CHAPTER 12

PRONOUNS AND GENDER

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1. INTRODUCTION

In February 2022, social media app TikTok updated its community guidelines to include a provision prohibiting users from posting, uploading, streaming, or sharing "content that targets transgender or non-binary individuals through misgendering or deadnaming."[1] In contrast—and just two months later—Tennessee's House of Representatives passed a bill specifying that teachers and other employees of public schools are "not required to use a student's preferred pronoun when referring to the student if the preferred pronoun is not consistent with the student's biological sex";[2] and Nicholas Meriwether, a professor at Shawnee State University in Ohio, won $400,000 in a settlement with his employer after refusing to use the preferred pronouns of one of his students.[3]

The present handbook appears during a period of historic controversy in the English-speaking world regarding the nature of gender and the use of gendered pronouns. And though the emergence of this controversy has been shaped by broader political and cultural trends (best analyzed by historians and political scientists), the arguments to which representatives of both sides appeal often turn on empirical questions about the meanings of gendered pronouns in English (best analyzed by philosophers and linguists).[4]

In keeping with the goals of a handbook of applied philosophy of language, our aim is to introduce readers to the empirical questions at issue in debates over gendered pronouns and to assess the plausibility of various possible answers to these questions. This project is primarily descriptive rather than normative: we are interested in describing the actual conventions governing the use of pronouns in languages, with a focus on English. We are not arguing for any particular conception of what the ideal

conventions might be. That said, we will stop at various points to discuss the normative implications of our descriptive claims for debates about the use of gendered pronouns.

We have written above of 'gender' and 'gendered pronouns', as well as of 'biological sex'. These terms invite confusion, and it is worth clarifying at the outset what we mean when we use them. There are two important distinctions to be made here. First, we distinguish between gender as a property of persons (*personal gender*) and gender as a property of linguistic expressions (*grammatical gender*). Grammatical gender is a theoretical posit in linguistics that is primarily intended to explain certain morphosyntactic processes of agreement. Personal genders, on the other hand, are generally taken to be socially constructed categories, akin to professional categories like *surgeon* and legal categories like *parent*.[5]

The second important distinction is between personal gender and sex. In contrast to personal gender, which is generally taken to be a social phenomenon, sex is generally understood to be a biological phenomenon.[6] Exactly how best to define sex is a complicated matter. Following Griffiths (2021), we note briefly that biologists, particularly evolutionary biologists, characterize sex in terms of gametes. Many species have phenotypes that are involved in producing larger gametes and phenotypes that are involved in producing smaller gametes. Organisms producing smaller gametes are classified as male; those producing larger gametes are classified as female. Although it is not in keeping with evolutionary biology, (human) medicine often characterizes sex in terms of chromosomes. In humans, individuals with one X chromosome and one Y chromosome are, in general, male; individuals with two X chromosomes are, in general, female. In the few cases where we need to represent what an informed non-expert might think about sex, we will use chromosomal sex as an example, even if this is not quite what evolutionary biology might tell us. We adopt a convention of using 'male' and 'female' to pick out sex categories and 'man', 'woman', 'boy', and 'girl' to pick out personal gender categories, without taking any further stand on what those categories are. Note that these terms belong to our semantic metalanguage; we are not interested here in the semantics of e.g. 'female' or 'woman' in English.

Finally, we note that existing literature in linguistics often contrasts grammatical gender with *natural gender*. As we understand this term, it is meant to pick out whatever non-grammatical properties are semantically implicated by a given language's grammatical gender system. Talk of natural gender is useful because it allows linguists to state certain generalizations about grammatical gender without having to answer the difficult question of whether the languages they are studying are semantically sensitive to personal gender, sex, or other properties. (As we will see below, languages make use of a wide range of natural gender properties.) That said, in what follows we will try whenever possible to use more specific terms ('personal gender' or 'sex') rather than 'natural gender'.

Given that grammatical gender is a theoretical posit internal to the science of language, it might reasonably be wondered why it is implicated in contemporary controversies about personal gender. The answer to this question is that, while grammatical gender is a property of linguistic expressions, it is in many cases associated with

those expressions in a non-arbitrary way which seems to be sensitive to something like sex and/or personal gender. When it comes to English pronouns like 'she' (grammatically feminine) and 'he' (grammatically masculine), it seems clear that linguistic conventions place constraints on the sorts of individuals to whom they may felicitously be used to refer: one cannot, for example, felicitously use 'she' to refer to Peter Geach, nor 'he' to refer to Elizabeth Anscombe.

Yet it is not clear whether the felicitous use of pronouns like 'she' and 'he' is governed by the personal gender of the referent (as TikTok's revised community guidelines seem to suggest), the sex of the referent (as the Tennessee bill seems to suggest), or some more complicated property or properties. Therefore, though gendered pronouns are clearly gendered in the grammatical sense, when it comes to semantics, it is not clear whether they are gendered, sexed, or neither—this is the main question we will consider here.

To emphasize the openness of this question about the semantics of pronouns, we will avoid using terms like 'masculine' and 'feminine' when referring to English pronouns.[7] Instead, we will refer to the English pronoun 'she' and its inflected forms as *S-series pronouns* and to the English pronoun 'he' and its inflected forms as *H-series pronouns*. Let us also introduce the term *S-properties* as a label for whatever properties of an individual license the use of S-series pronouns to refer to her; and let the term *H-properties* be defined in the same way, mutatis mutandis. Stated in our terminology, the crucial question about gendered pronouns in English is what the corresponding S-properties and H-properties are—whether personal gender, sex, or something else.

Our discussion divides naturally into two parts. The first part, consisting of sections 2 and 3, is a general introduction to the linguistics and psychology of grammatical gender. Readers who are familiar with these topics may wish to focus their attention on the second part of the chapter, which specifically concerns the semantics of gendered pronouns in English. We begin this second part by discussing some methodological limitations of empirical approaches to our topic and the normative implications of those limitations (sections 4 and 5). Relying on our own semantic judgements as native speakers of English, we then argue against three simple theories of the semantics of S- and H-series pronouns in English and propose an alternative, the *Gender-First View* (sections 6 and 7). Finally, we discuss the singular 'they' and its connection to nonbinary gender identities (section 8). Section 9 concludes.

2. Gender: An Overview

In keeping with our effort to ground our observations in linguistic facts, we start with a brief overview of the linguistics of grammatical gender. For us, the main observation is that grammatical gender is a feature of nouns that sorts them into *noun classes* in accordance with their involvement in *agreement patterns*. Some common examples include noun/pronoun agreement in English, as in:[8]

(1) a. The man reached his destination.
b. *The man reached her destination.

We also see agreement between nouns and predicate adjectives in languages like French:

(2) a. L'homme$_{M}$ est grand$_{M}$. ("The man is big.")
b. La chaise$_{F}$ est grande$_{F}$. ("The chair is big.")

Cross-linguistically, we also find a variety of other forms of agreement involving gender. We invite the interested reader to pursue this variety in the linguistics literature.[9]

In addition to driving agreement patterns and sorting nouns into classes, gender features are among what linguists often call phi-features (or φ-features). Phi-features typically include person and number along with gender. They are distinguished from other types of features by having semantic content. In contrast, other grammatical features need not have semantic content. Whatever features make a noun a noun and not a verb, for example, are not part of its meaning. Phi-features both play a role in syntax and have semantic content.[10] As we defined S- and H-properties, it follows immediately that the semantic contents of pronouns in English (their phi-features) reflect them. We will look at the wider range of contents of gender features cross-linguistically in a moment.

