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What pronouns do you use? The pronoun-sharing practice from an (im)politeness perspective

Abstract: This article focuses on the recent pronoun-sharing practice (in bio signatures or interactions) and demonstrates the need to apprehend the trend within a pragmatic framework. Basing her analysis on a questionnaire and extracts from the web via SketchEngine, the author shows that the different evaluations of the phenomenon cover the whole spectrum from politeness to impoliteness theory. Pronoun sharers evince what she calls "inclusive politeness" by paying attention to others' face needs. Rejecters consider the practice an impingement on their sociality rights. What they regard as an impolite act towards them in turn justifies their opting out of inclusive politeness. The author then evinces that there is a middle-ground attitude between these two opposed perspectives. Some people may not consider themselves allies to the cause and yet opt for the correct pronoun out of "civility", which can be either genuine or "virtue-signalling". The article proposes to see pronoun sharing as a preemptive act aimed at avoiding the damaging act of misgendering, and assesses the cost such a practice entails and to whom. It finally advocates for a Critical Politeness Theory, acknowledging the subjective position of the researcher and their critical third-order perspective on matters of consideration for fellow human beings.

Keywords: civility; consideration; inclusive politeness; ideological impoliteness; critical politeness theory

1 Introduction

The trend of indicating one's pronouns after one's name in bio signatures (in emails and/or on social networks) or the practice of sharing one's pronouns in what are called "pronoun rounds" before a meeting for instance, has recently spread beyond the LGBTQIA+ communities where the pronominal phenomenon

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emerged.[1] Recommendation as to the best way to start a conversation with strangers can be found on online guides: "you could say: 'Hello, my name is Charlie and I go by 'he, him, his' pronouns. What pronouns do you use?' or 'How would you like me to refer to you?'".[2] The question eliciting third-person pronouns is an indirect way of asking for someone's gender identity that Judith Butler defines as "a deeply felt sense of how one fits in the gendered scheme of things, the lived reality of one's own body in the world" (Butler 2024: 185). The aim of such a question is to avoid inferring gender identities from mere appearances.

This quite recent mode of address, showing concern for interactants' gender identity, has not yet entered the linguistic repertoire of every (western) individual's "moral order" (Haugh 2013: 57)[3] and there is no way of knowing how the practice will evolve, especially as, at the moment of writing, the use is being discouraged in the US: following a White House edict on January 31st 2025, federal employees were asked to remove their pronouns from their signature "by the end of the day".[4] Because pronoun-sharing is not yet fully part of normative politeness, construing the whole practice as a new politeness norm may sound premature. Politeness has indeed been defined by Sifianou (1992: 83) as "consideration for the other person, *according to expected norms*" (my emphasis), and Terkourafi (2011: 176) sees politeness norms as effecting "social regulations in as much as they contribute to the reproduction of the social order that gave rise to them in the first place, legitimizing and consolidating it further". The trend under study is at best "a norm in the making" so it can hardly be evaluated "according to expected norms" (see previous quote by Sifianou) and it certainly does not "reproduce" or "consolidate" the social order (see previous quote by Terkourafi). Yet I contend that the pronoun-sharing practice needs to be analysed from an (im)politeness theoretical perspective in close association with the related notions of care (for Gu [1990: 241], to be polite is to be "face-caring"), attentiveness (Fukushima 2004, 2009, 2011; Fukushima and Haugh 2014; Haugh 2019), respect (Haugh 2010) and civility (Sifianou 2019, 2024). To demonstrate that this practice

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1 It is difficult to date the birth of the practice precisely. Lal Zimman (2019) points to the quick spread from trans events to non-trans groups in his ethnographic work in San Francisco: "By 2016 virtually every trans event I attend that involves self-introduction will request people provide their pronouns along with names and by 2019 the practice can be found in the non-trans-focused spaces", which is as Zimman comments, a very "short timeline" (Zimman 2019: 162).
2 Taken from "Pronouns: a How-To" https://www.diversitycenterneo.org/about-us/pronouns/, last accessed 11 October 2024. See also https://pronouns.org/.
3 Haugh (2013: 57) uses Garfinkel's (1964) term defining the moral order as "'taken for granted' or 'seen but unnoticed', expected, background features of everyday scenes", that is, some standard familiar knowledge based on what is morally right or wrong to expect and do among members of a society.
4 https://abcnews.go.com/US/federal-employees-told-remove-pronouns-email-signatures-end/story?id=118310483, last accessed 19 Feb 2025.

deserves to be theorized within an (im)politeness framework, we need to adopt the perspective of those who perform the social action as well as those who evaluate it. I will rely on 806 answers given to a survey we set up in February 2024 about people's reasons for sharing or not sharing their pronouns. To cross data, this corpus is completed by 265 occurrences of the pattern "someone's pronouns" drawn from the world web, the English Web 2021 (enTenTen21)[5] via the SketchEngine tool.

After giving some demographic and methodological details about the survey (Section 2), I will study what sort of a pragmatic act the new pronominal statement embodies, highlighting the apparent oddity of using third-person pronouns (after one's name) as an indirect way to have others refer to oneself correctly in one's absence. I will demonstrate that the different evaluations of the practice occupy a wide spectrum going from what I call "inclusive politeness" to "ideological impoliteness", via "surface civility" (Sifianou 2019) or "civil hypocrisy" (Sorlin and Virtanen 2024a, b). Section 4 will more specifically show in what sense this practice can be considered "polite" from whose point of view and at what price. Section 5 focuses on the impoliteness of the same social practice as perceived through the eyes of those I have called "the rejecters" openly dissociating from the practice that they see as destroying basic conversational maxims and, behind them, the "moral order". Because the phenomenon gives rise to widely differing ideologically-laden evaluations, I contend we need a "third-order perspective" on the phenomenon in Haugh's (2024) terms and advocate for a Critical Politeness Theory, acknowledging the subjective position of the researcher and their critical metadiscourse on what matters when it comes to consideration of other fellow human beings.

