

# Archie Crowley: Language around gender and identity evolves

I am a linguist. Linguists study language. And we do this in a lot of different ways. Some linguists study how we pronounce certain sounds. Others look at how we build sentences. And some study how language varies from place to place, just to name a few. But what I'm really interested in is what people think and believe about language and how these beliefs affect the way we use it. All of us have deeply held beliefs about language such as the belief that some languages are more beautiful than others or that some ways of using language are more correct. And as most linguists know, these beliefs are often less about language itself and more about what we believe about the social world around us.

So I'm a linguist, and I'm also a nonbinary person, which means I don't identify as a man or a woman. I also identify as a member of a broader transgender community.

When I first started getting connected to other transgender people, it was like learning a whole new language and the linguist part of me was really excited. There was a whole new way of talking about my relationship with myself and a new clear way to communicate that to other people. And then I started having conversations with my friends and family about what it meant for me to be Trans and nonbinary, what those words meant to me specifically, and why I would use both of them.

I also clarified the correct words they could use when referring to me. For some of them, this meant some very specific changes. For example, some of my friends who are used to talking about our friend group as "ladies" or "girls" switched to nongendered terms like "friends" or "pals." And my parents can now tell people that their three kids are their son, their daughter and their child. And all of them would have to switch the pronouns they used to refer to me. My correct pronouns are "they" and "them," also known as the singular they.

And these people love me, but many of them told me that some of these language changes were too hard or too confusing or too ungrammatical for them to pick up. These responses led me to the focus of my research. There are commonly held, yet harmful and incorrect beliefs about language that for the people who hold these beliefs, act as barriers to building and strengthening relationships with the transgender people in their families and communities, even if they want to do so. Today, I'm going to walk you through some of these beliefs in the hope that we can embrace creativity in our language and allow language to bring us closer together. You might see your own beliefs reflected in these experiences in some way, but no matter what, I hope that I can share with you some linguistic insights that you can put into your back pocket and take with you out into the world. And I just want to be super clear. This can be fun. Learning about language brings me joy, and I hope that it can bring you more joy too.

So do you remember how I said that for some of my friends and family learning how to use the singular they was really hard, and they said it was too confusing or too ungrammatical for them to pick up. Well, this brings us to the first belief about language that people have. Grammar rules don't change. As a linguist, I see this belief a lot out in the world. A lot of language users believe

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that grammar just is what it is. When it comes to language, what's grammatical is what matters. You can't change it.

I want to tell you a story about English in the 1600s. Back then, as you might imagine, people spoke differently than we do today. In particular, they used "thou" when addressing a single other person, and "you" when addressing more than one other person. But for some complex historical reasons that we don't have time to get into today, so you'll just have to trust me as a linguist here, but people started using "you" to address someone, regardless of how many people they were talking to. And people had a lot to say about this. Take a look at what this guy, Thomas Elwood, had to say. He wrote, "The corrupt and unsound form of speaking in the plural number to a single person, 'you' to one instead of 'thou,' contrary to the pure, plain and single language of truth, 'thou' to one and 'you' to more than one." And he goes on. Needless to say, this change in pronouns was a big deal in the 1600s.

But actually, if you followed the debates about the singular they at all, these arguments might sound familiar to you. They're not that far off from the bickering we hear about the so-called grammaticality of pronouns used to talk about Trans and nonbinary people. One of the most common complaints about the singular they is that if "they" is used to refer to people in the plural, it can't also be used to talk about people in the singular, which is exactly what they said about "thou" and "you." But as we have seen, pronouns have changed. Our grammar rules do change and for a lot of different reasons. And we're living through one of these shifts right now. All living languages will continue to change, and the Thomas Elwood's of the world will eventually have to get with the program because hundreds of years later, it's considered right to use "you" when addressing another person. Not just allowable, but right.

