

Gendered Selves, Gendered Subjects: Transgender Identities and the Divided Person Metaphor

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It has been well-argued that cognition is often metaphorically conceptualized as the interplay of a single Subject and one or more Selves, as outlined primarily by Lakoff (1996) and Lakoff & Johnson (1999). While previous work has shown that this metaphor relates systematically to particular linguistic structures, I examine how these structures (and others) reflect the complexity of cognitive construal of Self accompanying particularly complex negotiations of personal identity. As such an example, I present how transgender individuals are often metaphorically understood as multiple people in a way that mostly follows this framework. With data gathered from recent newspaper articles (as representative of public discourse) and analyses brought in from critical gender studies, I demonstrate the very real effects this metaphor has on how transgender people are treated. As an example, the transition from one gender expression to another is sometimes narrated as *loss* or even *death*, and friends and family may find themselves *in mourning* and struggling to accept the *new person*.

What is most of interest is that, while there are circumstances where the transgender person is seen as having multiple Selves in the typical use of the term, there are also circumstances where there seem to be multiple Subjects. To demonstrate each: Speaking of one's life prior to transition *as when I was a woman* or *when I was a man* presents one's gender as an aspect of a mutable Self, but the earlier example of *mourning* and *death* seems surprising if this is simply a case of multiple Selves. I claim that the difference between these scenarios is whether one's gender identity is being considered part of one's subjective consciousness or whether it is instead linked to social roles, body configurations, temporal states, etc. The latter creates the more expected scenarios of *when I was a woman/man*, but the former forces one to understand a transgender person as undergoing a radical change in Subject, so that perhaps the old Subject is lost or dead. This is influenced by both linguistic facts, such as how gendered third person pronouns in English makes it difficult to refer to an ambiguously gendered individual, and by societal beliefs, such as those that say that the same individual by definition cannot be both a man and a woman.

My analysis serves as a reminder that cognitive linguistics must take into account the effects of societal beliefs on cognition. The effects of the Self/Subject division in transgender individuals would not make sense without an understanding of how gender is thought of in society, and my analysis expands the Self/Subject model so that it can handle this data. It also provides a linguistic model for understandings of gender, which is at different times seen either as internal and subjective or as external and culturally contingent. In short, this work closes a previous gap between cognitive linguistic theories and critical understandings of gender and transgender identities.

References

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