What is the status of the content carried by grammatical gender features? One natural idea is that the semantic contents of phi-features, including gender, are *presupposed*. This is a technical notion, but the main idea is that presupposed content is what is taken for granted in saying something, rather than the 'proffered content', which is what the speaker is adding by saying what they say. A useful example is the presupposition of a change-of-state verb like 'stop':

(3) Sam stopped smoking
a. Presupposition: Sam smoked in the past.
b. Proffered content: Sam no longer smokes.

In some way, the speaker takes for granted that Sam used to smoke, and adds that he or she no longer does.[11]

Presuppositions are often identified through projection patterns. What is taken for granted stays in place whether or not you negate a sentence, for instance, or whether you put the presupposition-carrying material in the antecedent of a conditional or a polar question. We thus see:

(4) a. Sam stopped smoking.
b. Sam did not stop smoking.
c. If Sam stopped smoking, it is great.
d. Did Sam stop smoking?

All of these indicate that Sam used to smoke.[12]

We see broadly the same behavior with the gender features of pronouns in English:

(5) a. Sam respects her.
b. Sam does not respect her.
c. If Sam respects her, I should too.
d. Does Sam respect her?

All likewise indicate that the referent of 'her' has S-properties.

So, it is an appealing idea that the contents of phi-features, including gender features, are presupposed.[13] That view has been advanced, e.g. by Cooper (1983) and Heim and Kratzer (1998). But we should note that Cooper's main interest is quantification, and that Heim and Kratzer's book is a textbook, trying to cover a wide range of material. Neither is focused on gender or phi-features. It is well known that when we look in more detail, gender features do not obviously project exactly like standard presuppositions. For example, we see:

(6) a. Bill thought that Sam stopped smoking.
b. Bill thought that she was a linguist.

In these environments, the presupposed content is typically that Bill believes or thinks the presupposition of the embedded constituent. Thus, it is indicated by (6a) that Bill believes that Sam used to smoke. But (6b) seems different. It still seems to indicate that the referent of 'she' has S-properties.[14]

Another problem for the view that phi-features are presupposed is that gendered pronouns show different behavior when they are bound. Presuppositions project under quantification. For instance:

(7) a. Every student stopped smoking.
b. Of all the students, only John stopped smoking.

The presupposition of 'stopped' projects here. Both of these seem to presuppose that every student used to smoke. Matters here are complicated by the fact that the properties of presupposition projection under quantification are disputed. Some have argued that what is presupposed here is only that some students used to smoke.[15] Regardless of exactly what is projected, however, something clearly is.

In contrast, gender features seem to disappear under binding:

(8) Of all the students, only Mary aced her homework.

Here we need agreement between 'Mary' and 'her' locally. But we see no indication that all the students bear S-properties linked to 'her'. The gender feature of 'her' does not seem to project up to the whole quantified sentence. This is in marked contrast to the

behavior we saw a moment ago. Likewise, in cases where the class is partly men and partly women, either of the following is acceptable (Heim 2008):

(9) a. Every student in the class voted for himself.
b. Every student in the class voted for herself.

Again, we see that gender features are not looking like presuppositions, at least, not at first glance.

It should be noted that the issue here is not restricted to gender. Bound pronouns can seem to lose their phi-features. We see this in:

(10) Only I did my homework.

The first-person feature seems to be lost here: 'I' seems to be functioning like a bound variable, and its person feature seems to have disappeared.[16] Somehow, when bound, pronouns can shed their phi-features, and specifically for us, they can shed their gender features, at least if the context allows. That is not typical presuppositional behavior.

There has been a great deal of work on what is happening in these cases with bound pronouns. We refer interested readers to Heim (2008) and Sudo (2012) for overviews and proposals. Sudo, in particular, argues at length that despite the problems we have noted, gender features are presupposed. Many authors have suggested that binding somehow eliminates phi-features. Heim expresses dissatisfaction with all the available options, and calls for more research to understand the phenomenon better.

For rough and ready purposes, we suggest that one can think of the semantic content of gender features as presupposed. Outside of binding cases, it behaves more or less like a presupposition. The binding cases present an unresolved set of problems, as do the delicate properties of projection under attitude verbs. So, we can say that gender features are presupposed, but do note that this is very rough, and ready only in some situations.

So much for the projective properties of gender features. We turn now to examining grammatical gender from a cross-linguistic perspective. In English, nouns are not grammatically gendered. Some nouns, e.g. 'man' and 'woman', are seen as carrying natural gender, reflecting the personal genders and/or sexes of the things they pick out. But we really only find phi-features on pronouns. 'He', 'she', 'it', and 'they' carry phi-features typically labeled *masculine*, *feminine*, *neuter*, and *common*, respectively.

Many languages show richer gender systems, and these systems also show important variety. Gender features, in contrast to number features and person features, typically carry contents related to personal gender, sex, animacy, humanness, or animalhood. We mention a few examples, drawn from work of Kramer (2020). Her broad cross-linguistic survey notes, among many other data points, that Sochiapan Chinantec (Otomanguean: Chinantecan) assigns gender using animacy: animate nouns are assigned one gender, and inanimate nouns another. As she also notes, many

Niger-Congo languages have one gender for human-denoting nouns and one for non-human-denoting ones. Some languages assign gender to nouns seemingly arbitrarily, at least outside of nouns with clearly gender-specific semantic content. Spanish is an example. Some languages assign gender based in part on morphology. Russian does this for 'lower animals' and inanimate objects. Some languages, like Hungarian, seem to have no gender at all, and do not have gendered pronouns. Some languages assign grammatical gender in a way that conflicts with natural gender. Polish, for instance, marks the terms for 'girl' and 'puppy' as grammatically neuter. Some languages assign grammatical gender to inanimate objects that may be associated with natural gender in some social group. So we find in French 'la jupe' (the skirt, feminine) and 'le pantalon' (the pants, masculine). Grammatical gender is, clearly, a rich and varied linguistic phenomenon.[17]

For all their variety, gender systems do seem to have a semantic core. This is what Kramer calls the *semantic core generalization*: that grammatical gender systems always have some nouns whose gender is semantically predictable, such that:

> Grammatical gender is always assigned to at least a subset of nouns on the basis of animacy, humanness, and/or social gender for humans/sex for animals. (Kramer 2020, 47)[18]

When we turn to English pronouns in later sections, it is the details of this semantic core that will concern us.

Before leaving our overview of the linguistic properties of gender, we pause to comment briefly on the use of 'they' as a singular pronoun. This has become increasingly common in the past several decades among some groups. Sometimes it is offered as a gender-neutral pronoun (or least one marked as common, rather than H-series or S-series). It is also offered as an appropriate pronoun for nonbinary individuals.[19]

This use is complicated by the fact that 'they' appears to carry a plural number feature for many English speakers. Even so, 'they' can appear to function as if singular in bound and anaphoric environments. Consider, for example:

(11) a. i. Every parent believes their child is a genius.
ii. Every parent believes his child is a genius.
b. i. Somebody made a large donation, but they don't want to reveal their identity.
ii. Somebody made a large donation, but she doesn't want to reveal her identity.

