Hypatia (2026), 1–20
doi:10.1017/hyp.2026.10106

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Pronouns and Linguistic Amelioration

Hsiang-Yun Chen

Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica, Taiwan
Email: hsiangyun@as.edu.tw

(Received 31 December 2025 UTC; revised 25 May 2026 UTC; accepted 6 July 2026 UTC)

Abstract

This paper aims to advance current debates on gendered language reform by making explicit the assumptions in much of the philosophical literature, and by proposing a reorientation of how we theorize about pronoun reform and linguistic amelioration. While sympathetic to the normative aims of prominent proposals, I caution that prescriptions grounded in any single language risk overstating language-specific features and blurring the sources and dynamics of gender essentialism. Drawing on the case of Mandarin Chinese, where gendered pronouns were a modern invention, I clarify the limits of language-specific diagnoses and show how reform is mediated by social conditions of uptake. More broadly, I advocate a shift from language-specific proposals to a cross- and trans-linguistic perspective: cross-linguistic comparison identifies which claims generalize across languages, and a trans-linguistic lens highlights how reform ideas and practices travel across contexts and are reshaped through uptake and negotiation. This approach offers a more philosophically robust account of the prospects and limits of linguistic amelioration, and of language's role in social change.

1. Introduction

Language is an important battleground for theorists and advocates, especially feminist theorizing and politics. Earlier discussions highlighted linguistic androcentrism and the invisibility of women (Lakoff 1975; Spender 1980).[1] Recent work has turned to the semantics and pragmatics of gender terms, exploring the implicit, generic meaning they carry (Leslie 2015; Sterken 2015), as well as examining the interaction between meaning and context and the ramifications for inclusivity and self-autonomy (Saul 2012; Díaz-León 2016; Chen 2021; Kukla and Lance 2023). Currently a major focus is pronoun usage. Amelioration proposals abound, aiming to challenge gender essentialist thinking (Baron 2020). Although philosophical discussions of such reforms remain largely

[1]Feminist scholars in the 1970s critiqued the pervasive centering of male experiences and perspectives demonstrated in language, such as the use of "he" as a generic pronoun in English as if men are the default human agents. See also Miller and Swift (1976) and Mercier (1995).

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Hypatia Inc. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

Anglocentric, scholarly attention to languages other than English is gradually increasing.[2]

This paper proposes a reorientation of how to think about pronoun reform and linguistic amelioration. Rather than offering a specific reform proposal, I advocate a methodological shift toward a cross- and trans-linguistic perspective. My point of departure is Dembroff and Wodak's (2018, 2021) influential call to eliminate gendered pronouns, which I use as a springboard. Building on their insight that linguistic gender marking can reinforce essentialist ideology,[3] I ask what follows once we move beyond English and examine a language with a very different structure. Drawing on the development of gendered pronouns in Chinese, a language that historically lacks them, I clarify the interplay between language, thought, and social change by focusing on uptake and recontextualization. More broadly, cross-linguistic comparison identifies how different languages encode gender marking and which philosophical claims generalize across languages; a trans-linguistic lens tracks how reform ideas and practices travel across languages and social contexts, highlighting how they are recontextualized, contested, and reshaped through negotiated uptake. By combining a structural comparison of linguistic features and a dynamic account of how ameliorative ideas circulate and are transformed, this approach offers a more philosophically robust analysis of why and in what sense amelioration can be both necessary and difficult, and of language's role in social change.

Here is the roadmap of what follows. Section 2 offers a sympathetic reconstruction of Dembroff and Wodak's central arguments and bolsters their core claims with recent work on linguistic hermeneutical injustice (Rosola 2024, 2025; Kapusta 2025; Klieber 2025). Section 3 critically examines the rise of gendered pronouns in Chinese (Liu 1995; Huang 2009/2023) to argue that gender marking is not merely grammatical but a product of sociocultural forces. Section 4 develops a cross- and trans-linguistic framework and evaluates the prospects and limits of linguistic amelioration.

2. Philosophical arguments for pronoun reform

To challenge binary gender assumptions and promote inclusivity, proposals to revise pronoun usage range from using gender-specific pronouns that match an individual's gender identity, avoiding binary pronouns when addressing genderqueer individuals, to eliminating gendered pronouns altogether. I focus on one of the most influential recent proposals, due to Dembroff and Wodak (2018, 2021), whose Radical Claim has become a central reference point in philosophical debates about gendered language.[4]

Dembroff and Wodak offer three main arguments for the claim that speakers ought not use gender-specific pronouns for anyone, regardless of that individual's gender

[2]A notable exception is González Vázquez et al. (2024), which examines gendered features of Spanish, Italian, and German. These are grammatical gender languages—that is, languages that mark gender much more extensively than English, assigning gender to not only pronouns but also most nouns. Greek, Hindi, and Polish are discussed in Rosola (2024, 2025), Kapusta (2025), and Klieber (2025).

[3]For present purposes, I follow Haslanger's (2020) characterization that ideology is a cultural technē gone wrong.

[4]Dembroff and Wodak initially considered a moderate thesis that we ought not use binary gender-specific pronouns for genderqueer individuals: just as we have a duty not to use "he" for transwomen (or "she" for transmen), we have a duty not to use binary gender-specific pronouns to refer to genderqueer individuals (Dembroff and Wodak 2018, 372). I focus on the Radical Claim, which is their stronger and ultimate proposal.

identity.[5] The first argument concerns the protection of private information. Consider Alex, a transgender man who has not publicly come out. When Brooklyn refers to Alex using "she," Alex faces a dilemma: correcting Brooklyn would mean outing himself before he is ready; staying silent allows the misrepresentation to stand and may feel deceptive.[6] On the assumption that grammar should not place people in morally troubling positions, we should not use gender-specific pronouns so that people do not have to choose between disclosing private information and deceiving others. Note that this point is made independent of any specific metaphysical theory of gender (Barnes 2020; Kukla and Lance 2023); the argument is perhaps even stronger if gender is understood in terms of reproductive features: as long as we agree that genitals are private, linguistic practices that continually require revealing genital status is problematic (Bettcher 2017; Dembroff and Wodak 2021, 368).

Their second argument combines egalitarian and practical considerations. Retaining gendered pronouns for binary individuals and using a catch-all pronoun, such as "they" or "ze," for all nonbinary individuals is fundamentally inegalitarian. It treats nonbinary people as exceptions, reinforces the binary as the norm, and obscures diverse nonbinary identities. Engineering a distinct pronoun for every gender identity, however, is cognitively implausible, epistemically problematic, and potentially counterproductive. Pronouns are a *closed-class* category: they are unreceptive to change, and learning even one new pronoun can be challenging (Fromkin et al. 2014).[7] Increasing the inventory of pronouns dramatically also increases the risk of misgendering, because correct usage would require reliable knowledge about people's gender identities.[8] By contrast, eliminating all gender-specific pronouns promotes equality, consistency, and feasibility.

The third argument concerns gender essentialism: "Linguistic markers of gender play a role in communicating harmful beliefs about the nature and social significance of gender identities, and that reducing the linguistic markers of gender would reduce the prevalence of such beliefs" (Dembroff and Wodak 2018, 395). Dembroff and Wodak understand gender essentialism not just as the view that gender is biologically grounded, but also as the view that gender is an intrinsic part of who one is that further explains one's psychological traits, and social roles, among others (2018, 395).[9] They think that linguistic markers of gender contribute to gender essentialism directly by conveying essentialist content, as well as indirectly by normalizing such patterns through repetition. While feminist philosophers have long criticized essentialist ideologies, Dembroff and Wodak treat gendered pronouns as both a means of sustaining essentialist beliefs and a site of potential disruption. Because pronoun use is typically automatic, deliberately changing taken-for-granted pronoun practices can disrupt habitual gender

[5] A growing number of scholars question the usefulness of gender identity. For instance, Barnes (2022) cautions that if gender categorization is determined by gender self-identification, many cognitively disabled people would not be capable of having a gender. Others, including Briggs and George (2023) and Hernandez and Bell (2025), challenge the assumption that gender identity is necessary in validating trans individuals' rights and explaining their experiences.

