FOLLOWING NORMS OR LEADING CHANGE: THE LANGUAGE OF "DEGENDERING" IN WEST COAST SWING DANCE

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Abstract

In this dissertation I employed linguistic ethnography to explore how language reform is being undertaken and understood within the context of West Coast Swing's (WCS) degendering movement. While WCS had traditionally been a heteronormative partner dance style in which men led, women followed, and each partnership comprised a woman and a man, in recent years, efforts have been made to move beyond this heteronormative model of participation—and the language associated with it—under the banner of *degendering*. In studying this movement, I was interested in: (1) how participants talked about the reform, (2) how the reform was being enacted, and (3) how language reform seemed to be contributing to, or entangled with, the broader social change targeted by the reform. I conducted 11 months of participant observation in a local WCS scene and at weekend competition events in the surrounding areas of the USA and Canada, as well as 20 interviews with 22 dancers. The resulting data was analysed using a scavenger methodology which drew on multiple (critical) discourse analytical techniques as well as theory from linguistics, anthropology, gender studies, queer theory, and dance studies. Overall, the data showed strong uptake of the language reform with most participants using degendered terms when referring to the dance roles generically. This uptake was supported by a liberal (rather than radical) approach to language reform (Cameron, 1995) which framed reformed language as being more accurate; being a response to exogenous social change; and supporting the liberal values of inclusion and civility. Despite this success at the lexical level, however, heteronormativity was still observed in other elements of language use and the participation structure of the dance. As a result, I propose that more explicitly political reforms are required—reforms (both linguistic and otherwise) that directly challenge heteronormative assumptions and model a participation structure in which role is not assumed on the basis of gender presentation.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the brave and brilliant dancers who have broken the mould, danced in the role that they felt most themselves in, and campaigned both through explicit activism, and through placing their own bodies on the line of judgement in competitions (and the social floor) to demand that space be made for them in the West Coast Swing scene. I especially acknowledge my dear friend and circuit travel companion Patrick Tran who shared his experiences as a follower with me before I began this work and drew my attention to the importance of the degendering movement, not just as a way to give everyone more options, but also as a way to let people fully realize their expressive potential by supporting and defending them in their pursuit of the role that most fully resonates with who they are as a dancer and an artist.

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1 Introduction

Lead, follow, switch?

1.1 Introduction

My experience in both linguistics and West Coast Swing dates back to the first year of my undergraduate degree. Running in parallel for many years, the two kinds of experiences eventually converged in this dissertation work where linguistic tools provide resources to understand the dance community, and the dance community provides a valuable site for linguistic (and particularly language reform) research. In the chapters that follow, I explore this mutually beneficial relationship in which West Coast Swing provides a site for investigating the role of language change in the midst of a major social change—i.e. changing the formerly heteronormative participation structure of the dance—and linguistic analysis provides insights into this dance style which has only seldom been addressed in previous academic research.

My first encounter with West Coast Swing came by way of my fledgling membership in the university's Ballroom Dance Club. As we were not competitive, it might be better to think of the club as a social dance club, but our repertoire was ballroom. One night at a social, a Top 40 song came on. It was cool, it was current, and I had no idea which of my dances could possibly be applied to it, but I was eager to move to this actually contemporary music. When I found out that this music was for a dance called West Coast Swing (WCS), a dance which I had never heard of, my quest to learn it began. At that time, back in 2009, I had no notion that I should do anything other than follow—"ladies" obviously followed and "gentlemen" led. I had led country dances before, but that was only due to the excess of women at barn dances. And so, for many

years, I happily followed. I learned to lead a bit in classes, again to balance the overabundance of women students, and I knew that I had to know both sides if I wanted to teach, but I accepted the heteronormative structure of men lead, women follow, and this only changes for (1) teaching, (2) advanced students balancing a class or (3) same gender friends fooling around at socials.

Unlike many other partner dances (e.g. salsa, tango, ballroom), WCS is still relatively circumscribed in its geographical range. New competition weekends and communities spring up regularly, but they tend to be smaller than other dance communities and in the early 2010s there were few substantial communities outside of the US, major Canadian cities, and France. This meant that, when I moved several times and found myself unable to afford travel to US events, my WCS exposure dwindled precipitously. However, upon relocating to the US in 2016, I re-entered a larger WCS community (in the Northeastern US) and got back on the competition circuit with plenty of distance and perspective. It was at this point of re-entry that I suddenly saw the beginnings of a shift: now, "leaders" and "followers" seemed to be more common than "ladies" and "gentlemen"; men were beginning to follow; women were beginning to lead; and I was meeting dancers who were deeply passionate about these pursuits and about being properly rewarded in the competitive rankings for dancing in these ways. These changes had come under the banner of *degendering*, a movement to delink gender from dance role. Being a social progressive and having always had an interest in language and social change, I watched this shift with great interest but noticed some interesting complexities in its enactment. I saw t-shirts that were cut in "women's" styles being advertised as "followers' tops" while t-shirts in unisex or "men's" styles were sold as "leaders' tops"; I heard the phrase "if your leader is a follower…"; and I heard from my friends dancing in non-heteronormative roles that not all was well even though they were now allowed to compete in their preferred role at increasingly many events.

Thus, did this research project originate. I wanted to investigate what exactly was happening with *degendering* in WCS and why these new terms seemed to not be working quite as intended.

In this chapter, I begin by providing a brief introduction to language reform before moving into a discussion of the specific case of WCS. I provide a short description of the dance itself before outlining the degendering movement and introducing the research questions this dissertation aims to answer. I conclude the chapter with some orientation for the dissertation as a whole, outlining important terminological and typographical conventions, and providing a roadmap for the chapters that follow.

1.2 Language reform

Metadiscourse about language use dates back to the earliest records of human language (J.V. Neustupný, 1993 as cited in Cameron, 1995). Much of this metadiscourse has focussed on tradition, aesthetic standards, and grammatical conventions as desirable norms, but increasingly over the last century, critique has expanded to include criticism of language that is seen as creating or perpetuating marginalization of certain types of individuals or groups within society (Cameron, 1995). Alongside these critiques, various social-justice-oriented[1] language reform movements have emerged. Gender-focussed language reform came to public attention in the 1970s when feminist scholars and activists (e.g. Henley, 1989; Martyna, 1983; J. Moulton et al., 1978; Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986) began agitating for language reform to address what has been called the androcentrism of many Indo-European languages (Spender, 1998/1980). These reform efforts, which focussed on language's role in the perpetuation of sexism and misogyny, have more recently been joined by reform efforts seeking to confront the binary gender assumptions that are often inherent in language use and which are argued to enact cis-sexism (Ansara &

[1] While this term may not be used by all activists in all time periods, it provides a useful category term to encompass all of those movements which seek to reduce marginalization and increase equity and justice in society.

Hegarty, 2013; Zimman, 2017). The success of these gender-focussed language efforts has, however, been inconsistent (Cameron, 1985; Ehrlich & King, 1992; Horvath et al., 2016), and the efforts themselves have been trivialized (Martyna, 1983; see also Murphy, 2016 reporting on Jordan Peterson's reactions to gender-neutral pronouns) and criticized as a distraction from more important problems (see Cameron, 1995). These critiques have not, however, ended calls for reform. In a post-structuralist, post-Butlerian (e.g. Butler, 1988, 1990, 1993) world, language has been recognized as a key resource for the performance and ratification of identity and particularly gender identity. Hence, no matter the critiques of language reform, the idea that language is powerful and important and that changing it can be an important part of changing social norms remains extremely salient for many activists (e.g. Dumais, 2021; Lindqvist et al., 2019; Wayne, 2005). Further, many critical approaches to semiosis in language (e.g. Bakhtin, 1986; Fairclough, 1992; McConnell-Ginet, 2011) argue that language serves as a repository for hegemonic ideologies and a system for reproducing them. Thus, language reform remains an important mechanism through which communities navigate changing social circumstances and power structures.

Within the traditionally gender stratified communities of social partner dancing, for example, efforts have been made to *degender* both the roles within dance partnerships and the language that surrounds them. This degendering seeks to enable all members to participate in their preferred role, whether or not it aligns with the traditional expectation that only men "lead" and only women "follow". Given that much, if not all, dance education and socialization is mediated through language, language reform has emerged as a key element in this degendering process. While many dance communities are engaging in different kinds of degendering strategies with varying degrees of success (e.g. Craggs, 2019 (news report); Londoño, 2019

(news report); Shaw, 2018; Wade, 2011), the dance community I chose to investigate—the WCS community—has officially accepted degendering through rule changes which have occurred over the past six years. Yet, full acceptance of degendered dancing remains contested. For example, not all dancers are willing to dance with dancers engaged in non-traditional role dancing and some publicly express disapproval towards degendering and/or their distaste for dancing with non-traditional role partners.[2] At the same time, pro-degendering activists have initiated language change in the WCS community, seeking to replace traditional gendered references to and descriptions of the dance roles (e.g. LADIES and GENTLEMEN in reference to the two dance roles, gendered third person pronouns in generic reference to either role, and presentations of leading or following that are associated with masculinity or femininity respectively) with non-gendered (or degendered) references such as LEADERS, FOLLOWERS, THEY, and constructions of the roles that do not rely on describing movements as masculine or feminine. However, perhaps unexpectedly, this language change has not come to completion and, even amongst those who are outwardly supportive of degendering, slips into the use of gendered language have been observed (O'Neill, 2024). Hence, this community presents a unique opportunity to observe how language and social reform are intertwined at a significant turning point in the degendering process, and further, to do so in a community where embodiment and physical interaction is highly salient and inextricably bound up with the linguistic and social reforms under way.

[2] When a heteronormative dancer dances with a non-heteronormative dancer, the result is, excepting the possible participation of nonbinary dancers, a same-sex couple. Given the frequent link between dance and sexuality illustrated by folk sayings such as "dance is a vertical expression of a horizontal desire", it may not be surprising that some heterosexual dancers express discomfort with engaging in what, to them, is now a homosexual interaction. While many other dancers argue that dance need not be sexual, this theme is nonetheless common in complaints from traditional role dancers who resist dancing with non-traditional role dancers.

1.3 West Coast Swing

Where gender-focussed language reform has been a topic of discussion in mainstream[3] North American society since at least the early 1970s, it has only recently become prominent in most North American social partner dance communities. As Pietrobruno (2006) argues, the process of adults learning gendered roles in such communities presents an explicit example of the constructedness of gender. Whereas participants may live in relatively gender equal communities, they choose to engage in dance practices that teach them to move and to relate to their partners in highly gendered, heteronormative ways (e.g. Bosse, 2015; Pietrobruno, 2006; Schneider, 2013a). Hence, the recent move in many dance communities to delink dance roles from gender offers a unique opportunity to observe a shift in gender regimes, from a strongly binary and heteronormative model to one that is ostensibly gender-neutral. These shifts in the regimes of embodied, physical interaction are accompanied by linguistic reforms in official rule documents, pedagogical norms, and verbal social interactions within the communal spaces surrounding the dance activity. Thus, these broad shifts enable the exploration of language reform and its relation to social reform in a space where embodiment is not only inescapable, but also highly salient to participants and therefore likely to surface more frequently in discourse than it might in the discourse of less body-focussed communities.

While many dance communities are undergoing these changes to varying degrees on varying timelines, and in varying ways (e.g. relabelling men's and women's roles as *larks* and *robins* respectively in contra dance; prioritizing partners switching roles back and forth throughout a single dance, as in so called liquid styles), this research focusses on the WCS

[3] See Thornton (1996) on the ideological functions of the concept of mainstream for subcultural groups. I use the term in order to refer to the broader social milieu outside of the WCS scene but acknowledge the theoretical limitations of framing these two groups as distinct cultural groups insofar as the mainstream is not necessarily a cohesive group in opposition to some cohesive subcultural group.

community and its dominant mode of degendering, namely, the retention of two complementary roles but with an attempt to delink them from their historical genderedness. WCS is a modern style of swing that emerged out of the Savoy style of Lindy Hop as it was danced by Dean Collins in the 40s and 50s (Watson, 1996). The dance continued to evolve alongside contemporary music trends—at times influenced by hustle, salsa, tango, and other dances that came in and out of fashion—losing Lindy Hop's characteristic bounce and developing a more upright body posture (see Figure 1.1 for a visualization of this contrast).



Figure 1.1 Two dancers in WCS posture (left) and Lindy Hop posture (right). Stills from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5xC4ceof_Y. Both dancers are highly skilled in both styles winning the contest shown in the video that required them to dance both WCS and Lindy Hop.

WCS is also typically much slower than Lindy Hop, being danced to music ranging from 90 beats per minute to 130 beats per minute. This slower speed facilitates a "stretchier" connection that gives WCS a slinkier and smoother look than most other swing styles (see the first song in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0sS5atP8XI for an illustrative example).[4]

[4] Videos of West Coast Swing are abundant on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok as dancers seek to popularize the style. I have provided an example of an improvised competition dance posted by an event organizer during the time in which I was collecting data. Competitions often require dancers to demonstrate proficiency in both fast and slow

WCS is also notable for the relative autonomy of the follower, which emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s as instructors began to teach followers how to ""hijack" the lead, essentially stalling or redirecting the intended instructions being sent from their partner" (Lavin, 2019, p. 145). While hijacking was sometimes controversial, the notion that followers can influence the dance or suggest movements to the leader is now largely taken for granted and leads are expected to "give follows room to significantly shape parts of the dance" (Lavin, 2019, p. 147).

With major changes to the rules surrounding gender and role in choreographic competitions having occurred in 2018 (effective for the 2019 season),[5] WCS was at a pivotal point in the process of shifting dance/gender roles at the time I began this research and is unique amongst social partner dance communities in this way. For example, Lindy Hop is much further along in the process and has even renamed the traditional "Jack 'n' Jill" competition category[6] "Mix 'n' Match" to avoid gendered associations (Shaw, 2018); ballroom and tango have tended to keep heteronormative and queer dance spaces separate (Freedman, 2018; Londoño, 2019 (news report)); and salsa remains resistant to the shift with same sex partnerships tending not to be taken seriously in social, non-competitive contexts (Schneider, 2013a) and being placed in separate "same-sex" divisions in competition (e.g. World Salsa Summit, 2021) and the community as a whole being deeply invested in heteronormativity both linguistically and in terms of partnership dynamics as per Boulila (2015). WCS, on the other hand, currently allows dancers in non-traditional roles to compete in the most serious competitions, but also still hosts

songs and both blues and contemporary (e.g. fast blues, slow contemporary as in the example; or slow blues, fast contemporary in other cases) so this video provides a glimpse of the spectrum of variation available in the dance.

[5] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic only one competitive season (2019) occurred after the rule change and before the pandemic, so it remained a new development at the time of my fieldwork.

[6] This competition type involves dancers drawing a random partner and dancing improvisationally to a randomly selected song while being judged on technical proficiency and teamwork with one's partner. This form of competition is the main competition used for tracking dancers' competitive rank in WCS and thus it serves as a centrepiece to most weekend dance conventions.

intentionally parodic same-sex competitions during late night parties at some events (Lavin, 2019). Further, due to the small size of the community, WCS cannot afford to split into a queer scene[7] and a heterosexual scene in the way that ballroom and tango have, and thus the negotiation of so-called degendering is inescapable for most WCS participants. This is particularly the case for those who travel to weekend events where, due to the sheer numbers of participants, they meet a greater diversity of dancers than may be represented in their local communities, including non-heteronormative dancers who may be discouraged in conservative local communities. Furthermore, at weekend events where competition with a randomly drawn partner is often the primary activity, dancers may not be able to avoid dancing with non-heteronormative dancers even if they would normally decline or avoid dances with such dancers in the less regimented context of party or social dancing at both local and weekend events.

Though early efforts to degender WCS date back to the mid 1990s, these attempts were highly local and often faced significant backlash (Lavin, 2019). In fact, it was not until degendering advocates began to organize on social media in 2014 that progress began to be made within the WCS community (Lavin, 2019). Since then, petitions, video demonstrations, and exhibition dances have been used to successfully advocate for rule changes. As of 2015, all competitors were allowed to earn registry points in Jack 'n' Jill competitions and they could do this dancing in either role, even if they had previously danced in the opposite role (Lavin, 2019); at last count, gendered rules were removed from Jack 'n' Jill contests at 85% of World Swing Dance Council sanctioned events in Canada and the US (Stokes, 2020). In 2018, a same-gender couple[8] won the Rising Star tour, a choreographic competition for up-and-coming dancers. This

[7] See section 3.2.2 for a discussion of the use of the term *scene* in this sense.
[8] While in theory degendering could facilitate a couple in which a woman leads a man, couples with a non-traditional role partner have more commonly been same gender couples in which one partner dances in a non-heteronormative role and the other dances in their traditional role. In improvisation competitions this is likely due to

was followed by the removal of gendered role restrictions from the premier professional choreographic tour, NASDE (Lavin, 2019). Finally, in 2021, it became possible for dancers to compete in both roles in Jack 'n' Jill contests at a given event provided they did so in different skill divisions. However, in spite of these official rule changes, it seemed when I began this research, that the social and linguistic shifts may now be lagging behind the *official* acceptance of non-heteronormative dancers. For example, some community members seemed unwilling to dance with a partner who was not in their heteronormative role (e.g. a woman leading, a man following), there was little trans and nonbinary visibility in the community,[9] and it was unclear the extent to which language reform (e.g. replacing gendered terms like "ladies" and "gentlemen" with degendered terms like "leaders" and "followers" when referring to the dance roles, and avoiding gendered language unless directly relevant) had been fully implemented, as gendered terms were still heard in generic and non-specific references to the dance roles. In particular, generic HE for leaders and generic SHE for followers seemed to persist, despite the longstanding availability of singular THEY for anaphora with such non-specific or generic antecedents such as LEADER and FOLLOWER (Balhorn, 2004; Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 1997).

At this crucial juncture, then, when there was acceptance of degendering at the official level, but some resistance to it in practice, the WCS community provided the ideal site in which

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the relative rarity of non-heteronormative dancers, meaning that a non-heteronormative dancer is unlikely to draw a random partner who is also a non-heteronormative dancer. In choreography competitions, the reason is less clear, though there have been instances of same gender couples trading roles during a single choreography which may be more visually impactful when the partners are the same gender, preventing the appearance of a heteronormative couple occasionally switching into non-heteronormative roles.

[9] There are some openly gay and lesbian participants in the community, many of whom are prominent specifically for their decision to dance in a non-traditional role. Additionally, over the course of the pandemic there appear to be some individuals who were already prominent in the community coming out as trans or nonbinary. As this phenomenon seems to be fairly new, I had hoped to include consideration of these identity shifts in my broader research, however I was not able to identify any openly trans or nonbinary individuals in my focal community and had only one brief interaction with a dancer who appeared to be nonbinary in my travel to events. I was made aware of two nonbinary dancers based in California, but they were not present at the weekend events I attended, and California was well outside of my geographic scope.

to explore the interaction of language and social change in an ongoing struggle over gendered models of participation. Further, as this is also a community in which language reform is inextricably intertwined with embodied movement and physical interaction, it enables an exploration of the intersection of embodied and linguistic gender in an environment where that intersection is particularly thick and focal to the activity of the community. Thus, this project aims to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1. What can we learn about the processes, efficacy, challenges, and attitudes towards gender-focussed language reform by looking at this community?

RQ2. How do community members (especially LGBTQ and non-traditional role dancers) experience (de)gendered language use in the community and how might it influence their embodied experiences, expressions, and communication in dance partnerships?

RQ3. How are community members using language to construct, regulate, and navigate gender and gendered expectations in the WCS community on both sides of the degendering movement?

1.4 Typological and terminological conventions

Before proceeding into the dissertation proper, I pause to lay out some typological and terminological conventions that I follow throughout. First, I address the term *degendered*. I then discuss the concepts of leading and following before addressing the terminology I use to refer to dancers who are dancing outside of their heteronormatively stereotypical role, and finally I discuss how I will attempt to mitigate the so-called "male firstness" effect.

1.4.1 Degendering

The first piece of terminology under contention is that of *degendering* itself. Despite being a common term used for the movement—having been used in the name of the activist

Facebook group *Degendering West Coast Swing* which has played a key role in advancing and popularizing the movement—the term has proven contentious insofar as it has been heard as suggesting that gender be removed from consideration in the dance entirely as opposed to just being removed from the requirements for participating in a given role. As one dancer puts it in a 2018 podcast:

> Host 1: yeah guess what I wanna be seen as equal as a female in this swing dance community with the male teachers but I'm still not seen as an equal but yet let's degender everything (.) let's take away that too
>
> Host 2: well okay I agree with you on the degendering term I think it's- I think it's dumb I don't think we should be degendering it's gender-neutral like in other words the roles are gender-neutral but that- that's terminology (.) that's terminology (Jacobson & Szekely, 2018)

Here, we see that degendering, as its morphological structure might suggest, is understood as literally "tak[ing] away" gender from those who find it a useful tool for understanding and articulating their experiences of marginalization. However, this sense of degendering is contested by the podcast co-host who, while agreeing that the term is "dumb", suggests that it actually refers to change such that "the roles are gender-neutral" and that it's just "terminology". The potential advantages of considering alternate terms are noted by one of the activists who was heavily involved in its popularization and believes he may have been its coiner. As he puts it:

> I believe (.) I'm the person that- that coined degendering as we use it in the community overall (.) um (.) 'cause I was just looking for some sort of a word we were looking for things like role neutral (.) um genderless blah blah blah like various things and- and the terminology has- has changed a lot and I st- I

> personally still haven't settled on any particular thing because I want to find words that are representative of what I mean and specifically what I mean…I try to adapt and evolve the language as it goes (.) um (.) role based dancing is another way (.) we could play with it so I've- I've played around with a couple different terms but like overall because of Degendering West Coast Swing as a group and like (.) that was kind of the main common term that- that was adopted and used um (.) throughout and y'know now we're using things like gender-neutral language gender-neutral dancing so (.) there's a lot of variants and variations but I think degendering was kind of the (.) the first core (.) pillar language wise um once it was kind of formally becoming a thing (M)

While he acknowledges the need to "adapt and evolve" and points to potential alternative terms such as "role based dancing" or "gender-neutral dancing", he ultimately returns to the foundational role that the term *degendering* played as a "first core pillar language wise". In my experience in the community both before and during this project, I too have gotten the sense that *degendering* is the most widely used and widely recognized term for this movement. Hence, in this project, I refer to the activist movement as *degendering* and describe the associated reformed language as *degendered* or *gender-neutral language*.

1.4.2 Leading and following

I have already mentioned the concepts of lead and follow and their importance in many partner dance communities; however, for those who have not participated in such dance communities, these concepts may remain opaque. Leading can be understood as using one's body to initiate specific actions in another body while following can be understood as responding to those initiations to carry out specific actions. Dances (and even dancers within dances) vary in

terms of the degree to which the initiation is a learned cue (e.g. raising a connected hand means do a turn) or a physical manipulation of the partner's body (e.g. providing rotation momentum *through* a connected hand), but the individual providing the initiation is the one determining the overall shape of the dance and is typically deemed primarily responsible for the couple's location on the dance floor and navigation of adjacent couples. Dances also vary in terms of the extent to which the follower can express autonomy, with some allowing the follower to revise or build on the leader's initiated pattern of movement and even to "suggest" upcoming or shared movements by the position of their own body. However, if the follower begins to actively initiate movements in their partner's body, they will have ceased following and begun to lead. In short, the leader is expected to direct the movement of both their own and their partner's body whereas the follower, though they may influence the leader with their positioning, is only able to directly manipulate their own movement. Thus, even a hijack, while sometimes considered "bad" following, does not become "leading" so long as the follower is only changing the movement of their own body.

While most Euro-centric partnered dances follow a division of roles as articulated above, there are some notable exceptions. Some of these are called dances like square dancing or contradance wherein a "caller" verbally announces the figures which the dancers then proceed to perform (each independently enacting their part of the paired figure). Another important exception is Contact Improvisation. Originating in the 1970s, contact improvisation has never sought to constrain partnership participation by gender and relies on a flexible relationship between dancers in which neither leads nor follows but, in fact, both partners engage in movement and response to movement concurrently (Novack, 1990).

1.4.3 Non-heteronormative dancers

Perhaps even more troubled than the term for the movement itself, however, is the general terminology used to identify women dancing as leaders and men dancing as followers.[10] Interestingly, "degendered dancer" does not make much of an appearance in my data. I argue that this is because (1) the dancer themselves is not degendered (the role is) and (2) such a term could plausibly map onto any dancer who supports the movement and who may not be in that moment engaged in dancing as a woman leader or man follower. Instead, the most common general term seems to be "non-traditional dancer". However, even this term is troubled, with one interviewee arguably reclaiming the idea of "traditional role" to state that she is "traditionally a leader" (D) as it has been her preferred role from when she first began dancing.