2 A brief overview of the survey

The survey was conducted via googleform with my colleague Ann Coady[6] and sent through our personal and professional networks. We received 806 exploitable answers from people using mainly English. We did not ask them where they came from but what varieties of English they used, and these were mainly North American and British/Irish/Scottish (and Australian English for 27 of them). Our respondents ranged from 18 to over 65 years of age. 488 of them identified as cis women (a label we offered among many others and that was sometimes contested, see below), 9 as trans

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5 This is to date the most recent version of the enTenTen corpus containing 52 billion words. SketchEngine uploaded the texts in October–December 2021 and January 2022.
6 It was initially designed for an international conference we organised in Montpellier in October 2024 entitled "What are your pronouns and why does it matter?". The selected articles drawn from the event will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Gender and Language*.

women, 179 as cis men and 12 as trans men. 138 other respondents chose the label "queer/non binary/gender non conforming". 25 either chose their own labels or did not answer at all. Using professional networks to dispatch the survey biased the results, as the vast majority of our respondents were academics or students (and left leaning on the political spectrum). Yet, despite the biases, the responses are instructive for our purposes as they show a wide variety of evaluation of the same phenomenon. We asked the following questions, without delving further into circumstances of the sharing.

Do you share your pronouns? (453 out of 806 said they do not share)

Sharing pronouns in a NON-PROFESSIONAL context: If you share your pronouns in non-professional contexts, please specify the situation.

Sharing pronouns AT WORK: If you share your pronouns as part of your job, please specify the situation.

If you DO share your pronouns, why do you do so?

You can add any details or explanations here if you wish

If you DO share your pronouns, how do you feel in situations where others do NOT?

If you DO NOT share your pronouns, why not?

You can add any details or explanations here if you wish

If you do NOT share your pronouns, how do you feel in situations where others DO?

Have you seen these pronoun sharing practices in languages other than English? If so, please give details.

Which label best currently describes you?

Is there anything that you feel we have missed about pronoun sharing practices or anything that you would like to add?

We had a drop-down menu from which respondents could select preferred answers, but we made sure they could also add details and explanations. This article mostly exploits these free answers.

3 A pragmatic oddity?

What could be puzzling in this new trend is the use of third-person pronouns that Benveniste has invited us to see as the "non-personne" (Benveniste 1966: 225–236), as it is excluded from any speech roles in the interactional I-you dyad. This should not surprise us too much though, as the third person is the one grammatical item that marks gender in English. Besides, we sometimes need to use the third-person pronoun to refer to someone in their presence. It may happen in a class when we are addressing a student, referring to another one: "what do you think about his/her/their remark?". Another instance is parliamentary debates which are replete with

third-person references targeting present parliamentary colleagues through expressions such as "Is my right hon. Friend aware how heartened my constituents are that he has managed to prise open that door to duty free in Europe, which the Tories wanted to slam shut?" (Truan 2021: 38).[7] In these instances though, the third person is used as third-person address in addition to third-person reference (see Ilie 2003). Brown and Levinson (1987: 201) also give an example of third-person address in the context of royalty and nobility: "Would his Highness prefer tea in the pink or the lavender room?".[8] The specificity of the pronoun-sharing practice is that the third person reference applies to the speaker themselves – but not in a Caesar-like way though, as the reference is not directly to themselves but on offer for others to take up. So what kind of indirect pragmatic act does this social act perform?

The pronominal indication could be seen as a pre-emptive move, giving the reader/addressee information in advance that will keep them from potentially making a gender mistake. Indeed, pronouns next to names in bio signatures or shared prior to any interactions are providing addressees/hearers with linguistic and social knowledge that will keep them from performing a face-threatening act that is now called "misgendering".

This may be where the oddity lies, pragmatically speaking. For in Brown and Levinson's (1987) seminal work on politeness, the speaker is the one who uses politeness strategies in order to mitigate the face-threatening act they are themselves performing, such as requesting something from a secretary, for instance. In the pronoun trend, the addressees are those that must avoid face-threatening acts by making appropriate use of the (gender) information provided by the speaker. If sociolinguists speak in terms of indexicality (Silverstein 2003) – the pronouns being used to index social meaning beyond deixis – pragmatically speaking this preemptive move is meant to save all faces involved. It is "other" face-saving as it will keep the addressee from feeling awkward or uncomfortable as a result of accidental misgendering, and it is "self" face-saving as it saves the pronoun-declaring speaker from being misgendered. Some of the respondents to a question in the survey asking them "If you do NOT share your pronouns, how do you feel in situations where others DO?" speak in terms of gratitude. Being given information preemptively is interpreted as a linguistic gift saving them for losing face or performing an uncomfortable faux pas:

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7 Besides, gendering can and does occur in interaction, as when a waiter takes your money with a "thank you, sir".

8 Many thanks to the reviewer for pointing out this example to me.

(1)   a.   I am grateful for the information to avoid possible faux pas (respondent 290)
      b.   I usually feel grateful that this person allowed me to avoid making any mistake or being involuntarily rude (respondent 293)
      c.   I feel comfortable [sic] and I am grateful when it allows me not to misgender someone (respondent 302)
      d.   I am grateful to know so that I do not misgender them, particularly if they identify as non-binary (respondent 422)

In turn, the use of the right pronoun by warned participants in subsequent interactions may have unsuspected effects on the receiver's feelings. In an interview, being questioned on the pronoun practice, after saying they are almost too old for this, Judith Butler comments on the use of "they" by the young people each time they referred to Butler when addressing other people:

> [pause] I'm almost too old for this. [crowd laughs and claps] But I said almost because I do feel like the youth gave me 'they' and I thought it was a beautiful gift. I was like, "Look at that: 'they'. Cool. Great". Feels exactly right. […] [S]omebody comes along and says well 'they', it's like *thank you*. Beautiful gift. […][9]

