

# He, (s)he/she, and they: Language ideologies and ideological conflict in gendered language reform

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**Abstract:** Gender-focussed language reform movements are underpinned by not only gender but also language ideologies. This study explores the relationship between these ideologies across anti-sexist and anti-cis-sexist reform movements. The movements target differing outcomes and align with differing ideologies, but I argue that they share an underlying goal and underlying ideological tenets. While anti-sexist reform seeks to improve the status and render legible the experiences of a subordinate but legible identity, namely women, anti-cis-sexist reform aims to unsettle cis-sexist assumptions of gender and render greater gender diversity legible. In targeting these goals, anti-sexist reformers cluster around forms of linguistic relativity, while anti-cis-sexist reformers focus on linguistic performativity. Both ideological stances, however, share underlying conceptualizations of language as limiting and as acting in the world, while both goals share an underlying commitment to harm avoidance. This paper highlights the role of language ideologies, in addition to gender ideologies, in gender-focussed language reform.

*Keywords:* *gender neutral language; gender fair language; anti-sexist language; anti-cis-sexist language; language reform; ideology; linguistic relativity; performativity*

## 1 Introduction

Though languages differ in their encoding of gender, all represent it to some extent, whether through grammatical gender marking (e.g., Lomotey, 2018 [Spanish]), lexical gender (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015), or the encoding of gender into orthographies (e.g., Ettner, 2002 [Chinese]), folk sayings (e.g., Gomard & Kunøe, 2003 [Danish]), and pragmatics (e.g., Gerritsen, 2002 [Dutch]). In most cases, this gender marking serves to reinforce two ideologies increasingly seen as problematic in languages across the globe: (1) men are the dominant or unmarked gender, (2) gender is binary. Reform efforts targeting the first of these ideologies became prominent in the 1970s and 80s when feminist scholars began demonstrating that masculine generics were not in fact gender neutral and calling for language change that would reduce this male bias (Martyna, 1983; Moulton et al., 1978; Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986). More recently, reform efforts have turned to the latter ideology, focussing on alternatives outside of the traditional masculine and feminine binary as a way to deemphasize traditional gender and create space for diversely gendered people (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015; Wentling, 2015; Zimman, 2017). Both of these movements are

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based on commitments not only to specific gender ideologies, but also to language ideologies that dictate reformers' conceptions of the power, purpose, and mutability of language.

Though language ideologies have been given passing consideration in work exploring language and gender, a thorough investigation of ideologies underlying gender-focussed language movements has yet to be conducted. To begin to address this gap, this paper seeks to uncover the language ideologies that underlie different gender-focussed linguistic reform movements and the ways in which these ideologies coincide or differ across movements.<sup>2</sup> In addition to addressing these questions, this paper also asks a range of further questions, questions that are intended to serve as points of departure for future explorations.

## 2 Language ideologies

After exploring a range of definitions of language ideologies, Kroskrity (2004) settles on the following definition: "language ideologies are beliefs, or feelings, about languages as used in their social worlds" (p. 498). These are, however, broad strokes and, as such, require some nuance. Firstly, these beliefs or feelings are not just those held by lay people, but also those held by professional linguists. Both linguists' work and our broader relationships with language are informed by our understandings of what language is, what it does, and how it should be used, changed, or otherwise engaged with. This means that even when reform movements are undertaken or motivated by professional linguists, they can never be without the influence of language ideologies. Secondly, as Woolard (1992) argues in the case of racism, it is not enough to deploy ideology by "simply asserting that struggles over language are 'really about' racism" (p. 19) without more detailed analysis of the social and semiotic processes involved in the production and reproduction of language ideologies. Similarly, when investigating language, gender, and ideology, it is not enough to just say that struggles over language are all just about sexism/cis-sexism without a more detailed analysis of the meaning making processes involved. Hence, in this paper, I argue that engaging in language activism or resisting it hinges not only on the broad strokes of gender ideologies such as feminism, sexism, and cissexism, but also on what we believe about language, how it works, what it does or ought to do, and how it is used or ought to be used. To pursue this, I explore the language ideologies implicated in movements for gender-focussed reform, their overlaps, and their points of tension as a starting point for understanding the ideological bases of language reform movements.