[6] The example is modified from Dembroff and Wodak (2018, 392).

[7] Closed class words serve essentially grammatical functions. In English, examples include pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, determiners, and auxiliary verbs. Sets of these categories are relatively stable and small.

[8] See Kapusta (2016) for the harms of misgendering.

[9] Beauvoir (1949/2010) provides a classic example, and Mikkola's (2016) traits-norm covariance model offers a more recent perspective on how gender ideologies impose restrictive roles and hierarchies of values to the traits and activities associated with different genders.

ascription, exposing underlying assumptions and turning them into explicit targets for reflective contestation.

Taken together, these arguments aim to show that gender-specific pronouns influence thought and behavior in ways that call for radical revision.[10] Importantly, although the Radical Claim could be narrowly read as applying only to English, a broader interpretation of its underlying rationale is not unmotivated: the thought that gendered pronouns place speakers in morally problematic situations, prolong stigma and stereotypes, and reinforce exclusion "should generalize to other languages" (Dembroff and Wodak 2021, 362). The question that naturally arises, then, is how far these arguments travel once we take linguistic diversity seriously.[11]

To clarify, asking how far these arguments travel across languages is not a rejection of Dembroff and Wodak's proposal. Nor do I take them to be committed to a simplistic view according to which gendered pronouns are necessary or sufficient for gender essentialism, or according to which eliminating gendered pronouns would by itself eliminate patriarchy or binarism. Indeed, Dembroff and Wodak adopt a weak Whorfian stance, according to which linguistic categories and usage can influence but need not strictly determine social cognition (Dembroff and Wodak 2018, 396). On their view, gender-specific pronouns can transmit essentialist views by signaling gender as relevant whenever they are used; when gender is encoded in the linguistic structure, such effects, even if context-dependent and defeasible, can yield enduring consequences.[12] The point, then, is that the normative force of Dembroff and Wodak's proposal, to which I am sympathetic, can be distinguished from a further empirical and explanatory question: whether, how, and how strongly gender-specific pronouns make gender salient and transmit essentialist views beyond English.

This question requires caution. For one thing, languages differ considerably in how and where they encode gender. In English, gender marking is limited primarily to third-person singular pronouns; in grammatical gender languages such as French and German, gender is marked more pervasively across nouns, adjectives, determiners, and agreement patterns; in languages such as Malay and Finnish, gendered pronouns are absent altogether. For another, despite growing recognition that language both reflects and shapes thought, the mechanisms and extent of its influence remain open questions. Specifically, the evidential support for the connection between grammatical gender and cognition is more contested than is often acknowledged. As Kirk-Giannini and Glanzberg (2024) argue, widely cited experimental studies, such as Boroditsky et al. (2003), Vigliocco et al. (2005), and Maciuszek et al. (2019), differ substantially in design and do not yield sufficiently consistent results to licence strong generalizations.[13]

[10]I set aside issues such as the specific mechanism through which gendered pronouns indicate the gender of their referents—whether this mechanism is presupposition, how presuppositions project, and detailed discussion of the harms of gender essentialism. Exploring them goes beyond the scope of this paper.

[11]Dembroff and Wodak explicitly allow that the case for reducing gendered language may be defeasible, noting, for example, that there may be reasons to preserve gendered Indigenous languages (Dembroff and Wodak 2021, 373, n. 5). My aim is not to deny this qualification, but to ask what their generalizing rationale requires in light of linguistic and social variation. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

[12]"Building social identities into the very grammar of the language communicates that the social identity in question is always relevant to explaining everything one does, and thereby helps to transmit essentialist views about social identities." (Dembroff and Wodak 2021, 366).

[13]Kirk-Giannini and Glanzberg (2024) identify several methodological concerns: studies differ in the languages examined, the richness of their grammatical gender systems, the effects targeted, and the tasks used. Boroditsky et al. (2003) report strong correlations between grammatical gender and gendered

On the other hand, the availability of gender as a frame for social categorization does not show that grammatical gender systems straightforwardly predict a society's gender ideology. Speakers of languages with pervasive grammatical gender are not thereby shown to be more sexist, and communities whose languages lack gendered pronouns are not thereby free from patriarchy or binarism.[14] Still, the absence of gendered pronouns can be significant: it may reduce pronoun-specific harms, such as some forms of misgendering, even when other gendered hierarchies remain.[15] Importantly, the ideological force of gendered pronouns does not follow from grammar alone, but must be assessed in relation to the broader linguistic, social, and historical conditions in which they function.

Recent work on *linguistic* hermeneutical injustice helps specify some of the mechanisms through which broader conditions shape how gendered language does its ideological work. Drawing on Fricker's (2007) notion of hermeneutical injustice, Rosola (2024) argues that the absence of a nonbinary grammatical gender creates a gap in collective interpretive resources that disadvantages nonbinary individuals in meaning-making.[16] In grammatical gender languages such as Italian and Spanish, non-binary individuals are forced to be represented within a binary system; they are thus misgendered structurally, not merely due to speaker error. Kapusta (2025), building on Dotson's (2014) distinction between first- and second-order exclusion, explains how entrenched binary ideology hinders language change. Klieber (2025) highlights that while inclusive hermeneutical resources already exist within queer communities (e.g., Italian *-u*, German *xier or sier*), their broader adoption is suppressed by transphobic power structures. In response, Rosola (2025) stresses that exclusion and resistance stem from ideology, as well as from cognitive and structural constraints, such as linguistic structure, cognitive effort, habit, and accessibility difficulty.

What is particularly significant about these accounts is that they specify mechanisms through which language "plays a role" in sustaining gender essentialism. They show how grammatical structure, usage norms, and power relations together constrain what can and cannot be said about gender, thereby complementing and enriching Dembroff and Wodak's view.

Crucially, however, the literature has so far focused primarily on languages where gendered pronouns are built into the linguistic structure: English is a natural gender language; Italian, German, and Spanish are grammatical gender languages. To assess and refine the insights of these accounts, it is necessary to examine languages that lack grammatical gender altogether. For this reason, I turn to Mandarin Chinese, whose

descriptions of objects, whereas Vigliocco et al. (2005) find only limited effects, and Maciuszek et al. (2019) report mixed results across tasks. These differences make it difficult to isolate the contribution of grammatical gender itself from broader cultural, contextual, or task-dependent factors.

[14]For discussion of both the apparent universality and cross-cultural variation of gender, see Ridgeway (2011) on gender as a "primary frame" for social categorization. Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012) examine 111 countries and report an association between language type and some measures of gender equality, but acknowledge that it is far from establishing a causal connection. Cameron (2023, 97) critically adds that culturally similar Scandinavian countries differ substantially in grammatical gender systems (e.g., Finnish vs. Icelandic vs. Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian), and their equality rankings do not track the pattern predicted by Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012).

[15]I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

[16]Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource." (Fricker 2007, 155).

grammatical structure and historical development offer a particularly instructive pressure test—not as a counterexample to existing proposals, but as a case for clarifying how their mechanisms operate across linguistic and social contexts, and as such illuminates the reciprocal relations among language, ideology, and social change.

