

LANGUAGE MATTERS: When gender collides with words

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GENDER IDENTITY

A Metroland Special Report

It used to be so simple, back in the days of Dick and Jane primary school readers.

We learned grammar by memorizing basic rules. Dick was a 'he', Jane was a 'she', Spot was a dog and together they were ... well, they.

Turns out, it wasn't so simple after all. Those clear-cut rules didn't fit everyone and today those who don't fit are speaking out, sparking what could be a linguistic revolution.

The two-gender, binary world of male and female is shifting. We now have gender-neutral driver's licences, gender-free washrooms, Toby's Law enshrining transgender people's rights in Ontario and Bill C-16 working to do the same across Canada. And increasingly, people are adopting a cornucopia of alternative pronouns to the traditional he and she.

"Gender is not black and white, but language is," explained Chris Talbot, a female-to male transgender youth from Newmarket.

Talbot, 18, prefers to be called he. He spoke with his guidance office in Grade 10 and soon his entire high school had switched references to he.

Today, Talbot is studying at Georgian College in Orillia, making use of gender-free washrooms on campus, readily accepted by his male roommates in his dorm.

"People have been amazing about it, really. I've never had a bad experience, no bullying, no judging," he said. "Maybe it's because [trans issues] are all over social media, but it has been easier than I thought."

Switching pronouns isn't smooth for everyone, especially for those who don't identify as male or female.

At 16, Beatrice Vandikas stumbled upon new pronouns being used by an online blogger: fae and faer.

Vandikas had been dating a trans man at the time, dealing with "nasty rumours" in a small-town community, and did not start using those pronouns right away. Now Vandikas is more comfortable using fae (for she/he) and faer (for her/his/him) — but also less upset when people don't.

Language is constantly evolving, Vandikas said. "It shouldn't be that difficult, but changes like that are really hard for people, especially when they're older."

Vandikas' parents, for example, haven't yet fully embraced the concept. Faer mother once asked faer to help her understand how fae would like her to talk about faer. Fae was encouraged, but faer mother's use of the pronouns didn't last — maybe, fae said, because it was such a foreign concept to the older generation, "so I just said to myself, she's my mom, I'll deal with it."

Reading that sentence may have been challenging for even the most open-minded readers, but Vandikas, and others who hope the English language evolves, said it's worth the trouble. Respecting others is more important than being grammatically correct.

Words hold power, Vandikas noted, especially when they feel wrong and especially when you have an identity disorder and rely on that perfect pronoun to understand who you are and find a sense of community.

"When people say gender pronouns are too confusing, what they are really saying is they don't want to take the time to question their assumptions about gender," said York University professor Sheila Cavanagh.

Gender is more complicated and nuanced than simple male and female, she said. "The importance of language, and gender pro-



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"Gender is not black and white, but language is," explains Chris Talbot, a female-to-male transgender youth. Talbot is studying at Georgian College in Orillia, making use of gender-free washrooms on campus.

noun usage, should not be underestimated."

Increasingly, professors at York and other North American post-secondary schools ask students to indicate their preferred gender pronoun when they introduce themselves.

Some go further, allowing students to register their pronouns in the university computer systems; professors are urged to include their pronouns in email signatures.

Alicia Lapointe, PhD candidate at Western University's faculty of education, suggested it may be easier for youth, who tend to view gender and sexuality differently.

"They're more fluid and open about it. By high school or post-secondary, it's too late to unlearn any transphobia or homophobia. Elementary students, in particular, are often bullied because of gender expression."

Lapointe uses nametags that say "please use ... pronouns," and introduces herself with: "I'm Alicia and I use she, her, hers pronouns".

"It's a way to get people to see that you shouldn't assume," she said. "I don't think we lose anything by acknowledging our wide diversity, or celebrating it. Our society is only better if we celebrate everyone for who they are."

"Maybe it's just words, maybe it's one small thing, but it's acknowledgement that the world is a lot different from what we imagined it to be," said Jen Gilbert, associate professor at York University's faculty of education.

"We're always inventing new ways to describe the world. Who knows what words we'll invent to describe ourselves in the future? Words describe the world and invent the world. And sometimes, we need to invent the world before it exists."

DO GENDER-BASED WORDS AFFECT OUR BEHAVIOUR?

Remember baby Storm?

The Toronto baby took the world by storm in 2011 when her parents decided not to reveal her gender to the world for her first years of life. Parents Kathy Witterick and David Stock wanted to let Storm decide what gender to identify with and, five years later, she is a she.

The couple also made a conscious choice to keep their kids out of public school, to avoid, in part, the school system's segregation of sexes.

What happens when we erase gender divisions? Does going gender-free impact our behaviour?

The research is unclear.

Lynn Liben, a psychologist at Penn State, studied preschool classes to look at the effects of gender-coded language.

She found when teachers lined children up by gender and emphasized gender in speech, ("Good morning, boys and girls"), students showed an increase in gender-stereotyped attitudes toward each other and their choice of toys.

On the other hand, researchers Kumiko Fukumura (University of Strathclyde, Scotland), Jukka Hyönä and Merete Scholfield (University of Turku, Finland), found no correlation between the pronoun system we use and our gender thinking. In the Finnish language, genders are not differentiated; "hän" refers equally to both females and males, and yet Finns do not think about the gender of people any differently than speakers of English, the researchers report.

How to be gender sensitive

- If you are uncertain about the gender identity of another person and have to refer to them in the third person, use they or them.
- It is OK to politely ask which gender pronoun a person prefers.
- If you work in an office that has intake forms, include X or Other (if you must collect information about gender — but consider that you may not actually need it).
- Make sure there are gender-neutral bathroom options in your place of work.

- Sheila Cavanagh, professor, York University



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