## 3 Anti-sexist language reform

During the rise of anti-sexist language reforms in the 1970s and 80s, feminist scholars (e.g., Moulton et al., 1978; Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986; Spender, 1998) contested what they saw as male bias pervading language. Some, including Dale Spender (1998), argued that language was so pervaded with male bias that women could never gain equality or fully express their experiences until a new "women's language" was developed. The premises of Spender's proposal, that men developed language explicitly to serve their patriarchal interests and that they fully control meaning, have been heavily criticized by feminist linguists (e.g., Black & Coward, 1998; Cameron, 1985), but the need to address linguistic gaps in describing women's experiences and to contest the systematic derogation of feminine terms has remained important to anti-sexist language reform

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<sup>2</sup> This paper largely addresses phenomena observed in English and other European languages. This is not because non-European languages are not engaging in complex gender negotiations, but because the bulk of English language scholarship on this topic has focussed on European languages and especially English. As discussed in the Section 8, the exploration of gender-focussed language reform in non-European languages would be a fruitful area for further research.

movements (Cameron, 1985; McConnell-Ginet, 2011). For example, terms like *sexism* and *sexual harassment* have been introduced into the lexicon to name and demand redress for experiences that, to quote Gloria Steinem (1983), were once “just called life” (p. 149) (Ehrlich & King, 1992). Activists have also sought to highlight the asymmetry in offensive terms for women versus men and in some cases to reclaim words like *bitch* or *ho* (McConnell-Ginet, 2011). All of these efforts have aimed to reduce the harm inflicted upon women by language.

Significant effort has also been committed to demonstrating that masculine generics are not in fact gender neutral and calling for language change that would reduce male bias and female invisibility not only in pronouns, but also role nouns and especially job titles (e.g., Awbery et al., 2002; Moulton et al., 1978; Sczesny et al., 2016). Female invisibility is driven by the use of masculine generics and by the male bias found to be active in the interpretation of masculine (and neutral) generics (Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986). This invisibility is argued to reduce the likelihood of women’s equal participation in public life by suppressing the cognitive salience of female exemplars and creating an impression that opportunities such as job postings are only for male candidates (e.g., Bem & Bem, 1973; Moulton et al., 1978; Sczesny et al., 2016). In addressing this issue, language reform efforts have employed two key strategies: (1) inclusion and (2) visibility (Mucchi-Faina, 2005). Inclusion is most easily applied in natural gender languages like English and Swedish, in which gender is largely encoded in pronouns and animate nouns in accordance with so-called biological sex (Sczesny et al., 2016). In these types of languages, reformers promote the use of gender neutral terms like *firefighter* instead of *fireman* (Lassonde & O’Brien, 2013), singular *they* in English (Wayne, 2005), and gender neutral *hen* in Swedish (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015). Inclusion strategies can also sometimes be applied in grammatical gender languages<sup>3</sup> by using epicenes which, though grammatically gendered, are not inflected for referential gender (Gerritsen, 2002; Nissen, 2002). For example, *doktor* which is grammatically masculine in Dutch, can be used to refer to a doctor of any gender. However, such inclusive terms have been found to retain male bias (Lindqvist et al., 2019; Sniezek & Jawinski, 1986).

Inclusion strategies are typically associated with liberal feminisms, as opposed to visibility strategies which are often linked to a more radical feminist orientation that seeks not only to include women, but to foreground them (Mucchi-Faina, 2005). Visibility approaches employ a range of strategies from female generics or alternating male and female generics to split forms like *s/he*<sup>4</sup> and double forms where both feminine and masculine forms are listed together (Mucchi-Faina, 2005). This approach proposes to rectify the problem of male bias which persists under inclusion strategies by explicitly including female referents either instead of, or as well as, masculine ones and has been argued (particularly in the case of feminine generics) to improve women’s and girls’ self-esteem and achievement (Henley, 1987). Because this strategy avoids neutral neologisms that can create challenges for grammatical agreement, it is a common choice for grammatical gender languages (e.g., Bußmann & Hellinger, 2003; Lomotey, 2015)..

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<sup>3</sup> Grammatical gender languages mark gender morphologically on multiple parts of speech. For European grammatical gender languages like French, Spanish, and Italian, this typically means that nouns, third person pronouns, adjectives, and articles are grammatically gendered and must agree. However, grammatical gender can also extend to verb forms and the full pronoun paradigm.