Note that the 'they/their' versions here are perfectly natural. They are perhaps most natural in cases where the quantifier ranges over a group which could include people of different genders or the target for anaphora is not specified for gender. But a least some English speakers also find bound uses of 'they' acceptable when gender is specified, as in:[20]

(12) Every man said they were happy.

We have already discussed the fact that in quantified environments, pronouns can sometimes seem to lose their phi-features. It may be that we are seeing the same phenomenon here.

Cases like these are a long-standing part of English. The more recent phenomenon is the use of 'they' as a singular pronoun in deictic environments, or, more generally, where it is not bound or anaphoric, and the personal gender or sex of the intended referent is clear to speakers. For instance, we often currently see 'they' used in certain speech communities as a preferred (singular) pronoun for nonbinary individuals.

Some speakers no doubt find deictic singular uses of 'they' awkward, even if they otherwise see themselves as part of a community like the ones we just described. Presumably, such speakers hear 'they' as marked plural and in deictic environments see it as awkward to use it for singular reference. However much they might want to conform to community ideas about gender-neutral pronouns, they simply hear 'they' as plural. Changing these sorts of facts about one's idiolect can be hard to do. This is likely because pronouns belong to what linguists call the 'closed class' part of language, which also includes (for example) tenses, modals, and aspect markers. In contrast, the 'open class' part of language includes the major lexical categories like nouns and verbs. It has long been observed that the open class categories are open in that it is easy and quick to add to them. To add a new noun or verb, we merely need to find an interesting new idea, attach a word to it, and see if it catches on. In contrast, to add a tense to a language is not something we can do so easily. Tense systems do change, but only at the glacial pace of language change. Just how quickly closed class expressions can change is not fully understood.[21]

Even though pronouns are closed class items, pronoun systems do change over time. Certainly, earlier forms of English had pronouns like 'thee' and 'thou', which in Middle English acquired marking for informality. We put aside any linguistic prescriptivism, which might insist on how singular pronouns 'should' be used. Our own suspicion is that our language is in flux, with mounting pressure for conventionalizing singular deictic 'they'.

With that, we will end our brief overview of the linguistics of gender marking. Our concern in what follows is not primarily with the syntactic realization of gender features or their role in agreement, but rather with their semantic and social properties. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that one of the main ways gender is identified cross-linguistically is via these purely syntactic properties. Thus our investigation here concerns the semantic properties of a feature in language that is as much syntactic as semantic. Gender is part of grammar, and it can show great variety and complexity. When we turn to the semantics of English pronouns below, we should remember that they show us one specific case of how gender appears in language. They exhibit interpretable features that can relate to personal gender and/or sex, but they also show agreement properties and other aspects of the inner workings of a human language.

3. Grammatical Gender and Psychology

In this section, we consider psychological work on the cognitive relationship between grammatical gender, personal gender, and sex. Does a word's grammatical gender affect how speakers think about its referent? This might seem obvious for English. We might assume that if we refer to someone with an H-series pronoun, then we automatically think of them as having a particular personal gender and/or sex. Perhaps we do. But consideration of other languages and work in cognitive psychology shows that the connection between grammatical gender and how we think about something is not always simple. This question arises most vividly for languages that mark masculine or feminine gender on nouns whose referents are not the right types of thing to possess personal gender or sex. Do such languages implicitly guide speakers to think of certain things as masculine/male or feminine/female because of grammatical gender marking, even if those things are non-human animals, plants, artifacts, or inanimate objects?

Many have assumed not.[22] But more recently, a number of psychologists and psycholinguists have asked whether we can see subtle effects of grammatical gender marking in cognition.[23] Proponents of specific views about what S- and H-properties are might hope to find some support for their view in these kinds of experiments. Might we in some subtle way think of things as specifically male or female, or as men or women, when the words we use for them are marked for gender?

A note of caution before proceeding: the results we will survey here are not all consistent, and the experimental designs differ substantially. As with any experiment, one can and should ask about their designs, the quality of the data, and the strength of the effects. These empirical results should be taken with great care and caution, and, when possible, should be used with input from experimentalists who can help us interpret them and use them well.

Our main question in this section is whether languages with rich gender marking and some arbitrary gender assignment trigger effects of grammatical gender when subjects think about objects without natural gender or sex (inanimate objects, artifacts, etc.). But one has to probe for this without relying on speakers' naming or categorizing the objects, which would simply reflect the genders their languages assign. One needs to find other ways to track the role of gender in thought.

Keeping our note of caution in mind, we start with the example of a much-cited set of studies from Boroditsky et al. (2003). In one of their experiments, Boroditsky et al. used a list of object nouns that have the opposite grammatical gender in German and in Spanish. Native speakers of German and Spanish were asked to provide the first three adjectives that came to mind to describe a named object. These were rated for whether they were masculine or feminine descriptors. The finding was that speakers' descriptors followed the grammatical gender of the noun.

This appears to be a finding that grammatical gender affects how we think about things. We can, as always, ask how strong such a result is. We can ask about the coding of descriptors, the sample size and population, and any number of other standard questions. And, we will see, other experimental designs have shown different results. But this result holds out the tantalizing prospect that when you hear a gendered descriptor, you think about the thing as if it has some form of natural gender.

Other findings are not so clear. Here is an example, involving a very different experimental design, due to Vigliocco et al. (2005). In this experiment, subjects were offered three words and asked to judge which two were most similar in meaning. Vigliocco et al. compared the judgements of speakers of Italian and of German, which mark nouns for grammatical gender, with the judgements of speakers of English. They found that for Italian speakers, meaning similarity is affected by grammatical gender for animal terms, but not artifact terms, where the results were similar to English speakers. For German speakers, they found no difference with English speakers for either animals or artifacts. Of importance here is that Italian has two grammatical genders, while German has three grammatical genders and marks all diminutives as grammatically neuter even if their referents have natural gender. Hence, it makes a less consistent mapping between grammatical gender features and natural gender. A final experiment compared Italian and English speakers, but replaced words with pictures. Vigliocco et al. found no effect of gender in this case.

In sum, Vigliocco et al. found at best highly limited effects of grammatical gender. They found them only for two-gender languages and then only for animal terms, not artifacts. In other experiments, they also found the effects to be highly task-specific. Generally, though the experiments are different in design, they do not seem to find the strong effects of gender that Boroditsky et al. (2003) did. This reminds us of our note of caution. These are complicated experiments, and to our knowledge, there is not a large body of related work with which to compare them.

Vigliocco et al. were careful to formulate two different hypotheses about how gender might affect thinking. One is that the effects of gender are not really distinctive. There is a well-known effect in language learning of learners wanting to associate similar morphosyntactic forms with similar meanings.[24] This could help simplify the language-learner's task. So one possibility is that when it comes to languages with rich grammatical gender marking, learners simply look for any similarity they can relate to gender marking. A second hypothesis is that speakers interpret grammatically gendered nouns directly as indicating sex or personal gender. This would work most easily for nouns for humans or animals. One version of this second hypothesis predicts effects only for nouns denoting humans, animals, and anything else that might easily be conceived of as having sex or personal gender. A more general version predicts that it would apply to any noun. (This is close to the hypothesis explored by Boroditsky et al.) The second hypothesis in either form predicts that languages that mark grammatical gender differently will produce different associations with gender. The first hypothesis does not. Overall, Vigliocco et al. did not find strong support for the first hypothesis for gender (though there is evidence for it in other domains). Nor did they find support for

the stronger version of the second hypothesis. They report only finding evidence for the modest and constrained version.

