

## 6 Reforming/Resisting: “It’s Like a Kind of Sexual Racism”

Linguists continue (rightly) to be impressed by the highly structured nature and essentially unlimited expressive capacity of all human languages, including sign languages used among communities of deaf people and disparaged varieties of spoken language like African American English. If languages are all essentially equal, then how could some speakers legitimately complain that inadequate or problematic linguistic resources contribute to their social oppression? Additionally, as linguists (again rightly) observe, much linguistic change happens below the level of conscious attention. Isn’t it pointless to push for linguistic reform?

Given this background, it’s not surprising that linguists lagged behind many other academics in recognizing that linguistic resources readily available at any given time might not equally serve the interests of all members of a particular linguistic community. And academics generally lagged behind political activists on language matters, at least in part because so many were in dominant social groups and did not find themselves bumping up against what seemed problematic linguistic practices.

But times have changed. Linguists, especially but not only sociolinguists, increasingly recognize that linguistic practices are far less uniform across speakers and communities than they might seem. Variation is the norm and to a considerable extent it is socially driven, a valuable resource for people that helps them adopt diverse social personae and maneuver in the social landscapes they inhabit, their diverse communities of practice, and their travels among them. It is not just pronunciation or syntax that varies – it is both the inventory of lexical items, words, and other meaningful units, and also the ways in which they are deployed in linguistic practice. And it is not just the lexicon of content words that reformers seek to change.

Linguistic reform of the lexicon can involve creation of new forms (*Ms.* as a social title for women that does not indicate marital status) or shifting of familiar forms in order to help change the phenomena they label (e.g., extending *marriage* so it is no longer confined to unions consisting of a woman and a man forming the core of a family). Sometimes there are efforts to eliminate forms deemed problematic because of the baggage they carry (*dumb*), perhaps replacing them with alternatives (*mute* or *without speech*) or perhaps trying to retire them altogether. And reform can target more abstract elements of language. In this [chapter I](#) will talk about gendered pronouns in English. In other work I have discussed socially motivated uses of grammatical gender in languages like French and Hindi.<sup>1</sup>

Few attempts at reform sail through without encountering pushback of various kinds. Along the way, I will mention resistance to reform attempts. Resisting can take many forms: offering alternative changes, trying to show the reformers that their mission is misguided, or open mockery. And of course attempted reform fails if it is ignored, if no community embraces it and joins with the reformers.

## The Birth of Sexism

In principle, it should be easy to add new words as needed for new things or new ideas, ways of organizing our experience. Human languages all benefit from the design feature that linguist Charles Hockett dubbed *dual articulation*. That is, the meaningful units of language are composed from a small set of recurring units that do not in themselves carry meaning. In spoken languages these are units of sound that can easily be put together in new ways to form new words. (Signed languages, too, can and do readily add new expressions.) When there is need to express new content, we can always create a new word to designate the new content. The problem dissolves. Or so it might seem.

The feminist psychologist Sandra Lipsitz Bem, a good friend, spoke to me on more than one occasion about her struggles in the mid-to-late 1960s to find a name for what she and other pioneers in the 'second wave' of feminism were addressing as part of what became known as the women's movement. "It's like a kind of 'sexual racism' – a 'sexism' – that, like racism, infects not only attitudes and assumptions but also a wide range of cultural discourses and social institutions." That's the sort of thing she remembered saying in various talks she gave. On page 1 of her 1993 *The Lenses of Gender*, she offers the following. "Beginning in the 1960s, the second major wave of feminist advocacy raised social consciousness . . . by exposing – and *naming* (my italics) – the 'sexism' in all policies and practices that explicitly discriminate on the basis of sex." Notice that in creating this name, she did not just put together sounds in some arbitrary fashion. Rather she used components like *-ism* and *sex* that were already in circulation, carrying some content and also some useful lexical baggage.

It is highly likely that a number of different people came up with *sexism* and the related *sexist* independently. In a 1985 article in *American Speech*, Fred R. Shapiro, a legal scholar and librarian interested in word histories, does not mention Sandy Bem when discussing the introduction into public discourse of *sexism* and *sexist*. He cites instead a 1968 talk by Pauline M. Leet at Franklin and Marshall College for the earliest usage of *sexist* he was able to locate. Leet explicitly develops the parallel of sexual and racial oppression: "both the racist and the sexist are acting as if all that has happened has never happened, and both of them are making decisions and coming to conclusions about someone's value by referring to factors which are in both cases irrelevant."<sup>2</sup> Shapiro cites the 1968 book *Born Free* by Carolyn Bird for the earliest printed uses of *sexism* and *sexist*, uses that credited the mimeographed speech by Leet.

Later that same year, apparently without knowing of Leet's and Bird's uses, Sheldon Vanauken, who taught history at Lynchburg College in Virginia, published a small pamphlet called *Freedom*

for *Movement Girls – Now*. Vanauken uses *sexism* and *sexist* throughout that book. In a “Note on Words,” he explains his choice.

The parallels between *sexism* and *racism* are sharp and clear. And just as a *racist* is one who proclaims or justifies or assumes the supremacy of one race over another, so a *sexist* is one who proclaims or justifies or assumes the supremacy of one sex (guess which) over the other. But the meaning of *sexist* is obvious. And that’s the whole point. It’s a better word than *male chauvinist*, which is bulky, usually mispronounced, and imprecise in meaning. . . . *Sexist*, on the other hand, is short, precise, instantly understandable. It has a short, vicious sound, and it inherits the ugly overtones of *racist*. It is potentially a word of power.<sup>3</sup>

*Male chauvinist* and *male chauvinism*, which began being used in the 1950s and which Vanauken advocated dropping in favor of *sexist* and *sexism*, were undoubtedly inspired by the leftist *white chauvinism*, which had been in use for some time with much the same coverage as *white supremacy*. But *white chauvinism* was mainly used by a small political elite, and the wider public were not familiar with the expression. Shapiro also points out that the expression *male chauvinist pig* was often used quite mockingly in the press, and *male chauvinism* focused on beliefs and attitudes and was less readily useable for systemic issues that disadvantaged women. In other words, *sexism* brought more welcome and less objectionable lexical baggage than its competitors.

Since the late 1960s, the suffix *-ism* has been widely used in the US to draw attention to systematic disadvantaging of people on a variety of bases: *ableism* (Merriam-Webster dates usage in advocacy for rights of those with disabilities to 1983), *ageism* (coined in 1969 by gerontologist Robert C. Butler), and *audism* (coined by Deaf Culture scholar Tom Humphries in 1975) are a few examples, all of which have been around for decades now. But for a variety of reasons, including the size and impact of the social

movements involved, these other *-ism* words have not gotten the wide traction of either *racism* or *sexism*. They are mostly used in communities of advocates for the groups in question. This does not mean that they have been useless. DeafBlind writer and activist John Lee Clark writes that adding a new word “can change the way we see everything.”<sup>4</sup> Clark talks about how *audism*, though introduced as noted above by a deaf intellectual, only really gained traction after hearing and sighted psycholinguist Harlan Lane used it in his 1993 book, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community*. As Clark observes, “Sighted Deaf people had always known that hearing society discriminated against them, but the new word suddenly made it much easier to identify and analyze.” For blind people, including those who are also deaf, the term *vidism* has been coined to add specificity beyond the generic *ableism*. But Clark sees a need for something over and above combining *audism* and *vidism*. He wants another term to help think about the special ways in which the DeafBlind community has been disempowered by the active discouragement of full use of various different tactile modes of sensing. Much of the hearing-sighted world (to which most of our globe’s people belong) has an array of practices that discourage gathering tactile information. People in many cultures do not readily touch most other people, other living things, or even inanimate stuff in their environment. Clark has recently proposed *distantism* for these attitudes and practices. Distantism, he argues, puts bubbles around people. These bubbles interfere with the kinds of physically close connections needed to develop and exploit people’s potentially quite substantial capacities to learn about one another and the world tactilely. Words like *distantism* and other *-ism* coinages can be useful even if they remain restricted to relatively small communities of practice.

Nonetheless, only *racism* and *sexism* are widely known and used. And only *racism*, at 3988, ranks among the 5000 most common words of English as determined on [wordfrequency.info](http://wordfrequency.info). Google hits on the last day of February in 2019, though an imperfect guide, gave these approximate results: *racism* 322,000,000; *sexism* 64,900,000;

*ageism* 3,520,000; *ableism* 2,520,000; and *audism*, which my word processor wanted to correct to *autism*, came in at a very distant 159,000 (about 2 weeks later, *vidism* got 7980 and *distantism* got 1450). These numbers reflect a phenomenon that feminist scholar Miranda Fricker has dubbed ‘epistemic injustice.’<sup>5</sup> What this means is that groups that are socially disadvantaged by oppressive institutions and practices or even mostly by small numbers are also at an ‘epistemic’ disadvantage. They are handicapped in their pursuit of knowledge, of understanding. An important component of this handicap is linguistic, as has been pointed out with many examples by black women thinkers, other feminists, and a host of activist scholars involved in trying to understand and combat various kinds of injustice. Labels and meanings that are most widespread and readily available tend to make existing social arrangements far easier to speak of than alternatives.

