

**Language reform beyond words:
A case study of discursive reform in West Coast Swing classes**
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Dating back at least as far as the 1970s feminist and queer activism (e.g. Ehrlich & King, 1992; Moulton et al., 1978; Rose, 2010; Zimman, 2017), has drawn attention to the ways that gendered language may participate in and contribute to sexism and cis-sexism in society. While the creation of gender-neutral role nouns has been a valuable mechanism in these efforts to address and redress (cis)sexist language, such word changes alone often fail to overcome underlying gender stereotypes associated with a given word (e.g., Lassonde & O'Brien, 2013). This paper explores how an on-going lexical reform in a social partner dance community interacts with the opening act sequences (Hymes, 1974) of classes within this community of practice to create affordances and/or barriers to students' participation in non-heteronormative roles (i.e. people other than men leading; people other than women following). The data, drawn from on-going dissertation work, were collected using linguistic ethnographic methods including participant observation and interviews with community members. These data span classes, weekend workshops, and other dance related events in Central Canada, the US Midwest, and the US Northeast, with interviews mainly conducted with participants in the focal community in Toronto.

West Coast Swing dancers have made significant strides in "degendering" the dance, including reforming "traditional" gendered terms (e.g., ladies, gentlemen) to so-called degendered terms (e.g., leaders, followers), and changing competition rules to allow dancers to participate in either role (leader or follower) regardless of their gender. However, West Coast Swing classes or workshops, often the main locales of dancers' socialization into the community of practice, differ in the ways that role allocation is managed and therefore in the extent to which dancers are given equal access to their preferred role. For example, the common prompt, "go grab a partner", while creating fewer barriers to non-heteronormative participation than splitting the class into roles with "guys over here, girls over there", also provides fewer affordances for non-heteronormative participation than splitting the class into "leaders" and "followers" using the degendered neologisms. When dancers are left to "go grab a partner" amongst themselves heteronormative biases re-emerge and, like the lesbians studied by Land & Kitinger (2005), individuals wishing to engage in non-heteronormative roles are left to correct heterosexist assumptions individually, without the support of a pre-established role-based discourse. Further, many instructors, including those who explicitly state that roles are not gendered, subtly police role choice, asking women positioned as leaders "are you leading" or men positioned as followers "are you following" without questioning heteronormative participants. While such interventions are often intended to assist new students, they mark the role choice as non-normative and potentially inappropriate.

Thus, though practices that afford more opportunities for non-heteronormative participation are emerging, "traditional" heteronormative logics remain substantial factors in the allocation of roles, appearing both in what is said, and in the discursive "gaps" left by what the instructor does not say or who they do not question. Ultimately, this work offers insights into the broader project of gender-focussed language reform and demonstrates the importance of considering language routines as well as lexical items in the contestation of (cis)sexist social structures which activists may wish to unsettle and/or tear down entirely.

References

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