Original Paper

What's in a Sociopolitical Pronoun?

A Linguist Looks at Grammatical Gender in Gender Declaration

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Abstract

Language practices, whether global, national, or at the personal level, carry influence for both good and ill. It is important that linguistic ventures into sociopolitical realms be well-informed. One such incursion has arisen from professors and administrators in university and government offices, who declare their pronoun choice, appending statements such as my pronouns are she, her, hers, at the end of their signature lines in letters and emails. While this assertion is straightforward in the English language, with its limited gender and case morphology, the linguistic landscape in other languages navigates a much greater challenge. Details of gender representation in the grammars of five other languages reveal a complexity not imaginable for English. Should the practice spread internationally, gender pronoun declarations will look very different.

Keywords

pronouns in the world's languages, gender markers, sociopolitics of language, complex morphology, preferred pronouns

1. Introduction

Language policies insinuate themselves solemnly through cultures, carrying innuendos, attitudes, and strong opinions about right and wrong, high and low, fair and iniquitous. The particular virtuous stance, as transitorily promoted by some, can be clearly signaled through word choice, depending on *Zeitgeist*, trends, and political climate. This universal spectacle is manifest in a currently growing practice at university and state institutions to include a line stating *my pronouns are* at the end of their signatures, following their titles (e.g., Associate Professor), degrees (e.g., PhD), department affiliation (e.g., Psychology) and university positions (e.g., Vice Dean). The additional entry at the bottom line of the signature field, a linguistic gender declaration, appears as below:

<p style="text-align:center">My pronouns are *she, her, hers*.</p>

Thoroughness in English would require the reflexive *herself* to be included in the listing, as well as consideration, for professors, of certain other forms, as below.

·   My pronouns are *she, her, hers, herself*;

·   My Latin-derived noun is *alumna* and my adjective is *emerita*.

Choosing *they, them* as the mandatory (singular *they, them*) pronoun—as does Taylor Mason in the TV series *Billions*, leads to the form *themself*, as in *They selected the course textbook themself*. This term violates syntactic and semantic rules, but, overall, according to normal processes bringing new words into the language, *themself* can arise as additional term. Missing from this list is the traditional English language feminine suffix (in the Germanic tradition) *-ess* (e.g., *stewardess*) previously appended to vocations, for which *ad hoc* solutions (e.g., *flight attendant*) have unfolded.

2. Method

The procedure was to examine how the practice of pronoun declaration predictably manifests in languages other than gender- and case-impoverished English. English has essentially lost gender distinctions in the morphological repertory, except for a few outliers (e.g., third person *he, she; him, her*; endings in *-ess, ette* for nouns). Other languages in the Indoeuropean and nonIndoeuropean families devote considerably more grammatical energy to specifying gender. A few of these languages were examined to provide a comparison to English. Languages investigated were Spanish, German, Garifuna, Japanese, and Greek.

3. Results

While English pronouns carry gender information only in the third person singular, Spanish pronouns, as an example of an Indoeuropean Romance Language, signal gender also in the first person plural, *nosotros* and *nosotras,* and second person plural, *vosotros* and *vosotras*, referring to masculine and feminine *we/us* and *you/you*. Turning to the Germanic family (of which English is a member), in modern German, because of extensive representation of gender throughout the pronouns system, the professed pronouns declaration must be somewhat longer. Different from English, it is common to use a definite article to designate a person, as in *der Hans*, *die Angela;* the article (*der* or *die*) must, of course, take the masculine or feminine form. In using German, it is obligatory to explicitly represent gender in titles, occupations, hobbies, and nationalities. When Angela Merkel came into office, there was a short wave of discomfort associated with replacing, for the first time ever, the usual term *Kanzler* (*chancellor*) with *Kanzlerin*, the feminine form. Because the feminine ending is obligatory on nouns of occupation, this new term, despite its initial strangeness, was soon generally accepted. All definite and indefinite articles, adjectives and personal pronouns are gender-marked and declined, leading to this comprehensive listing by persons declaring themselves for the feminine gender:

·   My personal pronouns are *sie, ihr, sich*.

·   My possessive pronouns are *ihre* and *ihrer*.

·   My definite and indefinite articles are *die, der, keine, keiner, eine, einer*, *solche, solcher*.

·   My modifying adjectives end in *-e, -er, -en*.

·   My relative pronouns are *die, der*, and *deren, welche, welcher*.