Using a "feel right" pronoun thus goes beyond using a mere linguistic form. It is performing a face-enhancing act under the form of a verbal gift of a specific kind. This "positive social act" (Danziger 2022) promotes sociability through the recognition of somebody's feelings. As will be further developed in Section 4, the relation between "face" and "feelings" was already present in Goffman's seminal work on face, connecting face-work to "feeling good" or "feeling bad or hurt" (Goffman 1981: 6). As opposed to this feel-good effect of the use of the pronoun "they" for Judith Butler, using the wrong pronoun can seriously affect the wrong-faced receiver and go as far as endangering their health. Reading the comments on and from gender non-conforming people in website articles extracted via SketchEngine makes it clear that using the wrong pronoun is not a mere grammatical error, it can affect bodies in a harmful/painful way.[10] These preferred pronouns are an important part of their identities, so using the wrong terms can be hurtful or offensive.[11]

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9 This is an extract from Judith Butler's talk at the British Library on their new book on Tuesday 19 March 2024 and forwarded to me by Denise Wong whom I thank for sending this answer by Butler during the Q&A. This conversation happens at roughly 1:01:00: https://www.blplayer.co.uk/eventlink/777/UTaVfLKM).

10 Out of the 265 extracts mentioning the collocation "someone's pronouns", there are 31 mentions of "hurt/hurtful" and 20 of "harm/harmful".

11 'From "Gender pronoun in the workplace"', https://www.indeed.com/hire/c/info/gender-pronouns-in-the-workplace?hl=en&co=US. N.62 sur SE, 2021, last accessed 11 October 2024.

(2) a. People often make assumptions about the gender of other people based on their appearance. These assumptions can be wrong and, when wrong, have the potential to be harmful[12]

  b. Unconsciously assuming someone's gender can be harmful and alienating for individuals, or at the very least, uncomfortable (imagine someone constantly mispronouncing your name or introducing you by the wrong name)[13]

  c. Harming a person's identity is no less real than damaging their body: the immediate damage may fade, but there are often consequences that aren't apparent for months or even years.[14]

However, if for some it does not "cost" anything to refer to a person with the correct pronoun,[15] not everyone sees this inclusive practice as a beneficial practice for minorities. On the contrary, in one response to the survey, the practice is even conceived as hurtful to minorities:

(3) I am a very vocal proponent for equality for all, but this gender-theatre-display is grotesque. It does not further the cause of minorities but marginalizes them more. There has been a lot of academic discussion about how harmful categorizing can be to minorities and I see this touting the pronouns as yet another LABELLING strategy. It's pathetic and I hope that it goes away fast. George Orwell would have surely written an amazing essay against this practice. I am a left-wing voter and am appalled how the left does not see the hurtful practices it embraces. Time to wake up and start making an actual change in the world and not just freaking focus on some irrelevant pronouns game. It's so childish, I cannot even express how stupid some academics can be (respondent 31)

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12 From "The Importance of Pronouns", https://www.sfu.ca/sexual-violence/education-prevention/new-blog-/consent/the-importance-of-pronouns.html, July 05 2023, last accessed 11 October 2024.

13 "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Medicine", https://www.mcw.edu/education/academic-and-student-services/office-of-student-inclusion-and-diversity/osid-resources-for-current-students/lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-people-in-medicine-lgbtpm, last accessed 11 October 2024.

14 "Microaggressions are real", from https://www.splicetoday.com/writing/microaggressions-are-real, 2021, last accessed 11 October 2024.

15 We have this type of comment on both Sketchengine (1) and in answers to the questionnaire (2):

  (1) It doesn't hurt you to use someone's preferred pronoun the way it doesn't hurt you to use someone's preferred name (from https://rareddit.com/r/bestoflegaladvice/comments/7lsqyv/angry_dad_of_infant_in_nicu_lashes_out_at_la_and/)

  (2) It costs me nothing as a cis woman to do this one small inclusive thing (respondent to the survey 478)

In contrast to what was analysed above as a preemptive face-saving move, the respondent in (3) explicitly states the counter-productive linguistic act of reducing gender to pronominal labels.

In the same vein, a linguist like Deborah Cameron (2016) has mixed feelings about the empowering force of stating pronouns next to names, judging it as "symbolic" rather than revolutionary, notably when the statement is not made face to face. For her, pronouns are certainly not a matter of life and death: "It doesn't mean I'm unwilling to use the pronouns an individual prefers. But I will do it as a matter of courtesy rather than conviction; and if I fail to do it, I'll consider that an oversight rather than a crime. Pronouns may be a great deal, but they're not a matter of life and death" (Cameron 2016). I have pointed out above the potentially hurtful effect of the misuse of pronouns if one aligns with the perspective of the primarily concerned, which could come as a qualification to Cameron's statement. Besides, the Trevor Project on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health has shown mis-gendering to have an effect on the health of those concerned, assessing that respecting pronouns amounts to lowering suicide attempts by 50 %.[16] It, therefore, all depends on the perspective one adopts. Yet Cameron's remark is interesting from a pragmatic point of view. She construes the practice in terms of "civility"/ "courtesy" paid by all interacting partners, indicative of a desire to have the conversation go smoothly and respectfully, displaying "good faith": "It's a symbolic affirmation of the partners' intention to conduct their subsequent dealings in good faith and with mutual respect" (Cameron 2016). This has relevance from a pragmatic perspective (see next Section).

Even for those who do not agree with the practice, the cost implied by the use of the correct pronoun seems minimal. However, for others still, as exemplified in responses from the questionnaire that will be analysed in the next sections, the cost is very high. The whole practice is rejected as it hurts their conceptions of binary gender and biological sex, bringing them to opt out of civility/courtesy altogether. The least that can be said is that the same linguistic practice triggers very different reactions. I contend that these diverse positions deserve a common evaluation under the aegis of (im)politeness theory. The notions alluded to in this section need to be more rigorously pragmatically defined. This is what Section 4 aims at doing.

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16 "The Trevor Project reports that transgender and nonbinary youth who report having their pronouns respected by all or most of the people in their lives attempted suicide at half the rate of those who did not have their pronouns respected" (From https://ppimhs.org/news-and-events/news/, last accessed 22 October 2024.