There are other moments in the data where the unsatisfactoriness of existing terms for the nuances of gender and role becomes clear as interviewees struggle over how to frame the relationship between dance role, gender, and heteronormative expectations. As will be discussed further in Section 5.3.2.2, one interviewee even goes so far as to innovate new terms on the spot to try to articulate differences which may be attributed to gender but which he thinks are attributable to which role one learned first, or to use his term, one's "native" role (O). Meanwhile, an activist in the community comments: "I personally still haven't settled on any particular thing because I want to find words that are representative of what I mean and specifically what I mean" (M).

[10] I acknowledge here a significant gap in the consideration of nonbinary participants. While there are now two relatively prominent nonbinary dancers based in California, I am not aware of out nonbinary persons in the area I focussed my research on, and it did not arise (other than limited passing comments) in my research. This is not to explain away an obligation to consider this community, but instead to provide context for why the terms of the debate, as they appear in my data, remain so binary. I explore the broader implications of this binary framing in the context of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1993) in Chapter 6, showing how this taken for granted frame continues to apply heteronormative logics to dancers even amongst those who espouse support for degendering and dance in roles that defy heteronormative expectations themselves.

Hence, while one may at some points in reading yearn for a short, simple term to name participants dancing outside of heteronormative expectations, I find that a single such term is not viable and does not do justice to the complex negotiations still underway in the community. Thus, where relevant I speak of women leaders/leading, men followers/following, and people who do both, aligning as much as possible with speakers' own presentation of themselves either as a lead/follower or a person who leads/follows. Where I find it necessary to speak in broader categories, while being cognizant of the risks of othering inherent in framing something as "not-this-thing", i.e. as marked, I choose to identify this, arguably still transgressive, mode of participation as *non-heteronormative dancing* and its participants as *individuals dancing in non-heteronormative roles*. This framing highlights the potentially liberatory moves being made by dancers as they question not only the logistical requirement that a couple should be composed of one man and one woman, but also the associated (gender) roles which entail that a man ought to be the strong lead, and a woman the responsive follow.[11] Hence, not only are two men or two women dancing together non-heteronormative, but also a woman leading a man who is following and arguably any dance in which a nonbinary person participates are inherently of this category.

1.4.4 Male firstness effect

Throughout this dissertation, I endeavour to avoid the so called "male firstness" effect (Willis & Jozkowski, 2018) both in literal references to women and men and in references to the traditionally gendered categories of follower and leader. Male firstness refers to the tendency for masculine referents to be listed first when listed alongside feminine equivalents—a tendency I

[11] One could argue that WCS is inherently non-heteronormative on the basis of the unusually agentive role of the follower (Lavin, 2019), but for the purposes of this dissertation and based on my observations, which show that this enhanced agency is limited insofar as followers can be more agentive but only if they ultimately remain responsive to the leader even if that entails cutting off their own idea, I reserve *non-heteronormative dancing* for cases in which roles are not taken in accordance with heteronormative gender expectations.

also observed in a seeming preference for the phrasing “leaders and followers” rather than the inverse during my interviews and observations. While one solution would be to always list the feminine referent first, I am cognizant that in WCS dance contexts (and other partner dance environments such as ballroom and hustle) there is a perceived tendency for followers/women to be highlighted in (see Chapter 5 for discussions of this). Hence, I have endeavoured to vary the order in which I present gendered terms or the two degendered dance role terms so as to avoid any unintentional normative implications arising.

1.5 The structure of the dissertation

Having introduced my topic, research questions, and relevant conventions, I turn now to outlining what follows. In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review situating my project within the context of existing work on gender-focussed language reform. Next, in Chapter 3, I describe my methodology for both data collection and analysis. In the following three chapters I provide my analyses. The first of these, Chapter 4, focusses on metadiscourse around degendering and degendered language, considering the language attitudes and ideologies that are displayed therein. In the following, Chapter 5, I assess the uptake of degendered language as well as the persistence of gendered language. I investigate linguistic strategies that seem to support the avoidance of gendered language as well as factors that may contribute to the persistence of gendered language use. Wrapping up my analyses, in Chapter 6, I move beyond the consideration of whether or not degendered terms are used and explore the extent to which the community is or is not breaking free of heteronormative conceptions of and expectations for participation in the dance roles. To do this, I consider the way that references to the roles appear in discourse, the nature of the discourse which surrounds the references, and the embodied mechanics of participation which arise in the actual conduct of WCS classes, contests, and

socials. Finally, I end with a discussion and conclusion in Chapter 7. There I briefly speak to several additional considerations, namely: the treatment of bodily diversity in the dance, shifts in the conception of the role of gender in the dance, trans and nonbinary inclusion, and alternative approaches to degendering as attested in other dance communities. I end the chapter by sketching areas for future research.

2 Literature review

For some twenty years, speakers of English have been in a position to observe a linguistic guerilla war raging all around them. This war, which most of us have at some time been dragged into, has been fought with cunning and with passion on both sides.

(Cameron, 1995, p. 119)

2.1 Introduction

Back in 1995, Deborah Cameron was already reporting on twenty years of verbal hygiene efforts tied to social movements—most notably, for our purposes, feminist movements. Arguably, such efforts extend even further back if we consider the more than 100 years of attempts to innovate a gender-neutral third person pronoun in English as a part of acknowledging the equal humanity of women and creating a more perfect language able to refer to third persons whose gender was unknown or irrelevant (Baron, 2020). This intertwining of social movements and language reform continues to this day with linguistic innovations regularly emerging across social justice movements including those around racialization, indigeneity, gender, sexuality, and more. Degendering in WCS has followed this trend, bringing a desire to change higher order social structures (i.e. access to [legitimized] participation in the dance roles) together with an effort to change the language which encodes these now contested heteronormative social structures: namely the use of feminine words to refer to followers and masculine words to leaders in generic and nonspecific contexts. While language change is only a part of the degendering movement—which has also been heavily invested in securing official contest rule changes—language is the medium through which much of this reform is being pursued, and

lexical level reform has been a prominent signifier for the movement. What's more, as a linguist, it was the changing language that first piqued my interest in the movement and thus it subsequently formed the heart of this research. Hence, in this chapter, I situate my work in the literature around gender-focussed language reform. I consider both anti-sexist and anti-cis-sexist reforms, as well as the various accounts employed to motivate as well as to resist such reforms. Where possible, I also draw on the literature that has attempted to understand the efficacy of language change for promoting conceptual change in individuals, which may be understood as a proxy for understanding the efficacy of language reform as a part of broader social reforms.

2.2 Anti-sexist language reform

I begin my survey of the literature in the 1970s and 80s when second wave feminists began drawing attention to language as a site of contestation. While some, such as Dale Spender (1998), went so far as to claim that men's greater social power had essentially allowed them to make language (particularly English) in their image, thus encoding male supremacy throughout the language, much energy was focussed on the specific problem of masculine generics. These included: generic HE, the presence of the string MAN in terms like POLICEMAN, MANKIND, and even WOMAN, as well as, in grammatical gender languages, the use of the grammatically masculine to encompass not only men, but also mixed groups of men and women.[12] Early studies found that the use of masculine generics predisposed readers to imagine a male referent (e.g. Gastil, 1990; M. M. Miller & James, 2009; J. Moulton et al., 1978; Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986). Further, women have been found to be less likely to imagine themselves eligible for an position advertised using masculine generics (Bem & Bem, 1973) and to experience fewer feelings of

[12] In fact, in English, the use of the masculine as generic has been argued to be an imposition on the language from Latin, based in the explicitly male supremacist logics of 16th and 17th century scholars who argued for the use of generic masculine on the grounds that the masculine was the worthier gender (Bodine, 1998).

belonging, motivation and suitability for jobs when presented with masculine generics in job interviews (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). This work seems to suggest that women's unequal position in society may be influenced, in part, by the use of language that seems to exclude them from prestigious professional opportunities, while also marking them as somehow other and only variably included in the category that was framed as default humanity—i.e. the masculine.

This ambivalence was also identified in the law where, even prior to the feminist language reform efforts of the latter half of the 20th century, suffragists had pointed to the use of generic HE to include all people in some areas of law (e.g. criminal codes) to argue that its use in laws related to voting ought to indicate that women were entitled to vote (Baron, 2020). Suffice to say, such efforts did not result in women getting access to voting, and legal authorities tended to insist that it was obvious when the use of the masculine was intended to encompass all humanity and when it was to include only men (Baron, 2020). Such dual interpretations not only facilitated the relative invisibility of women and their sense that certain positions were not intended for them as found in later research (see above) but also empowered those who were already well positioned socially to be the arbiters of when a masculine was generic or not—decisions that almost invariably disadvantaged women.

With the abundant problematics of the generic masculine in hand, many reformers focussed on tackling these lexical items—particularly the generic masculine pronoun and the use of grammatically masculine terms (or those which included the string MAN) for professional roles (see Hellinger et al., 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2015). If women were to secure equality of opportunity and social status, then they ought to be accorded equality of representation in professional titles and as representatives of the human species. How such equality was to be achieved in language, however, varied across the affordances of languages as well as the orientations of reformers.

Mucchi-Faina (2005) has described such approaches as broadly belonging to either feminization/visibilization approaches, which seek to draw explicit attention to the presence of women/the feminine, or neutralization approaches, which seek gender-neutral framings that do not explicitly point to either men or women.

2.2.1 Feminization/Visibilization

While feminization has been attempted in English—for example, some feminists' use of the generic SHE in place of generic HE (McConnell-Ginet, 2013)—this approach has seen substantially more use in languages with so called grammatical gender. In such languages, words are categorized by "gender"—often masculine, feminine, and optionally neuter in some European languages, though more expansive and less biosocial gender linked grammatical "gender" systems are represented in other languages—and are typically required to agree with other co-referring lexical items, as well as verbs and predicative adjectives, in terms of grammatical gender. This is most commonly represented on nouns, determiners, and adjectives but may also extend to other parts of speech. With respect to language reform, in languages with only grammatical masculine and feminine gender, where those categories closely overlap with the biosocial gender of human referents, gender-neutral alternatives to the generic masculine are challenging to produce. As a result, in some cases, reformers recommend and/or speakers opt to avoid gender markers (e.g. avoiding using pronouns or nouns or creating more complex structures analogous to "the one who is verbing") (e.g. Hellinger & Bußmann, 2003; Koniuszaniec & Błaszkowska, 2003; Pavlidou, 2003), but such strategies are difficult to implement, and due to their flexibility, are hard to encode into policy or recommendations. Instead, in many grammatical gender languages, the dominant approach has been that of split or

dual forms which include (at least components of) both masculine and feminine forms (Horvath et al., 2016; Mucchi-Faina, 2005; Sczesny et al., 2016).

Such forms, like the use of HE/SHE in English, sometimes rely on typographical conventions which are argued by some to be unpronounceable or otherwise a threat to the language (e.g. German's [NOUN]INNEN forms which append a feminine plural ending to grammatically masculine role nouns, using a capital I or other typographical to mark that both endings are intended (Mooshammer & Belz, 2024), or the French use of the point médian (Abbou, 2023; Burnett & Pozniak, 2021)), though emerging research shows that such innovations are developing corresponding pronunciations such as the use of a glottal stop for INNEN forms in German (Mooshammer & Belz, 2024). Where forms are unambiguously pronounceable (e.g. HE OR SHE in English or MAESTROS Y MAESTRAS in Spanish), they have been argued by some to be awkward, cumbersome, or simply unnecessary and have often been rejected on those grounds (e.g. Blaubergs, 1980; Parks & Roberton, 1998; see also the statement from Real Academia Española, n.d.; and popular press coverage such as Willsher, 2017).[13] Nonetheless, such feminization approaches (typically presenting both masculine and feminine forms together) have become commonly recommended in grammatical gender languages where anti-sexist language has been deemed worthy of pursuit (Mucchi-Faina, 2005; Sczesny et al., 2016).

Feminization approaches have also advocated for the use of feminine forms of professional role nouns when the traditional convention has been to name the profession using masculine grammatical agreement only (e.g. Anne Hidalgo, *la maire de Paris*, using the

[13] In 2019, L'Academie Francaise approved the use of feminine professional job titles, but doublets in the case of plural reference have still not been officially condoned (for coverage in the popular press see BBC, 2019; Broom, 2019)

feminine article “la” rather than the traditional “le” in her title (reported on in the popular press by Willsher, 2014)). This effort to make women visible in their own right, as opposed to them being encompassed under an overarching masculine term, has not been without contestation, even from women themselves as will be seen in Section 2.4.1.1, but it has nonetheless been an important aspect of some reform movements which strive to valorize the feminine and contest the applicability of masculine generics and role nouns to all human referents.

2.2.2 Neutralization

By contrast with feminization approaches, neutralization approaches tend to be more easily adopted in so called natural gender languages in which grammatical gender agreement only appears in a limited part of the lexicon: typically, nouns and pronouns referring to animate entities and mainly humans. Notably, this has been a dominant approach in English, where many have argued for the use of singular THEY in place of generic HE (see also, Swedish HEN), and for alternatives that avoid (even the suggestion of) gender marking (e.g. MAIL CARRIER instead of MAILMAN) in place of professional role nouns that contain the MAN string. At the same time, in contrast with feminization approaches which have in some cases innovated new feminine terms for masculine role nouns, neutralization approaches tend to also reject professional role nouns that have explicit feminine marking (e.g. STEWARDESS, MASSEUSE), promoting instead either neutral innovations (e.g. FLIGHT ATTENDANT, MASSAGE THERAPIST) or use of the ostensibly neutral generic masculine form for both genders (e.g. ACTOR). Aligned with this orientation towards neutral alternatives, reformers in English and other “natural gender” languages have also often advocated for the avoidance of gender through rephrasings that either pluralize, use nouns unmarked for gender, and/or avoid pronouns altogether (e.g. Curzan, 2014; Gomard & Kunøe, 2003; C. Miller & Swift, 1980).

Such neutralization approaches have also been favoured by many anti-cis-sexist reformers who, seeking to challenge the assumption of immutable binary gender, have often called for the avoidance of gendered language unless specifically relevant and the innovation of gender-neutral terms even in grammatical gender languages which lack existing structural affordances for gender-neutrality (Hord, 2016; Spade, 2012; Zimman, 2017a; see also Remezcla Estaff, 2018 for popular press coverage of activist perspectives).

2.3 Anti-cis-sexist language reform

Whereas anti-sexist reform has aimed to contest male supremacy and bring two already ratified gender categories into equal standing, the more recently prominent anti-cis-sexist reforms have aimed to tackle the assumption that everyone belongs to one of those two ratified categories and that such belonging can be ascertained by appearance alone. As a result of this orientation, such reforms have often focussed on the avoidance of gendered language entirely and the use of gender-neutral terms in generic and nonspecific contexts (e.g. Ansara & Hegarty, 2013; Spade, 2012; Zimman, 2017, 2018). Notably, anti-cis-sexist reformers have drawn attention to the fact that split forms and other approaches that aim to make women more visible fail to include nonbinary individuals or others who do not fall into the categories of either women or men, retaining a so-called normative gender bias (Renström et al., 2024). In so-called natural gender languages, gender-neutral terms like singular THEY, or Swedish HEN have become prominent alongside other neo-pronouns and a preference for avoiding terms that are semantically gendered (e.g. PARENTS instead of MOTHERS AND FATHERS). In grammatical gender languages, however, gender-neutrality is more complicated to achieve. For example, while Spanish reformers have promoted several options including those that have been deemed by some to be unpronounceable (e.g. -@ and -x as replacements for gendered -o and -a endings), a

more recent move towards using -e (i.e. ELLE instead of ELLO or ELLA) has also been contested by both laypersons and linguistic authorities who deem it an unnatural (sometimes elitist) imposition on the language (Puterbaugh, 2025), though as of 2020 it is now "under observation" by the Real Academia Española (covered in the popular press by Jackson, 2020). Similar efforts in French and Italian have also met with resistance from linguistic authorities (see Armellini, 2023 for news reporting on the Italian case; L'Academie Francaise, 2017), but such efforts nonetheless persist. Such attempts to produce a gender-neutral grammatical class across the lexicon are particularly important as, particularly for nonbinary people, languages with binary grammatical gender prove particularly inapt for articulating non-cis identities.[14] This has encouraged some nonbinary speakers of such languages, who also have access to English, to assess English as a more effective resource for articulating their gender identities (Hord, 2016).

While changing grammatical gender morphology in European languages has often been the most visible and highly publicized approach to anti-cis-sexist language reform, it is not the only one. Other research has shown a variety of approaches in other language communities such as Hebrew speakers systematically alternating between masculine and feminine in self-reference to establish an identity that is neither/nor (Bershtling, 2014), or those who make use of grammatical gender expressly to claim gendered identities that are in conflict with their assignment at birth, for example, *tombois* in Indonesia (Blackwood, 2014) and *boys* in Hindi speaking environments (Hall, 2009) using grammatically masculine forms to claim masculine identities. Such individual acts of naming and self-definition are also echoed in Anglophone trans communities where stereotypically sexed body parts have been creatively renamed to capture the gender identity of the individual even if it does not match the stereotypical

[14] Because the neuter form in trinary grammatical gender systems is often associated with inanimacy, or at best diminution, such grammatical gender systems may also be problematic for expressing nonbinary gender.

association of the body parts at hand (Edelman & Zimman, 2014; Marshall, 2019; Ragosta et al., 2021; Zimman, 2014). Despite these individual creative acts, however, much policy around anti-cis-sexist language reform has focussed on the goal of gender-neutrality. That is, reformers maintain that reference to sex or gender should only occur when expressly necessary and should be done in maximally precise ways (e.g. referring to people who have prostates rather than men) so as to avoid misgendering individuals who may not be the same gender they were initially assigned and particularly those who may not fit within the grammatical or social binary (Ansara & Hegarty, 2013; Spade, 2012; Zimman, 2017, 2018).

2.4 Studies of efficacy

While feminist language reformers spent a great deal of research energy proving the need for language reform by demonstrating that masculine generics were not so generic after all (e.g. Hamilton, 1988; J. Moulton et al., 1978; Murdock & Forsyth, 1985; Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986), there has also been more recent research assessing the efficacy of the reforms alongside continued assessments of the harms of unreformed language. Assessments of anti-sexist reforms tend to be conducted within psycholinguistic paradigms in an attempt to determine how the use of reformed or unreformed language impacts the likelihood that readers will picture a woman referent, perceive themselves as included in the category of referents, and/or their perceptions of the referent's competence, authority, etc. (e.g. Gabriel & Gygax, 2008; Horvath & Sczesny, 2016; Lindqvist et al., 2019; Sato et al., 2016; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011; Vervecken et al., 2013). Such approaches point to an orientation to language reform that sees success in changing cognitive biases through linguistic intervention—biases which are perceived to be entangled with prior problematic forms of language. In short, these ways of measuring reform success take a linguistic relativist approach which presupposes that the language that we use to categorize our

world may be understood to bias our perceptions. The concept of linguistic relativity, sometimes called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (especially by those who oppose it), is typically traced back to the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf who argued that language could influence the way that individuals understood the world. For example, in his comparison of "Standard Average European (SAE)" and Hopi language and thought, Whorf argued that these groups' differing articulations of time (Hopi as cyclical experiences, SAE as countable forms of substance) conditioned their understanding of experience including what each cultural group values, how their societies function, and even their movement aesthetics (Whorf, 1965). While this theory has been highly controversial and has tended to be dismissed by formal linguists in their emphasis on finding linguistic universals (Duranti, 1999, 2011), it has nonetheless attracted a great deal of on-going research effort, particularly in linguistic anthropology and in cognitive science where there has been a focus on the biasing effects of grammatical gender on animate and even inanimate nouns (Boroditsky et al., 2003; Chen & Faitaki, 2025; Nicoladis et al., 2016; Samuel et al., 2019). It also remains a compelling idea amongst laypersons.[15] Though research results have been very mixed, and conclusive evidence of linguistic relativity remains elusive, the persistence of such studies in the context of gender focussed language reform points to a strong cognitive (as opposed to perhaps affective) emphasis in terms of motivating reform: the reason to change language can be found in how it can influence cognition. That is, if we change our language, we may be able to change our biases.

By contrast, many anti-cis-sexist measures of success have tended to focus on the grammatical acceptability/uptake of novel forms (e.g. Baumler & Rudinger, 2022; Bjorkman,

[15] Undergraduate linguists are often very compelled by this idea and teaching about it requires a great deal of caution to prevent students from having too much faith in linguistic determinism thanks to the allure of the idea that variance in language might drive variance in culture or perception.

2017; Bolsen & Thornton, 2024; Bradley, 2020; Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 1997; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). Here, rather than presupposing that language may influence speakers' conceptual systems and stereotypes, the focus has been on avoiding microaggressions/misgendering (Ansara & Hegarty, 2013). Hence the mere use of gender-neutral terms itself can be understood as a success (insofar as it avoids misgendering) regardless of what may be happening at the level of cognitive categories.[16] In the sections that follow, I explore these varied measures of success that we see applied to anti-sexist vs. anti-cis-sexist language reform efforts. I not only consider their findings, but also how the structure of the studies speak to varied ideologies and orientations with regard to the purpose and the nature of language reform. I begin with anti-sexist reformers and their explicit goal of contesting male supremacy and patriarchal social systems, partly through language.

2.4.1 Contesting ideology

While feminist reformers were not insensitive to the harms of misgendering when women were expected to understand themselves as belonging to categories named by the (not so) generic masculine (e.g. Henley, 1987, 1989), a great deal of effort also went into contesting the very gendered ideologies that were understood to be encoded in language insofar as the masculine was the unmarked and often superior vis-a-vis the feminine. Hence, measures of success have been oriented not only to uptake but also to the extent to which uptake has (or has not) done anything to contest social ideologies.

Initially, such research on the cognitive effects of language was focussed on showing that generic masculine terms did in fact bias perceivers towards imagining masculine referents (e.g.

[16] There have been some important studies about the efficacy of singular THEY or neopronouns with regard to avoiding male bias (e.g. Bradley et al., 2019; Lindqvist et al., 2019; Martyna, 1983) but these have tended to be oriented towards contesting sexism as much as cis-sexism and there is as yet little research as to the capacity for singular THEY or neopronouns to unsettle gender categories more broadly.

Hamilton, 1988; J. Moulton et al., 1978; Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986) and, further, that masculine language aided and abetted discrimination against women in contexts like employment (e.g. Bem & Bem, 1973; Gaucher et al., 2011) and drove feelings of ostracization (e.g. Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). While these kinds of projects remain a substantial part of the research in this area, it has since expanded to considering the extent to which interventions interrupt this tendency and, overall, results seem to point to visibilization approaches as more effectively interrupting existing biases than neutralization strategies (Gabriel et al., 2018). For example, paired forms of role nouns (i.e. those including both masculine and feminine forms) have been found to "increase the mental accessibility of female jobholders, promote more gender-balanced perceptions of the success of males and females, and strengthen girls' interest in stereotypically male occupations" (Vervecken et al., 2013, p. 208). Similarly, Lindqvist et al (2019) found that paired pronoun forms more effectively ameliorated male bias in the perception of referents of neutral nouns when paired with pronouns relative to traditional neutral forms like singular THEY.

