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"Look at her": Function and Effect of Contemporary American English Gendered Slang

David King
Terrence Ross
Kimberly Lavery
Maya Muratov

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Abstract

"She's a happy pancake. She's good" (Porowski, 2019). This research considers such examples of the current trends of pronominal gender assignment in American English slang, specifically the use of gender pronouns among young adults (18-35 years of age) to refer to inanimate and non-gendered objects. Central to this research are the works of four key researchers, Andrew Pawley, Èlise Mignot, Kate Scott, and Anna Wierzbicka, who consider pronoun use and pronominal gender assignment through a categorization of phrases, a pronominal hierarchy, reference comprehension, and sexual and social relationships. With these works as a basis for analysis, a new theory relevant to the motivations and effects of the current trends in English gendered slang is proposed. These perspectives are supported by social, psychological, and linguistic studies and research related to English pronoun use and social comprehension of gender. The proposed theory defines the contemporary use of pronominal gender assignment as characterized by traditional gender roles and expectations and as limited in manner of expression by the structure of the English language, using gender pronouns to emphasize the characterization of a gender neutral object at a remove from gender categorization. The theory presented serves as a base to elaborate on the effects such language may have on identity and interpersonal communication. This research aims to support equal and gender-fair language through challenging the inherently accepted gender hierarchies and benevolent sexism that continue to define and limit both societies and social relationships.

Chapter 1: Introduction

A major topic of concern among communications scholars is the use and effects of slang among various populations. Slang, at any point in history, "reflects the times and continuously mirrors the age in which it is used" (Heffron, 1962). Not only does slang tend to fade in and out of popularity relatively quickly, but the phrases are often only definable in terms of "'good connotation' and 'bad connotation,' or in terms of each other" (Dean, 1962). Very often, however, little authority is given to the origins, uses, and influences of slang terms, even when those beginnings, means, and ends may pertain to and perpetuate beliefs and schemas regarding social values.

Contemporary society has witnessed a great deal of thought and scholarship tending to the use of such commonplace language in terms of gender and the role of slang in human communication. For instance, teens and school-age children in Baltimore adopted "yo" as a replacement for "he" and "she" gender pronouns when they did not know the gender of the referent, and sometimes even when they did (Hersher, 2013). Trends such as this one raise questions as to whether or not individuals using such language are thinking about themselves and others in terms of gender in English, a language in which relationships and references require knowledge of and attention to an individual's gender. As ephemeral as slang may be, it is important to consider how such language, gendered slang in particular, interacts with individual understanding of identity as well as with interpersonal communication and relationships by bringing complex concepts of human life to the forefront of our everyday speech.

While it is difficult to point out exactly when the expanded use of gender pronouns in everyday conversation became popularized, since approximately 2017, English-speaking American teens and young adults have added gender pronouns to discussions of and references

to observable inanimate and non-gendered objects within their physical environment. Often, an individual may refer to the sunset with "she" or "her," remarking "Look at her, she's beautiful!," or a coffee machine with "he" or "him," noting that "He just needs a second to get going." These remarks and references are subtle, yet noticeable in common speech in that these phrases break linguistic norms and grammar rules and may challenge the common schema of an event or an item (e.g. - a sunset or a coffee machine) as a gender neutral "it" in English. The use of gender pronouns when referring to a non-gendered referent may cause confusion as to what, not to whom, the speaker is referring.

In the research of pronominal gender assignment Andrew Pawley, Élise Mignot, Kate Scott, and Anna Weirzbicka have each produced considerable works and theoretical approaches addressing specific aspects of pronominal gender assignment relevant to contemporary English slang. In "He's A Big Tree, She's a Cold Wind: Pronominal Gender Assignment to Inanimates in Australian Vernacular English," Andrew Pawley (2016) has focused on the use of "pronominal gender assignment in an 'animated style'" (p. 149). This approach involves categorizing certain types of objects as usually referred to as masculine such as animates or usually referred to as feminine such as inanimates in Australian Vernacular English (AVE). Outside of such rather broad categories, Pawley (2016) argues that the use of gender pronouns may reflect the "emotional attachment to (feminine) or detachment from (masculine)" an object and that the system as a whole largely aligns with the history of gender assignment in Middle English (p. 149). Pawley also argues that other researchers have focused too much on the importance of stereotypes over the "inherent semantic criteria in gender assignment," placing significance on the words simply as representations of things as opposed to broader social implications associated with representation (Pawley, 2016, p. 166).

Élise Mignot (2012), in "The Conceptualization of Natural Gender in English," offers a more linguistically-based perspective rooted in the idea that individuals assume a shared understanding of gender and largely assume the gender of referents. Crucial to Mignot's argument is the use of pronouns to avoid anaphora, the repetition of the title of a specific subject. In this way, referencing non-gendered or inanimate objects with different gender pronouns would signal a distinct categorization of the referent as already known and as commonly understood (Mignot, 2012). These pronoun distinctions are, in general, defined categories without overlap according to Mignot (2012) suggesting that an individual, and perhaps even an object, is limited to one category of pronoun. Mignot (2012) thus argues that there is essentially a scale for categorization ranging from the base "it" through the masculine pronouns such as "he" and peaking at the feminine pronouns such as "she," making feminine pronouns representative of greater "construction of the reference" (Mignot, 2012, para. 90). The use of gender pronouns to refer to inanimate and non-gendered objects thus becomes an expression of categorization as opposed to an expression of preference.

Kate Scott, however, diverges with a separate linguistically-based perspective of pronominal gender assignment in "Pronouns and procedures: Reference and beyond" (2015). Scott (2015) applies procedural and expressive understandings of meaning to the use of English pronouns noting that, according to relevance theory, people prefer information that requires the least effort to decode and understand. Pronouns are often logically connected to the referent that is relevant to the conversation with minimal ambiguity (Scott, 2015). Through procedural comprehension, the pronoun forces the receiver of the information to identify a referent that matches the pronoun used according to factors such as gender and number (Scott, 2015). In this way, individuals must identify and categorize items and individuals that can be referred to with

particular pronouns based on widely accepted criteria, as opposed to personal opinion, based on the relevant information (Scott, 2015). Unexpected or incorrect pronominal assignment may impact the relevance of the reference according to the receiver considering their ability to make sense of the information, but Scott (2015) argues that the reference would be accepted if it is aimed at creating greater "cognitive effects" (p. 78).

Anna Wierzbicka, the last of the four key researchers noted, maintains an argument from a more purely social perspective of language. In "Sexism in Grammar: The Semantics of Gender in Australian English," Wierzbicka (2002) has argued that the use of gender pronouns in referring to inanimate and non-gendered objects should not be removed from its social context. Instead, focus must be leant to the use of gender pronouns for such referents as a sexual simile of sorts, understood by the social statuses of and relationships between men and women within the larger culture involving concepts such as authority and traditional man-and-woman relationships (Wierzbicka, 2002). Together, these four researchers represent the main approaches to explaining pronominal gender assignment. Other researchers have given support to similar ideas focused on "the individuation" of referents by type and cultural influence (Siemund, 2002), the relevance of the referent in conjunction with physical gestures (Arnold, Strangmann, Hwang, Zerkle, & Nappa, 2018), and the general influence of gender stereotypes based on social experience (Wilkie & Bodenhausen, 2012).

As an object of the larger body of language used naturally in everyday conversation, the way in which this slang reflects and perpetuates the conditions of our time must be considered. While slang terms and phrases do not carry absolute meaning, they do allow social groups to maintain relationships and common values (Izmaylova, Zamaletdinova, & Zholshayeva, 2017). Slang enables its users to define and coordinate groups of perhaps like-minded individuals who

share some understanding of language and its relationship with the real world. The use of slang speaks to the relationships that exist among social groups and even reflects their understandings and perceptions of social hierarchies which we may find reflected in our physical surroundings as well (Redkozubova, 2015). The distinct manner in which pronouns are currently being used may very well offer insight into our understanding and perceptions of the self and others in a social context.

Clearly there exists a significance to this use of gender pronouns beyond mere syntax and the agreement of pronouns with the subject or noun. Interestingly, research has focused considerable attention on categorizing the use of gender pronouns in the English language and on the perceptions of physical objects in relation to grammatical gender categories, largely in languages other than English. However, an insufficient amount of research has considered the interaction between these two topics as a part of everyday language, particularly in English. In order to address this gap in research, the current study utilizes theories and research from gender and linguistic perspectives to establish a unique theoretical interpretation relevant to the current trend of pronominal gender assignment in American English slang. This interpretation will serve as a basis for understanding the use and intended as well as unintended effects of this language on identity, interpersonal relationships, and communication more generally.

Slang will continue to evolve rapidly and may vary across contexts, but this research will provide a base for improving communication by pointing to the value of identity and our interpretations of the other in everyday speech. Prior to research, I had anticipated that the findings would suggest that this language is informed and perpetuated by gender roles and stereotypes and that the speech itself would contribute to a sense of inclusion and exclusion among those in conversation with regard to the referent. I expected that such language could

demonstrate and contribute to a socially constructed and defined image of the self and a poorly defined image of the other as a member of their gender group. This, I had hypothesized, could be particularly difficult for individuals who do not use nor identify with masculine or feminine pronouns or gender groups I will argue that this trend in language and slang finds its semantic basis in understandings of the concept of gender and its social significance, particularly in regard to slang, but that the linguistic use and functioning relies more heavily on the structure of the English language and our ability to associate referents in context.