3. The case of Mandarin Chinese

The Chinese language is grammatically genderless: there are no gender inflections on articles or adjectives and it historically lacked gender-specific pronouns. A single epicene third-person pronoun, pronounced as *tā*, was used for all singular references, regardless of gender, animacy, or humanness.[17] Currently, written Chinese differentiates between third-person pronouns 他 (*tā*, "he") and 她 (*tā*, "she"), along the lines of "he" and "she" in English. This distinction is a relatively recent development, emerging at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet the long-standing absence of gendered pronouns did not prevent patriarchal social organization and binary gender norms from structuring Chinese society.[18] Building on Liu (1995) and Huang (2009/2023), I show that the call for gender-specific pronouns in Chinese initially arose from contact with Western languages and cultures; the creation, contestation, and eventual social uptake of 她, however, were influenced by a myriad of factors beyond grammar.[19]

Poet and linguist Liu Bannong is generally credited with introducing 她 (*tā*) as a specifically feminine pronoun in the late 1910s.[20] Its emergence took place during the New Culture Movement and May Fourth Movement, two broad intellectual and sociopolitical reforms during the 1910s and 1920s that challenged traditional values and promoted individual freedom, science, democracy, and women's liberation. The increasing need to translate Western texts with grammaticalized gender distinctions highlighted a perceived limitation of Chinese: it lacked direct equivalents for English *she*, French *elle*, or German *sie*. Reformers argued that linguistic accuracy and precision required a visible marker to eliminate such ambiguity. Leading intellectuals such as Zhou Zuoren, Lu Xun, and Hu Shi believed that language reform was integral to social reform. Equality would be harder to achieve unless accurate delineation was in place, and women's achievement would remain obscured if the language lacked precise means to represent them (Huang 2023, 153). From this perspective, the absence of feminine pronouns mirrored the marginalization of women in traditional Chinese

[17]Kramer (2020) argues that grammatical gender is always assigned to at least some nouns on the basis of animacy, humanness, and social gender/biological sex. In Chinese, there is some lexical gender differentiation, such as the words for "mother," "father," "sister," and so on.

[18]Confucian norms, with the heavy emphasis on propriety, familial, and social order, have long functioned to support social conservatism, including reinforcing gender hierarchy. See Ettner (2002), Rosenlee (2006), Hershatter (2007), Fincher (2014), and Pang-White (2016) for example.

[19]Liu (1995) argues that China's encounter with European and Japanese languages was mediated by translation and lexical invention, and that the adoption of a feminine pronoun created a new symbolic reality that allows gender to reorganize power relations in modern literature. Huang (2009/2023) traces the emergence of the feminine pronoun in the early Republican era from a wide range of sources including newspapers, magazines, textbooks, dictionaries, and literary collections. Both books are exceptionally rich and I extract only their central points most relevant to the present discussion.

[20]Huang (2023, 17) reports that the earliest public mention of Liu Bannong's proposal to create the feminine pronoun 她 occurs in Zhou Zuoren's translator's note to his translation of August Strindberg's "Reform," published on August 15, 1918.

thinking.[21] The introduction of 她, marked by the 女 (*nǚ*) radical denoting femininity, arguably filled both a morphological and conceptual gap: it expanded the expressive capacity of the language, as well as enhancing symbolically women's visibility.

However, the proposal sparked vehement controversy. Some critics retorted that Chinese language had long functioned adequately: context usually sufficed to disambiguate, and the addition only compromised the language's simplicity. Others objected that the reform imported Western grammatical distinction unnecessarily.[22] Still others raised questions about semantic confusion and practical obstacles.[23] More importantly, some opponents rejected 她 on the ground of gender equality. The goal of gender equality, they argued, is to eliminate all disparities, so introducing a written form that marks the difference is both redundant and regressive. Moreover, the graphic contrast between 他 and 她 is one between the radical 人(*ren*)—"human"—and the radical 女(*nǚ*)—"women," suggesting that women are separate from, or even lesser than, full humans.[24] Closely related is the noted pattern that many characters containing the 女 radical carry pejorative or diminutive connotations, such as 妖 ("demon"), 奸 ("evil"), and 奴 ("slave"). To be sure, not all 女-radical characters are negative, but this pattern is troubling.[25] Due to these concerns, some reformers proposed 伊 (*yi)* as a more suitable alternative.[26]

Despite these objections, 她 eventually gained widespread acceptance. In retrospect, the uptake depended on a number of converging factors. First, the reform aligned with broader social movements and modernist pursuits: a gender-specific pronoun was seen as equipping the Chinese language with a written form that could match the Western languages. Meanwhile, such a pronoun responded to, although in a contested way, rising feminist consciousness and ideals of gender equality. Second, compared to its phonetically distinct rival 伊 (*yi*), 她 enjoyed visual advantages. It allowed for easy understanding and fit well with existing practices of using homophonous characters, as well as the broader trends toward vernacular language and literature. Third, adoption by influential and prolific writers, endorsement by educational institutions, and inclusion in authoritative dictionaries consolidated its status.[27] Over time, a combination of modernizing aspirations, feminist ideals, and practical linguistic considerations

[21]While classical Chinese thought, particularly Confucianism, has historically enforced rigid gender hierarchies and male authority, recent scholarship explores its potential for feminist and liberal reinterpretation. For discussions of these traditional structures and contemporary rereadings, see Angle (2012), Pang-White et al. (2024), and Rosenlee (2024).

[22]For instance, the historian and linguist Chen (1933) cautioned against "blindly following Western grammar": noting that since "Western languages" vary widely among themselves (e.g., German distinguishes multiple noun classes; Arabic marks gender even on verbs), Chinese should not imitate them in the false pursuit of perfection.

[23]The character 她 already appeared in early text as an archaic form of 姐 (*jie*), meaning older sister or mother. Others pointed out practical difficulties, as typesetters did not yet have printing blocks for the new character, complicating printing and publication.

[24]In May 1934 and again in August 1935, the influential magazine *Women's Voice* published "Announcement: This magazine refuses to use the character *ta* 她" for this reason (Huang 2023, 84–85).

[25]Characters containing the 女 radical with positive meanings often reflect idealized or stereotypically feminine traits, such as 娜 (nà: "elegant") and 嬌 (jiāo: "delicate, fragile"). See Hodge and Louie (1998) and Chan and Lin (2019).

[26]See Huang (2023), especially chapters 4 and 6, for alternative proposals.

[27]In July 1924, the China Education Improvement Institute's National Language Teaching Group passed a resolution endorsing 她 and urged the Ministry of Education to include it in the official *National Language Pronunciation Dictionary* to facilitate its adoption (Huang 2023, 122).

contributed to the successful addition. Today, 她 has become so entrenched that many native speakers simply take the feminine pronoun for granted, with no knowledge of the historical development.

Now, after a century's implementation, the spoken pronoun *tā* remains gender-neutral, referring to all people and things alike. However, in written Chinese, a clear asymmetry has taken hold. On the one hand, 她 is a stable part of mainstream usage. Many media outlets, feminist organizations, and platforms employ 她 not only for semantic precision but also to signal gender equality and foreground women's presence. In Taiwan, people even use 妳 (*nǐ*) as a feminine second-person pronoun, alongside the generic 你 (nǐ, "you"), with similar rationales about enhancing visibility and fostering solidarity (Wong and Zhang 2000).[28] On the other hand, while 他 continues to refer to all individuals, 她 is marked as exclusively feminine. Corpus studies suggest that 他 dominates written usage, including contexts where gender is unknown or mixed, reinforcing a male-default norm and revealing persistent biases (Cheng 2016; Su et al. 2016; Dong et al. 2023).

More recently, there have been grassroots efforts to create written forms for individuals with diverse gender identities. Many nonbinary individuals in the Chinese-speaking community have voiced their dissatisfaction with 他: due to the by now standardized contrast between 他 and 她, the former is associated with an implicit maleness and is no longer fully inclusive. Several alternatives have been proposed, including replacing the radical 人 with "X" to form a novel character "X你," or simply adopting the romanized "TA," all pronounced as *tā* (Davey 2024). These suggestions draw on resources outside the established inventory and experiment with new orthographic conventions.