By contrast, neutralization approaches seem to be more likely to leave biases uncontested. For example, Lindqvist et al. (2019) found that singular THEY still retained a masculine bias such that people were more likely to imagine a masculine referent than a feminine one when encountering instances of singular THEY. This is perhaps not surprising as dating back to the 1980s, singular THEY was found to be at least slightly biased towards masculine referents (Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986). What's more, gender-neutral references to humans (e.g. PEOPLE, AMERICANS, DRIVERS) were also found to be used in ways that presumed they referred to men (e.g. references to THEIR WIVES) (Black & Coward, 1998). These results point to what has been argued to be a broad social androcentric bias such that men are seen as the default or unmarked form of human regardless of whether terms of reference are grammatically

masculine or gender-neutral (Bailey & LaFrance, 2017; Hamilton, 1991), a bias which has been implicated in early grammarians attempts to promote the use of generic HE dating back to the 1500s (Bodine, 1998).[17] Whether this bias led to the use of masculine as generic or was influenced and/or reinforced by it is unclear, but its persistence speaks to the risks of neutralization approaches for contesting existing ideologies. As Cameron (1985, 1995) has argued, one of the greatest strengths of language reform is its capacity to draw attention to problematic, taken-for-granted ideologies or social structures; hence, if neutralization approaches do not actually draw attention to the problem of androcentrism, it may not be surprising that they are less effective in contesting problematic stereotypes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, where neutralization approaches have been found to be successful in attenuating male bias, this is more likely to be the case when the neutral options are novel forms, such as in emerging German nominalizations for role nouns, e.g. DIE LEHRPERSONEN rather than the masculine generic DIE LEHRER (Sato et al., 2016) and neopronouns in English and Swedish, e.g. ZE or HEN (Lindqvist et al., 2019).[18]

This weakness is also borne out by considerations of gender-neutral professional role nouns. For example, Lassonde and O'Brien (2013) found that even when using neutral professional role neologisms (e.g. FIREFIGHTER instead of FIREMAN) for professions traditionally named with a -MAN term, participants still experienced a processing delay if the referent was later referred to with a feminine pronoun unless the gender of the referent was explicitly stated in

[17] This social male bias also showed up in medical research wherein for many years (white) women were not used for medical trials, in part due to perceived risks that a woman may be unknowingly pregnant and that a trial may damage a fetus, but also because women were perceived as a marked vulnerable population. For example, women of "childbearing potential" were contrasted with "normal" subjects—presumably mainly men. It is however important to note that women (and men) of colour, by contrast, were often subjected to highly unethical medical research as a result of the devaluing of people of colour's wellbeing in general and in some cases their use as proxies for the white women being "protected" by paternalistic value systems (Whelant & Sims, 2020).

[18] Notably, in other studies the relative unfamiliarity of such forms can reduce their efficacy insofar as participants simply do not understand them (Bradley et al., 2019).

the introduction to the referent. A similar pattern was found in Norwegian wherein gender stereotypes continued to bias interpretations of gender stereotyped neutral role nouns, while neutral role nouns lacking gender stereotypes were more likely to be perceived as men (Gabriel & Gygax, 2008). What's more, Ehrlich and King (1992, 1994) note that where neologisms like CHAIRPERSON were introduced to replace CHAIRMAN it was sometimes the case that rather than becoming a gender-neutral term for all chairpeople, CHAIRPERSON came to be used to refer to women only whilst men continued to be called CHAIRMEN. Rather than succeeding in questioning the relevance of gender for a role or including all possible actors in the term, it seems that neutral neologisms may in fact just overlay existing biases, or insofar as they mark feminist intent, may come to distinguish a "special type" of a role, namely a woman in the role. These markedness dynamics, such that women remain marked in many categories while men remain the unmarked, default person, points to another challenge faced by language reformers: namely that of the euphemism cycle (Taylor, 1974).

2.4.1.1 Semantic pejoration and transmisogyny

The euphemism cycle refers to the effect by which new terms for marginalized groups tend to undergo systematic pejoration so long as the group they describe remains marginalized (Taylor, 1974). Each time a new term takes on the negative baggage associated with a group, reformers may be motivated to innovate a new term that does not carry this same baggage, and on it goes. Feminists have identified a similar pattern with words that refer to feminine referents, referring to this pattern as the semantic derogation of women (Schulz, 1975). McConnell-Ginet (1998) highlights the journey of HUSSY from referring to the woman of a house, to ultimately referring to a woman supposedly of loose morals. Such patterns of pejoration seem to be much more common for feminine than masculine terms, as, for example, the difference between

MASTER (expert or owner) and MISTRESS (illegitimate lover) or STEWARD (protector or manager) and STEWARDESS (sexualized flight attendant). These patterns of pejoration have also proven challenging for feminization approaches to feminist language reform. For example, in Italian, feminine professional role nouns (e.g. PROFESSORESSA) tend to be associated with lower status and tend to be seen as less persuasive and reliable (Mucchi-Faina, 2005), and, in general, people referred to using feminized professional terms tend to be perceived as of lower status and lower competence, and may be less likely to be hired even when the terms they use ostensibly refer to the exact same profession as the masculine (see Formanowicz & Sczesny, 2016, pp. 65–66). Polish women professionals have been found to prefer being referred to using masculine referring terms in order to avoid such ascriptions of lower competence and status associated with using feminine forms (Formanowicz & Sczesny, 2016). A similar pattern has also been seen in English wherein professional role nouns with -ESS endings have largely been cast off for the masculine or unmarked forms because of their pejorative associations (cf. ACTOR coming to refer to movie stars of all genders).

This persistent devaluation of the feminine, even when that feminine is intended to challenge the assumption that all members of a given group are likely to be masculine, points to a broader social pattern of misogyny and transmisogyny. Transmisogyny refers to the phenomenon whereby the feminine is systematically devalued in society and is particularly loathed when it is seen as being enacted by those assigned masculine at birth (Serano, 2021). Hence, that feminine terms tend to accrue more negative connotations than their masculine counterparts supports the notion that the feminine in general is devalued. Furthermore, insofar as feminization approaches challenge existing biases, it is largely because such feminine terms (for example the generic SHE deployed by some wishing to counter balance the longstanding

dominance of generic HE (Baron, 2020)) are seen as inappropriate for referring to men. Feminization, then, contests the idea of masculine as default or at least unsettles the idea that men are the only or majority members of referent groups. If one speaks of INGENEURINNEN then there *must* be some women amongst the engineers—why else would the feminine be mentioned?

That the feminine cannot seem to refer to masculine referents in many persons' conceptual systems (whereas women can be encompassed by the masculine) points to a system under which it is acceptable for a woman to align herself with the socially valued masculine, but not for a man to align himself, or be grouped by others, with the reviled feminine. Hence, even as some forms of language reform may contest assumptions about what kind of person might fill a certain role, that male bias persists in neutralization, and that feminization seems so vulnerable to devaluation even when deployed in the service of anti-sexist reform suggests that (trans)misogyny remains a significant barrier to gender-focussed language reform efforts.

These patterns of denigration point to the challenge of conceptual baggage which accompanies words and limits expression to those meanings which are already circulating within dominant socio-cultural discourses. That is, utterers can only convey meanings that they can assume are already available to their perceiver and which are likely to be attributed to their utterance (McConnell-Ginet, 2011). This limiting of expression on the basis of discursive history means that hegemonic ideologies circulating in society—like (trans)misogyny—are often entangled with the conceptual resources available for using language and, therefore, even well-intentioned language use can encode sexist and cis-sexist presuppositions. Combined with the exclusion of feminine referents under the male-as-default assumption, these conditions can do great harm to women's self-image, self-esteem, and sense of efficacy (Henley, 1987, 1989). Similarly, when trans and nonbinary people are misgendered or rendered invisible by cis-sexist

assumptions, significant psychological distress can result (Ansara & Hegarty, 2013), and the lack of linguistic resources to articulate one's gender and identity can limit self-actualization and prevent the full expression of one's gender identity (Hord, 2016). Thus, anti-sexist reformers' focus on the cognitive or conceptual impacts of language reform points to an explicit orientation towards language as a way of intervening in such discursive histories. Yet, the findings that so often reforms remain circumscribed in their ability to challenge male bias or sexist devaluation of the feminine points to the persistent challenges with such efforts. As Conrod (2024) notes with regard to trans language reform, language is not so much a cause as a symptom of inequality and hence language reform efforts must go alongside other efforts to improve the life conditions of marginalized people.

2.4.2 Avoiding misgendering

By contrast with the focus on analyzing the efficacy of language reform in terms of its effects on stereotypes and biases in anti-sexist reforms, much work evaluating anti-cis-sexist reform has focussed on the acceptability/uptake of gender-neutral forms—particularly neopronouns and, in English, especially singular THEY. This uptake is particularly important insofar as the use of gender-neutral forms can help avoid the misgendering of individuals both as individuals and as members of groups, which may occur when gendered terms are used. Such studies generally find increasing acceptance of singular THEY as grammatical in an expanding range of uses (Bjorkman, 2017; Conrod, 2020; K. Moulton et al., 2020). For example, the Oxford English Dictionary reports cases of singular THEY in use in English for non-specific or generic referents dating back to 1375, while psycholinguistic work has verified that singular THEY has no additional processing costs as compared to generic he when used in coreference with indefinite pronouns such as ANYONE (Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 1997). More recent work has shown that the

acceptability of singular THEY is expanding to additional forms of reference including specific individuals referred to by social role whose gender is not stated, named individuals with gender-neutral names, and for some participants, even specific known and named individuals, who are nonbinary (Bjorkman, 2017; Conrod, 2020; Hekanaho, 2020; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020; K. Moulton et al., 2020). As attested by these authors, such increasing acceptability appears to be conditioned by age (with younger participants accepting singular THEY in more contexts more readily) and by exposure to people who use they as their personal pronoun. Some limited research (e.g. Queen et al., 2024) has explored conditions that seem to elicit singular THEY, including the presentation of ambiguous or androgynous faces and the presence of conflicting gender cues (Kirsch, 2022).

While neopronouns (e.g. ZE, XE, FAE) are significantly less well known and less broadly accepted in English (Bradley et al., 2019), they are beginning to see some acceptance (Rose et al., 2023) and, where they are accepted, seem to be expected to refer to an individual whose gender cannot be captured by the categories of men or women, and who explicitly rejects those categories (Hekanaho, 2022). By contrast, the neopronoun HEN in Swedish, developed by analogy to Finnish HÄN, has seen quite good uptake both as a pronoun for nonbinary people and as a gender-neutral generic (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2021). While this increasing acceptance of gender-neutral forms as grammatical is promising, the focus on acceptance as opposed to consequent cognitive effects points to a somewhat different emphasis than earlier anti-sexist reforms. Instead of conceptualizing the language change as, largely, a way of changing perception or cognitive categories, this focus on the acceptance of the novel forms suggests that the goal is primarily to get the forms taken up regardless of their cognitive effects. In fact, while Lindqvist et al (2019) find that singular THEY still retains a male bias (which is not attested with

neopronouns or with Swedish HEN), the primary goal of promoting singular THEY in anti-cis-sexist reforms appears to be more focussed on avoiding misgendering than on necessarily trying to explicitly contest the social power structure.

In part because anti-cis-sexist reforms are harnessed to a social movement that aims to ratify social categories that have previously been illegible or abject (i.e. trans and nonbinary genders)—whereas anti-sexist reforms were associated with a social movement that aimed to improve the social standing of a category that was already ratified—the goals of the former are more focussed on establishing the validity of certain types of identities, while the latter did not need to establish a category so much as provide greater social potency for that category. Thus, whereas for anti-sexist goals, feminization may appear to hold greater potential insofar as it explicitly contests androcentric bias, for anti-cis-sexist goals, such feminization perpetuates cis-sexist binarism and the misgendering of people who are captured neither by the feminine nor the masculine. By contrast, whereas neutralization and the avoidance of gender is beneficial for avoiding misgendering and associated microaggressions (insofar as a gender-neutral term does not place an individual in any gender category—let alone the wrong one), it does not seem equally effective in challenging stereotypes, instead allowing existing male bias and gendered stereotypes to persist unquestioned by the structure of the language. Hence, an outstanding question remains as to the extent to which both anti-sexist and anti-cis-sexist goals can be achieved concurrently through gender-focussed language reform.

2.5 Resistance to reform

Notwithstanding these complex questions of efficacy and approaches to measuring it, both anti-sexist and anti-cis-sexist language reform movements have faced substantial resistance. While some research has found correlations between willingness to use anti-sexist language and

measures of sexism (Sarrasin et al., 2012; Swim et al., 2004), when participants are asked for their opinions about gender-focussed language reform, only relatively few invoke sexism or cis-sexism to account for their resistance to reforms (Blaubergs, 1980; Hekanaho, 2022; Parks & Roberton, 1998; Vergoossen et al., 2020). Instead, as is outlined in Table 2.1, resistors tend to invoke arguments that draw on notions of free speech, etymology and historical preservation, the triviality of language change, the difficulty of changing language habits, and the inelegance or "incorrectness" of reformed language, amongst other language focussed arguments (Blaubergs, 1980; Hekanaho, 2022; Parks & Roberton, 1998; Vergoossen et al., 2020).

These kinds of arguments for resisting language reform were also reflected upon by Cameron (1995) in her consideration of responses to so-called political correctness in language. She argues that resistors often chafe against the idea that language is political, resisting language reforms because they force one to take a side on social reform efforts, either using the old language and revealing one's regressive politics or changing one's language practices and being heard as an explicit supporter of the social movement in question (or one who has capitulated to activists). While Cameron argues that this very politicization (or perhaps drawing attention towards the already political nature of language) is key to what makes language reform efficacious in advancing social change—insofar as it draws attention to problematic social power structures and forces people to face them—she also discusses a so-called "liberal" approach to language reform which she argues mitigates some of the language ideological concerns at the cost of some radical potential. This liberal approach, which is further elaborated in Chapter 4, promotes language reform not so much as a political project, but instead as a project of bringing language into apolitical alignment with an existing society that values civility and inclusion.

Table 2.1. Previously attested arguments against anti-(cis)-sexist language reform adapted from Blaubergs (1980) and Parks & Roberton (1998) on anti-sexist language reform and Vergoossen et al. (2020) and Hekanaho (2022) on anti-cis-sexist language reform.

Objection	Definition	Attested by
Language is a Trivial Concern	"Sexist language is trivial compared to more serious injustices in society as well as to other forms of sexism; worrying about sexist language is frivolous in general" (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 452)	Blaubergs (1980); Parks & Roberton (1998); Vergoossen et al (2020); Hekanaho (2022)
Freedom of Speech/Unjustified Coercion	"People who want to change the language are 'deviants' who intimidate others with coercive tactics and deprive them of their freedom of speech." (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 452)	Blaubergs (1980); Parks & Roberton (1998); Vergoossen et al (2020); Hekanaho (2022)
Appeal to Authority	"The final authorities for the meanings of words are the dictionary, linguists, or people who are important in society or in our lives" (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 452) [Parks & Roberton added "people who are important in society or in our lives"; Hekanaho further expands to include all "language users" to account for "correctness" comments]	Blaubergs (1980); Parks & Roberton (1998); Vergoossen et al (2020); Hekanaho (2022)
Change is Too Difficult	"Most expressions, particularly pronouns, are too deeply ingrained to be changed by individuals; some people fear change, don't want to break habits, are stubborn, etc." (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 452)	Blaubergs (1980); Parks & Roberton (1998); Vergoossen et al (2020); Hekanaho (2022)
Sexist Language is Not Sexist	"The language is not really sexist because the users do not have sexist intentions; the problem with these terms is the listener who misinterprets terms as sexist." (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 452)	Blaubergs (1980); Parks & Roberton (1998); Vergoossen et al (2020)
Word Etymology	"The original meaning of a word is justification for its use." (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 452)	Blaubergs (1980); Vergoossen et al (2020); Hekanaho (2022)
Sexism and cisgenderism is Acceptable [cisgenderism added by Vergoossen et al (2020)]	"Males are superior to females, so it doesn't matter if language reflects their superiority." (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 453)	Parks & Roberton (1998); Vergoossen et al (2020); Hekanaho (2022)
Hostility and Ridicule	"The topic of sexist language is ridiculous, perhaps even dangerous; those who worry about it are insecure, parasitic, and contemptible." (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 453)	Parks & Roberton (1998); Vergoossen et al (2020); Hekanaho (2022)
Cross-Cultural	"No evidence that cultures using sexist language have more sex discrimination than those using a nonsexist language; no evidence that nonsexist languages result in equal treatment of the sexes." (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 452)	Blaubergs (1980); Parks & Roberton (1998)

Historical Authenticity	"Changing to nonsexist language would require the re writing of great literature, English idioms, and historical documents." (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 453)	Blaubergs (1980); Parks & Roberton (1998) [but only in the context of "tradition", ultimately framed as a new category]
Tradition	"Masculine terms are traditional in society; language has existed in society for a long time and should not be changed." (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 453)	Parks & Roberton (1998); Vergoossen et al (2020)
Lack of Knowledge/ Understanding	"Some people just don't know any better." (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 453)	Parks & Roberton (1998)
Distractor in Conversation	"The word is too loaded; it is too much of a statement; it detracts from the message; when using it, it may invite hostility from opponents of gender-neutral language." (Vergoossen et al., 2020, p. 333)	Vergoossen et al (2020)
Gender Identification Is Important	"Gender-neutral language is impersonal and objectifying; the wishes of those that want to be referred to with a gendered pronoun must be respected; gender is important for one's identity; gender is important in communication." (Vergoossen et al., 2020, p. 332)	Vergoossen et al (2020)

*Vergoossen et al. (2020) focusses on Swedish *hen* unlike the other three articles which focus on English terms. Their close fit with the other English studies that have used this coding schema originated by Blaubergs (1980), however, makes their work an interesting and important addition to the work of building a taxonomy of reasons given for resistance to more anti-(cis)-sexist language.

Under such an approach, reformed language aims to respond to exogenous social change to more accurately represent the world as it is and, in some cases, merely to be polite to those who might be offended by old language (without overt consideration of what non-linguistic systems that offense might point to). This orientation towards de-emphasizing political goals in order to secure adoption of reformed language is also reflected in recent research on anti-cis-sexist research. Winig & Rose (2024), for example, find that supporters of singular THEY and neopronouns take two main strategies to promoting reform. The first, more common amongst those who do not use nonbinary pronouns themselves and more likely to coincide with support for singular THEY than neopronouns, invokes the long history of singular THEY use in English to argue that singular THEY is an already established element of the language which should, therefore, be usable without controversy or complaint. The second, more common amongst nonbinary pronoun users and more likely to coincide with support for neopronouns, argues that individuals ought to have agency over what they are called. In short, both groups argue that language change is less about trying to change social categories and more about being respectful (civil) to those who may wish to be called differently whether using extant or novel terms.

2.6 Discursive reform

Gender-focussed language reform is not, however, only about changing specific lexical items or morphemes. Reformers from both anti-sexist and anti-cis-sexist movements have also targeted reform at the discursive level. Amongst anti-sexist reformers, this has taken a variety of forms including attempts to address the way that agency is articulated in media coverage of violence against women (e.g. Clark, 1998; Laplante et al., 2023; Slinkard & Ehrlich, 2020), the innovation of terms such as sexual harassment and date rape to name and articulate women's experiences of sexual violence (Cameron, 1998d; Ehrlich & King, 1992, 1994; Fricker, 2007;

Steinem, 1983), and the interrogation of norms around sexual consent (Ehrlich, 1998; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999; Kulick, 2003), and heterosexual relations more broadly (Cameron, 1998c), as well as the tendency for heteronormativity (in terms of both gender and sexuality) to pervade interactions (Ekberg & Ekberg, 2017; Kitzinger, 2005, 2007; Land & Kitzinger, 2005; Stokoe, 2011). Anti-cis-sexist reformers, have argued for avoidance of gender unless directly relevant in utterances and, where "gender" is relevant, the careful interrogation and articulation of exactly what element of gender is relevant and subsequently the specification thereof, e.g. "people with prostates" as opposed to "men" (Zimman, 2017).

Additionally, such movements have also promoted various linguistic routines to support the maintenance of individuals' semantic authority (McConnell-Ginet, 2018) over the terms used to refer to them. Some have studied pronoun circles, finding them both potentially valuable and potentially risky insofar as they position questioning or not-yet-out people as having to either out themselves or misgender themselves (Brown, 2019). Others have promoted offering pronouns in introductions or adding them to name tags/buttons (Conrod, 2019; Spade, 2012; Zimman, 2017) though asking for others' pronouns remains delicate (Conrod, 2019; Spade, 2012). These pronoun routines represent a potentially more overt reform effort. Rather than making novel lexical items acceptable through liberal approaches, the innovation of new discursive routines has the potential to confront interlocutors with the idea that gender cannot be read straightforwardly off of all bodies and that the choice of pronouns to refer to an individual falls within the semantic authority of that same individual (as opposed to that of interlocutors). Thus, like feminization approaches to anti-sexist reform, such discursive reforms seem more explicitly political and perhaps able to influence the conceptual systems of individuals who are forced to confront their own biases as they are contested by the reformed language (practices).

2.7 Embodiment

Shifting gender systems are not only articulated through language but also through bodies. For example, Butler (1993) theorizes that bodies are sexed and gendered through the matrices of meaning that are formed by social discourses. While Butler's ideas have been contested by others who point to the (sometimes obtrusive) materiality of the body (e.g. King, 2019; Prosser, 1998), this interest in material forms is apparent within sociolinguistics in the form of an increasing interest in embodiment. Researchers have considered the role of the stylized body alongside linguistic behaviour in constructing identity (e.g. Bucholtz, 1999a; Eckert, 1996), arguing that style is a holistic bricolage, not limited to any one part of the individuals' behaviour or presentation, but in fact manifest in numerous expressive modalities. Rosa and Flores (2017) have also explored the interrelation of language and bodies in processes of racialization and racism. However, most importantly for this dissertation, sociolinguists have begun to consider the role of the body in discourses of gender and sexuality (Zimman, 2020).

As King (2019) argues, "physical bodies and socially constructed gender and sexuality tend to "fuse" together, to a certain extent, rather than sit side by side as distinct elements in a line" (p. 2). Thus, in analyzing the role of gender-focussed language reform in social gender reforms, the body must be considered. The intertwined role of the body and language in navigating gender has been considered in studies of trans and intersex folks' genital labelling practices, which demonstrate creative uses of language to feminize penises and masculinize vaginas and clitorises in accordance with individuals' gender identities (e.g. Marshall, 2019; Zimman, 2014) and to attempt to make legible genitals which fit neither binary expectation (King, 2019). Such nonbinary genitals can, King (2019) argues, "resist dominant discourses and even influence language" (p.16) through their obtrusive material existence. Hence, where

language and social reform is desired, or even underway, it is crucial to consider the role of bodies in these processes and their material existences and interactions in the world. Though discourse may dominate many aspects of social power structures, bodies nonetheless can exceed their limits, and in doing so, may unsettle the naturalization of the existing discursive order, thus triggering or supporting language and social reforms.

2.8 Conclusion

The intersection of embodied linguistics and language reform, while increasingly attended to in anti-cis-sexist reform efforts, is nonetheless somewhat under-explored in the consideration of reforms that target changes to cognitive systems of understanding gender. Thus, in the study that follows, I consider how the shifting role of language may open up new possibilities for bodily expression and recognition for diversely gendered people in spaces that have traditionally been both highly gendered and heteronormative. Specifically, in social partner dance communities, language and social reforms are shifting the expectations for embodied experience, expression, and physical communication.

Because Eurocentric social dances have traditionally organized themselves in terms of gender roles (i.e. gentlemen lead, ladies follow), the communities that surround them have also traditionally been heavily invested in heteronormative expression and language. Many of these dances have quite literally referred to participants as LADIES and GENTLEMEN and allocated movements and roles in partnership according to this gendered distinction. As argued by Schneider (2013b), partner dance has often even allowed participants in otherwise progressive societies to embrace more traditional enactments of gender roles and gendered embodiment. Hence, as with strongly gender stereotyped professions (or the androcentric implications of the

MAN morpheme in role nouns), changing the genderedness of roles in this community is both a question of language and social change.

That the degendering language change in WCS has been presented largely in terms of neutralization (e.g. LEADER, FOLLOWER, THEY) rather than any possible feminization/ visibilization makes this community particularly interesting for exploring the questions highlighted in Section 2.4 around the potential (in)efficacy of neutralization both for avoiding the harms of misgendering and for the broader goals of unsettling hegemonic gendered conceptual models. What's more, because these traditionally gendered roles are crucial to how community members conduct themselves in dance spaces (i.e. classes, competitions, social dances), this community also offers a focussed environment for exploring discursive reform. If dancers must identify participants by role and talk about what it means to participate in a given role (in educational contexts), then they must navigate the challenges highlighted in Section 2.6 above: when is gender relevant vs. not? And how does one articulate it when relevant and avoid it when not?

Finally, because dance is deeply invested in embodiment and can be carried out with little to no verbal interaction in many social dance contexts, the obstrusive body (King, 2019) is omnipresent and renders the perceived genderedness of bodies a constant influence in how participants experience and navigate the community. Furthermore, if heteronormativity predicates certain types of genderedness (see Section 2.7), then the traditionally heteronormative structure of WCS undoubtedly influences what types of gendered expression are legible within each of the two social roles of the dance (i.e. leading and following).

Thus, as will be explored in the chapters that follow, these communities provide an opportunity to consider the interactions of bodies with discourse and metadiscourse as those

bodies become intelligible in roles and behaviours previously unavailable to them. What's more, this community presents an opportunity to explore the efficacy of a language reform effort—both in terms of uptake and conceptual/social impact—and to consider how an explicitly neutralizing approach (i.e. replacing formerly gendered terms with gender-neutral terms in an attempt to break down gendered limitations on participation) does or does not succeed in addressing the concerns of anti-sexist and anti-cis-sexist reforms. That is, how effective is this language reform effort in challenging harmful ideologies and conceptual structures and avoiding harm through misgendering or linguistic exclusion?

