Abstract

It is difficult to contextualize the rise of gender-inclusive language within formal linguistic theory. Current theories of linguistic gender define any language with a requisite system of nominal classification as having gender, in turn defining languages that manifest gendered distinctions in other ways as 'genderless' (Corbett, 1991; Kramer, 2015). In this way, linguistic gender is defined based on a given language's morphological type, not the particular ways that it may encode socially-meaningful gendered distinctions throughout the grammar and lexicon. Drawing from data on twelve typologically distinct languages, I present linguistic features of gender that are not purely morphological in order to argue that a reimagined theory of linguistic gender that centers the concept of social gender must be constructed in order to empirically situate the concept of gender-inclusive language. Such a theory would isolate languages with systems of nominal classification that are not based (even in part) on gender, and bridge dominant theories of gender, which emphasize the role of language (e.g. Butler, 2006, p. xx; Wittig, 1985; Irigaray, 1993, p. 67-74), and formal linguistic theory in order to explain the features of language that speakers determine to mark gender and analyze the capacity of a gendered language to change.

References

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