In the [next section](#) I will talk about attempts to redefine *racism*, to reshape its content so that it better covers the various kinds of factors that operate to sustain racial inequality. Before that, I will say a bit more about the checkered career of *sexism* (and also the related but much older terms *feminism* and *feminist*).

Given that second-wave feminism got a major boost from the experience of women working in the anti-racist civil rights movement in the early 1960s, it is not surprising that *sexism* took off as an all-encompassing name for a variety of matters those women and others were identifying. It is ironic, however, that, just like first-wave feminism in both the UK and the US, which pushed for suffrage and for political status for relatively affluent white women, the focus of second-wave feminism was on improving things for that same group. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* focused on the malaise that many well-educated full-time mothers and homemakers in the US felt, “the problem that has no name.” She urged them (us – I was in her target group) to hire nannies and housekeepers and find ‘fulfilling’ careers, neglecting the exploitation of low-waged domestic workers, virtually all women and many of them black women.

The feminine mystique, an ideology that presented women's all-consuming goal in life as caring for (and sexually satisfying) husbands and bearing and nurturing children, was not a problem for most black women. These women were overwhelmingly in waged labor of one kind or another. They were generally not suffering from the excessive chivalry or other constraining practices that are part of what psychologists Susan Fiske and Peter Glick have dubbed *benevolent sexism*,<sup>6</sup> which involves notions of 'protecting' and 'cherishing' women. There really is no such phenomenon as *benevolent racism* and, though benevolent sexism may have played some role in some black women's experience, it was hardly major. Any protection or cherishing they might get from lovers, husbands, brothers, or sons could be experienced as welcome respite from the indignities heaped on them in their workplaces and in so many public spaces.

A major difference between sexism and racism is that most people have intimate and often loving connections throughout much of their lives to others whose gender identity is different from theirs – offspring, parents, siblings, spouses, and lovers (for those in mixed-sex relationships). Relatively few (American) people have such connections to someone bearing a different racial label, and for even fewer do such connections persist through their lifetimes.

*Feminism* and *feminist* were terms of much longer standing than *sexism*, but they immediately came into use to label the anti-sexism efforts and those involved in them that got going in the 1960s and 1970s. Activists and intellectuals involved with both gender and racial issues within black communities, however, often found Alice Walker's *womanism* and *womanist* more appealing. "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender," proclaimed Walker. *The Womanist Reader* first appeared in 2006, and was followed six years later by *The Womanist Idea*, both important collections of womanist scholarship edited by Layli Maryapan (the first volume under the name Layli Philips).<sup>7</sup>

Social theorist Patricia Hill Collins has insightfully explored the debates among black women over the labels *womanist* and *black*

*feminist*, each of which carries its own lexical baggage and each of which can be mobilized for different purposes. She points to a tension between, on the one hand, focusing on differences among black women both now and over time and, on the other, developing social institutions and political strategies that can support a collective ‘voice’ for black women that emerges in part from conversations over time. “Whatever African-American women choose to name a Black women’s standpoint, womanism and Black feminism encounter the issues confronted by any knowledge that aims to ‘talk back’ to knowledges with more power.”<sup>8</sup> Collins insists on the critical importance of a “visionary pragmatism” that couples grand ideas of how the world should be with strong commitment to practical actions that might bring that world nearer. She cites black feminist anthropologist Johnnetta Betsch Cole, former president of Spelman College: “While it is true that without a vision the people perish, it is doubly true that without action the people and their vision perish as well.” In part because the words *sexism* and *sexist* were so often used in contexts that clearly did not include most black women’s experience, other coinages like *gendered racism*, introduced by sociologist Philomena Essed, have had considerable currency among black women intellectuals.

Recently digital media specialist and Black feminist scholar Mona Bailey came up with the portmanteau *misogynoir*, which she began using in writing by 2010.<sup>9</sup> The word, which Bailey emphasizes she intended “to describe the unique ways in which Black women [and not just any ‘women of color’] are pathologized in popular culture,” has become relatively widely used (on February 18, 2019, *misogynoir* slightly lagged the far older *audism* in Google hits with 125,000 but by February 19, 2020, it registered 286,000 and *audism* only 152,000). Trudy, self-styled womanist and creator of Gradient Lair, a digital space for Black women, has also played a large role both in spreading that word and theorizing about its significance.

One highly visible component of white mainstream anti-sexist activism was, of course, linguistic. Many feminist activists, not



only in the US but elsewhere, identified a significant range of linguistic expressions and practices as sexist and worked, with considerable success, to eliminate them. I'll have more to say about campaigns against so-called sexist language later, what they've accomplished and what they have not. It is clear, however, that launching the new labels *sexism* and *sexist* and, not long after, labels like *sexual harassment* and *date rape* and eventually *intersectionality* had enormous impact. Such linguistic reform was essential to doing both the analytical and the practical political work involved in what became known as the women's movement. It is not that there were clearly developed concepts and related publicly observable phenomena just waiting to get linguistically tagged. Rather, 'naming' areas of interest then created a publicly available space for further socially shared work on the phenomena, sometimes collaborative and sometimes contentious.

New expressions do not matter much if at all when they just lie on a shelf. They can and often do, however, give people instruments they need in order to accomplish collective social and intellectual work, and to develop concepts that can help in understanding (and changing) the social world. Of course what the words do keeps shifting and may often be contested. To see examples of this, we will look at some of what has happened and is happening to the racial ancestors of *sexism* and *sexist*.

### **Reshaping Existing Linguistic Resources: The Case of *Racism* and *Racist***

Most standard American English dictionaries explain the categories labeled by *racist* and *racism* in both race-neutral and individualistic terms. The noun form of *racist* is defined by *Oxford Online* this way: "A person who shows or feels discrimination or prejudice against people of other races, or who believes that a particular race is superior to another. Example: *'the comments have led to her being called a racist.'*" And the adjective, which can be used to categorize not only people but also actions,

institutions, and more, including words and their uses, has this entry: "Showing or feeling discrimination or prejudice against people of other races, or believing that a particular race is superior to another." Example: '*we are investigating complaints about racist abuse at the club.*'<sup>10</sup> Collins does not rely on words like *discrimination* or *prejudice*, saying that "if you describe people, things, or behavior as racist, you mean that they are influenced by the belief that some people are inferior because they belong to a particular race."<sup>11</sup> For a number of online dictionaries, entering *racist* brings up only definitions of *racism*, implying, perhaps, that a racist person is one who believes in or supports racism as they define it. And those definitions in standard dictionaries overwhelmingly focus on individuals' beliefs and actions. There is little if any attention in most established dictionaries to social practices and institutions that give systematic advantage to some at the expense of others on the basis of assignment to different racialized groups.

Activists in the civil rights movement recognized clearly that eliminating racism was not just a matter of "changing hearts and minds" but required changing laws and social practices. From the 1970s on, social theorists began arguing that to understand racism requires going beyond individuals' actions, beliefs, and attitudes to social and cultural factors. It is not that conscious ideas about one another, racially insensitive interactions, and racially charged emotions of individuals play no role in racism. Obviously they do. Rather, the point is that to tackle racism, we also need to attend to problematic social structures and practices that continue to support advantage on the basis of skin color. Here's the start of a sample definition of *racism* from that wider perspective, which readers might find useful. "Racism refers to a variety of practices, beliefs, social relations, and phenomena that work to reproduce a racial hierarchy and social structure that yield superiority, power, and privilege for some, and discrimination and oppression for others."<sup>12</sup> Of course such definitions do not really settle questions about what counts as racism or how to deploy the word.

There is a large philosophical literature on defining *race*, *racism*, and *racist*. Sally Haslanger, for example, has discussed

some of the issues involved, including why discussions of the terminology matter. And in a number of widely read papers, Jorge Garcia has argued for a focus on individual ‘vice,’ on morally reprehensible hatred or contempt or disrespect based on perceived racial identity. Charles Mills and others have criticized Garcia’s focus on what is in people’s ‘hearts,’ and discussion continues. Certainly the sociocultural framework that dominates social science discourse as well as much of the philosophical discussion can make assigning moral responsibility to individuals far more complex than views that focus on individual hearts and minds. Even though I suggested in [Chapter 3](#) that combatting racism often requires institutional policies that, for example, keep track of links between racial categories and certain sorts of outcomes, I would not want to say that the woman at the post-Charlottesville rally I attended who said she did not “see color” was racist or even that what she said was racist. Nor would I want to apply the label *racist* to everyone who dresses up in pseudo-Indian costumes to cheer on their high school football team or uses some kind of makeup to darken their face for some sort of costume party, even though such practices do, I think, help perpetuate racially unjust social arrangements. White parents who seek ‘good’ schools and ‘wholesome’ friends for their children avoid neighborhoods with a sizeable black population. In doing so, they shore up segregated living and educational systems that help foster continued racial oppression, yet characterizing such actions or the people engaging in them as racist on that basis may seem problematic.<sup>13</sup> Hearts and minds, motives, do sometimes seem morally relevant even though they tell only part of the story.