While these innovations have gained visibility online, especially among younger and queer communities, they remain informal and are yet to achieve wider adoption. The obstacles are multiple. Some are social and hermeneutical: nonbinary and genderqueer identities are still poorly understood by the general public (Dembroff 2018, 2020), and many see little or even no need for new pronouns.[29] Other obstacles are linguistic and technical: forms based on modified, new radicals or full romanization fall outside the standard writing system and face resistance from publishers, platforms, and software. Politics also matters. Given the Chinese government's poor record of supporting LGBTQ+ communities, top-down endorsement or institutional support in the near future is unlikely. In reference to recent discussion on linguistic hermeneutical injustice, innovative, inclusive hermeneutical resources are available, yet they struggle to move from local to shared interpretive repertoire, in part because of conservative social and political forces (Rosola 2024, 2025; Kapusta 2025; Klieber 2025).[30] Importantly, these difficulties should not be understood as reasons against inclusive pronoun reform. They show that the availability of a normatively well-motivated new form does not by itself guarantee ameliorative success, but they do not undermine the ameliorative goal.

[28]For instance, Taiwanese Feminist Scholars Association, Taiwan Women in Science and Technology (TWiST), Taiwan Women e Press, Fembooks (the first bookstore of women movement in Chinese community), and popular online media Womany.

[29]This is closer to the original conception of hermeneutical injustice Fricker (2007) articulates, rather than the linguistic variant Rosola (2024, 2025) analyzes.

[30]Because of these theoretical and practical obstacles, Cheng (2016) takes a pessimistic view of the prospects for a novel non-binary third-person pronoun. Davey (2024) offers a contrasting perspective, documenting how gender-inclusive reference is already negotiated in practice. For recent discussion of Unicode encoding and its implications for typability, see Yeung (2025).

In sum, the development of pronouns in Chinese both confirms and complicates the current theoretical picture discussed in section 2. On the one hand, the emergence of 她 shows that linguistic forms do "play a role" in ideology—once established, they render gender salient and contribute to normalizing binary distinctions. On the other hand, the Chinese case shows that the historical absence of gendered pronouns does not prevent patriarchy and binarism from being entrenched, and that well-intentioned reforms can nevertheless introduce new asymmetries that reinforce male-default patterns in writing. Finally, recent attempts to develop inclusive written forms illustrate that, even when alternative resources exist, they may fail to become shared interpretive tools since uptake is constrained by factors beyond linguistics. These observations do not settle what eliminating entrenched gendered pronouns would achieve today. They do show, however, that the relationship between pronoun systems, ideology, and social change cannot be adequately assessed by generalizing from any single language alone.

4. Rethinking linguistic amelioration

The rise of 她 is an especially telling "success story" because it comes from a language structurally different from cases that dominate philosophical discussions (English and grammatical gender European languages) and, accordingly, foregrounds under-examined dimensions of what prompts reform and what facilitates uptake. This motivates a shift in how we theorize about pronouns and linguistic amelioration. In this section, I develop a cross- and trans-linguistic perspective and apply it to assess the prospects and limits of linguistic amelioration and reflect on the broader methodological implications along the way.

One clarification is in order before proceeding. We can distinguish two versions of gender essentialist ideology: binarism is the view that there are only two genders, defined by essential characteristics, leaving no room for nonbinary identities; patriarchy refers to the complex social structures that privilege masculine traits and roles and subordinate the feminine. Reform proposals may target binarism, patriarchy, or both. The distinction matters for how we evaluate potential tensions.

4.1 Towards a cross- and trans-linguistic perspective

To begin, the development of gendered pronouns in Chinese supports a qualified claim about the relationship between language and ideology. Language can "play a role" in sustaining gender ideology without being either necessary or sufficient for perpetuating essentialism. The long history of an epicene third-person pronoun *tā* did not prevent entrenched gender hierarchy.[31] Once the written contrast between 他 and 她 is established, gender became easier to mark and be noticed. While pronouns do not determine ideology, they can affect salience and trigger gendered inferences.

Meanwhile, the Chinese example complicates any straightforward inference from a language's pronoun system to ideological progress. The two historical moments in the Chinese case bring out different aspects of this complication. The long history of an epicene *tā* shows that the absence of gendered pronouns is no guarantee of egalitarian social structure: patriarchy and binarism can be sustained without pronominal gender

[31]Binary gender differentiation is already evident in pre-Qin (before 221 BCE) literature and rituals, portraying, for instance, differential treatment of male and female infants, as well as gender separation in adult social interactions. See Ames and Rosemont (1998) and Chan (2000).

marking. The introduction of 她 highlights a complementary dimension: a gendered pronoun can be introduced in pursuit of modernist and feminist ideals, including precision and visibility, while its stabilization can nevertheless reconfigure the written system in ways that contribute to a male-default norm. Importantly, 她 did not arise from grammatical necessity; it was introduced for ideological reasons. This reverses the usual assumption that language shapes thought: social and ideological change can drive linguistic change, generating new forms of gender marking and understanding.

A second lesson concerns grammatical and orthographic affordances and constraints for expressing gender. Introducing the feminine pronoun 她 was relatively straightforward in a writing system where new characters can be formed simply by adding the 女 radical. But the ease of engineering 她 does not guarantee intended ideological payoff: the introduction of a separate feminine pronoun contributed to the stabilization of a male-default norm in writing, and it draws attention to the derogatory associations carried by many 女-radical characters. More generally, pronouns are just one of the many sites where essentialist assumptions can be linguistically encoded and reproduced. Cross-linguistic comparison makes this especially vivid: in heavily gender-loaded languages such as German, Italian, and Spanish, gender marking is not only localized in pronouns but spread across articles, nouns, and adjectives (González Vázquez et al. 2024).[32] These differences matter for reform: the availability of a new pronominal form tells us only part of the story, since its effects depend on how that form interacts with wider systems of gender marking and interpretation.

A third lesson concerns uptake. The ideological impact of language change is not determined by the surface form alone, such as whether a word looks gendered or neutral. It depends, rather, on how it is used within the linguistic practice and stabilized as social conventions. Consider again the contrast between the relative ease of inventing 她 and the present challenge of devising inclusive pronouns. Experimentation with "TA" or novel characters such as "X你" indicates that the barrier is not the availability of a new form, but whether it can become a shared interpretive resource in the common ground.[33] This connects directly to recent work on linguistic hermeneutical injustice and resistant hermeneutical resources: what can be readily expressed, recognized, and endorsed depends not only on grammar and processing burdens, but also on institutional gatekeeping, platform infrastructures, and political conditions that enhance or suppress wider adoption (Rosola 2024, 2025; Kapusta 2025; Klieber 2025). We therefore need to move from mere cross-linguistic comparison to a trans-linguistic framework that tracks how ideas for amelioration travel, how they change in contexts, and what contributes to their success or failure.

4.2 From cross- to trans-linguistic thinking

The framework I propose has two components. First, the cross-linguistic dimension takes seriously how different languages encode gender: some concentrate gender marking in pronouns (as in English), others distribute it across nouns, articles, and adjectives (as in German and Italian), and still others lack grammatical gender but

[32] Additionally, the use of overextended masculine–i.e., the practice of using the masculine plural forms in cases of mixed-gender groups, has recently sparked vibrant debates. See Sulis and Gheno (2022) for the discussion in Italian.

[33] Stalnaker (2002) offers a formal definition of common ground in terms of mutual belief and acceptance. My discussion here does not depend on the specifics of this model.

encode asymmetries in vocabulary or script (as in Chinese). Cross-linguistic comparison helps us identify which philosophical claims may generalize, and explain why strategies that look natural in one language may be ineffective or even counterproductive in another.

Second, the trans-linguistic dimension takes into account how ameliorative proposals, ideological formations, and linguistic practices travel across languages and contexts in an increasingly globalized world.[34] Such movement is not mere replication. When proposals and forms travel, they are recontextualized within new grammatical structures and sociopolitical environments, and their meanings and functions are renegotiated through contested uptake. Amelioration is therefore historically embedded and mediated by agents and institutions. Consequently, the "same" reform proposal, such as eliminating gendered pronouns, can have drastically different implications depending on where and how it is implemented.

