

WORDS AND ISSUES

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In some cases different words in a language are used with the same cognitive meaning but with different associations, often positive or negative. When I was at Reading University (1978-82), the issue arose of whether or not membership of the RU Student Union should imply membership of the National Union of Students – as it then did. The NUS was known for espousing strongly radical views with which some students wished not to be associated, for example its ‘No Platform For Fascists’ position – which itself invited discussion of who counted as a fascist and was thus somewhat unclear as well as controversial. Texts in the RU student literature which represented such students referred to **compulsory** NUS membership – a term with negative associations which invited opposition. Those who supported the NUS connection instead used the term **automatic**, which suggested convenience - no need to join NUS separately - and sounded harmless. Neither side engaged overtly with the crucial question of whether or not students at institutions which were not themselves associated with NUS **could** individually join NUS if they wished, or with the converse question of whether students at institutions which **were** associated with NUS could individually resign from the national body (if their student union were willing to issue them with special non-NUS SU cards, or if they were willing to forgo SU membership). Perhaps the polarisation of the debate suited both sides better than clarity on such specific points.

In other cases, the very same word is used with different senses and implications without the difference being made explicit. Many Americans claim that their country is the freest in the world, the only truly free country, etc.; some use the term *freedom* to refer to specific American ideas and even products, as in *freedom dollars*, *freedom burgers*, etc. They are surprised when non-Americans dispute the basic claim. When the matter is debated, it emerges that the two sides are covertly defining the term *freedom* differently. Americans – especially men – often cite their freedom to own and carry guns and decry as unfree countries such as Australia where gun-ownership is severely restricted. (They are not usually swayed by the information that the current Australian law was instituted as a result of a referendum staged after a gun-massacre - much less common in Australia than in the USA and thus perceived as shocking.)

In response, Australians (and others) cite their own freedom to go about their lives, send their children to school, etc without the constant fear of gun-crime. They also cite their freedom to go to see their GP when unwell, and if necessary to go to hospital, without the need to take out expensive private insurance and without the fear of horrendously large, sometimes bankrupting bills; to work only reasonable hours; and to take maternity leave or reasonable amounts of vacation leave without the fear of suddenly losing their jobs. Americans are often surprised at much of this information and even if they do acknowledge the facts they may simply dismiss these points as not really relevant to the question of freedom – quite contrary to Australian conceptions of the matter. Many Americans also decry national health service systems as ‘socialist’ – a term used more broadly in the USA than elsewhere and treated by most Americans as self-evidently implying oppression (whatever the positive outcomes of the policies) and indeed as associated with the stronger notion of ‘communism’ - which certainly cannot be applied accurately to the systems of ‘western’ countries. They regard non-Americans as unfree in being taxed to support medical care which is then free (by intention, at least) at the point of delivery (but which they personally may never need). American travellers are less scathing when as visitors they themselves benefit from these systems after expecting and dreading large bills for treatment! But they often still seem unsympathetic to their fellow Americans on limited incomes who are faced with the choice between paying for costly medical treatment and funding the necessary expenditure of daily life.

On a range of more specific issues the USA on the one hand and other ‘western’ countries on the other hand differ as to which freedoms they provide. Americans are less free than many elsewhere to demonstrate (even if peacefully) against their authorities, and are not free at all to consume moderate

amounts of alcohol or 'soft' drugs in public, etc. They may also wrongly believe that they have more free speech than e.g. Europeans. And the abnormally high status of Christianity (including 'Christian Nationalism') in the USA creates an atmosphere of oppression and limitations on freedom for American unbelievers, especially overt atheists (sometimes denigrated as less than fully American).

All in all, Americans may indeed be more 'free' in terms of their own definition of the word *freedom*. But this definition is unfamiliar to many from elsewhere, to the point where the matter is barely capable of being debated.