What ‘social’ notions of racism do is focus attention on the pernicious *effects* of racism on those oppressed by it. Individual people’s beliefs, affect, and motivations certainly contribute to but do not produce all, perhaps not even most, of these effects. In the US, such effects for African Americans include diminished self-esteem, increased police surveillance and incarceration, poverty and heightened stress levels, impaired physical and mental health,

de facto housing and school segregation with lowered educational resources, diminished opportunity for intergenerational accumulation of wealth, and so on. And because this broader understanding of racism links ideologies – beliefs, both acknowledged and tacit – to hierarchy and to structurally based privilege, it is not symmetric. In many ways, racism in the USA could accurately be called *white supremacy*. That term, however, is closely tied to the overt extreme bigotry and hatred promoted by the Ku Klux Klan and similar groups.

No matter what it is called, however, racism is not symmetric. In other words, the term *reverse racism* makes little sense if we are thinking of racism in social terms. People of color can (and sometimes do) negatively stereotype white people or yell insulting names at them. Doing so demonstrates what might be called *reverse racial prejudice*. It does not, however, invert existing racial hierarchies and their seriously damaging effects. But there is widespread belief that practices such as affirmative action constitute reverse racism, that they give unfair advantage to black people over white people. (There is substantial evidence that this is not so.) Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, whose work I mentioned in [Chapter 3](#), argues that the widespread use of a somewhat shifted norm of *colorblindness* is part of what supports racism in a new guise.

The word “reproduce” in the expanded definition I gave above points to the stubbornly persistent nature of racial hierarchies. In the US and elsewhere, these hierarchies are supported and sustained by what sociologist Philomena Essed dubbed *everyday racism*. Actually, that’s misleading. Essed, herself a woman of color born and educated in the Netherlands but now based in the US, first coined the Dutch expression *alledages racism*. That was the title of her 1984 book, which was translated into English less than a decade later. Everyday racism involves routine practices that reinforce racist biases and that in various ways work to elevate one group over another. Such routine practices often involve linguistic practices. Anthropological linguist Jane Hill

has explored what she calls the “everyday language of white racism.” She includes the use of terms like *squaw* that target native Americans, the use of ‘Mock Spanish’ in media and in lighthearted banter (“no problemo,” “hasta la vista”), and the repetition and wide circulation of racial slurs and stereotypes in the ‘moral panic’ that ensues when some public figure comes out with something overtly racist.

Virtually everyone living in the US, no matter what racialized group label is assigned to or claimed by them, engages in some of these arguably problematic practices. The point of the broader social perspective on racism is to help better understand the persistence of racial inequality so as to increase the chances of success in collective anti-racist projects. The goal is not to assign guilt or cast blame on a wider group of individuals, to broaden the pool of those labeled *racist*. Yet the (partial) shift in much public discourse to a somewhat broader conception of racism (and of sexism and other ways in which social power relations confer advantage on some at the expense of others) is often experienced as morally castigating all whites (or men or members of other ‘ascendant’ social groups).

As we have already seen, matters are complicated by the fact that people live in intersecting hierarchies of power and privilege. Black women have brought out very clearly the frequent casual racism of many of the white women who identified themselves/ourselves as feminists, including their/our all-too-frequent neglect of the experiences, lives, and perspectives of women of color. This intertwining of feminism and racism began in the nineteenth century with the suffragists and continued throughout the next century. Although twenty-first-century feminists mostly acknowledge this problematic history and at least “talk the talk” of anti-racism, it would be naïve indeed to think that all such problems have vanished. Class and economic status are also dimensions that rank people and accord them differential privilege. Although people of color are statistically far less affluent than their white counterparts, there are some very wealthy black people

and there are many impoverished white people. Education too ranks people in the US, and it intersects with economic status, with race, and with sex.

The social broad-based understanding of racism was first articulated by activists and scholars of color and then influenced the work of a number of other politically engaged intellectuals (including those working on sexism and related issues). What people not committed to such projects often heard were sweeping critiques of familiar practices in which they participated and ‘gotcha’ applications of the *racist* label (or *sexist* or *male chauvinist*). It is not surprising that the favored entry for *racist* on the *Urban Dictionary* site,<sup>14</sup> reproduced in the first entry in Figure 6.1, is a rant against the author’s interpretation of an expanded social approach to understanding racism and a plea for what the author calls the ‘real’ definition, something like what many standard dictionaries give. The second-ranked entry has substantially more ‘thumbs up’ (or ‘likes’) than the top definition but a slightly lower ratio of likes to dislikes; it just hurls invective at the whole notion of racism. The third insists that not all racism is directed at blacks, and the fourth and fifth basically try to present their authors as non-racist.

*Urban Dictionary* contributors do not, of course, constitute a representative slice of Americans, whether whites or people of color. Their entries do, however, illustrate, the widespread panic about being labeled *racist*, especially in certain contexts. Some of that panic is the product of what sociologist Robin DiAngelo has dubbed ‘white fragility.’<sup>15</sup> White fragility fosters (often deliberate) ‘white ignorance,’ the notion of which was articulated and named by philosopher Charles Mills.<sup>16</sup> This fragility stems from fear that we whites, including those of us who call ourselves progressive and take pride in proclaiming our commitment to racial equality, will be exposed for our role in maintaining the deep hypocrisies of American history and of persisting racial stratification and injustice in “the land of the free.” Some panic, however, stems both from misconstruing the expanded notion of racism (which leads

Figure 6.1 *Urban Dictionary* Definitions of *Racism* (in order of rankings)

**1. racism** (posted December 20, 2005)

A term that used to mean **prejudice** towards one or more races.

In modern use, this word is used by people to explain the behaviour of people of other races, whether race is called into **the issue** or not.

Also: racism can now include having good race **relations**. If you try to be friends with someone of a different race, someone will call you a racist.

*ME: Dude I met this black guy when I was ...*

*IDIOT: RACIST!*

*ME: How is that racism? I was going to say that I met this **black dude** when I was going to see my best friend, who's asian.*

*IDIOT: You're **just friends** with that asian because you think that makes you a good person for not being racist. You must feel sorry for him, you goddamn racist!*

*ME: Race doesn't come into it. But **people like you** force race issues into everything.*

Like: 1423 Dislike: 424

**2. racism** (posted January 26, 2008)

**Pure Bullshit. Fresh out of the bull's arse.**

Like: 4640 Dislike: 1580

**3. racism** (posted April 20, 2004)

something people cant understand **doesnt** just happen against **blacks** from **whites**. On an example **earlier** people keep using **black people** as **the only** people discriminated against

Like: 2889 Dislike: 977

**4. racism** (posted May 26, 2004)

It's **Stupid**, we are all **amazing**, so **chill**. *white, black, hispanic, asian, indian, arabic, does it matter? Racism is messed up, all of our races have done good and bad.*

Like: 684 Dislike: 221

**5. racism** (posted May 4, 2003)

An excuse given by one 'race' of people to abuse another person's **rights**. Usually created by **blind ignorance**.

*Racist: "All black people lie, steal and cheat – its in their genes."*

*Actual: "All people lie, steal and cheat – its in their genes."*

Like: 1777 Dislike: 744

From [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=racism](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=racism) (accessed August 5, 2019)

some to think that speaking of race at all is racist) and from the weaponizing of the label *racist* for purposes that have nothing to do with anti-racist motives. For example, given official proclamations of anti-racism at many corporate headquarters and the like, labeling a coworker *racist* can be an effective way to get them in trouble, perhaps removed from the payroll.

Here is one real-life example of such malicious labeling told to me by an observer. (I'm eliminating identifying information to protect the privacy of those involved.) A young black man employed in a large store was telling his white manager about a comment he'd heard from a white stranger he happened to encounter at a country music concert. She looked startled by his presence and said something like "Your people don't listen to this kind of music, do they?" "I reminded her," he reported in his conversation with his manager, "that 'my people' have the vote now." The manager laughed appreciatively and said "Did she remind you that it was just 3/5 of hers?" They went on working together companionably. A new young white employee, already at loggerheads with the manager, observed this interaction and later reported in a public meeting that "I don't like working under a racist." How he described the exchange to the higher-ups is unclear but their response was to suggest that the manager accept a transfer to another store, which he did not want to do, or resign. Using *racist* to label others can be a way of claiming virtue, of distancing oneself from all responsibility for continuing racism. Such labeling also focuses on individuals rather than on larger social patterns and arrangements. And the management response illustrates the kind of 'moral panic' that can overrespond to racially charged incidents while neglecting genuine persisting problems.

