This is a transcript for Lingthusiasm Bonus Episode 74: Neopronouns, gender-neutral vocab, and why linguistic gender even exists - Liveshow Q&A with Kirby Conrod. It's been lightly edited for readability. [Listen to the episode here.](#) Links to studies mentioned and further reading can also be found on the show page.

[Music]

Gretchen: Welcome to Lingthusiasm, a podcast that's enthusiastic about linguistics! I'm Gretchen McCulloch. I'm here with Dr. Kirby Conrod. They're a Visiting Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, USA, and all-around cool linguist who talks about gender on the internet. We're here doing a liveshow on the Lingthusiasm patron Discord where we're getting enthusiastic about your questions about gender and language.

[Music]

Gretchen: Hello, Kirby, welcome back to the show!

Kirby: Hello, thanks for having me back! I'm very excited to be here.

Gretchen: Last time we saw you on Lingthusiasm it was early 2020, a.k.a. forever ago.

Kirby: Oh my god.

Gretchen: Do you wanna give us a brief update of what you've been up to since then?

Kirby: Yeah, oh my god. At the time, I had just graduated with my PhD, and I was working as a part-time lecturer at the University of Washington. Since then, I have moved to where I am currently employed at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, in the United States. I'm a visiting assistant professor here in linguistics. I've been doing a lot of new, fun research. I am really interested in neopronouns lately – also getting really into some weird stuff with reflexive pronouns – and living in Philadelphia. I got new cats. I think those are the important updates.

Gretchen: I think that we'll probably have to ask you for a picture of the cats at some point later. But since this is an audio podcast, let's start with the questions that are more easily asked about in audio form. We have some questions from the Discord. Annamatopoetry asked, "Has there been any development of a gender-neutral option to 'sir/ma'am'? I mostly use them in a jocular manner, but I would still like an option."

Kirby: I think that "sir" and "ma'am" are really something that a lot of people struggle with, and it's because we're really trained – especially the people who grew up where it's a sign of respect, especially if you're addressing an adult – and it's something that there's not, that I know of, a perfectly gender-neutral equivalent that people feel is the intuitive third option. I think that the – my joke answer to this, first of all, is that I like to be called "comrade" instead of "sir" or "ma'am."

Gretchen: That's great. I like it.

Kirby: One of my best friends in grad school is Southern – Rachael Chapman – she's a great linguist. She really wanted to call me either "sir" or "ma'am," and was just alternating and having

a really hard time with it, so we settled on "comrade" as a fun alternative. That doesn't really work for everybody. I think that the most important thing to think about is what context are you using these words in. I think that the context that people use these words in are varied. You get them in a "We're having a conversation, and I know you, and I'm showing that I'm being respectful," like, "Oh, yes, sir." That's gonna be a different context than if I am interacting with you in a customer service context or if you're just a stranger on the street, and I'm trying to get your attention for some reason in a respectful way like, "Pardon me, ma'am, you dropped your cat." I think that the replacements that I would suggest if people are interested in un-gendering that kind of term of address is to think about what is a friendly and respectful word that suits the context. So, "Pardon me, friend," is a great way to get somebody's attention. Also, I notice that a lot of people do just use "sir" and "ma'am" to be like, "I'm trying to get your attention." So, "Pardon me" is perfectly polite in my opinion. You don't actually need an honourific there.

Gretchen: I think sometimes I just say like, "Excuse me, sorry." I'm Canadian, so I can always say "sorry" to make things more polite, and it's not addressing someone. But it's very polite, I can tell you.

Kirby: It's very polite. I think that if you are worried about "Just taking 'sir' and 'ma'am' out of my vocabulary means that I have fewer ways to be polite," I would just heap on other helpings of politeness markers that you have at your disposal. If I'm interacting with somebody in a sort of a customer service context, I am especially effusive about saying, "Oh my goodness, thank you so much. You have been such a big help. I'm so grateful" to just be really emphasising like, "I'm being so polite to you right now because I want you think well of me, and I want you to know that I respect you." That's the goal of what we are using these honourifics for. Thinking about other strategies that you can use to accomplish that same goal is gonna work a lot better than trying to just find and replace the word with another word. That's gonna be true for a lot of stuff that people think of as "I have to say to this because it's impolite not to." It's like, "You have other tools at your disposal about how to be polite." That would be my ruling on "sir" or "ma'am" if you don't wanna use "comrade," which I still think is a great option.

Gretchen: I've also seen some people mention things like "my liege" or "your eminence," especially in the jocular context, like really over the top titles – or "your highness," "your majesty" – you know, a bit antithetical in spirit from "comrade," which is more egalitarian, but I think in a joking context could work really well, too.

