

## Beyond the cis gays' cis gaze: the need for a trans linguistics

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### Abstract

*Trans and other nonnormatively gendered subjectivities served a foundational role in queer linguistics, but it is only recently that a wave of trans researchers have begun to carve out distinctively trans approaches to the study of language. This commentary explores the question of why this shift has taken so long and how certain disciplinary norms have made linguistics a less-than-attractive home for trans scholars, namely an apoliticised ideology of descriptivism, the flippant indulgence of linguistic curiosity and claims to linguistic authority. Importantly, these processes are vulnerable to furthering not only transphobia but also racism, colonialism, ableism and linguistic subjugation. These convergences present opportunities for coalition-based responses to the maintenance of social hierarchies in linguistics and allied disciplines, and underscore the importance of community-based approaches to research on language and gender alterity.*

KEYWORDS: TRANSGENDER, TRANS LINGUISTICS, COMMUNITY-BASED LINGUISTICS, INTERSECTIONALITY, QUEER LINGUISTICS

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Like queer theory, queer linguistics has from its inception been concerned not only with nonnormative sexualities, but also nonnormative genders. Indeed, one of its key early insights was that the division between gender identity and sexual orientation is a constructed and culture-specific one that is evaded by many of the world's queers. However, while queer theory and queer linguistics questioned the gender/sexuality divide in the 1990s, transgender activists in North America, Europe and elsewhere were increasingly insistent that a clear distinction between gender and sexuality is necessary for the comprehensibility of certain trans identities, such as those of lesbian trans women and gay trans men. Of course, queer linguists were engaged with academic discourses that employed a simple, under-theorised division between gender and sexuality, whereas trans activists were defending the legitimacy of their identities among nonacademics for whom gender and sexuality were and remain very much entwined. Yet this tension between the concerns of queer academic theorists and those of trans activists bears connection to the complex position of trans people in linguistics, which is the focus of this commentary.

The prominence of nonnormative gender identities and practices in foundational contributions to queer linguistics was driven in part by anthropological perspectives on queer practices in the Global South. Though various forms of gender nonnormativity have always been central to the theorisation of language and gender (Hall 2004), nonnormative genders were represented in this literature primarily by research participants who were assigned male at birth, who typically had male sexual partners and whose femininities were transgressive in relation to local norms (e.g. Hall and O'Donovan 1996; Gaudio 1997; Kulick 1998; Besnier 2003), but who were not necessarily identifiable as transgender, at least as the category has been deployed in the Global North. A smaller body of research was produced during this time on language among transgender-/transsexual-identified people in the Global North (e.g. Moriel 1998; White 1998; Livia 2000). At the time, research that merely recognised the existence of trans and gender nonnormative lives had transgressive potential. Yet the sense that any and all of this work was equally transgressive, affirming or worthy of praise for its representation of trans people is undoubtedly related to the fact that it was written predominantly by cisgender queer linguists (though see Cromwell 1995) and evaluated by cisgender readers. Only in the past decade have we seen a surge of publications on language in trans communities authored by trans researchers, enabling the identification of a distinctive, emerging approach to the analysis of trans people's linguistic practices that runs in parallel, but never complete contiguity, with queer linguistics: a distinctively *trans linguistics* (Zimman 2020). Trans linguistics, thus imagined, centres social and linguistic transformation, the dialogic

nature of identity construction and affirmation, and the discovery of what is possible over the documentation of trends and norms. It also increasingly prioritises linguistic interventions that impact trans people's wellbeing, safety and vitality (e.g. Ansara and Hegarty 2013; Zimman 2017; Knisely forthcoming; Zimman and Azul forthcoming). The latter goal underscores the necessity of research practices that interrupt the reproduction of whiteness and colonialism at the centre of queer/trans language and life (Feu'u 2017; Snorton 2017; Davis 2019) in favour of building coalitions within and across community-based approaches to language. The work of trans linguistics, then, is not only about the importance of trans people leading that work, as critical as that factor has been, but also of disrupting ways of thinking that are rooted in cissexism – work that we all must do (for recent examples in this journal, see de Jesus and Caldas-Coulthard 2018; Katsiveli 2021; Turton 2021).

The centrality of community-based interventions for trans linguistics is an entry point to a question that has weighed on my mind since I began my path into linguistics in the early 2000s: where are all the trans people? Trans folks passionately theorise language, with particular attention to ideologies and their material impacts, normativities, strategies of subversion and the endless complexity of interactional context. Linguistics has always seemed to me a natural academic home for trans scholars, but throughout my graduate training and for several years after I received my PhD in 2012, there were very, very few of us. Today, there are still precious few openly trans academics employed in linguistics departments, and fewer still with employment security, but there are many more trans students who are eager to study their own communities' language, particularly when that language is also multi/translingual and/or racialised. How has this promising romance yet to blossom? Given that other social sciences have been learning from trans people's experiences since the 1960s, why are linguists so late to the game? With reflections on a few instances of transphobia in linguistics – some major, others mundane – I outline a few large-scale ways in which the discipline has yet to live up to its potential to accompany trans people's linguistic activism (Bucholtz, Casillas and Lee 2016). These include the emphasis on an apoliticised ideology of descriptivism, the indulgence of cisgender curiosity and our claims to unique linguistic authority. These are by no means the only problems, nor are they particular to trans people or linguistics. Similar ideologies manifest in varying ways across multiple axes of subjectivity and marginalisation and must be confronted in ways that attend specifically to those distinct realisations and to the expertise of those who inhabit them. My own comments, then, should be understood as a product not only of my positionality as a trans person and a queer man, but also as a person who is disabled/chronically ill, white

and Middle Eastern/Mizrahi, class privileged, a US citizen and a native speaker of (only) American English.