For instance, the now familiar practice of declaring one's pronouns likely originated in English-speaking contexts and has since circulated into other linguistic communities, in which cases they take on different pragmatic roles, such as expectations about politeness. In Italian and Spanish, proposals to neutralize gender marking have also travelled via graphic innovations: "-x," first introduced in Spanish as a gender-neutral ending, has been adopted in some Italian usage, and "-@" is used to replace gendered suffixes in both languages (González Vázquez et al. 2024).[35] In Chinese, exposure to Western languages and cultures has been central in motivating both the use of 她 and current debates about inclusive alternatives. These cases illustrate similar trans-linguistic dynamics: reforms emerge under local pressures, circulate through contact, and are reinterpreted by context-specific uptake negotiation.

This transformative aspect is best understood when language is seen not as a fixed determinant of thought, but one medium among many through which gender essentialism is reproduced and contested. Language is a community-based practice: a site where ideology, culture, and social practices interact to shape attention and interpretation. This is why linguistic forms can influence salience without dictating what speakers can think; if language strictly shapes thought, critical reflection, resistance, and intentional revision would be out of the question (Cameron 1992). Accordingly, linguistic and ideological change are reciprocally related, historically situated, conditioned by the resources of particular languages, and mediated by speaker agency. Social change often motivates attempts to reform language, and linguistic changes can in turn support further social transformation, encouraging new forms of recognition or norms of address, and, in some cases, moving institutional practice and legislation. As such,

[34]I draw on two partly independent "translingual" traditions: the first is Liu's (1995) account of *translingual practice* in translation and historical-literary inquiry, where cross-language contact is a site of contested meaning-making and shifts in cultural authority; the second is Horner et al. (2011) and Lu and Horner (2013) in composition studies, where a *translingual approach* rejects "standard" language ideology and treats linguistic difference and negotiation as pervasive. Regardless of disciplinary differences, both reject the idea that languages are discrete, internally uniform systems and emphasize the power-sensitive dynamics of uptake and stabilization. I deliberately use "trans-linguistic" as a broader label for my methodological aims, that is, cross- and trans-context diagnosis of pronoun reform and linguistic amelioration, without committing myself to either Liu's historical, literary, and translation-theoretic framework or the composition-studies program and its particular pedagogy.

[35]The Swedish gender-neutral pronoun *hen*, originally introduced as an alternative to *han* ("he") and *hon* ("she"), provides another prominent example of cross-context circulation. It has been taken up in some German contexts, alongside other neo-pronouns such as *ze* and *sier*. See González Vázquez et al. (2024).

language will continue to be a critical battleground for those seeking in-depth ideological change.

Overall, a cross- and trans-linguistic perspective recommends doing normative work on pronouns and gendered language in close engagement with the histories of the relevant practices and languages. Since the phenomena are variable and complex, there is no universal recipe for an easy fix. Simple rules, such as eliminating gendered pronouns altogether or always adding new marked forms, are unlikely to generalize across languages and contexts. Instead, ameliorative proposals are better understood in light of (i) the grammatical and orthographic resources and constraints of each language; (ii) the historical trajectories through which gender categories and gendered forms emerged; (iii) the institutional, technological, and political conditions of uptake, and (iv) the agency of speakers, activists, and policymakers who negotiate reforms by adopting, reinterpreting, or resisting them.

We cannot identify a small set of linguistic features as solely responsible for sustaining gender essentialism, nor think that removing them will resolve long-standing social problems. The roles language plays are more varied and context-dependent than what this simple picture depicts. This recognition, however, complicates the very idea of "fixing pronouns" and raises foundational questions about the prospects of linguistic amelioration: how such efforts can be justified, how they can be implemented in particular linguistic communities, and what should count as success. Since these questions are multi-dimensional and extend well beyond pronouns, I can only sketch what I take to be the central considerations rather than offering comprehensive answers.

4.3 The prospects and limits of linguistic amelioration

A cross- and trans-linguistic perspective forces us to be more precise about what makes linguistic amelioration philosophically interesting and politically useful. A first complication is that pronoun reforms can target more than one goal. Recall the two types of gender essentialism—patriarchy and binarism. Attempts to address patriarchy tend to focus on androcentrism and gender stereotyping; efforts directed at binarism typically aim to reduce compulsory gender classification and affirm gender diversity. Though not inherently incompatible, they can generate difficult questions of prioritization: should we make gender more visible to contest male-default norms, or less obligatory to resist binary enforcement? The tension is not accidental; it reflects the fact that different aspects of essentialism may require different linguistic interventions.

A cross-linguistic perspective sharpens this point because the implications in making gender visible or less obligatory vary with how gender is encoded in a given language. Cross-linguistically, amelioration efforts utilize two main strategies, *feminization* and *neutralization*.[36] Feminization counters androcentrism by introducing or emphasizing explicitly feminine forms, from generic "she" in English to 她 in Chinese, where a feminine written form was introduced into a previously epicene written system. Neutralization, by contrast, reduces the salience of gender by replacing gendered forms with gender-neutral alternatives, from "they" or "ze" in English to forms like "TA" or

[36]Feminization and neutralization roughly corresponds to what González Vázquez et al. (2024) call the "visibility project" and the "gender-neutrality project." The former focuses on making marginalized genders visible by challenging the generic and overextended masculine, while the latter emphasizes trans inclusiveness and the de-emphasis of gender, addressing misgendering alongside generic and overextended masculine forms.

"X你" in Chinese. While each strategy is in principle justifiable, each has predictable risks. Though neutralization can reduce compulsory gender specification and thus support anti-binarist objectives, it also undercuts feminist aims of visibility; while feminization can disrupt the presumption that the masculine is the default, it may reinforce the idea that the unmarked form is the "real" default and the marked feminine is just a derivative.[37] Importantly, the cross-linguistic lesson is that these strategies do not have fixed costs or effects across languages. Their prospects depend on how a language encodes gender and on how particular reforms interact with existing linguistic and interpretive conventions.[38] The upshot is not that reform is incoherent, but that a single strategy can hardly advance all legitimate aims simultaneously.

A second source of difficulty concerns feasibility and uptake. Uptake requires negotiation over historically situated norms under conditions of asymmetrical social and institutional power. Some reforms impose non-trivial processing and communicative burdens, creating practical obstacles for wider acceptance.[39] Reform proposals also require coordination and support across institutional gatekeepers, such as schools, publishers, style guides, dictionaries, media organizations, and digital platforms. Without their endorsement, a proposal may be intelligible to a local community, but remains socially marginal.

From a trans-linguistic perspective, uptake is not merely the implementation of a fixed proposal, but part of the process through which reforms travel, are reinterpreted, and become stabilized or resisted across contexts. This is illustrated by the contrast between 她 and contemporary proposals such as "TA" and "X你": 她 was facilitated by visual alignment with existing graphemic conventions, trans-linguistic contact with Western languages, and institutional endorsement during the modernization movement, whereas "TA" and "X你" face different challenges because they depart more radically from established conventions in a less receptive political environment. Moreover, successful implementation may nevertheless yield mixed ideological effects. Even the much celebrated Swedish inclusive pronoun *hen* still triggers masculine mental representation (Renström et al. 2022, 2023). Therefore, structural availability and implementation are no guarantee of socially stable uptake or intended ideological impact, nor do they settle how burdens of accommodation are distributed.

Given these complexities, one might be skeptical, perhaps even disillusioned, about the prospect of linguistic reform. Critics may contend that tinkering with pronoun usage is simply misguided and that advocates for gender equality and inclusion would do better to focus on more substantial forms of social and political change. Ideological diversity will continue to exist among speakers of the same language,[40] and language that

[37]The Brazilian politician Dilma Rousseff provides an interesting case. When Rousseff became the 36th President of Brazil in 2011, she adopted the title *Presidenta* instead of the traditionally used *Presidente*. Although *Presidente* can refer to both male and female referents, Rousseff chose to use *Presidenta*, a newly introduced, explicitly feminine variant. See also Cameron (2023), Merkel et al. (2012) and Formanowicz et al. (2013).

