

## Transgender Language, Transgender Moment: Toward a Trans Linguistics

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter sketches out trans linguistics as an emerging framework for research on language in populations defined by their deviation from gender norms. Although queer linguistics has always been concerned with both sexual and gender (non)normativity, some early queer linguistic analyses of transgender or otherwise gender-variant populations were limited by the absence of openly trans scholars and distinctively trans analytic perspectives. Trans linguistics, by contrast, centers trans practices and subjectivities not as rare exceptions, but as central to any understanding of gender. Three domains of language are discussed here, including grammatical gender, gender difference in the voice, and gender in discourse. In each case, trans linguistic research offers new perspectives on gendered power, the nature of categories, the significance of embodiment, and the linguistic navigation of persistent dehumanization. Crucially, trans linguistics is committed not only to trans analytic lenses, but also to social and linguistic justice for gender non-normative communities.

Keywords: transgender, queer linguistics, trans linguistics, grammatical gender, voice, discourse, embodiment, power

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## Language and Trans Communities

For as long as scholars have written about gender, they have been concerned with individuals who disrupt it by transforming accepted categories, creating new ones, or blurring and moving between them. Whether or not gender nonconforming groups are explicitly put in focus, nonconformity has remained just as central to the theorization of language and gender as the gender binary has been, as Kira Hall's (2003) review of "exceptional speakers" makes clear. Compared to other social sciences, however, sociocultural linguists have been relatively slow to bring transgender speakers into the study of language, gender, and sexuality. It was not until the rise of queer linguistics in the 1990s that trans people and others who trouble the naturalized gender binary began to appear in linguistically oriented research (e.g., Livia and Hall 1997; Leap 1995). Many of these

studies centered on non-normatively gendered communities in the Global South (e.g., Manalansan 1995; Hall and O'Donovan 1996; Hall 1997; Gaudio 1997; Kulick 1998; Besnier 2003; Jackson 2004), who became instrumental in demonstrating the intertwined nature of gender and sexuality. However, it is primarily within the last decade that a dramatic growth can be seen in research on language among women, men, and nonbinary<sup>1</sup> individuals who would describe themselves with a word like *trans(gender)*. In this body of work, we can see an emerging set of theoretical orientations that constitute a new perspective on language, gender, and sexuality: a *trans linguistics*.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter reviews research on language in trans and gender non-normative communities in order to sketch out a theoretical base for continued studies in trans linguistics. It begins with a critical discussion of who is understood to be transgender and how sociocultural linguists have implemented this social category, focusing on both limitations of the (often implicit) theorization of trans identities found in early queer linguistic research and the ways a distinctively trans linguistic framework would implement different interpretive lenses than did its queer linguistic forebears. Following this discussion, I present an overview of research on language in trans and gender non-normative communities through which a trans linguistic framework has developed. Three levels of language are addressed: grammatical gender, the embodied voice, and discursive practices. The chapter ends with a synthesis of the trans linguistics framework and a call for stronger coalitions between sociocultural linguists and trans communities.

It is worth noting that this review includes critical reflections on transphobic language and thinking within the scholarly literature. Even where we may observe that authors' language or framing falls within acceptable standards at the time of their production, remember that standards of acceptability were, until very recently, set by cis people. If linguistics is to become a field that attracts trans students and scholars, we must reckon with our disciplinary past as well as aspire toward a better future.

## What—and Who—Is *Trans*?

Among the most harrowing challenges for a review of language in transgender communities is defining its scope. *Transgender* has been variably used as an umbrella label encapsulating all those who depart from norms for their assigned sex and as a label for a specific type of gender identity that emerged in the late 20th century within the United States, its close cultural allies, and burgeoning digital spaces (Valentine 2007). Today, *transgender* is often defined (by those who identify with the term) as referring to anyone who does not self-identify with the sex/gender category assigned to them at birth, but this definition may only be compatible with certain cultural perspectives and continues to undergo rapid change. This section provides a brief history of *transgender*, the ways it was mobilized in the queer linguistics of the 1990s, and how this conceptualization must be reconsidered as part of a trans linguistics of the 21st century.

### A Brief History of Transgender

The concept of transsexuality gained widespread recognition in the English-speaking world with the publication of Harry Benjamin's (1966) book, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. The text defined a set of diagnostic criteria medical professionals could use to determine who should obtain access to the hormones and surgery trans people sought. These criteria were highly normative, requiring trans people seeking such access to embody stereotypes for their self-identified gender, have a strictly heterosexual orientation, and experience deep discomfort with their bodies. It was in the context of resistance to the medical model of transsexuality that *transgender* first appeared. Virginia Prince, a self-described heterosexual male cross-dresser who was a vocal activist and community organizer (Stryker 2008; Prince 2005[1978]), used *transgender* to refer to those who changed their gender role or gender presentation without desiring medical intervention. *Transgender* thus served as a nonmedicalized alternative to *transsexual*, and it retains its popularity in part because of that status. However, major changes within trans communities in the 1980s and early 1990s resulted in a shift in *transgender*. Activists like Holly Boswell (1991), Sandy Stone (1992), and Leslie Feinberg (2006[1992]) presented a new vision of transgender not as an alternative to the body modifications associated with transsexuality, but as an alternative to its compulsory gender normativity and the single-track model of a medical transition that culminates in genital surgery.