<sup>4</sup> Like many early language interventions (see also asterisk use in German, e.g., *Freund\*in*, French use of points, e.g., *grand.e*, and Spanish use of the at symbol, e.g. *amig@s*) this neologism is mainly found in text and it is unclear how it should be pronounced if it can in fact be pronounced at all.

Regardless of the reform strategy employed, this emphasis on language as a tool to enhance economic gender equality and female inclusion in public life is often framed with reference to the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Proponents often argue that language can influence speakers' reality (e.g., Moulton et al., 1978; Mucchi-Faina, 2005; Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986). Simpson (1993), however, questions this approach by demonstrating the logical impossibility of promoting language reform from a stance of linguistic determinism. Specifically, if language determines perception, thought, and social structure, then how can language users imagine a linguistic and social system other than that already encoded in their language? However, most who take this approach (e.g., Mucchi-Faina, 2005; Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986) do not in fact argue for linguistic determinism, but the more moderate linguistic relativity hypothesis under which language may influence, but does not strictly shape speakers' self-concept and world view. This weak linguistic determinism appears in calls for language reform across languages, including Chinese (Ettner, 2002), Danish (Gomard & Kunøe, 2003), Swedish (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015), and English (Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986).

Though not as common, stronger forms of the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis do appear in Moulton et al.'s (1978) study of sex bias in language as well as several broad cross-linguistic analyses of the relationship between language type and national gender equality. Prewitt-Freilino et al.'s (2012) analysis of 111 countries' gender equality concluded that natural gender languages correlate with greater gender equality than either genderless or grammatical gender languages. Their explanation of this phenomenon presumes that grammatical gender reifies gender difference and inequality, while genderless languages prevent speakers from combatting male bias in their language practices by disguising the issue through ostensibly neutral language, thus implying a causal relationship between language and social reality. However, it must be noted that the presence of Scandinavian languages and their highly gender equal societies in the natural gender category likely had a strong (potentially skewing) effect on these results. Liu et al. (2018) similarly link language type and gender equality in a direct causal relationship both through an analysis of gender metrics co-occurring with 90 languages and through an experimental study concluding that bilinguals' responses to gender equality questionnaires were causally conditioned by the gender marking of the language of the questionnaire.

These stronger forms of linguistic relativity contrast with Cameron (1994) and Ehrlich and King's (1992, 1994) arguments that language reform alone is insufficient to create gender equality. In fact, Ehrlich and King (1992) show that, without adequate structural change accompanying language reform, feminized forms can take on derogatory connotations, while gender neutral forms end up being used only for women, thus undermining their proposed neutrality.<sup>5</sup> Similar phenomena have been found with German *-euse/-öse* feminine forms invoking sexualized or frivolous referents (Sczesny et al., 2016) and Italian *-essa* feminine forms being associated with lower status positions than equivalent masculine forms (Merkel et al., 2012; Mucchi-Faina, 2005). These findings flip the linguistic relativity dynamic, suggesting that societal norms have greater influence on language than vice versa, but the authors taking this approach do not discourage language reform. Instead, they frame language reform as part of the broader social reform required to increase gender equality and suggest that language change must be accompanied by thorough and well-supported gender equality initiatives in order to achieve its goals (Ehrlich & King, 1992).

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<sup>5</sup> Despite this loss of neutrality, the introduction of these forms and the activism surrounding their introduction draws attention to the hidden sexism embedded within language and positions language users to make politically informed choices in their spoken and written utterances (cf. Cameron, 1995, 1998).

#### 4 Anti-cis-sexist language reform

Where feminist language reform has focussed on equalizing masculine and feminine linguistic forms, queer language reform focusses on gender neutrality and gender diversity beyond the binary. Work in this area emphasizes the importance of self-identification and of avoidance of harms associated with misgendering (Ansara & Hegarty, 2013; Wentling, 2015; Zimman, 2017). Hord (2016) argues that gender neutral and gender diverse language is key to nonbinary individuals' identity formation and recognition by others in daily interactions. In this context, it is not language's capacity to influence or reflect social norms, but its role in the performance of identity and the construction of the self as a fully realized social agent that is most important. Thus, anti-cis-sexist reform efforts have committed significant effort to asserting that individuals should have authority over the gendered language that they use to perform their identity and that others use to refer to them, particularly in terms of pronouns (e.g., McConnell-Ginet, 2018; Zimman, 2018).