Kirby: Yeah, I think when people are using these in a joking, friendly way it's going to be a different set of tools that you're gonna use. I think also "my liege" is really fun because people know we're not in a monarchic relationship with each other, we're just pretending to for fun, so it's, I think, totally normal and reasonable to be like, "This is a funny over-exaggeration of a thing we were already doing." But thinking about, "What is the social meaning that I'm trying to convey by using this word?"

Gretchen: We've got a similar question from studyofnonsense who asks about "What non-gender versions of 'dude' or 'bro' have you seen in English or other languages? I've heard of current teenagers/middle schoolers using 'fam' as a casual reference/greeting to a group of friends." And lieke says, "I've heard people older than teenagers use 'fam' (and also 'pal') as well." Any further suggestions about words like "dude" and "bro"?

Kirby: I think that this is one where actually the context in the sentence actually matters a lot. I'm Californian. I grew up very much on the west coast. "Dude" and "bro" are both words that I use a lot as terms of affection.

Gretchen: "Duuuuude."

Kirby: Yes. I also have a very fronted "Duuuuude," so I sound very surfer when I say it. It's great. It's like, I had to go to Santa Cruz because I already had that vowel.

Gretchen: This is how we're deciding who goes to what university now just entirely based on vowels.

Kirby: Yes, that's actually how they do it is they just look at your vowel chart. It's so wild.

Gretchen: Some people think it matters what marks you get in school, but it's actually just your vowels.

Kirby: No, it doesn't matter at all. The thing with "dude" and "bro" and similar terms – and this is actually quite different from "sir" and "ma'am" – is that it matters what part of the sentence you're using them in. If you're using it as a way of saying, like, "Wow! That was a really gnarly wave, dude," that's not really calling somebody a dude, whereas if you use it as a way of referring to people of like, "Look at that dude over there," that is a way of referring to somebody. As best as I have been able to tell – and I think that a lot of people from my similar sociolinguistic background have similar instincts – is that "dude" and "bro," when they're used in an exclamation way, are actually already gender neutral because they're not referring to a person, whereas if you're referring to a person using "dude" or "bro" then that is very gender non-neutral. So, if I say, "There's a bunch of dudes over there," I do usually mean men. It would be usual for me to refer to a group of women as "dudes."

Gretchen: Whereas if I say like, "Dude, no," or "Dude, that's not cool," or "Dude, what are you even doing here," I feel like I could say that to a woman or a person of any gender, and that would be a normal thing to say in my variety sort of like when you say, "Oh man, that was a long night" or "Oh boy, that sounds like so much fun!" You're not necessarily referring to a man or a boy. Like, I've definitely said "oh boy" in contexts where there were no boys, which is maybe clearer to see for those. It is interesting, and probably sexist, that it seems to be words that refer to male people that get used in that discourse way. I don't know a lot of people saying, "Oh girl, that was really fun." I think you'd still be talking to a girl.

Kirby: I think that you're right that it is true that a lot of the words that get used as these exclamations tend to be male or masculine coded, except for "bitch."

Gretchen: That's true.

Kirby: Some uses of the word "girl," like, "Girl, hold on," is not necessarily referring to a person as a girl, it's more like an exclamation. I think that there's some stuff where exclamations are different than referring to people. I also wanted to talk about "fam" because it's interesting. This is one of those words that, to me, is really associated with African American English in particular, and it's one of these things that gets kind of recoded as – big air quotes – "youth

language." It's, I think, one of those patterns that we see a lot where something that originates in African American English gets taken up as a mark of coolness or being hip and with the times. It gets stripped away of its other social meanings. I think it's interesting to watch. I definitely know that there are many linguists who have strong opinions about whether or not this is a form of appropriation. It's something that I don't think I'm really qualified to rule on that, but I did just wanna observe that the word "fam" is definitely something that I don't see myself as someone who gets to use that word, and I know that a lot of other people – I'm white, and I feel like it would be weird for me to use it, but I know that not everybody feels that way.

Gretchen: I feel like it'd be weird for me to use it, but also, I'm old now, and I'm not cool, so maybe that's also part of it.

Kirby: You're also Canadian. [Laughs] That'd be really funny to me.

Gretchen: I am Canadian, which is coded as very white – even though not everyone in Canada is white. There's a fun example of a gender-neutral word that I heard recently from a linguist named Casper – I'm sorry, I don't remember their surname – in New Zealand when I was there who used the word "fan-kidding" as a gender-neutral version of "fan-girling" or "fan-boying."

Kirby: Wow. That's fun.

Gretchen: Like, "I'm totally fan-kidding about that." I was like, "Oh, this is perfect!" Because I'd been looking for a gender-neutral or a gender-inclusive or non-binary version of "fan-girl" or "fan-boy" because it's got such a gendered thing in it. I said, "fanning out," which is kind of fine, but "fan-kidding" is perfect because it has that youthful connotation, it's got a good number of syllables, and I was just really pleased about that.

