

Names Before Pronouns: Variation in Pronominal Reference and Gender

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In this study, I use the tweets about Chelsea Manning as a case study for examining the relationship between names and pronouns in gendering language. This is a sociolinguistic study using a corpus of Twitter data to examine innovation and variation in pronominal co-reference when referring to a transgender person. I follow Bamman et al. (2014) and Tatman (2016) among others in treating Twitter as a source for written data that encodes sociolinguistic variation. I argue that in cases where a person's gender changes over the course of ongoing discourse, names, which are lexical, change before pronouns, which are grammatical (Muysken 2008).

Chelsea Manning has received much attention in the press and in public discourse centering around her transition from her gender assigned at birth towards her gender identity (Capuzza 2015). Aside from her public identity as a transgender woman, Manning is a politicized figure due to her involvement in the release of military documents (Tate 2013). Her identity as a transgender woman in the public eye is compounded with her identity as a figure of political intrigue; this is reflected in the way that English speakers refer to her. Besides using her rank and surname, many refer to Manning by her birth name, Bradley, which she no longer uses. The pronouns used to refer to Manning appear to vary depending on sociopragmatic context and speaker. However, use of either first name does not appear to correlate completely with use of either pronoun in referring to Manning.

Below are some examples of tweets about Manning; (1) and (2) exhibit a match between the gender of the name and pronoun, while (3) is mismatched. However, while tweets like (3) are attested, the reverse of (3)—the use of feminine pronouns referring to Manning's birth name—are not.

- (1) Releasing Chelsea Manning back into the world just as her job becomes automated is actually the perfect way to round out this presidency [5573]
- (2) Let's not kid ourselves if Bradley Manning didnt do the whole Chelsea thing he wouldn't have been commuted. Obama is a narrative president. [2870]
- (3) If Chelsea Manning had been caught leaking DNC emails to Assange would Obama have commuted his sentence? (I say no way) [7624]

I predict that Twitter users may use the name "Chelsea" with either pronoun (indicating that they acknowledge her name change), but that the name "Bradley" will only be used with masculine pronouns. I also predict that the use of gendered names and pronouns will vary based on each tweet's attitude towards Manning.

I pulled 10,000 tweets from Twitter made on Jan. 20, 2017 including the words "Manning" and either "Bradley" or "Chelsea." I filtered out duplicates, leaving 3,117 tweets. I separated these

tweets by use of either first name, and which use of gendered pronouns. I combined these categories to make a four-way distinction: tweets contained either "Chelsea" and feminine pronouns, "Bradley" and masculine pronouns, or mismatching names and pronouns. I hand-analyzed each tweet to mark whether the pronoun co-referred with the name used for Manning. This left 110 tweets where the pronoun and name were coreferential.

I hand-tagged only the coreferential tweets for sentiment, based on whether tweeters expressed solidarity or sympathy for Manning regarding her transgender status or her sentencing and later commutation. Tweets were tagged -1 for expression of negative views towards Manning, 0 for cases in which the attitudes were neutral or not clear, and 1 for positive tweets. This placed each group of tweets on a scale ranging from -1 (strongly negative) to 1 (strongly positive), where a mean rating of 0 would indicate an overall neutral stance towards Manning.

The null hypothesis is that there are ONLY tweets where the gender of the first name matches the gender of the coreferential pronoun in the tweet; the expected number of each gender (and no mismatches) is shown on the left below. On the right are shown the observed counts of tweets where Manning's name and the pronouns used were coreferential.

Expected Values		
	She, her	He, him
Chelsea	51	0
Bradley	0	51
Observed Values		
	She, her	He, him
Chelsea	67	16*
Bradley	0	20

Notice that there are 0 tweets where "Bradley" co-refers with "she." However, there are 16 tweets where "Chelsea" co-refers with "he." This supports my hypothesis ($p < 0.05$ Fisher's Exact Test): more tweets show acceptance of Manning's new first name (83 tweets used "Chelsea" in this set) than those that use her preferred pronouns (67 tweets used "she" overall).

Sentiment analysis also yielded a pattern: the mean rating of tweets with "he" and "Bradley" was -0.7, a strong negative rating; tweets with "he" and "Chelsea" averaged at -0.5, a less negative rating; tweets with "she" and "Chelsea" averaged at 0.3, a more positive rating.

I suggest that this indicates a difference between lexical categories, like names, and functional categories, like pronouns. Manning was chosen because, as a publicly-visible transgender person, she has been part of the public discourse throughout her gender transition; thus, the corpus used in this study constitutes a cross-section of what may be an ongoing change in how speakers refer to her. I argue that this demonstrates the social variability and salience of pronoun use, as evidenced by the variability in sentiment. Previous studies on pronouns such as Raymond (2016) support the claim that pronouns are socially salient and dynamic throughout discourse.

References

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