4 How "polite" is the pronoun-sharing practice and to whom?

4.1 From consideration to civility

Politeness has been shown to be more than strategic avoidance of disagreement, agreement in safe topics or show of deference. Although, as mentioned in the introduction, the notion of "consideration" has always been connected with politeness (Haugh 2019; Watts 2003), it is only recently that it has been further studied along with such notions as "concern" for others and the demonstration of "attention" to their (face) needs. Fukushima (2015) has shown that "attentiveness" (in the sense of "paying attention to others") may consist in anticipating or making inferences as to the beneficiary's feelings and wants. This anticipation can take the form of "preemptive" offers[17] (Chang and Fukushima 2017; Fukushima 2015, 2019: 231), that is to say "voluntary" helping "without being asked" (Fukushima 2011: 550). Fukushima (2004, 2011) also speaks in terms of "empathy", as the demonstration of attentiveness implies first and foremost feeling what other human beings may be feeling. This idea of anticipating what the other might need/feel/want in order to make them feel comfortable can be said to find an echo in people's taking pains to ask for others' pronouns in the trend under study. As already mentioned in the previous section, considering somebody's feelings is also at the heart of Goffman's (1981: 10) notion of "considerateness", as one is expected to save face and the feelings of all present "willingly and spontaneously because of emotional identification with the others and with their feelings".

I would contend that people who are cis-gender and yet share their pronouns in bio signatures, or spontaneously ask for a person's pronouns to anticipate possible discomfort, show consideration for others' feelings and face. This "helpful behaviour" could also be interpreted as a "supportive technique" in Arndt and Janney's (1985: 282) terms. For the latter indeed, "a supportive speaker smooths over uncomfortable situations, or keeps situations from becoming interpersonally uncomfortable, by constantly acknowledging his [sic] partner's intrinsic worth as a person" (Arndt and Janney 1985: 294). What seems at stake in the pronoun sharing practice on the part of those who can be called "allies", is the act of "acknowledging" someone's worth through concern for their gender identity. In sharing their own pronouns, they also help normalize a practice. In their desire to protect vulnerable subjects

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17 "by attentiveness I mean a demonstrator's preemptive response to a beneficiary's verbal/nonverbal cues or situations surrounding a beneficiary and a demonstrator, which takes the form of offering" (Fukushima 2011: 550).

from attacks, the allies perform solidarity politeness through proactive behaviour. Their answers in the questionnaire confirm this "protective orientation" (Goffman 1981: 16):

(4) a. I will share my pronouns for the comfort of others in situations where others do or if I'm asked to do so. In this way everyone will feel confident, comfortable and respected (respondent 95)

   b. I support the goal of normalising pronoun-sharing so that non-binary, trans, genderqueer, and other groups are not singled out as the only who share their pronouns (respondent 115)

   c. [I share] To show that I care about others, to signal to any trans people that might come across it that I am safe to approach (respondent 145)

In my corpus from the web via SketchEngine, "respect" is the word that regularly comes back in association with the act of using/asking for the right pronouns (it occurs 118 times in the 265 extracts). The term has often been used in relation with politeness. Back in 2010, basing his remarks on Langdon (2007), Haugh (2010: 280) points out that "respect" has four meanings: respect as "social power", respect as "social rules or norms", respect as "caring", respect as "equality and accepting differences". Haugh underlines that if the first meaning can be associated with the notion of deference, and the second pertain to what it is "proper" or appropriate to say as part of social norms, the last two definitions have been more "relatively neglected" (Haugh 2010: 281). In the corpus, the meaning of "respect" clearly orientates to both caring and acknowledging difference:

(5) a. Learning about pronouns is an act of **respecting someone as a human being**[18]

   b. For those who do not identify with their birth sex or as male or female, it is a sign of **respect and consideration** to use their correct pronouns[19]

   c. Respecting pronouns communicates **respect for human rights**; it makes us stronger as a union[20]

   d. Asking about and correctly using someone's pronouns is one of the most basic ways to **show respect for their humanity and their gender identity**[21]

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[18] "A guide to pronouns" https://www.unb.ca/initiatives/equity-diversity-inclusion/pronouns.html October 2021, last accessed 14 October 2024. The emphasis in the examples is mine.
[19] "Understanding Gender Identity. How Inclusivity Translates to Better Care", https://www.nm.org/healthbeat/healthy-tips/emotional-health/understanding-gender-identity, last accessed 14 October 2024.
[20] Canadian Union of Public Employees "Allies on gender diversity", July 3, 2019. https://cupe.ca/allies-gender-diversity, last accessed 14 October 2024.

e.   Using someone's correct personal pronouns is **both polite and respectful**, and it helps create an inclusive environment[22]

f.   Using the correct pronouns for someone is **a basic sign of respect and courtesy**[23]

g.   "This small but significant **sign of respect** goes a long way in creating an environment where everyone can show up, be seen, and addressed **respectfully** as who they are," said Alex Schmider, Associate Director for Transgender Representation at GLAAD[24]

h.   To use someone's pronouns correctly shows them that you **respect** their identity and have made **an effort to make them feel welcome**[25]

i.   Normalizing these practices creates a **culture of respect**[26]

j.   Just like calling someone by the right name, using someone's pronouns is an important way of **signaling respect, curtesy [sic] and acceptance**[27]

For the advocates of the new trend, using the correct pronouns amounts to performing an "act of respect" that shows "care" and "consideration" for the other as a "human being". This mention of "humanity" points to the "communal" aspect of the act and is thus in close proximity to what Sifianou (2019) calls "civility" in her own work. According to Sifianou (2019: 57), civility is "mainly related to moral and social norms/conventions that are associated with communal living rather than with individuals' face". In her review of definitions given by philosophers, she comes to understand civility "as showing consideration and respect to self and others (see also Buss 1999), with some scholars (e.g. Boyd 2006; Calhoun 2000) also including tolerance, a concept that has not been, explicitly at least, incorporated into politeness frameworks" (Sifianou 2019: 57). The reference to "courtesy" twice in the extracts from the web above (5f. and 5j.) also point to a civil attitude towards the other based on what Boyd calls "a sense of moral equality" (Boyd 2006: 863, quoted in Sifianou

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21 "How to be an ally in the newsroom", https://www.ire.org/how-to-be-an-ally-in-the-newsroom/, Nov 2021, last accessed 14 October 2024.