One more example of work in this area is from Maciuszek et al. (2019), focusing on Polish. As Maciuszek et al. describe it, Polish has three main grammatical genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter), and also a rich system of gender-marking morphology and two further genders for plural forms (masculine-personal and non-masculine-personal). It shows significant arbitrary gender assignment.[25] Maciuszek et al. take as a starting point Vigliocco et al.'s hypotheses about the ways gender can affect cognition. In one experiment, they used the three-word paradigm of Vigliocco et al., but tried to be more careful about other measures of similarity between words in a triple. Also, instead of using English as a comparison, they computed statistics directly from Polish speaker data. They found similar effects to those found in Vigliocco et al. for German, though with some more details about semantic classes. But they also ran two other experiments. One was based on a variant of the Implicit Association Test (IAT). This work found more support for the first of Vigliocco et al.'s hypotheses: that similar forms are associated with similar meanings. In another experiment, they used a paradigm of asking speakers to assign masculine or feminine voices to objects. They compared objects presented as pictures with presentation of corresponding nouns. Both inanimate objects and animals were used. Here they found a strong effect of grammatical gender on how objects are conceptualized. Overall, they find a complex situation, where aspects of grammar and cognition interact in a number of ways, and different hypotheses seem to be supported by results of different sorts of tasks. We think this illustrates the need for caution. Different studies, even with similar designs, show somewhat different results. We suggest that philosophers wait for more clarity and stability before relying on emerging empirical results in this area.

We end this section with one more intriguing finding. A result from Segal and Boroditsky (2011) suggests that certain grammatical gender assignments seem to pick up at least some metaphorical significance in cases of personification. For example, the word for 'sun' in Spanish ('el sol') is grammatically masculine while the corresponding word in German ('die Sonne') is grammatically feminine, and the word for 'death' is grammatically masculine in German ('der Tod') while the corresponding word is grammatically feminine in Spanish ('la muerte'). Might Spanish speakers and German speakers depict the sun or death differently for this reason? Here we know a little. Segal and Boroditsky (2011) found a strong correlation between personification in art and assigned grammatical gender. So, at least when it comes to art or metaphor, speakers can recognize and exploit arbitrary grammatical gender assignments. It is not easy to decide how this relates to our understanding of language, as the relation of metaphor interpretation to other aspects of language is not a well-understood matter.[26] But at least this finding suggests that hearing a grammatical gender might trigger some metaphorical thinking about natural gender.

In light of the results just described, our best assessment, with due caution, is that given the complicated nature of the experiments and the conflicting nature of the results, not much should be concluded with certainty. Our brief overview of some

results from psychology, together with our brief overview of some results from linguistics, reveals a complicated empirical situation. We have seen that languages mark gender in many different ways. These can relate to personal gender and/or sex, but can also reflect animacy, humanness, or other properties. Even in languages where gender marking does relate to personal gender and/or sex, it can also show signs of arbitrary marking for many nouns. When we look at languages with grammatical gender marking that at least sometimes reflects personal gender and/or sex, we can ask if the presence of such marking triggers thinking related to personal gender or sex in speakers. We have seen that the psychological results on this are, so far, incomplete. There may be some such effects, in some cases. At the same time, it may just be that language learners see similar morphosyntactic marking as an indicator of similar meaning, and are only accessing their ideas about personal gender and/or sex to find some similarities.

As we turn to the English pronoun system and issues surrounding it, we would do well to remind ourselves that it is one among many different gender systems in language. We should be careful about drawing too many conclusions about how the marking of gender relates to thought from any one example.

4. Methodological Limitations

We have seen that English lacks any grammatical gender on nouns and has a system of gendered pronouns corresponding roughly to personal gender and/or sex. In addition to S-series and H-series pronouns, there are the neuter *it* and the plural *they*, which is sometimes glossed as 'common' gender, as it can refer to groups with members of different genders and/or sexes. Thus English appears to be limited in the richness of its gender system, but to be no exception to the cross-linguistic generalization that most gender systems have a semantic core that is tied to something like personal gender and/or sex (or animacy, etc.).

In the remainder of the chapter, we look more carefully at the situation with English in its current social environment. It is fitting to begin this discussion by mentioning our limitations. Semantic theories are built around a number of data points, including judgements of assertability, truth, synonymy, and entailment. These semantic judgements can be supplemented with data about syntax, morphology, and so on, to fill in a picture of how a language works. The toolkit has expanded over the years, but that has been and remains its core.[27] When we face aspects of language that relate to current social issues, we need to remind ourselves that the methods of linguistics work best when they target hypotheses between which ordinary speaker–hearers can easily distinguish, when diachronically stable linguistic conventions prevail at the community level, and when questions of speech are divorced from questions of politics.

In the case of gendered pronouns, in the setting of the English language and the politics of the United States, none of these conditions are met. Typical English speakers

likely do not draw a sharp conceptual distinction between sex and gender. The minimal amount of grammar we see in the English gender system offers us few stable points from which to start describing subtle aspects of semantics. Cognitive psychology offers us few solid results to build on—if there are subtle effects on thinking triggered by grammatical gender, we do not yet understand them. At the same time, the increasing visibility of trans and nonbinary individuals has resulted in the need to coordinate at the community level on linguistic conventions governing the use of gendered pronouns in cases involving individuals exemplifying combinations of sex and personal gender that, fifty or a hundred years ago, would never have become salient to the typical English speaker–hearer. And the broader conversation about how to coordinate on these conventions is bound up with heated political discussions of feminism and the rights of trans people.

These observations suggest to us that any descriptive inquiry into the semantics of gendered pronouns in English should proceed with humility and caution. It is likely that the idiolects of individual speakers differ with respect to what property or properties license the application of gendered pronouns. It is also likely that the phi-features of gendered pronouns in the idiolects of many speakers are underspecified with respect to whether they pick out sex, personal gender, or some other, more complicated property. Some speakers may report patterns of judgements about the acceptability of uses of gendered pronouns that consistently suggest one theory of their phi-features as opposed to another; the judgements of other speakers may not fit into any coherent pattern. Differences in pronoun usage may also reflect different views about what constitutes sex or personal gender rather than or in addition to different internalized semantic theories for S- and H-series pronouns. At the community level, it may be that considerable agreement between speakers exists about how gendered pronouns may be acceptably used, but it also possible that no convention yet exists. These are empirical questions, answerable only by eliciting the judgements of a large and diverse body of English speakers.[28]

To summarize: when considering English pronouns, we face an empirically difficult situation. We have limited grammar to work with, as the gender system of English is minimal. Results from psychology are uncertain. And we face a political and social situation that can render linguistic judgements indeterminate or hard to probe for.

But it does not follow that nothing at all can be said about the semantics of English gendered pronouns. Below, we discuss the pattern of our own intuitions about cases and argue that they favor one possible theory of the phi-features of gendered pronouns over certain others. To the extent that our intuitions are shared by others, our discussion can be interpreted as evidence that the theory we favor correctly describes the meaning of gendered pronouns in English. But it should be kept in mind that the intuitions are, first and foremost, our own, and that drawing any firm conclusions about the grammar of English would require empirical work beyond the scope of the present discussion.

