how they share both of these

pronouns with others. At lines 6-11, Lucy notes that this depends on the context of a given setting, or the vibes they're getting from others—for example, at lines 16-20 Lucy specifies that, if she received an internship she had applied for, she would likely introduce herself solely as using *they/them* pronouns. As Lucy notes at lines 19-20, giving the option of using *she/her* alongside *they/them* required much more of an interpersonal closeness, happening on a “personal level.”

(5) Lucy (she/they)

06 Lucy: Ummm. It depends on the setting.
07 (0.3)
08 JR: Okay.
09 Lucy: UHH it depends- mm it sounds not great but
10 it- kind of depends on like the vibe that
11 I'm getting, or the setting that I'm in.
[[4 lines of talk omitted]]
16 So like. Um, knock on wood I get one
17 of these internships and somebody asks me, um
18 I'll probably just end up saying oh, they is
19 what I use. Um, she/they is more on a personal
20 level.
21 Lucy: Um like my friends use she/they, um.
22 Obviously Amanda:? Um my sister uses both,
23 it's- it comes with the level of knowing that
24 you're, allowed to she/her me? But I am
25 not a woman.

Lucy specifies what they mean by that “personal level” first by describing some people that use both she and they with her—like Lucy's best friend Amanda, and Lucy's sister, both of whom are not only also queer, but understand that Lucy is nonbinary regardless of the pronouns that others use with them. But at lines 21-25 Lucy further specifies that referring to them as *she/her* requires that the speaker understands that Lucy is not a woman: in other words, the speaker should not be reading Lucy through a cisnormative lens in which *she/her* exclusively indexes that Lucy is a woman.

Returning to Evergreen's interview, I also asked what *they/them* signifies for them. They offer two responses: At lines 7-11 Evergreen notes that *they/them* pronouns are not tied to a specific gender identity, but rather index Evergreen's identity as a queer person, which is something they find very validating.

(6) Evergreen (she/they)

07 Ever: well I guess like one, they/them is like very much
08 like tied into like my identity as I think being like
09 a queer person? like I really
10 JR: okay
11 Ever: I find that like to be really like validating? .hhh
12 and then also like it it's really nice to have like
13 a non gendered pronoun? like it's like un- you
14 know it like really like it just feels like very
15 unattached to like any of the

16 expectations of like what you might be expected to do
 17 as like .hhh someone who uses she/her versus someone
 18 who uses him and so like that to me is like really
 19 .hhh like nice?

At lines 12-19 Evergreen also notes that part of what is appealing about *they/them* is the fact that it is not normatively understood as gendered. At lines 14-19 they explain further by noting that *they/them* is simply removed from cisnormative and heteronormative understandings of gender, divorced from expectations of how someone using *she/her* or *he/him* will embody their gender. For Evergreen, *they/them* pronouns are affirming specifically because they do not index an understanding of gender grounded in cisnormative epistemologies.

Similarly, when I later asked Willow about what *they/them* signifies, she also offers an understanding of *they/them* as feeling “ungendered.” For Willow, that lack of a concrete index within normative understandings of gender offers a blank space that allows Willow the freedom to play around with gender. The unspecification of a gendered index for *they/them*—at least in cisnormative understandings of gender—offers Willow a space for gender exploration that they find affirming.

(7) Willow (she/they)

15 Will: Because I do think I think I like the fact
 16 that the term feels ungendered in the sense
 17 that it’s kind of a space where I can play around
 18 with freedom from gender as opposed to kind of
 19 like which gender expression is right for me
 20 it’s kind of more like a negative space um of
 21 you know exploring that exploring that negative
 22 space

In thinking about the relevance of these findings to how we refer to people who use multiple pronouns, I want to revisit my interview with Evergreen, who talked in Excerpt 3 about their discomfort with how *she/her* could be understood as offering a “false assumption” about their gender given that such pronouns normatively only index being a woman. At the beginning of our interview, shared below as Excerpt 8, I asked Evergreen how I should refer to them in research presentations and manuscripts. At line 3, they note that I can shift between *she* and *they*. After pressing further, Evergreen notes at lines 7-11 that any use of these pronouns is in fact fine for any interlocutors to use with her: all *they/them*, all *she/her*, or a mix of both.

(8) Evergreen (she/they)

01 JR: Is there a particular pronoun or maybe set of
 02 pronouns you want me to use for you in this writeup?
 03 Ever: You can use she or they interchangeably
 04 JR: Okay uh when you say interchangeably what does that
 05 mean to you Evergreen how do you like most prefer
 06 that
 07 Ever: um I literally do not care if you would like
 09 to use they you can if you would like to use she
 10 that’s also fine like if you use both that’s also
 11 cool.

[[8 lines of talk omitted]]

- 20 Ever: um so I think in general like if people
21 use a little bit of she and a little
22 bit of they that's like ideal?
23 JR: Okay
24 Ever: but if someone uses all she that's like totally like
25 fine I'm not uncomfortable but if someone uses all
26 they/them I'll be totally fine

At lines 20-22 Evergreen reiterates that a mix of both pronouns is ideal, but shares at lines 24-26 that using solely one or the other is tolerable; notably, this flexibility is not an attitude that all interviewees shared. In comparing these two excerpts, we are left with claims that are potentially at odds with one another: while Evergreen initially discusses “not (being) uncomfortable” with speakers who refer to them as solely *she/her* (Excerpt 8), Evergreen also goes on to reveal how in many contexts *she/her* can in fact entail an uncomfortable misreading of Evergreen’s gender, a “false assumption” about Evergreen being a woman rather than a person that is grounded in cisnormative understandings of gender and indexicality (Excerpt 3). As my interview with Evergreen shows, a normative understanding of pronouns as exclusively indexical of gender informs much of how many trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming speakers understand the meaning of the pronouns that others use with us, and this understanding is critical for better approaching how speakers can use language in the most trans-affirming ways possible.

4. Conclusion. My goal for this paper has not just been to examine how we should refer to speakers who use multiple pronouns—across my 26 participants, the answer to that question in fact varied widely—but rather to examine some of the language ideologies that these speakers hold regarding the pronouns they use for themselves. In doing so, I have examined the ways that such ideologies rely on epistemological orientations to understanding gender, whether through a dominant cisnormative lens or through trans-inclusive and trans-affirming epistemologies. In keeping with the goals of a trans linguistics, my aim with this talk has been to highlight how using trans-affirming language requires understanding gender in ways that go beyond cisnormative epistemologies—for example, it requires going beyond the normative default of referring to someone who uses *she/they* pronouns as solely *she/her*, and it requires not seeing everyone use *she/they* pronouns as just “a woman, but queer.” As Zimman (2020) notes, a trans linguistic approach shows us that the experiences of trans people are not just rare exceptions, but central to any understanding of gender, and I hope that the preceding discussion has demonstrated how this applies to trans epistemologies of multiple pronoun use.

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