22 "Teesside University Proud", https://www.tees.ac.uk/lgbt/, nov 2021, last accessed 14 October 2024.

23 From https://www.occjok.org/news_publications/occj-news-archives.html/article/2020/04/06/what-s-in-a-pronoun, last accessed March 2024.

24 "New! More Easily Add and Manage Your Pronouns in Zoom", from https://www.zoom.com/en/blog/zoom-pronoun-sharing/?cms_guid=false&lang=fr-FR, last accessed 14 October 2024.

25 From https://www.winthrop.edu/safezones/frequently-asked-questions.aspx, last accessed 14 October 2024.

26 "Pronouns: A Guide For the American University Community" from https://www.american.edu/student-affairs/cdi/pronouns-guide.cfm, last accessed October 15 2024.

27 "–Why express personal gender pronouns in an email signature?" from https://www.savagegroup.biz/why-express-personal-gender-pronouns-in-an-email-signature/, last accessed 14 October 2024.

2019: 57). In the context of the pronoun-sharing practice, the moral norm that its advocates are promoting is, however, not part of everyone's "communal living": their push for solidarity politeness with gender non-conforming people could be called "inclusive politeness", designed to show respect in the fourth sense mentioned by Langdon (2007) and Haugh (2010) above, that is, respect as "equality and accepting differences".

4.2 The price of inclusive politeness

In the changing "moral order", the emerging norm requires some adjustment with a practice that is yet unstable. For one, not all gender non-conforming individuals are ready to come out with a clear pronoun choice – some of them are still transitioning and/or may still be experimenting with pronouns. In terms of cost/benefit, pronoun-sharers must be able to assess whether it is safe to ask people for their pronouns (see Brown 2025 on pronoun rounds as a vulnerable space for trans people). Sometimes it is safer to refrain from asking and be "tactful" in order to "minimize cost to Other" (Gu 1990: 245; Leech 1983) and prevent any incident. The guidelines online emphasize the need not to be pushy and be careful not to "out" anyone, especially when it can be a covert means to be intrusive about a person's gender identity:

(6)   a.   If people don't want to disclose their pronouns, respect their wishes and
             do not push for them to give a response[28]
        b.   How should you go about asking someone's pronouns? You shouldn't
             force anyone to offer up their pronouns, as this can make gender
             marginalized people feel singled out. "It can sometimes be used as a
             covert way to interrogate people, and demand that they conform to some
             sort of gender binary by telling us your pronouns," says Robinson [an
             assistant professor at Dalhousie University][29]

Consideration can thus sometimes take the form of "non-imposition" (see Haugh 2019: 213). Some responses to the questionnaire confirm that asking for someone's pronouns can be seen as "intrusive" and indiscrete or, to take up Fukushima's terms in the case of preemptive offers, to come off as "meddling" (Fukushima 2011: 550):

(7)   a.   I think it's best not to push it, as not everybody feels safe sharing their
             pronouns (respondent 38)

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28 From https://www.lakeheadu.ca/students/wellness-recreation/student-health-and-wellness/wellness/pride, last accessed 15 October 2024.
29 "Sharing Your Pronouns – What It Means And Why You Should Consider It" from https://chatelaine.com/living/sharing-your-personal-pronouns/, last accessed 15 October 2024.

b. I do feel a little frustrated when pronouns are required instead of optional, not only for myself but because I think it shows a surface-level understanding of queer realities. If nothing else, people who are in the closet shouldn't be put in a position of either misgendering themselves or outing themselves. Just because one person in the room decided we were all going to share pronouns doesn't mean every person in the room is safe to be out too (respondent 569)

Pragmatically speaking, being considerate of the other can be analysed as a generous act towards them as it abides by Leech's Generosity maxim consisting in giving a high value to O's (other person[s]) wants (Leech 2014: 91). But this generous act comes at a cost to the helping speaker for learning the new trend is not easy and requires some listening and practising. The online guidelines do acknowledge the awkwardness of asking the question "What are your pronouns?". Hence the use of imperative forms in the following extracts to guide people towards this new polite etiquette:

(8)   a. Listen for the pronouns they use. Share your pronouns before asking for someone else's. You can say: "I go by she and her. What are your pronouns?" It can feel awkward at first, but using the wrong pronoun is worse[30]

       b. It might feel awkward to ask for this information, but experts say that the act of asking for more information shows you care about addressing someone properly[31]

       c. If you're awkward like me or don't know how to ask someone their pronouns, here are some examples of what you can say. Try asking: "What are your pronouns?" At first, it may seem awkward, but it is a lot more awkward to get it wrong or make a hurtful assumption[32]

The guidelines make it clear that the cost of learning this new inclusive politeness norm falls on the addressee, just as repairing potential pronominal errors is the blunderer's burden, not the gender non-conforming person's. In case the speaker realizes they have performed the face-damaging act of misgendering, the best way to go about it is to correct the pronoun and get on with what one is saying. The point is not to "overcorrect" it by drawing explicit "attention to the error in the process of correcting it", as is the case with what Bolden et al. (2022: 204) call "over-exposed self-

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30 "Allies on gender diversity", https://cupe.ca/allies-gender-diversity, last accessed 15 October 2024.
31 "How writers can be inclusive with their use of pronouns", from https://www.ragan.com/how-writers-can-be-inclusive-with-their-use-of-pronouns/, last accessed 15 October 2024.
32 "Let's talk about 'pronouns', baby": Gender pronouns and their importance: https://www.wionews.com/opinions/lets-talk-about-pronouns-baby-gender-pronouns-and-their-importance-425562, last accessed 15 October 2024.