As the word *transgender* shifted in the '90s, it also came to be defined as an "umbrella label" referring to anyone who diverges from gender norms for their assigned sex: transsexuals, drag performers, genderqueers, and even masculine women and feminine men. This flexibility allowed *transgender* to be extended to include a range of identities in various cultural contexts (but see Towle and Morgan 2002). In practical usage, however, *transgender* came to be used in self-reference primarily by people who transitioned from one binary gender to the other. Decades later, *transgender*—and its more popular shortened form *trans*—may be used in reference to trans women and men as well as nonbinary people, and anyone else who does not identify with their assigned sex/gender. Indeed, self-definition is central to contemporary understandings of transgender identity, which is one indication that transgender identity is not a universal concept but rather rooted in particular times and places in which self-determination is valued and a distinction between a "true" inner self and the visible body is intelligible (Zimman 2017b). The use of the word *trans(gender)* to describe people who do not mobilize that category to describe themselves thus has the potential to erase that cultural and historical context.

### *The Transgender Umbrella in Queer Linguistics*

The inclusion of an array of global identities under the flag of queer linguistics established a field that attended to both non-normative sexualities and non-normative genders. There are some notable differences, however, between the analyses of gender found in early queer linguistics and those found in the emerging framework of trans linguistics.

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The literature on non-normatively gendered communities from the 1990s highlights the strong influence of anthropology on queer linguistics. Foundational queer linguistic work was often ethnographic, engaging with communities of Hindi-speaking *hijras* in India, who describe themselves as neither women nor men (e.g., Hall and O'Donovan 1996; Hall 1997); Hausa-speaking 'yan daudu in Nigeria known as “men who act like women” by virtue of their feminine professions and styles of self-presentation (e.g., Gaudio 1997); (*faka*)leitis in Tonga, whose practices balance tensions between local and global selfhood (e.g., Besnier 2003); *kathoey* in Thailand, who embody the value of balancing femininity and masculinity (e.g., Jackson 2004); diasporic Filipino *bakla* in the United States, gay-identified men who describe feminine practices as key to their identities (e.g., Manalansan 1995); and *travestís* in Brazil, whose bodily transformations are similar to those of trans women but whose discursive identity work is quite different (e.g., Kulick 1998).

It is often unclear which of these communities, if any, should be considered transgender. Some were characterized by researchers as *transgender* or *transgendered*—the latter of which is now considered problematic by many trans people—while others were actively contrasted with that category. Niko Besnier describes leitis as “transgendered males” (e.g., 2002: 534), Peter A. Jackson refers to Thai *kathoey* as “male-to-female transgenders” (2004: 203), and Don Kulick (1998) showcases the word *transgendered* in the title of his book, *Travestí: Sex, Gender, and Culture Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*, even as he maintains that *travestís* are not trans women. Kulick says *travestís* use “female names, clothing styles, hairstyles, cosmetic practices, and linguistic pronouns” (5) and dramatically feminize their bodies, but he concludes that *travestís* are feminine gay men, rather than trans women, because they “do not self-identify as women” (5) and “do not wish to remove their penis” (6). Other scholars have been more consistent in differentiating their communities of study from Western notions of trans identity. Rudolf P. Gaudio (1997) describes 'yan daudu as “Hausa-speaking men who talk and act like women” (416), does not use the word *transgender*, and generally employs masculine pronouns though 'yan daudu “frequently use feminine names and grammatical forms” (423) for one another. In later work, Gaudio (2009) notes that he elects not to refer to 'yan daudu as *trans(gendered)* because they do not “choose or feel compelled to embrace a gender identity ‘opposite’ or merely different from their ascribed biological sex,” and never “tried to pass as a woman socially,” ultimately seeing themselves as “‘real’ men” (10). Hall (1997) also declines to characterize *hijras* as *transgender*, instead providing a critical perspective on the various categories invoked in the anthropological literature, including *eunuch* and *third sex*, and employing the local term, *hijra*, when referring to research participants.

Trans identities thus figure prominently in queer linguistics, even in cases where a non-normatively gendered community is explicitly described as *not* transgender. The variety of ways these authors orient to trans identity is undoubtedly informed by the different cultural contexts of their research as well as the challenge of “translating” local identities for a Western audience. However, the difficulty in pinning down who is—or isn't—trans seems driven in part by uncertainty among some authors regarding what *transgender* and *transsexual* mean for those who identify with the terms. The characterizations just cited

construct an image of a trans person as someone who self-identifies as a woman despite being assigned male at birth—the existence of trans masculinities is rarely acknowledged—who wishes to be perceived as a (cisgender) woman, and who desires genital reconstruction. Yet many of these publications appeared a decade or more after the major changes within trans communities described earlier had been laid out in published form, including the emergence of Boswell's (1991) "transgender alternative," the blurring of the transsexual/transgender distinction, the increasing visibility of female-assigned trans people, and the emergence of new kinds of subjectivity among those who reject the gender binary entirely. The image of a homogenously gender normative, essentialist, genital-focused trans community consisting only of male-assigned individuals had been critiqued for years and was becoming obsolete in the West, yet the characterization of global gender non-normativity in some queer linguistic literature had the impact of reifying this model of trans subjectivity.