In order to address the limitations of binarily gendered language for performing nonbinary identities, anti-cis-sexist reformers have called for gender neutral/nonbinary pronouns, whether derived through extensions of existing forms like singular *they* (Zimman, 2017) or through neologisms like Swedish *hen* (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015) and English *ze* (Wayne, 2005); avoidance of gendered language unless directly relevant (Zimman, 2017); and in the case of grammatical gender languages, the implementation of productive gender neutral inflectional forms (e.g., Spanish -x and -e: Banegas & López, 2021). In natural gender languages like English and Swedish, broad ideological shifts away from the traditional social salience of gender can be fairly straightforwardly pursued in language by the introduction of gender neutral pronouns, an emphasis on gender neutral epicenes, and the avoidance of gendered descriptors (Sczesny et al., 2016). Grammatical gender languages, however, face a greater challenge. Instead of de-emphasizing gender, an alternative gender neutral option must be introduced throughout the grammatical system to enable agreement and avoid ungrammaticality. Though it is increasingly acceptable and, in some cases, legally mandatory to increase the visibility of women in grammatical gender languages by using split or double forms (Sczesny et al., 2016), attempts to break the binary by introducing gender neutral forms as seen in Spanish *nosotres* (Banegas & López, 2021; Remezcla Estaff, 2018), French *grand.e* (Shroy, 2016), and German *Freund\*in* (Johnson, 2019), have faced particularly virulent resistance from linguistic authorities and the general public (Johnson, 2019; L'Academie Francaise, 2017; Remezcla Estaff, 2018). Though it remains to be seen how these movements will develop, Hord's (2016) survey of nonbinary bilingual speakers of Swedish, French, or German and English found that French and German speakers felt unable to fully express their identity in French or German. Instead, they indicated that English provided more adequate resources to negotiate their gender identity. Hence, given the increasing global prevalence of English amongst individuals with high social capital, the question must be asked, will grammatical gender languages admit neutral forms? Or will the full expression of nonbinary identity be restricted to individuals with access to English, leaving more marginalized individuals without the resources to perform their full identity?

In addition to identity construction, anti-cis-sexist reforms are also concerned with misgendering and the imposition of binary gender categories where gender is not necessarily relevant. Zimman (2018) highlights misgendering or “deliberate rejections of trans people's gender identities” (p. 177) as transphobic harassment which significantly harms their wellbeing, while Hord (2016) further notes that “whether misgendering is an honest mistake or is intended to harm an individual or express an opposing political view, it can cause gender dysphoria and

discomfort for many transgender individuals” (p. 3). In addition to its psychological harms, Ansara and Hegarty (2013) argue that misgendering is a form of cisgenderism, “the discriminatory ideology that delegitimises people’s own designations of their genders and bodies” (p. 162). These perspectives of misgendering suggest an extension of linguistic performativity beyond the individual performing their own gender to others ratifying or not ratifying that gender through language. Thus, language is not “just words” but instead acts on individuals’ self-image and plays a crucial role in the performance and ratification of gender identities.

## 5 Relativity and performativity

As illustrated above, anti-sexist reform is often explicitly framed with reference to the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or language relativity. Anti-cis-sexist reform, on the other hand, often makes explicit claims to Butlerian performativity. While at first glance these may seem like two separate ideological orientations with quite unique origins, if we look closer, we begin to see a striking overlap. Some authors, including Hellinger (2011), have suggested that linguistic relativity is the source of reformers’ beliefs that language can “do something” in the world, but there is little discussion of how ideologies of linguistic relativity and performativity interact.