3 Methodology

What does "leaving the field" mean when you're still a community member?

3.1 Introduction

I begin this chapter with a fieldnote from near the end of my participant observation. By this point I had wrapped up my attendance at local classes and was no longer travelling to weekend events but was still attending socials where I met dancers who commented on my absence in classes. Despite the fact that my attendance in classes had always been framed as being for research purposes, I had become a member of the sub communities that loyally attended each instructor's classes, and because I was still engaging in the broader WCS community, my absence was not parsed as "leaving the field" but instead as choosing to stop attending a particular class, a choice that needed to be accounted for. Even later, after my data collection was done and I became absorbed in writing and found myself attending only one social per month, dancers commented on my reduced participation. Because I had been a member of the community before my research, and remained one after, it proved impossible to cleanly draw a line under my participation as researcher. To some extent, I never truly left the field, as I continue to dance to this day and cannot help but experience WCS through the analytic lens I have developed through this research. This dilemma is emblematic of one of the major challenges inherent in the methodology I chose for this project. When conducting insider ethnography, the overlap between one's identities as researcher and as existing community member are particularly complexly intertwined and require careful management. In this chapter I discuss my approach to studying the WCS community's response to degendering. I first outline

my data collection via linguistic ethnography—including both participant observation and interviews—and address the complexities of using this research method as a community insider as well as the specific challenges of deploying it in the aftermath of COVID-19 and in the context of a physically intimate practice, namely, partner dance. In the second half of this chapter, I detail my analytical approach including both quantitative and qualitative methods. I finish with a brief summary and an introduction to the three analytic chapters which follow.

3.2 Linguistic ethnography

Guided by the approaches developed in linguistic ethnography (Copland & Creese, 2015), data collection involved both interviews and participant observation as well as the inspection of relevant documents which were encountered in the course of my research. While the interviews provided a corpus of data for textual analyses, participant observation and associated document review enabled richer contextualization of this linguistic data as well as a consideration of intertextual relations between language, movement, and participation dynamics in WCS. Together these approaches also allowed for triangulation (Denzin, 2007) to be used as a mechanism for testing hypotheses developed through the analysis of any one data type. Hypotheses that I developed through participant observation were checked by asking interviewees for their thoughts on phenomena, while hypotheses developed on the basis of interview responses were checked through comparison with the comparatively naturalistic behaviours observed during participant observation.

Because ethnography is always filtered through the researcher, I begin this section by establishing my positionality within the WCS community and in the specific context of this research.

3.2.1 Positionality

I came to this project as a community insider, having spent more than a decade participating in the WCS community in Canada, the United States, Europe, and China. Because the community is not as large or as ubiquitous as dance communities like salsa and ballroom, I have not always had access to vibrant WCS communities and regular dancing. In fact, I was only able to engage in intensive participation for approximately three years (2016-2019) while living in the US Northeast. During this time, I became increasingly interested in tracking the degendering movement and became friends with numerous dancers who dance in non-traditional roles, who assume either role depending on the specific context at hand,[19] and/or who engage in switch dances, where both dancers trade roles back and forth over the course of a single song. Hence, I began this research from a position supporting degendering and its proponents, sensitized to the effects of gendered and degendered language on the experiences of participants with diverse gender identities, sexualities, and preferences of dance roles. Recognizing that "there is no view from nowhere" (Gal & Irvine, 1995, p. 995, note 5), I did not attempt to approach this study as a neutral, naïve observer. Instead, I held my own critical, queer perspective (Butler, 1993; Herzog, 2016; Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013) in constant consciousness, and allowed it to inform my choices in the field even as I endeavoured to present myself as open to hearing all sides.

As part of this research, I chose to participate as a leader wherever possible. This meant taking classes, competing, and social dancing as a leader whenever circumstances allowed, though I did still also dance as a follower in some classes, competed in both roles, and social

[19] This can include dancing in whatever role is less represented in a class (e.g. in a class with 4 leaders and 6 followers, one might choose to dance as a leader, while in a class with 6 leaders and 4 followers the same individual may choose to dance as a follower); dancing whatever role one's social dancing partner at a party asks them to; or freely switching between the roles from song to song as per personal preference.

danced fairly freely. I am a feminine presenting person and, while I have mixed feelings about my own gender, I am typically read as a woman who has traditionally primarily followed in WCS. As such, my choice to lead meant that I was visible in the community as a non-heteronormative dancer which, while giving me profound insight into the experience of non-heteronormative dancers, may have also somewhat influenced how others interacted with me both in dance environments and in the interviews that I conducted.

3.2.2 Interviews

As the core of my data collection, I conducted interviews with participants I had identified as representative of a broad spectrum of the community during my participant observation (detailed in Section 3.2.3 below). The goal of these interviews was both to interrogate participants' conscious understandings of and ideologies around degendering and the language changes associated with it, as well as WCS dancing and gender more broadly, and to provide relatively free and relaxed discussion of WCS to enable quantitative measures of gendered versus degendered language use, in line with my prior work quantifying reform in a WCS podcast (O'Neill, 2024). As articulated by Winig and Rose, "interviews [] enable us to see how people actually use gender-neutral language in natural conversation, and whether or not this usage reflects their opinions on language" (Winig & Rose, 2024, p. 9). Hence, these interviews provided a critical context not only to interrogate participants' opinions, but also to identify whether or not these opinions are reflected in their use. Guided by Copland and Creese's (2015) recommendation for linguistic ethnography, interviews were semi-structured to enable the conversation to move freely into areas that proved particularly rich with a given interviewee and to allow for further probing on given topics.

I began this project with the interview guide outlined in Table 3.1 (regular font) as guidance for my semi-structured interviews. As I spent more time in the field, new questions emerged from my participant observations, particularly in relation to instructors. This is not unexpected, as ethnographers have also found it productive to use interviews to inform understandings of phenomena observed in the participant observation stages (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007; Copland & Creese, 2015; Lindquist, 2002). What's more, as I began to deploy the guide in interviews, other questions naturally emerged from conversations with participants and the order shifted and flowed from participant to participant. To respond to both of these effects, I adjusted the questions as needed, thus facilitating a more reflexive and responsive data collection process. Additional questions which either arose from participant observation or proved valuable in earlier interviews were added to the guide for future interviews (italics in Table 3.1) and ordering remained flexible in order to allow me to follow the flow of participants' responses and probe relevant topics as they arose (sometimes without being prompted by a specific question).[20]

Table 3.1. Semi-structured interview guide

Opening and Warm up
• *How would you describe WCS to someone who knew nothing about it?*
• How did you get started in WCS?
o How long ago was that?
o How do you feel about that?
• What is your personal dance style like?
o Who has been your biggest role model/influence in WCS?
o *Would you say that your dancing is feminine? Masculine?*
o *Does your style differ between the roles?*
Preliminary Entry into Role Talk

[20] The interview was intended to be followed by participants completing the modern sexism scale (Swim et al., 1995) and the revised genderism and transphobia scale (Tebbe et al., 2014) in order that an independent measure of participants' sexism and cis-sexism could be attained, however, after the first three interviewees completed the surveys, each expressed discomfort with the questions and/or concern that if they had erred in clicking the buttons they might be misperceived in a way that they strongly disavowed. Hence, I determined that the risk of these surveys causing emotional distress to participants was greater than any benefit that might be gained from delivering them. Instead, I relied on the text of the interview itself to probe questions of sexism or cisgenderism.

- Which role(s) do you dance in?
    - *What role did you learn first?*
    - *Which role do you prefer to dance in?*
- How did you end up [role]?
    - Did you decide or was it decided for you?
    - Have you ever tried the other role? How did you feel about it?
- Can you describe to me how it feels to [role]?
- How do you usually get dances? Ask? Wait? Eye contact?
- *How do you figure out what role you're going to be dancing in any given dance*
    - *Have you ever been asked to dance and not known what role you would be dancing? Or were expected to dance a role you didn't want/couldn't?*
    - *Do you do anything to indicate what role you want to dance in terms of clothing? Behaviour? Etc.?*

Focussed Degendering Questions

- Has WCS partnership/leading/following changed since you started? If so, how?
- What's your opinion on degendering?
    - Do you feel that we should continue degendering? If so, how? If not, why?
- Can you tell me about how you feel when you dance with someone who is the same gender as you?
    - Does it feel different to [role] a man vs a woman?
- How do you feel when you see a woman leading? A man following? A same gender couple?
- What words do you normally use to refer to people in the dance community? What words do you hear most frequently in your home community? At conventions?
- *Do you notice when people use degendered vs not degendered language?*
- How do you feel when people use words like "ladies" or "guys" when talking about WCS roles?
- How do you feel when people use words like "leaders" or "followers" when talking about WCS roles?
- How would you like to see people talk about roles in WCS?
- Do you think language is important in WCS? If so, why and how?
- *Do you think that gender plays a role in our dance/affects how people engage in the dance?*
- *Have you attended any queer dance events? Have you seen the same or different at queer events? [Only for openly queer participants]*

Instructor Specific Questions

- *How do you conceptualize WCS partnership to explain it to your students?*
- *How do you introduce the choice of roles to brand new students?*
- *How do you see your role in as a teacher in the community?*

Closing and Demographic Questions

- Are there any things we haven't discussed that you think we should talk about?
- How often do you attend socials, practices, classes?
- About how many conventions do you attend each year?
- The following four questions are optional. Please answer only to the extent that you are comfortable sharing:
    - How would you describe your gender?
    - Your sexuality?
    - What is your age? You can give me a range if you prefer.
    - Where did you grow up?
    - Where do you consider your home now?
    - *What is your profession?*

Interviews were video or audio recorded as per interviewees' preference. Participants were asked if they wished to remain anonymous or would consent to their real name being used in research outputs. However, because not all participants consented to the use of their real names, I have opted to present all interviewees and their data anonymously. This is because this seemed the best approach to ensure anonymity for the interviewees who wished to remain anonymous, given that all interviewees share a broader community of practice and 18 of the 22 share a relatively small community of practice.[21]

The interviews, which ranged in length from 53 minutes to 2 hours and 20 minutes,[22] were transcribed using simplified Jeffersonian transcription conventions modelled on Rampton (1995).[23] These conversation analytic transcription conventions afforded enough detail to enable the analysis of hesitations, cut offs, and recasting, without complicating the transcripts so that they became unreadable or intimidating for participants, who were given the opportunity to review the transcripts and offer any clarifications or corrections that they may want.[24] Furthermore, the level of granularity offered by more complex transcription systems was not needed for the kind of analysis that the data would be subject to.[25] Similarly, while detailed

[21] While I have anonymized the location of that CoP in publications, members of the focal community cannot help but identify their own community, as I was highly visible conducting my participant observation therein.
[22] I had intended for interviews to last 1-2 hours, but some participants' extensive knowledge and eagerness to share meant that interviews occasionally exceeded 2 hours.
[23] The following transcription conventions were applied:
- cut off speech
[ ] overlapping speech
(.) audible pause
(( )) nonverbal behaviour, such as laughter, specified within the brackets
" " reported speech
? question intonation
[24] Participants were also invited to review and provide feedback on the way their data figured into the final analysis to ensure that I had not misunderstood and to enable them to request changes to the presentation of data in accordance with their own personal comfort (e.g. removing details for anonymity or confidentiality). This was motivated by my desire to share my findings back to the WCS community and hence the likelihood that participants would be strongly invested in the way that they (even if anonymized) were presented back to their community.
[25] My backchannel vocalizations (e.g. mm, right, ok) were transcribed but are generally not included in the excerpts presented herein as they do not add to the analysis and unnecessarily complicate the presentation of interviewees' utterances.

coding of gesture and facial expression was not necessary for this analysis, gesture that was used in place of or alongside words to articulate movements or postures in the dance was of interest. Hence, I took note of such instances and referred back to the video as needed when analyzing these segments.

3.2.2.1 Participants

Interviewees were purposively sampled (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) based on participant observation and my existing knowledge of the community. My goal was to capture a broad range of perspectives by recruiting interviewees across a range of ages, genders, sexualities, levels of WCS experience, and WCS role preferences. I also interviewed instructors wherever possible and was able to interview one weekend event organizer though sadly, their event was cancelled in 2022, in response to continuing COVID-19 concerns. In addition to the interviewees drawn from my focal community, I also interviewed four non-local dancers who are frequent attendees at weekend events that interface with the focal community and who have been involved in degendering activism and/or are prominent representatives of non-heteronormative dancing within the broader WCS community.

The final slate of 22 interviewees—of which 18 were interviewed individually, and four in pairs—is summarized in Table 3.2. They ranged in age from 26 to 64 years of age, included both gay and straight participants, and covered a wide range of role preferences. All demographic information was solicited via open-ended questions and participants were informed that they could opt out of any question that they did not wish to answer. This allowed participants to freely articulate their relationship to gender and sexuality without the constraints of set categories (cf. Ansara & Hegarty, 2013). While only one participant declined to answer—opting not to provide her sexuality—and most chose fairly conventional terms for their sexuality (gay or straight) and

gender (mainly male or female), some did exhibit sensitivity to gender diversity by describing themselves as "cis gender(ed)". While I had hoped to also involve trans or nonbinary participants, I am not aware of any such dancers that were active in the focal community at the time. There were several out nonbinary dancers based in California at the time, but they were far outside of the geographical scope of my study and, as such, the question of how trans and nonbinary people experience dance roles in WCS and their reconstitution under degendering must be set aside for the present.[26]

Table 3.2. Interviewee demographic information

	Gender^	Sexuality^	Age Cohort*	Role†	Notes
A	female	straight/heterosexual	25-34	F	
B	female	(declined to state)	25-34	LF	
C	female	hetero	25-34	L{F}*	
D	female	gay/lesbian	35-44	L{F}*	
E	female	hetero	35-44	F{L}	organizer
F	female	straight	45-54	F(L)	
G	female	straight	45-54	LF	instructor
H	female	heterosexual	45-54	F(L)	
I	cis gendered woman	heterosexual	45-54	L(F)	
J	female	straight	55-64	F	
K	female	straight	55-64	F(L)	instructor
L	male	straight	25-34	L(F)	instructor
M	cis gender male	gay	25-34	F{L}*	instructor
N	male	gay	25-34	F(L)*	
O	man	straight	25-34	L(F)	
P	male	gay	35-44	FL	instructor
Q	male	straight	35-44	L(F)	
R	male	straight	45-54	L(F)	
S	male	heterosexual	45-54	L	
T	male	straight	45-54	L(F)	instructor
U	male	heterosexual	55-64	L	
V	male	heterosexual	55-64	L	

^ Gender and sexuality were self-described.
† L - leaders, F - followers, listed in order of preference.
Round brackets enclose non-dominant roles. Curly brackets enclose a role which the participant is able to do but expresses resistance towards. Asterisks mark individuals who pursued a non-heteronormative role first.

[26] In a highly encouraging development, a local social that was established in 2024 appears to be attracting a more diverse and openly queer crowd which may facilitate an increase in the trans and nonbinary participation in WCS in the focal community more broadly.

3.2.3 Participant observation

Penny (1999) has argued that "the practice of viewing…dance participants 'in isolation'—that is to say, outside of the entire context of competition ballroom dancing through its stages of development, produces an inaccurate picture of the dance practice" (p. 50). Similarly, I argue that viewing WCS participants' language practices in interviews without attention to the entire context of the WCS dance community and its activities would produce an inaccurate, or at the very least an incomplete, picture of those practices and particularly how those practices relate to participants' embodied experiences in dance spaces. Hence, a significant proportion of my data collection efforts were dedicated to participant observation in WCS spaces.

Though the WCS community is not limited to any one place nor to any one set of individuals, and is in fact characterised by geographic, political, and age diversity (Watson, 1996), all participants are linked by shared repertoires of movement and discourse and thus can be understood as constituting a community of practice (CoP) (Callahan, 2005; McConnell-Ginet & Eckert, 2011). Thus, I employed a multi-scalar, multi-site (Hannerz, 2003) approach, observing both in local sites in my focal community in a central Canadian city and at weekend competition events across a much larger geographical area that interfaces with the focal community. This approach facilitated understanding of the WCS community as a mobile, flexible CoP, a type of CoP which Wieschiolek (2003) has characterized using the emic term "dance scene" (see also Straw, 1991). Such scenes are flexible and open-ended networks of participants circulating through various physical spaces with some degree of overlap between all spaces and social networks but without any strict delimitation of membership or physical territory. This amorphous constellation is common in social dance communities, particularly amongst highly

mobile, middle class North American adults who appear to comprise the majority of WCS participants.

I began my participant observation attending two weekly classes (one intermediate, one beginner—offered by the same instructor on the same night) and a weekly outdoor dancing event (weather pending). As my fieldwork progressed and the community began to revivify after COVID-19 lockdowns, I was able to secure permission to attend another two regular weekly classes—also one intermediate, and one beginner, but taught by a different instructor in a different venue—as well as several regular (monthly or biweekly) socials (some of which began with a class) and two local workshop weekends which featured social dancing as well as several hours of workshops taught by All Star or Champions[27] level dancers.

In addition to local sites within my focal community, I also attended eight weekend competition events. These events form an important cornerstone of the WCS community as they are where dancers go to attain official rankings, to learn from internationally renowned professionals, and to mix and socialize with dancers from across North America and the world. Serious dancers (with the means to do so) often attend an event every month and some even more. Canadian dancers tend to be somewhat less prolific in their attendance as there are fewer Canadian events and cross border travel is more expensive due to the cost of flights and the typically lower value of the Canadian dollar. Nonetheless, they do travel. Thus, based on my years of attending events while based in the US and my conversations with dancers in my focal community, I chose events that dancers from my focal community typically attended and/or were

[27] Competition divisions (and therefore often prestige rankings) in WCS are as follows from lowest to highest: Newcomer, Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, All Star, Champions. Champions dancers are typically travelling professionals who make their money by teaching, judging, and competing at weekend events; All Star dancers are often those dancers who aspire to this life and invest substantial time, energy, and money into developing as dance professionals.

planning to attend in the course of my fieldwork. In keeping with proximity to the focal community, the events were located within a single day's drive or a roughly two-hour or shorter flight from the focal community; this means that all fell within Central Canada, the US Midwest, the US Northeast, and the US Mid-Atlantic.

All of these events were affiliated with the World Swing Dance Council (WSDC),[28] and so are subject to the current WSDC rules which allow, but do not mandate, degendered Jack 'n' Jill competitions and, as of 2021, allow participants to compete in both roles at a single event provided that they are not competing in the same division for both roles. All of the events I chose to attend had, in fact, degendered their Jack 'n' Jill competitions and were allowing people to dance in both roles at a single event following the WSDC rule changes. The events also all participated in the WSDC points system which allows participants to accrue points in competition that then determine the level at which they compete in future events. Hence, a large number of participants from a wide geographic area are motivated to participate in these events and the events themselves are often a site for the setting of standards and community building, as they are sites where dancers come into contact with high prestige members of the community such as event Masters of Ceremonies (MCs), event organizers, and professional dancers who compete, teach, and judge at such events. Because of their high prestige, these participants play an important role in ratifying or resisting changes to community norms.

At all of these sites, I acted as a participant observer: taking part in classes, competitions, and social dancing while taking notes whenever I got a chance, with particular attention to

[28] One of the events was not an official WSDC event in 2022 as it was their first event back after the pandemic and, they chose not to take on the risk of a hotel contract (required by the WSDC) in light of concerns about lower attendance. However, it had previously been an official WSDC event and returned to official WSDC status in 2023. Hence, it was still run in accordance with WSDC rules in terms of contests and while unable to award WSDC points, still hosted All Star and Champions level instructors and drew a number of participants from the surrounding area which included my focal community.

language use and partnering dynamics. Because dance is a relatively nonverbal activity, the majority of language behaviour I observed was instructors' talk in classes. Within these contexts, instructors provide verbal information and direction while the students mainly respond by embodying the directions given (cf. Broth & Keevallik, 2014; Keevallik, 2020). Hence, students speak relatively little—often only to navigate partner changes or provide brief feedback to each other—while instructors speak a great deal. Here, I was most interested in how the class was coordinated (e.g. how were students split into role groups, how were unpartnered dancers managed), how the roles were described and referred to in the conduct of teaching, and how students carried out role negotiations and rotations in the course of such classes. In competitions, the MC hosting the contest is the most prominent, but still relatively brief, speaker. But, given the entertainment context of the role, only very few MC utterances were relevant to my interest in the labelling and construction of the roles. Competition marshals (often called "floor moms", a term which may speak to persistent heteronormativity in alignment with a "dance mom" persona as popularized by tv shows such as *Dance Moms* or to the fact that this organizational support role has tended to be populated by women) were also observed using language as they coordinated dancers (putting them into the correct line and line sequence for contests), but this again, typically comprised very brief formulaic utterances (e.g. "get in line by bib order" "show me your number" "where is [bib number]"). That said, such contexts did provide some interesting validation for interviewees' reflections about role misrecognition in competition line ups. Finally, at socials, while some longer conversations do happen at the edge of the floor, I generally deemed these to have a higher perception of privacy and so did not treat them as data. Instead, I focussed on invitations to dance and negotiations of roles prior to a given dance, as

well as watching the partnering tendencies of the room as a whole and the rough demographic character of people dancing in each role.

My primary fieldwork (including attendance at classes and weekend events) took place May 2022 – December 2022, but I continued to attend local socials and take notes on them through to March 2023, as the local scene seemed to be picking up and I wanted to ensure that my observations held across the newly emerging socials. However, since my primary fieldwork was wrapping up, this meant that, while in January I still attended three different organizers' socials, in February I attended only two socials, both associated with the same organizer, and in March only three but this time with one from another organizer (also represented in January). Because my official ethical approval only lasted one year, I knew that I needed to officially cease *fieldwork* in advance of that deadline, but because I was not leaving the WCS community physically, it was challenging to phase out of researcher mode and back into simple participant mode. This has led to my fieldwork having a somewhat fuzzy end point (see Section 3.2.6.3 for further discussion of this challenge).

3.2.3.1 Ethical considerations

While I did secure formal permission to conduct my participant observation from organizers in order to maintain good relationships and support transparency in my research, because of the flexible nature of the WCS community, it was not possible to secure explicit consent from all of those who might cross my path within these publicly accessible but CoP affiliated spaces. Hence, I maintained strict anonymity for all participants in my field notes.[29] While I often noted down perceived age (e.g. middle aged), gender, dance role, or professional

[29] While I did keep record of which specific event each fieldnote resulted from, this information is not reported in the dissertation as it was not needed to draw the general conclusions that have been drawn and as such only risked reducing anonymity.

role within the space (i.e. instructor, MC, organizer) and occasionally cross referenced notable individuals I observed over multiple occasions with alphabetic codes, I did not collect names, instead taking notes only on publicly observable behaviours or utterances and my own experience of and reaction to experiences in the community. Furthermore, in the chapters that follow, such data is discussed broadly in terms of the trends I observed, and utterances are only quoted when they serve as representative of those broader trends and can be presented without providing any information that might make the speaker identifiable. In short, I have taken every precaution to ensure that no data from my participant observation could be linked back to any specific observed individual.[30]

In addition to preserving dancers' anonymity, I was extremely mindful of the potential perception of privacy within some dance spaces and avoided taking notes on any interaction that appeared to be private or personal. While I had initially considered including some more private spaces, it quickly became clear that the questions I was interested in could be explored entirely within the public spaces where dancing actually took place, i.e. classes, social dances, competitions, and shows—all of which are accessible to any (paying) member of the public. This means that I did not take notes on conversations that took place outside of the specific sites of dancing. For example, at weekend events which take place in large hotels, I only observed and took notes on what I saw happening within the ballrooms. Peripheral spaces such as room parties, hotel restaurants and bars, registration and vendor spaces, all of which have a somewhat less public character than the ballrooms, were not included in my research.[31] Furthermore, I did

[30] I did discuss some observations with interviewees that had been observed as a way to check my interpretations of their actions, however any other observations that were discussed in my interviews were referred to only in aggregate to avoid compromising anonymity. Interviewees sometimes introduced discussion of shared experiences or events that they knew I had also attended of their own accord.