### Early Examinations of Trans-identified Speakers: Problems and Promises

The 1990s saw only a handful of publications on people who describe themselves as *transgender* or *transsexual* (Knight 1992; Cromwell 1995; Livia 1997, 2001; White 1998; Moriel 1998). One primary theme of this early research was the negotiation of authenticity, secrecy, and "passing,"<sup>3</sup> which created space for the expression of problematic ideologies about the authenticity of trans identities. A common set of questions concerned how well trans people approximate the linguistic styles associated with cis people of the same gender identity—but without necessarily questioning the empirical status of those associations. For example, C. Todd White's (1998) case study of a trans woman's use of a mixture of purportedly "feminine" and "masculine" discursive strategies characterizes her as androgynous, rather than feminine, because she uses assertive discursive techniques in her work as a salesperson, which White describes as "distinctly un-ladylike" (221). Rather than concluding that assertiveness is not necessarily a masculine trait, or that assertive practices might be driven by factors like profession rather than gender per se, White suggests that his speaker must be vigilant to keep her natural masculinity from leaking through her imperfect attempts to "maintain the illusion of femininity" (215). Liora Moriel (1998) takes an even more delegitimizing stance toward trans identities, describing trans Israeli pop star Dana International as someone who will never achieve the status of a "real" woman (1998: 226) and who is not fully licensed to use feminine grammatical forms in Hebrew because she is forever "biologically male" (228) regardless of medical interventions. At times, the problematic language is subtler, as when trans identities are described as a "belief," "insistence," and "claim" (Livia 2001: 161, 172), while no such mitigators are used in reference to cis identities.

Anna Livia's (1997, 2001) discussion of grammatical gender in a French autobiographical text by a transsexual woman, Georgine Noël, is particularly useful to illustrate the ways trans linguistics may produce different interpretations of trans experience than those that emerged early on in queer linguistics. Livia takes the possibility of gender-neutral and gender-subverting uses of grammatical gender seriously, but her analysis also takes a

consistently problematizing stance toward trans identities, for instance framing trans people's desire for bodily transformation as inherently essentialist and contrary to the recognition that gender is a continuum (2001: 163). This strain of thought appears most concretely in Livia's account of Noël's occasional departures from her usual pattern of using masculine grammatical forms to talk about her life before she began her transition and feminine forms for events occurring after. In one case, Noël refers to herself in the feminine when describing the romantic feelings she had for a young man in her youth. Whereas Livia examines this moment through a lens of same-sex attraction—interpreting Noël's reluctance to refer to herself in the masculine as a sign of internalized homophobic discomfort with her interest in boys—a trans-centering reading might stress the relational aspects of sexuality and the importance of gender in negotiating eroticism for many trans people. Invoking Monique Wittig, Livia draws a contrast between “women” as those “on the losing side of the gender binary” and “male-to-female transsexuals” as individuals who are “invisible to it” (2001: 161) and for whom “a return to masculine gender presentation and masculine privilege is always possible” (175). By contrast, trans theorists have worked extensively to document trans women's experiences with both misogyny in general and with specific forms of transphobia that target trans feminine people (i.e., *trans-misogyny*, per Serano 2007). As the next section reveals, recent trans linguistic work calls attention to the ways trans people are very much on the/a “losing side” of gendered oppression—and how trans people contest their marginal status.

Transmisogyny and other forms of transphobia can be seen in a number of other early publications. H. Merle Knight (1992) is particularly critical of trans women whose gendered practices deviate from restrictive, misogynistic gender norms imposed upon women—i.e., those who are not sufficiently feminine. He even goes as far as to actively misgender (that is, misattribute the gender of) trans women whose “aggressive” interactional styles supposedly belie male privilege (314) rather than, perhaps, a way to be seen and heard in the face of rampant dehumanization. Other authors display a preoccupation with genital surgery (Moriel 1998) and feel entitled to reveal irrelevant and salacious details about speakers' bodies (Moriel 1998; White 1998). Trans women are described as “fool[ing]” people into thinking they are female (in both White 1998: 220; Moriel 1998: 227) and are contrasted with “‘real’ women” (Moriel 1998: 226). Trans speakers are frequently misgendered by authors, and White even feels the need to give an account for his choice *not* to misgender his participant, conceding that the (presumably cisgender) reader “may be uncomfortable with [White's] use of feminine pronouns” (223, fn3). The comfort of the trans reader is apparently not considered, or perhaps even imagined.

Jason Cromwell's (1995) study of trans people's use of “protective” language in public spaces diverges from the other publications from this period in a few ways. In addition to being openly trans and the only scholar discussed in this section to use ethnographic methods in a study of trans people in the Global North, Cromwell emphasizes the constraints placed on trans people, who must carefully manage strangers' access to information due to the ongoing threat of transphobic violence. Yet, Cromwell shows, trans people do not remain silent but rather employ strategically vague language that draws on shared knowledge to exclude cisgender eavesdroppers. Despite its limitations, Cromwell's piece

foreshadows the development of trans linguistics: rather than being evaluated on the basis of their authenticity or how well they serve cis people's gender politics, trans people are recognized for their creative engagement with the resources available to them in the face of overwhelming injustice.