correction". The guides rather suggest what could be called "under-exposed self-correction", consisting in quickly correcting oneself and moving on. Long apologies as repair-work are indeed counterproductive, as they place misgendered persons in the position where they have to make the blunderer feel better:

(9) a. If you address someone with the wrong pronoun, apologize and move on. Don't make it about you. It can be tempting to say how bad you feel or how hard you're working. That won't help. The person you misgendered might already be hurt and exhausted. It's not their job to educate or comfort you[33]

  b. Acknowledge when you've made a mistake about someone's name and/or pronouns, and correct yourself swiftly. Refrain from giving a drawn-out apology if you do misgender someone; this burdens the person who was misgendered with the pressure to forgive you, or placate your guilt[34]

  c. Drawing attention to the mistake only means the other party has to dwell on it longer to ease your guilt. All you need to do is look them in the eye, apologize, and repeat what you were saying with the correct pronoun[35]

  d. If you do mess up someone's pronouns, the best thing to do is simply apologize, rephrase and move on. "The important thing is to move on with no drama," says Airton. "Don't dissolve into a state of devastation and awkwardness because what that does is it requires the person you misgendered to take care of you"[36]

What I have called "under-exposed" self-correction is a way not to dwell on the mistake and almost act as if nothing happened. This in fact corresponds to what Goffman (1981) terms "tactful overlooking" consisting in pretending no face-threatening act occurred: "when a person fails to prevent an incident, he can still attempt to maintain the fiction that no threat to face has occurred" (Goffman 1981: 18).

Like any other acquired form of politeness, speakers are thus endowed with the responsibility of learning the practice, which can come at a cost before the new inclusive politeness norm becomes a shared habit. Like any other form of politeness

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33 From https://cupe.ca/allies-gender-diversity, last accessed 15 October 2024.

34 From https://barnard.edu/gender-inclusivity-classroom, last accessed 15 October 2024.

35 "The trouble with misgendering" from https://www.splicetoday.com/sex/the-trouble-with-misgendering, last accessed 15 October 2024.

36 https://chatelaine.com/living/sharing-your-personal-pronouns/, last accessed 15 October 2024.

as well, the new act can be either genuine or non-genuine, as the next subsection will further comment on.

4.3 "Reflexive" or "surface" civility

If politeness theorists have always been aware of the possibility of insincere politeness – Leech speaks of "communicative altruism" as opposed to "genuine altruism" (Leech 2014: 4) – they have tended to leave the issue of sincerity to other domains such as psychology. However, more recently, forays into non-genuineness have emerged in pragmatic studies. Sifianou (2019: 54) contrasts "surface civility", that she defines as mere "compliance with rules", to "deep civility", coming from the heart and from the "realization that fellow human beings deserve love and respect". In her cross-cultural work on "attentiveness", Fukushima (2011: 550) also distinguishes between "genuine" forms of attentiveness from "reflexive attentiveness": the latter is for the benefit of the demonstrator who wishes to be seen as someone who is kind and reliable and, thereby, enhance their reputation. More recently, Sorlin and Virtanen (2024a, 2024b) have delved into the notion of hypocrisy from a pragmatic point of view. Hypocrites pretend to be concerned about the others while, in fact, attending to the image they want others to have of them, thus making the others "feel good" in order to conceal their self-interests (Sorlin and Virtanen 2024a: 9). Sorlin (2024: 244) speaks of "civil hypocrisy" when a speaker uses hypocrisy as a way to maintain a form of courtesy encouraged by the situation: for instance, congratulating your opponent who won the elections is the expected social norm or etiquette, although it can be said hypocritically. Here is Sorlin and Virtanen's general definition of verbal hypocrisy:

> Verbal hypocrisy is a pragmatic phenomenon of pretence that aims at concealing self-serving motivations by enhancing the hypocrite's face as well as other faces, and/or by avoiding mutual face damage. The hypocritical pretence can be performed in order to deceive or mislead others, or out of polite civility and on occasion even playfulness. (Sorlin and Virtanen 2024b: 44)

This self-oriented surface/reflexive/hypocritical civility is denounced in the questionnaire by people indicating that the new practice is just to "show care" and "signal virtue", that is, to appear virtuous and ethical. In a space purposefully left for them to add details in the survey, one pronoun-sharing ally among the respondents clearly states the difference between genuine and surface civility:

(10)   it's not to 'show' anything. but to actually do it. not to show care (which is about me), but to care (which is about them). not to show respect (which is about me), but to respect (which is about them) (respondent 515)

Out of the 806 responses, 129 indicate that the practice is merely "virtue-signalling", far from any deeply generous intentions: "I unfortunately feel it has become a marketing tool to show how inclusive you are" (respondent 507). Some respondents indicate they do not share for fear this act might trigger "unwanted inferences" (Elder and Haugh 2023) and make them give a face they are not comfortable with, such as appearing to be "virtue signalling", or being seen as indexing wokism, for instance:

(11)   With all the debates and accusations of "wokeness" as a bad thing, though, I am not brave enough to show this in my professional e-mails (on mailing lists for example) for fear of getting my main message lost (conference announcement, professional question &c.) (respondent 281)

By sharing pronouns in bio, some respondents fear it might attract the wrong inferences and that the real content of their message will get lost or misinterpreted as a result. Others indicate that they share in order to conform to what is required: "I feel like it's expected from me (peer pressure)" (respondent 578). In terms of face-work, these respondents are not oriented towards protecting the other's face, but adopt a "defensive orientation towards saving [their] own face" (Goffman 1981: 14). Conforming to the new norms is a way to appear inclusive, even though this act of civility is only reflexive and/or hypocritical.

We have seen that the reactions to and voluntary actions in favour of the new practice cover a wide spectrum of notions associated with politeness, respect in particular, and what we could call the 4Cs (consideration, concern, care and civility). If, for the allies, sharing pronouns does not "cost them anything", some extra effort is required for those who do not feel so concerned about gender identity but still want to attend to the other's face by using the correct pronoun. For those that reject the practice, the effort required is too much to be made. In Airton's (2018) distinction,[37] the "extra" effort becomes "excessive" to the point of triggering total rejection: this is the "threshold between 'extra' effort to accommodate social difference, which is felt to be unremarkable, and 'excessive' effort, which is felt to lie beyond the scope of the social contract and therefore cannot be legitimately demanded of one" (Airton 2018: 791). Section 5 brings impoliteness into the picture, as some respondents clearly reject the whole practice, opting out of polite civility altogether.