Back in October of 1991 Clarence Thomas provided a master class in evacuating *racism* of real content in order to weaponize it. A year later Toni Morrison edited *Race-ing Justice, En-gender-ing Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the*



*Construction of Social Reality*. Among the articles is “Doing Things with Words: Racism as Speech Act and the Undoing of Justice” by Claudia Brodsky Lacour, whose theoretical writings often draw on philosophical thought. In this case, she uses aspects of philosopher John Austin’s theory of speech acts, articulated in his *How to Do Things with Words*, to analyze Thomas’s deployment of the word *racism*.<sup>17</sup>

Anita Hill’s words were silenced not by any conflicting testimony, nor certainly by anything that could be passed off as evidence, but by a word, the very word that, unspoken, had previously safeguarded Clarence Thomas from rigorous investigation. It was in “response” to Anita Hill’s testimony that Thomas said the word “racism,” and in proclaiming himself a “victim” of “racism,” an apparently enraged Thomas disarmed his interrogators . . . [I]t was “racism” the *word* [italic added], not the thing, that rendered Anita Hill’s words effectively meaningless by rendering deaf those for whom those words were intended. From the Senate hearing room, to the press room, to the living room, the word “racism” cut off a mental channel of communication.

When Thomas used the word *racism* to discredit Anita Hill’s testimony, which no one really believed was motivated by racism, then, Lacour suggests, he told the public that the word was empty, that racism was not a real thing. The word replaced any real response and “aimed blame in melodramatic gestures at no one in particular and at everyone . . . With a calculated ripple effect the word ‘racism’ took everyone supposedly surrounding Anita Hill into its scope. . . . [T]he attack worked. Thomas drew sympathy from blacks and whites alike and ‘racism’ was universally deplored.” Members of the congressional hearings committee, all men, piled on to join in loudly deploring the racism that Clarence Thomas and his black family had faced. They implicitly acquiesced with Thomas’s implication that it would be racist to even consider the charges of Anita Hill, a black woman, against him, a black man.

Disputes over applicability of *racism* and *racist* continue. They are often part of ongoing debates over how best to understand and confront issues of race, especially the position of black Americans, in the USA. In turn, these arguments about the meanings of words stand in for (unacknowledged) debates over issues like school busing in order to desegregate schools, which are ‘color-conscious,’ vs so-called ‘colorblind’ policies in many arenas of life. And much more. In his brilliant *Keywords*, social theorist (and word historian) Raymond Williams cautions against attempting to push for “one ‘true’ or ‘proper’ or ‘scientific’ sense and dismissing other senses as loose or confused.”<sup>18</sup> He speaks here of the word *culture*, but what he says is, I think, applicable to the word *racism*. Competing senses reflect in part competing understandings of how individual beliefs and actions as well as everyday practices relate to larger-scale institutions and social structures. There is clearly interaction between ‘hearts and minds’ and social and cultural systems. For some purposes – intellectual, political, even moral or ethical – it can be both useful and appropriate to push for one rather than another understanding. Philosophers recently have given considerable attention to delineating interpretations with particular purposes in mind.<sup>19</sup> My emphasis here, however, is on different understandings of words like *racism* and *racist* that are advanced and deployed by ordinary people in the course of their social lives.

Given the different understandings, the different meanings associated with *racism* and *racist*, should we say that disputes over their applicability in which the different meanings play a part are ‘merely verbal,’ that those arguing with one another are really just talking past one another? No. At least most of the time, such arguments are really about what the words *should* mean. And that linguistic dispute is part of the nonlinguistic argument about what social relations and arrangements tied to racialized groups should be and also about what strategies might be needed for change. There are

no easy answers here but the disputes are substantive, not ‘just semantics.’

### **Is It About Language? Redefining *Rape***

In some cases language gets reformed with little or no talk about words as such but only about their content. The case of *rape* provides a good example. Many are unaware that the word *rape* in English usage several centuries ago simply did not apply to penile–vaginal intercourse forced by a husband on his wife. The crucial issue was that of consent. Sir Matthew Hale’s seventeenth-century formulation is widely quoted: “The husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself on his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this context unto her husband, which she cannot retract.”<sup>20</sup> Hale’s Law, as this ‘marital exemption’ principle was called, operated in many Anglo-American jurisdictions well into the 1970s.

In her 2013 book *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation*, historian Estelle Freedman offers a wide-ranging historical account of evolving understandings of *rape* in the United States.<sup>21</sup> She notes that despite the continued rule of Hale’s Law in courtrooms, nonconsensual sex within marriage was seen early on by some feminists as importantly like other kinds of nonconsensual sex in inflicting harm on the women assaulted. In the 1870s and 1880s, for example, Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell detailed husbands’ assaults on wives in their “Crimes against Women” column in the *Women’s Journal*. Although Stone and Blackwell did not protest the general tendency to cast black men as rapists of white women and to ignore white men’s rapes of black women, they did hold white husbands responsible for sexual violence targeting both their wives and their servants.

Like wives and servants, sex workers also have generally been presumed to be unable to withhold consent. In the spring of 1986,

Pasadena Superior Court Judge Gilbert C. Alston dismissed rape allegations brought by a thirty-year-old Hispanic sex worker, declaring “A woman who goes out on the street and makes a whore out of herself opens herself up to anybody.” Alston’s decision was widely criticized, but many others were also unwilling to acknowledge that a person may consent to some sexual encounters yet nonetheless withhold consent for others, even if they are with the same person. Interestingly, even in the nineteenth century not all viewed a woman’s chastity as essential to finding that she had been raped. Writing in 1864, a Vermont justice said, “It is no defence that she was a common strumpet, if a rape was actually committed upon her.”

Black women during reconstruction and the subsequent Jim Crow era did not shrink from calling attention to the racial politics of talk about rape, which was sometimes dubbed “The Negro Crime.” Not only were black men often accused of rape on the basis of no more than looking a white woman in the eye, and then murdered by lynch mobs, but black women were portrayed as sexually promiscuous and thus always consenting to, indeed even welcoming, sexual attentions from white men. The idea that a white woman might enter consensually into a sexual relationship with a black man was considered unthinkable. A white woman who did so could later with impunity label her black partner a rapist. False accusations of this kind were sometimes the result of strong pressure on the woman from white family or friends, sometimes the result of the woman’s changed attitudes toward the man.

Beginning in the early 1880s, journalist Ida B. Wells was unflinching in exposing the many false rape accusations made against black men that led to lynchings. Often, she wrote, the lynchings gave an “excuse to get rid of negroes who were acquiring wealth and property,” and “to keep the race terrorized.”<sup>22</sup> Carefully studying news reports she found that fewer than one-third of lynchings actually involved accusations of rape, and of these many of the accused were in fact innocent. Blacks were sometimes lynched, as she observed, just “because they were

saucy” – that is, not adequately deferential, obsequious. Wells also pointed to false accusations of rape that did not come from the white woman whose ‘honor’ was supposedly being protected. She noted that a white reporter had found that a black man lynched for alleged rape of a young white woman in Chestertown, MD was innocent. “The girl herself maintained that her assailant was a white man. When that poor Afro-American was murdered, the whites excused their refusal of a trial on the ground that they wished to spare the white girl the mortification of having to testify in court.”<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, Wells noted that black women had a long history of sexual assault on themselves and their daughters by white men, a history that began with slave-owners raping enslaved women to increase the number of human beings in their possession. Emancipation did not end white men’s sexual abuse of black women without fear of consequences, a situation that was exacerbated by the hypersexualizing stereotypes of those women. Ida B. Wells was perhaps the most outspoken and direct in her analysis of the role of rape, purported and actual, in helping shore up white power over black people. She noted that it was only white women whom southern white men seemed eager to protect and she did not shrink from criticizing the hypocrisy involved. “Virtue knows no color line, and the chivalry which depends upon complexion of skin and texture of hair can command no honest respect.”<sup>24</sup> Wells and other black women gave reasoned and insightful analyses of interracial rape and accusations as about racialized power rather than sexual desire or proclivities. Although they sometimes wrote for publications with white audiences, their ideas got little currency beyond black communities. Their work did, however, play some role in the eventual creation in the twentieth century of interracial coalitions to stop the practice of lynching. Rape myths in the service of racism continue: Donald Trump characterized Mexican immigrants as “rapists.”

Nearly a century after Ida B. Wells wrote, white feminist thinkers like Susan Brownmiller began articulating a similar

view that rape was about power and not desire.<sup>25</sup> Their emphasis, however, was on men's power over women, mostly ignoring racial dimensions. Nearly a century after Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell detailed and labeled "crimes" sexual assaults on wives by husbands, this latter group of feminists began to use *rape* to talk about such crimes. They realized that this linguistic move could be a powerful way to hold such husbands morally and legally accountable, to move toward making their actions criminal and not simply distasteful or unfortunate. Applying the label *rape* to a husband's sexual assault on his wife, whether or not a court validates the labeling, can have profound effects.