The major terms of this study include:

- **Slang** - words, phrases, or use of language specific to a group of individuals and may involve newly created words or preexisting words associated with a newly accepted and commonly understood meaning, tending to remain in use for a relatively short period of time

- **Sex** - refers to the biological nature of a living organism as either male or female based on genetics and genital form, often used as the basis for the assignment of a gender

- **Gender** - social identification of an individual commonly as man or woman, but inclusive of identities such as nonbinary and gender neutral and of the social ideologies associated with those roles

- **Gendered language** - describes a language that categorizes its words, particularly nouns, based on a distinction between the words as masculine or feminine and may include other categories such as neuter

- **Non-gendered language** - describes a language that does not categorize its words, particularly nouns, based on distinctions such as masculine or feminine

- **Non-gendered object/event** - (in the physical world) an inanimate object or event that does not have an identifiable sex and is not assigned a gender; (in language) an object or event that is represented by a word that does not carry grammatical gender; these two definitions often coincide in the English language

- **Gender/Gendered slang** - refers to slang involving gender as a main component in understanding the mutually defined meaning of a word or phrase, often apart from a conventional definition

While the use of gender pronouns for non-gendered and inanimate referents has pervaded contemporary American pop culture, this study is limited to gender pronoun use in slang among English-speaking American teens and young adults (18-35 years of age). The interpretation and examples are confined generally to the slang as it exists in the Greater New York City area with examples gathered anonymously largely from the area of the Adelphi University campus in Garden City, NY. The current study focuses on the main theories regarding gender pronoun use for inanimate and non-gendered objects and includes a semantic and pragmatic analysis of this language in context considering the ways in which it affects our communication and sense of identity. I will examine the use and understanding of the words in relation to their referents and within the context of a casual conversation where this slang is most likely to naturally occur.

In order to better exemplify the use and interpretations of this particular variety of gendered slang, I will utilize a transcript of real-world examples gathered from everyday conversation. Each example will be presented alongside a description of its relevant context in order to present a basic concept of the semantic environment in which the slang occurred. Specifically, these examples listed in Chapter 4: Slang Transcript will allow for a more thorough consideration of this language through the application of specific concepts and perspectives

described in Chapter 2: Review of the Literature and of the new interpretation and theory as outlined in Chapter 5: Findings.

Through an analysis of the gendered slang as highlighted in my transcript, I expect to establish a broadly accepted understanding of this language as it is used among English-speaking American teens and young adults and offer examples for analysis. An examination of self-reported interpretations of one's own use of pronominal gender assignment would require an extensive sample size and considerable analysis yielding likely questionable results (Pawley, 2016). Therefore, I have chosen to examine and establish a theoretical understanding of the contemporary trends in gendered slang and their effects on the individual and on interpersonal communication.

In the next chapter, Chapter 2: Review of the Literature, I will establish an understanding of the use of gender pronouns in English and continue to examine the existing literature relevant to the topic of gendered slang as it has been defined. Chapter 2 will focus on the social and linguistic theories related to our understanding of pronoun use in general and specifically in terms of unexpected use such as when referring to a non-gendered object with a gender pronoun.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Gender as a part of our social hierarchy has clearly gained consideration in contemporary society. While the unexpected use of a gender pronoun when referring to an object may appear confusing, it has embedded itself into the everyday language of young American English-speakers, perhaps signalling a shared understanding and maintenance of social concepts across large populations. This trend may offer a glimpse into the interactions of gender and social relationships beyond our perceptions of our physical environment, beyond referring to a pancake as a "she." This chapter will discuss the use of pronouns in a social and linguistic context and examine four main theories explaining pronoun use according to Pawley, Mignot, Scott, and Wierzbicka. Altogether, this research will serve as a basis for examining the current trends of gendered slang as they relate to pronominal gender assignment.

Understanding the sentiment that underlies this language is particularly necessary today when considering contemporary social conditions. Along with the transformation and growing fluidity of gender roles largely encouraged by social and economic pressures (Scott, 2006; Smits, Mulder, & Hooimeijer, 2002), in the 2010s, a tremendous dialogue has opened up regarding the individual's right to define themselves as they feel is appropriate. The idea of gender itself has become more fluid with the creation of new gender pronouns such as "ze," "hir," and even simply "they," prompting individuals of all identities to specify the pronouns they prefer for themselves as a method of destigmatization of nonbinary and trans gender identity within the context of heteronormative binaries (Blaylock, 2020; Mcglashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). The American Dialect Society elected "(my) pronouns" as the word of the year and "they" as the word of the year at the end of 2019 as did Merriam-Webster (Blaylock, 2020).

Such complex capacities for language and thought are the hallmark of humanity. Yet, people wonder carefully and debate wildly over how such changes in what have been accepted as absolute, defined truths for so long will change our society. To many, it is simply unnatural. Some people characterize those who prefer only the use of "he" or "she" gender pronouns as "imposing your will on others, and not seeing the forest for the trees" (Harris & Tarchak, 2019). Caitlin Dewey notes such attitudes as "a stubborn, longtime hurdle to transgender acceptance and equality, a fundamental refusal to afford those people even basic grammatical dignity" (Bennett, 2016). Studies suggest that resistance to the use of pronouns according to a masculine-feminine binary is driven more by "gender role attitudes" than "grammatical conventions" (Bradley, Schmid, & Lombard, 2019, p. 52). This indicates attention to concepts of gender, masculinity and femininity, in pronoun use as opposed to the strict grammatical agreement of noun and pronoun. The use or not of gender pronouns can be deliberate and powerful or tossed around almost without thought. Assigning a gender to a coffee maker, therefore, may resonate quite differently with a cisgender man than with a transgender woman. Such basic pieces of our language can have a profound effect on how we express and identify ourselves, interpret and classify our surroundings, and perceive and understand others.

Languages such as Spanish, French, and Arabic classify nouns by gender, masculine and feminine. These classifications inform much more than just the way in which one constructs a sentence. Boroditsky and Phillips (2003) showed that Spanish and German speaking individuals perceived objects as more masculine or feminine based on the noun's assigned gender in their dominant language even when these distinctions were tested in English. For example, Spanish speakers would consistently refer to objects that are masculine according to Spanish grammar with more "masculine" English adjectives and group objects in English according to those

grammatical categories in Spanish. Aside from organizing objects into categories, evidence shows that "societies with gendered language consistently display deeper gender inequality than societies with neutral language" (Harris, Biencowe, & Telem, 2017). While English still contains gender pronouns including "he" and "she," often based on the referent's "natural gender" originally determined by sex, the language does not carry grammatical gender, meaning that it does not classify nouns in terms of a system like binary masculine-feminine gender. One must then consider the possibility that a trend in the gendering of inanimate objects and events in everyday English speech could contribute to a shift towards greater or more expressed gender inequality.

To many, the classification of nouns into gender categories appears arbitrary, perhaps especially so to native English speakers. Yet, some researchers argue that the classification of nouns by gender is not as random as we might think and is instead logically based on "the complex interaction of productive rules, phonetic/morphological principles, and semantic domains" (Craig, 1986, p. 108). The possibility that modern English words are not well suited to carry gender in an organized way only raises further questions regarding the apparently arbitrary classification of objects and events with gender pronouns in English slang today.

Gendered nouns have, in fact, existed in the English language in the past with masculine and feminine articles "se" and "sēo" respectively. However, modern English does not use gendered nouns organized into gender categories and, as such, is largely considered a non-gendered language. Words such as "man," "woman," "boy," and "girl may carry gender in definition, but the words themselves do not carry a gender or belong to a grammatical gender category. For instance, in Old English the word kingdom was *cynedom*, a masculine noun which would be paired with a masculine article (Curzan, 2003). Such a system, as has been noted, may

encourage the grouping and comparison of things and concepts that one may not otherwise associate with one another in a language where nouns are not gendered (Boroditsky & Phillips, p. 932). Physical objects take on the categorical characteristics of their verbal counterpart and may be perceived and treated according to those categorizations.

The evidence to explain why English shifted from this structure of linguistic gender categorization to a non-gendered structure is insufficient. Some linguists point to an examination of an inherent deterioration of gendered nouns prior to English's social and linguistic interactions with Norse and French in England (Wilton, 2010). Others like Anne Curzan (2003) argue that the actual mixing of English with Old Norse in Northern England created confusion regarding noun gender which did not always align across both languages and so the distinctions were dropped to avoid such confusion (Persson, 2005). The contemporary trends in English gendered slang are not, however, a return to these gendered categorizations of nouns.

