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Epilogue: on *keoi* and the politics of pronouns

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ABSTRACT

This essay reflects on the cultural politics of pronouns. It analyzes recent practices that attempt to create an inclusive linguistic environment for those with non-normative gender identification. Noting some of the limits and blind spots of these practices, the essay advocates a multilingual approach to creating gender-inclusive environments. Inter-referencing the examples of French and Cantonese in contrast to English, the essay shows that diverse cultural and linguistic contexts present different possibilities and challenges for practising the inclusive usage of pronouns.

KEYWORDS

Ponouns; gender; inclusion; non-binary; multilingualism

In recent years, trans inclusion efforts in English-speaking universities in North America have led to intense debates on the politics of pronouns. Binary-gendered third-person pronouns, in particular, are considered a culprit for perpetuating cisgender norms. In response, the ungendered third-person plural pronoun “they” is being adopted by many as an alternative. This usage has become so popular that “they,” in the sense of reference to nonbinary gender identity, was chosen by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as the 2019 “Word of the Year” (Merriam-Webster 2019). The registration system of many universities now includes “they” and “nonbinary” as an option for pronoun and gender preference. The ritual of self-identifying one’s preferred pronoun at the beginning of public gatherings, meetings, and email signatures has also become commonplace. These practices are meant to alleviate the burden of self-identification which would usually fall only on those with non-normative identification. While well-meaning and, to some extent, successful in creating an environment where more diverse forms of gender identification and embodiment can thrive, these pronoun strategies also betray a monolingual and Anglo-centric blind spot which limits their impact, or at times unintentionally put strain, on those with linguistic experiences outside of English. For example, the response in France to Merriam-Webster’s 2019 “Word of the Year” shows that the strategy would create more problems than solutions for speakers of French, as “they” in French is gendered (*ils, elles*), and the male pronoun *ils* is conventionally used for a mixed-gender group. Even attempts to create non-gendered plural pronouns (such as *iels* or *illes*) in the mold of “they” lead to more questions of how these pronouns would agree with other parts of speech such as adjective and noun which, unlike English, are also gendered (Le Breton 2019). For speakers of a language like Cantonese, which already has an ungendered third-person singular pronoun, the practice of having to publicly self-identify with he, she, or they pronouns actually forces them to *re-gender* their linguistic experience. Last year, students in my department were involved in a project making pronoun buttons for people to self-identify at an event. It dawned on me that had this exercise been done in a Cantonese-speaking environment, we would only need one button

option, with the inscription *keoi* (Figure 1). *Keoi* is an ungendered third-person singular pronoun, in both spoken and written forms, with a similarly ungendered plural form *keoi dei*. *Keoi* is androgynous in the sense of “neither and both” (Introduction in this issue): it allows reference to a person while leaving the gendering option radically open. I recalled the many experiences I had of describing someone in Cantonese without assigning gender for an extensive period of time, in a way that would have sounded deliberate and awkward in English but effortless in Cantonese. *Keoi* performs a linguistic androgyny that alleviates the non-consensual dynamics that A. Finn Enke (2016, 219), in a reflection on nonbinary pedagogy, attributes to English: “[T]he structure of English appears to require speakers to make and articulate a binary gender assessment of every person spoken about. This virtually always takes place without the explicit consent of the person being spoken about.” By contrast, *keoi* leaves room for speakers to refrain from gendering others in day-to-day encounters because there is no linguistic pressure to attribute gender every time a pronoun is used. The social stress of being gendered, as well as the pressure to gender others, are often the underlying factors that give rise to many instances of transphobic encounters. Inspired by a Swedish’s grade school’s introduction of the non-gendered “friend” as everyone’s pronoun, Enke’s own pedagogical practices experiment with creative uses of language that encourage non-gendered ways of thinking about and referring to other people (2016, 223–229). An even more effective strategy, especially in contexts where there are people of diverse linguistic backgrounds, is the cultivation of a multilingual environment, where it is less about creating new communicative signs to relate to one another, and more about allowing speakers to cross back and forth into multiple linguistic possibilities of (not) gendering, thus denaturalizing any single grammatical structure and its gendered associations. Moreover, the freedom to inter-reference different languages organically allows translingual creativity to emerge. David Gramling and Aniruddha Dutta (2016, 337) have provocatively compared the construct of cisgender with that of monolingualism: they describe “cislangu- alism” as “the compulsion to perform on the normatively ‘here’ side of language(s), rather than in the ‘there’ of wayward, unhygienic, excessive, translingual, or disorderly speech.” Without underestimating the achievement of using “they” to blast open binary gender norms, it is also necessary to move beyond its limits, and revel in how the knotty, rigidly gendered constraints of *ils* and *elles*, the androgynous possibilities of *keoi*, and countless other multilingual expressions of (no) gender can productively and messily blast open the “cislangu- al” politics of pronouns.



Figure 1. A button showing the ungendered third-person singular pronoun in Cantonese.

Special terms

keoi
keoi dei

佢
佢哋

Notes on contributor

Helen Hok-Sze Leung is a Professor and current Chair of the Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University in Canada. She has published widely on queer screen media and queer cultural politics. She is the author of *Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong* and *Farewell My Concubine: A Queer Film Classic*. Her current research projects include a study on *Transpacific Film Cities* and an oral history project on queer Asian cultural activism in Vancouver during the 2000s.

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