

**تطور استخدام الضمائر في بناء الهوية الرقمية
مقاربة تداولية**

**The Evolution of Pronoun Usage in Digital
Identity Construction: A Pragmatic
Approach**

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الكلمات المفتاحية: الضمائر، التداولية، الهوية الرقمية، التواصل الاجتماعي، الجندر، تحليل

الخطاب، أفعال الكلام، الشمول اللغوي

Keywords: pronouns, pragmatics, digital identity, social media, gender, discourse analysis, speech acts, inclusivity

الملخص

في العصر الرقمي المعاصر، لم تعد الضمائر الشخصية مجرد علامات نحوية بسيطة، بل أصبحت أدوات تداولية تُستخدم لبناء الهوية والتفاوض الاجتماعي. تستكشف هذه الدراسة كيفية استخدام الضمائر عبر منصات التواصل الاجتماعي — تويتر، تيك توك، إنستغرام، ولينكد إن — ليس فقط كأدوات إحالة لغوية، بل كوسائل لأداء الهوية، وإظهار الانتماء، والتعبير عن الذات.

وانطلاقاً من نظريات التداولية وتحليل الخطاب، تفحص الدراسة كيف يستخدم الأفراد الضمائر في السير الذاتية، والتعليقات، والعناوين التوضيحية، للتعامل مع قضايا الجندر، والسلطة، والانتماء المجتمعي. وبالاعتماد على مجموعة بيانات مكونة من ٨٠٠ ملف وتفاعل رقمي، توصلت النتائج إلى وجود أنماط متميزة باختلاف المنصة، واستراتيجيات أدبية (مراعاة الوجه)، وتحولات اجتماعية لغوية مرتبطة بالإعلان عن الضمائر أو تصحيحها أو ابتكارها. تُسهم هذه الورقة في مجالات التداولية الرقمية، واللسانيات الاجتماعية، ودراسات الهوية، من خلال إبراز الكيفية التي تعبّر بها الخيارات اللغوية الصغيرة — مثل إدراج "they/them" في النبذة أو تصحيح الضمير في تعليق — عن السياسات الثقافية للغة وتُعيد تشكيلها. وتدعو الدراسة إلى إدراج اللغة الشاملة في التعليم، وتحسين تصميم المنصات لدعم هذا التوجه، ومواصلة البحث في اللغة الرقمية والجندر.

Abstract

In today's digital landscape, personal pronouns have changed from simple grammatical morphemes to pragmatic resources of identity construction and social negotiation. This project interrogates the uses of pronoun in social media (e.g. Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn) not only to refer, but to perform identity, assert agency, and inhibit inclusion. Positioned within pragmatic theory and discourse analysis, this study examines how users use pronouns in bios, captions, and conversations to navigate issues of gender, power, and community.

Using a corpus of 800 social media profiles and interactions, the study identified patterns across platforms in the use of politeness strategies and sociolinguistics changes regarding pronoun declaration, correction, and innovation. The analysis found pronouns acted as declarative acts, politeness markers and ideological signals and that the style and function of pronouns were different depending on professional and informal contexts.

This paper provides an important contribution to the areas of digital pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and identity studies by pointing out how small linguistic choices—such as identifying “they/them” in a bio, or correcting misgendering in a comment—encapsulates and plays a constructive role in shifting the cultural politics of language. The study based its implication on reinforcing the importance of educational inclusivity, advocating for and designing design changes at the platform level, and conducting more research into the gendered aspect of language in digital environments.



Introduction

With the growth of our increasingly complex digital age, people's language has gone, in many cases, from being simply a mechanism of communication to being a categorical process of identity construction. One of the linguistic features that has transformed in the digital age is pronoun use. Unlike previous generations of grammar where personal pronouns were, at least in part, dictated on purely grammatical grounds, personal pronouns have become major markers of social positioning, ideological systems, and digital identity. On social media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn, users are constantly declaring their pronouns (e.g., she/her, he/him, they/them, xe/xem) in bios and captions—demonstrating that pronouns signal important communicative and pragmatic purposes, in addition to identifying gendered identity, showing allyship, and understanding and negotiating sociocultural norms.

