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Language’s Importance in Discussing Trans People

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In his iconic dystopian novel, 1984, George Orwell describes how language influences perception and reality. The protagonist works for the totalitarian government, purging words from the language, which prevents citizens from expressing certain ideas. That’s how it felt before I found the language to articulate the fact that I’m a transgender man.

Of those who understand the power of language and word choice, journalists rank high on the list. Journalists learn to write clearly and accurately while avoiding bias. However, some biases are so ingrained within society that nearly everyone, including journalists, fail to realize their impact or even their existence.

The language used to discuss transgender people is a clear example. Many common terms imply that trans people are not actually our respective genders, that we are deceiving others by pretending to be something we’re not. Especially when publicized by reporting, these terms harm trans people by perpetuating the falsehood that we are delusional or deceptive.

“Gender Identity”

The phrase, “gender identity” is redundant because gender is a part of identity. Cisgender journalists often write statements like, “MJ identifies as male,” whereas if I were cis they would write simply, “MJ is male.”

Trans activist Asher Bauer writes in an essay titled *Not Your Mom’s Trans 101*, “self-identifying is the only meaningful way to determine gender.” Bauer continues, explaining that everybody self-identifies,

“If you answer the question, ‘are you a man or woman’ with ‘yes’ [or ‘no’], you have just self-identified.”

Bauer adds that cis people don’t consider their genders to be “self-identified,” they consider them “self-evident.”

That’s transphobic. Although gender is an aspect of a person’s identity, there is no reason to say “gender identity” only when referring to trans people. Doing so suggests that trans people’s genders are less real and valid than cis people’s.

A simple example: “Jane is a woman and her gender is female.” This is more succinct, accurate and respectful than “Jane identifies as a woman and her gender identity is female.”

Saying, “He identifies as male,” leaves the sinister implication, “but he’s actually not.”

“Biologically” or “Born Male/Female”

Describing a trans woman as “born or biologically male,” or a trans man as “born or biologically female” is just another way to misgender trans people. Misgendering trans people is extremely disrespectful as well as incorrect.

In a 2014 TV interview, trans actress Laverne Cox interjected to correct CBS host Gayle King, when she described Cox as “born male.” Cox replied, “I was assigned male at birth, is the way I like to put it, because I think we’re born who we are and the gender

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thing is something someone imposes on you. And so, I was assigned male at birth but I always felt like I was a girl.”

The distinction between “born/biologically” and “assigned at birth” may seem trivial, but it’s important. The phrase “assigned at birth” acknowledges that our society assigns genders to infants based on the appearance of the infants’ genitals. Since gender is a part of people’s personalities, and infants have not yet developed personalities, it’s clear that infants are not born with genders. Rather, adults assign genders to infants.

Some may balk at this, claiming something about “biology,” “chromosomes” or “reproductive organs.” Well-meaning people often differentiate between “gender” and “sex,” to simplify trans existence so cis people can understand it more easily. They might say, “gender is the brain, sex is between the legs.” However, the reality isn’t that simple.

Intersex people are born with physical traits commonly associated with both men and women. Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) increases testosterone levels in cisgender women, which can cause facial hair to appear. Hormone levels (which determine gendered traits) can vary due to injury, genetics, illness and age. Human bodies are fragile and changeable, so it’s flawed and reductive to view them as the means of determining an aspect of personality, like gender.

And of course, body parts are not inherently gendered. A penis is not inherently “male,” and a vagina is not inherently “female.” Last year, Target stopped categorizing kids’ toys by gender. Rather than assigning dolls for girls and trucks for boys, Target acknowledged that any toy can be for any child. Physical traits are no different. Facial hair is only masculine because people say it is. But in reality, primary and secondary sex characteristics occur in people of all genders.

Describing people’s body parts as “male anatomy” or “lady parts” denies trans people the autonomy to describe our own experience. It tells trans people “I know your body better than you do.” Like using incorrect names or pronouns, misgendering a person’s body sends

the message, “I don’t believe you and I refuse to respect you.”

