



Intersex Article 4: Language

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Considering the difficult medical and social problems which surround intersex people, it might be difficult to see why language is a significant issue, but the language we use defines much of the way we think. Language influences the way we perceive social matters (such as gender) and the way we perceive our own bodies.

If you've studied a language like French or German, you may be aware that some languages have gender markers, sometimes purely grammatical but sometimes used to denote the sex of a particular person. In English we still have some terms like these - 'fireman', for instance - though they are gradually becoming outdated. This is one example of how language perpetuates the idea of a binary gender system, one in which there is no place for people who fail to identify as male or female. If you were Thai or Japanese, the very words you spoke would be determined, to an extent, by your gender. There was recently a scandal in Japan when it was discovered that some groups of schoolgirls were speaking using word forms normally reserved for men. The girls were breaking a stronger taboo than the use of any swear word in the English language.

It has long been accepted that the lack of a gender neutral second person pronoun (to accompany 'he' or 'she') in English is a problem. The word 'they' has come to be used in this context, but it's clumsy, since it also has another meaning. 'He/she' or 'he or she' tends to be used in formal writing, but can be unwieldy. The internet has increased the popularity of invented pronouns like 'sie' and 'xie', but these have yet to establish themselves in wider circulation. The result is that those intersex people (and other transgender people such as androgyne people) who do not identify as either male or female nevertheless usually have to accept being referred to as 'he' or 'she' (or both). Most intersex people find it extremely offensive to be labelled as 'it', which is sometimes used to demean them by unsympathetic family members.

Aside from the social difficulties caused by language, there can be personal difficulties. Intersex people have no words for their own distinctive body parts. Their genitals are generally referred to in relation to normal male or female

genitals, so we get terms like 'micropenis' and 'pseudo vagina'. The negative associations which these terms convey encourage people to feel that their bodies are inadequate and that they are unsuccessful at being male or female rather than successful at being themselves. This is an example of how intersex people are discouraged from feeling positive about their bodies and hence about their potential as human beings.

The medicalisation of the intersex experience is emphasised every time a particular intersex condition has to be described using an unwieldy medical term. To an extent, this is being eroded as intersex communities increasingly rely on acronyms and abbreviations. Creating more natural alternatives, which fit easily into conversation, is one way in which intersex people can start to determine their own identities.

As intersex people develop a positive sense of their own identity, we need to look at how language can change to accommodate them. It's important for families, friends, and those providing public services (such as health care) to intersex people to respect their choice of terminology in defining their identity. We need to adjust our language habits to make room for new terms originating within the intersex community. Languages are fluid things which change as society changes, adapting to new social realities, and enabling linguistic change is an important part of accepting intersex people into society.