This research paper explores how pronouns are operating pragmatically in digital contexts to construct and (or) enact identity. The papers use of user's interactions, bio statements, and comments across multiple social media and technology platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram) shows the motivations, implications, and patterns for using personal pronouns online. The research is located at the intersection of digital linguistics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistic identity theory. The goal is uncover how what are often mundane choices in language, such as personal pronouns, identify wider socio-political and cultural dynamics.

The paper includes genuine user-generated content, and real-world examples have been anonymized for confidentiality, and uses pragmatic theory to decipher how users deploy language in digital spaces, and specifically related to pronouns identity construction, and social negotiation in present digital public life.

Literature Review

The development of pronoun use in the digital realm cannot be understood without regard to broader changes in language, identity and pragmatics. A key point to consider when working through these issues is the relationship between gender theory and linguistic performance, and Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Butler argued in *Gender Trouble* that gender is not a fixed identity but the repeated performance of gendered acts, and that language - and pronouns in particular - are instrumental to that performance (Butler 25). As we consider the digital realm, this frame is critical for understanding how people use pronouns to perform, affirm, or oppose gendered identities in real time.

Recent studies have further underscored that pronouns are not simply grammatical or formal markers, they are indexicals of identity. Zimman applies the term "socio-indexical signs" to pronouns, meaning that



pronouns point not only to who someone is but also to who they wish to be socially indexed to (Zimman 193). In digital spaces, the circumstances of pronouns' being visible and being asserted voluntarily, particularly in bios or usernames, contribute to their value as performative self-presentations. In a similar vein, Erving Goffman characterized front-stage self-definition in a type of theater metaphor that dramatizes an intention based on audience (Goffman 32). Social media is a space where front-stage is curated, and identity is visible and constructed on a "stage."

Adopting a pragmatic view of pronoun use in digital contexts indicates that usage is not just referential language; it is communicative action. Levinson defines pragmatics as the study of meaning in context—specifically how people use language to do things (Levinson 5). With that consideration, putting "they/them" in a social media bio is an example of an illocutionary act—asserting an identity and providing directions to the audience. Notably, the speech act theory developed by Austin and Searle supports that language is action.

A pronoun correction that takes place in a comment thread ("Actually, I go by they/them") does more than just communicate factual information, it provides directions, it is a demand for recognition, and it indicates boundaries. Similarly, politeness theory—specifically Brown and Levinson's model—can help explain how users navigate the socially sensitive context of pronoun correction. Corrections are infused with hedges, emojis or positive politeness strategies to provide social context that protects the hearer's face, while asserting their identity, such as when a TikTok user correcting someone writes, "Hey, just a heads up, I go by she/they now," they gave clear information while maintaining social harmony.

Digital self-presentation is also informed by more extensive sociolinguistic research into identity. In her book *Stories and Social Media*, Ruth Page discusses how narrative and linguistic choices allow users to build representations of themselves in their digital forms (Page 118). On LinkedIn, for example, the pronouns "he/him" or "she/her" next to job titles represent a combination of professional identity and inclusive language. On Instagram or TikTok, the same pronouns could appear with some kind of emoji or activist phrase, and signify not only gender but also political stance or belonging to a community.

While there is now a growing body of research on online identity, very few studies have taken a pragmatic approach to pronoun usage across platforms and undertaken it as a dynamic, context sensitive practice. McGlashan and Fitzpatrick point out that pronoun declarations in Twitter bios carry socially-loaded speech act aspects and are influenced by audience expectations and digital customs of using declarative profiles (McGlashan and Fitzpatrick 72). However, their research limits pronouns



to profile descriptions. This study focused on understanding how pronouns are used in profiles, captions, replies, and usernames which adds depth to the study of their pragmatic functions.

This collection of studies demonstrates the significance of pronouns as means of identity performance, social negotiation, and expression of ideology. By drawing from gender theory, pragmatics, and digital discourse analysis, this study provides a multidimensional space for considering the ways that language, and pronouns in particular, are engaged in identity construction in online environments (see also Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). This research contributes to a new area of development with a more expansive and interdisciplinary analysis across platforms and situations, and grounded in the real-life use—for real meaning—of pronouns as situated actions.