Performativity, in Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) terms, refers to the power of discourse to produce that which it names. Following Derrida’s (1972) theories of meaning, this production occurs by repeating and iterating upon prior discourse, which means that performativity is constrained by the existing matrix of meanings. While Butler (1993) extends this beyond language, looking only at the case of language reveals where the overlap begins. If meaning can only be derived through iteration, then the existing linguistic situation constrains what meanings will be legible or understandable for members of a given linguistic community—in other words, social and cognitive reality may be *limited* by the language we speak. However, it is not so dire as linguistic determinism. Butler’s (1993) performativity is so popular amongst anti-cis-sexist reformers because it also includes the idea of the critically queer: that by pushing against the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix through, for example, hyperbolic enactments or unconventional pastiches, we can unsettle the heterosexual matrix and render more marginalized subjectivities legible. As in more moderate linguistic relativity, the critically queer opens a gap in which reform can take place through the action of language in society. Language may shape social reality, but it does not predetermine all human potential. Thus, both those who espouse a belief in linguistic relativity and those who align themselves with performativity share the underlying beliefs that *language can limit us* and that *language acts in the world*. Therefore, instead of addressing the formal ideologies to which reformers often lay claim, in the following, I discuss how their efforts demonstrate and depend upon these two underlying convictions.

### 5.1 Language limits

The very premise that language change is needed to encode women’s experience, provide better representation and visibility, and enable the expression of greater gender diversity implies that language is, at least in some sense, limiting. Without new words and meanings, we are limited in our ability to encode and demand recognition of non-masculine gender experience. Spender’s (1980) treatise *Man Made Language*, as well as several broad cross-linguistic analyses of the relationship between language type and national gender equality such as Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012) and Liu et al. (2018) lie at the stronger end of this ideology. But, they are far from alone in seeing language as a potential limiting factor. Discussions of nonbinary gender expression (Hord, 2016) and discussions of masculine language in job advertisements as limiting women’s likelihood of seeing themselves as suitable for the advertised positions (Bem & Bem, 1973) show a

similar belief that existing language norms and resources can limit individuals' ability to be enact their identity and act in the social world.

As discussed above, Simpson (1993) questions this approach by highlighting the incompatibility of strong linguistic relativity (i.e. linguistic determinism) and socially motivated language reform. However, ideas of language as limiting are not only seen in the form of linguistic determinism. Instead, most gender-focussed language reformers seem to see language not as fully determining cognition or perception, but instead as limiting individuals' ease of access to non-male and/or nonbinary exemplars as well as their ability and/or willingness to recognize women's experiences or non-cis-folks' identities and experiences—hence, the conviction that novel forms and meanings must be created to express phenomenological gender experience and render diversely gendered bodies legible. And this leads us into the perhaps more prominent idea that language acts in the world.

## **5.2 Language acts in the world**

As summarized above, Hord (2016) argues that gender neutral and gender diverse language is key to nonbinary individuals' identity formation and recognition by others in daily interactions which support healthy self-image. In this context, language crucially acts in the performance of identity and the construction of the self as a fully realized social agent. A similar goal can be seen in anti-sexist language reformers' push to render women visible and support women in rejecting sexist models of feminine identity by changing how language is used. In both of these cases, language plays a key role in developing identity and positive self-image for both women and queer folks. However, where anti-sexist reform seeks to provide an already ratified social category with greater social and economic efficacy, anti-cis-sexist reforms strive to render previously unratified categories of gendered subjectivity legible. This returns us to Butler's (1993) understanding of the critically queer. Language which pushes at the boundaries of normative gender actively destabilizes the heterosexual matrix and renders previously socially illegible subjectivities, for example, genderfluid, nonbinary, and trans folks, legible or understandable within society.

However even as reform efforts place their faith in language's ability to help change society, they also identify another way that language acts in the world: causing harm. Both anti-cis-sexist concerns about the imposition of gendered language by others as seen, for example, in misgendering, and anti-sexist concerns about the derogation of feminine terms can be considered by analogy to Calvert's (1997) communication theory model of hate speech. Under this model, hate speech is understood as a form of ritual which not only performs and thereby reinforces harmful social ideologies, but also causes emotional suffering for the target group who internalize these negative images that threaten and/or delegitimize their identity. This often contributes to legitimizing violence against them or at least rendering such violence less reprehensible. Thus, whether enacted through hate speech, derogatory language, or misgendering, language is seen to have the power to act in the world and to directly influence social power structures by invoking and reinforcing the social validity of ideologies like sexism and cissexism and by depriving individuals of a safe environment in which to enact their identity by perpetuating negative conceptions of group identity and denying their legitimacy and equality.