Kirby: Yeah, that is a fun one. I think that "fan-boying" and "fan-girling" is a fun one because it's a verb even though it's got nouns in it.

Gretchen: In English, we don't normally encode gender in the verb.

Kirby: And I don't think that "dude-broing" is a verb as such. It could be if we decided. If we all decided to verb it, it would be a verb. That would be exciting. Let's all do that. I think that, yeah, my ruling on "dude" and "bro" is that it kind of depends on the situation. And I think, again, I'm not gonna suggest a find-replace option so much as I'm going to suggest to generally people who are interested in this kind of thing, think about what sort of social meaning you're using these words to create because I know that you have other tools that would create that kind of social meaning without necessarily being just like, "I just need to replace this word."

Gretchen: This is a question from Max who says, "One time a friend was telling me a story about someone she knew and I did not, using 'they/them' pronouns to refer to her friend. A couple sentences into the story, this person paused and said, 'Wait, actually, you've met Sarah. She was at such and such event,' and then finished the story using 'she/her' pronouns. It was as though the friend's gender was extraneous information to the story until she realised that I had previous information of the person in question. Is this 'gender as optional' information in story-telling a thing even when the storyteller knows the subject's pronouns? If so, why?" What's up? Can you talk about this?

Kirby: Oh my gosh, yes. I could talk about this again for an hour just on this question. Don't let me do that. The short answer is that, yes, it's totally a thing. This is something that's actually pretty consistent in the linguistic published research on "singular they" in linguistics literature right now is that we are pretty sure that "they" is just, it's not non-binary, it's just not gendered. And it's not singular or plural. It's just number agnostic. "They" is a pronoun that's giving you minimal information about the entity that you're talking about, and all of the information is coming from figuring that out from context. This is something where using "they" because gender is not relevant is super common. People don't even know that they're doing it half the time unless you point it out to them. The other thing that I see people doing in the gender optional thing is that they'll use "they" because they don't want to share the person – like they want to intentionally obfuscate the gender of the person they're talking about. If you don't really want to share what gender of person you're dating, you're like, "I went on a date last night. They were super cringe" or whatever. It's like, "I don't wanna tell you" –

Gretchen: I've also seen profs do this talking about students to try and anonymise the student further. Like, "A student asked me a question. They wondered if this." You don't even know the student's gender in that context.

Kirby: It's a combination of not including social information just in general of like, "I kind of don't want you to think about who I'm talking about," or intentionally excluding social information like, "I don't want you to think about the gender of the person that I'm talking about." I also see people doing it when they know they're talking to somebody who's gonna be sexist. This is something that, like, if somebody wants to read a 400-page dissertation about this, I've totally written one.

Gretchen: We'll link to that in the shownotes just in case anyone's super keen. This is your dissertation, right?

Kirby: Yes. I have a whole chapter about the pragmatic context of singular they. "I just don't want to include the gender in this conversation" is absolutely something that happens a lot. My short answer, I guess, is, again, just, yes, this is totally a thing. People do this.

Gretchen: Let's keep moving onto other questions and get into other languages. We have a question from frankcesca saying, "How are translators or multilingual speakers or other languages in general which have historically been pretty gender binary dealing with 'singular they' and with any other pronouns?"

Kirby: My colleague, Ártemis López, has written about this and their input has been very informative to my thinking. They have this concept of "indirect non-binary language" and "direct non-binary language." Essentially, translators have to make a lot of executive decisions when they're translating. This is one of the reasons I'm not smart enough to be a translator. I admire people who can do that work, but I can't. You have to make a lot of decisions about when you're translating of like, "Do I want to intentionally use something that's coded as non-binary, or do I want to use something that doesn't have any gender information at all?" "Singular they," in English, in most contexts, doesn't have any gender information, and when you're using it about a non-binary person, you have to make the decision "I'm going to use a form in the language that I'm translating into or out of" of like, "Am I going to use a neutral form, or am I

gonna use something that's like, 'Yeah, they're non-binary!'?" With languages like Portuguese – Ártemis works with Spanish – I know that this is something that people are thinking about in a number of languages that have grammatical gender. It's just a lot of decisions you have to make of like, "Am I going to avoid giving you any information, or am I going to pick a form that is giving me cool gender queer vibes?"

Gretchen: He had a comment from Quandtuniverse in the chat, who I know is also here, who said it's very common to see queer people using cross-gender grammar – this is in Portuguese – lesbians using masculine, gay men using feminine, etc., as a way to indicate queerness but not necessarily gender identity and various kinds of neutral grammar have also been coined. Pronouns like "elu" and "ile," neutral ending -e, and many others, although those are the most common ones. -e in particular – that's pronounced /ɛɪ/ because English vowels are a whole thing – is sort of becoming standard in things like greetings and announcements so as not to assume the lister's gender, and I think that's true of Spanish as well.