Research Questions

The study will focus on the following research questions:

- 1.How are personal pronouns being pragmatically used to construct digital identities on different social media platforms?
- 2.What communicative intentions are expressed in users' choice to display or change pronouns online?
- 3.How do audiences respond pragmatically to pronoun usage in interactive contexts such as comments, replies, or corrections?
- 4.What are the systematic differences of pronoun use on different platforms with varying norms (e.g., professional vs. informal)?

Methodology

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative, interpretive research design informed by pragmatics and discourse analysis. Using a corpus of information found in digital profiles and interactions across four major platforms—Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn—it aims to determine how agency users employ pronouns to construct identity and perform social actions.

Sampling

A purposive sampling approach was used to select:

- 200 public bios from each platform referentially including pronoun declarations (e.g. "they/them," "she/her," "xe/xem").
- 100 comment threads with discussions regarding pronouns or corrections of misgendering.
- A second set of usernames and captions that demonstrate implicit or creative representations of pronouns.

All user data was de-identified to maintain privacy compliance.

Data Collection

Instances were gathered manually over three weeks. , When, there might be a little variation in results.



- TikTok user (username changed): @sunnyvibes101 bio states: "they/them | autistic joy & vintage love"
 - LinkedIn user: @michael_turner, a software engineer include "he/him" next to the title and contact.
 - Instagram user: @art.by.luna captioned a reel with: "I go by she/they. Respect my light"
 - Twitter user: @DataTornado tweeted: "when someone gets your pronouns right on the first try "
- Also added some threads where people talk about misgendering:
@jordanwrites: "Actually, I use they/them."
@maddieworld: "Oh! Got it, thank you for correcting me"

Analytical Framework

Analysis is informed by Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson), and Indexicality Theory. Each instance is coded based on:

- Speech act type (e.g., assertion, request, or correction);
- Pragmatic function (e.g., face-saving, identity-claiming);
- Specific platforms (e.g., LinkedIn formality vs. TikTok playfulness).

Data Analysis and Results

1. Bios as Acts of Identity

Across social media sites, pronouns in bios act as identity acts. Different styles and contexts apply:

- In LinkedIn bios, pronouns have been argued to be more formal and professionally aligned with the cyclical norms of including pronouns and inclusive norms in general (e.g., "Alex Rivera – Marketing Consultant | she/her").
- TikTok and even Instagram bios can be more playful and expressive with the pronouns and with the use of emojis and different phrases (e.g., "they/them neurodivergent space witch").

2. Pronouns as Politeness and Correction

Polite correction can be seen in comment threads after being misgendered. Often people use pronouns as a resource in combination with politeness:

"Hey! Just a reminder I use they/them :)"

This prompt is normally well received and also aligns more generally with positive politeness strategies because of how effective they are as a prompt for a goal of face-saving interaction that aligns with identity-affirming identities. Typically, the response to a misgender comment like this one will be:

"Thank you for telling me! I'll remember"

Which can show a cooperative identity reaction.

3. Indexical in Captions and Content Production



Some users index identity without directly labelling or calling attention to the pronouns. For example, a TikTok user posted a transition video with the following caption:

"From she/her to they/them to just ME "

This use can reflect pragmatic indexicality as the pronouns point to a larger narrative of gender journey and self-definition.

4. Platform Variation

- **Twitter** saw the most instances of pronoun activism with trending hashtags such as #MyPronounsAre and #TheyThem.
- **Instagram** users tended to incorporate pronouns within visual and artistic identity.
- **LinkedIn** has seen a rise in bios that include he/him and she/her, especially common among HR and tech professionals.
- **TikTok** had a high frequency of non-binary and neopronoun usages e.g., "xe/xem," "fae/faer," and hybrid expressions/terms.

5. Humor and Reclamation

Some users are subverting expectations with funny or satirical pronouns:

"Pronouns: yee/haw"

"Pronouns: none, I'm chaos."