[31] Because of my long-standing membership in the community and because I have existing friends that I see only at such events, I did sometimes find myself taking part in such environments (e.g. room parties) but I did so only as a dancer and friend—leaving my researcher persona and note taking habits in the ballroom.

not include conversations between dancers at the side of the floor that went beyond arranging to dance together or briefly commenting on some feature of the social—e.g. a surplus of people dancing in one role—as such conversations may have been understood as at least semi-private. Where individuals conversed with me directly, I limited my notes to those elements of the conversation that were directly relevant to dancing and endeavoured to make my role as researcher known whenever possible.[32]

Ultimately, the only site where I collected data despite determining that there may be some perception of privacy was in local weekly classes. These tended to have smaller numbers of attendees (sometimes as few as 6 and typically less than 20) and a repeating cast of characters week to week. Hence, I secured permission from instructors not only to observe, but also to introduce myself and my work at the start of each class and to secure verbal consent from the students present. Understanding that it might be hard to refuse consent at the time of my announcement, I emphasized that students were welcome to speak to me privately later if they wished to be omitted from my notes or if they had any questions. Some did come to me with questions or general interest in the project, but no one asked to be omitted.

Elsewhere, I endeavoured whenever possible to discuss my research with other participants in the scene and, through this self-disclosure, to make my role as researcher clear and to allow participants to refuse consent to my observation or to modulate their engagement with me with the expectation that it may become part of my research. Nearly everyone I spoke to about my project was supportive and interested to hear the results—some were incredulous that I would study *language* in *dance*, but none expressed concern about or distaste for the research.

[32] Because I regularly made myself known as a researcher, I got the impression that some dancers sought me out to specifically share their opinions on the dance.

Instead, as will be discussed in Section 3.2.5, this project fit well within the broader effort to bring attention and prestige to WCS as a dance and community.

By maintaining participant anonymity, being attentive to perceived privacy, and self-disclosing my researcher status wherever possible, I have endeavoured to ensure that my participant observation only minimally disrupted the typical conduct of WCS dancing spaces while also enabling me to collect vitally important data, without negatively impacting participants' privacy, confidentiality, or trust.

3.2.4 Documents & movement video

In addition to participant observation and interviews, I also asked interviewees if I could collect movement recordings of them after their interviews (either immediately thereafter or at a social event shortly after). This option was included on the informed consent form and, in cases where the recording occurred on a different day from the interview, an additional form was used to ensure on-going consent from the participant. Where possible, I recorded participants dancing with me. Where this was not possible, an additional partner consent form was prepared to secure consent from the other dancer if they were not an interviewee. I had intended to use these videos of embodiment to support analyses of the physical enactment of the roles, but due to the richness of the linguistic data I collected from interviews and participant observation, such an analysis was ultimately out of scope for this project. I did however also collect online documents from the World Swing Dance Council website, event websites, and online shop fronts in the WCS community which I used to support my analyses and to provide the necessary background to changes in the competition rules and event policies.

3.2.5 Reciprocation

Having taken an ethnographic approach, I was sensitive to the need to reciprocate what I was given by the community. This reciprocation took several forms. For those who I video recorded, their videos were sent to them for their own uses as well. While this may seem like an unusual form of reciprocation, in WCS, dance videos are highly valued as they allow dancers to assess their own movement and better target future development. Typically, such videos are captured by asking friends to record one's competition dances or, less commonly, social dances and are contingent upon the availability of some trusted individual to either take the dancer's phone to record with or to use their own and be trusted to send the videos after. In addition to the videos that I took for my research, I also made myself available to film dancers during their contests.

As well as assisting with recordings, I endeavoured to be flexible in my support of beginner classes. Though, for my own purposes, it was most important that I experience leading, for some class contexts it was most valuable for others to have me follow. I compromised by endeavouring to stay in the leading role for intermediate level local classes and workshops at weekend events but made myself available to dance whatever role was under-represented in beginner classes. I chose this approach because beginner classes are an important venue for attracting new dancers to the scene and so there has been a tradition of encouraging higher level dancers to "stay for the beginner lesson" for free so that they can provide the beginner dancers a taste of what the dance could feel like in future. Because of this goal of providing beginning dancers with the best possible experience, hopefully motivating them to return to classes, I danced whatever role was needed to balance the class and, in some cases where classes comprised an odd number of dancers, stepped out of the partner rotation to ensure none of the

other dancers had positions in the rotation without a partner. I took a similar approach in "Newcomer" sessions at events where I volunteered to join the welcoming sessions and served as a warm-up partner for dancers wanting to warm up in either role. Both recording and filling in gaps in the role balance in beginner classes provided ways of ensuring that my presence in the community was not one-sided as I conducted my participant observation. That is, I endeavoured to support the community and give back in whatever way I could, with the two examples above being the most common forms my reciprocity took.

At a more macro level, reciprocation has also been embedded in the process of research dissemination. When I began this research, I was able to find only three scholarly works on WCS: one undergraduate thesis (Cox, 2012), one master's thesis (Lavin, 2019), and one academic article (Callahan, 2005). Compared to other partner dances like ballroom, salsa, tango, or even the closely related Lindy Hop, about which one can find numerous academic books and articles (not to mention undergraduate and graduate theses), WCS is strikingly underrepresented in the academic literature. While for some communities such a state of affairs might be desired, the WCS community has had the opposite impulse.

Particularly in recent years, there has been much in-community discussion about trying to make WCS more visible to general society not only for name recognition but also to help the community to grow (see Section 4.5.2 on the desire and incentives for drawing more people into the dance). To name just a few examples, this has taken the form of creating feature length films about WCS (Molloy, 2009, 2022), a campaign to change the name to the perhaps more enticing "Modern Swing", a book project by the champion of "Modern Swing",[33] a collaboration with a

[33] The book, *West Coast Swing: The Complete Technique Book on Modern Swing Dancing*, by Benji Schwimmer was announced as forthcoming in 2024, but to my knowledge has not yet been published.

physics researcher to analyze WCS movement in scientific terms,[34] and innumerable efforts to promote the dance on social media, often through video focussed platforms like Instagram reels and TikTok.

I detail these efforts because they point to an overarching attempt to gain mainstream (see Thornton, 1996) attention and recognition for the dance—an attempt which I believe my research dissemination can support. While academic research may not be the most popularly accessible mode of knowledge sharing, it is nonetheless a valuable mechanism for securing a place for WCS in the historical record and for attaining a level of institutional prestige which, given the efforts with physics which have been lauded by members of the broader community, I believe many dancers value. Indeed, many dancers have been excited to hear about my research and there has been positive reception of my early dissemination (on work preliminary to my dissertation research). Hence, in addition to providing a summary with recommendations for future efforts to support degendering to my participants and the community more broadly (see Appendix A), I also intend to publish academic chapters and articles based on this dissertation (in addition to an article and proceedings which I have already published on a WCS podcast) which will play some small role in staking a claim for WCS as a dance deserving of the same recognition and respect afforded to other, more well known partner dances.

3.2.6 Challenges

Having now laid out my data collection procedures, I take this opportunity to discuss some of the challenges that emerged over the course of the research. These include: conducting research in a physically intimate community in the aftermath of a global pandemic, managing

[34] This collaboration, which I had heard rumours of, was confirmed by one of my interviewees.

issues of researcher-participant intimacy with the added complication of my insider status, and managing the challenges of leaving the research field as a community insider.

3.2.6.1 Impacts of COVID-19

I began conceptualizing this project in 2018 and began the PhD program of which it is a part in 2019. Unfortunately, before I could conduct the research itself, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived on the global stage. Hence, the specific planning and formal proposal for this study took place at a time (in late 2021 – early 2022) when dance spaces were only just beginning to re-open and many would not re-open at all. Over the period of on-going lockdowns across North America, many professional dancers and event organizers lost their primary income. Many professionals pivoted to teaching online or went back to day jobs that they had previously left behind. Meanwhile, some organizers had to cancel events for which they had already paid significant deposits and were faced with the difficult dilemma of deciding when to re-open and how to do so. Rumours circulated about re-opened dances being super-spreader events and, within my focal community, a vigorous debate took place over re-opening, masking, and vaccination. Even the venues, where dance classes and socials had previously been held, suffered and some closed down.

Additionally, given the extensive pandemic lockdowns that were instituted in my focal community, the scene was significantly hampered in re-gaining its footing vis-a-vis comparable US communities. When I officially secured my research ethics approval and began data collection, my focal community was only just beginning to return to dance. A monthly social had returned alongside a few classes and an outdoor social. It was a shadow of the community that I had met when I moved to my focal community in 2019, but it was what was available.

In addition to the challenges on a local scale, I also faced worries about travelling to the US. At times it would not have been possible for me to do so or would have required expensive PCR testing before each flight—something which would have been prohibitive to my planned seven trips to US events. I was not alone in this, as many dancers found themselves unwilling or unable to afford to cross the border for more far-flung events while PCR testing was required. Fortunately, however, by the time I arranged to attend my first event, proof of vaccination was enough to cross the border and so I was able to make my trips.

I had intended to only attend those events with mandatory vaccination protocols, but this proved impossible in the shifting sands of COVID-19 policy. Some switched to rapid-testing-based policies and ultimately others quietly let go of restrictions entirely. While I fully support all attempts to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic, such attempts (including total shutdowns) meant that this research is not entirely a snapshot of regular operating procedure in this dance community. Instead, what has resulted is a portrait of a community in the midst of re-emergence, working around losses of participants, venues, and international mobility, while also progressing into new territory in terms of degendering after the WSDC's mid-pandemic (2021) decision to allow competition in both roles within a single Jack 'n' Jill contest.[35]

In this context of re-emergence, my participant observation was also mediated by mask-wearing. While many of the classes and events I attended were no longer requiring masks, I chose to continue wearing mine so that, even at the height of my fieldwork travel, I would be less likely to become a vector for spreading COVID-19 through the community. While there is no way for me to exactly quantify what difference mask wearing might have made in my data collection, I acknowledge that it did mark me out as different, especially when traveling to US

[35] Participants must compete in a different skill division for each role; usually this takes the form of competing in one level lower in one's secondary role.

events, and may have made me less approachable to other community members, particularly those with more conservative or libertarian views. It may have also communicated that I was a liberal or progressive type person in ways that could have conditioned the way that people interacted with me. This is something that I must simply acknowledge and accept, hoping that my choice supported public health at least as much as it might have affected my research.

3.2.6.2 Ethics of intimacy

Beyond the risk of transmitting COVID-19, the close physical intimacy of WCS also presents challenges for managing clear boundaries between researcher and participant. Sexualized risks faced by female researchers in the field have been considered in other areas of ethnography (e.g. Sharp & Kremer, 2006); however this is particularly relevant in dance contexts, especially those which take place in clubs or other nightlife environments (e.g. Perrone, 2010; Rodríguez Neira, 2024). WCS events are perhaps less sexualized than nightlife contexts insofar as the latter may be understood to be, to a large extent, about finding potential sexual partners, whereas WCS, for many participants is a form of serious leisure (Gillespie et al., 2002; Stebbins, 1982, 2011)—i.e. a hobby to which they dedicate significant time and energy with the intent of becoming a highly skilled practitioner. However, because the dance nonetheless involves extensive touching of others' bodies, and, in the case of weekend events, often mixes that touching with alcohol or marijuana consumption, the line between just sharing a dance and doing something more can become blurry. In order to preserve my position as researcher and avoid problematic power dynamics, I ignored any suggestions that a dance partner may be feeling a greater intimacy than just that of a friendly dance and persisted in leaving any intimacy or emotional connection "on the floor" at the end of the dance—meaning that I assumed any such feelings or expressions were merely a performance of the dance and did not extend into life

outside of that dance encounter. In this way, I was likely facilitated by my insider status as it reduced my vulnerability vis-à-vis genuine newcomers who may be seen as potential "fresh meat", and I already knew many people in the community. Ignoring flirtation or indirect propositions had also been my strategy for managing such encounters prior to beginning my research and, hence, having established a reputation as being either oblivious to or uninterested in sexual liaisons in the dance community likely prevented more uncomfortable encounters.

In contrast with managing sexual intimacy, my insider status was more challenging in terms of managing platonic intimacies. I avoided interviewing anyone who I considered an intimate friend or who I regularly travelled with to events, so as to prevent participants feeling obligated to consent. This concern also informed my choice not to take fieldnotes in less public spaces like room parties or while having drinks or meals at weekend events or in proximity to local events. Like Cuomo and Massaro (2016), I worried that my existing friendships within the community would make it difficult to clearly delineate between "on" and "off" and so I took fieldnotes only on topics directly related to my interest in the dance roles, language reform, and gender and did so only in the relatively public spaces where dancing actually took place.

What I had not considered, however, was the intimacy that was developed through interviews. Spending one to two hours actively listening to an individual and inviting them to share their thoughts on topics that they may not often get to discuss in some cases deepened my relationships with interviewees from an acquaintance-like connection to something closer to friends. In general, I do not think that this deepening was problematic, particularly since I remain in the community, and may have become friends with many of these people regardless. But I am conscious of the asymmetry that may have developed between my experience of conducting an interview and my participants' experiences of being invited to speak at length and to be very

attentively listened to while doing so. Unlike some other ethnographers who have written on this topic (e.g. Pettit, 2020), I have not received any complaints about these friendships being one sided, perhaps because, being an insider to the community who still attends social dances (if not classes and weekend events), these warm relationships have been able to continue. While I felt some discomfort with the possible asymmetry of these friendships' development, it may equally be understood as a benefit of my research: participants were given an attentive space to share their thinking and talk through ideas, which are preserved in my data and some of which will be shared through the dissemination of my findings.

3.2.6.3 Leaving the field without leaving the site

As I alluded to in the opening of this chapter, I didn't quite know how to "leave the field" when the field was a (broader) community that I had been a part of since 2009, and when the focal community was one that I intended to remain a part of. After months of trying to ensure everyone understood me as a researcher, how did I go back to being just a dancer?

I wrapped up my attendance at classes and weekend events by the end of 2022; I was still attending local socials (which I do to this day) but was trying to decide exactly when to officially end my research. My ethics approval extended until April but was also reaching saturation and so after two months of attending only a few local events a month, I stopped taking fieldnotes at the end of March 2023. Officially I was done my data collection, and I made that known, but I was still in the community. Instead of being able to bid everyone farewell and cleanly depart, I was just not collecting data anymore.

Fortunately, WCS is populated by relatively highly educated people and a highly analytical approach to the dance has become increasingly prominent in the teaching of classes over the course of my years in the community. As such, I didn't experience a persistent

othering—we were all "analysts" of the dance, and there was no notable class or cultural distinction. If anything, my status as a graduate student may have placed me lower on professional prestige and socioeconomic rankings than many of the other dancers. Once I was no longer seen taking notes, the other dancers seemed to return to treating me as just any other dancer—though not without occasionally asking if I'd finished writing yet.

Over time, however, I also found myself attending fewer dance socials as I became busier with analysis and teaching, and questions of why I "never come out dancing anymore" joined the comments about how students "never see [me] in class anymore", alluded to in the introduction. Even some dancers from outside of my focal community, which I was connected with on social media, mentioned missing seeing me at weekend events (which I was no longer able to dedicate time and money to). While I have not had to struggle through perennial outsider-insider status, I have instead felt guilty that, to the extent I have pulled back from the community, my dual status as insider and researcher and my continuing relationships to people in the field means that it has been experienced not straightforwardly as a researcher leaving the field, but instead as a dancer no longer supporting as many local events nor making themselves available as another leader in follower-heavy classes (see Section 6.3.2 for further discussion of role balances).

While all those who have made such comments have been those that I explicitly spoke about my research to, my presence and participation seems to have been understood as more than that, tied not just to my research goals, but also to my dedicated membership in a community that relies on individual dancers' support and attendance to ensure continued viability. Jones (2012) discusses a similar phenomenon in her work with a lesbian hiking group where, despite having made her researcher status clear to all members of the group, some nonetheless attributed her regular presence to her being a "keen walker" as opposed to a dedicated researcher. Like Jones,

based on the support I have received and continue to receive for my research in the community, I attribute this not to my researcher status having been forgotten, but to me having been successful in establishing myself as a member of a community engaged passionately in a leisure pursuit. Indeed, I am a keen dancer, so my reduced attendance, while necessary for many reasons is not my preferred state—I would love to be dancing WCS multiple nights a week again. Hence, as part of my efforts to give back to the community that made this research possible, it is my intent to return to more active participation in and support of the community once my writing is complete and I have slightly more time and energy.

3.3 Analytical methods

I have placed this section after the details of my data collection as the limitations of linear documents demand that each item come one after another. But this ought not to suggest a neat delineation between data collection and analysis. Instead, my analysis began the second I entered the field. With each observation and interview, I formed and tested hypotheses about degendering in WCS, using each successive encounter with the community to refine and further develop my theorization. With this as my foundation, I then began to perform more formal analyses using the field notes and transcripts that my data collection produced. I approached these analyses from the perspective of Scavenger Methodology. Originating in Halberstam's queer theoretic work, scavenger methodology has also shown promise in queer linguistics, particularly in the work of William Leap (e.g. Leap, 2020, 2021). This framework does not limit itself to a single analytical technique, tool, or orientation, but instead, in line with the concept of queering as pushing at boundaries and contesting norms, this approach draws on any methodological tools that the researcher finds productive for understanding the people and communities that they study. As articulated by Halberstam,

> A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior. The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence. (Halberstam, 1998, p. 13)

While the community I am studying is not explicitly queer, I take this queer approach to my work because I am interested in what could be understood as the queering of the dance roles, the breakdown of heteronormative structures and routines, and the ways that participants understand and enact this process of degendering. To do this, I have found it productive to leave disciplinary boundaries to the side and draw on a range of different analytical tools and approaches to make sense of the sometimes messy process of language and social change. Specifically, I have combined both quantitative analyses at the token level and an expansive set of qualitative analyses that enabled a deeper understanding of language attitudes and ideologies as well community internal conceptual and social systems. Before detailing the specifics of my analytical methods, however, I begin by discussing my operationalization of *gender*.

3.3.1 Operationalizing gender

Throughout this project, I made use of a category that I describe as "perceived gender" when collecting and analyzing data. I want to be clear that I do not believe that this category is necessarily coterminous with gender identity. I follow Ackerman (2019) in arguing that "the gender that is expressed, inferred, and used by a perceiver to classify a referent" (Ackerman, 2019, p. 3)[36] is not the same as gender identity, i.e. an individual's own concept of their gender. Thus, while I always defer to an individual's own gender identity, for the purposes of

[36] Ackerman (2019) calls this "conceptual gender" but I have opted to use the term "perceived gender" to emphasize that it is gender based upon the conception of the perceiver not the expresser.

participation in WCS, the way in which one's gender is perceived proved to be a significant predictor of how one was situated within the community (see, in particular, Chapter 6).

Hence, while interviewees were invited to self-identify, it was impossible to secure self-identifications from every member of the broader WCS community. Furthermore, asking about the specifics of an individual's gender identity without substantial existing rapport is often inappropriate and rude. Thus, for observations, gender is operationalized as perceived gender (unless I was aware of the participants' gender identity, specifically). This means that biosocial (Ackerman, 2019) gender markers such as body size and other phenotypical markers, clothing choices, hair style, make up, and vocal pitch were combined as a gestalt to determine what perceived gender that individual would be classified as for analytical purposes. While this undoubtedly risks miscategorising some participants, as I highlighted elsewhere, there were relatively few out trans or nonbinary participants active in the WCS community at the time of data collection, and most other participants seemed to present themselves in ways that aligned with either masculine or feminine gender categories. What's more, this mechanism of categorizing perceived gender closely matched the patterns of treatment which I observed in the community, strongly suggesting that community logics rely on such perceived gender to organize participation in the dance.

3.3.2 Quantitative analyses

As a baseline measure of the success of the degendering movement, I began by conducting a quantitative analysis of the interview data which forms the core of Chapter 5. Because field notes are not exhaustive and have a higher risk of being biased by what is novel or interesting to the researcher, it was not possible to apply the same quantitative methods to that data. Instead, I relied upon the interviews to enable me to quantify what proportion of generic or

non-specific references to the dance roles (i.e. leader and follower) were gendered (e.g. HE, SHE, LADIES, MEN) versus degendered (e.g. LEADER, FOLLOWER, singular or plural THEY, YOU, YOUR PARTNER). Based on prior research I conducted using a WCS podcast as data (O'Neill, 2024), I anticipated that in addition to grammatical or semantic gender, grammatical person and number would also be important, as I found that participants seemed to use both second person pronouns and plurals to avoid the pitfalls of gendered third person singular pronouns. In addition to coding the references to dance roles for role, gendered/degendered, person, and number, I also coded for definiteness and part of speech (to distinguish pronouns and nouns). While carrying out this coding, I noticed more complex structures used to articulate the roles. In some of these structures, generic or non-specific reference to the roles were specified for gender. Those that specified gender were also coded in terms of whether they were a simple noun phrase modified by a single adjective (e.g. male followers) or a more complex noun phrase with a complement phrase such as "a guy who follows". These were then also coded by role and gender specified which allowed them to be grouped as heteronormative or non-heteronormative. Coding was applied using MAXQDA tools which allowed for the extraction of complex code combinations at the participant and group level. Ultimately, rates of degendered vs. gendered language use were computed for each participant, as well as rates for specific strategies such as pluralizing, using second person, and using singular THEY. Because of their lower frequency, rates for the gender specified structures were only computed at the group level.

3.3.3 Qualitative analyses

In addition to the quantitative analyses, I also employed qualitative techniques to analyze not only the interviews, but also the less quantifiable data contained in my field notes. My approach to this element of my research was founded in (Critical) Discourse Analysis, broadly

understood. I particularly drew on Fairclough's (1992) *Discourse and Social Change* and Blommaert's (2005) *Discourse: A Critical Introduction* to consider the way that language and social systems interact. Following Blommaert (2005), I supported my analysis of the text itself with extensive reference to my experience in the field so as to understand utterances in the context of broader social systems within the WCS community. These detailed close readings of critical instances of discourse around gender, role, and sexuality[37] supported my analyses across all three analytical chapters but were especially prominent in Chapter 6. There I brought together interviews and field notes to consider the extent to which heteronormative conceptual systems and participation models are or are not being unsettled. This component of my analysis also drew strongly on queer linguistics' sensitivity to normativities (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013) and to category formations which can either contest or reify existing normativity (Canakis, 2018).

In order to facilitate my critical discourse analysis, I used grounded theory (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014) to develop thematic codes for discourses around language attitudes and ideologies as reported in Chapter 4. While my coding was influenced by language ideology and attitudes research on other instances of language reform (e.g. Blaubergs, 1980; Cameron, 1995; Hekanaho, 2022; Parks & Roberton, 1998), my themes were developed inductively. I looked for patterns in the data, grouped them into narrow categories and then grouped those categories into related themes. I then turned back to the language ideology and attitudes research cited above to help make sense of these themes and bring them into conversation with prior research and theory.

While working through the data in this way, I also coded inductively for themes related to (de)gendered language and (non)heteronormative discourses which emerged in my data—

[37] Such critical instances were identified with reference to the quantitative coding of gendered/degendered language as well as additional coding of role references recorded in my field notes as gendered or degendered and the coding of discourse and observed behaviour across as my data as potentially gendered or heteronormative. This initial coding allowed me to extract the critical instances that I then analysed further.

supported by my extraction of gendered and degendered tokens in my quantitative work. Particularly with regard to the distribution of gendered versus degendered language, I was sensitized to some potentially relevant contexts (e.g. voicing/reported speech; accommodation) by my earlier analysis of a WCS podcast (O'Neill, 2024). Drawing further inspiration from this earlier work, I employed several key micro-analytic tools to understand my data. Conversation Analytic (CA) tools and Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 2008) allowed me to interrogate the interactional dynamics that may have influenced token choice. In the context of consciously motivated language change, the use of unreformed language may be perceived as a source of trouble in interaction and, hence, the CA concept of repair (Kitzinger, 2013) was deployed to explore cases where terms referring to the dance roles were marked as trouble sources and recast or amended. This, in turn, provided a window onto the micro-processes of reform. That is, CA work on repair provides extensive consideration of the mechanics of marking trouble sources and "repairing" whether this is done by the original utterer or an interlocutor (e.g. Kitzinger, 2013; Schegloff et al., 1977; Stokoe, 2011), all of which provide insights into the interactional management of word choice when referring to the dance roles.

Similarly, given that this change is socially salient, I drew on Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 2008) to explore the extent to which utterers modulated their token choices in accordance with those of interlocutors. Typically, individuals' language use patterns converge with those that they want to affiliate themselves with but may also diverge to establish differentiation between themselves and an interlocutor that they want to distinguish themselves from. For example, there may be pressure on speakers to converge with members of the community overall, and if reform is highly valued, there may also be incentives to diverge from those who continue to use unreformed language.

As in my prior work (O'Neill, 2024), reported speech also proved to be an interesting site for the consideration of gendered incursions into otherwise degendered speech and, hence, I considered voicing effects (Bakhtin, 1986; Bucholtz, 1999b) and their relationship to speaker roles (Goffman, 1981) as part of my toolkit for understanding the appearance of gendered language in the interviews.