Kirby: I think that the orthographic E – the -e ending – that you're seeing crop up in Portuguese and Spanish, 1.) there's not nearly enough linguistics research about this. If you are somebody who's doing linguistics research like, hey, do some on this. C'mon.

Gretchen: And then email it to Kirby.

Kirby: Yes, just directly email me PDFs. I always wanna be emailed PDFs all the time. Two, I think that, when we're looking at translation, that's sort of a different question than what we're looking at within language stuff that we're doing, but I think that the gender inclusive forms that are cropping up in a lot of languages of like, "I'm trying to be less sexist," is something that can be very easily turned into non-binary forms but isn't always what people go for. Sometimes, people are like, "I actually want a specific gender non-conforming thing to do that I wanna do on purpose rather than just not giving you any gender information." I think that one of the beautiful joys about language as a giant group project that we're all always working on is that there're always gonna be multiple right answers of like, there's not going to be a single consensus form across an entire language community. There's just gonna be patterns and trends, and that's one of the things that I'm really excited to hear about these forms in Portuguese, and I wanna hear more about them especially. Thank you for sharing that also.

Gretchen: I was also really excited to see some people talking about German and Swedish. We have frankcesca saying "A cool thing that I've started to see in German lately is using adjectival nouns to describe professions. Last night, the show my kids were watching called researchers 'Forschende,' 'people who are researching' – using literally the word for 'researching' – rather than any version of 'Forscher/Forscherinnen/Forscher*innen'" – with a star in between – "and also 'Studierende,' 'studying,' to mean 'students' in a way that's gender neutral." Sionnach also commented that that was going on in German. Eiowlta said that "Studierende" can be used in Swedish as well as a gender neutral thing, which this was new to me. I've seen the "Student*innen" version where you have "Student" being masculine and "Studentin" being feminine, and then you combine all of the endings, but I hadn't seen this "Studierende" form, which is neat.

Kirby: Yeah, this is new to me, too. I'm very excited about it. I think that, 1.) the extra forms with the asterisk or sometimes it's a period or a capital letter in German – and I guess not just German but other Germanic close relatives – my understanding is that it cropped up as a way of being not sexist in a job ad. I actually wanna plug – I have a thesis advisee who wrote a beautiful thesis and has graduated from Swarthmore College, Mia Limmer, wrote her thesis about these doubly gendered forms in German that I found very exciting, looking into the morphosyntax and the theory of what's going on. She did some Praat spectrograms. It's all very linguistics. But the participle form is new to me. And I think it's so fun because it's like, languages love recycling. "I already have this form that's not gendered. I guess I will use it for this thing that I don't want gender on" is like, yeah, great, do it. The participial form of "those who study" as a way of avoiding gendering students is like, it's so cool, and I just want everybody to know that they're doing a great job. I have no further comment on it except like, hell yeah, I want that to be a whole thing, yay!

Gretchen: I think something that's neat about it, actually, is – so "student" itself comes from Latin where it's the same "studying" – present participial form of "studeo," "study" – and then a "student" is one who studies. E-N-T is like the "-ing" for Latin. It's actually doing the same thing grammatically that the original form was.

Kirby: It's coming full circle.

Gretchen: It's like a European party. They're all recycling the same strategies together.

Kirby: Hell, yes, I'm delighted by this.

Gretchen: We have a question that's from annamatopoetry that's originally based on Finnish about the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun "hen" and the Finnish "hän" – or also pronounced "hen" – which are both used for gender-neutral purposes. Are there other cases of artificially implanted or enforced personal pronouns or generally gendered pronouns?

Kirby: I mean, the situation where Swedish just borrowed this Finnish pronoun is, I think, really genius brained because, again, it's more efficient to recycle than to create something whole cloth. I think that the situation where Swedish just borrowed – it's "hen," right? I think I saw the note that it's /hæn/, and /æ/ is my favourite vowel, so I wanna go with that. This is something where I don't think that I would describe this as "artificial" or "neologistic." I don't think it's a new word that's created out of just, like, from nothing the way that some neopronouns are, but rather, it's like, "Our neighbours have something that looks useful. Let's go rifle through their recycling bins to do some arts and crafts with it."

Gretchen: I love how sustainably ecosystem this pronoun thing is turning out to be.

Kirby: Nature loves sustainability, and language is a part of nature. That would be my big generalisation about non-binary language is that we love doing sustainability because it's natural and organic processes, and stuff is happening. Rifling through your neighbour's recycling bins is a really good way to find pronouns – and other forms as well, not just pronouns. I actually don't know of that many situations outside of English where pronouns have been coined not by borrowing them from somewhere. Neopronouns in English –

Gretchen: Or sort of analogy with existing –

Kirby: Yeah.

