GENDER IN LANGUAGE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE NEED FOR GENDER-NEUTRAL PRONOUNS

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Abstract: This paper is the result of a library research undertaken to examine the necessity to introduce 'gender-neutral' pronouns into language and thus transform the prejudices in society with regards to those who do not conform to expected gender roles and behaviour. It examines the existing methods of implementing the usage of gender-neutral pronouns as well as introduction of pronouns which will encompass all genders without isolating and targeting them pejoratively. Gender-neutral pronouns as both a "modern" concept and an existing matter in certain languages is examined to reiterate the stance that gender is not binary and perpetuation of gender roles and behaviour occurs through how language is used.

Keywords: Cisgender, Gender, Gender-Neutral, Gender Non-Conforming, Gender-Sensitisation, Transgender.

Introduction: The topic of grammatical gender in many of the world's languages is something that linguists have been pondering over for a long time, with no resolution in sight. In this essay, the complicated topic of grammatical gender such as 'masculine', 'feminine', 'neuter' and the many other varieties (both sex based and non-sex based genders) that exist in the languages of the world, will not be dealt with. This essay will deal with the existence of gender-neutral pronouns in the world's languages, creation of gender-neutral pronouns to reflect the progressive climate (linguistic prescriptivism), and the topic of 'genderlects'. The invented gender-neutral pronoun 'Ne'[1] will be used by the author in this essay unless and until the use of a gender-specific pronoun is warranted. The following table illustrates how this will work:

	Nominative (subject)	Objective (object)	Possessive determiner	Possessive Pronoun	Reflexive
She	She cried.	I called her.	Her eyes hurt.	That is hers.	For herself.
He	He cried.	I called him.	His eyes hurt.	That is his.	For himself.
It	It cried.	I called it.	Its eyes hurt.	That is its.	For itself.
They	They cried.	I called them.	Their eyes hurt.	That is theirs.	For themselves.
Ne	Ne cried.	I called nem.	Nir eyes hurt.	That is nirs.	For nemself.

The need for the use of gender-neutral pronouns is not all that recent. Earliest attempts to bring about a gender-neutral tone in the English language dates back to the 1700s. The use of 'Ne' hasn't shown up conclusively in any writings but Dennis Baron, in nir essay 'The Words that Failed: A chronology of early nonbinary pronouns' states that, the appearance of the word can be assumed to have been around 1850[2].

Gender-Neutral Pronouns in Existence: Unlike popular belief, gender-neutrality in languages is actually more common than gender-specificity. The languages belonging to the Indo-European and Austro-Asiatic families are known to have gender-specificity within them but even some of the languages within these families do not display gender-specificity. For example, Bengali uses the same pronoun for both the binary genders of men and women; 'S/he is coming' is /O asche/. The same is true of languages such as Odiya, Assamese, Armenian, Persian etc. These languages lack gender-specific pronouns as well as grammatical gender. Though, to distinguish between the professions, sometimes suffixes are added. Mostly, it is not considered grammatically invalid to omit these suffixes.

However, the lack of gender-specific pronouns in genderless languages does not always signal the lack of grammatical gender or sex-based gender differentiation in the languages. For example, Finnish (a language belonging to the Uralic or Finno-Ugric language family) has only gender-neutral pronouns and does not have grammatical gender. In Finnish, *hän* is used to refer to both s/he but the problem arises in certain cases where the traditional word for something has 'man' or *mies* in it. The word continues to be used, such as in *puhemies* or chairman, even when the 'chairman' is a cisgender woman, transgender man/woman, gender-non-conforming person or anybody who belongs to the vast gender spectrum. By referring to a cisgender woman who occupies the 'chairman' position as *rouva puhemies* (Mrs or Madame Chairman), Finnish also imposes the sanction of marriage upon the appointee.

Hungarian also faces flak for the lack of gender-neutral terms for professions, although they have gender-neutral pronouns. The necessity for adding a suffix that indicates the difference between male and female professionals in Hungarian has been criticized by Hungarian women, transgender people, non-gender conforming people etc because this places precedence on male professions, emphasises that a female is performing work and completely disregards that it needn't be either of the binary genders or sexes working in that profession.

