Affirming Writing: Writing About Transgender Communities
Lex Konnelly, University of Toronto
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Writing about trans communities in affirming ways involves attention to both the specific lexical items used as well as the framing; it other words, it requires care with respect to not just what is said, but what is left implicit. The following hypothetical excerpts[1] consider three broad categories of writing about trans communities on a cline of 'affirming-ness'. These are intended to be for expository purposes only, and not to advocate for any particular taxonomy. With hope, these examples will be supportive in thinking about how to facilitate growth experiences for students in engaging with trans communities in their academic work and scholarship.

Discussion is separated into three broad categories of reference to trans communities: those that are (1) hostile, those that are (2) problematic, and those that are (3) affirming. The handout concludes with some additional resources for consideration.

1.   Hostile

Unfortunately, hostility towards trans communities does occur in academic writing, and TAs and instructors in sociolinguistics (or sociolinguistics-adjacent) classes may need to be especially vigilant. Consider the text below:

Gender neutrality represents the ideology that people should be legally bound to describe and address transgenders in a certain manner that avoids any type of discriminatory language. In this paper, I will analyze the impacts of Bill C-210 and C-16, which legally require the public to use transgenders' preferred pronouns. I will show that individuals on the left are attempting to implement a radical ideology that does not offer any positive outcomes, and will actually further provide a negative and damaging environment for the transgender community.

Discussion: Overall, it's apparent that the 'author' of this text is expressing their own opinion about the trans community. As is often the case with discussion of minoritized communities (where opinions about a particular community become framed as linguistic or grammatical concerns), the connection to language is loose, prescriptive, and inappropriate within the context of a linguistics class. It is also clear that there is perhaps a targeted misunderstanding or misapplication of the concepts introduced in service of this argument (for instance, the

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[1] Though each example is 'inspired' by actual examples encountered in student work, none have been replicated faithfully from the original source.

erroneous definition provided for gender neutrality, a lack of knowledge of what bills C-210 and C-16 actually say and no citation of this source material, etc.). This is not only clearly unkind, but also centrally ill-suited for the purposes of the assignment: students are generally not asked to provide their subjective opinions about communities in this way.

Tips: A notable macro-level strategy for course instructors may be to ensure that their assignment guidelines are clear in not seeking students' personal evaluations. Though this is not always the case, hostile writing often comes from an inattentiveness to assignment expectations, where students may be 'leaning' on their own biases rather than course material.

If a TA were to come across an excerpt like this in their grading, they should notify the course instructor immediately. Returning to the guidelines will be necessary in providing any evaluation of the material. This way, instructors can be clear that students are not graded on their opinions, but on whether they meet the requirements for the project itself. This can also prevent backlash from students who may feel that they received a lower grade because the teaching team disagreed with them.

2. Problematic

Problematic examples may arise when a student is trying to write in an affirming way, but they may still struggle with using the appropriate linguistic expressions (such as using those that do not reflect current usage), in their overall framing, or both. For example:

*In this paper I address whether female and male speech patterns are influenced by **purely social means or whether there are biological elements** linked to the style or nature of speech. As **transgendered** people have **both the biological gender of one and the psychological gender of another**, further research on their language will help us identify whether biological sex plays a role in gendered speech patterns.*

*This study will therefore comparatively analyze the use of linguistic features for two groups of speakers, **transgendered and binary**. Specifically I will focus on **preferred pronouns,** intensifiers, and politeness markers. These features will be investigated to test for correlations with speakers' biological sex and the **gender that they identify with**, and answer the question of whether **natal males and natal females** sustain the patterns of their biological sex or change to the opposite features through **passing as another gender**.*

Discussion: There are a number of specific language features to draw attention to in this passage that may come up in student writing that members of a teaching team should draw attention to if encountered.