Before turning to our intuitions, however, we pause to consider the normative implications of the possibility that there might be no single convention governing the use of gendered pronouns in English.

5. Anything Goes?

If different speakers might be guided by different internalized grammars for gendered pronouns, and if there might not at present exist any community-level conventions or clear psychological tendencies to which one could have recourse in deciding which uses of gendered pronouns are correct and which are not, does it follow that all ways of using gendered pronouns are somehow on a par? In particular, does it follow that there is nothing wrong with *misgendering* trans individuals by referring to them using pronouns other than those they prefer (e.g., using 'she' to refer to a trans man or 'he' to refer to a trans woman)? In this section, we argue that the answer to this question is negative.[29]

If the conventions of English as it is currently used do not decide whether the phi-features of gendered pronouns pick out sex, personal gender, or something less specific, then using gendered pronouns to misgender someone cannot be said to be incorrect according to the conventions of English. Nevertheless, we argue that misgendering uses of gendered pronouns can be assessed in other ways, and can be found objectionable, or, at least, dispreferred. We can find a normative dimension to misgendering, even if it does not derive from the current conventions of English. We will focus on two aspects of misgendering uses of gendered pronouns, drawing on the literature on pragmatic approaches to the pejorativity of slurs.

First, Bolinger (2017) offers an explanation of the pejorative effects of slurs in terms of *constrastive choice*. Bolinger's idea is that the use of different expressions—even ones with the same semantic content—can be probabilistically associated by listeners with different information about the speaker. To take a simple example, if a speaker chooses to use the lexical item 'aubergine' rather than the lexical item 'eggplant' to refer to an eggplant, hearers will likely infer that she is British (note that this inference depends on the assumption that the speaker could just as easily have tokened the other expression; when this assumption is not justified, the inference does not go through). But the information probabilistically associated with uses of expressions can also pertain to the beliefs, affective attitudes, and political orientations of a speaker. This, on Bolinger's view, explains why freely choosing to use a slur rather than its neutral counterpart is offensive: it signals to hearers that the speaker harbors pernicious beliefs, attitudes, or political views.

Whether or not they are linguistically correct, it is plausible that misgendering uses of gendered pronouns are probabilistically associated in the minds of many English speaker–hearers with certain beliefs, affective attitudes, and/or political commitments regarding trans individuals. These could range quite widely, depending on facts about the individual doing the misgendering. In some cases, misgendering could simply indicate a general insensitivity to or misunderstanding of current social and political issues. We might think this when talking to an elderly person, who would have grown up in an environment where current issues about gender were never spoken of, if they were recognized at all. In other cases, the tissue of beliefs, attitudes, and commitments

could be much stronger. In our current social and political environment, misgendering someone might signal dislike of people who prefer pronouns differing from those corresponding to their sex. In more extreme cases, it could, for instance, signal a belief that trans people are mentally ill or a political commitment to passing legislation to deny them appropriate medical treatment and exclude them from gendered spaces corresponding to their gender identities. It is not our job to comment on politics here. But to the extent that signaling such beliefs is hurtful, misgendering might also be hurtful. And to the extent that any of the beliefs in question could be held to be normatively objectionable, so, too, could misgendering as an expression of them.[30]

Second, Herbert (2017) emphasizes the fact that hearing an utterance of a slur (even a slur being mentioned rather than used) can produce harmful effects; "pernicious associations," as she describes them.[31] Thus hearing a slur might raise to salience the troubled history of the use of that slur, the associated complex of prejudicial beliefs about the group it targets, and/or certain well-known instances of violence against that group. Hearing a slur might also cause members of the audience involuntarily to recall unpleasant personal experiences involving the slur. These associational effects of slurs play an important explanatory role, since they provide an account of how uttering a slur can be offensive even when the slur is quoted. Though in such cases the speaker cannot correctly be said to have *used* the slur or *applied* it to any individual or group, if she could have made the same point without uttering a word which would conjure pernicious associations in members of her audience, she can legitimately be criticized for failing to show concern for her interlocutors.[32]

The same effects can be seen with misgendering. Of course, the effects of any particular case of misgendering will depend on the psychological facts about the individuals involved, and perhaps also the political and social situation. But here is a generalization drawn from current research: trans individuals consistently report that misgendering uses of gendered pronouns that target them conjure negative emotions and associations which are plausibly just as unpleasant as those triggered by slurs.[33] So, just as associational offense explains how slurs can be offensive even when they are quoted (and thus semantically inert), the possibility of associational offense related to misgendering uses of gendered pronouns explains how they might be offensive even if they are linguistically correct in the idiolect of the speaker.

We leave it up to the reader to assess how the considerations we have just described bear on the moral properties of misgendering. We do hope to have shown, however, that a lack of clear conventions about how English pronouns should be used would not by itself settle the question of whether misgendering can be objectionable.

6. Three Simple Theories

Bracketing concerns about whether there is a stable community-level convention governing the use of gendered pronouns, we turn now to a discussion of our own

intuitions. The pattern of our judgements about cases leads us to reject a number of simple proposals about the semantic content of the phi-features of gendered pronouns in English, and to endorse the more nuanced theory described in section 7 below. To the extent that our intuitions are shared by readers, they have reason to believe that their idiolects are best described by our preferred theory as well.

The two simplest defensible accounts of the contents of the phi-features of S- and H-series pronouns are:

(Gender-Only View): S-series pronouns are appropriate if and only if the referent is a woman or girl; H-series pronouns are appropriate if and only if the referent is a man or boy.

(Sex-Only View): S-series pronouns are appropriate if and only if the referent is female; H-series pronouns are appropriate if and only if the referent is male.[34]

According to (Gender-Only View), the phi-features of gendered pronouns are exclusively sensitive to personal gender; according to (Sex-Only View), they are exclusively sensitive to sex. A third possible account, based on the first two, is:

(Ambiguity View): Each S-series pronoun is ambiguous between a lexical item which is correctly described by (Gender-Only View) and a lexical item which is correctly described by (Sex-Only View). The same is true of each H-series pronoun.

According to (Ambiguity View), whereas it would at first seem that there is a single English personal pronoun 'she,' in fact there are two: one which can appropriately be used to refer to an individual just in case that individual is a woman (or girl), and one which can appropriately be used to refer to an individual just in case that individual is female.

We will briefly discuss each of these three views in turn, sketching its advantages and then describing the considerations we take to show that it is not viable as a final theory of English gendered pronouns.

6.1. The Gender-Only View

There is much to recommend (Gender-Only View). Most simply, it seems natural to refer to men by 'he' and women by 'she'. Moreover, (Gender-Only View) explains the practice of referring to (binary) trans individuals using their preferred pronouns. Since trans men are men and trans women are women, it is appropriate to refer to trans men using H-series pronouns and to trans women using S-series pronouns. Importantly, the explanation it offers here is that these uses are *linguistically correct* given the relevant claims about personal gender. To use anything but an H-series pronoun for a trans man or an S-series pronoun for a trans

woman is to presuppose something false about that individual's gender. For this reason, (Gender-Only View) has a neat explanation of what is objectionable about misgendering a trans person.