Although change came slowly in this matter, the marital exemption, Hale's Law, had disappeared from rape laws in the United States by the end of the twentieth century as a direct result of the work of anti-rape activists. There continues to be some pushback, but Anglo-American courts (as well as courts in many other jurisdictions around the world) now hold that a man's being married to a woman does not mean he cannot rape her. Indeed, for any man, whether or not he is someone with whom a woman has at some point consented to have sex is generally no longer held relevant to whether he raped her on a particular occasion. It is no longer just women who can be raped, and there has been growing public awareness that boys and men can also be victims. Readers of the *NY Times* in 2011 chastised the paper for avoiding the word *rape* in its reports of sexual assaults on young boys by Jerry Sandusky, an assistant football coach at the University of Pennsylvania. The public editor responded with an interesting article on *rape* as a word "in flux."<sup>26</sup> As announced by then Attorney General Eric Holder on January 6, 2012, the FBI now uses a new gender-neutral definition in collecting data on rape: "The penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim."<sup>27</sup> The generally prevailing norms and conventions for labeling sexual contact *rape* have changed significantly as part of our general

understanding of what counts as consent to sexual contact. But there continue to be debates.

Work like that of discourse analyst Susan Ehrlich helps us understand how, even though the boundaries of the word *rape* have expanded and continue to expand, there is an array of ongoing social and linguistic practices that help sustain sexual violence by constraining what gets counted as *rape* or even as the less seriously sanctioned *sexual assault*.<sup>28</sup> The law may say that a woman's sexual history, the clothes she wears (or doesn't wear), or whether she puts up a 'fight' should not be considered in deciding whether she has been raped. That does not, however, keep lawyers, juries, less formal investigative panels, and sometimes judges from taking such factors into account. Their questions to a female accuser often assume she is on trial, and their questions to a male defendant often assume that he has simply 'misunderstood' her lack of enthusiasm for his advances. She can be blamed for insufficiently vigorous objections, with her expressed fear of the man ignored.

Philosopher Susan Brison argues that the whole idea that being raped is just having had sex but not consenting to it is profoundly confused and misleading. As she notes, we don't treat being robbed as a nonconsensual gift or murder as nonconsensual assisted suicide. She proposes that we understand rape not as a kind of sexual interaction to which one party has not consented but as "gender-based sexualized violence." And, she suggests, rape of boys and men or of nonbinary people are also tied to wider systems of genderized power relations and do not just constitute objectionable individual actions. Part of the difficulty, as Brison sees clearly, is that familiar ways of talking (and thinking) about heterosexual activity not only ignore gender inequality but foster assumptions about women and men that contribute to sustaining that power differential. "The language of consent assumes a double standard in heterosexual relations. It is assumed that the man – the strong, active, sexually aggressive, partner – takes the initiative, seeking consent from the woman – the weak, passive, sexually submissive, one."<sup>29</sup>

Sexualized violence, or the threat thereof, is part of what supports continued gender hierarchies. Thus there are significant vested interests at play in trying to limit the scope of what can be labeled *rape*. These topics continue to be explored in the era of the #MeToo movement. For instance, there is beginning to be talk of *gray zone sex*, which may not constitute rape, sexual assault, or even sexual harassment but is in some real sense not fully consensual and far more than a “bad date.” There are also, of course, occasional cases of false accusations of rape. But the myth of rape as a heinous crime committed only by vicious monsters, by ‘brutes’ who jump out and attack defenseless virtuous young maidens, is one reason why both women and men, often understandably, hesitate to apply the label to what they both recognize as nonconsensual sexual encounters, as coerced.

What is far harder to understand is the extreme reluctance to use the *rape* label even in cases like assaults on unconscious women. In her very instructive blog on feminist language issues, linguist Deborah Cameron reports that virtually all media sources expressed what she aptly labels “unreasonable doubt” in early 2019 reports on a case in Arizona. A severely brain-damaged woman who had been essentially comatose in a healthcare facility for many years (reports ranged from “over a decade” to “27 years”) surprised her caretakers when she gave birth on December 29, 2018, her moaning finally drawing attention to her condition.<sup>30</sup> Even in the (unlikely) event of artificial insemination, there had to have been an assault on this woman, a crime committed. Virtually all the news reports, however, spoke of “alleged” or “possible” or “apparent” assault or rape. Why? As Cameron points out, some of this might have been just reflexive wording to ensure that the perpetrator was treated as “innocent until proven guilty” and not convicted by the press. But she also argues that this obviously excessive reluctance to label what happened a crime is likely to stem as much from systemic devaluation and widespread ignoring of the difficulties facing disabled women (and perhaps also Native American women – it later emerged that the woman was



Navajo) as from trying to protect a potential defendant against criminal charges.

Legal journalist Dahlia Lithwick reports that Jeffre Chevront, a Nebraska district judge, barred the word *rape* from proceedings in the fall of 2006 in which a complainant (*complainant* has replaced the word *victim* in many courtrooms) was alleging that she had been raped.<sup>31</sup> Chevront approved a motion from the defense that the words *rape*, *victim*, *sexual assault*, *assailant*, and *sexual assault kit* all be forbidden. And then in preparing for a retrial in 2007 the prosecution asked for a ban on words like *sex* and *intercourse*, a motion that was denied. As Lithwick puts it, “The result is that the defense and the prosecution are both left to use the same word – *sex* – to describe either forcible sexual assault, or benign consensual intercourse. As for the jurors, they’ll just have to read the witnesses’ eyebrows to sort out the difference.” The defense lawyer had raised the worry that use of *rape* would prejudice the jurors. “It’s a legal conclusion for a witness to say, ‘I was raped’ or ‘sexually assaulted.’” But as Lithwick and legal scholar Robert Weisberg point out, there really is no neutral language for the prosecution and its witnesses to use. Lithwick puts it this way. “The real question . . . is whether embedded in the word *sex* is another ‘legal conclusion’ – that the intercourse was consensual . . . If the complaining witness in a rape trial has to describe herself as having had ‘intercourse’ with the defendant, should the complaining witness in a mugging be forced to testify that he was merely giving his attacker a loan? . . . [O]ne can still say *murder* or *embezzlement* on the stand.”

At this point one might well want to protest that the changes and ongoing debates I have been discussing are not about language or what we call things at all. They are about sexual consent and coercion. Certainly such debates are not only about language. They are, however, in part about language, particularly about the applicability of certain words and expressions like *consent*, *rape*, *assault*, and *have sex*.<sup>32</sup> In the case of the word *consent*, debates are often doubly about language, given that there are norms of linguistic practice (e.g., those that make ‘no’ a frowned-upon move

in many contexts) that can lead to what looks like ‘assent’ but may well be less than full ‘consent.’ Those words figure in informal practices of accusing and denying as well as in institutional contexts such as congressional hearings and judicial processes. Sexualized power relations and sanctions, not only those legally imposed but those operative in corporate cultures and elsewhere, play out in part through linguistic practices.

## Preferred Gender Pronouns

English speakers have long taken it to “go without saying” that people can be readily sorted into women and men, girls and boys. We have also presumed that, once sorted, an individual’s gender category remains constant. These assumptions of gender binarism and constancy are by no means the province of English speakers. They are pervasive. What is true of English and a number of other languages (but far from all) is that we rely on those assumptions whenever we speak of a particular individual other than ourselves or our addressee(s).

The standard English personal pronouns for singular third-person reference are gendered. English speakers learn very early to use *she* (and the rest of the paradigm: *her*, *hers*, and *herself*) for specific individual (presumptively) female referents and *he* (and *him*, *his*, and *himself*) whenever speaking of those we take to be male. There continues to be a limited use of *he* where there is not a specific referent and the point of what is said is general (e.g., “an English major chooses his words very carefully”). As noted in [Chapter 2](#), such usages are declining, and singular *they* (along with *them*, *their*, *theirs*, *themselves*) now often appears, even in formal written contexts. In such generic cases there has long been the practice of using singular *they*, kept in check only by the concerted efforts of many English teachers, editors, and the like. There is a website detailing many places in Jane Austen using singular *they*; the site also gives many more recent examples of singular *they*.<sup>33</sup>

In many cases where gender identity is unknown or the speaker would rather not specify, *they* (along with the rest of the paradigm) comes to the rescue: “someone left *their* computer in 106” or “my friend is going to lend me *their* unicycle so I can try it out.” But we still tend to resist *they* in such contexts as those where the individual has just been referred to by a proper name. “Lee lost *their* bike” seems to suggest that the bike Lee lost belonged to a group (to which Lee might or might not belong), although such uses are increasing, helped by automated messages on social media (“Lee has changed their status”). Could we just repeat Lee’s name? For many, the difficulty here is even greater. “Lee lost Lee’s bike” strongly suggests two different people named Lee being spoken about. There’s almost certainly a better chance of getting ourselves used to interpreting “Lee lost their bike” as a non-gendered equivalent of “Lee lost her bike” or “Lee lost his bike” than going the two-*Lee* route, a strategy that would only work in any case where an individual’s name is known. And nearly equivalent sentences with *they* or the other members of the paradigm already sound perfectly OK in everyday encounters. Two people meet in a parking lot near the trail where they plan to hike. One points to a person off in the distance and says “That person told me just before you got here that they lost their bike here yesterday so be sure to lock yours.” Easy. Admittedly this would be much harder if the person who gave bike advice is still on the scene, and the speaker points to that person and says “They just told me . . . ,” no matter how androgynous their appearance might be. Yet people are beginning to be accustomed to such usages, and singular *they* is definitely increasing its reach.