Regardless of progress made, some of the problematic trends described earlier continue in discussions of trans people's linguistic practices. Kulick (2019), for example, questions trans people's objection to cisgender gay men's appropriation of transphobic words like *shemale* and critiques trans people's status as "self-appointed arbiters of gendered language." He expresses disappointment that trans people "are not interested in unsettling identity," but rather "securing it," echoing the objections made by late-20<sup>th</sup>-century scholars like Judith Lorber (1994), who lamented trans people's failure to live up to their theoretical function of destroying the gender binary. Kulick characterizes these trans people who want a say in what qualifies as transphobic language as just no fun; "we don't laugh as much anymore" (2), Kulick complains, as trans readers wonder who "we" includes. At the same time, trans-exclusionary theories of gender are seeing a return among cis "feminists"—including a few prominent scholars in language, gender, and sexuality—who reject trans women's womanhood. These problems highlight the need for an explicitly articulated trans linguistics. It is not enough to live in an increasingly trans-affirming world or to have a positive disposition toward trans people—we must actively devote ourselves to dismantling transphobia in ourselves, our world, and our discipline.

## Trans Linguistics: Grammar, Voices, and Discourse

While the previous section addressed some of the challenges and problems to be found in early research on trans people's linguistic practices, this section shifts to the insights offered by a trans linguistic framework.

### Trans Grammar

One of the first and most prolific analytic foci on trans people's language has been the management of binary grammatical gender systems by speakers who disrupt the expectation that each individual can be easily, naturally, and consistently placed within a binary gender structure (see also Abe, this volume; Chen, this volume; Conrod, this volume). Trans people's divergence from this system presents a number of choices. One is how speakers refer to an individual who has undergone a shift in gendered referring forms—e.g., from masculine to feminine grammatical marking—when speaking about their life before that shift took place. The strategies speakers employ, however, vary across communities. Some shift between gender markers to reflect whether they are referring to a person's current gender positionality or the gender role they occupied in the past, as documented in Kira Hall and Veronica O'Donovan's (1996; also Hall 1997, *inter alia*) study of hijras, Rodrigo Borba and Cristina Ostermann's (2007) analysis of Brazilian travestís, and Livia's (2001) treatment of Georgine Noël's autobiography. By contrast, current norms in

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many trans communities in the United States dictate the use of forms that reflect a trans person's current identity even when referring to their pre-transition lives.

In addition to managing potential discontinuity over time, speakers also sometimes diverge from the pattern they typically follow. In the studies just mentioned by Hall and O'Donovan (1996) and Borba and Ostermann (2007), hijras and travestís who typically refer to themselves and one another in the feminine diverge from that pattern not only when referring to their early lives, but also when indexing a referent's status and power, when talking about normative family structures, when voicing noncommunity members, and when expressing negative feelings toward or distancing themselves from individual hijras or travestís. Far from simply indexing gender identity, these practices reveal the complex interactional stances and indexical fields that are conjured by the choice of feminine or masculine forms.

A final key question is whether binary grammatical gender systems prevent the expression of nonbinary gender identities. Orit Bershtling's (2014) study of genderqueer Hebrew speakers demonstrates that nonbinary identities *can* be expressed in the context of binary grammatical gender systems. In addition to alternating between binary forms, Bershtling's speakers report using of the unexpected form (i.e., feminine forms for speakers perceived as male and vice versa); concatenation (stringing together both feminine and masculine morphemes); and avoidance through grammatical exceptions (e.g., use of the first person plural or future tense, neither of which are gendered in Hebrew). Bershtling's study highlights an important tension: binary grammatical gender can be limiting, but it also provides fodder for its own subversion by allowing nonbinary speakers to signal their gender identities more directly than languages like English allow. Other languages show similar signs of grammatical subversion, particularly in digital spaces. Among these are blended forms, as when German speakers combine the pronouns *sie* (she) and *er* (he) into *xier*, and new morphemes, such as the use of *-x* or *-e* in place of *-a* or *-o* in Spanish words like *amigo<sup>m</sup>/amiga<sup>f</sup>*, i.e. *amigx<sup>nb</sup>/a'migεks/or amigue<sup>nb</sup>/a'migε/*. Whatever tactic is used, it is clear that speakers are capable of complicating, troubling, and refiguring the grammatical, as well as social, structures to which they have access, though the uptake of such practices by (cisgender) others remains underexplored.

### Trans Voices

The gendered voice is of central importance to both linguists and trans people, but published sociophonetic research on trans voices remains sparse. Prior to the past decade, most of what was known about trans voices was based on the work of speech-language pathologists, who tend to take a medicalized view of the gendered voice that pathologizes non-normative styles (Azul 2013; Zimman 2012, ch. 4). Challenges to phoneticians' naturalization of the gendered voice were levied early on in language, gender, and sexuality (e.g., Sachs 1975), but linguists who do phonetic analysis still tend to maintain a conservative vision of sex/gender in which all speakers and voices can be categorized as either female or male based on supposedly fixed physiological characteristics (i.e., "sex").