It is important to note that, although individuals may refer to a non-gendered object or event with a gender pronoun in contemporary English slang, gender is not assigned to the words, but rather "to their 'real world' referents, usually represented by a noun" (Pawley, 2016, p. 152). Therefore, the assigned gender may vary between individual use and the exact object or event being referred to (Pawley, 2016), making the trend inherently different from the system of grammatical gender used in languages such as Spanish or German. Of course slang does not always clearly follow the formal grammatical rules of a language, but in this case the phrases used are defining qualities and perceptions of referents. Despite this lack of uniformity in gender assignment within the current trends of gendered slang, it is still significant to consider what effect the gendering of inanimate objects and events has on our understanding of our surroundings and of others.

The nature of language implies a "relationship between the speaker and his audience" (Dean, 1962, p. 323). Slang further classifies this relationship and limits the inclusiveness of a group based on a common understanding of values and meaning (Dean, 1962; Heffron, 1962). Individuals also inherently prefer information that makes the most sense to them and requires the least amount of effort to understand (Scott, 2015). The use of pronouns, and improper use in terms of grammatical rules as has been noted, creates ambiguity among communicators and yet this trend has still caught on among various populations. Those using gendered slang in conversation must then share an understanding of this stretched use of gender pronouns which must be in some way relevant to the current conversation or situation. This trend does not arise in formal writing or in more formal or refined forms of speech such as what one might experience in a professional work setting. Instead it appears among teens and young adults engaged in casual conversations seemingly on a whim.

How these references are meant to be understood in terms of language is open for debate among researchers. While some linguists stress the significance of the expression of personal preference for the referent and of cultural norms in the expanded use of gender pronouns in slang (Pawley, 2016; Wilkie & Bodenhausen, 2012), some point to a linguistic and schematic scale of sorts for classifying objects when using pronouns to specify a referent that is inanimate or non-gendered (Scott, 2016; Mignot, 2012), and others suggest the influence of social roles and interactions between the sexes (Wierzbicka, 2002). In any case, speakers must share a semantic environment of agreed upon relationships, goals of communication, and shared meaning in order to make sense of the pronouns used in conversation (Arango, 2018). While the meaning of these words ("he," "she," "him," "her") has not been changed exactly according to definition, the manner in which they are used and the ideas and information they convey has become redefined.

The current use of gender pronouns for referencing inanimate and non-gendered objects and events functions so as to direct attention to a particular referent or refer to an already defined referent in an unexpected way. In many cases, the referent will be wholly apparent to the individual receiving the information or can be easily deduced by the gaze or gestures of the speaker or by asking for clarification. The relevant approaches to interpreting the use of gender pronouns for referencing inanimate and non-gendered objects in English can largely be defined into two main groups. One group focuses on the linguistic functioning and processing of gender pronouns and references, the other on the social context in which such references might occur involving both the immediate situation and larger social conditions. Pronominal gender assignment may be understood in terms of a categorization of like objects (Pawley, 2016), a pronominal hierarchy (Mignot, 2012), reference comprehension (Scott, 2015), or even power- and gender-based understandings of objects (Wierzbicka, 2002) as will be discussed. The effects of gender in language, particularly with pronominal references and assignments, are believed to place the individual into categories with predetermined characteristics. This becomes particularly salient with slang, affecting one's ability to define and perceive a referent based on socially constructed categories (Redkozubova, 2015), maintaining particular relationships and values (Izmaylova, Zamaletdinova, & Zholshayeva, 2017). The way these concepts relate to the current understanding of pronominal gender assignment in contemporary slang will be analyzed according to four main theoretical approaches to references and gender pronouns.

Andrew Pawley has approached the use of gender pronouns for inanimate and non-gendered referents through a method of categorization. Pawley's (2016) approach examines pronominal gender assignment based on categories of things that are consistently referred to as masculine, such as trees and living things, and things that are consistently referred to as

feminine, such as inanimates quite generally whether concrete or abstract in AVE. These inanimates that become feminine in AVE seem to come from disparate groups including body parts and seasons in Australian Vernacular English (AVE) without any sort of distinguishable connection, semantic or physical, between the referents (Pawley, 2016). The categorical difference that Pawley deduces is based on a semantic analysis of examples of pronominal gender assignment and the information conveyed to the listener.

The distinction between these categories according to Pawley (2016) falls to the emotional connection or lack thereof that the speaker experiences with the referent. Objects that one feels interested in or emotionally attached to are marked as feminine whereas objects from which a person feels disconnected or in which they are uninterested would be marked as masculine. Pawley (2016) also states explicitly that he feels that cultural factors such as gender stereotypes are overemphasized by other theorists. Instead, Pawley (2016) argues that "semantic criteria" is sufficient in analyzing the assignment of gender which he states may function well as a method of analysis when considering pronominal gender assignment in AVE and American English (p. 166). Pawley (2016) also points to an understanding of pronominal gender assignment as not referring to words themselves, "but to their 'real-world' referents" (p. 152). Pronouns, particularly in the current case of gendered slang, refer specifically to the individual referent in that moment, a specific and unique sunset or coffee machine as opposed to all sunsets or all coffee machines. A referent may receive a masculine or feminine gender pronoun depending on the individual experience of that unique referent.

Apart from Pawley's theory specifically, particularly challenging for all theories and explanations is the fact that people often cannot satisfactorily explain why they choose particular pronouns for inanimate objects, whether in slang dependent on individual experience of a

referent or in common language, such as referring to a ship as "she." For instance, in one case similar to the examples listed in Chapter 4, an individual referred to a rabbit as "him." When asked to explain why "him" was chosen to refer to the rabbit the speaker reasoned that they did not know and only guessed at an explanation, saying that "brown is a boy color." Such explanations are not only extremely simple, but also subjective and arguably arbitrary. This raises questions as to whether or not the systems of meaning in play are recognizable to the individuals using and maintaining them. Pawley (2016) notes that "useful insights" about pronominal gender assignment cannot be gained from speakers' reasoning since they often rely on loose cultural stereotypes (p. 161). Even when gathering a large amount of such information and reasoning, a thorough explanation based on that information is difficult to achieve.

Conversely, while still considering concepts of social interactions and expectations, Élise Mignot focuses attention on the use of gender pronouns as constructs of the English language. Beginning with the very concept of gender pronouns as parts of speech, Mignot (2012) establishes that a gender pronoun in speech or text does not offer any new information about the referent. Pronouns are often used to refer to a previously mentioned referent and individuals readily assume a shared understanding of another's gender in conversation based on information from physical appearance and semantic features of things such as proper name (Mignot, 2012). This means that referring to a previously unmentioned individual with a gender pronoun that aligns with their physical appearance, proper name, or social or occupational role would not disrupt conversation because assumptions of the perceptions of gender are broadly agreed upon to begin with. Furthermore, Mignot (2012) points to the fact that there are no English nouns that describe only human gender since words like "man" and "girl" denote gender as well as age and "male" and "female" do not refer exclusively to human beings. Before we can even decide

whether something is a man or a woman, male or female, we must first decide that one is a human being.

On this basis, Mignot (2012) argues that gender serves as a "structuring principle of the lexicon" of English nouns (para. 62). One cannot simultaneously be "human and not human" in the same way that one "cannot be male and female at the same time," Mignot (2012) argues (para. 80). In English writing, speech, and thought, speakers are forced to decide which categories a subject fits into so as to refer to them in a clear and coherent way, as human or not and as male or female. Mignot (2012) makes the assumption that once we have decided that something is human, we mark them as a "someone" with the first available category being male. Male is followed by the category of female according to this understanding, almost a qualification to the category of male. This critical scale leads the concept of femininity in language, inclusive of feminine pronouns, as carrying a sense of greater "construction" (Mignot, 2012, para. 90). Words such as "that" or "it" then are representative of a base categorization. The categorization of objects or humans by words such as "he" and "she" thus signify consideration of a subject as belonging to increasingly specific groups.

Along a similar vein of organizing linguistic and semantic categories regarding real world referents, Kate Scott (2015) argues for a procedural rather than a conceptual understanding of English pronouns based on sub-personal comprehension of categorization. Scott explains that pronouns encode information that suggest a particular referent which is to be identified by the listener. In this way, a listener must decide which individuals align with the characteristics suggested by the gender of the pronoun used. Additionally, by utilizing the concept of relevance theory, Scott (2015) defines that individuals tend towards inputs that appear most relevant and offer the greatest potential for valuable information. For instance, using the gender pronoun "he"

avoids reiteration and causes the listener to decode the information by identifying a referent that satisfies the individual and masculine qualities of "he." According to relevance theory, the more ambiguous or unclear a reference or any piece of information is, the less interest the listener will have in decoding the utterance.

Our cognitive ability to categorize, Scott (2015) argues, operates at a sub-personal level. This comprehension of pronouns holds that the categorization of referents thus occurs in an almost inherent manner that acts independently of conscious thought. Some of these categorizations occur based on widely accepted, sub-personal meaning in English, such as a ship being acceptably referred to as "she" or the more natural "it." By these distinctions, the use of gender pronouns to refer to someone or something in an unexpected way impacts the relevance of the information by complicating the listener's process of determining a referent. The gender pronoun draws attention to specific aspects of the referent based on the sub-personally defined categories of gender. Using the gender pronoun "she" for instance prompts a listener to assume that the referent has a feminine name and appearance among other characteristics and primes the listener to focus on those individuals who possess feminine characteristics.