Another example of debates being rendered difficult by the presence of differing definitions of key words involves the highly topical question of how people who are transitioning or have transitioned to the opposite gender should be treated in law. Those of us who became familiar with these matters in the late C20 – as I myself did in the highly liberal LGBT community (not then so-called) in Oxford in the mid-late 1970s – learned the term *transsexual* and spoke of people as having been 'born in the wrong body' and as 'changing sex'. A birth-male who had transitioned in physical terms as fully as is possible, including genital surgery, was now a woman (despite lacking a uterus etc) - and *vice-versa*.

As time went by the term *gender* came to prominence in this context. This was partly because the term *sex* came to be interpreted as referring to 'strict' biological sex, defined in terms of genetic characteristics which (at least at present; maybe for always) cannot be changed. The term *transgender* thus came largely to replace *transsexual*; what was changed by hormone replacement and surgery was one's gender, a key feature of one's persona, rather than one's sex, which remained as it had been since birth.

In the pro-LGBT community, gender came to be seen as more important than sex. The expression 'gender assigned at birth' became salient and often now appears on survey response forms: one is asked if one's current gender matches that assigned at birth. It can be argued that this usage misses the point. Although there are additional genetic subtleties and variations, one's biological sex is immediately apparent at birth (with very rare exceptions) and involves a binary distinction (again, with rare exceptions). The designation is not arbitrary, as the term *assign* might suggest.

What **is** assigned, not directly at birth but as an ongoing process, is sex-based expectations and features of the process of upbringing. It is here, surely, where the imposition on children of female or male roles arises. Some children come to perceive themselves as of the opposite gender/sex from their biology; this could not be predicted at birth. Where these feelings are strong and persist over time, these youngsters will mostly resist assigned sex-roles and seek transition, which is nowadays available – with or without support from family or the wider environment. See further below.

Some LGBT advocates seem to regard gender, seen as present from conception, as largely separate from sex. There are reasons for questioning this. Firstly, young people who begin to experience trans drives typically refer to them using the same terms as apply to biological sex, not altogether different terms. They say things like 'Ma, I'm a girl'. Secondly, youngsters like this very typically suffer from gender dysphoria, a condition which is recognised by psychologists and involves vast amounts of unsettlement, angst and the like. This condition usually recedes once a person has transitioned (including genital surgery) – but may reappear if a trans-hostile regime ceases to recognise the person as being of their adopted sex (as we used to say) or gender. If gender were truly separate from sex, one would not expect these effects. I suggest that gender is better seen as the main psychological manifestation of sex, which occasionally mismatches with physical sex.

A more recent, opposed trend has been the foregrounding of the view that 'biological sex' should be defined in terms of immutable physical sex at birth. The presence of gender dysphoria (when it emerges) is not taken into account here. Neither are the results of genital surgery (external genitalia of the person's adopted sex/gender) taken into account - or indeed the results of hormone replacement (breasts etc.). In fact, the very notion of gender is often downplayed; supposedly, gender as opposed to biological sex should not be regarded as important in public contexts. Trans women are described

as biological males, with no admission that their status is unusual. Groups such as Sex Matters and individuals such as the well-known author J.K. Rowling have advocated this view as part of their campaign to lessen or even eliminate social and legal recognition of trans status (largely because of clearly exaggerated worries about trans women creating difficulties/issues in all-female contexts such as public lavatories, swimming clubs, sports clubs, etc). The prominent scientist Richard Dawkins (often seen in other contexts as a skeptical hero) has adopted the same view, as have some other scientists (though not so many medical scientists, whose governing bodies are often 'pro-trans'). The positions of Dawkins and others have encouraged commentators to regard pro-trans stances as 'unscientific'.

Along with some of my fellow-skeptics, I would re-cast this in terms of different, still scientific definitions of the notion of 'biological sex', in which the terms *man* and *woman* apply not only to 'cis-males' and 'cis-females' but also a) to people suffering from gender dysphoria and intending to transition fully and b) to those who have already transitioned and now manifest the completed outcomes of hormone replacement and genital surgery. (Of course, this does not exclude the possibility that **some** people, effectively un-transitioned but claiming to be trans, could reasonably be denied that status in official contexts. See below on non-ops, etc.)