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Though the voice does inevitably foreground the body, it is unclear how trans voices should be analyzed within a biological essentialist framework.

There are a number of important issues on which studies of trans voices can shed light (Zimman 2018). One is the identification of acoustic cues that lead listeners to categorize the gender of a voice. Fundamental frequency (F0)—the primary acoustic correlate of pitch—is the most intuitively obvious gender difference in the voice. Although the pitch range a speaker employs is clearly influenced by the size of their larynx, which is sensitive to testosterone (Azul 2015), my own multiyear study of ten trans masculine individuals during the early stages of hormone therapy (Zimman 2017c) highlights interspeaker variation in the degree and rate of change that seems to reflect differences in other factors like age, life history, transition path and speed, intersecting identities of various types, and habitual use of high or low frequency phonation (e.g., falsetto or creaky voice, respectively). Given that most of the speakers reached a normatively masculine F0 range after one to two years on hormones, it seems reasonable to characterize their voices as “male,” but doing so also raises a number of questions: what of the few speakers who maintained a more ambiguous mean F0, or speakers who have no F0 change because they do not take testosterone? At what point does a voice become female or male, and how does this process apply to cisgender voices (Azul 2013)? If grounded in perception, does the gender of a voice differ by listener? And what about features other than F0?

Some studies report that trans feminine speakers may be perceived as female even with a very low mean F0 (e.g., 119–128 Hz in Günzburger 1995) or perceived as male even with a very high mean F0 (e.g., 181 Hz in Gelfer and Schofield 2000),<sup>4</sup> indicating that features other than mean F0 must contribute to the perceptual categorization of voices. Although it might be tempting to determine the gender of a voice on the basis of characteristics like pitch, the introduction of additional features complicates the process. In my analyses of the relationship between /s/ and F0 (Zimman 2017a, 2017d), I have found that the speakers with the lowest pitch in these studies also have the most “feminine” (highest frequency) productions of /s/. This surprising pattern motivates my argument that the gendered voice is a set of multidimensional styles rather than a single, static, binary property of each speaker. Although my investigations of /s/ among trans people in San Francisco and Portland, Oregon (Zimman 2017d, forthcoming) find a great deal of variability among trans speakers—especially those who identify as queer and/or nonbinary—research on other trans populations have found more gender-typical uses of /s/. Both Robert J. Podesva and Janneke Van Hofwegen’s (2016) study in rural Redding, California, and Evan Hazenberg’s (2016) work in Ottawa, Canada, place trans women and men on a continuum of /s/ productions relative to their cisgender counterparts, finding that the trans speakers were similar to, but not quite as polarized as, cis people of the same gender identity.

Another important insight from this body of work concerns the role of stereotypes and expectations in the perception of the voice. Adrienne Hancock, Lindsey Colton, and Fiacre Douglas (2014) demonstrate this through an analysis of trans women’s intonation in comparison to cis women and men. Despite no difference in rising intonation usage between the cisgender women and men in the study, the researchers found that trans women who

used more rising intonational contours were more likely to be perceived as female than those who used fewer. Hazenberg's (2012) investigation of high rising terminal, or "uptalk," among anglophone Canadian trans women and men points to contradictions in indexical values in which both groups express negative views toward uptalk, but trans women in the study were more likely to use it because of its association with femininity. Another issue explored in my work (Zimman 2016) is how ideologies about testosterone creating a male voice limit the degree of agency that some trans men exert over their voices, which helps to contextualize these speakers' non-normative vocal styles.

In sum, trans speakers have many lessons to offer regarding the nature of the gendered voice. They also highlight the need for a more nuanced approach to "vocal sex" that recognizes the importance of the body without being limited by the ideology that human bodies and voices come in two fully distinct, mutually exclusive types.

### Trans Discourse

The majority of research on trans language is concerned not (only) with grammar and voices, but also with the broader realm of discourse-level strategies that characterize trans people's place within structures of power. This section is organized around three themes that reflect trans linguistics' concern with the delegitimation, erasure, and structural oppression that trans people experience: medical gatekeeping and narrative authenticity; the negotiation of legal and embodied selves; and globalizing forces. In addition to identifying power hierarchies that harm trans people, much of this work also points to opportunities for resistance and trans agency.

**(1) Gatekeeping and narratives of authenticity:** One theme that pervades research on trans discourse is the looming role of powerful institutions. The initial diagnostic criteria for transsexuality created an intensive gatekeeping system that required trans people to convince authority figures of the legitimacy of their identities in order to access medical care. Several studies have examined trans people's interactions with gatekeepers, revealing what Rodrigo Borba and Tommaso Milani (2017) refer to as "crystallised structures of cisnormativity." Susan Speer and Richard Green (2007) examine interactions between trans patients and gatekeepers in the British National Health Service in which practitioners position themselves as neutral and necessary arbiters of how "successful" a trans person will be in a new gender role such that a patient's ability to "pass" as cisgender may be considered when judging their suitability for transition. In another study, Susan Speer and Ceri Parsons (2006) examine hypothetical questions in gatekeeping interactions framed as "therapy." Yet close analysis of one psychiatrist's questions about what patients would do if they were denied transition care reveals that these are not just any hypothetical questions, but ones in which trans patients know that the asker has the power to make the hypothetical scenario come true—and that their answer may influence the psychologist's decision.