Even when the referent is apparent despite a technically improper use of pronouns, the incongruence between pronoun and referent suggests "extra expressive effects" (Scott, 2015, p. 78). The unexpected pronoun use may take more thought to decode, but may more thoroughly express the speaker's opinions of the referent and draw attention to specific characteristics which the speaker wishes to distinguish. Scott (2015) provides powerful examples of a dehumanizing effect through the use of "it" for a person in place of "he" or "she" reflecting a harsh negative perception or valuation, which I will later posit may function in a similar but opposite way when using "he" or "she" in place of "it." Scott (2015) notes that the significance of such utterances

comes from the effects the reference has on the listener's ability to deduce a referent and to make sense of the reference in context. This perspective focuses on the ability of the listener to think back to find a relevant referent that fills the masculine, feminine, or neutral qualities of the pronoun used.

While these perspectives may appear deeply entrenched in linguistic analysis, a gradient in theories still exists. Anna Wierzbicka constructs her argument for a sexual and sexist interpretation of pronoun use largely in conversation with Andrew Pawley's work in AVE. While a categorization of pronoun use such as Pawley's may be useful in many regards, Wierzbicka (2002) argues that such research leaves considerable gaps for considering the motivations behind such language and words which carry particular significance within each unique cultural context. For example, words translated between languages inherently cannot mean the exact same thing because of their linguistic and semantic associations within their original context. Furthermore, much like slang more generally, words "can only be explained in terms of other words and other constructions" (Wierzbicka, 2002, p. 146). The relationships between gender pronouns and referents thus becomes determined by the cultural expectations defined within male/female, man/woman relationships. Wierzbicka's interpretation of pronominal gender assignment turns to the opinions of and assumptions of the speaker as opposed to analyzing the observable characteristics of the referent.

Significant to both Wierzbicka and Pawley's arguments, however, is the idea that the use of gender pronouns for inanimate or non-gendered referents does not necessarily create personification so much as "grammatical animation" (Wierzbicka, 2002, p. 149). The use of "she" to refer to an object according to Wierzbicka's (2002) perspective reflects a cultural opinion of women as passive objects themselves or of a comparable categorization and value, not

affection as Pawley (2016) notes. Wierzbicka (2002) argues that Pawley's generalization of "she" for attachment is so generalizable that it lacks meaning in understanding the use of feminine pronouns. As such, Wierzbicka describes the use of "he" and masculine pronouns as allowing the speaker to define a sense of lackluster familiarity with the referent. The referent is still relevant and of interest to the speaker, but the masculine categorization opens the possibility of descriptions to objective positive and negative comments. While this aligns quite generally with Pawley's categorization of gender pronoun use in AVE, the bases for understanding clearly differ. These uses of gender pronouns, Wierzbicka believes, abide by the social interactions of and expectations for men and women, not merely the semantic value of each word.

These four theories address a variety of conditions related to the use of gender pronouns for referencing non-gendered objects. As much as they make valuable points and forge their own paths in understanding pronoun use and pronominal gender assignment where relevant, the four theories interact and contradict each other in a number of ways. Most clearly interacting are Pawley and Wierzbicka's works and theories. For instance, while Pawley (2016) states that "he" may be used to express a sense of familiarity with and mastery of an object, making it less intriguing to the speaker, Wierzbicka attempts to refute this point. Wierzbicka (2002) asks why even bother referring to an object with a gender pronoun if it is not of interest to the speaker, conveying no insightful information. Significance to the speaker is clearly still at play if linguistic norms are broken in order to merely refer to the object Wierzbicka argues. Additionally, the idea of mastery cited by Pawley seems to imply a history and, thus, some inherent significance, although perhaps not associated with the specific referent. Instead, Wierzbicka (2002) states that one may understand the use of "he" to allow for a discussion of the now masculine referent in an objective way, whether evaluated positively or negatively. Mignot

and Scott's explanations clash in their concepts of identifying a referent. Mignot (2012) stresses an deductive pattern of thought and pronominal gender assignment whereas Scott (2015) inversely approaches the issue through inductive thought on the part of the listener. While Mignot's approach actively categorizes individuals into categories to which pronouns can be applied, Scott's approach defines relevant individuals and a particular referent based on the pronoun used. In both of these examples, the underlying meaning and relationship between individuals transform completely with a slight shift in perspective.

Still, with each theory, there are also potential issues and remaining questions. Wierzbicka argues that Pawley's concepts of attachment and detachment are far too vague and "cannot explain all cases of gender assignment" (Pawley, 2016, p. 162), similar to the example noted above. Pawley's argument applies specifically to pronoun use in AVE and assigns broad definitions to masculine and feminine object categories. Mignot's (2012) argument makes a rather large assumption that all individuals utilize the same mental hierarchy for categorization with a male/masculine priority. While this may be readily accepted and understood by many in a world where male dominance is constantly indicated, further research may be necessary to verify what Mignot considers to be a universal schematic characteristic across distinct cultures and value systems. Similarly, Scott (2015) argues that the comprehension of pronominal references are decoded based on widely accepted conditions and characteristics, which necessitates assumptions on the part of the speaker and assumptions on the part of the researcher for imagining what a speaker may think or assume. This could potentially be guided by stereotypes and prejudices on multiple levels. Wierzbicka suggests that the use of gender pronouns to refer to non-gendered objects originated among men and is mimicked by women with "he" expressing a

sense of neutrality and "she" expressing force over an object (Pawley, 2016), a perspective which may raise questions of an assumed hierarchy in theorizing.

Assumptions are necessary in establishing broad definitions in gender and language and so it is necessary to be conscious of those assumptions in relation to identifiable facts and trends. Of course, every aspect of each work and theoretical approach cannot be relevant to the current trends of gendered slang. Being so, through analysis, I will outline which aspects of each theory are relevant in establishing an understanding specific to the current use of gender pronouns in American English slang. The following chapter will outline the methodology to be used in analyzing and understanding the use of gender pronoun references within American English slang. It will lay out the structure of the research conducted, the process of formulating a new theory of gendered slang in English, the application to examples compiled in a transcript, and the individual and social implications understood based on the newly formed theory of pronominal gender assignment.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The trend of referring to objects and events with gender pronouns is clearly distinct from past forms of gender assignment in English. However, shared definitions and meaning must still exist in order for these references to be understood and accepted in everyday language. This exact trend of pronominal gender assignment as a part of slang has not yet been thoroughly addressed in research and studies. By utilizing four key interpretations of pronoun use related to pronominal gender assignment as defined by Pawley, Mignot, Scott, and Wierzbicka a theory specific to the current trends of gendered slang will be articulated and proposed.

The methodologies for characterizing and defining the use of gender pronouns when referring to inanimate and non-gendered referents clearly embrace varied approaches. Pawley (2016) finds that specific categories of referents are often male or often female and the distinction between the two lies in the speaker's preference for or connection with the referent. Mignot (2012) points to our ability to define and categorize the other as a gendered human based on our perceptions and assumptions with male or masculine being the standard human category. Scott (2015) focuses on a communicative understanding of references which assumes shared understandings of others. An unexpected pronoun may confuse the listener whether or not shared interpretations or perspectives exist and may thus be used to signal greater attention or significance. Wierzbicka (2002) argues that the meaning of words can only be fully realized within their social context and that the use of pronouns reflects the social interactions of those to whom they refer, men and women. The current study does not, however, aim to replicate any particular approach described here, such as creating a categorization of the uses of gender pronouns in American English following Pawley's categorization in Australian English. Instead, this study will draw on the information offered by these relevant theoretical understandings in

order to inform a definition of the current trends of gender pronoun use in a contemporary and commonplace context in American English slang and within the broader context of U.S. American culture.

While linguistic gender has been studied extensively across a variety of languages, the sources chosen for this study have focused on research of the English language specifically. These sources do include different English dialects, such as American English and Australian English, all with an emphasis on pronoun use and reference comprehension as well as on concepts of gender identity and inclusiveness within the English language. Supporting information is derived from psychological and social research, linguistic studies, and analyses of slang and pronoun use, especially in contemporary society. Any interpretations or claims made will be substantiated and explained by these studies.

Each of the four primary researchers' works will be considered according to Robert Ennis' Critical Thinking Assessment (1993). This process will be used to critically analyze the validity of the sources used according to each work's definition of terms, assumptions made by the author, and supporting research and evidence. Through the information gathered from the four primary researchers and from related research and experiments, a unique theory relevant specifically to pronoun use in gendered slang will emerge. This theory will also provide three integral questions that can be used to interrogate an example of pronominal gender assignment in contemporary slang and help to provide a more thorough consideration of the meaning and motivations of such utterances.