Unfortunately, (Gender-Only View) is also subject to a number of difficulties. It fails to predict the felicity of using gendered pronouns to refer to beings which possess sex but not gender, such as the higher non-human vertebrates. Along similar lines, on the assumption that infants are too young to assume gendered social roles or to have developed internal gender identities, it struggles to explain the common practice of referring to infants using S-series pronouns if they have female genitalia and H-series pronouns if they have male genitalia. On (Gender-Only View), it would seem to be a conceptual or linguistic mistake to refer to one's newborn child or one's pet using gendered pronouns, whereas this practice is common and relatively uncontroversial.

6.2. The Sex-Only View

The advantages and disadvantages of (Sex-Only View) are almost precisely the inverse of those of (Gender-Only View). (Sex-Only View) straightforwardly predicts the felicity of using gendered pronouns to refer to beings which possess sex but not gender. On the other hand, it fails to predict that it is linguistically correct to refer to binary trans individuals using their preferred pronouns, and thus that there is anything mistaken about misgendering uses of gendered pronouns. Indeed, it predicts that referring to binary trans individuals using their preferred pronouns is linguistically *in*correct. The best the proponent of (Sex-Only View) can say about this issue is that we might have pragmatic reasons, such as those discussed in section 5, to refrain from using linguistically correct gendered pronouns to refer to trans individuals. We take this to be a significant consideration against (Sex-Only View), since it seems to us that using binary trans individuals' preferred pronouns is linguistically correct in addition to being courteous. Consider, for example:

(13) a. If Jonah is a transgender man, he is the first transgender man at his company.
b. *If Jonah is a transgender man, she is the first transgender man at her company.

Our judgement is that (13b) is a linguistically incorrect use of S-series pronouns (not simply, for example, a discourteous one). (Sex-Only View) cannot accommodate this intuition.

Similarly, it often seems that we can be ignorant about an individual's sex without being ignorant about which gendered pronouns are the linguistically correct ones to use to refer to that individual. The possession of a Y chromosome is, at least *ceteris paribus*, associated with male sex. But we judge the choices of gendered pronouns in the following examples felicitous because correct:

(14) a. I don't know how many Y chromosomes Joan has because she hasn't told me.
b. I don't know whether Joan is trans; it would be rude to ask her out of the blue.

Again, (Sex-Only View) cannot predict these judgements.

It is also possible to use gendered pronouns to refer to individuals with no sex. It is easiest to find examples of this in fiction, but we note that the fictional cases show no linguistic resistance. We naturally refer to fictional humanoid androids like C-3PO of the *Star Wars* franchise and Marvin the Paranoid Android from Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* using H-series pronouns. Though these things do not exist, we find no *linguistic* problems with the fictions. A similar point can be made about inanimate objects: it is acceptable to refer to watercraft using S-series pronouns, for example. These observations are difficult to reconcile with (Sex-Only View).[35]

6.3. The Ambiguity View

Because it holds that English gendered pronouns are ambiguous between a gender-only-type meaning and a sex-only-type meaning, (Ambiguity View) predicts felicity in any case where either of those two views would predict felicity. Unlike (Gender-Only View), then, (Ambiguity View) predicts that it is acceptable to use gendered pronouns for beings which possess sex but not gender. Unlike (Sex-Only View), moreover, (Ambiguity View) predicts that it can be correct to refer to a trans individual using their preferred pronouns. In these respects, (Ambiguity View) represents an improvement over both (Gender-Only View) and (Sex-Only View).

But the advantages of (Ambiguity View) should not be overstated. Indeed, we include it here more for completeness than because we think it a likely competitor view. Like (Sex-Only View), it fails to predict that there is anything mistaken about misgendering uses of gendered pronouns—for this reason, it fails to predict the intuitive contrast between (13a) and (13b). And it does no better than (Gender-Only View) and (Sex-Only View) at explaining how gendered pronouns can felicitously be used to refer to inanimate objects which possess neither gender nor sex. Perhaps more importantly, as the ambiguity view is a claim about the semantics of a natural language, we would like to find independent evidence that English pronouns are ambiguous—and we do not see any such evidence. For these reasons, we think that (Ambiguity View) is implausible as a semantic theory. We must look elsewhere for a satisfactory theory of English gendered pronouns.

7. Gender First

None of the three simple theories we have just canvassed stands up to scrutiny, at least from the perspective of our personal linguistic intuitions. In this section, we argue that

this is not at all surprising. There is no reason to expect that the correct theory of the phi-features of English gendered pronouns will be simple. Adding some complexity, we propose an alternative view which we find more plausible.

We have seen that grammatical gender is important for noun/pronoun agreement in English and for noun/adjective agreement in other languages like French. The first of these processes appears to require a match between the grammatical gender of the pronoun and the personal gender and/or sex of its referent; the second requires agreement between the grammatical gender of the adjective and the grammatical gender of the noun it modifies. But things get more complicated as soon as we consider gendered pronouns in languages with a grammatical gender distinction for nouns. In many such languages, the lexical items which are used as personal pronouns are also obligatorily used to refer anaphorically to inanimate objects with the corresponding grammatical gender. In German, for example, the word 'Kamera' (camera) is grammatically feminine, and so the appropriate pronoun for referring to a single camera is 'sie' (she):

(15) Wo ist meine $\underline{\text{Kamera}}_{\text{F}}$? $\underline{\text{Sie}}_{\text{F}}$ ist im Schrank. ("Where is my camera? It is in the cabinet.")

At the same time, 'sie' is the appropriate deictic pronoun in German to apply to women. So the phi-features of gendered pronouns in languages which, like German, require agreement between the grammatical gender of a pronoun and the grammatical gender of its nominal antecedent must obey a complex disjunctive rule: if the referent is a person, their acceptability depends on some set of social and/or biological facts about that person; if the referent is not a person, their acceptability depends on the grammatical gender of the nominal antecedent.[36] Phi-feature complexity of this type is common in natural language. Similar examples could have been constructed using the languages of the Romance family, for example. For languages with more complex noun classes or gender features not related to personal gender or sex, as we reviewed in section 2, matters can get even more complicated.

What examples like (15) show is that it is possible and indeed cognitively natural for humans to internalize complicated and disjunctive rules governing the acceptability of pronouns. So, while nothing excludes a priori the possibility that the correct theory of English personal pronouns is as simple as (Gender-Only View) or (Sex-Only View), we assign that possibility a low probability, even setting aside the considerations discussed in section 6. Some of the data we reviewed in section 3 also support this perspective.

Once we discard the thought that the correct theory of English gendered pronouns must be simple, a vast terrain of theoretical possibilities reveals itself to us. We will not presume to explore this terrain fully; instead, we will discuss one view of the semantics of English gendered pronouns we find especially appealing because of its fit with our linguistic intuitions about particular cases. According to the view we favor, the phi-features of English gendered pronouns are sensitive to gender when they are used to

refer to gendered beings, sensitive to sex when they are used to refer to beings with sex but not gender, and potentially sensitive to still other facts when used to refer to things possessing neither sex nor gender:

> **(Gender-First View):** If the referent of an English personal pronoun belongs to a gendered category, S-series pronouns are appropriate if and only if the referent is a woman or girl, and H-series pronouns are appropriate if and only if the referent is a man or boy. Otherwise, if the referent belongs to a sexed category, S-series pronouns are appropriate if and only if the referent is female, and H-series pronouns are appropriate if and only if the referent is male.