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Borba (2015, 2017) and Borba and Milani (2017) consider the role of gatekeeping in a Brazilian gender clinic, bringing up questions about cultural specificity, colonialism, and globalization. Borba (2017) takes on the issue of “rehearsed narratives” in gatekeeping encounters and describes how the clinic implements international standards of care as part of a process of “discursive colonization.” In addition to the constraints gatekeeping presents to all trans subjects, those attempting to access medical transition care in the Global South must inhabit narratives produced in cultural contexts that are quite different from, and already exert colonial power over, local practices. Borba is also able to capture interactions that occur outside of the clinic, in which trans people share strategies for making it through the gatekeeping process. In another context that also reflects the way trans people depend on one another’s expertise to navigate the power gatekeepers wield, Avery Dame (2013) considers how trans expertise and knowledge is produced and distributed among trans male video bloggers (vloggers) on YouTube. By focusing specifically on cases in which vloggers challenged their viewers’ behavior, Dame sheds light on a process whereby trans people position themselves as experts on trans experience through an array of interactional strategies.

Exemplifying the shift to a trans linguistics framework, the analyses just described demonstrate how fraught trans people’s position is within institutions that serve them, how high the stakes are, and how much trans people endure to gain agency over their own bodies. At the same time, trans linguistic research does not stop at describing the vulnerability of non-normatively gendered communities; it also uncovers forms of resistance that such communities enact.

The impositions placed on trans narratives within the gatekeeping context can often follow trans speakers into other contexts, including research interviews. Trans people face a double bind: presenting themselves as gender normative women or men may legitimize their gender to skeptics, but adhering too closely to those norms may put them in the crosshairs of feminist critique. Several studies of trans narratives (Mason-Schrock 1996; Gagné, Tewksbury, and McGaughey 1997; Parsons 2005) bemoan the gender normativity speakers invoke without considering how their narratives may have been shaped by the context of a research interview conducted by a psychologist, i.e., someone with the same disciplinary affiliation as most gatekeepers. Other studies show signs of trans speakers rejecting clinical norms. Speakers in my analysis of coming out narratives (Zimman 2009) oriented to norms for trans identity only to call attention to the ways they did not fit those norms. These speakers legitimated their identities not through adherence to gender stereotypes, but through their well-being and satisfaction. Elijah Edelman (2014) similarly highlights the ways his participants’ narratives challenged the homonormative frame of “coming out” that portrays those who fail to come out as politically repressive or repressed. Trans narratives thus contain signs of both resistance to normative discourses and insistence on a distinctively trans politics of visibility.

In the few studies that consider how trans and gender nonconforming identities intersect with other axes of subjectivity, we can see additional layers of resistance. This is the case in Jenny L. Davis’s (2014) account of an educational event organized by Two-Spirit indi-

viduals, who are indigenous North Americans defined as spiritually both female and male and who may also identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, transgender, etc. Davis emphasizes the way participants subverted the either/or designations that guide colonial models of identity, in which one is either female *or* male; trans *or* gay/lesbian; LGBTQ *or* Two-Spirit. The navigation between multiple competing identity frameworks is particularly salient in indigenous populations, (post-)colonial contexts, and communities of color in diaspora.

**(2) Legal and embodied selves:** The law is another discursive domain of institutional power that has a role in perpetuating transphobia (Hao 2017; Hutton 2017; McDonald, Byrne, and Dickson 2017). Christopher Hutton (2017) considers the legal definition of *sex*, particularly as it relates to marriage, and finds that definitions of legal sex have depended on “a covertly authoritarian understanding of ordinary meaning,” (55) that ultimately falls apart under attempts to make explicit a single logic or set of criteria. The messiness of this system is of particular importance for the carceral system, in which trans women are regularly jailed alongside cisgender men, making them highly vulnerable to exploitation, physical abuse, and sexual violence. This vulnerability is made poignant by Elisabeth McDonald, Jack Byrne, and Sandra Dickson’s (2017) discussion of the legal definition of rape in New Zealand, which reveals how laws intended to address gendered violence can be used to perpetuate transphobia. In 2005, the legal definition of rape in New Zealand was changed so that it no longer referred to nonconsensual penetration of a woman by a man but rather nonconsensual penetration of a person with “female genitals” by a person with a penis, meaning trans women who have not had genital reconstruction cannot be considered victims of rape from a legal perspective, and are instead framed as potential perpetrators. Trans women face exceptionally high rates of sexual violence (Grant et al. 2012), yet here the legal language is matched by legal (in)action: the authors report that sexual assaults of trans women have almost never resulted in convictions under New Zealand law.