Of course much of the time people successfully talk about non-addressees using the familiar gendered pronouns. But even those who do not question either gender binarism or gender constancy and rarely if ever knowingly encounter people who do raise such questions sometimes find themselves in a position where a non-gendered singular third-person pronoun would be useful. In addition to the many general cases that have

been widely discussed, the gender identity of the person one wants to speak of may be unknown or irrelevant.

Increasingly, especially for younger people, speaking of those who might identify as transgender or nonbinary raises live and not just theoretical pronoun issues. It is not really difficult to speak of transgender women or transgender men. Most appreciate being referred to by the pronoun that matches the gendered identity they affirm. (It can be a little trickier speaking of transgender people before their transition. Some, but not all, adopt the policy of using the pronoun that would have been used of them at that earlier time.) That is not to say that all who know they are speaking of a transgender woman use *she* in speaking of her. Misgendering by using *he* to speak of a transgender woman can be a deliberately hostile act and does happen. The wrong pronoun may, however, sometimes slip out from a speaker who knew the person well before transition and is still struggling to change old linguistic habits. (Those old friends and family may also sometimes forget and use a former misgendered first name; if done with deliberate malice, as does happen, the practice is often called *deadnaming* by members of transgender communities and their allies.) Misgendering can also and sometimes does occur when someone simply mistakes another's affirmed gender (and that happens not only to transgender people). When a speaker is not sure of gender identity (or rejection thereof) of people of whom they are speaking, it would be useful indeed if *they* (and its mates) were always considered acceptable. We are certainly not there yet in most English-speaking communities of practice.

But what should be done if a speaker wants to talk about someone whom they know rejects gender binarism, identifying as neither female nor male? My own default is to try to go with singular *they*, even though it still sometimes feels quite odd. That oddness is not only because of the (relatively minor) issues discussed above in contexts where a proper name has just been used or where the person is present with those speaking to one another. It is also because choosing *they* can highlight my avoidance of the more usual gendered options, something that could on occasion

interfere with other things I'm trying to accomplish in the particular context. Nonetheless, singular *they*, which the American Dialect Society (ADS) chose in 2015 as the Word of the Year, was recognized again by ADS at the beginning of 2020 as the Word of the Decade precisely because of "its growing use to refer to a known person whose gender identity is nonbinary."

Some universities and other educational institutions now routinely ask students for their "preferred gender pronouns" (widely abbreviated as PGPs) and send these to instructors, asking them to respect students' preference for how others should speak of them. Occasionally, meeting venues provide name tags allowing attendees to indicate their PGPs, and a very few people offer their PGPs when introducing themselves face-to-face or online. "Hi, I'm Sally, and my PGPs are *they*, *their*, and *them* though I expect and am perfectly happy with the *she/her* option." At a meeting designed to increase awareness of gender-identity issues, I actually said something along these lines. I was the only person still affirming the gender identity assigned me at birth – that is, the only cis person – who chose the non-gendered option. The others at the meeting giggled a little but no one, even among these open and active transgender and nonbinary supporters, used *they* to speak of me. My attempt to model singular *they* as a general-purpose default option to familiar gendered forms was a resounding failure. Even more recently, I attended a party to welcome the out-of-town cast and director for an upcoming play at a local theater. One of the theater staff asked us to give our pronoun preferences when introducing ourselves. Most people forgot or just mumbled them – a couple of interns asked for *they*, *them*, and *their* (probably this known preference was what prompted the staff member's suggestion). I was one of the last and this time I said "I'm Sally and I write about pronouns – I prefer *they*, *them*, and *their* as defaults but I don't mind people using *she* and *her* to talk about me." Well, it was a party, and the wine-fueled laughter just upped the enjoyment level.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of English speakers (and perhaps many readers of this book) have not even heard of PGPs

and still assume that choosing between the *she* and *he* options is always appropriate. They may occasionally be slightly perplexed when someone's appearance is a little hard to read (and may sometimes use *they* in such situations), but pronouns are not a huge concern for them. When I drafted this section in early spring 2019, offering or requesting PGP information was a relatively rare occurrence in my own experience and, according to my informal poll of friends still teaching at colleges and universities, not terribly common even for those more closely in touch with young people. Interestingly, by January 2020, volunteering one's PGPs in person or online with the expression "my pronouns" had apparently become highly salient to members of the ADS, many of whom are in university settings. They voted in "my pronouns" as 2019 Word of the Year. Along with Word of the Decade "singular *they*," recognition of Word of the Year "my pronouns" highlights developing linguistic practices in many communities of practice that make it easier for people to control how others assign them gender.<sup>34</sup> But this does not eliminate the need for default options. Even if it becomes standard in introducing oneself to offer, along with a name, "my pronouns are . . .," there will still be situations in which a pronoun is needed to refer to someone with unknown and unavailable PGP. For such reasons, I strongly advocate widening the use of singular *they* as a default non-gendered option.

Many protest that the pronoun's plurality should rule it out. But remember the discussion in [Chapter 4](#) of the development of *you* to address individuals and not just groups. As we saw, *you* began as the plural of *thou*, and we now find its use to refer to single individuals as well as groups unproblematic. Keep in mind that *you* continues to take plural verb agreement in mainstream varieties of English even when designating a single individual yet it also has a singular reflexive form, *yourself*. ("If you are [not *is*] unhappy, treat yourself [not *yourselves*] to a massage.") On this model, it would seem easiest to retain plural verb agreement for *they* but adopt the singular reflexive form. (Speaking of someone using the non-gendered option would then yield sentences like "If

they are feeling stressed, they should treat themselves to a massage.”) In addition, there are many people around the world who use English regularly but have some other native language (or even several other languages they use for work and at home). Some non-native speakers whose own language does not gender pronouns frequently make what native speakers and the person spoken of take as the “wrong” choice of gendered pronouns. For such non-native speakers, a non-gendered default like *they* might also be welcome.

Having *they* as a default is quite consistent with using other options if preferred by the person of whom one is speaking. Some, for example, ask others to refer to them using *ze* (with either *zir*, *zirsself*, *zirs* filling out the paradigm or *eir*, *eirsself*, *eirs*). Others opt for the so-called Spivak pronouns, which were relatively widely used on LambdaMOO, an online community launched in 1990 and very popular for some years. These also have variants: either *e* or *ey* instead of the subjective *she* or *he*, *em* instead of the objective *her* or *him*, *eir* instead of the possessive adjective *her* or *his*, *eirsself* for the reflexive *-self* forms, and *eirs* instead of the possessive pronouns *hers* or *his*.

As I was writing this section in the spring of 2019, I heard about a conference slated to be held in June 2019 in Kingston, Ontario, “They, Hirsself, Em and YOU: Nonbinary Pronouns in Research and Practice.” Organizers posted a notice on LinguistList that called for linguistic work on this topic and indicated that there would also be contributions from educators, activists, and scholars outside linguistics, and a wide range of other discussions. Just a day or two earlier I had learned that the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Resource Center at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, planned to host a celebration on October 17, 2019 of International Pronouns Day. The point of their event: to promote not only finding out the pronouns others prefer but respecting those preferences by using them. Here is their statement of purpose: “Referring to people by the pronouns they determine for themselves is basic to human dignity. Being referred to by the wrong pronouns particularly affects transgender

and gender nonconforming people. Together, we can transform society to celebrate people's multiple, intersecting identities."<sup>35</sup> Both the Canadian conference on nonbinary pronouns and the Wisconsin celebration of respecting people's pronoun preferences show that nonbinary pronouns and personal pronoun preferences are quite consequential issues within certain communities.

There appears to have been concern about nonbinary pronouns in English many hundreds of years ago, but the worry at that point was the possible loss of gendered pronouns. Our current familiar 'feminine' *she* only came into English when the contrast between *hē* (the Old English ancestor of the modern so-called masculine *he*) and *hēo* (the OE so-called feminine pronoun) was vanishing because the unstressed final syllable of *hēo* was so often dropped. Had *she* not been pressed into service, we would have had only one personal pronoun in English by Chaucer's time, and the current concerns over nonbinary pronouns might not ever have surfaced. About a millennium ago some of those speaking what is now called Old English, a Germanic language from which modern varieties of English descend, apparently were so eager to retain a gender binary in the pronoun system that they may well have brought in a new pronoun from a Scandinavian language to do the job. We don't of course know very much at all about what went on in the various communities in which *she* and *hēo* competed with one another. We do know that taking a function word from another language – an article, preposition, pronoun – is relatively rare. This is in sharp contrast with the ease with which languages adopt content words from other languages. In English, examples of content words that were originally non-native, modeled on words in another language, abound: *beef* from French, *algebra* from Arabic, *glitch* from Yiddish, *patio* from Spanish, *toboggan* from Miqmaq (an Algonquian language of North America), *tsunami* from Japanese, *tomato* from Nahuatl (once called Aztec, varieties of which are still spoken widely in Mexico), *bungalow* from Urdu (spoken in India and Pakistan), and on and on. Borrowing of *she* from Icelandic or some other Scandinavian language is not the only possibility, and we may never really



have the full story on the history of *she*. What we can certainly infer, however, is that many of those tenth- and eleventh-century speakers cared a lot about keeping the binary split, the split that causes so many difficulties in our own times, especially for transgender or nonbinary people.