3.3.3.1 Gestures & embodiment

While my data lends itself to consideration of how the dance is embodied and enacted physically, the scope of this dissertation does not. That is, I leave for future projects an investigation of how following and leading are experienced on and in the body. Here I discuss gestures in a more limited way, specifically, I analyze how gestures play key roles in inviting others to dance and in articulating styling options for followers (and less frequently leaders). Both of these elements lend themselves to the consideration of heteronormativity in Chapter 6, in terms of how they support activities that would otherwise be verbal or speak to the construction of follower/leader persona. I also discuss embodiment in broader terms in the final chapter.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined my approaches to both data collection and analysis. The former is based in Linguistic Ethnography and involved both participant observation as well as interviews to ensure a well-grounded understanding of the community both through interviewees' explicit articulations of their understandings and ideologies surrounding degendering as well as through my own observations and experiences, often as a dancer in a non-heteronormative role. I also discussed some important challenges of this approach in terms of the impact of COVID-19 as well as the impact of my insider status on both intimacy within the community and the process of leaving the field without ceasing to participate in the dance.

Following this, I introduced my analytical methods, focussing on scavenger methodology which allowed me to draw on a wide range of valuable tools to understand my data and the community that it was drawn from. I described my quantitative analysis of the interviews as well as my qualitative analyses of field notes and interviews which were informed by a range of theoretical frameworks including conversation analysis, accommodation theory, queer linguistics, cognitive semantics/linguistics, grounded theory, and critical discourse analysis.

Having thus outlined my approach to the data, I turn now to my findings. In Chapter 4, I focus on the interview data to discuss participants' attitudes towards degendering and show how they draw on discourses which Cameron (1995) has called liberal (as opposed to radical) approaches to language reform. I also explore how this liberal approach interacts with common critiques of gender-focussed language reform. Next, in Chapter 5, I turn to the enactment of the reform itself, focussing on the quantitative analysis of the interviews to discuss the extent to which linguistic degendering has been enacted by my interviewees. I also consider where gendered language still arises, drawing on observational data to support my analysis of the relatively few tokens of gendered language found in the interviews. Finally, in Chapter 6, I combine both interview and observational data to consider the relationship between language reform and conceptual reform. I present a number of contexts where heteronormative conceptions of the roles appear, often alongside degendered language or even in the conceptual systems of people who prefer to dance in non-heteronormative roles. Following these three analytical chapters, I close with a final chapter in which I summarize my findings before discussing what I see as the next step for reform in WCS, i.e. the reform of interactional routines, as well as a selection of other considerations and future areas for research.

4 Attitudes towards language reform

like it- it should not be a complicated choice (.) it should have always been leader follower (.) it should never have been male female (.) but back in the day (.) that's just the way it was (.) right your males were leaders your females were followers (.) so as- as a professional in the community it's an easy switch for me (P)

4.1 Introduction

In contrast with the contentious battles over anti-sexist and anti-cis-sexist language reforms in public discourse, in the WCS community spaces where I did my participant observation and amongst the participants I interviewed, the idea of reforming the language used for roles within the dance (i.e. *leaders* and *followers*) was widely supported. While some interviewees expressed concerns about language changes outside of the community (e.g. the use of singular THEY for specific individuals, or the implementation of pronoun rounds in professional meetings) and some uncertainty about the possibility of ever achieving the goals of degendering (i.e. equal numbers of men and women following; equal numbers of women and men leading), the transition to labelling the roles qua roles rather than in relation to gender was supported by all interviewees. In contrast, despite the overrepresentation of "young, highly educated, self-reported liberal and feminist individuals" (p. 212) in their sample, Hekanaho (2022) reported significant attitudinal variation among their participants in response to gender-focussed pronoun reform generally. Hence, the question may be asked: why, when the WCS community is demonstrably diverse in age (ranging from minors to senior citizens) and attested

by interviewees to be highly diverse in ideology, has this language reform been so broadly accepted (in principle) and promoted at the level of metadiscourse?

4.2 Language reform approaches and attitudes

4.2.1 Liberal vs. radical language reform

In her 1995 work on verbal hygiene, Deborah Cameron posits two opposing approaches to language reform: the radical approach and the liberal approach. The radical approach promotes language reform as part of social reform, leveraging its ability to draw attention to problematic hierarchies through the explicit politicization of language. That is, if there is a gender-neutral alternative to a term like *policeman*, then choosing to say policeman is recognized as a non-neutral choice, and it becomes harder to claim that language is a purely neutral medium for conveying thoughts directly and transparently from one mind to another. Duranti (1999, 2011) also promotes a conception of language as a non-neutral medium, pointing to linguistic relativity as an important concept in this regard. From a linguistic anthropological perspective, culture (and correspondingly) language is key in how we understand and navigate our social worlds and hence, "we must conceive of context and language as a dynamic and evolving relation in which words mediate between different versions of the world" (Duranti, 1992, p. 95). Hence, the radical approach is indebted to linguistic relativity insofar as it proposes that the way we use language affects how we understand and participate in our social world and thus can and should be changed as a mode of promoting social justice movements. Cameron contrasts the radical approach with the liberal approach which de-emphasizes the political nature of language, instead promoting reforms as improving language not for reasons of social justice, but to make it more accurate, more responsive to social change (which is understood as taking place organically and independently of language activism), more inclusive, and relatedly, more civil. Such an

approach might claim that we should use “he and she” to refer to a class of students because there are some women present as a result of broader changes in university attendance, and because it is polite and civil to use language that will make the women feel included. Moreover, given that this latter approach is explicitly framed as non-political, and as responsive to social change rather than as initiating it, it is less likely to provoke resistance from those who believe that language should be apolitical (cf. Blaubergs, 1980; Parks & Roberton, 1998).

With these two contrasting approaches in mind, I turn now to the WCS community. Because language reform was never explicitly discussed in the observed classes and events, this chapter focusses on discourses articulated in the interviews. As part of the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to share their observations of and opinions of language reform in the community. In most cases, this topic was initially broached by asking participants if they had noticed any changes in the community over the course of their engagement with it. This question, however, seldom elicited reflection specifically on language, instead focussing on changes in participation patterns. Hence, participants were then asked if they had noticed any changes in the language use in the community and what they thought about any changes, and/or the reform movement more generally. Instructors/organizers were also asked about their approach to language in their own teaching/organizing. Some participants ended up discussing prior experiences with unreformed language and, for those, further questions interrogated their experience of that and how they responded to it.

While a number of participants did not seem to find reflecting on the language reform particularly stimulating or worthy of comment, how they responded to these prompts nonetheless fed into discourses articulated more fully by other participants. As will be demonstrated in detail below, these discourses broadly align with Cameron’s (1995) “liberal reform” in that they focus

on language change as a refinement of terms' accuracy and their responsiveness to already occurring social change—change that is valued insofar as it enhances inclusion. Furthermore, throughout my participants' interviews, despite some stories of microaggressions and politicization as a result of the reforms, an overarching ethos of civility prevailed. Direct confrontations about language use, as have been seen in other environments (e.g. Zimman & Hayworth's (2020) work on a transmasculine LiveJournal community), were exceedingly rare and participants sought, wherever possible, to account for unreformed language in ways that "understand" and forgive users of unreformed language. Additionally, while some of the resistant positions outlined in Table 4.1 are attested to be held by *others,* none are reported to be held by my interviewees. As I will show in the following sections, I find that many of these arguments are precluded by the liberal arguments made for the reform, and that others are explicitly rejected as invalid or, even if relevant, as insufficient to justify resisting a reform seen to benefit the community in terms of both the accuracy of language used and the inclusivity such language supports.

4.3 Accuracy

A key discourse that emerged across interviewees' discussions of the WCS language reform was a belief that the terms FOLLOWER and LEADER are better or more accurate terms than GENTLEMEN and LADIES (see excerpts 1 and 2 below).

(1) yeah I think lead follow is a- is a much better (.) um set of definitions (V)

(2) I think using the term leader and follower is just more accurate (.) in general (.) right um so it's better language (.) to use than you know guys girls (L)

These arguments are made quite simply, with the reformed terms LEADER and FOLLOWER consistently being framed as "better". While on the surface, "better" could be understood as

reflecting any number of ideological stances, perhaps even more political ones that see the terms as better in terms of their ability to promote degendered values, interviewees often accounted for this better-ness (where they accounted for it at all) with reference to the greater fit between this choice of language and the state of the dance itself. As shown in excerpt 3 below, the motivation for using such terms is framed as better reflecting the possible gender configurations of the class "because" there may be some people leading who are women and some people following who are men.

(3) I now try my hardest everything is leader follower right because you may have (.) a follower in your class who's a male you may have a follower- a leader in your class who's a female you may have (.) a follower in your class who refers to they them (.) right (.) so it's leader follower (P)

In fact, here the speaker even includes the possibility of a participant who uses THEY/THEM pronouns. While the possibility that an individual might use THEY/THEM pronouns seldom comes up in the interviews, its presence here is meaningful, because in many lay understandings of gender, using THEY/THEM pronouns marks an individual as nonbinary. Thus, none of the traditional gendered language of WCS (e.g. GUYS, GIRLS, LADIES, GENTLEMEN) could adequately describe such an individual—new terms are needed. This is not the only account provided by this interviewee, however. He goes on to argue that, not only should the language be used for the reasons above, but in fact that "it should have always been" (P) this way. While this particular speaker doesn't fully explain what is meant by this idea that the terms should have always been "leader" and "follower", his reference to the historical validity of these terms speaks back against the common contestation of reformed language as ahistorical or tampering with tradition (Blaubergs, 1980; Parks & Roberton, 1998). For this interviewee, the reform is not some novel

imposition on the language but instead a correction of language that was previously imprecise or insufficient. What made this prior language so imprecise was elaborated on by other interviewees and particularly interviewees who acted as instructors in the WCS community.

4.3.1 Pedagogical motivations for accuracy

Instructors demonstrated particularly keen attention to the importance of language in dance. Whereas some other participants seemed less attentive to language, attesting to visuals as being more important (see Section 4.4.2. for further discussion of this discourse), and/or to not really noticing language, instructors frequently articulated a strong commitment to finding the "best" or "better" language. For example, referring to the broader terminology of the movement, one instructor and activist talks about "want[ing] to find words that are representative of what I mean and specifically what I mean" (M), expressing a strong orientation towards words as important tools for his meaning making practices that must be refined in order to be most effective. As shown in excerpt 4, another frames his engagement with language through learning styles and the need to ensure that all students are provided the best possible access to content. He then goes on to present an argument that draws on the notion of linguistic relativity, arguing that the words we use shape our understanding of the world.

(4) certainly is a lot of people learn visually (.) a lot of people learn physically by doing things but some people will learn it by conceptualizing it through words first so if you're not careful choosing your words (.) then you're going to have difficulties with communicating and you're sort of setting up (.) like again with the gender issue (.) we're setting up expectations and we're building (.) we understand our word- our world through language (.) we see differences only because we have defined them linguistically (.) … so yeah it's important (T)

Through this framing, this interviewee presents accurate language as vital to ensuring success in conveying the critical differentiations between the two roles, differences which "we see…only because we have defined them linguistically." This strong motivation amongst "most teachers-over 80% [who] like genuinely want their students to improve" (L) suggests a critical structural facilitator for the language reform: if people who want to be their best as instructors see this language change as benefiting that goal, they will be motivated to change their existing language in line with the reform.

What's more, as another instructor (L) argues, the reformed terms are "more accurate" and "better" even if the entire class is composed of participants dancing heteronormatively. To him these terms are "more efficient" because, as he articulates earlier in the interview, "I believe that the roles are asymmetrical and I think that's important for the dance" (L). For this instructor, what is key is having terminology that allows him to pick out the specific nature of the roles as asymmetrical, regardless of who fills them. This emphasis on the roles as *roles* contrasts with traditional imaginings of "the man's part" or "ladies' part" (still sometimes heard in the field) which framed the roles as intrinsically tied to the gender of the dancer. Despite the persistence of some explicit reference to the roles as gendered in my observations (typically by older dancers), this shift towards seeing the roles qua *roles* was pervasive across the majority of interviews.

4.3.2 Roles qua *roles*

Several of my interviewees reflected upon the fact that there were very few women leading or men following at the time the degendering movement began and, despite their increase in representation, people who exclusively dance in non-heteronormative roles remain fairly rare (see also discussions of gendered distribution in Chapter 5 and discussions of persistent heteronormative logics in Chapter 6). Thus, strictly from a numerical point of view,

there are relatively few people who are consistently harmed by the use of gendered language. Other researchers working on gender-neutral language reform have found that such reforms often face resistance from those who argue that either the numbers of nonbinary people are too small for such significant language reform (Hekanaho, 2022; Vergoossen et al., 2020), or even that "pronouns for individuals with non-binary gender identities are unnecessary because there are no individuals who are not either a woman or a man" (Vergoossen et al., 2020, p. 331). However, this kind of resistance to reform never appeared in my interviews. As seen below in excerpt 5, it seems that such concerns were deflected by broader discourses which framed the "deliberate" delinking of the roles from gender as a "welcoming change" that allows the roles to be defined "by the roles", as distinct from the gender that has traditionally been associated with them.

(5) there has been a much more deliberate movement towards (.) um (.) defining roles by the roles rather than by gender um (.) and I think that that overall has been a really good and welcoming change (O)

4.3.2.1 The (un)importance of gender

By arguing for the use of degendered terms on the grounds that they are more accurate than their gendered counterparts, this approach to language reform not only provides an effective argument for reform, but also guards against another series of common arguments against anti-cis-sexist language reform: specifically, that gender-neutral language should not be used because "gendered language is important for one's identity, and that knowing someone's gender is necessary in communication" (Vergoossen et al., 2020, p. 335). Because the reform in WCS is framed as referring to the roles as specifically distinct from gender, the change does not threaten the importance of gender to one's identity. In fact, gender is often appended to role nouns, particularly when the referent is identified as belonging to a gender that is not typically

associated with the role (e.g. “woman leader”, “male follower”; see Section 6.2.2.2 for more on this asymmetry). As argued in a popular WCS podcast, “I think it’s [the term degendering is] dumb I don’t think we should be degendering it’s gender-neutral like in other words the roles are gender-neutral but that- that’s terminology…I still have my masculine and feminine energies and you’re gonna have yours right” (Jacobson & Szekely, 2018). In short, despite the name of the movement, its goal is not to remove gender from people, but to let people bring their gender to either role.

This disjunct between role and gender may in part be possible due to the non-serious nature of dance as a hobby (Bollen, 1996). In excerpt 6, another interviewee reflects on an instructor opening a class by explicitly challenging the idea that roles are dictated by gender. This instructor specifically draws on the idea of dance as a non-serious pursuit (cf. Bollen, 1996), stating that “nobody fuckin’ cares like it’s dance” as opposed to some more serious pursuit. Because dance is not a serious space—“it’s literally dance and no one will die”—there is room to explicitly challenge the importance of gender that might be observed in our everyday lives.

(6) she was saying like in the beginning and end of class basically like “do whatever role you want like nobody fuckin’ cares like it’s dance (.) like live your life” (.) like just (.) even if like (.) all of the leaders are men and all of the followers are women (.) like it’s OK to be like and you can change like nobody cares it’s fine it’s literally dance and no one will die (N)

Imbricated in this idea of dance as a non-serious space, where roles can be played with, is the contestation of the old canard that dance is the vertical expression of a horizontal desire (i.e. that dancing is an expression of the desire for sexual intercourse). If dance is understood as inherently sexual, then freedom of roles might be experienced as threatening not just to the gender

paradigm but also to dancers' (hetero)sexuality. And, in fact, as an activist attests in excerpt 7, this very threat was a key challenge to the early phases of degendering.

(7) so the issue here is- is that y'know you don't want to have a sexual dance with another person of the same sex…they'd be like "I can't find a way to dance (.) um (.) like I have to be able to dance sensually or sexually or whatever" and I was like (.) "how do you think the women feel about that?"…or (.) y'know "what if you drew a junior what would you do then?"…or I would just share my perspective of y'know since up until that point I had (.) always been dancing as a leader and at that point I was effectively dancing with female presenting people "I'm like I've never been sexually attracted to anybody I've ever drawn in a competition" (M)

This excerpt is drawn from the interviewee's longer reflection on his early days (around 2014/2015) where he promoted the idea of degendering roles in competition through social media. In this particular section, he talks about how he often faced men who resisted the idea of dancing with other men due to the supposed necessity of "danc[ing] sensually or sexually". He describes how he challenged this idea of dance as necessarily sensual or sexual by asking how commenters handled dancing with underaged participants with whom it would be inappropriate to be sexual. He also mentions having referred to his own situation as a gay man who, in a heteronormative competition environment, never got to dance with people he was sexually attracted to. These two rejoinders to homophobic worries about dancing with other men, instead of explicitly challenging the homophobia, challenge the idea that dance must have anything to do with horizontal desires (i.e. sexual intercourse).

This idea that homophobia might be a barrier to degendering the roles was also picked up by another interviewee who wondered "have some people sexualized it so much that it's- it's a (.)

it's a homophobia issue" (F) before going on to argue that "none of it has anything to do with (.) s- sex" (F). Again, despite the history of partner dancing being intimately intertwined with mate selection and courtship in many cultures, this interviewee suggests that the sexualization is not within partner dance itself, but within "some people" who are sexualizing the dance improperly. The idea that WCS need not be sexual is reinforced by other interviewees, even when articulating prior dispreferences for dancing with non-heteronormative dancers. As one interviewee puts it, while explaining why some women didn't initially want to follow other women: "it wasn't a sexual thing it wasn't "I- I need to dance with a man" I just (.) wanna dance with a partner who's- who's going to (.) give me good direction" (G).

The proposed reason for not dancing with women in the past was about a tendency for women to give weaker leads. Since the interviewee argues women are "becoming much stronger (.) as leaders" (G), there is no longer any reason to not want to follow them and, given that the original reason was explicitly "not a sexual thing", squeamishness around sexuality is implied to be an inappropriate reason to avoid someone who could indeed give "good direction". As another puts it: "there's romance in the- in the y'know theatrical side of romance but not in the (.) mate recruiting ((laugh)) mode" (O). Hence, the gender of one's partner ought not to be an issue since they are merely a dance partner not a potential sexual mate.[38]

Contesting the importance of sexuality, gender, and particularly, historical linkages between heteronormativity, gender, and role goes beyond merely stating that it need not be so. In fact, one instructor framed the roles as being better understood as matching personality types, e.g. "want[ing] to be in charge" or "hav[ing] control issues" (excerpt 8).

[38] Another interviewee highlights that not only should sexuality not limit one's partner choice, but also that "it should never be about your [sexual] orientation into which role you wanna do" (P), thus contesting the traditional assumption that men who followed were gay and women who led lesbians.

(8) there would be no need to- to sit back and say well as a leader (.) back in the 1900s (.) y'know you would be a male y'know (.) there's other ways to talk about it (.) because there are multiple people who are not male who (.) want to be in charge who have control issues (.) and that's- that's what you ask "who wants to be a leader?" "well I don't know if I want to be a leader or follower" "do you have control issues? yes then you're a leader" (P)

Here, choosing to be a leader or a follower doesn't need to be informed by a heteronormative history; instead, role choice can be informed by non-gendered personal characteristics "because there are multiple people who are not male who (.) want to be in charge" and therefore would both enjoy and be suitable for the leader role. This transition away from (social) roles as inherently gendered and towards roles as individual choices—supported by individual characteristics—extends well beyond WCS. In fact, this transition from prescribed social roles to individual choices pervades our contemporary neoliberal system as I will discuss further below.

In his analysis of gay and lesbian self-stylizations and the rejection of 'labels', Halberstam (2005) situates these dynamic processes of piecing together identities as part of the project of the flexible, neoliberal self. Neoliberalism relies heavily on individualist ideologies, which are founded on the notion of the individual as self-sufficient, as taken up with the private pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment, and often blind to the social structures that support their own individual actions (Turner, 2008). This deemphasizing of social hegemonies and the concomitant valorization of the individual as free and self-contained (i.e. the neoliberal flexible subject) aligns neatly with understandings of gender as a personal, internal identity to be realized through individual expression, as opposed to through externally imposed social constraints and affordances. This individualist orientation and the associated freedom from the strictures of

traditional gendered and kin-based roles makes room for individuals to engage in roles and lifestyles that might have been incompatible with earlier models of social positioning. Indeed, this emphasis on individuality is also reflected in some of my participants' discussion of their choice of movements—they are articulated as reflecting their own personality more than some externally structured model of their gender. In other words, not only does one have the personal agency to choose a role but also to choose how one embodies it. Below, we see several interviewees articulating their relationship to the stylization of their movement through either context dependent artistic choice (excerpt 9) or personal identity which, in the case of excerpt 10, may include gender but is not limited to it and may in fact be juxtaposed with it, as in excerpt 11.

(9) it depends on the song so if I feel like um I'm dancing to the song where it requires a more let's say masculine leader or y'know then maybe I'll- I will incorporate more masculine movements (.) um and vice ver- and vice versa so I- it really it depends for me on the song and how I want to express that song (I)

(10) I just move in a way that I feel is authentic to myself ˚do I think about femininity?˚ uhh no…I just feel like I am generally [feminine] (E)

(11) I wanted my influence of the dance to be my personality not to be my gender (M)

Such a prioritization of individual agency not only aligns with broader (neo)liberal ideology but also with liberal language reform approaches. Whereas a more radical approach might seek to demand change as part of a collective political project, liberal approaches focus on motivating use through providing apolitical rationale and, as will be discussed in Sections 4.5 and 4.6, an emphasis on being inclusive of a range of individual preferences and ensuring that civility is maintained even across diverse individual perspectives. Further, such an ideological orientation fits well with a neutralization (i.e. neutralizing the gendering of terms) rather than a

feminization or visibilization (i.e. changing terms to explicitly include or even foreground women) strategy (Mucchi-Faina, 2005) as such an approach arguably focusses on the creation of opportunity rather than the imposition of novel conceptions of categories that might be part of a more radical reform (cf. neo-pronouns, feminization strategies, etc.). That is, we see among members of the WCS scene a conception of degendering that is not meant to radically change society, but instead to be a simple correcting of a past error that need not impinge on anyone's understanding of or desire to embody specific gender identities.

4.3.3 Accuracy as an account for gendered language too

Interestingly, the accuracy discourse also facilitates understanding of both past gendered language use and the use of gendered language in contemporary environments (often understood as errors, see Section 4.6.2). Because what is at stake is the accurate use of language, gendered language can be understood to be accurate in cases where no non-heteronormative dancers are present in the referent group. As one interviewee editorializes, after using a generic "her" while describing how he expresses masculinity in his interactions with followers, "it's [the follower is] almost always her" (V). This paraphrastic reflection on the use of gendered language not only marks awareness of the potentially dispreferred nature of the use of generic "her", but by explaining it rather than repairing it, suggests that regardless of the preference for gender-neutral terms, if the group of followers encompassed by the generic is almost all women, then gendered language is accurate and justifiable (if not automatically justified). Similar accounts were also observed in the field where gendered slips were sometimes accounted for on the basis that all the dancers in a given role in a given class were in fact the heteronormatively expected gender, e.g. all of the followers present in a class were perceived as being "ladies", so referring to the class of followers as "ladies" was not inaccurate. Again, regardless of the preference for gender-neutral

language, gendered language is framed as reasonable insofar as it accurately reflects the relevant referents. This idea is also deployed in excerpt 12.

(12) like it it should not be a complicated choice (.) it should have always been leader follower (.) it should never have been male female (.) but back in the day (.) that's just the way it was (.) right your males were leaders your females were followers (.) so as- as a professional in the community it's an easy switch for me (P)

Even as he claims that "leader [and] follower" were always better, more accurate terms, on the pivot of a "but" he suggests an explanation for former failures to use them by describing how in past times "males were leaders…females were followers". Thus, at that time, gendered language is implied to have been an accurate (if not the most accurate) reference to the group of individuals who were engaged in each role, respectively, and therefore understandable, but now things have changed, and the better language should be the "easy" choice. In these examples, we can see how the accuracy argument, while perhaps making the reform less threatening and less likely to face the counterarguments commonly faced by gender-focussed language reform, is equally amenable to unreformed use. If the state of the world remains gendered, then language can too and, hence, for those who may not want to use reformed language, the persistent heteronormativity in participation patterns (women mainly follow, men mainly lead) provides justification for using unreformed language. This framing not only feeds into the discourses of language as a politically neutral code that can and should be used to represent the world as accurately as possible, but also into the theme which will be discussed below: responsiveness.