[38]The cross-linguistic point is not that the two strategies cannot be identified from within a single language, but that their costs, availability, and ideological effects vary across linguistic systems.

[39]Strategies that use symbols like "-*" or "-@" are confined to writing, since they lack standard pronunciation and disrupt spoken interaction. They also raise accessibility concerns, as altered forms can hinder word recognition for dyslexic readers, rendering anti-sexist and anti-ableist aims in opposition. For detailed discussion of various such innovations in Spanish, German, and Italian, see González Vázquez et al. (2024).

[40]For example, competing feminist positions—such as trans-inclusive versus trans-exclusive perspectives—engage in tense debates using shared linguistic resources.

appears neutral can still be harmful in the mouth of bigots. This can happen in two ways: formally neutral or inclusive language can still operate within biased interpretive practices or be used by hostile speakers in ways that communicate exclusion. Structurally, the Chinese case illustrates how a formally gender-neutral spoken pronoun can coexist with written and interpretive patterns that default to masculine reference. Pragmatically, even inclusive terms may be used dismissively, sarcastically, or with scare quotes that signal rejection rather than recognition.[41]

A further worry is that since revising language can verge on regulating thought, reforms may seem to pose a threat to intellectual autonomy and democracy. Finally, if there is no straightforward correlation between linguistic gender-marking and gender equality, then perhaps philosophers should stop treating pronoun reform as a promising route for advancing social change.

In my view, however, this skeptical conclusion is too quick. The fact that reform proposals provoke intense debates shows that linguistic change is no small matter. Because language is tightly interwoven with broader sociopolitical structures, it is unsurprising that efforts to challenge long-standing conventions are met with conservative resistance. More importantly, the difficulty of implementation is not just a practical obstacle but a condition of legitimacy. Queloz and Bieber (2021) argue that the "implementation challenge" reflects commitment to liberal democracy.[42] Kitsik (2023) similarly warns against epistemic paternalism, recommending explicit persuasion, education, and open exchange of information as appropriate mechanisms for change.[43] Ideally, proposals should be justifiable publicly rather than imposed top-down, and the disagreements they generate can create valuable opportunities for collective reflection. Disagreement is in fact characteristic of norm negotiation in pluralistic communities and essential for achieving broader ameliorative objectives.

Moreover, the value of linguistic amelioration is not exhausted by uniform acceptance. Even when a proposal fails to become a settled convention, it can still make background norms explicit, render default assumptions contestable, and force reflection on who bears the burden of misrecognition and of accommodation. Revision proposals are *linguistically transgressing* relative to long established practices—including grammar, morphology, and other interpretive resources in the common ground. But they aim precisely to "disrupt the functions of the language system, so as to affect change" (Sterken 2020, 422). Whether they secure eventual uptake or not, the debates they prompt can engage different parties to reflect on the rationale and consequences of their linguistic practices, along with how different changes may generate "representational and worldly benefits." (Sterken 2020, 430). This way, both proponents and opponents can review their own habits, privileges, and identities, leading potentially to ideological transformation (Haslanger 2012; Pinder 2022).

Still, not every controversy is worth pursuing. It does not follow that the more a proposal challenges existing linguistic norms, the more effective it will be in drawing

[41]For example, a speaker may sarcastically respond to a request for gender-neutral pronouns by saying "Great, I'll call everyone 'they'!" to convey dismissal and rejection. Similarly, framing trans people's pronouns as "preferred" pronouns can appear respectful but implicitly denies their validity. Neutrality of form does not guarantee neutrality of use. See also Kukla and Lance (2023) on the pragmatics of gender ascription.

[42]For discussion of implementation challenges in conceptual engineering, see Cappelen and Plunkett (2020), Jorem (2021), and Nimtz (2024).

[43]Kitsik (2023) defines epistemic paternalism as non-consultative interference in people's inferential and attentional dispositions which threatens to violate their intellectual sovereignty.

attention to underlying gender ideologies. Extreme proposals, especially those facing significant practical constraints, are unlikely to be fully implemented and may provoke backlash and outright dismissal that hardens resistance. Since uptake is partly affective and depends on coalition-building, deliberately advancing predictably unworkable reforms is likely to be counterproductive. In practice, compromise is often necessary, and the prospects of amelioration turn on whether reforms can be framed and implemented in ways that are publicly intelligible, motivationally acceptable, and institutionally supportable.[44]

In short, given a cross- and trans-linguistic perspective, we can be cautiously optimistic. Pronoun reform alone is not a self-sufficient remedy for gender essentialism, but it is not merely lip service either. Since language is a dialectic between structure and speaker agency (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013; Eckert 2019), it is a meaningful route for destabilizing entrenched norms. However, because linguistic changes are typically gradual, incremental, and more likely to endure when they become organic, we should not expect ideological shifts to happen immediately. Crucially, reform proposals should be analyzed and assessed in terms of how they are justified, which aspects of essentialism they target, what trade-offs they impose, how they can be integrated given the resources of particular languages, how they can secure uptake, and what benefits they can plausibly deliver in the long run, rather than in terms of whether they can eliminate essentialism once and for all. On this understanding, the prospects of linguistic amelioration may be modest but nevertheless genuine.

5. Concluding remarks

I have argued that philosophical work on pronouns and gendered language should be more responsive to linguistic diversity and context-situated practices. Starting from Dembroff and Wodak's radical proposal to eliminate gendered pronouns in English, I offered a sympathetic reconstruction of their view and connected it to recent discussions of linguistic hermeneutical injustice. The history of 她 in modern Chinese shows that gendered pronouns are neither necessary nor sufficient for sustaining essentialism, and that gender marking can be introduced as part of broader projects of modernization and feminism. This supports a modest "language plays a role" thesis and undermines any simple inference from the presence or absence of gendered pronouns to the strength of essentialist ideology.

On that basis, I developed a cross- and trans-linguistic perspective on linguistic amelioration. Cross-linguistic comparison makes clear that different languages afford different reform strategies and that no single reform can address all dimensions of patriarchy and binarism. Trans-linguistically, I emphasized how ideas of reform travel across contexts and are reshaped through recontextualization and contested uptake, under constraints that are at once grammatical, institutional, and political. Even when uptake is partial, debates can make default assumptions explicit and thus open to collective evaluation. In this sense, proposing linguistic change is an important route through which ideologies are made visible, negotiated, and sometimes transformed.

[44]New language use involves both deliberate and habitual processes; in particular, novel forms are more easily accepted when endorsed by official regulations (e.g., American Psychological Association 1975, 2020). However, linguistic gatekeepers are more likely to adopt reform proposals that are moderate. See Sendén et al. (2015) and Sczesny et al. (2015).

The overarching methodological points are the following. First, philosophers should take linguistic diversity seriously when analyzing the relationship between language and thought, especially when grounding ameliorative proposals in such theorizing. Second, language is not an isolated system, and metalinguistic awareness is required for seeing it as part of a broader social fabric and our own role as agents. If language can affect attention, interpretation, and action, then beginning from any one language can potentially bias both diagnosis and prescription.[45] The dominance of English in contemporary academic philosophy is impossible to miss, and I do not reject English as the discipline's *de facto* working language. We should, however, avoid treating any single language as methodologically transparent, for doing so can inadvertently invite overgeneralization from language-specific features and overstate the reach of our analysis.[46]

Gendered ideology can be sustained through many linguistic sites besides pronouns, and the prospects of any reform depend not only on what a language makes easily expressible, but also on the historical paths by which its gendered expressions arose and the social conditions that stabilize uptake in practice. If we are committed to challenging gender-based stereotypes and discrimination, and if we find patriarchy and binarism problematic, then addressing these issues through language calls for a way of doing philosophy that is empirically cautious, historically and politically situated, and linguistically pluralistic.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2026.10106

Acknowledgments. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Meaning and Reality in Social Context II, the 2025 Academia Sinica Conference, and IAPh 2025 in Tokyo. I am grateful to Shiu-Ching Wu, Sandy Goldberg, Sam Berstler, Esa Díaz-León, Quill Kukla, Norman Teng, Chia-Ming Chen, Tse-Mei Wu, Ellie Hua Wang, Ken Shan, Shen-yi Liao, Nikolaj Pedersen, and Yuko Murakami for helpful comments and discussions; to the audiences at these events for their feedback; and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions. This research was supported by the National Science and Technology Council, Taiwan, under Grant NSTC 113-2410-H-001-051-MY3.