Bodies, clearly, take center stage in negotiations of trans authenticity and (dis)empowerment, and trans linguistics has centered questions about embodied sexual difference, beginning most clearly with Borba and Ostermann’s (2007) call for more attention to trans embodiment. Trans bodies, most basically, complicate the naturalization of “biological sex.” Even if the fleshy body is not directly transformed by language, its social meanings—including “female” and “male”—certainly are. This has been the central argument of my and my collaborators’ examinations (Edelman and Zimman 2014; Zimman and Hall 2009; Zimman 2014) of the ways trans men exhibit linguistic agency in their talk about their genitals, frequently invoking canonically “male” terms for their own surgically unmodified bodies. Brian King (2016, this volume) provides another perspective on non-normative embodiment through an analysis of talk about intersex bodies in an educational setting. While the trans speakers I have written about are overtly critical of normative language surrounding biological sex, the intersex activist King describes gently guides high school students to imagine what might be possible as they learn about intersex bodies. King’s analysis is particularly useful in demonstrating the emergent process

through which linguistic norms about the body are troubled and shifted, laying the groundwork for more creative ways of thinking and talking alike.

**(3) Global flows:** A final major theme in the study of trans discourse concerns transformations in practice and meaning brought about by the increasing and increasing rapidity of global flows of people, ideas, practices, and language (Kulick 1999). Questions about globalization have been central in queer linguistics as well (as in Leap and Boellstorff 2004), with one key focus being how to interpret the global appearance of identities like “gay” and “lesbian,” particularly as they stand in contrast with local forms of queer practice defined in terms of gender presentation rather than sexual practice alone (e.g., Hall 2005, 2009; Boellstorff 2004; Jackson 2004; Blackwood 2014).

We can see these tensions at work in Hall’s (2005, 2009) work with a New Delhi NGO (“the Center”) focused on education regarding sexuality and providing services to gays, lesbians, and related communities. In analyses focused on several groups that might be considered transgender, Hall demonstrates how English usage, upper-classness, and cosmopolitan cultural orientation are mapped onto identification as lesbian/gay rather than with local categories, the latter of which are often viewed as low-brow, vulgar, and culturally regressive by lesbian-/gay-identified Indians. These local identities include *hijras*, *kotis*, who engage in parodic performances of hijra identity, and *boys*, who are masculine female-assigned individuals who feel drawn to transsexual body modifications. At the Center where Hall’s fieldwork took place, a homonormative framework is imposed on gender-crossing groups; for instance, hijras and kotis must dress as men in order to work at the Center, which the former group refused to do.

Importantly, homonormative gay identities emerged in the West in part through the rejection of other forms of queerness, including trans identities (Stryker 2008). The globalization of homonormativity thus carries a transphobic history that is especially clear in Hall’s (2009) analysis of a group conversation among a group of boys and Liz, a white British expatriate who worked at the Center. Hall describes a discursive struggle throughout the interaction in which Liz aims to help the boys “understand” (143) that they can be masculine without identifying as male or pursuing medical transition. While Liz sees herself as preventing the boys from the “burdens” of “dangerous” surgeries, she places herself and her interlocutors within a history of discourse from the Global North in which cisgender people express a preferential stance for gender non-conforming cisgender identities (e.g., “masculine woman”) over trans identities.<sup>5</sup> The globalization of gay and lesbian identity is thus not only a global movement of words, nor even of identities, but of entire frameworks for understanding gender and sexual alterity (see also Thoreson 2013). As Hall’s analysis shows, globalization transports not just lesbian and gay identities, but also trans identities and trans medical services. At the same time, Borba’s (2015, 2017) research centers the process of localizing these words, identities, and practices to the Brazilian context. Though discourses from the Global North are taken up enthusiastically by providers at the gender clinic where Borba worked, providers also work to ensure that

patients show no signs of being travestis rather than transsexuals, such as enjoying using their genitals to penetrate others.

As part of the process of glocalization, categories traveling from the global “center” may be remapped onto local distinctions in the global “periphery.” However, these categories need not work as mutually exclusive orientations to global sexual modernity. Evelyn Blackwood’s (2014) research in West Sumatra, Indonesia, reveals that masculine-presenting *tomboys* align themselves simultaneously with local gender-difference based sexual dynamics, where masculine tomboys pair with feminine women who have no marked identity, and a global *lesbi* (from *lesbian*) identity that applies without regard to gender normativity or cultural locale. Besnier’s (2003) discussion of the Miss Galaxy Pageant in Tonga similarly showcases the ability leitis have to move between the local and the global. Because contestants in the pageant are making claims to a global, cosmopolitan femininity, audience members may challenge them to speak English; if their English is not good enough, however, the same audience will mock them. Yet Besnier, in capturing this paradox, demonstrates how strategic claims on Tongan authenticity can be used to forestall critiques of leitis’ acceptability on a global scale.

An important shift in current research on global gender non-normativity, as in globalization studies more generally, is toward examining local models of identification without setting up a comparison with or assuming uni-directional flow from dominant Euro-American models. Poiva Junior Ashleigh Feu’u (2017) exemplifies this approach through a comparison of Samoan *fa’afafine* and Maori *whakawahine*, both terms for feminine individuals who were assigned male at birth. Focusing on the ways members of each group draw on the history of their identities to position themselves within a gendered cultural tradition, Feu’u shows how colonialism impacts, but never fully determines, the way postcolonial subjects understand themselves.