There are certain languages such as Malayalam, Tamil etc which have gender-specific pronouns but also have a third-person pronoun which is gender-neutral and can be used in place of these pronouns; *avar* or *avangal* can be used just like 'they' in English is used to present a gender-neutral text. However, the difference is that when 'they' is used, the grammar of English is violated whereas in the case of Malayalam and Tamil, this can be used interchangeably with the gender-specific pronouns in most cases other than for a few exceptions.

Now, what can be seen from the examples given above is that there are many languages in existence in the world which have gender-neutral pronouns and completely disregard grammatical gender. Yet, for some reason, they continue to have suffixes that try to distinguish between the terms used for professions done by 'men' and 'women'. This seems to have no linguistic reason and the sole reason for the evolution of this method of differentiation seems to have been socially motivated to enforce power relations.

Creation of Gender-Neutral Pronouns: Coming to the creation of gender-neutral pronouns, the creation to make news most recently was the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun *Hen*. The pronoun was first introduced in 1966, then 1994 and recently in 2010, when it started making its appearance in books, magazines and journals. It finally found its way into the education system of Sweden when, in July 2014, it was announced that *Hen* would make it into *Svenska Akademiens Ordlista*, which is the official glossary of the Swedish Academy. Before that, *Hen* started making a regular appearance in Egalia, a preschool in Sweden[3]. However *Hen* is still not widespread in Sweden, unlike what the rest of the world may perceive. One of the leading newspapers of Sweden, *Dagens Nyheter*, has banned the use of *Hen* in its official publications. The Swedish Parliament has banned the use of *Hen* in official government documents, although the spoken debates and written motions have been excluded.

The lack of gender-neutral pronouns may seem like a small issue or even a non-issue to some people but it's the denial of identity to another section of people. For example, in English, there is no gender-neutral honorific that can be used to refer to somebody in the stead of Sir/Madam. So, even the creation of gender-neutral pronouns such as 'Ne', 'Ve' etc don't reflect complete gender-neutrality. However, this does not mean that the concept of a gender-neutral pronoun for formal address is unknown. For example, in Malayalam, */thaankal/* or */medhavi/* is used for both Sir/Madam; such as, Respected Sir/Madam would be */Bahumaanapetta Medhavi/*.

According to Navadeep Bharat, who identifies nemself as genderqueer and agender, 'the mainstream gives transgender persons space[4] and yet doesn't let them live as human beings with rights'. Bharat states how the mainstream society expects the so-called "outcasts" to abide by all the rules of the

gendered society, including the matter of language; even when they have been recognized as being outside the realm of traditional binary genders (N. Bharat, personal communication, March 5, 2016). This is exactly what is happening in the matter of creating gender-neutral pronouns. A systematic re-examination of language is not being undertaken, in order to alter every instance of gender-specificity within a particular language. Transgender people, genderqueer people, agender people are now becoming more visible but the language is not evolving to reflect this visibility. Take the case of Manobi Bandopadhyay, India's first transgender principal[5]. She identifies herself as a woman and also underwent a sex-change operation. The newspaper article reporting the news about her appointment referred to her as 'she', as Dr. Bandopadhyay prefers.

Now, take the case of Mx. Anindita Mukherjee[6], the first student in India to be awarded a degree with Mx as the honorific. Mx (pronounced either /ˈmɪks/ or /ˈmʌks/) is a gender-neutral honorific, used in place of the gender-specific Mr/Ms. The use of Mx has gained popularity in the English-speaking world over the past few years, with the adoption of the honorific being quite rapid in the United Kingdom; and in 2015, the Oxford English Dictionary added it into its list.

Taking this into account, NALSAR University awarded Mx. Mukherjee nir degree with this honorific. Ne also stated that ne prefers to be referred to as 'they' rather than 'she'. The author of this essay prefers to use the pronoun 'Ne' as it doesn't violate English grammar conventions like 'they'. However, the issue here is that, all of the mainstream articles which reported this news, referred to nem as 'her' when in reality, ne specified that ne prefers a gender-neutral pronoun.