Based on the new theory's definition of the social and linguistic mechanisms underlying the use of gender pronouns for non-gendered referents, the effects that this trend has on an individual's sense of identity and on interpersonal relationships and communication more

generally will also be assessed. By considering the interaction between language, social relationships, and the physical experience of one's surroundings, this research will establish a more thorough explanation of the relevant values and the effects that this language has on the individual and on the way in which the individual perceives others. Analyses will be offered based on anonymized, real-world quotes gathered from everyday conversations and compiled into a transcript. These examples offer a variety of uses of gender pronouns, both masculine and feminine, in perhaps unexpected ways. Each example is prefaced by a brief description of the context in which the reference was made. All of the quotes are derived from organic, casual conversations among young adults from the greater New York City area, largely from the Adelphi University campus in Garden City, NY. These quotes will serve as examples for understanding the utterances in which this gendered slang occurs and serve as a basis for analysis against theoretical concepts and the newly proposed theory.

While the transcript of quotes functions as a basis for analysis and theoretical applications within this research, the examples do lack the richness of experience including audio and visual context available for analysis. Future research may benefit from incorporating such examples that would allow for a more complex analysis of concepts related to speech such as tone and the broader conversational context. Much of the analysis and interpretation is based on first-hand experience of the language both speaking it and making sense of it. Interpretations may vary based on individual experience and perceptions of the language and of the related concepts such as gender and individual gender identity. The majority of the quotes listed in Chapter 4 were spoken by Caucasian females who identify as women. Suggestions for future research, such as considering the use of gender pronouns in referencing inanimate objects across distinct populations, will be considered and addressed in full in Chapter 6: Conclusions. The

following chapters, Chapter 4: Transcript and Chapter 5: Findings, will work together to draw

the four main theories into interaction and propose a method for interpreting the contemporary

trends of gendered slang.

Chapter 4: Slang Transcript

In order to provide a more thorough understanding of the gendered slang in question and create a basis for the analysis and application of theories, this transcript of examples of gendered slang has been compiled from casual conversations in which they occurred naturally. Preceding each quote or interaction is a brief description of the setting in which the example occurred in order to set the scene and establish a basic sense of the semantic environment. The quotes have been anonymized, but have been gathered primarily from male and female college students, young adult men and women mainly around twenty years of age.

(1) On a bus through Manhattan, stopped next to a construction site, Speaker 2 points to brand new tables that caught their eye stacked on the side of the construction site. Person 1 points out a dusty blue wheelbarrow left alongside a row of construction supplies, noting their affinity for that wheelbarrow.

Person 1: "I like that wheelbarrow. That cute one right there."

Person 2: "We have one that looks like him."

(2) After exiting a Starbucks parking lot with friends, the speaker sipped their drink and commented on the beverage which they have had before.

Speaker: "I feel like she's thicker than usual."

When asked immediately afterward why the speaker referred to the drink as "she," the speaker guessed that they felt the coffee was a beautiful color and that they tend to "put together 'she' and things [they] like."

(3) While heating up food in a communal microwave, a conversation was interrupted by an unusual knocking noise coming from the microwave. The speaker asked for another person's opinion as to whether or not the microwave was functioning properly.

Speaker: "Is he okay?"

(4) While walking down the sidewalk, the speaker referred to a bush to the side that was recently trimmed and continuing to grow onto the sidewalk. The interjection was made without previous mention of the bush noting the bush's continuing growth into the path.

Speaker: "He looks like he's ready to keep going."

(5) Upon meeting, Person 1 asked if Person 2's jacket was new since they had never seen it before. When Person 2 confirmed that the jacket was new, Person 1 briefly complimented the jacket.

Speaker 1: "Is that new?"

Speaker 2: "Yeah, relatively."

Speaker 1: "I like her. She's cute."

(6) While playing with a slime toy, the speaker noted their discomfort with the texture of the slime in their hands. Their statement declares to the speaker's friends that they do not want to play with or hold the slime any longer.

Speaker: "I hate her, I hate the slime."

(7) In a tired discussion about completing assignments, Speaker 2 closed their laptop because it was making noise from overheating and needed to be charged. Speaker 1 attempts to encourage Speaker 2 to continue with their work and Speaker 2 defends that their laptop cannot be used at the moment because it needs to cool down and be charged. Interestingly, Speaker 1 continues Speaker 2's use of "she" to refer to the laptop.

Speaker 1: "You need to do your work."

Speaker 2: "She needs to rest."

Speaker 1: "She's okay, she's okay."

(8) Speaker 1 approaches Speaker 2 sitting in a communal area working on their laptop and asks when they will be finishing and going home. Speaker 2 remarks that they do not know who "home" is asking for clarification as to whom Speaker 1 is referring. Speaker 1 then agrees that "home" is an unknown individual and continues with Speaker 2's gender assignment for "home."

Speaker 1: "When are you going home?

Speaker 2: *Laughs* "Home? Who is she?"

Speaker 1: "Yeah, who is she?"

(9) While eating at a small Mexican restaurant, the speaker wanted to get up to go to the salsa bar. Having already taken a couple of bites out of their burrito, they attempted to stand the burrito up or lay it down so as to keep the insides from spilling out. When they finally got the burrito into a good position, the speaker stood up and asked that the burrito be watched to make sure none of the fillings fall out.

Speaker: "Can you watch her? Make sure she behaves."

(10)   Drawn from the Netflix series *Queer Eye*, Season 4 Episode 3, Antoni Porowski

teaches a man, John Stoner, basic cooking skills to better care for his young daughter.

While learning a pancake recipe, Porowski leads by flipping the pancake and catching it

in his pan and instructs Stoner to try for himself. When Stoner catches his pancake in his

pan, Porowski commends his ability by complimenting the pancake.

Porowski: "You saved it. Press it down. She's a happy pancake. She's good"

Chapter 5: Findings

Drawing on the four principle theories and research previously discussed, a social and linguistic interpretation of the current trends of gendered slang can be established. Beginning with the sentiment behind slang phrases that use gender pronouns to refer to inanimate and non-gendered objects in English, it will be argued that the underlying meaning relies on socially defined and accepted concepts of femininity and masculinity. The reliance on gender pronouns in order to express these perceptions and categorizations of objects can be understood largely in terms of English linguistic limitations on expression and emphasis of a referent. Defining and explaining these aspects of pronominal gender assignment as a part of gendered slang will allow for an examination of the social conditions in which this language exists and thrives.

While Pawley, Mignot, Scott, and Wierzbicka have clearly gathered considerable research on the topic of pronoun use and pronominal gender assignment within the English language, I will briefly verify their validity with regard to the current research of gendered slang in American English. In order to interrogate these sources, I will utilize Robert Ennis' (1993) critical thinking assessment in order to properly examine the claims made and to assure "reasonable reflective thinking" regarding the information presented (p. 180). This will be done by questioning each work's definitions of terms, assumptions made by the authors, and supporting research and evidence. In critically assessing these sources, it is important to consider that each work defines the terms used in a way that is appropriate for the current context and discusses the same definitions of pronouns and gender pronouns (Ennis, 1993). The four main works do in fact consider the concept of pronominal gender assignment or items related to such according to the same definitions and understandings of pronouns in English. Each work evaluates the use of gender pronouns according to a grammatical binary, masculine and

feminine, as is used for English pronouns and also refers to the use of the neutral "it," all with regard to references involving a third person referent. The method of processing these words and the significance they carry vary between each researcher's interpretations, but the words themselves remain the same in definition and grammatical use. The concept of pronominal gender assignment for inanimate or non-gendered referents is addressed in each work to varying degrees, but here as well, all four works do discuss the subject according to the same definitions of pronouns and assignment of gender through pronominal references.

Keeping in mind that these works came to fruition within varying cultural contexts around the world, the four works also rely on certain overarching assumptions. Considering that a male priority has been identified in many social contexts and modes of thought, each theorist utilizes a male-centric understanding of language and pronoun use. This assumption makes logical sense and is proven relevant within the social and cultural contexts in question, but may inherently limit the methods of discussing pronominal gender assignment even with expanding gender identities. Further, these works focus on gender and gender pronouns as a binary system when in fact there are a number of gender identities beyond biological dimorphism that are actively used with pronouns such as "they" and "ze." This limitation itself may contribute to rather basic, binary, and heteronormative discussions of pronoun use and pronominal gender assignment in these works and in the current research. Additionally, very broad assumptions are made in each work as to the best method to approach an analysis of pronouns and pronominal gender assignment. In these and similar works, researchers generally utilized social and gender-based understandings or linguistic and semantic understandings. The categories certainly bleed into one another, but are maintained as distinct domains of analysis which split methods of explanation and discussions of purpose and effects.

The resources used to inform these four works largely consist of relevant, published articles and examples focused on linguistic, semantic, and gender theories and analyses. The majority of which were produced in the ten to twenty years prior to the publication of each of the four primary works, generally into the end of the twentieth century. Andrew Pawley's analysis draws on research that stretches back a bit further into the mid-twentieth century with sources addressing rules of grammar and lexicon. Through these sources, a possibly outdated understanding of the rules and use of language may be described, presenting an image of language as static. Mignot and Scott, having published their works within the past ten years, utilize similar semantic and linguistic analyses, but also include more contemporary concepts of society and gender in their research compared to Pawley and Wierzbicka. In all, the sources for these works focused on relevant information from a variety of published sources that encouraged further studies within a defined tradition of research assuring that the information put forth could be reasonably considered.

