

A Relativist Ameliorative Approach to Gender Terms

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Abstract

Gender terms play a crucial role in our lives, in that they allow us to categorize ourselves and others as of a certain gender, which in turn has important social, moral and legal implications. In contemporary philosophy of language, the discussion of the meaning of gender terms has been mostly conducted within ameliorative projects (Haslanger (2000)). Roughly, an ameliorative project investigates what the meaning of words should be, in opposition to a descriptive project which investigates how meanings are. The main idea is that philosophy of language should strive to provide accounts of “loaded” terms that are sensitive to social, moral, and political ideals: e.g., avoid discrimination, bring about more justice etc.

In this paper, I propose a novel ameliorative account of gender terms. By focusing entirely on the case of trans people (who didn’t undergo gender-affirming medical procedures), I show that one of the main views in the semantics of natural language expressions (relativism) can be successfully appealed to in order to yield the ameliorative account sought after. However, since an orthodox version of the view is unsuitable, I propose a *flexible* version of relativism, one that is independently motivated by various considerations in the literature on perspectival expressions such as predicates of taste, moral and aesthetic terms, epistemic modals (e.g., problematic cases of truth-assessment, data about retraction, etc.). I base the flexibility in question on the general notion of *the importance of the asserter’s situation*, which in application to gender terms is replaced with the notion of *the situation of the subject of the gender attribution*. With this latter notion in hand, all the problematic cases for the orthodox relativist view (and for the other views on the market) are handled satisfactorily.

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In this paper, I will focus almost entirely on the case of trans people (who didn’t undergo gender-affirming medical procedures). In general terms, an ameliorative project about gender terms in relation to trans people should fulfil at least the following two desiderata: i) to allow trans people to use the gender terms of their choice and ii) to assure that this choice be respected by

others. More specifically, I cash out this project as allowing utterances of sentences like “(G) John is a man.” (or their first-person equivalents “I am a man.”), where John (or the speaker) is a trans man who hasn’t undergone gender-affirming medical procedures, to come out as true at least in some contexts in which a) trans people attribute themselves a certain gender; b) other people attribute trans people a certain gender.

1 A quick survey of the main views and their shortcomings

When it comes to the semantics of gender terms, several views can be found in the literature, among which invariantism, contextualism and relativism. As I will show in this section, none of these (at least in their simple versions) are suitable for the type of ameliorative project I aim to undertake.

Two versions of invariantism have been popular in relation to gender terms: *biological invariantism*, according to which gender is reducible to biological traits ((G) is true iff John possesses biological traits X, Y, Z ...) and *social invariantism*, according to which gender is reducible to social roles ((G) is true iff John plays social role R1, R2, R3 ...). Both versions are problematic from an ameliorative point of view: due to its focus on biology, the former cannot help with the inclusion problem, as (G) will come out false in all contexts; due to its focus on social elements, the latter yields the wrong results if John doesn’t play any of the roles envisaged by the theory and thus (G) comes out false in some contexts in which it shouldn’t.

Contextualism has entered the debate as a way to solve the problems faced by invariantism, and also motivated by variation in truth-values of sentences like (G) across contexts (perceived to be true in, say, activism contexts, when self-identification matters, but false in medical contexts, when female biology is relevant). Building on previous views, Saul (2012) discusses a contextualist view that provides the following truth-conditions: “[(G)] is true in a context C iff X is human and relevantly similar (according to the standards at work in C) to most of those possessing all of the biological markers of [male] sex.” Generally formulated, contextualism takes the determining factor for the truth value of sentence like (G) to be found in the context of utterance. But, as Saul (2012) herself and many critics (e.g., Bettcher (2017), Díaz-León (2016), Jenkins (2016)) acknowledge, this type of contextualism doesn’t help with the inclusion problem either, since it allows (G) to come out false in the mouth of

transphobes (it is their context that determines its truth-value). Another version of contextualism, proposed by Díaz-León (2016) has it that the factor determining the truth-value of (G) is the situation of the subject of the gender attribution; this “subject-contextualism” fares better than “speaker-contextualism”, but it has been criticized on various counts (by, e.g., Laskowski (2020), Zeman (2020b), Chen (2021), etc.).

Relativism has not been applied to gender terms until recently. Generally formulated, relativism takes the determining factor for the truth value of sentence like (G) to be found not in the context of utterance, but in that of assessment (thus, treating gender terms as *assessment-sensitive*). Zeman (2020a) has explored how the view fares vis-à-vis the ameliorative project assumed here, and his findings were mixed: while it gets some good results (e.g., accounts for cases in which (G) is uttered by a transphobe but assessed by a trans person or an ally or makes sense of trans people taking themselves to have been wrong about their gender before transition), it also fails to improve on contextualism (it cannot account for cases in which (G) is uttered by a trans person or an ally, but assessed by a transphobe; or for the simple case in which a transphobe would utter (G): since the context of utterance and that of assessment are the same, it will come out as false in their mouth).

The conclusion is bleak: three of the main semantic views are not suitable for the type of ameliorative project pursued. In the remainder of the paper, however, I will show that a suitably modified version of relativism might give us what we want.