- Rather than "transgendered" (adj., derivational *-ed*) or "transgender(s)" (noun), remind students that the current usage is "transgender" (adj.) or "transgender person."
- Note that "transgender" and "binary" are not mutually exclusive, and the latter can apply to either transgender or cisgender individuals.
- Avoid the phrase "preferred pronouns" in favor of simply "pronouns" or "personal pronouns of reference." The term 'prefer' implies a choice between equally viable options, and while some transgender and non-binary people do alternate between different pronouns and thus may have preferences for which pronouns they use in certain situations, this is not universally the case.
- Discourage students from the use of terms like "natal females" and "natal males" to describe transgender people, and be cautious and skeptical about the necessity of discussion of transgender people's bodies or sex assigned at birth at all. If reference to this is necessary, encourage students to use "assigned female at birth" or "assigned male at birth" instead, which reflect current usage.

In addition to the above concerns, there is a much larger issue that is inherent in this particular example: an overall stance of biological essentialism. Not only is there an emphasis on "biological sex" and an assumption of linearity between sex and gender, but the hypothetical author appears to treat "social" and "biological" as mutually exclusive, rather than mutually constitutive with respect to how we understand sex and gender. This is what leads to the framing of transgender people's bodies as somehow incongruent or in opposition with their gender identity.

Tips: What examples like this show is that the specificities of non-affirming language are often pointing to larger gaps in understanding about the community the student is writing about. In evaluating work that falls into this category, as part of drawing attention to the more specific concerns in the text itself, instructors and TAs should also encourage students to go to the source and engage with contemporary and affirming community-based materials as an accountable part of their research practice.

3. Affirming

In contrast to the previous two examples, consider the excerpt below:

*This study will comparatively analyze the use of linguistic features **among transgender speakers** living in Toronto, exploring the effects of urban vs. rural place identity on speech practices within the transgender community. Many LGBTQ+ people from rural places relocate to urban centers in adulthood **(TransPulse 2019)**, and for those who are aware of their LGBTQ+ identity and grow up in unsupportive communities, might wish to do so early in life. With this in mind, it may be expected that even rural transgender speakers orient to the speech practices of urban centers, rather than local features (Podesva et al. 2016).*

Discussion: What differentiates this example is, in large part, the framing of the text. Here the 'author' is situating their interest in the unique speech patterns of trans people, rather than frontloading how they differ from cisgender people. Instead of departing from an implicit assumption of biological essentialism, there is an emphasis the varied life experiences of trans people and the significance of their own distinct communities, rather than an emphasis on their bodies, and rather than treating transgender people as innately homogenous. It also includes citation of a study conducted by and for transgender communities, indicating that the student has engaged with source materials.

4. **Other suggestions**

-   Instead of "Transgender pronouns," encourage students to use the more straightforward "pronouns." In this case the expression "transgender pronouns" is either inaccurate or not fully descriptive, depending on what the student is actually referring to It's a common misconception that trans people are the only people who use pronouns, but cisgender people also use pronouns! Another possibility could be "neopronouns" (e.g., pronouns like ze/zim/hir, if that's what is intended by the student).
-   It should be emphasized again that members of teaching teams should be very cautious about student work that involves centering transgender people's sex assigned at birth. Please be empowered to be deeply skeptical the necessity of this! The overemphasis on trans people's bodies can be very distressing for trans people, and it can be exceptionally invalidating: often times, it's a subtle way of reinforcing that trans people are somehow forever beholden to the gender identities associated with their sex assigned at birth. Ultimately, it amounts to working in mention of trans people's genitals that is completely inappropriate, and is an especially common form of transmisogyny in particular.
    -   If reference to this *is* truly necessary, "assigned female at birth" or "assigned male at birth" are currently the terms in wide circulation, rather than "natal female" or "natal male."

- Likewise, encourage students to think critically about the framing that they're presenting for transgender communities, advocate for them to engage with trans linguistic concerns that do not fall into the trope of contrast against an implicit cisgender norm.

Additional resources:
- *Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER) list of terminology* http://www.transstudent.org/definitions
- *Julia Serano's list of terminology* http://www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html
- *Jacob Hale's* Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans ____. https://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html.
- *University of Toronto Sexual and Gender Diversity Office (SGDO)* https://sgdo.utoronto.ca/