In applying these theories upon careful consideration, I will first put all of the gender pronouns back on an even playing field. Andrew Pawley (2016) had argued that the use of "he" or a masculine pronoun more generally to refer to an inanimate referent signified a lack of interest in the subject. Pawley posited that "he," being masculine, suggested a disconnect between the speaker and the referent and perhaps even a sense of independence from the referent. I, however, agree with Wierzbicka (2002) who argues that Pawley's evaluation of "he," along with other masculine pronouns, as signifying a lack of interest does not work alongside the rest of the information and research presented by Pawley. According to relevance theory, listeners prefer information that is most easily accessible and understood (Scott, 2015). If "he" or "him" carried no information or meaning other than making the listener think more about what is

being said, it is hardly likely that masculine pronouns, or female pronouns for that matter, would be used at all for inanimate referents. In this way, Pawley's argument does not apply to the gendered slang in American English being considered in this research. Instead, the use of "he" or a masculine pronoun to refer to an inanimate referent must signify a distinct evaluation and deliberate consideration of the object by the speaker, contrary to Pawley's suggestion of a disconnect or disinterest. I will argue that all gender pronouns do offer information about the referent beyond the speaker's opinion or apparent relationship and interaction with the object, notably so in American English gendered slang.

To this end, it is also interesting to consider the simplicity of the phrases that include gender pronouns in contemporary gendered slang phrases. "She's good." "Look at her." "Is he okay?" These are by no means complex constructions that aim to express much beyond a shift in focus or a simple valuation or description. These short sentences do, however, carry significant meaning. These phrases rely on the information conveyed through the gender pronoun used in order to characterize the referent. Any meaning derived from these statements relies largely on gender schemas, concepts of what it means to be a man or a woman within a particular culture, which are suggested by the gender pronoun. The derived information is open to individual interpretation within each scenario, but, in all scenarios, the information must be assumed. This appears to allow the listener to make sense of the information in a way that best fits their own unique concepts of gender. However, this communication is unfolding in a social setting, forcing both speakers and listeners to interpret the information from the mismatched gender pronoun in more conventional and perhaps stereotypical ways to better achieve a group understanding, an important aspect of this language noted by Mignot (2012).

Mignot (2012) argues that, in general, the gender pronoun does not truly offer new information about the human referent. Those participating in conversation assume the genders of others, assume the gender pronouns that are appropriate in order to refer to those gendered individuals, and assume that all those involved in the conversation would use the same gender pronouns based on a shared interpretation of indicators such as appearance, proper name, and social role. By using a gender pronoun, we are participating in a semantic environment and reaffirming a shared understanding of the referent as being either masculine or feminine in some regard. Similarly, Scott (2015) argues that the categorization of referents through pronouns occurs at a sub-personal level, assumed to be mutually understood based on broader social definitions of gender. Scott (2015) emphasizes that this presumed mutual understanding of the referent's gender generally functions to allow speakers to avoid reiteration of the referent's title whether a proper name or simply a noun. For instance, instead of restating a proper name that holds a masculine connotation every time a person wants to refer to a perceived-masculine individual, "he" is assumed to be an acceptable pronoun to use in place of the proper name. Within each culture, proper names generally carry either a masculine or feminine connotation that, along with other indicators like appearance, are used to determine the individual's gender identity.

However, in the current case of gendered slang, gender pronouns are used casually and unexpectedly to refer to objects that may not have been previously mentioned. While the use of gender pronouns may be anaphoric in many cases, information is stretched beyond reference and ease of making a reference in contemporary gendered slang. Scott (2015) explains that while this use of a gender pronoun is grammatically incorrect, it may be accepted if aimed at creating heightened expression. Much of this expressive information, while able to be determined in part

by the pronoun used in American English gendered slang, does still rely on the broader conversational context and the speaker's overall tone. In terms of expression, Mignot and Scott's models again come close to one another, but do not converge. Scott (2015) focuses on the ability to express degradation from a human "he" or "she" to an objectified base "it." Utilizing a similar ranking from non-human to human, Mignot (2012) argues that our ability to classify referents begins with the recognition of a figure as an "it" moving one step up to a "he" when the figure is clearly identifiable as human and possibly moving up another step to "she" if the human figure is recognized to be female. While each scale could arguably function in either direction, both scales are organized according to a logical interpretation of a male priority in identifying a referent in context.

Numerous studies have documented a male bias in identifying an undefined figure (Lindqvist, Renström, & Sendén, 2018), moving these models from intriguing and logical to verifiable. With a definitive male priority established and clearly visible in everyday life, the current interpretation of gendered slang in American English makes "male," "man," and "masculine" the standard with "she," "woman," and "femininity" essentially functioning as exceptions and qualifications to the standard. Women and females thus become second-rate individuals in language, communication, and our understanding of society.

Through this understanding of the use and meaning of gender pronouns overall, I favor Wierzbicka's (2002) explanation of the use of gender pronouns for inanimate and non-gendered referents. Pawley's (2016) classification relies perhaps too heavily on the individual perception of the referent with too vague of a justification for pronoun use to explain such language, particularly the current, widespread trend of pronominal gender assignment as a part of American English slang. For example, Pawley (2016) attempted to explain the use of "she"

through a dependence on each referent's "personal value or interest to the speaker" (p. 161).

While Pawley (2016) agrees with Mignot (2012) and Scott (2015) that "masculine is the

unmarked gender for living things" (p. 153) and offers examples of referents which usually

belong to that category, his categorization does not provide a unifying, social motivation for the

use of gender pronouns in a grammatically incorrect way. Pawley's research and categorization

hold that analysis of semantic criteria is sufficient in understanding the complexities of

pronominal gender assignment, yet does not provide any sort of social explanation or reasoning

that would contribute to a continuing use of gender pronouns for non-gendered objects that is

necessary in explaining slang.

Wierzbicka (2002), conversely, lends focus to the motivation behind the use of pronouns

for non-gendered and inanimate objects largely through the lens of gender in terms of social

relationships. A tree, for instance, can be either a "he" or a "she" according to contemporary

American English gendered slang. Despite its physical appearance as a tree, the way in which it

interacts with its environment or affects the speaker's perception may influence its classification

as a "he" or as a "she" (Wierzbicka, 2002). Both Pawley and Wierzbicka agree, however, that

this characterization is not exactly personification so much as "grammatical animation"

(Wierzbicka, 2002, p. 149). The referent does not necessarily take on human features when

referred to by a gender pronoun, but may arguably then be subject to human forms of

categorization and description, lending focus to particular attributes of the referent based on the

gender pronoun chosen. The object does not become a man or a woman, but becomes open to

interpretation according to conventional masculine or feminine characteristics as defined by the

relevant culture and society. Interestingly, Gary Lupyan has argued for a label-feedback

hypothesis, explaining that linguistic labels such as gender pronouns heighten perceptions of relevant features associated with the label (Sato & Athanasopoulos, 2018).

The widespread reliance on gender pronouns for categorizing and discussing objects may at first seem odd. There are certainly other ways to fully describe the manner in which an object or any referent is affecting the perception or environment of a speaker. Instead of saying "I like her. She's cute," as in Example 5 in Chapter 4, one could simply say "That's a nice jacket. It looks really good on you." However, such a description is somewhat predictable in that it is perhaps equal in categorization to Mignot's (2002) general base level of categorization associated with the pronoun "it." In order to express greater attention to the referent in contemporary gendered slang, the speaker may use a gender pronoun to imply a more complex and specific categorization of the object despite not being physically male or female nor masculine or feminine according to the English language (Scott, 2015). The use of a gender pronoun also further implies a shared semantic environment among those in conversation, affirming that their values and perceptions do align.

The use of gender pronouns within the current trend of American English gendered slang becomes largely categorizable according to general gender roles or stereotypes. Feminine pronouns are used generally to refer to objects which have in some way affected the speaker through their physical appearance or are objects which must be used or acted upon for some purpose. Masculine pronouns, on the other hand, are used to refer to objects which serve a functional purpose or are active forces within the given environment. These definitions function as extrapolations from conventional expectations of men and women as parts of American culture and society. While women tend to be objectified according to their physical appearance and ability to be of service to others, men tend to receive recognition for their skills and ability to

act, command, and provide for others. These schemas of gender and social roles which inform

our definitions of "man" and "woman," masculinity and femininity, are used subliminally

through gender pronouns to describe the referent according to its role and actions whether

observed or perceived in relation to the speaker. The specific gender pronoun that is used,

masculine or feminine, may draw attention to different features of the same referent. The same

object or event may be a "he" or a "she" depending on what aspects of the referent are relevant

to the speaker. In this way, the pronouns do not offer all-encompassing definitions of the

referent, but instead direct attention to the object within a particular lens or frame of reference.

This slang as such relates strongly to the interactions that take place between the individual and

their surroundings.