Views such as those of Sex Matters have been described as 'gender critical' and treated with derision by pro-trans lobbies. The adoption by the UK Supreme Court of a definition of sex in purely biological terms (as observed at birth), which was then seized upon by many organisations even before there was any question of immediate legal application in organisational contexts, has resulted in vehemently hostile views on the part of pro-trans groups. Some groups (e.g. some branches of the Women's Institute) have dissolved themselves rather than comply with the increasing institution of 'gender critical' positions.

Of course, gender-critical groups often treat pro-trans ideas in similarly dismissive ways. The exchange of ideas (which seldom amounts to genuine discussion) is typically very polarised. See below.

Gender-critical thinkers are at one extreme here: trans people, even those who are externally indistinguishable from cis people of their assumed sex/gender, do not count as members of their assumed sex/gender (and thus must be barred from the relevant toilets, etc.). In contrast, many pro-LGBT thinkers hold that one's gender is to be determined by oneself only. 'If I say I am a woman, then I am a woman (whatever my appearance etc.)'. One cannot be legitimately challenged on this point. And one's physiology, however arrived at, is irrelevant.

This latter view reminds a linguist of the claim 'If I say I am a Celt, then I am a Celt (even if I speak no Celtic language)'. This matter involves 'Celtic -culture' enthusiasts and arose particularly in the context of modern Galicians in NW Spain claiming – successfully, for a while – to be of Celtic ethnicity, even though the Celtic language of the area is long dead and the distinctive usage of Galicia instead resembles Portuguese. It should be noted that there is **no** clear non-linguistic definition of the notion of being Celtic.

The two extreme positions on gender/sex both achieve simplicity and decisiveness at the cost of grossly misrepresenting many specific facts about specific people. This suits those who prefer polarised opposition to thoughtful debate. There is too little common ground to permit a real discussion, and there is much plain hostility and derision, on all sides. I recently heard two women literally screaming at each other in this context on a radio programme.

Some skeptics, however, will urge more subtle positions. In my own view, self-identifying women who have male external genitals but are nevertheless regarded by some strongly pro-trans lobbies as women do **not** count as women unless they are 'pre-ops' fully committed to complete physical transition (such people usually suffer from gender dysphoria until this is achieved). A term which we used in the 90s and noughties for those **not** intending to transition (for whatever reason) was *non-op*.

Alternatively, the term *shemale* was (and still is) used for some non-ops, particularly in an overtly sexual context. (Not that one can by any means always **distinguish** between members of such groups and cis-females when the individuals are clothed!)

Other terms such as *translesbian* have been used to refer to cis-males who either are or are not thinking of fully transitioning but who present as female (some of them are arguably simply convincing cross-dressers) and are sexually interested in women. Etc., etc.

The ongoing change to official sex terminology in the UK involves a third and a fourth category of 'trans-men' and 'trans-women'. But many who have been through the trans process do not identify as trans (that is their personal **history**, not their current identity) and are determined to resist such terminology – especially where they are visually indistinguishable from cis-people of their adopted gender/sex. Such people are most unlikely to create issues in cis contexts and strongly resent separate classification. Many members of these groups are now emigrating from the UK; some others have committed suicide or plan to do so.

The linguistic terminology and the associated issues in this area have certainly become much more complex and contentious than they were 50 years ago when I first moved in such circles.

Of course, different lobbies may describe events in very different terms, even where individual **words** and their associations are not centrally involved. I remember reading two politically-opposed accounts of the 1968 Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia; few salient individual words with multiple senses or associations were involved, but the politically-charged narratives were nevertheless so different that it was not at once clear that they were describing the same event.