A trans person’s body parts belong to that person. So, if a man has a vagina, then his vagina is male genitals because they are genitals which belong to a male. If a woman has a penis and testicles, then those are her lady parts because they belong to a lady. A non-binary person’s reproductive organs are also non-binary.

Of course, people may choose to describe themselves and their bodies however they please. The point is, it’s up to each trans person to make their own decision.

Birth Names and Pronouns

Including a trans person’s birth name in reporting or repeating it to someone is nearly always unnecessary. Using trans people’s birth names, even in a past tense like “John used to be Jane,” implies that birth names are “real names,” which is untrue. Sharing a trans person’s birth name isn’t just irrelevant information, it’s also offensive.

Local media outlets often write about trans people using incorrect pronouns and birth names. This is particularly insulting and tragic when the article is about a transgender murder victim.

Many trans people were never our assigned birth names and genders. So, even when writing or speaking about them before they came out, it’s best to refrain from retroactively misgendering them or using their birth names.

“That Transgender Transgendered” and Other Grammar Errors

“Transgender” is an adjective, not a verb or a noun. “Transgender” is correct, “transgendered” is incorrect. “Transgender person” is correct, “A transgender” is incorrect. Last year, the Washington Post began using the singular form of the pronoun, “they,” to refer to non-binary people who use that pronoun for themselves. Although some people claim “they”



must only be plural, it’s rude and inaccurate to use “he” or “she” pronouns when referring to someone who uses “they/them” pronouns. Plus, the claim that “they” only refers to plural nouns is simply wrong. Informally, people regularly use the singular “they” when they don’t know or assume the subject’s gender. For example:

Person A: “Somebody called for you earlier.”
Person B: “What did they want?”

It’s not difficult nor grammatically incorrect to use the singular “they” when writing or speaking about non-binary people. We do it all the time.

Professional Organizations Taking Note

Professional associations have recognized the importance of accurate and respectful reporting about transgender people. GLAAD, the National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association, Media Matters for America and the Associated Press have developed and published guidelines for writing about trans people.

Media Matters’ guidelines go beyond outlining appropriate terminology. Their 2016 article titled *The Do’s And Don’ts On Reporting On Anti-Bullying And Nondiscrimination Protections For LGBT Students*, explains that reporters should avoid uncritically repeating false, fear-mongering myths about nondiscrimination policies, focusing on medical issues of transition, asking inappropriate questions about trans people’s bodies and relying on cisgender perspectives about transgender issues. Although national news organizations are catching up, many local publications still fail to report about trans people with accuracy and respect. In October 2016, the Akron Beacon

Journal published an article which claimed a transgender girl was “born a boy,” and included poll results about trans people’s restroom usage instead of including the evidence showing that nondiscrimination protections for trans people do not increase threats to public safety.

Why It Matters

This isn’t an issue of so-called “political correctness.”

In the first 11 months of 2016, there were 26 trans people reported killed, more than any previous year. Cis men killed trans women upon realizing they were trans or after having sex with them, projecting their own self-loathing onto the women. This self-loathing can stem from a misconception that they are gay, because they felt attracted to a woman they view as “actually male.” So, when journalists and others spread the notion that women are male because they’re trans, they perpetuate the incorrect ideas behind these acts of violence.

While the causes behind transphobic violence certainly aren’t limited to reporters misgendering trans people, journalism still influences perception. If cis men didn’t perceive trans women as male, they may refrain from killing them for being trans. If politicians didn’t know their constituents perceive trans people as deceptive sinners, then they wouldn’t propose “bathroom bills” which waste time and money, dissuade businesses from creating jobs in those states and cause trans students to get urinary tract infections from avoiding the restroom all day. Although word choice in journalism isn’t the only factor in transphobic violence and discrimination, it is an important one. ●

“Misgendering a person’s body sends the message, ‘I don’t believe you and I refuse to respect you.’”