Gretchen: So, "neopronouns" is the term for when a pronoun gets invented, although now we're questioning how much of that is inventing inventing and how much of it is recycling.

Kirby: Or upcycling.

Gretchen: Upcycling.

Kirby: [Laughs] Some neopronouns in English include "xe" – that's orthographic X-E – is one of my favourites. It just so happens that that's kind of analogous with both "she" and "he," but it's like, okay, well, it's a different fricative.

Gretchen: One of the things that made "xe" easier for me to use when I was thinking about people who use it as a pronoun in English – or some people have "xey/xem" or "xe/xem" – if you have a certain kind of French accent, like a Parisian French accent, you'll pronounce the /θə/ in "they" and "them" as if it's "zey/zem" – "What is zat zing zere?" If you just pronounce everything with a French accent, you can adapt to using "xe" very easily.

Kirby: Even things that are called "neopronouns" in English – and this is something that I've been researching more recently – almost all of them, as far as I can tell, have some analogy with existing pronouns. They are not completely made from the raw ore of language. We're upcycling these beautiful mason jars, you know. We found them in our neighbour's recycling, or we have them in our own recycling, and we're doing stuff to them. We're changing them and making them suit our purpose, but they're not coming from nowhere. That's true with almost all neologistic forms. They're not coming from nowhere. They're being adapted from existing linguistic resources. Again, I just think it's efficient.

Gretchen: That answers manishearth's question as well, which is neopronouns in English but how widespread are they in other languages, and do they work differently?

Kirby: That's also something that is very, very under-researched. I have just started dipping into neopronouns.

Gretchen: What's your neopronouns research say, Kirby?

Kirby: Oh my gosh. So, they're badly under-researched in English, too. It's just like me and three other people. I'm just constantly like, "Please, people, do linguistics research on neopronouns." Right now, I have experimental results that my lab and I have presented this at a couple of conferences. But I suggest that, okay, neopronouns are easier and more natural than stuff that we would expect to be just flat out ungrammatical. But they're a little bit harder for people than what we're calling "canonical" pronouns. In English that would be "he," "she," "they." They're kind of middling when we're just looking at everybody all together. Also, we're doing this as a sociolinguistic study. It might not surprise you to learn that younger people find neopronouns a little easier. People who are non-binary find neopronouns a little easier. People who are LGBT find neopronouns a little easier. When we're looking at big groups of people,

we're looking at who is likely to have some proximity or exposure to these forms, and those people are likely to find them easier to understand and keep up with.

Gretchen: Did you ask people how many friends they have that use neopronouns? Because I feel like just exposure is a big thing.

Kirby: Yes, so, that's one of the questions that we're asking is, "Have you heard of these? Where have you heard of these? Do you have friends who use these?" Yeah, people who have heard of them before find them a little bit more natural sounding. Exposure and familiarity and repetition are the biggest predictors of what is going to be a part of my mental language is "Have I ever seen it in my language world – my language habitat?"

Gretchen: I'm really excited for the next 30 years of you still doing this work because eventually we're gonna end up with a longitudinal version of this and then get to see how things change.

Kirby: I am also really excited for that, yes! Oh my god, I wanna do a longitudinal – I wanna follow people around and be like, "How are you feeling about them now? Okay, how about now? Okay, how about now?" for like 10 years at a time. I'm gonna be the most annoying linguist on Earth. I'm so excited for it.

Gretchen: I think you have a lot of competition for that title – in a very good way. The one that I've seen in another language is – so French has "iel," I-E-L, and sometimes it's spelled I-E-L-L-E or Y-E-L. There's a couple different versions, which is clearly related to "il" – spelled I-L – and "elle" – spelled E-L-L-E. Again, it's upcycling. You know, we found some nice scraps of pronouns at the thrift shop, and we're sewing them together into a quilt or something. But yeah, it's got this relationship with that. I think Spanish is doing /ɛɪjɛɪ/ which is from "el" and "ella," which always confuses me because /ɛɪjɛɪ/ is spelled the same as "elle" in French. Sometimes, I see someone's pronouns in their Twitter bio or something, and I'm like, "Oh, wait, no, I have to reparse that as French, actually," or as Spanish.

