**Why trans is in but tranny is out**

To outsiders, debates over the language of transgender may seem trivial. In fact, says Roz Kaveney, linguistics is a vital battlefield

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As a trans man or woman, you soon notice how many people have what Daffy Duck called 'pronoun trouble'.

No matter how supportive of your transition they claim to be, and how much well-intentioned advice they give you about your new hairstyle, or the name you always used in your head but only just told them about, they misgender you every other time they open their mouths, and get quite upset if you call them on it.

You're being too sensitive, they say, or it's too soon. Families, in particular, think it's too soon even after years. Getting your name right is a minimum requirement of respect - referring to you in the third person by the wrong pronoun means that respect is only superficial politeness.

I used to think that straight men particularly tended to misgender me if they were losing an argument; now I've seen them do it to trans men too. Misgendering is sometimes cluelessness, but more often it's quiet, hostile aggression, especially if we aren't gratefully deferential for whatever crumbs of acceptance we are thrown - if we speak up as freely as if we were actual, you know, human beings.

Oh, and a word to far too many columnists and pub philosophers: the only time 'it' is acceptable is with [neutrois-identified people](http://gender.wikia.com/wiki/Neutrois), some of whom regard it as mandatory. And if that's one rule too many to keep in your social vocabulary, well, tough.

The trans community's internal debates about [language](http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/language), and our preparedness to be fussy about what people call us in public, have grown ever more intense, even acrimonious. One way of looking at this is to say that when trans people are being murdered all over the planet, arguing about words is staggeringly trivial-minded. Another way is to say that when people are dying, you can't let any slur go unremarked. Trans people's battle for language is no different from the struggle against other sexist language; we're not just being picky.

It's mostly working-class trans women and men of colour in the developing world that are actually being killed, but no matter how middle class and white one is, almost every trans person sooner or later realises we walk on thin ice. You can be a famous astrophysicist and still find people campaigning for you to lose your job. More often, we have to worry about groups of drunks guessing our past on the tube. It starts with name-calling, but it doesn't always end there.

Some terms were always insulting. 'She-male' has the interesting distinction of being simultaneously used by the pornography industry and radical feminists such as [Janice Raymond](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janice_Raymond). 'He-she' is unpronounceable when sober. Raymond's terms, like 'male-to-constructed-female', were always so unwieldy that they disappeared even from the language of abuse.

The tabloid-beloved 'sex change' lacks a sense of nuance - not everyone wants, or can get or afford, surgery that is seen as putting us where we should always have been, not somewhere new. Yet we use words that involve the notion of crossing over - language is all about paradox.

There are words used in the community that almost no one else wants or needs. People 'pass', and some of those who pass decide to 'go into stealth' and sever all ties with the trans community. Some stealthers snipe on the internet at everyone else for making their lives more difficult, for being inferior failures; others are just getting on with their lives in privacy. Yet all stealthers, just like those of us who want social acceptance on our own terms, are at risk of being 'read' and outed.

Most trans people can agree on 'transition' at least - for the moment. On the other hand, MTF and FTM were for a while standard, then got into the personal ads and disappeared from respectable usage. 'Transexual' is too medicalised for a lot of people's taste, and 'gender dysphoric' plays the pity card. '[Transgender](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/transgender)' is a useful portmanteau term for a coalition of almost everybody unhappy with rigid unalterable binary gender roles, but rapidly became too vague to be entirely useful.

Right now, trans is just about universally acceptable - though in recent years there was a fight over whether it should be an adjective or a prefix. A trans woman, the argument goes, is a woman who happens to be trans as she might be, say, blonde, but a transman is some special and distinct order of being.

For a while, it seemed as if some younger trans men were going to successfully reclaim 'tranny', at least as a 'smile when you say that' epithet, or a 'we can say that about ourselves; you can't' in-group word like 'queer'. It didn't take, though, partly because it had never stopped being used by would-be hip lad journalists to abuse not only actual trans people, but a list of 'weird' people seen as non-gender-conforming.

Unwieldiness is always going to be the thing that stops some of the currently modish terminology catching on. Once you start using self-descriptions like 'male-identified, female-assigned-at-birth, female-bodied (currently), non-operative', you are getting into a place where the map is as big as the territory and you hand out a CV every time you have a conversation. The thing about just saying you're trans is that it tells people we're here, get used to it.

That's why, particularly for younger trans people, writing and activism are one. Old-school language such as 'trapped in the wrong body' was always sentimental twaddle, but spoke to how life felt. Now young trans poets are trying to make new language for their situations. As a recent play about trans male life and genitals put it, "There is no word for it."

There is, however, now a word for people who are not trans. Amazingly, there has recently been a controversy in feminist blogs about the term 'cis', popularised by [Julia Serano](http://www.juliaserano.com/), which is about as value-free and non-derogatory as you can get - it's a standard Latin prefix, as in 'Cisalpine Gaul'.

This exemplifies the fact that language is a battlefield for trans people: we can find ourselves in a row just for having our own word for everyone else.

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