The second belief about language that people have is that dictionaries provide official, unchanging definitions for words. When you were in school, did you ever start an essay with a sentence like, "The dictionary defines history as ..." Well, if you did, which dictionary were you talking about? Was it the Oxford English Dictionary? Was it Merriam Webster? Was it Urban Dictionary? Did you even have a particular dictionary in mind? Which one of these is "the dictionary?" Dictionaries are often thought of as the authority on language. But dictionaries, in fact, are changing all the time. And here's where our minds are really blown. Dictionaries don't provide a single definition for words. Dictionaries are living documents that track how some people are using language. Language doesn't originate in dictionaries. Language originates with people and dictionaries are the documents that chronicle that language use.

Here's one example. We currently use the word "awful" to talk about something that is bad or gross. But before the 19th century, "awful" meant just the opposite. People used "awful" to talk about something that was deserving of respect or full of awe. And in the mid-1900s, "awesome" was the word that took up these positive meanings and "awful" switched to the negative one we have today. And dictionaries over time reflected that. This is just one example of how definitions and meanings have changed over time. And to keep up with it, how dictionaries are updated all the time.

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So I hope you're starting to feel a little more comfortable with the idea of changing language. But of course, I'm not just talking about language in general. I'm talking about language as it is impactful for Tran's people. And pronouns are only one part of language, and they're only one part of language that's important for Tran's people. Also important are the identity terms that Tran's people use to talk about ourselves, such as Trans man, Trans woman, nonbinary or gender queer. And some of these words have been documented in dictionaries for decades now and others are still being added year after year. And that's because dictionaries are working to keep up with us, the people who are using language creatively.

So at this point, you might be thinking, "But Archie, it seems like every trans person has a different word they want me to use for them. There are so many opportunities for me to mess up or to look ignorant or to hurt someone's feelings. What is something I can memorize and reliably employ when talking to the Trans people in my life?" Well, that brings us to the third belief about language that people have. You can't just make up words.

Folks, people do this all the time. Here's one of my favorite examples. The "official" term for your mother's mother or your father's mother is grandmother. I recently polled my friends and asked them what they call their grandmothers. We don't get frustrated if your friend's grandma goes by Meemaw and yours goes by Gigi. We just make rather short work of it and memorize it and move on getting to know her. In fact, we might even celebrate her by gifting her with a sweatshirt or an embroidered pillow that celebrates the name she has chosen for herself.

And just like your Nana and your grandma, Tran's people have every right to choose their own identifying language. The process of determining self-identifying language is crucial for Tran's people. In my research, many Tran's people have shared that finding new vocabulary was an important part of understanding their own identities. As one person I interviewed put it, "Language is one of the most important personal things because using different words to describe myself and then finding something that feels good, feels right, is a very introspective and important process. With that process you can piece together, with the language that you find out works best for you, who am I?"

Sometimes the words that feel good are already out there. For me, the words Trans and nonbinary just feel right. But sometimes the common lexicon doesn't yet hold the words that a person needs to feel properly understood. And it's necessary and exciting to get to create and redefine words that better reflect our experience of gender.

So this is a very long answer, but, yes, I'm absolutely going to give you a magic word, something really easy you can memorize. And I want you to think of this word as the biggest piece of advice I could give you if you don't know what words to use for the Trans people in your life. Ask. I might be a linguist and a Tran's person and a linguist who works with Trans people, but I'm no substitute for the actual Trans people in your life when it comes to what words to use for them. And you're more likely to hurt someone's feelings by not asking or assuming than you are by asking. And the words that a person uses might change. So just commit to asking and learning.

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Language is a powerful tool for explaining and claiming our own identities and for building relationships that affirm and support us. But language is just that, a tool. Language works for us, not the other way around. All of us, transgender and cisgender can use language to understand ourselves and to respect those around us. We're not bound by what words have meant before, what order they might have come in or what rules we have been taught. We can consider the beliefs that we might have had about how language works and recognize that language will continue to change. And we can creatively use language to build the identities and relationships that bring us joy. And that's not just allowable. It's right. Believe me.