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37 In their article, Airton speaks of the threshold between extra and excessive effort as regards the use of singular "they" for a known person.

5 A multi-faceted evaluation: from inclusive politeness to ideological impoliteness

For those that I call the "rejecters", being asked to share or use pronouns is interpreted as an impingement on their "negative face" (Brown and Levinson 1987)[38] or "equity rights" (Spencer-Oatey 2002). Spencer-Oatey describes "equity rights" as:

> a fundamental belief that we are entitled to personal consideration from others, so that we are treated fairly: that we are not unduly imposed upon or unfairly ordered about, that we are not taken advantage of or exploited, and that we receive the benefits to which we are entitled. (Spencer-Oatey 2002: 540)

For rejecters, granting gender nonconforming people equity rights (entitling them to "personal consideration from others, so [they] are treated fairly" [Spencer-Oatey 2002: 540]) is depriving them (rejecters) of their own equity rights not to be "unduly imposed upon or unfairly ordered about". Besides, rejecters do not think pronoun sharers are "entitled" to receive the "benefits" they think they are entitled to. As Conrod (2019) points out, some people may not like being corrected in their use of pronouns: "dictating what pronoun a speaker should use is an imposition on their negative face" (Conrod 2019: 154). In our survey, such dislike for correction does not come up, but it is certainly another way people might feel the practice is impolite towards them. But in a similar way, respondents see this requirement to share or use pronouns as a face attack in the name of freedom of action and speech. They consider themselves "pressured" to follow a new norm that is "imposed" upon them:

(12)   a. I find the sharing can feel **coercive** (respondent 259)
        b. I won't be forced to use unrealistic terms. I avoid **compelled speech** (respondent 173)
        c. I will not be **bullied by a gender police** (respondent 263)
        d. I **resent the pressure** from a bunch of **controlling**, sanctimonious and priggish wankers (respondent 241)

In other words, what is evaluated as (genuine or hypocritical) civility by some is assessed as impolite by other respondents: rejecters feel they are being unduly "coerced" into complying with a newly imposed social action. The feeling of being "pressured" goes all the way to feeling that a minority group wants to "convert" them all:

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38 Negative face is defined by Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) as "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. freedom of action and freedom from imposition".

(13)   I just feel that non-binary people want to set the agenda and force people.
         They can share their pronouns, but they don't need to force everyone else to
         do so
         Sometimes it feels like non-binary people want to force the rest of the world
         to be non-binary (respondent 645)

Gender nonconforming people are further blamed for their intolerance and
narcissism. Instead of being a means to promote inclusivity, the pronoun sharing act
is on the contrary deemed divisive and intolerant: "I think it causes more tension or
split in society, which is the opposite of what I think should be the aim of a pro-
gressive, inclusive and tolerant society" (respondent 615). Sharers are blamed for
signalling "in-group" membership that disintegrates the social fabric. For a society to
remain united, without tensions, progressive and tolerant, it requires the vulnerable
minority not to put their claims forward for it shows self-importance:

(14)   Why do people care how others refer to them in the third person? The
         practice of pronoun sharing seems rooted in Narcissism (respondent 701)

What they reject is a new form of political correctness clearly signalling a "political
stance act" (Du Bois 2007) and some "allegiance" to what they call the "gender
ideology":

(15)   a. I feel (1) they are wasting their time, (2) they have been duped by gender
             ideology (respondent 706)
         b. It now signals agreement with a gender ideology perspective. I am sex
             realist - there are two sexes and you cannot change sex (respondent 231)
         c. It is something I strongly disagree with because it signals acceptance of
             gender ideology (respondent 284)
         d. I do not subscribe to the gender ideology that drives pronoun badges
             (respondent 386)

Discarding the practice on ideological grounds, rejecters perceive the new trend as
politically charged (respondent 710: "hyperwoke"; respondent 27: "too political").
This is how they justify their refusal to make the effort they regard as "excessive" in
Airton's (2018) sense:

(16)   they are taking a political/ideological stance and expecting everyone to take
         the same stance. My feeling is that there is very little acceptance to diverge
         from their line of thinking (respondent 27)

I propose the label "ideological impoliteness" to capture the face-attack that
pronoun-sharing constitutes for rejecters. As always with ideological evaluations,
the ones denouncing ideology think they are themselves under no ideological spell

and are entirely neutral in matters of gender, as their conception is "true" because it is "obvious" and taken for granted. In the name of what they see as too ideological, they justify their own impoliteness towards pronoun sharers by refusing to put the "excessive" effort needed in the use of the pronoun required.

Interestingly, the rejecters' statements reveal a strict adherence to Grice's (1991) conversational maxims, as they abide by the maxims of Quality (1), Quantity (2), Relevance (3) and Manner (4).

(1)   Rejecters are on the side of truth and "evidence":

> People are being pressured to add pronouns when their sex is **blindingly obvious**. […] Being asked to say she/her for someone who is clearly male creates cognitive dissonance. At worst, it's an attack on our reality and the **evidence of our own eyes** (respondent 49)

(2)   Stating pronouns is an infringement of the maxim of Quantity according to which one must give just the amount of information necessary, no less no more:

> If a male-presenting, with a traditional male-sounding name shares his "he\him" pronouns, I would consider that **redundant information** (respondent 343)

> [I feel] lightly encumbered by being given the information if **I didn't ask for** it (respondent 272)

(3)   Stating gender is irrelevant for rejecters:

> I don't need to share my pronouns. It's **obvious what gender I am** (respondent 11)

(4)   Pronouns make things more confusing, not less:

> I think it's sometimes **confusing** as I have to look twice to understand that, as the name suggests, it's the gender I assumed it would be (respondent 435)

Rather than interpreting the act of sharing on the part of the primarily concerned as a preemptive act to avoid misgendering, they regard the practice as a negation of "obvious truth" and infringement of basic conversational maxims. What this strict adherence to Grice's CP seems to reveal is that the rejecters do not see the pronoun sharing as a civil act of shared humanity beyond exchange of information.