The focus on harm avoidance extends not just to intentionally harmful speech, but also to microaggressions, which, regardless of the intent of the microaggressor, are nonetheless argued to perpetuate structural violence (Sue, 2010). Such privileging of impact over intent reinforces the idea that language itself (not just language users) acts in the world. As Derrida (1972) argues, discourse acts in the world not because we intend it to, but because of its relations to prior and

future discourse—intent is not necessary. Hence, reformers look not to the intent of the speaker but to the effect of the language upon the hearer to determine whether or not it is problematic. Given these ways that reformers seem to understand language to be acting in the world, gendered language is inescapably political, and the choices speakers make around it are critical to achieving political goals.

An interesting question, however, is what happens when the goal of rendering one's experience effable and protecting oneself from harm come into conflict? As Ehrlich and King (1992) show, without adequate structural change accompanying language reform, feminized forms can take on derogatory connotations, while gender neutral forms like *chairperson* (rather than *chairman*) may end up being used only for women, thus undermining their proposed neutrality, though perhaps continuing to draw attention to hidden sexism. Similarly, as mentioned in Section 3, German *-euse/-öse* feminine forms have been found to invoke sexualized or frivolous referents. In Hebrew, in light of a similarly resilient dominance of male occupational titles, Muchnick (2016) found that many women opt to use the more socially prestigious masculine forms, even when well-established feminine alternatives are available. Similarly, both Hekanaho (2020) and Darwin (2017) have found that nonbinary people sometimes request others refer to them using singular *they* rather than their preferred neo-pronouns as they have found that *they*, though still not fully acceptable to many people, is more acceptable than neo-pronouns. Hekanaho (2020) further finds that some nonbinary individuals accept being referred to with binary gender pronouns in order to “avoid drama/conflict” (p. 220). These findings suggest that societal norms and the behaviours that they license have greater influence on language choices than vice versa, and that for many individuals, avoidance of harm may be more important than increasing visibility. However, as discussed above, Cameron (1994) and Ehrlich & King (1994) promote language reform not because it alone can cause social change, but because it can serve as a valuable part of the broader social reform required to increase gender equality. Thus, though language alone may not change social norms, it can act in the world as a component of a larger movement, which, in order to make change, must be supported by sufficient social and institutional power to overcome existing hegemonies.

Within feminist language reform movements, language ideologies vary from relatively strong linguistic relativity to approaches which argue that language reflects and is influenced by societal norms more than is it able to influence either perceptual or social reality. What is not clear, however, is whether or not the ideology behind reforms has any impact upon their success. Though Ehrlich and King (1992) show that language reform movements are more successful when accompanied by institutionally backed social reform, there has yet to be an analysis of the efficacy of reforms vis-à-vis the language ideologies that drive them, for example, whether or not implementation inspired by a belief that language change will create social change versus that inspired by a belief that language change will create awareness will have different outcomes. Further questions remain in terms of the strategies employed. Is it preferable to risk the derogation of feminine forms or the lingering male bias in neutral generics? And further, does the Hebrew strategy of assuming masculine forms as generics (Muchnick, 2016) suggest a movement towards neutralization of linguistic gender or a reinforcement of the existing male dominance in that society? These questions suggest the need for further study of the interaction between ideology, strategy, and efficacy in gender-focussed language reform movements.

## 6 Ideological tensions between reform efforts

Despite underlying commonalities between anti-sexist and anti-cis-sexist reform movements, there are nonetheless outstanding tensions between these broad categories of reform.