Kirby: Yes. So, you got to watch out for that. I love "iel" and "elle" because they are both blends. And I love blends. Blends are some of my favourite ways of creating new words is I'm just gonna smoosh them together and make them hold hands. It's like, okay, some of my favourite English nouns are blends like "bromance" and "brunch" and "bootylicious." Really good blends. "Iel" and "elle" are both essentially blends. I've just smooshed them. I really, really like it. I think that in some way you could think of that's what's going on with those "-innen" forms in German where I have both of them just slapped onto the same noun. It's like doing a tiny little blend and then slapping it onto a noun. I think that's delightful. I think that looking at non-binary language is a really great way to discover "How do languages like to make stuff?" because we have certain strategies that we tend to use over and over across many different contexts. Recycling, borrowing, blending – it's great. I love it.

Gretchen: Can I read you an example of another strategy which I coincidentally found on Tumblr while we were preparing for this episode?

Kirby: Oh my god, Tumblr linguistics, yes, please, hit me.

Gretchen: This is from a user named testosteronetwunk.

Kirby: [Laughs] That's another good blend.

Gretchen: This person says, "Since regrettably most of my followers aren't Vietnamese, I'd like y'all to know that the Vietnamese language is pretty moderately gendered. Most of our honorifics are gendered. So, non-binary Vietnamese people have been creating their own gender-neutral pronouns like by combining 'chị,' which is 'girl older than you,' and 'anh' – dude older than you – into 'chanh.' But 'chanh' is also the word for 'lemon.' So, for a short while lemons became a symbolic non-binary thing. But then some nonbinary Viets were like, 'Hmm, we don't like how that pronoun is defined by the gender binary,' so they created a new pronoun, 'cam,' which means 'orange' like the fruit."

Kirby: Oh my god. Oh my god, I love that. I also love that they're keeping a theme. It's such a game of symbolism telephone. I love that. That's so fun.

Gretchen: It really makes me wonder, you know, are limes or grapefruits further down this path also. Where are we going with this?

Kirby: Oh my god, I would love that to be the case. Different kinds of little tangerines and stuff – yes. If anybody has any data or wants a really good research topic, I really – again, email me PDFs of this. I wanna know everything about it. I'm just completely obsessed.

Gretchen: This is a question from the The_Linguist_LL which says, "The Korana language distinguishes three grammatical genders – masculine, feminine, neutral – in all three persons – first person, second person, and third persons – in all of singular dual – so that's referring to two people – and plural – which in this case would be three or more numbers. I always think languages that mark gender on the second person are interesting because if you're talking to someone, what's the function in specifying their gender to them." Do you wanna talk about other places that languages mark or don't mark gender?

Kirby: Oh yeah, I mean, languages love to mark or not mark gender. I like to think of social gender as, I dunno, like –

Gretchen: Is this like horoscope signs or something? Yeah.

Kirby: Yeah, yeah, it's like, okay, it's just a category that you're in that may or may not mean something, but people find it meaningful and are interested in talking about it and knowing about it.

Gretchen: I guess there could be a function if you're in a group with lots of people, and you wanna specify who you're talking to, that gender would give you some degree – in the same way that gender gives you some degree of narrowing down who you're talking to even though it's obviously a very lossy encoding system because if you have eight people, you probably don't have eight grammatical genders to refer to each of them differently.

Kirby: But what if you did?

Gretchen: What if you did?

Kirby: I think that this is one of the reasons that I really like comparing gender to honourific systems of like, it's not literally gender, it's just more about reducing ambiguity. I think that languages are always being pulled by two forces. The forces are reducing ambiguity and increasing specificity, and then the other force, the opposing force, is make it easy to say, like, be efficient about the message, include as little information as possible because it's hard for me to move my meat flaps around. Whether I'm using spoken language or another modality, it's just like, I want stuff to be easy to articulate. The push and pull are always like, "Do I put more information in, or do I put less information in?" Thinking about gender as a system of honourifics lets me compare it to something like Thai, which has a lot of pronouns. It's a different pronoun if you're a monk, or the king, or somebody's big sister.

Gretchen: This goes back to "my liege" again.

Kirby: Yes. Calling somebody "Big Sister" is both gendered, but it's also about age, and it's about relative social role, and it's about your outfit that day and vibes and what our relationship is personally. Back to the original question of "What's going on with marking gender on the second person?" I think that people like having their social relationships reinforced by the people that they're talking with. Cis people get gender euphoria, too.

Gretchen: As a cis person, can confirm. I get gender euphoria.

Kirby: Yeah. People who like thinking of themselves as women like to be called "women." That's very normal. It's absolutely true for like – cis women love having their womanhood reinforced in ways that are validating and not shitty.

Gretchen: I think there're a lot of things that we mean by "cis," and sometimes people are like, "Oh, I just want people to assume a vague sense of gender and not be gendering me aggressively all the time."