In other words, according to (Gender-First View), the S-properties and H-properties differ depending on what sort of thing the referent is. Note that, as we understand the notion of *belonging to a gendered category*, it does not require an individual to actually possess a gender. Normal adult humans belong to a gendered category, and so a given gendered pronoun is appropriate for them only if they possess the corresponding gender. There may be some normal adult humans who do not have a gender; (Gender-First View) then predicts that it is not linguistically correct to refer to such individuals using either 'he' or 'she'. We consider the semantic issues raised by such nonbinary identities in section 8.

Note that (Gender-First View) is compatible with many different accounts of when it is appropriate to use gendered pronouns to refer to objects possessing neither sex nor gender. We think this is as it should be, for English. For instance, it is probably a one-off convention, not amenable to interesting systematization, that it is acceptable in English to refer to watercraft using S-series pronouns—and there are probably a variety of these sorts of one-off conventions across natural language.[37] So a complete account of the conventions governing the use of gendered pronouns will be very complex and disjunctive; (Gender-First View) captures just the part of that complexity which governs the application of English gendered pronouns to things which possess personal gender and/or sex.

Observe that (Gender-First View) reproduces the advantages of both (Gender-Only View) and (Sex-Only View) without being subject to their disadvantages. Like (Gender-Only View), it explains our intuitions about examples like (13a, 13b) and (14a, 14b) and provides an account of the incorrectness of misgendering uses of gendered pronouns. Like (Sex-Only View), it explains why it is often correct to refer to non-human animals using gendered pronouns. If fictional humanoid androids can be said to have a gender, it explains why it is appropriate to refer to them using gendered pronouns; if they cannot, it assimilates them, like watercraft, to the hodge-podge of non-sexed, non-gendered entities which might feature in one-off conventions governing the acceptability of gendered pronouns. Finally, though it accounts for variation and complexity, it does not posit a brute lexical ambiguity. For these reasons, we find (Gender-First View) to be a good candidate for the correct view of English gendered pronouns.[38]

8. Nonbinary Identities and 'They'

We noted in section 2 that some communities use 'they' as a singular deictic pronoun (in addition to its bound and anaphoric uses). We now turn to a brief discussion of the semantics of such uses.

Running parallel to the recent increase in discussions of issues concerning binary trans individuals and the use of gendered pronouns has been the emergence of dialogue about nonbinary trans identities and the gender-neutral singular deictic pronoun 'they'.[39]

In this section, we will focus on the relationship between 'they', nonbinary identity, and the semantics of gendered pronouns. In particular, we will be interested in assessing an argument against (Gender-First View) and (Gender-Only View) from two premises related to nonbinary identity. First, assume that what it is to be nonbinary is to lack a gender. Second, note that it is sometimes appropriate to refer to nonbinary individuals using gendered pronouns. Thus, it is not always unacceptable to token:

(16) Dallas told me that she identifies as nonbinary.

If (16) is acceptable, and if Dallas lacks a gender in virtue of being nonbinary, then (this argument proceeds) S-series pronouns must be licensed by features of individuals other than gender. Thus the acceptability of (16) might be thought to favor (Sex-Only View) over alternatives.

We think there are a number of ways of resisting this argument. First, the claim that all nonbinary people lack a gender is very strong, and perhaps dubious. Dembroff (2020), for example, provides testimony from a number of individuals who identify as both nonbinary and women. But if nonbinary individuals can be gendered, (Gender-First View) and (Gender-Only View) have straightforward explanations for the acceptability of sentences like (16).

Even when nonbinary individuals do not identify with any gender category, the acceptability of sentences like (16) might be due not to their semantic well-formedness but instead to the fact that the relevant nonbinary individuals have explicitly permitted the use of semantically inappropriate pronouns to refer to them as a way of acknowledging the difficulty many members of society experience with using the singular 'they'.[40] As Dembroff (2020, 9) remarks:

> In our current society, saturated in exclusive, binary divisions, there is no possibility of never taking gender norms to be relevant to oneself. Public spaces, such as toilets and locker rooms, legal institutions, social clubs, language, and marketing, to name but a few places, are heavily gendered, and gendered not only according to the binary, but in a way that leaves someone attempting to navigate these structures *no choice* but to pick a side. Moreover, because all (or nearly all) genderqueer persons

> were socialized as either men or women, and often are perceived as men or women, only self-applying the norms of 'a person wearing people clothes' is not possible.

In cases where conventions for usage are in flux and communities face complex issues about how to establish stable uses, acceptability judgements can reflect more than just semantic or syntactic well-formedness. When nonbinary individuals who do not identify as gendered permit others to use gendered pronouns to refer to them as a way of acknowledging the impossibility of avoiding being perceived as gendered, sentences like (16) are predicted to be acceptable though not semantically well-formed. Again, then, the acceptability of sentences like (16) does not demonstrate the falsity of (Gender-First View) or (Gender-Only View).[41]

Indeed, far from counting against (Gender-First View) or (Gender-Only View), we think that sentences like (16) actually form the basis of an argument against (Sex-Only View). For in cases where a nonbinary person neither identifies with a gender category nor explicitly permits others to use gendered pronouns to refer to them, we judge that sentences like (16) are not acceptable: the only acceptable singular pronoun to use in such cases is the gender-neutral 'they'. This fact is easily explained by (Gender-First View) and (Gender-Only View), but (Sex-Only View) struggles to accommodate it, since on (Sex-Only View) gendered pronouns can be correctly employed to refer to nonbinary individuals regardless of facts about their gender identities.

9. Conclusion

English gendered pronouns are controversial. Yet if our arguments above are sound, perhaps they should be less so. There is little to recommend the simplistic idea that the linguistic correctness of S-series and H-series pronouns must be sensitive in all cases either exclusively to sex or exclusively to personal gender, but our intuitions about sentences like (13a, 13b) and (14a, 14b) suggest that any plausible semantics will predict that the correctness of S- and H-series pronouns turns on personal gender whenever they are used to refer to normal adult humans. Even if there is at present no stable convention among English speakers governing the use of S- and H-series pronouns, the considerations discussed in section 5 suggest that all speakers, regardless of idiolect, have reasons to use their addressees' preferred pronouns which resemble their reasons not to needlessly mention racial slurs. Together, these considerations suggest that there is no strong linguistic or normative argument to be made in favor of practices of misgendering trans people.

But we also note that the issues of English pronouns do not by any means exhaust the range of issues surrounding gender in language. The range of grammatical gender systems, the complexity of our cognition of gender marking, and the richness of social and political environments in which we find languages and thinkers are vast. We hope to have shed some light on pressing contemporary questions about pronouns in English

and their relation to gender, but also to have indicated a little of where these questions fit into a broader perspective.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Ernie Lepore, Elin McCready, and Matthew Stone for very helpful comments on previous drafts of this chapter.