I noted earlier that the ADS has singled out singular *they* and “my pronouns” as helping English speakers escape the familiar forced binary of *he* and *she*. In part because of the unusual and interesting history of *she* and in part because of the increasing frequency of its occurrence in the late twentieth century as feminist analysis and activism made clear that *he* was not so generic as had often been proclaimed, the ADS has also honored *she*. In the year 2000, ADS selected *she* as the Word – not of the Year, Decade, or Century – but of the (immediately past) Millennium.<sup>36</sup> Back in 2000, escaping forced gender binaries was still not something widely discussed. The ADS announcement did not talk about the fact that *hēo* might have quietly vanished and left English with a single personal pronoun, thus one with no gender content, erasing the forced binary choice.

The pronoun *she*, however, is by no means yet a fully equal partner of *he* – it remains marked. Nearly two decades after *she* was selected as Word of the Millennium, MIT linguist Roger Levy and colleagues at Potsdam and at the University of California at San Diego decided to use the 2016 US presidential elections as a naturally occurring experimental situation to study gendered pronouns. What they found was that, even among people who both expected and wanted Hillary Clinton to win, there was considerable reluctance to use *she* to refer to the (then as yet undetermined) “next president.” Singular *they* was the favored choice and gender hedging was also used (e.g., *he or she*), but *he* was preferred to *she*. And reading *she* in contexts where it was not stereotypically expected that the referent would be female led to comprehension difficulties compared to *he* or *they*. A year later the research team conducted similar experiments using the UK parliamentary

elections, where Theresa May was not only the incumbent prime minister but her party was heavily favored to win (and did win). The pronoun *she* was produced more often in the UK study for “the next prime minister” than *he*, but not at the expected rate, and without the expected comprehension advantages for *she*.<sup>37</sup> Although the authors do not put it this way, there still seems to be reluctance to embrace *she* as able to refer to just an ordinary human being. Femaleness still contrasts with maleness in being seen as specially distinctive, a condition that bars those having it from being fully representative of ‘normal’ humans.

Many current speakers of English are dismissive of pronoun concerns. Language users mostly talk and write or text with little explicit attention to their pronoun choices. Most of the time pronouns, which are more tied into language structure than content words, get slotted into what we say almost automatically, with no explicit attention to the process at all. Being forced to weigh pronoun choices feels “weird” to many and makes them (us) uncomfortable. The parenthetical “us” is my admission to my own occasional discomfort about pronoun choices, discomfort with many sources. For some speakers, such discomfort can lead to noticing the privileges derived from never having questioned gender identities. People nudged out of their comfort zones sometimes become allies of those whose own position has not allowed them the luxury of comfort about these matters.

Most people like to think of language as just ‘there,’ as neutral. They do not enjoy being reminded that some familiar linguistic practices may become unsustainable as social practices become more sensitive to the interests of a wider range of people, including those outside standard gender/sexual binaries. Changes are underway, but those involving pronouns are especially challenging. This is in part because pronouns are more deeply embedded in linguistic structure than content words like *girl* or *boy*. It is also in part because issues of gender, sex, and sexuality are very deeply embedded in social structure – and many, perhaps especially older people, would rather not think about them much at all.<sup>38</sup>

## Euphemism vs “Identity-Affirmation” or “Correction”

There is a substantial literature on euphemisms, which linguists Keith Allan and Kate Burridge dubbed ‘shields.’<sup>39</sup> A euphemism is used as an alternative to other ‘dispreferred’ expressions in an effort to shield language users from harmful effects that use of the dispreferred alternatives, often ‘blunter’ or ‘more direct’ or even ‘tabooed,’ might bring. Feared harm could be to the speaker: perhaps avoiding the distasteful alternative seems thoughtful or polite, saving the speaker from potential social disapproval. And speakers do not only try to shield themselves. The reason for avoiding alternative expressions is often fear that their hearers may be harmed by them. Perhaps direct criticism will damage a hearer’s self-esteem, so the speaker shields the hearer by substituting some euphemistic comment for the criticism they would otherwise give. Some of what its critics call “PC language” might qualify as euphemism, but certainly not all. I’ll discuss language policies and guidelines, including some of those labeled “PC” and debates around them, in the [next chapter](#).

Do euphemisms actually ‘improve’ language? There is a vast array of areas in which euphemisms are regularly introduced: death, sex, bodily functions, money, religion, governmental actions, and many kinds of taboos. Linguists are fond of pointing to what cognitive scientist Steven Pinker dubbed the “euphemism treadmill.”<sup>40</sup> Gravediggers and embalmers give way to undertakers who become morticians who become funeral directors. A water closet becomes a toilet becomes a bathroom becomes a rest room becomes the facilities. When a dog can “go to the bathroom on the living room rug,” “go to the bathroom” needs another euphemism – it can no longer “shield” us from the immediate image of smelly bodily wastes spilling into the outside world. The original indirection has vanished because of the very heavy use of the new term. The distasteful lexical baggage carried by earlier forms has been firmly reattached to what is now essentially their replacement. Some euphemisms persist *as* euphemisms, generally because they have not crowded out terminology that denotes more directly.

Few if any believe that changing terminology will in and of itself change other aspects of the world, including social arrangements. Relabeling garbage collectors “sanitation engineers” will not bring them respect or higher wages, nor will it free them from dirty, smelly, heavy physical labor on the job. And it is hard to imagine that anyone doing such work ever thought so. In many cases, the new labels are not initiated by those being renamed. There are certainly cases of those in power – bosses or politicians, for example – offering terminological window dressing to groups they control in lieu of improved working conditions and genuine respect. Such insincere ‘merely verbal’ moves have given a bad name to linguistic activism.

Are frequent shifts in identity labels like those we saw in the [first chapter](#) signs that the euphemism treadmill is operating? Steven Pinker seems to think so. “Names for minorities will continue to change as long as people have negative attitudes toward them. We will know we have achieved mutual respect when the names stay put.”<sup>41</sup> But people did not begin adopting *black* or *African American* rather than *Negro* to shield anyone from pain or embarrassment. They were not advocating alternatives to *Negro* in a misguided attempt to veil racist attitudes, to lessen bigotry. They were, I contend, far more concerned about naming themselves and fostering new positive associations within black communities than in obscuring negative ones that outsiders might have (or that even those so labeled might have internalized). Those who offer new identity labels for themselves and those with whom they share that identity are not proposing yet more euphemisms. Rather they are trying to strengthen ingroup ties, to use positive self-definition as one (though certainly not the only) component of group mobilization, part of a strategy to improve the group’s standing. Such shifts can be seen as identity-affirmations from within, which take different forms at different times. Motives and source matter enormously in deciding whether a particular linguistic innovation is a euphemism.

ASL (American Sign Language) scholars Jami Fisher, Gene Mirus, and Donna Jo Napoli make this important point in their recent paper on some cases of (sub)-lexical changes being

proposed and adopted within ASL-using communities.<sup>42</sup> Many signs in ASL (and in other sign languages) originate as highly iconic – that is, the appearance of the sign in some ways resembles its content. For example, the sign for *SMOKE* looks a lot like someone holding a cigarette (a V-shape made by the index and middle fingers held near lips, other fingers folded down), and the sign for *DRINK* looks a lot like someone holding a glass and moving it up from mid-chest to near lips, ending with thumb at mouth and palm outward and slightly curved fingers.<sup>43</sup> Over time iconicity is often reduced as new signs stabilize but may nonetheless remain, a process that is more evident to some than to others. Spoken languages too have iconicity – for example, words like *EEK* and *BOOM* ‘sound like’ their content. Iconicity is far more pervasive, however, in sign languages than in spoken languages because the three-dimensional space used in signing offers more potential than speech sounds for creating signs that ‘resemble’ their content. (The difference in medium means that sign languages differ in other ways from the languages with which hearing people are familiar. Most hearing people are unaware that sign languages have complex and distinctive structures of their own and are not ‘signed’ versions of ambient spoken languages.) Iconicity often brings with it what I’ve called lexical baggage – that is, associations beyond the content of a lexical item. What reformers (my term, not theirs) propose is to ‘correct’ a sign – that is, to change it in order to remove baggage that seems at odds with how the reformers understand what is being talked about. They want to ‘align’ the form with the meaning, to make the sign ‘truer’ to the world or to their experience, less potentially misleading or distorting.