Kirby: Yeah. It's definitely not universal, but there are definitely lots of cis people who feel deeply that their gender is an important aspect of who they are. I am specifying cis people because I think this is something that gets put on trans people where people act as if we are unique in wanting our genders affirmed. No. Cis people very much want their gender affirmed – a lot. They just mostly get it. I think that if you think of affirming somebody's gender in a linguistic way by marking their gender on a second person pronoun like the "you.feminine," it's a way of saying, "I see you. I acknowledge that our relationship is the one that you think it is. We are in agreement about what kind of social roles we have in relation to each other." I think that that's something that people like doing, and it also makes conversations less confusing because it's giving me a little bit more information about who we're talking about and to.

Gretchen: Absolutely. When I got back to Montreal – because I've been doing a lot of travelling – I was like, "Oh, people are gonna refer to me as 'madam' again." That's kind of nice. I like it. There's a tension between like, "Okay, why do we have all these gendered address forms, and strangers get referred to by forms that assume their gender?" And I'm like, "Yeah, but if you look at me, I'm clearly trying to do this feminine thing, and I really enjoy people noticing that."

Kirby: That's great. I think that that's very much something that I think a lot of people do experience of like, "I like when people show that they pick up what I'm putting down." Of like, "I

like when there's some linguistic indication that people are finding me legible and are understanding what I'm trying to accomplish with my outfit and hairdo and general demeanour." I think that this is one of those cases of like, it's affirming, and it's a way of also recreating and reinforcing those social relationships that gender is made out of.

Gretchen: Absolutely.

Kirby: Can I answer one of these questions about the existence of grammatical gender?

Gretchen: Sure. Is this question, "Is the existence of grammatical gender sexist?" from Dan?

Kirby: Yes. I do wanna talk about this. Dan, I actually really like this question. Grammatical gender is referring to languages like German or Italian or Spanish – those are my examples that I like to go to – where not just nouns that are referring to people have gender endings but also nouns that are referring to non-people like tables and chairs have masculine and feminine endings. One of the things that I've been really trying to push when I'm teaching linguistics and when I'm talking about this is to instead of gender think of these as noun classes. There're many languages that have noun classes that actually don't correspond to social gender at all. There're languages that have noun classes that some of them correspond to social genders, but a lot of them correspond to like, "Is this thing very large?"

Gretchen: I think most famously the Bantu languages have something like, depending on which Bantu language, somewhere between like 8 or 12 and 20 noun classes. The famous Bantu noun classes, most of them start with human singular and human plural – singular and plural are different noun classes. That is a little bit the way that gender sorts people into those types of ontologies, but then there's also noun classes for things like abstract nouns or long, thin objects or flat objects or little ball objects or large objects that are ways of compartmentalising the kinds of things you might be talking about. Those are just classes of nouns. Closer to home, Dutch has two noun classes, and they are "neuter" and "common" because, like other Germanic languages, they used to have masculine, feminine, and neuter like German does and English used to, but they collapsed grammatically the masculine and feminine into the same noun class, and it's used for people, and it's called "common." There's an Indo-European example for you.

Kirby: I am gonna put that in my pocket forever. Back to Dan's question, the existence of grammatical gender is an arbitrary accident of morpho-phonological patterns. The reason that "la mesa" is feminine in Spanish is not because a table is like a woman, it's because it ends in "-a," which is also the thing that women adjectives end in. The reason that linguists call these classes a thing in the first place is because they have an impact on what adjectives are gonna end with or what articles are gonna go with this word. If you think of grammatical gender instead of having anything to do with social gender and just reconfigure your mind to think about this as a noun class system – it is no different from any other noun class systems except that it happens to sound like words for also social classes that exist. That said, there are some studies that people will sort of – this is a very light Sapir-Whorf sort of linguistic relativism thing – there's a couple studies looking at people who are native speakers of different languages that the word "table" is feminine in one language and masculine in another, people will think of tables as more delicate or more robust based on their opinions about gender ideology of "Do you think of feminine things as being smaller?" That tends to be mostly unconscious on the part of speakers

who hold those beliefs, and I think that it's mostly accidental. I don't think that it's an indication of being misogynist. I think that it's like, "Well, gender ideology is the water that we are all swimming in, and so it's impossible to not pick up some of it."

Gretchen: I think it takes a fairly fine-grained study to pick that up. I think the example they had was "bridge," which I think it's "le pont" in French, and then it's "die Brücke" in German. They asked speakers to draw a bridge, and they sort of draw a prettier bridge if they thought it was feminine and a sturdier bridge if they thought it was masculine, based on the language. But that doesn't mean that if they see a bridge that doesn't correspond to that particular drawing, they're like, "This is not a bridge," in the real world.

Kirby: This is the weak version of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It's not deterministic; it's just a light influence.

Gretchen: The fun thing is, is that the word "gender" comes from the same root as "genre" and originally only meant the grammatical thing, and then people felt squeamish about saying the word "sex" and started using it for the more social thing also, which I find is kind of – not that etymology is everything – but I find it kind of nifty.