4.4 Language change as responsive to social change

As seen in excerpt 12 above, whereas gendered language could be understood as an accurate form of reference in the past, this claim seems to lack legitimacy in the now, as the

interviewee notes that he has switched his language and that that shift was “easy”. As will be explored in this section, such shifts in language are not only framed as improving the accuracy of terms; they are also framed as responding to shifts in participation that are often understood as preceding or at least as independent of the language reform. More women are leading, more men are following, and nonbinary people are beginning to be out as nonbinary in the community; therefore, it’s only natural (and “easy”) that language changes too.

Despite the fact that degendered dance contests were attested in WCS dating back to the 1990s (Lavin, 2019), such events were very uncommon and at least one organizer “ran into flack and she ran into (.) y’know hate mail and that kind of thing” (M) when she tried to degender contests at her event. This interviewee argues that this is because “general (.) world social progress (.) was not where it needed to be yet” (M) and, correspondingly, the use of gendered language by people who began dancing/teaching in that time (or even quite a few years after) is often viewed as more understandable than it would be today. As shown in excerpt 13, some interviewees specifically argue for a context sensitive approach to language reform.

(13) you have different generations of teachers here and there are definitely teachers (.) who still use that language (.) and for me I personally prefer to like give grace to what that generation is- for their norm…it’s like their- their generation learned it that way (.) right (.) they shouldn’t be (.) punished (.) for that however like the new generation that’s like starting to develop the language I think it’s- (.) i- i- it should be that way does that make sense? (L)

This same participant argues elsewhere that the reformed language is better and more accurate; however, here he carves out space for those who “learned it [the old] way” and argues that they

should be given grace for their language use (see Section 4.6 for further discussion of the civility focussed management of gendered language use).

While less oriented towards responses to gendered language use, another interviewee also offers the fact that "our community specifically is an older (.) generation" (C) as a plausible account for being "still slow (.) to change over that (.) um (.) wordage" (C). This again suggests that language is seen as responding to social change and speakers who had more time to develop habits before this change are less able to change their language use. In fact, even an interviewee who was less forgiving about the use of gendered language, asking "is that really like the lesson you're trying to teach" (N), nonetheless accounts for such language use as the result of having "been doing this for like fifty years" (N).

In addition to framing contemporary language use in terms of individuals' length of engagement with the dance, gendered language is often also seen as part of the past: "back in the day" (P) or "like a million years ago" (N). Framing the way things "used to be" as now sounding "archaic", "old school", or "like a dinosaur" (T). This (re)ascribing of gendered language to past times or to people who have spent more years in WCS promotes the broader idea that, even if follower and leader were always more accurate, in the past other ways of participating and speaking were the norm. It was only after significant changes in those ways of participating that language change really came into its own. What's more, for those who came up and spent many years in a community that was almost exclusively heteronormative,[39] their greater exposure to pre-reform times is seen to account for their gendered language use.

[39] Interviewee (K) reflects on how, despite having been leading (in addition to following) from early in her dance career, she faced pushback and, in some cases, direct refusal of her choice to lead, e.g. "girls don't lead here this is Texas"

4.4.1 Change as inevitable

Despite these references to a past time when both language and the dance were gendered, many now frame degendering as an inexorable force. And, because of the changes in participation, exclusion of non-heteronormative participants or refusal to use degendered terms is unjustified. As one interviewee puts it, responding to the changes that have already begun, "at this point I don't see uh any way of (.) putting that cat back in the bag" (G), and so there is no path but forward. In fact, multiple interviewees draw a straight line from the changes in participation to the motivation for degendered language. As seen in excerpt 14, the presence of a "male" who wants to follow serves as the catalyst for using degendered language—it is a response to non-linguistic social change.

(14) if you identify something else then fine if you're a male and you want to follow then fine so now everything becomes leader follower (P)

Similarly, in excerpt 15, the interviewee contrasts past gendered language use with what she has seen "recently", explaining the move towards degendered language as having resulted from "just…more people doing non-traditional roles" (including the interviewee herself). This use of "just" implies that the existing social change is the *only* reason for the language change.

(15) um (.) in the past yes but recently people are going- have moved towards followers and leaders (.) because there's just there's more people doing non-traditional roles (I)

Even amongst dancers who neither are instructors nor regularly participate in non-heteronormative roles, a change in participation patterns—"mixed roles" (S)—is presented as not just a reason for language change, but in fact a reason that such change should have been a "very (.) very easy switch" (S).

While changes in participation serve to motivate degendering language and some interviewees reported rapid increases in the numbers of participants engaging in non-heteronormative roles (especially after it became possible to compete in both roles at a single event), it is notable that there is also discussion of the slow progress of degendering. As one participant says, "'bout time honestly" (F), and this sense that the change was, if anything, perhaps late, is echoed in excerpt 16.

(16) I- I think I think changes that I have seen would be evolutionary versus revolutionary (V)

Framing degendering as a series of evolutionary[40] versus revolutionary changes feeds into discourses of natural social change; change is not driven by activists nor some great "revolutionary" force, but instead it is understood as natural and "evolutionary". Hence the language change is not forcing some unnatural shift in society but, instead, is responding to a wholly natural growth in social patterns and inclusion.

4.4.2 Visual as prior to verbal

In fact, in line with this model of language as responding to social change rather than as encouraging it (under the assumption that politicizing language choices is a way to draw attention to harmful social structures), only one participant attested to the language reform influencing how she experienced hearing gendered language. As she puts it in excerpt 17, she was initially quite accepting of the use of masculine terms for the group (i.e. leaders) that she was participating in. However, once degendered language began to gain prominence in the community, gendered language use came to be "bothersome" to her, presumably because with

[40] "Evolution" is a fairly common discourse across the interviews in terms of understanding how, not just the community, but the dance itself has changed over time. Such changes are framed as natural and inevitable if not always to one's personal taste (cf. discussions of changes in anchoring/post technique).

the availability of degendered language she felt entitled to be referred to in ways that didn't implicitly misgender her, e.g. with the degendered term LEADER rather than the gendered term MAN.

(17) well in the beginning I was way more um (.) uh (.) accepting maybe of the gendered language (.) uh in some of these workshops in y'know nine ten years ago right I- I was not offended by it um (.) even y'know my mom grew up singing and she sang bass and sang with the men and so she was always referred to as a man right so it didn't (.) bother her (.) really so it didn't really bother me to be roped in with like the men at the dance right but then as times have changed and that has (.) y'know uh become something that (.) y-y'know is put out there maybe in the beginning of the- the weekend to the judges to the (.) staff to y'know be more careful about your language things like that (.) like now as time has gone on that gendered language actually does offend me like it is bothersome now where- where before I just didn't- didn't care as much but now it is (.) bothersome (D)

In contrast to the many articulations of forgiving and giving grace to users of gendered language (discussed in Section 4.6), this participant later reflects on an experience where an older instructor used gendered terms, and she did not feel inclined to automatically forgive this gendered language use. Instead, the use of gendered language felt intentional and offensive as there were multiple non-heteronormative dancers in the class. Further, the instructor's occasional repairs were seen not as efforts made in good faith but instead as a further emphasis of her insincerity—if she knew she should be using degendered language, could see people in the class for whom it was relevant, and yet still did not use such language, then she was understood to be acting in bad faith. This assessment is in line with this interviewee's increasing appreciation of

the potentially political nature of the words used for the roles: using gendered terms was seen as a *choice* that marked the speaker as disrespectful to non-heteronormative participants.

Another interviewee highlighted the potential impact of gendered language on participation patterns, also suggestive of a more radical approach to language reform.

(18) the guys over here like uh yeah and like I can remember the earlier classes they said "well the guys" (.) "guys go over here (.) uh the women go over there" it was just uh you're assumed that women were the followers and the men were the leads (S)

He highlights how the use of gendered terminology might influence gendered assumptions about who ought to participate in which role, implicitly drawing on the notion of linguistic relativity—the idea that language use can shape our understandings of the world.

While these two excerpts map onto a more radical approach to language reform, that is, understanding language reform as a way to build political awareness in people harmed by extant social structures reflected in language, they are the only occurrences of such discourses in my interviews. Instead, when reflecting on what factors most influenced their acceptance of and/or participation in non-heteronormative roles, most interviewees pointed to visual factors rather than linguistic ones. In fact, a not insignificant number of participants attested that, while they supported the language change in theory, they didn't notice whether others' language was gendered or degendered at all in practice.

As shown in excerpt 19, this interviewee believes that she would have inevitably wanted to learn to dance both roles so long as she had seen "someone doing the other role". If she'd "never seen (.) any women leading or men following", she perhaps wouldn't have been encouraged to try, but she speculates that exposure to even one non-heteronormative dancer would have been enough. The crucial point is that it was a visual stimulus, i.e. *seeing* "someone

doing the other role", as opposed to the specific language used, that made the idea of learning to lead a possibility for her.

(19) *if you'd started in one of these environments like where it's people talking men and women rather than at the university club you did do you think you still would have ended up wanting to lead?*

mm I don't know (.) I'm not sure (.) I think if I had never seen (.) any women leading or men following (.) either or (.) um (.) then (.) maybe I would have ended up just following (.) but honestly I think as soon as I would have seen (.) someone doing the other role (.) I would have been like I wanna try that (.) at the very least to like try (B)

Similarly, another interviewee (F) attested to visual exposure as the primary way that she, coming from a ballroom background, came to embrace non-heteronormative dancing. When asked if she felt that being exposed to degendered terms for the roles influenced her to want to try non-heteronormative dancing, she demurred, instead saying "it was more for [her] seeing like [man's name] as a- a really strong follower" and a trio of women who switched between leader and follower roles in choreographed routines that drove her desire to learn both roles. Even the participant who spoke in excerpt 17 of the language reform as facilitating her sense that she could demand not to be framed as "one of the men" highlighted the role of the visual over the linguistic. While degendered language was already used in the small town dance scene where she started, actually "see[ing]" others dancing non-heteronormatively and being accepted for it at larger dances in a neighbouring community "was noticeable" and "felt inclusive" because it means she "wasn't the only one doing this other thing" (D).

Similarly, despite being a strong advocate for both competition rule changes and language changes, the interviewee highlighted in excerpt 20 downplays the role of language change in facilitating social change, instead highlighting the importance of visibility.

(20) so I wouldn't say y'know the language (.) making direct chang- like other than y'know seeing certain pros like "hey they're- they're really trying" y'know and seeing that but like for me the- the visual effect is I'm literally seeing more people who that language counts for (.) showing up (M)

While the language is an important sign of people "trying", according to this interviewee, the actual metric is seeing people dancing non-heteronormatively—it is "having (.) multiple representatives of y'know non-traditional dancing" that "effectively normalize[s] it" (M). As seen in the discussion above, then, *seeing* people dancing in non-heteronormative roles seems to be more influential than language change in dancers' decisions to participate non-heteronormatively. In other words, it is not the language which incites change; the language merely responds to changes in behaviour driven by personal agency and access to visual models of new behaviour. Thus, the real vector of social change is not understood to be the imposition of new language, but the natural evolutionary progress of human society.

The discourses illustrated in this section, which frame language reform as responsive to change rather than initiating it, are also notable insofar as they interface with Bolsen and Thornton's (2024) experimental findings with regard to injunctive versus descriptive norms as motivators for gender focussed language reform. Injunctive norms are those which propose to capture the world as it *should* be (e.g. "Referring to people by the pronouns they determine for themselves is basic to human dignity. This is something everyone should do" (Bolsen & Thornton, 2024, p. 3)), whereas descriptive norms propose to capture the world as it actually *is*

(e.g. “The singular use of they/them pronouns to refer to transgender or gender-nonconforming persons is growingly accepted grammar in the English language” (Bolsen & Thornton, 2024, p. 3)). While Bolsen and Thornton (2024) did not find compelling evidence for the efficacy of either kind of normative appeal, they did find that injunctive appeals can lead to backfire effects, particularly amongst Republican and independent men. That is, an approach to language reform as a norm *creating* device seems likely to face more resistance and even backlash than approaches which focus on merely *describing* norms which are posited to already exist. The accounts of language reform discussed in this section, i.e. language reform as a response to social changes, are more consistent with this latter approach, and this may be another reason there has been limited resistance to degendering language reform in the WCS community.

4.4.3 WCS as inherently progressive

Within the WCS community, the impetus for the gradual change to dance roles, something that the language reform is understood to be responding to, is articulated in two key ways by my interviewees: (1) as a result of the natural progressiveness of dance in general and WCS in particular and (2) as the result of broader societal changes in terms of LGBTQ+ rights and visibility. The first of these two explanations tends to take an exceptionalist view of WCS, framing it as “one of the more progressive dance communities” (Q) and, often, as seen in excerpt 21, suggesting that that this is the result of the highly improvisational/creative nature of WCS.

(21) when you think about the- the dance too it’s such a free dance it’s got so much room for creativity why not have that extra option to change roles like (.) i- it’s really a natural evolution (H)

In this excerpt, progress in terms of roles is framed as a continuation of the existing freedom of improvisation in WCS, but it is also, importantly, framed as a “natural evolution”. As

mentioned above, this idea of "evolution" is prominent throughout discussions of the move towards degendering. As further illustrated by excerpt 22, this change is not understood as a sudden revolution, but instead as naturally emerging from the "street" or non-syllabized (i.e. without a "syllabus") nature of the dance. It is not like ballroom which has been frozen and codified but rather is a living "evolving" street dance. Emerging from this evolving nature, then, are affordances for degendering: if the dance is already evolving, "why [] wouldn't [we] be able to evolve into a degendering direction" (A) or "have that extra option to change roles" (H)?

(22) I mean it's- it's a street dance right like it's a constantly evolving dance um and I see no reason why (.) uh why we wouldn't be able to evolve into a degendering direction (A)

As discussed above, this notion of evolution feeds strongly into the discourse of responsiveness, i.e. the idea that language change is a response to social changes within the community. As some of my interviewees implicitly indicated, this responsiveness discourse is orthogonal to perspectives that would foreground the political potential of language change: we are not changing WCS through language, it is just an "open and liberal" (R) community that "lean[s] left" (L), naturally evolving in a degendering direction. This idea of WCS as naturally progressive and always changing is further extended to language in general (excerpt 23). Here, the interviewee speaks of technical terms beyond those of the role names.

(23) what's interesting is that no matter what words we use there aren't- I haven't discovered any terms that stay consistent for more than a couple of generations of our dance (.) … cuz as the dance is evolving I think the language will forever be evolving (L)

While here the interviewee is not specifically talking about the role nouns, he nonetheless models a responsive understanding of language change: the dance is constantly evolving and therefore the terms for many of its elements must similarly evolve. Through these discourses, then, changes become naturalized, and language changes, framed as responding to this natural evolution, become similarly natural and apolitical. Recalling the discussion in Section 4.3, the new terms are simply the most accurate terms for the current evolution of the dance.

4.4.3.1 Follower agency as a catalyst

In addition to general articulations of WCS's progressiveness, some interviewees also link the gradual degendering of roles in WCS to the inherently greater agency of followers in WCS versus other dances. This feature of WCS is discussed by Lavin (2019), who describes the uniquely creative role of followers in WCS, such that they can not only respond to leaders' suggestions, but in fact can make suggestions themselves and/or engage in improvisation that ranges from adding styling (common in other dances) to fully hijacking the movement (uncommon and, in many dances, seen as "bad" following). Despite the discourses highlighted in Section 4.3, which emphasize the need for two distinct terms to accurately describe two distinct roles, this unique degree of follower agency actually results in a dance in which there is more than the usual overlap between the roles. As articulated by an interviewee in excerpt 24 below, following is not just following, but "following through…back lead[ing] (.) chang[ing] the direction of the movement" and leading is not so much leading as "suggesting". Similarly, another interviewee argues that "in West Coast swing specifically…I think that um leading in itself is (.) a more reactive role than a proactive role" (L).[41]

[41] He expands this to explain that while the leader may initiate a pattern, once they have done so, their job is to react to the follower and respond to the momentum and action that the follower introduces into the system.

(24) I think (.) we've now come to appreciate and this may just be a total byproduct of the degendering movement it may be a coincidence that these two things have happened together but we now recognize a lot more autonomy in following (.) than I think had been there previously (.) um before it had very much been as a follower you followed what the leader said and that language still hasn't changed we still have leaders and followers (.) but I think now what we more appreciate is that leading is more suggesting and following is really more following through and there's so much more roles for followers to back lead (.) change the direction of the movement and- and maybe because it's more difficult like there is a degree of complexity when you have this bidirectional (.) uh communication (.) um (.) but I think that there is something to be said about how the degendering movement and this tend- seemed to have coincided that the fact that y'know it's no longer "ladies and gentlemen" coincides with the fact that leaders and followers are no longer being strictly defined by the roles of exclusively leading and exclusively following I think it's more than a coincidence that these two movements have coincided (O)

While the interviewee in excerpt 24 is not willing to commit to a causal relationship between follower autonomy and degendering, he explains them as "more than a coincidence" and proposes that the shifts in language may be involved not only with degendering but also increases in follower autonomy within the dance. By contrast, another interviewee explains: "the old school thing is- is the- is the gender thing and also (.) leader leads follow follows no room for (.) inter- int- interpretation no room for taking extra time" (K). Here, too, the role of gender and follower autonomy are linked, suggesting that the heteronormativity that was traditional to this dance extended beyond merely assigning roles and partnerships to dictating what actions were

appropriate within the roles, i.e. that women ought to be passive and responsive, whereas men ought to be active and initiating. Thus, a progressive community, responding to challenges to traditional gender roles (and sexism) in the wider society, might begin to soften the boundaries around what gendered individuals are expected to do within their socially prescribed roles, before[42] ultimately opening up to the idea that individuals need not be allocated roles in accordance with gender at all. This relationship between the progressiveness and the constantly evolving nature of WCS and broader social shifts is further articulated by interviewees who draw more or less direct lines between degendering in WCS and broader societal changes with regard to gender and sexuality.

4.4.4 WCS reform as linked to broader societal change

One of the clearest and most elaborated articulations of the relationship between WCS degendering and larger social forces is provided in excerpt 25 by an interviewee who has been heavily involved in activism around degendering. As he understands it, degendering in WCS has "mirrored" the fight for equal marriage and trans rights in the United States, where the bulk of the global WCS community resides and where the World Swing Dance Council is based.

(25) yeah I mean um the West Coast Swing community I feel has mostly mirrored (.) kind of at least my (.) encountering of American social culture in general (.) um (.) like when degendering was going on it was happening at the exact same time as marriage equality (.) and so as that was starting to pass like almost (.) section for section there was (.) uh kind of (.) uh (.) parallels in the situation so when marriage equality was kind of at that state where (.) um certain states could make their own laws but the

[42] Lavin (2019, p. 144) quotes swing legend Skippy Blair claiming that this increasing follower agency began in the 1970s, substantially predating the uptake of degendering, even taking into account early attempts to do so in the 1990s.

federal government didn't necessarily recognize it but it also didn't say no (.) around that same time the world Swing Dance Council didn't say yes or no ˚federal government˚(.) while events (.) now have the clarity to be like well we can individually choose to allow it (.) it's just that the WSDC won't give points (.) and then eventually WSDC sanctioned it and it was shortly after marriage equality had passed (.) or not passed that went through the- through the court system…um (.) just because (.) marriage equality was a thing back through the you know 2010s or so region (.) and it just so happened that I was sort of spearheading this movement (.) in tandem with general social change (.) and now I feel kind of the- the next general social change is uh things to do with trans and nonbinary rights (.) and that started- there's a lot more awareness especially since 2020 or so (.) a lot more of that is showing up and so now within our community a lot more awareness of like "hey let's talk about pronouns let's talk about (.) gender-neutral language" like we were talking about it for degendering ages ago (.) but now we're really starting to get into the weeds of (.) there's layer one which is say leaders and followers instead of guys and girls (.) but then there's layer two which is (.) referring to leaders and followers as (.) they instead of he or she (.) except in specific cases where like you know the person pronouns that you're talking to and you're talking about that person not leaders or followers in general (M)

As seen in excerpt 25, state-level acceptance of equal marriage is analogized to event-level acceptance of degendering while the federal legislation is equated to World Swing Dance Council rules and policies. Interestingly, there is no causal relationship proffered between the two strains of historic change; instead, they are framed as "happening at the exact same time".

Instead of marriage equality being responsible for the movement towards degendering, both seem to emerge from some zeitgeist which makes such shifts possible. While not explicitly drawing on evolutionary discourses but, in fact, highlighting the critical activist work that the interviewee participated in, this framing nonetheless posits some external energy that facilitated both of these movements.

As he moves into discussing more recent moves around trans rights, the interviewee turns to discussing language use explicitly (rather than contest rules, and the physical participation therein). Here we see a framing under which the broader social change (activism around trans rights) seems to coincide with greater "awareness" of the importance of gendered language. After mentioning the broader social phenomenon of "trans and nonbinary rights", he then introduces its connection to language awareness in WCS with "and so", suggesting a causal relationship which did not appear in his earlier argument about marriage equality. While the rules around participation may have sprung, alongside equal marriage, from the zeitgeist of the early 2010s, this focus on language, which began to be explored early in the degendering movement, is presented as an outgrowth of the broader social movement. Hence, language is framed not as a source, impetus, or initiating factor in social change, but instead as a response to it. In fact, though the interviewee does say that "we were talking about it for degendering ages ago", this reflection does not appear alongside his articulation of how degendering mirrored marriage equality. Instead, it appears to be somewhat of an afterthought provided to contextualize the "really starting to get into the weeds" that is now happening in light of society-wide actions in relation to trans rights. Such a narrative of WCS in the context of wider social changes in the US supports a responsive understanding of reform: social reform as responding to a natural zeitgeist and language reform as responding to social change more generally.

While the excerpts above present responsiveness at a fairly wide scale, encompassing the entire degendering process, such links between the wider society and WCS practices are also drawn expressly in reference to language practices, as seen in excerpt 26.

(26) it was funny actually ‘cause we were just starting and- and the instructor- many of the instructors uh would catch themselves (.) saying “guys ohh I mean leaders” y’know so it was kind of like- to me it was a bit comical because- and I as a [school] teacher also have been trying to change my language somewhat because (.) I- I mean it’s- (.) it’s s- society as a whole is evolving and you want to be very present for that and so I- I have a horrible habit and I still do it sometimes I’ll catch myself be like “gah” but I’ll say guys (.) referring to my whole class and it’s just like my casual all you people kind of a- a speak and I- I’m working on not saying that but then it’s hard to say (.) like (.) young people doesn’t sound so hip or cool right (.) so y- you’re trying to find this like fun balance I’m just like “OK Grade [Number]s ((two claps)) here we go” um uh ((laugh)) but I need- I need a cool hip phrase that is degendered I- I’m looking for one (F)

While discussing her experience of degendered language in WCS, this interviewee segues to her own professional experience as an elementary school teacher also “trying to change [her] language somewhat because (.) I- I mean it’s- (.) it’s s- society as a whole is evolving”. Again, while this interviewee does not directly posit a causal relationship between language change in WCS and language change more generally, she does set up a causal relationship between her own language change outside of WCS and the evolution of society as a whole: note her use of “because” between the two propositions. The linkage the interviewee creates between the discussion of language change in WCS and a school teacher changing her language because she

wants to be "present" for changes to the "whole society" suggests that, like language change outside of the dance community, language change within the WCS community is also driven by a desire to respond to community-wide social changes.

A similar pattern of connecting WCS to one's non-dance professional life is also seen in excerpt 27. Over a slightly more protracted span of text, this instructor first links the use of degendered language in WCS to an experience of having to revise his pronoun use for a work colleague and then emphasizes the tie between WCS and the wider world through an analogy to COVID-19 vaccine regulations.