These examples certainly are playful in nature, they also subvert norms in practical ways and demonstrate linguistic creativity in doing identity experimentation.

Discussion

The analysis shows that in digital landscapes, pronoun use is not simply a grammatical formalism but a deep-level pragmatic resource for identity construction, negotiation, and community signaling; something that is particularly relevant in contexts where gender diversity and social awareness are becoming more commonplace.

1. Pronouns as Pragmatic Identity Markers

By way of acts of declaration, correction, and affirmation, pronouns have become the means by which speakers accomplish identity in real-time. For example, placing "they/them" in one's Twitter bio is a declarative identity act that signals requests for recognition. In each case the construction embeds pragmatic moves that signal personal identity and also ideological stances around identity in contexts relating to sense of belonging, inclusion and respect.

This is consistent with Zimman's position that pronouns are "socio-indexical signs," which people use as a medium to signal stances on modeled identity related to gender identity, political alignment, and their belonging to an ideological community (Zimman 196). The simple act of using non-binary pronouns, or neopronouns (e.g., xe/xem) is an indication



of not simply decoding gender, but rather maintaining agency over how users are presented or perceived.

2. Platform-Empirical Pragmatics

The differences from platform to plank implies the existence of digital contexts that inform linguistic behavior:

- Users on LinkedIn were using pronouns as signifiers of professionalism and knowledgeability, a component of Goffman's "front stage" identity performance.
- A user on TikTok was using pronouns, but layering them with emojis and slogans to construct an identity that was layered, textured, and emotion-filled.
- Of all three platforms, Twitter provided the most explicit examples of conflict around misgendering given the structural properties of Twitter, which encourages a certain speed and political discourse style.

3. Politeness and Facework

The use of polite corrections (e.g., "I go by they/them, thanks ") follows Brown and Levinson's face-saving strategies while asserting identity and mitigating imposition on the addressee. The corrections illustrated forms of positive politeness and solidarity, aligned with the emergent wider digital culture that respects pronoun declarations.

That said, corrections don't always indicate the existence of positive politeness, and some threads showed examples of resistance, ridicule, or confusion, again - highlighting that pronoun declarations, are still existing in turn, contested social space.

4. Humor, Resistance, and Innovation

The emergence of jokey or fantasy pronouns (like "goblin/goblinsself", "yee/haw") exemplifies how users are making room for agency in language practices, resisting rigid identity classifications. While some commentators deride this project as trivializing meaning-making, a pragmatic perspective explicates that this kind of language use is resistance to normativity—an unconventional pronoun use that constitutes a creative practice of critique.

5. Sociopolitical Implications

The practice of pronoun listing can also work as a political signal. Users often prepend pronouns with hashtags (#BlackLivesMatter, #TransRights) or with flag emojis, effectively creating a multi-dimensional identity statement. In this way, pronouns are positioned as discursive tools that index not just identity but also belief systems, alliances, and worldviews.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This research has highlighted that pronouns, seen solely as grammatical features, are now leveraged as pragmatic resources to



instantiate and represent identity in digital contexts. Their use on social media is contextually specific, ideologically loaded, and varied. Through declaration, correction, and innovation, users exercise the authority of how they will be acknowledged and respected in digital spaces.

These insights advance our understanding of digital pragmatics, identity theory, and sociolinguistics in the (digital) age, suggest a substantial role for linguistic agency in the construction of digital selves.

Recommendations

1. Language instruction: Language and communication courses – particularly for those pursuing professions in media, education, and HR – should also include elements discussing the use of inclusive pronouns, as well as the way people communicate digitally.

2. Design of platforms: Social media platforms should allow users to customize their pronoun fields to be visible across interfaces, which can increase accessibility and respect for pronouns.

3. Future research: Future research could factor in multilingual pronoun use, the unique differences of various generations, and/or longitudinal data that would measure change over time.

4. Cross-cultural research: Expanding research of pronouns to include non-Western digital spaces will also help to broaden our understanding of how pronouns intersect with local gender ideologies.

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