Kirby: I think it's very funny.

Gretchen: Cormac says, "A few weeks ago, I somewhat jokingly said my pronouns were 'he/him' or 'slay/slem,' but then realised that they're also pronouns, so I started using them. My question is, 'Can I respectfully use these neopronouns if I wasn't too serious when I originally came up with them?'"

Kirby: You can do anything you want forever.

Gretchen: [Laughs]

Kirby: I give you, personally, permission, but also everybody. You can use whatever pronouns you want. It's fine. I have said this, and I've said this in writing, and so if you wanna use some pronouns, you just can. You don't need a doctor's note or a permission slip. I'm giving you a permission slip. You just can. They don't have to be super serious. You don't have to use them forever. You don't have to use them with everybody. You don't actually have to use them with anybody. You could just use them in your own head and never tell anybody and have a juicy little secret for yourself of like, "This is what I'm up to." I really wanted to make sure that I said that to you and to everybody of like, you can use any pronouns. It's fine.

Gretchen: I also think that every bit of language was made up at some point, so it's not like there're some parts of language that aren't made up. It's all made up. We've collectively made it up. It's part of culture and life and human experience. It isn't that some parts of language aren't made up. No, literally, it was all made up at some point just some bits are older than others.

Kirby: All pronouns are made up. All words are made up. This is also why there's no such thing as "biological pronouns." That's a fake idea. You can do whatever you want.

Gretchen: I think my favourite comment about this came – we did a bonus episode ages ago about prototype theory and how we don't actually know what a chair is or what a bowl is

because once you start trying to write a definition – or what a bird is – you realise that, "Wait, but does an emu count as a bird?" and "Could this cup count as a bowl because it doesn't have a handle?" and all sorts of things that it ends up being that no one knows what a cup is or what a bowl is. Somebody reblogged it on Tumblr saying, "You know, this makes me feel a lot better about my gender in that I don't really know what a woman is because if we don't know what a cup or a bird is, maybe it's okay that I don't know what it means to be truly a woman because we also don't know what it means to be truly a chair."

Kirby: We are the ones making these categories. These categories aren't objectively real. We are categorising things.

Gretchen: We have a final question from ember who says, "I'm planning to get a cat at some point," great decision, "and would like to assign it neopronouns. Is there a set of neopronouns you think would be particularly good for this hypothetical cat or method you'd recommend for choosing which ones to use for a given cat?"

Kirby: No, that's delightful. I think that "nounself" pronouns are really good for cats and pets because it's like kind of fun and playful. I was thinking – okay, I have a whiteboard outside my office, and I'm like, "Pronoun of the Week," and then somebody corrected it and was like, "Pronoun of the Month," because I didn't change it for a month, and so they're like, "Professor Conrod, it's been a month with this one pronoun."

Gretchen: I'm not sure if the people in your office hallway are really waiting with baited breath for what the pronoun of the week is.

Kirby: So, one of the suggestion pronouns that I got in my pronoun suggestion box is "kin" – K-I-N. I don't actually know how it declines, but I would be really interested in finding out. I think that would be extremely cute because it's like, "This is a member of my family. This cat is my kin." I also think, okay, I do know that people have pronouns that are like "kit/kitself," and I think that would be really good for cats because it's like –

Gretchen: That would be so cute. "The cat loves kitself."

Kirby: Yeah, that's so good. I actually am seeing in the listen along chat that somebody else suggested a form of this "kit/kis/kiself."

Gretchen: Cute.

Kirby: Also, some suggestions of just "meow." And then "purrself," which I like.

Gretchen: "Purrself." Oh, that's so clever!

Kirby: It's good, yeah, no, I love it.

Gretchen: "The cat loves purrself."

Kirby: Yes.

Gretchen: Actually, "per," spelt P-E-R, short for "person," is a gender neutral pronoun that I encountered in this 1970s speculative feminist sci-fi book called Woman on the Edge of Time, which was really interesting and sort of imagines this future where the gender pronouns are sort of "person," which gets shortened to "per" and "perself." You sort of use "person" the first time, and then you can shorten it to "per" on later reference. It's very easy to read. I never encountered that before this book. But by the time I finished the book, I was like, "Yeah, this is fine. I am totally parsing this."

Kirby: I love that. That sounds really fun. I need to – I mean, I'm an academic, and so I have a really hard time reading for fun during the school year, but when I get to summer, I have to binge read everything all at once. I really need to make a list of books that have fun pronouns because I think that reading an entire book with a pronoun that's not familiar to you is a great way to just get a lot of exposure. I think that that sounds really fun.

[Music]

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Kirby: Stay lingthusiastic!

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