In his study on "consideration" in (Australian and New Zealand) English, Haugh (2019: 208) uses a feature on SketchEngine thesaurus that can discern clusters of words "based on a statistical analysis of their shared collocational behaviour". The term "considerate" reveals four of those clusters. Three of them may seem unsurprising, as they have been used in studies of the word "polite": "Respectful",

"Attentive", and "Accommodating". The last one is the adjective "Open-minded". For Haugh, this is "less obviously related to *polite*", revealing that "considerate" also pertains to the realm of morality (Haugh 2019: 209). I find the association of "consideration" with open-mindedness particularly interesting in the context of the culturally and politically-charged (im)politeness I have just described: by refusing to be considerate of the reason why people (need to) share their pronouns, rejecters refuse to open up their minds to the complexity of gender, ruling it all out as "ideological". But as Butler recalls, "the practice of *ruling out alternate possibilities*" when they already exist "is surely an ideological move!" (Butler 2024: 76).

In my own theoretical evaluation of the social act of sharing pronouns, I have chosen the label "inclusive politeness" as regards the attention paid to others' face needs and the label "ideological impoliteness" in reference to rejecters who proclaim themselves victims of impoliteness, which, in turn, justifies their own impoliteness towards sharers as they opt out of civility. These theoretical evaluative labels belong to what Haugh (2024) calls "third-order evaluation"[39] of (im)politeness defined as "reflexive ideological discourse". My evaluative "metadiscourse" both recognizes that evaluations of (im)politeness are "rooted in multiple perspectives" (Haugh 2024: 220), depending on which point of view one takes, and acknowledge my own subjective position as a scholar. I agree with Haugh that (im)politeness can no longer be seen as a uniformizing "grand theory" that can be "reduced to a few key variables" (Haugh 2024: 222), and that the researcher's own subjective position needs to be explicitly situated. I need to question my position as an analyst: as a French gender conforming (white) woman, I do not have an emic perspective, as would gender nonconforming people or scholars, and yet my third-order theoretical evaluation inevitably has some bearing upon the data, which makes me no neutral, objective observer. Certainly the label "inclusive politeness" reveals something about my sociocultural perspective on what the world should be. In other words, the way I have theorized the recent social action of pronoun sharing is informed by how I observe the phenomenon and my own ethical orientation.

The pronoun-sharing practice reveals that what can pass for politeness for some is turned into impoliteness for others. In an "us" versus "them" irreconcilable dichotomy, the rejecters blame the other side for depriving them of their freedom of speech while, in so doing, deny pronoun sharers the same authority as to what they can say or not. In my third-order evaluation, I construe (im)politeness as a locus of

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39 Haugh transcends the traditional understanding of first-order (emic/lay) and second-order (etic/ academic) by showing the multi-layered complexities of evaluations. Concerning our object of analysis, a first-order perspective would be the practices of those who share their pronouns, what Haugh calls "evaluation as immanent to social action" (Haugh 2024: 216). The different comments on the practice received in the survey or the web articles would be second-order evaluation that is "evaluation as occasioned by social action" (Haugh 2024: 214).

(un)wanted renegotiation of the status quo and see my own subjective position as conducive to the creation of what we could call Critical Politeness Theory (CPT). Such a theory would emphasize the relation between vulnerability, ideology and rejection, by more explicitly positing politeness as ideologically and culturally charged among participants competing for meaning and existence. (Im)politeness usage always exposes a historical moment in the shaping of norms. CPT would offer a critical point of view on (im)politeness use and take it upon itself to highlight what is ethically owed to another human beings in terms of civility, tolerance and respect as "caring" or as "equality and accepting differences" (Haugh 2010).

6 Conclusions

I have tried to demonstrate that the current practice of pronoun-sharing deserved a pragmatic analysis and that regarding this particular social action, evaluation of (im) politeness will depend on what perspective we wish to (dis)align with. I argued that from the viewpoint of the primarily concerned, it could be construed as a preemptive anti-face-damaging act offered to save all faces. It is interpreted as such by voluntary allies who are not only ready to acknowledge gender nonconforming people's rights to gender self-determination, but share their own pronouns in order to normalize the inclusive politeness practice. Others agree to attend to sharers' positive faces by using the correct pronouns, but may do so out of hypocritical/surface/reflexive civility. There is thus such a thing as "deep" inclusive politeness and "surface"/hypocritical inclusive politeness that merely signals virtue. Lastly, from the perspective of those who feel offended by the gender ideology shaking their profound conception of gender, the practice is perceived as an infringement of their equity rights: as they consider pronoun-sharing impolite to them, they opt out of politeness by ruling out the practice altogether. Acknowledging the offered pronoun would be signalling agreement with inclusive politeness. To them, pronoun sharing is an impolite ideological imposition, requiring "excessive" unjustified effort.

Taking the pronoun sharing trend as an ontological and epistemological object of study brings to the fore how ideologically-charged consideration of (im)politeness might be. Since the practice is still a norm in the making, it is the site of social and political affirmation and contestation. Beyond politics, the social action of sharing pronouns may be evaluated as showing "consideration" and "concern" for other vulnerable human beings. The rejecters refuse to see it as a matter of civility because they evaluate the practice as a face attack on their (religious or political) gender beliefs. Because of the power relationships involved in the practice (who has authority over pronouns?), I have propounded a Critical Politeness Theory which, in the manner of Critical Discourse Analysis, would investigate (im)polite evaluations in

relation to socio-political contexts with a focus on how (im)polite norms are contested or invented. Such a critical perspective would encourage scholars to explicitly recognize their own situatedness in relation to the topic under study.

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