According to this explanation, Example 5 of Chapter 4 "I like her. She's cute," refers to

the jacket as feminine, suggesting that attention should be paid to the jacket's physical

appearance, relying on conventional expectations for feminine beauty and visual appeal.

Example 3, "Is he okay?," instead refers to a microwave oven as masculine, pointing to the

functional abilities of the appliance and its ability to operate on its own. Similar to Scott's (2015)

explanation that the use of a gender pronoun forces the listener to identify a relevant referent

with characteristics based on the gender information indicated by the pronoun used, a person

listening to contemporary gendered slang would have to identify a referent based on these such

conceptions of gender. In the same way, this also relates to Lupyan's (2018) label-feedback

hypothesis. The use of "she" would signal to listeners that the referent must fit the category of

particularly striking in appearance, whether positive or negative, or of a more passive, functional

object according to the feminine categorization suggested by "she." The use of "he" would signal

that the referent must be an independently functional item or one that may create an active change in its environment according to the maculine categorization suggested by "he."

In order to identify and analyze phrases that employ this form of pronominal gender assignment in contemporary American English gendered slang, these three questions can be used in order to critique and interrogate the language in terms of meaning and function.

- Does the pronoun indicate a referent that is known or previously mentioned?
- To what characteristics or properties of the referent is the speaker drawing attention?
- Does the reference treat the referent as a passive object or as an active entity within the conversation and relevant context?

For example, these questions can be applied to Example 10 of Chapter 4, "She's a happy pancake. She's good." The gender pronoun does in fact indicate a previously mentioned referent, the pancake which was the subject of the conversation and activity. The speaker here wishes to draw attention to the pancake once it has been flipped nicely in the pan, complimenting the execution and appearance of the pancake. This attention to the physical appearance of the pancake encourages the use of "she" in order to exaggerate a discussion of the pancake's physical appeal. In this case, the phrase treats the referent as a passive item which has been objectified and must be controlled or acted upon by those involved. While this meaning is certainly not absolute in defining the referent, it does draw attention to specific aspects of the pancake as an object through a feminine lens.

Instances such as Example 8 of Chapter 4 may involve and relate to other trends in American English slang not specifically addressed in this research, but which can still be considered according to the theory outlined here. Both Speaker 1 and Speaker 2 refer to Speaker 2's home as "she" saying they do not know her. There is in fact another trend in American slang

that involves referring to an irrelevant or intentionally ignored individual or object as "she" or "her." These phrases often occur as a question such as "Who is she?" or statements such as "I don't know her." The dismissing and condescending sentiment is, however, incredibly similar to the minimizing and objectifying sentiment of the feminine pronominal gender assignment described in this research. With Example 8, the speakers refer to the previously mentioned "home" as "she" and treat the "home" as a passive object that is worthy of objectification and, as described, disregard. Examples and trends such as this align more closely with Scott's (2015) argument for the use of gender pronouns to create "extra expressive effects" (p. 78).

These perceptions become continually reaffirmed and validated when used daily in casual and non-critical settings as a part of American English slang. The question then becomes focused on how these changes in language may be reflective of perceptions of the self and of our social environment. In languages that do categorize nouns by grammatical gender, speakers tend to view items according to their assigned linguistic gender, affecting their ability to describe and group objects (Boroditsky & Phillips, 2003). Furthermore, countries that use languages with grammatical gender often contain more deeply ingrained gender inequality than countries with neutral language (Harris et al., 2017), perhaps due to the integration of strict gender categories into social perception. While English-French bilinguals, for instance, use grammatical gender to distinguish sex-related characteristics, monolingual English-speakers tend to draw on gender concepts to inform categorization (Sato & Athanasopoulos, 2018).

Clearly, the use of gender pronouns for categorizing referents and objects warrants consideration as American society seeks to advance beyond the traditional limitations of gender. With regard to everyday communication, this use of gender pronouns may not only signal, but perpetuate striking disparities in social relationships and individual identity. As has been noted,

pronouns are at the forefront of social consciousness today and have been throughout the 2010s, bringing forward issues of gender and individual identity. Although I as a cisgender man find myself to be priveleged by the trends of gendered slang as they have been described, it is not difficult to understand how the experience of such language may be a wholly unique challenge for those who do not identify with the socially accepted, heteronormative binary and even for those who do. Particularly, individuals who identify as transgender, as gender nonconforming, or even as women may find themselves at a disadvantage in terms of this slang.

While many youths are already acutely aware of issues related to sexual orientation and gender (Brown et al., 2020), such concerns may be justified in social experience. One study conducted by Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady (1999) found that Asian-American women primed for consciousness of their ethnicity answered more questions on a test than those Asian-American women made conscious of their gender, supporting concerns that the announcement of pronouns may contribute to the activation of gender bias and discrimination. While this study indicates the possibility of improving ability through stereotypical concepts as well, it remains disheartening that simply calling forth female identity can impede one's abilities (Shih et al., 1999).

As Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady's (1999) study notes, highlighting femininity may reinforce gender hierarchies and suppress the abilities of women on certain tasks. In a similar way, transgender and gender nonconforming individuals are often acutely aware of the use of gender pronouns, particularly for themselves. The use of incorrect gender pronouns for transgender or gender nonconforming individuals, known as misgendering, may be perceived as a simple mistake or as a distressing "tactic for harassment and bullying" (Clements, 2018, Why does misgendering happen? section; Brown et al., 2020). The mere use of pronouns and individual identity become significant hurdles in the most mundane conversations and attention

to such may contribute to fears of discrimination (Clements, 2018; Mcglashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Interestingly, many transgender and gender nonconforming people find discomfort in specifying pronouns particularly because they feel that the act reinforces gender hierarchies among those involved (Mcglashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

In this way, the use of gender pronouns in referring to inanimate and non-gendered objects further accentuates the attention to the sensitive subject of gender and gender identity in a social setting. This ties strongly to my original hypothesis that this use of gender pronouns would contribute to a greater sense of inclusion and exclusion among those involved in conversation because of heightened awareness of the normalized structure of gender and gender hierarchies. Language shapes our understanding of the self and others and can raise negative awareness of gender according to its status within the relevant cultural context (Macarthur, Cundiff, & Mehl, 2019) with homosexuality and transgender being marginalized as abnormal (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2018). Through the use of gender pronouns to refer to inanimate and non-gendered referents, the concept of gender is brought forward in conversation and thought, causing those in conversation to deduce referents according to perceptual and stereotypical understandings of gender. This slang may encourage greater anxieties surrounding individual identity among the noted populations who are already disadvantaged because of their identities.

This argument does not point to a desire to eliminate the use of gender pronouns in English. In fact, the use of proper gender pronouns for transgender and gender nonconforming individuals can reaffirm a sense of identity by allowing for proper representation of the self (Hanna, Stevens, Keyes, & Ahmed, 2019). Gender pronouns can be a wonderful way to affirm a transgender or gender nonconforming individual's gender identity (Hanna et al., 2019), providing them with a sense of agency in their own lives. LGBTQ youth report that using proper

pronouns allow them to feel safe within communities (Brown et al., 2020). However, the unnecessary use of gender pronouns to refer to non-gendered referents in American English slang may reasonably create anxieties and preoccupations in settings in which they do not conventionally exist. This is in line with my original hypothesis, predicting that this language could contribute to perceptions of the self according to widely accepted social categories and poor perceptions of the self and others in comparison. However, I cannot truly speak to the experience of transgender and gender nonconforming individuals; I only hope to promote empathetic considerations of others and conscious recognition of privelege in everyday conversation.

The current trend of gender pronoun use has here been described to rely on traditional understandings of gender and social relationships often involving masculine dominance. This case of gendered slang thus reflects a broad societal acceptance of traditional gender roles and a gender hierarchy, a mindset that is often referred to as benevolent sexism. Benevolent sexism is a form of sexual discrimination that places value on and supports the sexes and genders, but in a way that maintains traditional social roles such as men needing to protect women (Meagher, 2017; Bobbitt, 2015). Despite a valuation and perhaps appreciation of men and women, this type of sexism places limitations and expectations on each groups' behaviors that perpetuate historically recognized power relationships involving men as dominant and powerful over subordinate and objectified women. According to the presented interpretation of pronominal gender assignment in American English slang, the current trend is unfair in that it perpetuates these social and gender relationships that effectively idealize the role of the man and characterize the woman as an object to be examined or used.

Quite generally, language tends to downplay the status and role of women as the other in society (Harris et al., 2017). For many people, both speakers of gendered and non-gendered languages, grammatical gender does not appear as a choice in language, perhaps limiting expression of the individual to expression through gender and gender identity (Audring, 2013). Sex and gender not only determine what will be expected of the individual, but how the individual, human or inanimate, will be perceived and treated (Cutas & Giordano, 2013). The use of pronouns as seen in contemporary gendered slang draws attention to these perceptions and relationships in order to define the individual referent (Sela, Wheeler, & Sarial-Abi, 2012).

