Integration and disruption: A preliminary typology of pronominal innovation strategies

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With gender non-conforming and non-binary identities gaining more recognition worldwide, linguistic communities are faced with the challenge of finding an appropriate means of reference. For many languages with grammatical gender, this plays out most visibly in the pronominal domain. Queer communities have been working actively towards the creation of more equal grammatical representation for at least around half a century, and the effects of these efforts are becoming increasingly visible. In this study, we analyse the emergent phenomenon of neopronouns in 11 languages and present a preliminary, descriptive typology of their formation. The findings suggest the existence of three central strategies of innovation:

(1) **Resemanticized pronouns** give preexisting forms with a new, gender-neutral meaning (e.g. English *they*, Arabic هما/انتما, Dutch *die/hen/hun*).

(2) **Disruptive pronouns** are purposefully given unexpected or marked features as an activist means of calling attention to discrimination. This may happen orthographically and/or phonologically, often using the glyph <x> and possibly its phonologic value as an iconic marker (e.g. German *xier*, Spanish *ellx*, Chinese *X也*).

(3) **Recombinative pronouns** are formed from segments of established pronouns in a full portmanteau fashion (e.g. French *iel*) or by combining salient elements, often consonants, with sounds absent from the established pronominal canon (e.g. Swedish *hen*, Icelandic *hán*, Welsh *ŵ*). A special subset of recombinative pronouns is made up of denominal pronouns (e.g. English *hu < human*, *thon < that one*, *fae < faerie/fairy*, German *ens < Mensch*, *per < Person*)

Further, some languages rely on (4) **borrowed pronouns** taken from languages with a more established neopronominal domain. Major source languages are English (often *they*) and Swedish (*hen*, attested in e.g. Danish, Norwegian, German and Dutch). Depending on the phonology and grammar of the target language, these borrowings can be analyzed as (2) disruptive pronouns (c.f. English *they* with a highly marked initial voiced dental fricative /ð/ when used e.g. in German) or as (3) recombinative pronouns (cf. the phonologically adapted German forms *dey/sey* with approximative initial consonants more typical for the pronominal domain of the target language). As more languages establish neopronoun inventories, borrowings in neighboring lects may become more prevalent and (4) may come to constitute its own strategy.

Lastly, three neopronoun-adjacent strategies can be identified: (5) foregoing the use of pronouns altogether, (6) using established masculine and feminine pronouns interchangeably while referring to the same individual, and (7) using inanimate or neuter pronouns to refer to an individualized human entity. All of these are innovative

in the sense that they break away from the established syntactic, semantic and pragmatic rules of their languages.

Out of these strategies, (1) resemanticized and (3) recombinative pronouns (e.g. English *they*, Swedish *hen*, Icelandic *hán*) have so far seen the most wide-spread adoption in their general communities, possibly due to performing well on the spectrum between minimal ambiguity and maximal domain-specific structural conformity. However, each strategy has functional advantages which may interact with specific societal or in-group codes, and hardly any strategy can be said to be fully established yet.

The impact of a shift in societal categories on closed-class forms has been observed previously in English and Dutch, where socioeconomic change lead to the self-contained replacement of the second person singular pronouns (MidEng. *thou*, MidDu. *du*) by new forms originating from the plural (En. *you*, Du. *jij*; cf. Brown & Gilman 1960). Presently, online communication facilitates the lateral exchange of strategies among queer communities of different linguistic backgrounds, uniquely characterizing this present moment of language change.

References

Brown, Roger and Albert Gilman (1960). "The pronouns of power and solidarity". In: Thomas Albert Sebeok (Hrsg.): Style in Language. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. 253-276.