The case given above perfectly showcases the necessity that exists for the creation of a gender-neutral pronoun and recommended usage of it. The recommended usage can perhaps be included within the guidelines of newspapers, journals, magazines etc. Perhaps the authors of the newspaper articles were unwilling to violate English grammar conventions by using the pronoun 'they' but the reality in this case is that the authors of the articles did not factor the preferences of the individual into account, even when it was explicitly specified.

What is Genderlect and How Does it Factor Into The Gender-Neutrality Debate: The concept of 'genderlect' was put forward by Deborah Tannen in the book 'You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in conversation'. The basic tenet of Tannen's research is that the binary genders of men and women possess different methods of conversing due to social conditioning. In short, men and women have different conversational styles and thus misunderstandings arise out of this.

Now, the concept of 'genderlect' can be broken down further into 'genderlects' among the LGBTQIA community, the different communication styles among cisgender and transgender persons, the different communication styles that exist within the sub-cultures of the transgender community itself (such as the Hijra community) etc.

The topic of 'genderlects' is important for the gender-neutrality debate because the original concept, when it was first put forward, made people sit up and realise that misunderstandings between men and women exist because of the social conditioning in the manners of speech and behaviour and that it wasn't solely the result of biological difference. This in short showcased that gender is a construct and with changes being introduced to social conditioning of what is 'masculine' and 'feminine'; gender lines and identities would blur.

Many transgender persons prefer to use the 'Spivak pronouns' which are an invented set of gender-neutral pronouns attributed to Michael Spivak, a mathematician. It solidified its identity as a gender-neutral pronoun set when it was used in a gaming platform where it turned out to be immensely popular. Another set of gender-neutral pronouns that are somewhat popular is 'Ze and hir'. When people who are unaware of the existence of these invented pronouns hear or see them in use, misunderstanding and confusion are likely to be there; in turn, enforcing the existence of 'genderlects'.

When it comes to the Hijra community, the entire set of Western ideas of sexuality and gender is challenged. The Hijra community has a complex set of practices which set them apart from the Western concept of being a transgender person but which is included within the South Asian concept of third gender. They prefer referring to themselves with feminine pronouns and speak in the feminine sense but identify themselves as being neither of the biological sexes of male and female. The concept of 'genderlect' can also be attributed to them; apart from referring to themselves in the feminine sense, they also possess their own words and phrases to communicate in, which is the secret language of 'Hijra Farsi'[7]. They refer to begging as *dheengna*, sex work as *raarha*, performing at ceremonies as *toli*, their colourful and bright saris as *satla* etc. The words also do not change with the region the Hijra community belongs to. They are used along with the native languages the community speaks and words from other languages have entered Hijra Farsi. Even gestures are a part of their 'genderlect', for example; the method of clapping that they use to get one's attention involves a special way of holding both the palms together.

Conclusion: The need of the hour is a gender-sensitisation drive wherein 'gender-sensitisation' truly encompasses what gender is; which is a vast spectrum and not just two parts. The topic of gender-neutrality in language evolved from the feminist movement, beginning with the removal of sexist language, creating the honorific Ms to use in the place of Miss and Mrs (which indicate the marital status of a woman, something which men are not subjected to through the use of Mr), sensitising people into using 'humanity' in place of 'mankind', and in short bringing women on par with men in the visible world and visible languages. Although the struggle has been long, it has been fruitful. Therefore, evolving gender-neutral pronouns to encompass the people who don't identify with the gender binary shouldn't be viewed as impossible or as an attack on the purity of language. When Ms was first introduced (it started appearing in print sometime around 1923), the backlash was immense as it was viewed as an infringement upon the sanctity of the English language and yet, more than 90 years later, it is in widespread use, along with Mrs and Miss (Zimmer, 2009). This instance alone shows that it is possible for languages to adapt according to the changing political climate; all they need is time.

Besides, the argument that the purity of a language must be maintained, especially that of a language such as English which borrows heavily from other languages, is inherently contradictory to the existence of languages which are a product of years and years of change.

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