References

American Psychological Association. 1975. Guidelines for nonsexist use of language. *American Psychologist* 30 (6): 682–84.

American Psychological Association. 2020. *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association*. 7th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Ames, Roger T., and Henry Rosemont, Jr. 1998. *The Analects of Confucius: A philosophical translation*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Angle, Stephen. 2012. *Contemporary Confucian political philosophy: Toward progressive Confucianism*. Cambridge: Polity.

Barnes, Elizabeth. 2020. Gender and gender terms. *Noûs* 54 (3): 704–30.

Barnes, Elizabeth. 2022. Gender without gender identity: The case of cognitive disability. *Mind* 131 (523): 836–62.

Baron, Dennis. 2020. *What's your pronoun? Beyond he and she*. New York: Liveright.

[45]The language we employ and the concepts we have determine "not only what beliefs we can have but also what hypotheses we can entertain, what desires we can form, what plans we can make on the basis of such mental states, and accordingly constrains what we can hope to accomplish in the world." (Burgess and Plunkett 2013, 1096-97). See also Burgess et al. 2020.

[46]See Glock (2018), Schwitzgebel et al. (2018), Yen and Hung (2019), Contesi (2023), Finocchiaro and Perrine (2024), and Catala (2024) for closely related discussions.

Beauvoir, Simone de. 2010. *The second sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley. New York: Random House. (Originally published 1949.)

Bettcher, Talia. 2017. Through the looking glass: Trans theory meets feminist philosophy. In *The Routledge companion to feminist philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader, and Alison Stone. New York: Routledge.

Boroditsky, Lera, Lauren A. Schmidt, and Webb Phillips. 2003. Sex, syntax, and semantics. In *Language in mind: Advances in the study of language and thought*, ed. Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadow. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Briggs, R. A., and B. R. George. 2023. *What even is gender?* New York: Routledge.

Burgess, Alexis, Herman Cappelen, and David Plunkett, eds. 2020. *Conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burgess, Alexis, and David Plunkett. 2013. Conceptual ethics I. *Philosophy Compass* 8 (12): 1091–1101.

Cameron, Deborah. 1992. *Feminism and linguistic theory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cameron, Deborah. 2023. *Language, sexism, and misogyny*. New York: Routledge.

Cappelen, Herman, and David Plunkett. 2020. Introduction: A guided tour of conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics. In *Conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics*, ed. Alexis Burgess, Herman Cappelen, and David Plunkett. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Catala, Amandine. 2024. Linguistic othering and epistemic injustice in philosophy. *Asian Journal of Philosophy* 3 (2): 1–11.

Chan, Marjorie K. M., and Yuhan Lin. 2019. Chinese language and gender research. In *The Routledge handbook of Chinese applied linguistics*, ed. Chu-Ren Huang, Zhuo Jing-Schmidt, and Barbara Meisterernst. New York: Routledge.

Chan, Sin Yee. 2000. Gender and relationship roles in the Analects and the Mencius. *Asian Philosophy* 10 (2): 115–32.

Chen, Hsiang-Yun. 2021. Contextualism and the semantics of "woman." *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 8 (20): 577–97.

Chen, Yinke. 1933. [Letter to Professor Liu Wendian on national-language examination questions]. *學衡 [The Critical Review]* 79: 1–7.

Cheng, Tzu-Wen. 2016. Radical equity: A case study of the use of Chinese third-person pronouns in Taiwan's third grade social studies textbooks. *Intercultural Communication Studies* 25 (3): 99–111.

Contesi, Filippo. 2023. Stylistic appearances and linguistic diversity. *Metaphilosophy* 54 (5): 661–75.

Davey, Janet. 2024. Taking "TA" beyond the binary: In search of multimodal gender-inclusive pronouns in Chinese. In *Narrating Asia Multimo-dally*, vol. 25/3, ed. Li-Chi Chen and Matthew M. Mucha. Image & Narrative.

Dembroff, Robin. 2018. Real talk on the metaphysics of gender. *Philosophical Topics* 46 (2): 21–50.

Dembroff, Robin. 2020. Beyond binary: Genderqueer as critical gender kind. *Philosophers' Imprint* 20 (9): 1–23.

Dembroff, Robin, and Daniel Wodak. 2018. He/she/they/ze. *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 5 (14): 371–406.

Dembroff, Robin, and Daniel Wodak. 2021. How much gender is too much gender? In *The Routledge handbook of social and political philosophy of language*, ed. Justin Khoo and Rachel Katharine Sterken. London: Routledge.

Díaz-León, Esa. 2016. Woman as a politically significant term: A solution to the puzzle. *Hypatia* 31 (2): 245–58.

Dong, Ming, Rong Chen, and He Lin. 2023. Gender bias in the Chinese epicene pronoun ta. *Language Sciences* 97: 101543.

Dotson, Kristie. 2014. Conceptualizing epistemic oppression. *Social Epistemology* 28 (2): 115–38.

Eckert, Penelope. 2019. The limits of meaning: Social indexicality, variation, and the cline of interiority. *Language* 94 (4): 751–76.