2 Motivating Flexible Relativism

Relativism has come to prominence in connection to the semantics of perspectival expressions – terms like “tasty”, “beautiful”, “good” and their negative counterparts, (epistemic) “might”, “knows”, etc. Among the phenomena that relativism has been taken to offer a better treatment than rival views are: eavesdropping (Egan, Hawthorne & Weatherson (2005)); faultless disagreement (Kölbel (2004), Lasersohn (2016)); retraction (MacFarlane (2014)). However, it has become clear in the debate that a rigid, orthodox version of relativism is not tenable anymore. The main challenges that relativism faces come from certain cases of truth-value assessment in which relativism yields the wrong results and from recent arguments against

the support relativism has been taken to receive from retraction. In relation to the first, Dietz (2008) and others have presented cases of so-called “knowledgeable assessors” involving certain exchanges with epistemic modals (see the scenarios about Mastermind in von Fintel & Gillies 2008) where certain utterances are felicitous, yet according to relativism they shouldn’t be. In connection to the second, in addition to many critical considerations “from the armchair” (von Fintel & Gillies (2008), Dowell (2011), Rafmann (2016), Marques (2018)), several recent experimental studies show either that the connection between retraction and truth-value assessment is not as tight as the relativist assumes (Knobe & Yalcin (2014)) or that people in fact don’t retract (Kneer (2021)).

Both challenges can be met if relativism is construed as a flexible position. While the view has been usually conceived of as a rigid position, according to which the relevant truth-determinative factor, always initialized in the context of the assessor, is the one relevant in that very context. But flexible versions of relativism are also available (see, for example, Zeman (2010, 2024), MacFarlane (2011, 2014), Khoo (2015), Beddor & Egan (2018) etc.); according to such versions, the assessor can “step out” of their context of assessment and sometimes adopt the perspective that is relevant in the context of utterance, when the initial assertion was made (regardless of whether the initial assertion was made by themselves or by a different person). The flexibility inherent in such versions of relativism solves the challenges mentioned (see MacFarlane (2011, 2014) in relation to “knowledgeable assessors” scenarios; see Beddor & Egan (2018) in relation to Knobe & Yalcin’s (2014) results; see Zeman (2024) in relation to Kneer’s results).

But now another challenge arises – that of finding a non-ad-hoc principle underlying the shift from the context of assessment to that of utterance (see Dowell (2011), Kneer (2021)). One ready answer is the literature is that of Beddor & Egan (2018), who take the main factor that drives flexibility to be the question under discussion. But they also agree that this cannot be the only principle, and they mention charity as another option. Other factors can be envisaged: for example, in explaining someone’s beliefs or actions in a certain context, appeal to the body of information of that person at the time of believing/acting seems the obvious choice. Given this, it seems to be better to postulate some kind overarching principle: in Zeman (2024) I propose a meta-

principle based on the notion of *the importance in a context of assessment of the situation of the person making the assertion assessed* (“the importance of the asserter’s situation”, for short). This allows for some context-sensitivity in what exactly the flexibility-driving factor is, but it addresses the ad-hocness challenge.

3 Application to gender terms

Having motivated a flexible version of relativism and having proposed a solution to the ad-hocness problem, in this section I apply the view to gender terms. At least two questions arise in this connection: what does importance amount to in this case and how does the view account for the problematic cases.

In looking for an answer to the first question, we should follow closely the goals of the ameliorative endeavor. Since these are to allow trans people to use the gender terms of their choice and this choice to be respected, *self-identification* should be part of the picture. So, the proposal is to include self-identification as one of the factors that makes the situation of the asserter important in a context of assessment. Granted, this seems to be a different aspect of importance, in comparison with those mentioned in the previous section. But my proposal was purposely *pluralistic*: various elements could be important, and arguably how one conceives of themselves is such an element.

In relation to the second issue, the view proposed accounts for the problematic cases, but not without (a slight) modification. First, the view yields the right result in the cases in which (G) (or, rather, the first-person equivalent) is uttered by John himself (in non-medical contexts) and assessed by a transphobe: since John’s self-identification makes his situation important in the context of assessment, it is the truth-determinative factor in his context that matters for the truth of (G). A complication that arises here, however: (G) could be uttered by someone else, who could be either a trans man or not, a transphobe or not. In such cases, the asserter’s situation is *not* the one relevant for the truth of (G); instead, I propose we should take that to be *the situation of the subject of the gender attribution*. (This is similar to Díaz-León’s (2016) subject-contextualist proposal, which seems to be equally available to the

relativist.) Going this way will also solve the cases in which (G) is uttered (and assessed) by a transphobe by making John's self-identification as a man what determines whether an assertion is true or not.

Further questions might arise. For example, can the view account for the perceived variation in truth-value of sentences like (G) across contexts, which would avoid the view's collapse into invariantism? It seems so: since it is the importance of the situation of the subject of the gender attribution that matters for truth-evaluation, and since self-identification is the crucial factor in the situation of the subject, it all comes down to how the subject self-identifies. So, if John self-identifies as a man in a context of activism, then (G), as uttered in such a context and assessed from any other, comes out as true. But if John doesn't self-identify as a man in a medical context, then (G), again as uttered in such a context and assessed from any other, comes out as false. We thus get the relevant variation in truth-value across contexts.

Thus, by embracing a flexible version of relativism and allowing the notion of importance to comprise not only the situation of the asserter, but that of the subject of the gender ascription as well, we arrive at a solution to the cases that proved to be problematic for the orthodox version, as well as for other views on the market. Taking gender terms to be assessment-sensitive (in the way suggested) is thus one way in which an ameliorative account of gender terms can proceed.

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