### An Expanding Field of Inquiry

As trans linguistics has emerged, there has been a broadening in the identities and communities studied and in the research frameworks and methods employed. However, there remain several significant gaps in the representation of trans and gender nonconforming populations in language, gender, and sexuality. The early literature focused almost exclusively on individuals who were assigned male at birth, many of whom represented indigenous identities in postcolonial contexts. In recent years, more work has been done with female-assigned trans people, mostly in communities that speak English and other European languages (save Hall 2009 and Blackwood 2014), leaving trans feminine people in the Global North and trans masculine people in the Global South underrepresented. Non-binary people have much to offer sociocultural linguists, as recent studies have begun to explore (Corwin 2017; Gratton 2016; Bershtling 2014; Conrod, this volume; Zimman forthcoming). These speakers are well-poised to answer questions about linguistic innovation, agency, and cognition, having introduced not only new labels (e.g., *genderqueer*, *agender*, *bigender*, etc.) but also grammatical innovations in the form of new pronouns (e.g., *ze* and *hir* as gender-neutral third person singular forms), new scopes for old pronouns (e.g., ap-

plication of singular *they* for specific individuals), and new interactional practices (e.g., explicitly asking people for their pronouns). This growing interest in binary-transcendence should be extended to bodies, as much more work is needed on intersex subjectivity and bodies to build on King's (2015) insights.

The most glaring form of underrepresentation, however, is trans communities of color. While anthropological studies have often involved populations that are not white, race has rarely been a central analysis. As Rusty Barrett's (2017) examinations of performances by African American drag queens suggest, race is frequently a critical element of the critiques enacted through the gendered practices of queer people of color. We need a better sense of the ways trans identity intersects with other important aspects of social subjectivity, and how our current view of trans language may be heavily inflected by whiteness. As the scope of trans linguistics is widened, it becomes particularly important to attend to the political divides and hierarchies within gender non-normative populations.

## Conclusion: Toward a Trans Linguistics

With three decades of literature on trans language reviewed, it is now possible to sketch out the theoretical perspective I have described as *trans linguistics*. Some of these characteristics are held in common with other interventions to reclaim linguistics as a tool of empowerment for groups that have historically been excluded, erased, and harmed by the discipline. A linguistics of the oppressed, more generally, is attentive to the processes of research and writing and their ethical, political, and material implications (e.g., Leonard 2017). It highlights the way researchers' subjectivities and relationships with speakers shape scholarly production. It challenges the discipline's knowledge and demands accountability to lived reality beyond academia. It depends on the wisdom of marginalized communities. It is attuned not only to oppressive language but also to agency in, through, and beyond language.

Trans linguistics also possesses distinctive characteristics. Perhaps most centrally, this framework regards transformation, fluidity, and movement as central aspects of both identity and language. It is a framework in which deterministic and homogenizing accounts of (non)normative social practice are approached with skepticism. Trans linguistics centers trans people and others who occupy the margins of normative categories, those who exceed them, and those who travel between them. It pushes us to consider how other categories might be transcended or transversed. It prioritizes exceptional cases and discovering what is possible rather than privileging norms and generalizable claims. Trans linguistics is both political and applied, participating in the critical reexamination of its own intellectual histories. A central goal is to find ways to implement linguists' expertise in the empowerment of trans people and others at the margins (Zimman 2017d), which trans communities need now as much as ever.

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Crucially, in trans linguistics, trans people are no longer objects to be evaluated for their implications to gender theories and politics developed by cis thinkers, but analytic agents with unique capacity to inform the discipline. Key questions about the origins, flexibility, and political ramifications of gendered linguistic practices can be answered by considering trans people's practices and theories about language; cissexist assumptions about how the body and identity relate to one another may be challenged by the embodied experiences of trans linguists; challenging questions about the gender politics of our theories will be posed by trans students; and useful theoretical and methodological tools are available from trans theorists in other disciplines. Trans linguistics is not just about centering trans speakers, nor only about creating space for more trans people to become linguists. It is about channeling the strength, creativity, beauty, and vitality of trans experience into new ways of being a linguist that are as yet unknown.

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### Notes:

(1.) *Nonbinary* is an umbrella label for anyone who does not identify as strictly female or strictly male.

(2.) Though homophonous, the trans linguistics theorized here is distinct from the *translinguistics* outlined by Lee and Dovchin (2019). The two frameworks share an orientation to the importance of thinking about blurring and moving between categories once recognized as distinct (for Lee and Dovchin, different languages). However, they differ in that the trans linguistics proposed here centers the experiences of trans people in addition to using transness as a theoretical device for thinking through language, embodiment, and identity. Trans linguistics is thus necessarily grounded in a political commitment to social and linguistic justice for gender non-normative communities.

(3.) Trans people often place scare quotes around the word “passing” to reflect its problematic nature, as referring to a trans person as “passing as a woman/man” implies that the person in question is not “really” a woman/man, just as someone who passes as white is not really white, someone who passes as straight is not really straight, etc.

(4.) Averages reported for American English-speaking “men” tend to be 100–120 Hz and for “women” 200–220 Hz. These numbers are based on speakers who are presumably assumed to be cisgender, though their trans status is unknown to us.

(5.) Liz frames herself as arguing against biological essentialism and medical transition specifically, but she notably does not suggest that the boys can be men without genital surgery. As she presents it, the only alternative to a phalloplasty is womanhood.

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