·   The singular ending on my nationality, professional title, hobby or other social designation (American, professor, artist, runner, doctor) is *-in* as in *Amerikanerin, Professorin, Kunstlerin,* or *¨-in* as in *Läuferin*, *Ärztin*" and *innen* in the plural form.

Other languages have subtler requirements, but these also have heft, and would require consideration in a gender declaration. Garifuna, an Arawakan language of Central America, has men's vs. neutral speech in some grammatical constructions and a limited number of vocabulary items. Men's speech is currently used primarily by conservative elderly male speakers, but all fluent speakers over forty years of age know the forms. Neutral speech is used by almost everyone, but people will refer to it as *women's speech*. Among the different words are words for *I* and *you* (singular; there is no formality distinction): *nugúya, I* (neutral) - *áun* "I" (men's). This is gendered, because only men use the second word to refer to themselves: *bugúya, you* (neutral) - *amûrü* (men's). The gender difference refers to the sex of the speaker rather than that of the referent.

The Japanese language is known for detailed and pervasive sociopolitical markings. *I* is partially marked for gender and *you* in written form can be marked for gender. The term *I* in Japanese is *watashi* 私 which is generic, but is commonly associated with women. Men would only use *watashi* in a formal context, but within a more informal context, men would or could use the term *boku* 僕 (which is socially correct and polite but can also be used as a second-person pronoun to refer to young boys) or *ore* 俺 (which gives a more masculine/rough image and is highly informal). Second person pronouns like *you* are not often used because they are considered invasive and impolite. To say *you*, the most natural way to call the name with *-san* to address politeness (e.g., *Sato-san*). One might nonetheless use *anata* in written language. 貴方 (*anata*) can refer to either a man or a woman who is of the same status as you or inferior (most generic and common). Written 貴女 (pronounced *anata* or *kijo*), it refers to a woman with the same or higher status than you. The equivalent for men would be 貴殿 (*kiden*) or 貴男 (pronounced *anata* or $_{kinan}$), but 貴男 is extremely rare.

Now the spotlight turns to Modern Greek. Here, use of a definite article with a proper name, unlike the optional usage in German, is obligatory, as in ο Γιάννης, η Ελένα (where *o* and *η* are masculine and feminine *the*, respectively, with *John, Elena*). Gender designation pervades the grammar, embracing an even more compelling complexity than German. Personal and relative pronouns, adjectival endings, nationality suffixes, personal name diminutives, and morphological elements conveying vocations and occupations all carry obligatory gender markings. A preferred pronoun and related gender-grammatical declaration in Modern Greek (Papaloizos, 2009) targeting the feminine forms, looks like this:

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·   My strong pronouns are αυτή, αυτής, αυτήν, αυτές, αυτών;

·   My weak pronouns are τη, της, την, τες, των, τους, τις.

·   My possessive pronouns are της, τους.

·   My indefinite pronouns are μία, καμιά, καθεμιά, κάποια, μερικές, άλλη.

·   My definite articles are η, της, τη (την), οι, των, τις.

·   My indefinite articles are μια, μιας.

·   My relative pronoun is η οποία.

·   My demonstrative pronouns are αυτή, εκείνη, τέτοια, τόση.

·   My interrogative pronoun is ποια.

·   My adjectival endings, depending on class, are ή, η, της, ές, ών, ων,ες, α, ας, ιά, ιάς, ιές, ιών, ούς.

·   Nationality suffixes, corresponding to my countries of origin, are ή, ίδα, ινή, έζα, or άνα.

·   Diminutives for my name are ίτσα and -ούλα.

·   Designations of my vocations and occupations include άλα, ρία, ισσα (e.g., δασκάλα, female teacher, καθηγήτρια, female professor, καταστηματάρχισσα, female store owner).

4. Discussion

This selected survey of the presence of gender in a few languages other than English suggests that grammatical gender has the potential to reflect an essential, wide-ranging, and embodied reality in linguistic structure. This presence occurs through the use of explicit morphological markers throughout grammatical categories, including nouns, pronouns, and adjectives. In at least one language (Modern Greek), proper, personal nouns must be introduced by a gender-marked definite article. An array of relativizing pronouns are obligatorily marked for gender, leading to a dramatic depth of this practice.

From this sample of the world's languages, the declaration of preferred gender markers, if the custom spreads internationally, may confront a complexity not at first recognized by Anglophiles, the initiators of this practice. We have much to learn from examining form and meaning in languages other than our own.

Acknowledgments

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