Eckert, Penelope, and Sally McConnell-Ginet. 2013. *Language and gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ettner, Charles. 2002. In Chinese, men and women are equal—or—women and men are equal? In *Gender across languages: The linguistic representation of women and men*, vol. 2, ed. Marlis Hellinger and Hadumod Bußmann. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Fincher, Leta Hong. 2014. *Leftover women: The resurgence of gender inequality in China*. London: Zed Books.
Finocchiaro, Peter, and Timothy Perrine. 2024. Linguistic justice in academic philosophy: The rise of English and the unjust distribution of epistemic goods. *Philosophical Psychology* 37 (6): 1483–1512.
Formanowicz, Magdalena, Sandra Bedyńska, Aleksandra Cisłak, Friederike Braun, and Sabine Sczesny. 2013. Side effects of gender-fair language: How feminine job titles influence the evaluation of female applicants. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 43: 62–71.
Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
Fromkin, Victoria, Robert Rodman, and Nina Hyams. 2014. *An introduction to language*. 10th ed. Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning.
Glock, Hans-Johann. 2018. The awful English language. *Philosophical Papers* 47 (1): 123–54.
González Vázquez, I., Anna Klieber, and Martina Rosola. 2024. Beyond pronouns: Gender visibility and neutrality across languages. In *The Oxford handbook of applied philosophy of language*, ed. Ernest Lepore and Luvell Anderson. New York: Oxford University Press.
Haslanger, Sally. 2012. *Resisting reality: Social construction and social critique*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Haslanger, Sally. 2020. Going on, not in the same way. In *Conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics*, ed. Alexis Burgess, Herman Cappelen, and David Plunkett. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Hernandez, E. M., and Rowan Bell. 2025. Much ado about nothing: Unmotivating gender identity. *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 12 (50): 1313–40.
Hershatter, Gail. 2007. *Women in China's long twentieth century*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Hodge, Bob, and Kam Louie. 1998. *The politics of Chinese language and culture: The art of reading dragons*. London and New York: Routledge.
Horner, Bruce, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. 2011. Language difference in writing: Toward a translingual approach. *College English* 73 (3): 303–21.
Huang, Xintao. 2023. *A cultural history of the Chinese character "Ta (她, she)": Invention and adoption of a new feminine pronoun*. New York: Routledge. (Originally published 2009.)
Jorem, Steven. 2021. Conceptual engineering and the implementation problem. *Inquiry* 64 (1–2): 186–211.
Kapusta, Stephanie. 2025. Linguistic hermeneutical injustice toward nonbinary people: First-order and second-order exclusions, implementing change, and gender binary ideology. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 14 (1): 10–17.
Kapusta, Stephanie Julia. 2016. Misgendering and its moral contestability. *Hypatia* 31 (3): 502–19.
Kirk-Giannini, Cameron Domenico, and Michael Glanzberg. 2024. Pronouns and gender. In *The Oxford handbook of applied philosophy of language*, ed. Luvell Anderson and Ernest Lepore. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kitsik, Eve. 2023. Epistemic paternalism via conceptual engineering. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 9 (4): 616–35.
Klieber, Anna. 2025. The words are there, even if some people refuse to use them: A response to Rosola's "linguistic hermeneutical injustice." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 14 (1): 18–26.
Kramer, Ruth. 2020. Grammatical gender: A close look at gender assignment across languages. *Annual Review of Linguistics* 6: 45–66.
Kukla, Quill, and Mark Lance. 2023. Telling gender: The pragmatics and ethics of gender ascription. *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 9 (42): 1130–59. https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.2911
Lakoff, Robin. 1975. *Language and woman's place*. New York: Harper & Row.
Leslie, Sarah-Jane. 2015. Hillary Clinton is the only man in the Obama administration: Dual character concepts, generics, and gender. *Analytic Philosophy* 56 (2): 111–41.
Liu, Lyida H. 1995. *Translingual practice: Literature, national culture, and translated modernity—China, 1900–1937*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Lu, Min-Zhan, and Bruce Horner. 2013. Translingual literacy, language difference, and matters of agency. *College English* 75 (6): 586–611.
Maciuszek, Józef, Monika Polak, and Natalia Świątkowska. 2019. Grammatical gender influences semantic categorization and implicit cognition in Polish. *Frontiers in Psychology* 10: 2208.
Mercier, Adèle. 1995. A perverse case of the contingent a priori. *Philosophical Topics* 23 (2): 221–59.

Merkel, Elisabeth, Anne Maass, and Laura Frommelt. 2012. Shielding women against status loss: The masculine form and its alternatives in the Italian language. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 31 (3): 311–20.

Mikkola, Mari. 2016. *The wrong of injustice: Dehumanization and its role in feminist philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Miller, Casey, and Kate Swift. 1976. *Words and women: New language in new times*. New York: Doubleday.

Nimtz, Christian. 2024. Engineering concepts by engineering social norms: Solving the implementation challenge. *Inquiry* 67 (6): 1716–43.

Pang-White, Ann A., ed. 2016. *The Bloomsbury research handbook of Chinese philosophy and gender*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Pang-White, Ann A., Stephen Angle, Sarah Mattice, and Lijuan Zhang. 2024. Symposium: How would feminist concerns fare in the debate between Confucian role ethics and virtue ethics? *Journal of World Philosophies* 8 (Winter 2023): 73–121.

Pinder, Mark. 2022. Is Haslanger's ameliorative project a successful conceptual engineering project? *Synthese* 200 (334). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03803-x

Prewitt-Freilino, Jennifer L., T. Andrew Caswell, and Emmi K. Laakso. 2012. The gendering of language: A comparison of gender equality in countries with gendered, natural gender, and genderless languages. *Sex Roles* 66: 268–81.

Queloz, Matthieu, and Friedemann Bieber. 2021. Conceptual engineering and the politics of implementation. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 103 (3): 670–91.

Renström, Emma A., Anna Lindqvist, Gulcin Akbas, Laura Hekanaho, and Marie Gustafsson Sendén. 2023. Are gender-neutral pronouns really neutral? Testing a male bias in the grammatical genderless languages Turkish and Finnish. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 42 (4): 476–87.

Renström, Emma A., Anna Lindqvist, and Marie Gustafsson Sendén. 2022. The multiple meanings of the gender-inclusive pronoun hen: Predicting attitudes and use. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 52 (1): 71–90.

Ridgeway, Cecilia L. 2011. *Framed by gender: How gender inequality persists in the modern world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rosenlee, Li-Hsiang Lisa. 2006. *Confucianism and women: A philosophical interpretation*. New York: SUNY Press.

Rosenlee, Li-Hsiang Lisa. 2024. *Confucian feminism: A practical ethic for life*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Rosola, Martina. 2024. Linguistic hermeneutical injustice. *Social Epistemology* 38: 1–11.

Rosola, Martina. 2025. Towards linguistic justice for non-binary people: Linguistic resources and hurdles beyond discriminatory ideologies. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 14 (6): 25–32.

Saul, Jennifer. 2012. Politically significant terms and philosophy of language: Methodological issues. In *Out from the shadows: Analytic feminist contributions to traditional philosophy*, ed. Anita Superson and Sharon Crasnow. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schwitzgebel, Eric, Linus Ta-Lun Huang, Andrew Higgins, and Ivan Gonzalez-Cabrera. 2018. The insularity of anglophone philosophy: Quantitative analyses. *Philosophical Papers* 47 (1): 21–48.

Sczesny, Sabine, Franziska Moser, and Wendy Wood. 2015. Beyond sexist beliefs: How do people decide to use gender-inclusive language? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 41: 943–54.

Sendén, Marie Gustafsson, Emma A. Bäck, and Anna Lindqvist. 2015. Introducing a gender-neutral pronoun in a natural gender language: The influence of time on attitudes and behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology* 6: 893.

Spender, Dale. 1980. *Man made language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Stalnaker, Robert. 2002. Common ground. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25 (5–6): 701–21.

Sterken, Rachel. 2015. Leslie on generics. *Philosophical Studies* 172 (9): 2493–2512.

Sterken, Rachel. 2020. Linguistic interventions and transformative communicative disruption. In *Conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics*, ed. Herman Cappelen, David Plunkett, and Alexis Burgess. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Su, Jui-Ju, Nicola Molinaro, Margaret Gillon-Dowens, Pei-Shu Tsai, Denise H. Wu, and Manuel Carreiras. 2016. When "he" can also be "she": An ERP study of reflexive pronoun resolution in written Mandarin Chinese. *Frontiers in Psychology* 7: 1–15.

Sulis, Gigliola, and Vera Gheno. 2022. The debate on language and gender in Italy, from the visibility of women to inclusive language (1980s–2020s). *The Italianist* 42 (1): 153–83.
Vigliocco, Gabriella, David P. Vinson, Francesca Paganelli, and Karolina Dworzynski. 2005. Grammatical gender effects on cognition: Implications for language learning and language use. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 134 (4): 501–20.
Wong, Andrew, and Qing Zhang. 2000. The linguistic construction of the tóngzhì community. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 10 (2): 248–78.
Yen, Chun-Ping, and Tzu-Wei Hung. 2019. New data on the linguistic diversity of authorship in philosophy journals. *Erkenntnis* 84: 953–74.
Yeung, Jessie. 2025. Soon you may be able to type a new Chinese character: The gender-neutral pronoun. *CNN*, December 26.
Zhou, Zuoren, trans. 1918. Gaige [Reform], by August Strindberg. *Xin Qingnian [New Youth]* 5 (2) (August 15).

Hsiang-Yun Chen is an Associate Research Fellow at the Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica, Taiwan. Her research focuses on philosophy of language, philosophical semantics, and analytic feminism, particularly the semantics of pronouns and gender terms, conceptual amelioration, and epistemic injustice. Her work has appeared in *Ergo*, *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, *Philosophia*, and *Techné*, among others.

Cite this article: Chen, H.-Y. (2026). "Pronouns and Linguistic Amelioration." *Hypatia* 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2026.10106