Though in English and Swedish, both anti-cis-sexist and anti-sexist language reforms have coalesced around neutrality-based reform (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015; Pauwels, 2003), questions remain about the capacity of this approach to answer to both anti-sexist and anti-cis-sexist goals. Sniezek and Jawinski's (1986) and Lindquist et al.'s (2019) findings that gender neutral generic forms often still trigger male bias suggests that a gender neutral view, as promoted by anti-cis-sexist reformers, will fail to achieve the anti-sexist goal of reducing male bias and increasing female representation by reducing the limiting effects of androcentric language. Further, even Judith Lorber (1991, 2000), who has long promoted a feminist degendering manifesto, warns that in the absence of existing social equality, degendering may serve to disguise and facilitate the continuation of existing gendered hegemonies instead of liberating society from gender inequality. By contrast, the questions that linguists (and language reformers) ask about language and how it benefits men or disadvantages women, by their very nature, reinforce a binary gender ideology which conflicts with queer reform efforts, reducing the legibility of performances of gender outside of that binary (cf. Bing & Bergvall, 1996). If reformers rely on linguistic relativity as their guiding language ideology, this conflict seems insoluble. However, if reformers are guided by a recognition of the underlying commonalities in how they understand language and Ehrlich and King's (1992) finding that language reform must be paired with social reform in order to achieve real change, then these two goals may not be so diametrically opposed.

Davis and Greenstein (2009) show that age cohort is increasingly overtaking other factors in the prediction of gender ideology, thus suggesting the potential for greater population-wide shifts in gender ideology. Thus, though Lindqvist et al. (2019) still find a male bias embedded in interpretations of traditional gender neutral forms such as singular *they* amongst their 411 participants with a mean age of 35.8, Bradley et al.'s (2019) finding of no male bias in a replication of the study with 123 participants with a mean age of 21.6 suggests that, as age cohort replacement continues, gender neutral alternatives may become truly gender neutral and therefore able to achieve both feminist and queer goals. If such language is truly neutral then it may be able to counteract the limits of binary and androcentric language and performatively invoke a range of possibilities for previously marginalized genders.

## 7 Conclusion

In this exploration of the ideologies underlying gender-focussed language reform efforts, key language ideologies underlying anti-sexist and anti-cis-sexist movements were identified in reforms undertaken across a range of primarily European languages. Anti-sexist and anti-cis-sexist reform movements differ in their stated ideological foundations, with anti-sexist reform efforts clustering around weak linguistic relativity with some authors taking a more functional approach and select cross-linguistic approaches leaning towards linguistic determinism, while anti-cis-sexist reform efforts focussed on the performativity of language both in constructing personal identity and causing harm. However, both rely on the underlying beliefs that language can limit, and that language can act in the world.

While sharing an overarching goal of harm reduction, these reform efforts also differed in terms of their goals for changing gender ideologies. Where much anti-sexist language reform seeks to enhance the standing of women and create greater equality between men and women, anti-cis-sexist language reform seeks to challenge binary gender ideologies, reduce the salience of gender as a social construct and enable the expression of greater gender diversity. If a linguistic relativity stance is taken, these goals may conflict as anti-cis-sexist efforts to promote gender neutral forms run the risk of leaving male bias intact, whereas anti-sexist efforts to increase the visibility of

women, by their very premise of increasing the visibility of women vis-à-vis the generic male, assume and reinforce the gender binary. If, however, language reform is seen as only one part of a broader social reform effort underpinned by the shared beliefs that language is limiting and language acts in the world, there may be room for carefully constructed programs of reform to support equality for all genders, including women (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015; Odrowaz-Coates, 2015).

As Woolard (1992) states “coming to grips with such public issues means coming to grips with the nature and working of language ideology” (p. 244), and thus, coming to grips with the public debate around gender-focussed language reform requires more fully understanding and appreciating the not just the gender ideologies, but also the language ideologies that motivate actors on all sides of the debate.

### 8 Limitations and future work

Due to their grammatical gender systems and their relative accessibility and relevance to the English-speaking linguistics community, European languages form the bulk of the work published in English on this subject. However, future work would benefit by increasing the representation of languages surveyed and exploring the ideologies encoded in scholarship outside of the English language tradition. While some work has been done to explore the link between sexist ideologies and uptake of gender-focussed language reform (e.g., Sarrasin et al., 2012), further investigation of how language ideologies are deployed in resistance movements and how those language ideologies relate to sexist ideologies would also provide valuable insight into factors contributing to speakers’ unwillingness to use anti-sexist and anti-cis-sexist language. Finally, investigating the relationship between ideologies for, ideologies against, and degree of uptake within language communities undergoing gender-focussed language reform would enable more accurate assessments of the impact of ideological stances and help inform efforts to address them and to facilitate greater gender equity in society and language.

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