Notes

1. https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines (accessed 5/20/2022).
2. An Act to Amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 49, Chapter 6, relative to student pronouns, HB2633, 112th General Assembly (2022).
3. As reported in Lavietes (2022).
4. Of course, the grammatical and semantic aspects of gender are only some of the many ways gender and language interact. Sociolinguistics has explored a great number of these. For an introduction to this work, we refer readers to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003); and Hellinger, Bußmann, and Motschenbacher (2001–2015).
5. See, for example, Haslanger (2000); Dembroff (2016); and Barnes (2020).
6. For a discussion of some of the complexities involved in this distinction, see Dembroff (2021).
7. Though such pronouns are clearly *grammatically* masculine or feminine, using terms like 'masculine pronoun' may suggest a view on which the felicity of English pronouns like 'he' is sensitive exclusively to the gender of the referent. Better to have terms which do not invite misinterpretation in this way.
8. The * marking the second sentence indicates that it is judged somehow bad by speakers. It is not specific about what makes the sentence bad.
9. See, for instance, den Dikken (2011); and Corbett and Fedden (2016).
10. For extensive discussion, see Sudo (2012).
11. A good reference on presupposition is Beaver (1997). For some interesting new developments, see Tonhauser et al. (2013).
12. It remains a controversial issue in the foundations of presupposition just what the 'indicate' relation is. Perhaps the best we can say, for our purposes, is that it is some form of implication, understood generally. Some theories see it as a feature of contexts in which an utterance is felicitous. Others see it as a combination of entailment and implicature. We will not pursue this matter here. See again Beaver (1997), as well as Simons (2006).
13. Note that agreement does not, in any way, project. Rather, the idea is that the semantic content of a phi-feature might project like presupposition.
14. For presupposition projection from attitudes, see Heim (1992), and the many references therein. For an extensive discussion of how these issues relate to gender, see Sudo (2012).
15. Again, see Beaver (1997) and Sudo (2012) for overviews. This is a lively topic of current research.
16. This example is probably due first to Partee (1989). See Heim (2008) for more references.
17. Some readers may wonder what it means to say, as we have above, that some languages assign grammatical gender using (e.g.) animacy. After all, if a grammatical phenomenon has to do with animacy rather than personal gender and/or sex, in what sense is that phenomenon grammatical *gender*? This raises an important methodological point, which is

that, from the perspective of linguistics as a science, there is no interesting difference between grammatical gender systems which are sensitive to personal gender and/or sex and morphosyntactic systems of noun classifiers which are sensitive to other phenomena like animacy. For this reason, linguists often refer to all such morphosyntactic systems as gender systems. For more on gender across languages, see again Corbett and Fedden (2016).

18. Kramer (2020, 46) clarifies that she "use[s] the term social gender for the property of human beings indexed by grammatical gender"—that is, for whatever the S-properties and H-properties turn out to be.
19. Some readers may find the idea of nonbinary gender identities unfamiliar. A good resource to consult on this topic is Dembroff (2020). We will have only a little to say about the complex social and political issues involved. Our main focus is on the semantics of 'they'.
20. In fact, the two authors of this paper disagree about this example, which illustrates how much variation in judgements we can find.
21. Any good linguistics textbook will expand more on the difference between closed and open classes. Some more recent theoretical work includes Abney (1987) and Baker (2003). For some reflections on a case where language change appears to have happened unusually quickly, see Doron (2015).
22. See e.g. István (1959).
23. Note that this is an instance of the more general question of how language affects thought. The idea that language broadly influences thinking is the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis (Whorf 1956). It has been widely criticized (e.g. Pinker 1994). Recent years have seen a number of developments of more carefully drawn ideas of how language can affect thought and a great deal of experimental work on the issue. See Gumperz and Levinson (1996) and Gentner and Goldin-Meadow (2003). For a somewhat critical overview see Gleitman and Papafragou (2012).
24. This is a version of the syntactic bootstrapping hypothesis. See, e.g., Landau and Gleitman (1985); and Fisher et al. (1991).
25. A brief glance at the literature suggests that the gender system of Polish has been a controversial issue. See, for instance, Swan (2015).
26. For an overview and many insights, see Camp (2006).
27. See the first chapter of Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet (2000) for a good overview of the data and methods of semantics. The papers in Maienborn et al. (2011) give an overview of more recent developments.
28. Moreover, as we noted in section 2, it might be that some speakers initially have trouble producing certain individuals' preferred pronouns, even when they regard those pronouns as correct.
29. The prefix 'mis' in 'misgendering' might be taken to suggest that applying the term to a given use of a pronoun carries the normative implication that the use was linguistically incorrect. As we understand the term 'misgendering', however, it is purely descriptive: misgendering an individual is simply referring to them using pronouns other than the ones they prefer. Adopting a purely descriptive definition of 'misgendering' is important for our purposes, since, as we have seen, there may be no stable community-wide conventions governing the linguistically correct use of pronouns in certain cases.
30. For a recent treatment of misgendering which appeals to a similar mechanism, see Davis and McCready (2020).

31. On the subject of how the pejorative force of slurs interacts with quotation, other work has come to similar conclusions—see, for example, Anderson and Lepore (2013).
32. To be clear, we are not taking a stand on the correct theory of slurs. We merely find these ideas about slurs helpful for addressing the issue of misgendering.
33. For a recent study of the effects of misgendering on trans individuals, see Gunn (2020). The participants in Gunn's study described the feeling of being misgendered variously as "a black cloud hanging over my head," "a sinking feeling in my chest and a rock in my stomach," and "being punched in the gut" (Gunn 2020, 38–39).
34. We remind readers that we have adopted a convention of using *man* and *woman* to pick out personal genders and *male* and *female* to pick out sexes.
35. Note that the convention of using S-series pronouns to refer to watercraft is also evidence against (Gender-Only View). Whether (Gender-Only View) can be reconciled with our observation about humanoid androids depends on whether such beings can correctly be said to possess a gender. One's answer to this question will depend on the particular account of gender one endorses: on Haslanger's (2000) social account, for example, they will fail to possess a gender; whereas on Jenkins's (2016) account of gender as identity, some fictional humanoid androids might be men or women.
36. Or, in cases lacking a salient nominal antecedent, on the grammatical gender of the most common noun used to refer to items of that type.
37. We speculate that something similar is happening in languages that show a substantial number of arbitrary grammatical gender assignments.
38. Of course, (Gender-First View) is a simplification suitable for a handbook discussion. It is in close sympathy with the important work of McConnell-Ginet (e.g., 2014, 6). We quote her at length:

> My own research, especially McConnell-Ginet ([1979] 2011), shows that gender in English, while not 'grammatical' in the fullest sense because pronouns are the only agreement targets, is not really 'natural' either. English-like languages have what I now call notional gender systems: pronominal usage cannot be understood without considering sociocultural gender and the ideas about sex and sexuality current at a given time. And it is such gender 'notions' that can be embedded in and affect agreement phenomena, especially but not only pronouns, even in languages where grammatical gender predominates.

We recommend McConnell-Ginet's work to interested readers.

39. As we mentioned in note 19 above, readers who find these issues unfamiliar might wish to consult Dembroff (2020).
40. We pause to emphasize that we take semantic well-formedness not to be a prescriptive matter. In the case in question, we can suppose that the pronoun semantically requires a referent of a particular gender (or sex), and yet is being used to refer to an individual that lacks it. This is a problem within the semantics, not a matter of prescription.
41. Methodologically, note that we believe our linguistic judgements are sensitive to whether a given example sentence is linguistically well-formed in addition to whether it is acceptable in a social setting. Thus (16), which is acceptable but not linguistically well-formed, strikes us as different than (13a), which is acceptable because linguistically correct.

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