Not all form–meaning mismatches get ‘corrected.’ Much as English continues to use ‘films’ long after film-free digital photography has taken over in Hollywood and elsewhere, long after cell phones have taken over, ASL mostly continues to use a sign for *TELEPHONE* inspired by handsets that the user holds to ear and mouth. (There is a newer sign especially for cell phones, but it is not widely used.) This misalignment of form and meaning goes

uncorrected because there are no serious interests at stake, no potential unwanted problematic meanings conveyed. For many, the sign is probably now completely arbitrary, no longer iconic at all. There does not seem any need for correction.

Here is a case where the authors of the study mentioned above find evidence that a felt need for correction has indeed pushed change. The earlier *BLIND* sign involved a bent-V handshape, pointed directly toward the eyes. The newer sign preserves the handshape but moves the hand to the cheek on the same side as the hand. This shift reduces the iconicity and thereby is better aligned with views that being blind, as an identity, involves more than absence of vision just as being deaf involves more than matters of hearing. In discussing this change, a number of their deaf consultants reminded the authors of an ASL sign for *AUDISM* used some decades ago. That sign graphically indicated a similarly simplistic essentializing by many hearing people of deaf people. Such essentializing is an important component of audism, which is systematic privileging based on audiological status. The sign used B-handshapes above, below, and on the ear, suggesting problematic ‘boxing in’ of deaf people by many hearing people on the basis of their audiological status. (Finger-spelling is more commonly used for *AUDISM* nowadays.) Correcting the *BLIND* sign, deaf consultants explained, helped avoid suggesting that blind identity is just about people’s eyes, about the status of their vision.

Not all the cases discussed in this study are connected to identity. They all, however, are instances where some deaf signers have seen the forms as problematic from their perspective as members of deaf communities. (Not all signers agree, in part because iconicity is in the eyes of the beholder and in part because not all recognize a misalignment.) The suggested corrections in the cases discussed are not offered or adopted as ‘shields’ to protect against something unpleasant or impolite or tabooed in some way. Rather, they are designed to remove problematic visually suggested messages, including those that assume the universality of the perspectives of hearing people.

Linguistic awareness, the authors suggest, is especially acute in deaf communities, given that ambient spoken languages are not fully accessible and entry into signing communities is often hard-won. Modern technology, including posting videos, has allowed deaf communities more readily to discuss and to change their shared languages. ‘Correction’ of signs not only eliminates what the reformers see as misalignments of form and meaning. Correction also helps spread newly emerging ‘sensibilities’ within deaf communities. It can be an important part of the process of supporting and promoting the new attitudes and stances.

Euphemisms can be useful linguistic innovations. Some even escape the lure of the euphemism treadmill. But calling a proposed linguistic change a euphemism often constitutes resistance to that change, dismissing the possibility that it might be helpful to language users pursuing certain interests. Self-affirmation and correction are metalinguistic moves that can be useful components of social action and change.

## Notes

1. See [McConnell-Ginet 2014](#).
2. Quoted in [Shapiro 1985](#), p. 6.
3. Quoted in [Shapiro 1985](#), p. 7.
4. John Lee Clark, “Distantism,” *Tumblr*, August 3, 2017, <https://johnleeclark.tumblr.com/post/163762970913/distantism>.
5. See [Fricker 2007](#); she uses the term ‘hermeneutical injustice’ for this particular kind of difficulty in improving understanding that faces those who lack social power. As Mary Kate McGowan reminds me, there is a vast literature from black women thinkers and other feminists on the ways problematic assumptions are often ‘built into’ readily available linguistic labels.
6. [Glick and Fiske 1996, 2001](#).
7. See [Phillips 2006, Maryapan 2011](#). Thanks to Mary Kate McGowan for suggesting I mention these important collections.
8. [Collins 1998](#), pp. 70–71. Pages 61–76 are all highly relevant to the issues underlying debates among black women intellectuals on *womanism* vs *black*

- feminism*. The reference to “visionary pragmatism” and the quote from Cole are on p. 188.
9. See Bailey and Trudy 2018 for discussion, especially of their contention that their work in developing and applying this new concept is often ignored.
  10. “Racist,” *Oxford Dictionaries*, n.d., <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/racist>.
  11. “Racist,” *Collins Dictionary*, n.d., [www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/racist](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/racist).
  12. Nicki Lisa Cole, “Defining Racism Beyond Its Dictionary Meaning,” *Thoughtco.com*, July 14, 2019, [www.thoughtco.com/racism-definition-3026511](http://www.thoughtco.com/racism-definition-3026511).
  13. See, e.g., Haslanger 2012 [2010], Garcia 1999, Shelby 2002, Mills 2007, Faucher and Machery 2009.
  14. Emerging Technology from the arXiv, “The Anatomy of the Urban Dictionary,” *MIT Technology Review*, January 3, 2018, [www.technologyreview.com/s/609871/the-anatomy-of-the-urban-dictionary](http://www.technologyreview.com/s/609871/the-anatomy-of-the-urban-dictionary).
  15. DiAngelo 2018.
  16. Mills 2007.
  17. Lacour 1992. First quote from p. 132, second from 138. For Austin’s foundational work on speech acts, consult Austin 1975 [1962], the second edition, which includes emendations from editors J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa.
  18. Williams 1983.
  19. Haslanger 2012 [2000], Cappelen 2018, and Shields 2019.
  20. See, e.g., Russell 1990, p. 17.
  21. Freedman 2013 is my source for the material in this and the next four paragraphs.
  22. Freedman 2013, p. 107.
  23. Freedman 2017, pp. 107–108.
  24. Freedman 2013, p. 104.
  25. Brownmiller 1975.
  26. Arthur S. Brisbane, “Confusing Sex and Rape,” *The New York Times*, November 19, 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/opinion/sunday/confusing-sex-and-rape.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/opinion/sunday/confusing-sex-and-rape.html).
  27. “Attorney General Eric Holder Announces Revisions to the Uniform Crime Report’s Definition of Rape,” US Department of Justice, January 6, 2012, <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/news/pressrel/press-releases/attorney-general-eric-holder-announces-revisions-to-the-uniform-crime-reports-definition-of-rape>.
  28. Ehrlich 2001, 2007.



29. From Susan Brison's unpublished 2018 Dartmouth Presidential Lecture, "Sexual Violence, Social Meanings, and Narrative Selves," available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYLN5K6ISrc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYLN5K6ISrc).
30. "Unreasonable Doubt," *Language: A Feminist Guide*, January 13, 2019, <https://debuk.wordpress.com/2019/01/13/unreasonable-doubt/>.
31. Dahlia Lithwick, "Gag Order: A Nebraska Judge Bans the Word Rape From His Courtroom," *Slate*, June 20, 2007, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2007/06/a-nebraska-judge-bans-the-word-rape-from-his-courtroom.html>.
32. I have written elsewhere about debates over applicability of *have sex*; see, e.g., [McConnell-Ginet 2018b](#).
33. "Jane Austen and Other Famous Authors Violate What Everyone Learned in Their English Class," The Republic of Pemberley website, n.d., [www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/austtheir.html](http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/austtheir.html).
34. See [www.americandialect.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-Word-of-the-Year-PRESS-RELEASE.pdf](http://www.americandialect.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-Word-of-the-Year-PRESS-RELEASE.pdf) for the ADS press release on both "my pronouns" and "singular *they*."
35. "Gender Pronouns," LGBTQ+ Resource Center, University of Milwaukee, <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>.
36. The ADS announcement of that choice can be found at the following URL, [www.americandialect.org/1999\\_words\\_of\\_the\\_year\\_word\\_of\\_the\\_1990s\\_word\\_of\\_the\\_20th\\_century](http://www.americandialect.org/1999_words_of_the_year_word_of_the_1990s_word_of_the_20th_century).
37. For a concise and clear account of the research see Anne Trafton, "'She' Goes Missing from Presidential Language," *Phys.org*, January 8, 2020, <https://phys.org/news/2020-01-presidential-language.html>, which reports on [von der Malsburg, Poppels, and Levy 2020](#).
38. After this book was already in production I read the review at [www.nytimes.com/2020/01/21/books/review/whats-your-pronoun-dennis-baron.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/21/books/review/whats-your-pronoun-dennis-baron.html). (Joe Moran, "English's Pronoun Problem Is Centuries Old," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2020.) Judging from the meticulous scholarship in Dennis Baron's earlier books on gender-neutral pronouns in English and related topics, I am confident that reading [Baron 2020](#) will greatly enrich the reader's knowledge of the history and current situation of English personal pronouns.
39. [Allan and Burridge 1991](#); [Allan and Burridge 2006](#) and [Allan 2018](#) continue their work.
40. [Pinker 2002](#), p. 212.
41. [Pinker 2002](#), p. 213.
42. [Fisher, Mirus, and Napoli 2019](#).
43. See Cristina Baus, Manuel Carreiras, and Karen Emmorey, "When Does Iconicity in Sign Language Matter?" 2012, NCBI website, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3608132/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3608132/) for discussion of iconicity in sign languages and pictures of some iconic and some non-iconic signs.