Descriptivism – a language ideology that prioritises overtly nonjudgemental stances toward variation in linguistic usage – is often framed as a tool for undermining linguistic oppression. Linguistics students are aggressively socialised into descriptivism in their training, and letting go of prescriptivism is difficult for some. The difficulty comes not only from students who are attached to prescriptivist ideologies, but also those who are engaged in language activism. I'm often asked by students in the latter group whether telling someone not to use an offensive term, or to stop misgendering someone, or to otherwise be more inclusive, is a form of prescriptivism and, if so, whether it's acceptable for a linguist to do these things. But students of linguistics also pop up in online political disputes only to invoke descriptivism to dismiss objections to oppressive language. This move is not limited to novice linguists: in a now widely-discussed event in 2017, a senior linguist and prolific contributor to *Language Log* characterised the expectation that he not misgender nonbinary people who use they/them pronouns as 'the most extreme manifestation of prescriptivist Stalinism [he had] ever encountered'. When descriptivism functions as a depoliticised cover for linguists who would like to avoid supporting social justice movements just as easily as it does to critique linguistic injustice, its utility must be carefully reconsidered.

Little can top an accusation of Stalinism directed at a student who simply asks not to be publicly misgendered, but many other practices contribute to a less-than-welcoming environment for trans linguists. One of these is the unmitigated exploration of curiosity and armchair theorisation on the part of linguists who lack an understanding of the gravity of language in trans people's lives. In a moment that felt ordinary to me, I witnessed a colleague ask presenters in a trans-inclusive language workshop about the pronunciation of *hir* (from the ze/hir/hirs pronoun series) as /hir/, which he found surprising based on the spelling. I learned later that his observation was perceived by some trans participants as challenging the legitimacy of ze/hir pronouns. As a linguist, I recognised the question as driven by curiosity and genuine interest (I was delighted to see my colleague at the workshop!), but the trans nonlinguists were reminded of the perpetual demands we face to convince cis people of the validity of our language. In other cases, curiosity leads to more blatant social violations, as when a friendly meeting with a cisgender colleague turned into an exhausting, multihour Q&A regarding my gender identity and transition, peppered with apologies for the personal nature of the questions and acknowledgements that this was not the conversation we met to have. Curiosity is a

luxury, and one which may be bought at another's expense; here, the cost was my limited physical energy.

Finally, linguists' desire to assert linguistic authority must be reconsidered as part of an ongoing project of recognising the expertise of lived experience and the novice status linguists must at times occupy. Put another way, trans people haven't flocked to linguistics because linguists have apparently yet to realise how much they have to learn. The same forms of transphobia and exclusion found throughout the academy and other institutions of power are found in our disciplines, and scholars of language and gender must be particularly cautious about old transphobia dressed up in new terminology (e.g. 'gender critical feminism').

I couldn't begin to count the number of conversations I've had in which cisgender linguists have passed judgement on trans people's language in ways they undoubtedly perceived as supportive but were in fact anything but. Cis colleagues have expressed disappointment when trans people blend traditionally feminine and masculine forms rather than being 'more innovative.' They have encouraged their nonbinary students to use more 'positive' language rather than defining themselves by what they are not. They have even, in the midst of a job interview, spent half an hour justifying their choice to misgender the trans people they know. Linguists have kindly informed me that trans researchers who study trans people are more biased than their cis counterparts (strangely, the same logic doesn't seem to apply to cis researchers who study cis people, perhaps because it would indict nearly the entire field) and that there is no point to studying trans people unless you are comparing them to a 'normal', 'heterosexual' population. What these examples have in common is how the individuals delivering them seemed to find a sense of great value – even delight – in their contributions, as if they had hit on something a trans person never would. The authority of being a linguist was apparently enough. There are so many opportunities for linguistics to rise to the challenges posed by the communities the field has excluded and dominated, but this is impossible without becoming more comfortable relinquishing our linguistic authority.

Trans linguistics, as I see it, is not only a label for community-based linguistic research with trans communities, but an opportunity to reconsider fundamental issues through a trans lens. In this sense, trans linguistics is not exclusively for trans thinkers, but for anyone who aims to fully divest from transphobic worldviews while meeting the moral obligation to materially invest in the wellbeing of trans humans, including supporting and amplifying the voices of trans students and scholars. It is equally important for trans linguists to address the needs of and questions raised by thinkers and activists who are Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC), disabled, speakers of nondominant languages and varieties, and otherwise

marginalised, some of whom will also be trans. Realising a liberatory, transformed linguistics grounded in social justice requires the learning of new values, skills and roles, and the unlearning of others.

So, where are all the trans people? We are here, and we are asking for more. The question that occupies my thoughts now is how the discipline will answer.

## About the author

Lal Zimman is an Associate Professor of Linguistics and Affiliated Faculty in Feminist Studies at UC Santa Barbara. His research takes a sociocultural linguistic approach to language and trans communities, applying a variety of methods to issues including embodiment, the gendered voice, the theorisation of identity and trans-affirming linguistic practices.

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