Attempts at creating non-sexist language have largely focused on feminization and neutralization to create a balance in gender pronoun use or to avoid specifying gender in any capacity, aiming to defy traditional expectations (Zalewski, 2010; Nosko, 2016; Lindqvist et al., 2018). Although, many argue that such habits may marginalize the status of men (Zalewski, 2010) and, more importantly, studies have demonstrated the failure of these efforts in eliminating a male bias (Lindqvist et al., 2018). From gender assignment in contemporary gendered slang to the assignment of gender at birth, individuals continue to perpetuate the idea that humans can be grouped and categorized as necessary for understanding others according to pre-established ways of being (Rubin, 2012). Therefore it is of the utmost importance to be mindful of the truths that we accept and speak in everyday life, such as what has been outlined in this research, in order to eliminate disparities in restrictive expectations associated with gender. "Non-sexist language is an important symbol… that enables people to communicate precisely and without oppressive systems determining our pronoun usage. While the language itself may not create oppression, the negative connotations... which pervade society has an effect on what language we use" (Bobbitt, 2015, p. 11-12).

The following chapter, Chapter 6: Conclusions, will reflect on the research and findings that have been presented here thus far. This will include a consideration of the research process, the extent to which this research achieved its aims, any issues faced in the research process, and indications for further research and discussion.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

The current research ultimately aimed to review existing understandings of pronouns, pronoun use, and pronominal gender assignment from multiple perspectives in order to inform a more complete understanding of the current trends of pronominal gender assignment as it exists in contemporary American English slang and American culture more generally. The argument presented states that the use of gender pronouns among American, English-speaking young adults relies on traditional concepts of gender and gender roles in order to draw attention to particular aspects of a referent and to categorize its appearance or function within the current physical environment. The theory that has been posited engages the terms and phrases relevant to the current trends of American English gendered slang in terms of linguistics, semantics, and gender and is able to address the trend in all instances and according to various individual perspectives. It is ultimately up to the individual using the language to define the intended sentiment, but the schemas and values perpetuated by this language can be assessed and recognized by anyone willing to engage the topic.

As anticipated in researching and defining pronominal gender assignment as a part of American English slang, the literature that exists on this subject specifically is slim. While meager conversations discussing the topic have surfaced, there exist no known considerable studies drawing conclusions or valid hypotheses as to the origins, underlying meaning, and social effects of this trend. The new theory that has been presented indicates that the pronominal gender assignment present in the gendered slang considered may be indicative of a trend of stereotypes and sexism larger and more lasting than the phrases themselves. Research began by looking at strict definitions of what a pronoun is in English, its functionality in sentences and in spoken language. Early research also sought to establish an understanding of the changing role of

pronouns and gender throughout the history of the English language and to consider how English speakers process and make meaning of pronouns as references to other things.

Upon establishing an understanding of how pronouns function as a basic part of the English language, the research moved into investigating how gender pronouns convey meaning and how their meaning can be understood, particularly in a social context. There exist multiple interpretations of how information can be derived from gender pronouns. Often these perspectives prioritize meaning differently across linguistic and social or gender perspectives as seen in the four primary theories chosen for this research. Additionally, research was carried out in order to define how adherence to the use of masculine and feminine gender pronouns for inanimates might affect individuals who do not identify as male or female, masculine or feminine. It has become wholly apparent in recent years that gender identity has developed beyond a binary and into a spectrum and that accounting for all individuals according to their experience is crucial in understanding the effects that this gendered slang has on our society.

However, this research was also affected by certain roadblocks. The research's strict limitation to the trend of pronominal gender assignment in contemporary American English gendered slang limited the range of sources that would be relevant. Many studies have been done on the role of gender in what are considered gendered languages such as Spanish and German, but relatively little research has considered similar topics in English, particularly with regard to slang. Gender as a grammatical concept does exist in English, but is more easily observable and linguistically relevant in other languages that utilize grammatical gender categories. Studies relevant to the role of gender in other languages were still considered and were valuable resources, but limited in number and scope. With relatively limited information serving as a base

for the proposed theory, the theory itself and its considerations may be limited to predetermined concepts of pronoun use, gender, and slang.

The research presented here has aimed to treat slang as a unique lens through which culture, values, and everyday life can be examined. This would help to address a gap in research in order to combine the subject areas of pronominal gender assignment quite generally and perceptions of the real world and others based on gender groups. Beyond a confusion of references, this research considered four key works and approaches that provided critical information and unique perspectives on aspects related to pronominal gender assignment allowing the topic to emerge as a distinct trend in language and slang. While all four works proposed wholly distinct approaches to understanding pronoun use and pronominal gender assignment, each work also pointed to the necessity of considering how such language may perpetuate certain schemas and values and may resonate differently with people of different identities, particularly in terms of gender.

The four theories themselves did overlap in many ways while also contradicting one another and making a number of assumptions that served as bases for explanations of pronoun use. The current research did not aim to replicate any of the four works used as a basis for analyzing the current trends of gendered slang and provides and refers to real-world examples in order to better explain and analyze concepts. The four works were assessed for consistent definitions of terms, for assumptions made, and for the relevance of their sources. The proposed theory begins by stating that gender pronouns would likely not be used when referring to non-gendered or inanimate referents if the only objective was to make the reference less accessible to the listener. Instead, the gender pronoun must signal some information about the speaker's specific interaction with or perception of the referent. The use of gender pronouns is interpreted

as reliant on gender schemas and stereotypes treating the feminine as passive and controlled objects and the masculine as active and independent entities. The phrases themselves ensure shared perceptions and values and signal a particular method of characterizing physical surroundings and others. The three questions offered alongside the proposed theory encourage individuals to question and evaluate the motivations and values behind the use of pronominal gender assignment for non-gendered and inanimate objects and events.

These findings indicate an understanding of pronominal gender assignment as a part of American English slang and culture as reliant on conventional expectations of gender and gender roles in order to characterize referents. The full sentiment that is carried by these words and phrases may continue to go unrecognized by those whom these stereotypes do not negatively affect, but the proposed theory should encourage consideration of the effects that language can and does have on others and on our social interactions. The research is presented in such a way so as to avoid challenging individual self concept. As difficult as it may be for an individual to accept a concept of themselves as benevolently sexist or sexist in any capacity, it is a necessary truth to be acknowledged in understanding what is meant in socially constructed terms and phrases. The current use of pronouns in gendered slang appears to be a continuation of the male bias that prioritizes men and masculinity over women and femininity.

While the origins and background of this slang are not addressed in this research, such information may be critical in understanding the semantic interpretations of pronominal gender assignment. The majority of the examples gathered from everyday conversations as outlined in Chapter 4 were stated by women. Further research would be necessary in defining trends of use among specific populations which may have been skewed by the location and researcher. However, it is interesting to consider the prevalence of this language among women being that,

according to the current interpretation, this would indicate that this language disadvantages the very people who use it the most. Feminine pronouns are arguably more common than masculine pronouns among American English phrases when referring to inanimate referents from countries and concepts like justice and freedom to ships and vehicles among other types of machines. These are standardized and acceptable uses of feminine gender pronouns, practically simple replacements for "it," despite being technically grammatically incorrect. The objectification of the female may very well go hand in hand with the common use of feminine pronouns in English pronominal gender assignment whether dealing with ships and cars or with the contemporary slang addressed in this research. The use of masculine gender pronouns is less obvious among English phrases often referring to people and animals. The preexisting prevalence of feminine pronouns in American English may influence perceptions of the current trends of gendered slang and the use of feminine pronouns in slang pronominal gender assignment.

In continuing this research, it would be beneficial to consider several perspectives and methodologies. As previously mentioned, analysis of the use and comprehension of this gendered slang across socioeconomic status and gender and its prevalence within different English-speaking populations may provide interesting insights into the trend. This would further require consideration of and coordination with a broader understanding of cultural values of gender and social status. Similarly, being that the majority of the utterances used and referenced in this research were from women, considering if this slang is simply more common among women and, if so, why may offer new understandings of the function and value of this slang. Understanding how this language is used and understood by analyzing examples with audio and visual context may also be beneficial in further research. The way that these values are portrayed in and perhaps even perpetuated by the media as a part of American pop-culture could be

considered and investigated. Shows such as *Queer Eye* as noted in Chapter 4 should be assessed for their ability to reflect current social trends and perpetuate social values. On its own, the theory presented in this research can be further substantiated and serve as a basis for a broader analysis of phrases in which the discussed variety of pronominal gender assignment occurs. This may verify or disprove a tendency for using male or female gender pronouns in conversation to draw attention to specific aspects of a referent. Interviews and qualitative analysis of individual perceptions of the use of gender pronouns would be an extremely time consuming and subjective endeavor, but could provide insights into various perspectives of the use of gender pronouns in slang and the way it personally affects individuals of varying gender identities. Content analysis considering how often pronominal gender assignment or gender pronoun slang more generally occurs in young adult and even teen media may also spark conversation about the relevance of such trends among specific populations. The aim in further research should always be to examine and explain the underlying meaning of the values and relationships perpetuated by the reliance on gender pronouns in order to refer to non-gendered objects and events.

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