(27) right it's [using degendered language in WCS] the same right now in the work that I'm doing we have an individual who works for us who goes by they them (.) w- when they were hired (.) they never told us this (.) so for two months I called them a him or a he (.) and then they finally wore like a- a- a pin that said they them and I'm like "why didn't you tell me right off the bat?" (.) like now I have to switch my- now I have to switch it because I've been calling you a he for two months (.) right and so it's taking me just a little bit (.) like it's going to take me four months if not longer to make that switch…I can say I want a vaccine only event (.) but at the same time I currently work forty hours a week for a company (.) who is open (.) you can be vaccinated you don't have to be vaccinated (.) so I would al- like I'm sitting back going I can't re- I can't request that this event go vaccine only because (.) like my regular life is (.) open…y'know so it's the same- for me it's the same thing like (.) I live in this world (.) this is (.) I will be leader follower they them he she male female whatever (.) needs to be done is done will it take me some time? of course (P)

Instead of characterizing degendered language in WCS as an isolated phenomenon, this interviewee quickly links it to a challenge he faced with a colleague who, while presenting in a way initially interpreted as "he", later expressed a desire to be referred to as "they" by wearing a pronoun pin. Thus, while degendering in WCS is focussed on generics (rather than specifics) and often gets framed around nouns (rather than pronouns), this interviewee understands learning to change his language as "the same" in both spaces. This tie between daily life and dance is emphasized by his discussion of vaccine policy. If he works in a space without vaccine regulation, he cannot demand it in his dance work/play spaces. As he reiterates, "it's the same", and since "[he] live[s] in this world", the world as a whole has a bearing on his participation in the WCS world. Critically, as he sets up this tie between his dance and non-dance lives, the impetus for language change is framed as a necessity: "now I **have to** switch it" (emphasis added), "whatever (.) **needs** to be done is done" (emphasis added). Elsewhere in my interviews, this interviewee evinces strong support for degendered language, saying that it should have always been thus. Here, however, while articulating the nature of the shift itself, he positions the agency driving the change outside of himself. He is not demanding this change; rather, "this world" that he lives in demands certain forms of language use and he can only comply. Again, rather than suggesting that language may drive or support social change, language change is seen as a *response to* social change taking place beyond the individual.

Interestingly, however, not everyone anticipates this social change will progress indefinitely. In excerpt 28, an otherwise supportive interviewee articulates a hesitation about the degree to which degendering will or won't change the overall gender distributions across the roles.

(28) I don't actually think we'll get to a situation where half the men are leading and half the men are following and half the women are leading and half the women are following I- I think that there- (.) like the- I think the- the reason (.) like the gender roles formed in the first place was because of preference whether it be interests or whatever so I think we'll see improved ratios but I think (.) my guess would be that men will- will predominantly lead (.) still and women will predominantly follow (.) um especially as like the- the um novelty (.) wears off I do think people will not regress but like we'll- we'll see most- most of those people just sit with the gender norms (L)

Despite "improved ratios", he anticipates that the majority will still engage heteronormatively because he understands the original gendering of roles as responding to some "preference" such that most women ultimately prefer to follow and men to lead. While this may seem counter to the earlier articulated discourses of WCS as inherently progressive, it also speaks to the idea that, just as in broader society, most people are happy to stay in their traditional social roles even as they may wish to make room for the few who are not. In fact, as articulated in excerpt 29, the progressive goal put forward by many of my interviewees may be understood as "get[ting] rid of those…oppressive systems" even if, as articulated above, most people may not ultimately choose to move beyond the traditional boundaries.

(29) in general I'm very (.) like liberal minded I don't (.) I don't think there should be (.) such a thing as (.) homophobia and I don't think that there should be racism and so all of those things I'm like oh yeah the- the more we can normalize whatever it is that gets rid of those (.) those (.) boundaries those um oh god there's a (.) proper word for this

(.) those oppression- those oppressive systems the more we can get rid of them the better it is for everybody (F)

Contrary to the commonly reported critique that language reform is trivial, or a waste of effort (Blaubergs, 1980; Hekanaho, 2022; Parks & Roberton, 1998; Vergoossen et al., 2020), these participants propose an understanding of language reform as broadly worthwhile in response to wider social changes, even if there are relatively few non-heteronormative dancers and therefore relatively few people who would be misgendered by continued use of old gendered language. Firstly, the reformed language is more accurate; secondly it is responding to changes that are demonstrably taking place both in WCS and beyond; and, as will be discussed in the following section, the language reform is serving to enhance inclusion of the (perhaps minority of) participants that might feel excluded by gendered language.

4.5 Inclusion

A key theme of liberal language reform as articulated by Cameron (1995) is the idea of inclusivity: reformed language ought to be used in order to make everyone feel included. While some studies of degendered language such as Vergoosen et al.'s (2020) study of Swedish *hen* have found that there can be resistance to language reform because the groups excluded by non-inclusive language are limited in number, other research has shown "the non-marginalized group supporting the desires of a marginalized group over their own opinions about language" (Winig & Rose, 2024, p. 7). Similarly, in the WCS community, both those who dance in non-traditional roles and those who don't seem to share a common orientation towards inclusion as a primary goal of the WCS language reform.

Interviewees make explicit reference to avoiding exclusion and promoting inclusion. For example, instead of "excluding people" by using gendered language, Interviewee (I) says, it's

"better" to use degendered role nouns. Similarly, and drawing on links to the broader society discussed in Section 4.4.4, another interviewee moved from a discussion of degendering in WCS, "there should be no restrictions" (S), to argue for the need for "a more inclusive society" (S) in general. This interviewee echoes other interviewees' calls for "room for everybody" (K) in the dance. And, in the words of one interviewee, (M), this goal of inclusion is being accomplished within WCS. He attests to seeing "more just general queerness" in the dance as more people are able to "experience the dance however they want to" and are "sticking around" in the WCS scene.

These discourses of inclusivity are not limited to individual orientations, preferences, and beliefs. Interviewees also make the case that WCS (and, for some, dance in general) is inherently inclusive and diverse. As one interviewee argues, dance—and the arts in general—"is a nonbinary non labeling place to be" (J). By participating in these communities, one is opening oneself up to all the diversity that is intrinsic to such an open, inclusive space. As a result, the degendering movement and associated language changes don't even "bump" her, she "do[esn't] even notice" (J)!

Moving into the specific context of WCS, another interviewee argues that WCS is "one of the more inclusive dances in general" (Q). Later in the interview, he goes on to reflect further on what he perceives as the inherent inclusiveness of WCS.

(30) um (.) I always thought our community and I could only base this really off in [CITY] 'cause on the videos everything looked always inclusive from (.) my eyes or maybe I'm just seeing recent years 'cause I did stop for a couple of years (.) uh so when I came back everything was already more inclusive in general (.) um but even in our community I always (.) thought there was an- it was very inclusive and I was always

> surprised by our community 'cause (.) they're an older generation too (.) which is typically not the way things work but um (.) yeah I just (.) I just the- when- when- like when I was mentioning earlier I- I always use that as a selling point when I meet somebody (.) in terms of inclusion 'cause it does two things (.) it weeds out the people who are ((laughing)) not inclusive and brings in- and if the person that does decide to come in (.) is probably inclusive um I just find our community's really good with that in general like uh (.) I know no- it didn't directly answer the question but (.) I don't know I just I haven't noticed much change I just noticed everyone (.) it's always been like that to me in my opinion ((laugh)) (Q)

Similar to the interviewee cited above (J), he ultimately states that he hasn't noticed "much change" as a result of the progression of the degendering movement because he has always[43] experienced the community as "inclusive". In fact, his repetition of "inclusive" throughout the excerpt speaks powerfully to the importance of this concept in his understanding of the community and how he promotes it to others who may find similar inclusion within it. As will be discussed in Section 4.5.2, below, the capacity to attract new dancers is important to the financial success of professionals in the dance community. Hence, that inclusion is seen as key to attracting the right kind of new members means that it becomes entangled in the economic system of the community.

4.5.1 Language reform as preventing microaggressions

In addition to the explicit support for "inclusion" articulated above, interviewees also feed into discourses of inclusion via their discussion of the potential harms of individuals failing

[43] This "always" dates back to 2015 when he started, towards the end of the major initiation of degendering in 2014-2015, but 5-6 years before the explosion of non-heteronormative competition dancing in response to the rule changes that allow people to participate in both roles at a given event.

to use reformed language. While discussing improvements to the community, a man who prefers to follow talks about how, previously, the use of gendered language would "derail" (M) him in classes as he would "have that moment of like (.) not a lady" (M), whereas now, with more degendered language, he is able to "mentally partipat[e] in class more readily" (M). Similarly, a woman interviewee who prefers to lead reflects on how a prior experience with gendered language left her "very bothered".

(31) it was great but every- everything was ladies and men (.) and- (.) and there were maybe two or three times throughout the class where she would correct herself and saying "oh I mean- I mean- or I should be saying followers OK now ladies" y'know and she- so she would correct herself and then go right back into her (.) y'know- y'know gendered uh language immediately so (.) and- and I was very bothered by this (D)

These two accounts suggest that, for people dancing outside of heteronormative roles, the use of gendered language may be experienced as a verbal microaggression—a use of language which, whether intentionally or not, subtly communicates negative attitudes towards a marginalized individual's identity and/or belonging in a certain space or role (Sue, 2010). Such microaggressions take them out of the optimal headspace for learning and may make them feel excluded or misgendered. Experiencing gendered language as misgendering was also corroborated in the field where I witnessed gendered language causing displeasure in dancers engaging in non-heteronormative roles which was, in at least one case, commented on to me as being irritating. Misgendering microaggressions such as these are not trivial, but instead, in work on sexist and cis-sexist language, have been found to correlate with reduced self-efficacy and self-esteem (Henley, 1987, 1989), as well as increased stress and greater likelihood of

experiencing negative mental health symptoms (DeSon & Andover, 2023; Jacobsen et al., 2023; Sue, 2010). However, interestingly, where one might expect such individuals to advocate for language change on the basis of the harm it causes them, in excerpt 32 below (a continuation of excerpt 31), we find that instead of focussing on her own concerns, this interviewee's problematization of gendered language use is framed in terms of the larger group of individuals potentially affected by the language choice.

(32) *right yeah yeah um and can I ask like in what way did it bother you like was it sort of a personal thing or a broader social thing? how- (.) what- what element of that was causing you irritation or distress?*

well I feel like there were a lot of people in the class that that (.) affected there were several men following and there were several women leading and y'know and she was watching us all it's not like we- it wasn't obvious y'know and it- it just felt intentional I guess I hate to say that but uh y'know uh you could have seen what was happening and- and chose to you know correct your language and you- and you didn't and that's what was most annoying (D)

While this interviewee does still attest to her own irritation at being mislabelled by gendered language, there are other interviewees, such as the one speaking in excerpt 33, who turn their focus exclusively to its impact on others. This interviewee does not speak up on her own behalf but wishes that she were more vocal at times when she's "not the only one" being affected.

(33) um (.) I (.) don- (.) but again I wish that (.) like the times where (.) I- I'm not the only one being- like where it is just me being affected like- maybe I should say something…because even if there's no one else (.) who maybe it would really

affect them more (.) maybe you don't know maybe somebody has picked the gendered role 'cause they're like I'm uncomfortable not (.) and I wanna (.) um (.) I wanna y'know be in the accepted spot and so just in the sense of (.) oh that the teacher said something that is now (.) u:m (.) solidifying that person's choice is like oh well (.) like maybe (.) like we don't know like we don't know what's happening in the students' minds (C)

She then goes on to speculate as to how gendered language might affect someone who may have taken on a heteronormative role to ensure that they are "accepted" or included in the community. She worries that an instructor using gendered language might reinforce such a choice and further discourage the individual from dancing in the role they truly prefer. This idea that others might be harmed by the exclusive effects of gendered language use is further picked up in excerpt 34. While this interviewee indicates that gendered language use can be "jarring" when he is following, he goes on to state that it "doesn't bother [him] either way". Instead, he focusses his concern on others that might be more vulnerable to the harm and even oppression that being misgendered can give rise to.

(34) because uh when I'm following and they'll say "OK ladies let's do this" it- it's this like brief moment that's jarring … I don't know if I would have the same response [to gendered language used for leaders] because y'know it's easy when the- the title that they're using matches your own self gendered identification you- (.) you don't really have a reflex to say "oh that's a little unusual" but certainly I have noticed as a f- when I'm following whenever people use gender specific language to describe followers um (.) as women

and what's the experience of that like like do you intervene or does it affect your

learning what's the (.) experience of it?

personally no um it doesn't bother me either way um (.) but I also recognize that that's not the same experience for everyone and that um (.) gender and gender identity (.) are steeped so much in the way that we (.) see ourselves both as individuals and how we see ourselves in the world and that for someone who has had a different (.) um (.) journey than me being misgendered in that environment can be harmful can be distracting can be (.) um uh oppressive even at the extremis (O)

While this interviewee does not directly invoke inclusion here, he does talk about the "harmful…distracting…oppressive" effects of "being misgendered" for individuals who have had gender journeys different from his own. He thus speaks to the importance of language in ensuring that the full range of society's diversity is welcomed and included in WCS. If WCS is to be inclusive, then such harmful gendered language must be avoided.

Throughout these discussions of the harms of gendered language, and the affordances of degendered language, inclusion remains a key theme. Gendered language is harmful because it may make some individuals feel excluded; degendered language is beneficial insofar as it supports greater inclusion across a wider range of diverse gender expressions and participation preferences. Where this motivation for inclusion originates, however, has yet to be discussed.

4.5.2 Financial incentives for inclusion

It is important to recognize that individuals who make their income from professional activities within the WCS community are financially incentivised to promote inclusivity. Unlike dances like competitive ballroom, in which elite professionals can make their income primarily through coaching a relatively limited number of competitive dancers—an environment in which exclusivity can be an asset—WCS remains a much smaller community overall, with significantly

less total investment and sponsorship. In fact, the way most WCS professionals make their money[44] is through attracting the largest possible numbers of students and event attendees. This need to expand the community to make WCS careers possible means that professionals are strongly incentivized to include as wide a range of participants as possible. As one instructor puts it, "if you're going to wipe out part of the (.) the y'know (.) a- a portion of the people who are going to support you (.) you don't need to be in charge of anything" (G). Furthermore, given that professionals, and particularly instructors, are responsible for producing the lion's share of publicly consumed and emulated language in the community, they are also those most strongly incentivised, not only to use the "best" language as discussed in Section 4.3, but also to use the language that will make the space inviting to the largest number of possible participants. In fact, while some of the instructors interviewed express some difficulty or, at least, a learning curve associated with making the transition away from gendered language, their motivation for making this difficult change was often framed in terms of a desire to ensure that everyone feels welcome and included.

4.5.3 Inclusion as motivation for overcoming cognitive challenges

While some interviewees claim that making the change in their language use was "easy", others describe it as substantially more difficult. As one interviewee puts it in excerpt 35, language change is "a struggle". As she explains elsewhere, she "work[s] very hard" to avoid gendered language—particularly pronouns—and, as seen in the excerpt, this hard work is justified given her support for the roles "opening up" and degendered dancing being "normalized" such that it doesn't cause "uneasiness".

[44] If they make money at all. As one instructor notes, "nobody's making that much money off (.) of running any communities and teaching um (.) very rare (.) situation that y'know champions are making money but (.) the rest of us are just trying to cover costs" (G)

(35) as I said it's just- it's- it's- it's- it's a struggle not to put the- put the gender and I- then whether that's just you know old school or whatever that I've just been teaching for s- for a long time doing it that way even though as I said I've been leading (.) almost right from the beginning um (.) it's- it's still (.) uh too easy to say him and her for leader and follower um and I'd like to (.) work on that personally um but um (.) but I'm really glad to see the roles I'm really really glad to see it opening up and I'm really glad to see (.) that there's (.) no (.) I don't se- I dunno maybe I'm blind to it but I don't see any uneasiness in my class about it and ah just it's- it's uh it's people right you're just- y'know we're all just people right nobody is asking you to sleep with anybody we're just having a dance right so yeah yeah it's um yeah it's- uh it's- it's- it's good and it's- it's good that it's getting normalized (K)

While this interviewee does not specifically use the term "inclusive", the idea of "opening up" suggests providing access to more people and hence being more inclusive. Similarly, the idea of normalization, which is pervasive across the interviewees, feeds into inclusive discourses insofar as "normalized" behaviour is that which was perhaps previously excluded, but which has been rendered normal and thus included within the fold of the norm.

Another instructor similarly discusses some areas where she is still working on degendering her language (e.g. using GUYS as a gender-neutral term, sometimes slipping into gendered pronouns) and explains that "if I knew someone was bothered by that I would definitely try to (.) um change my language but for the most part leaders and followers I'm pretty good at" (G). Though she is good at using the role nouns, the remaining gaps in her practice are being reformed because of the risk of people being "bothered" or "uncomfortable", which, in light of the discussion in Section 4.5.1, can be understood as referring to potential

microaggressions. Further to this concern of making people feel excluded through discomfort/ microaggressions, this interviewee specifically states that she would not want anyone to "think that they're doing something wrong" as a result of her language use. Hence, despite the cognitive effort required for her to reform her language, she sees it as valuable and worthwhile insofar as it is key to making sure that everyone feels welcome, included, and valid in their chosen role.

Interestingly, this emphasis on inclusion extends beyond just including those who wish to dance in non-heteronormative roles. One interviewee uses similar discourses of inclusion to discuss his engagement with "professionals who are still making that linguistic transition" (M). Specifically, he articulates attempts to "help them feel called in rather than called out" (M), suggesting that rather than directly confronting people who use unreformed language (cf. Zimman & Hayworth's (2020) LiveJournal participants who vigorously called out language slips), he is choosing to engage in ways that balance the desire to reform language with inclusion and civility (see Section 4.6)—civility even towards those who are not behaving in inclusive ways.

4.5.4 Institutional influences

In addition to articulating discourses of inclusion at the individual level, interviewees also spoke of inclusion as a value at the institutional level, a value that is enacted through policy regarding the use of "inclusive" language. While, as shown above, many participants avow strong personal support of inclusion, the ability to enact inclusive policies is often framed with reference to institutionally sanctioned roles such as organizers and instructors. As seen in excerpt 36, even if institutions are not directly invoked, the critique of non-inclusive stances is framed around a hypothetical "you" that might be organizing "your dances or your classes".

(36) um if- if you're (.) saying that you're- you're not allowing degendering in your dances or your classes or whatever (.) really you're saying that you don't accept a portion of the community (.) um or society…so (.) by not allowing a dege- degendered space (.) you're- you're basically ruling out (.) part of society that (.) is not acceptable (G)

Here the concern is less about private individuals who might reject degendering, but instead about those who have influence in the community because of their institutional role as instructors or organizers.

Such references to the power of institutions were not always so oblique. In fact, on the local level, one particular dance school was raised as an important positive influence in a number of interviewees' reflections. One interviewee describes this school as having "always been very inclusive and forward thinking" (T) and focussed on the potential therapeutic benefits of dance instead of producing champion dancers, as is often the priority of ballroom dance studios. This same interviewee then went on to describe how this "inclusive" studio decided to implement degendered language and make it "official" because "anybody can lead anybody can follow". This explicit policy of only using FOLLOWER and LEADER was noted by several other participants—not only instructors who had worked at this studio, but also students who had taken the studio's ballroom teacher training program but had not gone on to teach. As one such interviewee puts it, "they specifically said (.) we don't use gender just lead and follow and in the teacher training you have to do both" (U). Despite this participant being in the 55-64 year old cohort and strongly preferring his heteronormative role, he nonetheless made consistent use of degendered language throughout the interview. This likely speaks to the strength of this institutional intervention, which took place very early in his exposure to WCS.

Another interviewee (E) who was, for a time, a ballroom dance teacher at the studio of note also reflected on the specific policy around language at the studio. Despite beginning her dance career in contexts where gendered language was normalized and "didn't really bother [her]"—even when it was misgendering her—the transition to this inclusive studio scaffolded her linguistic transition so effectively that she "do[es] not think of it consciously now…it's just kind of in there". The importance of this studio level intervention is further emphasized in light of this interviewee's orientation towards the events she now runs. While her orientation towards creating safe and inclusive spaces likely originates in her own personality and/or upbringing, "just who I am", as she puts it, the attention to language, which she may not have even considered prior to working at this studio (since, as she says, it didn't bother her), is carried through as an element of inclusivity.

(37) I am really committed to (.) making anything I do a safe space…because I- I do want to create a safe space in every aspect (.) I (.) I- I- I want that to be (.) the main thing that the Code of Conduct (.) i- includes that includes appropriate language for that (.) um for anybody um (.) that (.) that certain things are not (.) going to be (.) tolerated (.) at anything that I run (.) um the idea is that people should come and dance and be who they are…I do hope that often it my (.) it's just who I am kind of comes out in how we run events and how (.) that's- I believe that everybody should just be who they are (.) and I think that (.) that's just how I do things (.) I am finding myself being more cognizant of it and much more deliberate (.) to help other people understand that may not pick up on it but otherwise I feel like I do OK at creating safer spaces and (.) um the understanding that (.) that it doesn't matter to me which role anybody dances or (.)

um (.) how they identify themselves in any way (.) as long as it's a way that they are comfortable with (.) and that they are (.) receiving acceptance when they show up (E)

In excerpt 37, this interviewee discusses her goal of creating safe spaces through a code of conduct, the first element of which she articulates as language guidance. Throughout this discussion of safe spaces, she draws on inclusivity discourses of people "be[ing] who they are" in the space. Here the emphasis is not on the freedom of speech discourses that have often shown up in contestations to gender focussed language reform (e.g. Blaubergs, 1980; Parks & Roberton, 1998; Vergoossen et al., 2020), but instead on the freedom of individuals to "be" whomever they want to be: the freedom to be true to themselves in terms of gender and dance role in an environment where they are "receiving acceptance", in part, through the language being used.

4.5.4.1 Agency and inclusion

The emphasis on individual agency with respect to role choice is prevalent throughout the interviews (e.g. excerpt 38); however, in contrast to work on gender-neutral language in the context of nonbinary individuals (where personal agency is linked to defining a new gender category (Winig & Rose, 2024)), discourses of personal agency in WCS emphasize a choice between two already established (if relabelled and ostensibly degendered) roles.

(38) we all cared heavily about (.) like (.) degendering we didn't call it that at the time we were just like "we care that you can dance whatever you want to dance" (B)

In Winig & Rose's (2024) study, references to individual agency coincided with support for neopronouns, whereas those who explicitly supported singular THEY (but not necessarily neopronouns) were more likely to focus on the historical justifications (e.g. citing the historical presence of singular THEY) for its use. They claim that arguments for language change on the basis of individual agency (i.e. the right to dictate how one is referred to) "demand[] language

change towards inclusion, often implying or outright stating that the universally agreed-upon features of the language are not sufficiently inclusive as they currently stand" (Winig & Rose, 2024, p. 8). By contrast, as seen in the previous sections of this chapter, the same interviewees who draw on individual agency and choice in WCS also frame the language change as a matter of enhanced accuracy and responsiveness to broader social changes, rather than an attempt to name and define new identities/roles. As articulated in Section 4.3.2, the framing of inclusive language as more accurate is facilitated by discourses that delink gender and role, explicitly representing role as a personal choice dictated by factors beyond one's gender.

This same disjunct between role and gender similarly supports a less radical deployment of the personal agency narrative. Whereas a nonbinary person having the agency to establish a gender identity beyond the traditional binary challenges the dominant structures of society, a dancer choosing to take on one of two roles that have been delinked from gender, while perhaps challenging for some who still ascribe to heteronormative models of the roles, is not demanding change through the language used. Instead, "more accurate" language "responding" to existing social change is simply part of a broader orientation towards inclusivity and personal choice in line with neoliberal models of individual choice as primary (see Section 4.3.2.1), a choice further emphasized in excerpt 39.

(39) why are we dictating these things with the- th- these should not be things that are dictated right (.) you should be able to (.) dance with whoever you want (.) compete with whoever you want marry ((laughing)) whoever you want (.) y'know (.) live whoever you want without anybody having any say in these things (.) so (.) if there's a degendering movement (.) I'm all for it but my question is (.) why was this in the first place? (U)

Here the interviewee questions any institutional constraints on how individuals participate in dance (and in life); instead, he promotes the idea that such freedom should have always already been sanctioned. To some extent, this narrative combines the two discourses found by Winig and Rose (2024): an emphasis on agency and a reference to history both converge on the same need to degender references to the roles.

Similarly, another interviewee argues, in contrast to freedom of speech rhetoric which opposes prescribing linguistic choices in other domains, that degendering "really only provides options…it doesn't take options away" (A). While this is focussed on role choice rather than language explicitly, the understanding of degendering as something that creates choice, rather than something that might constrain the expression of someone who perhaps clings to heteronormative ideals, speaks to the wider narrative of individual choice which privileges participation choices over the choice to resist language change (see Section 4.3.2.1).

Even where the history of heteronormativity is explained to participants, as discussed in excerpt 40, the focus is upon individual comfort and decision making.

(40) I- I always let people decide where they want to be (.) um but I do give them (.) the background of tradition (.) um not to try and sway them either way…um (.) so either way I want- I want people to (.) do what they're comfortable with (G)

This prioritization of individual agency in relation to identity and dance participation arguably feeds into the broader economic incentives discussed in Section 4.5.2. If more people feel welcome to come as they are and to participate in the dance in the way they want, they are more likely to join in the dance, and organizers can manage to break even or maybe even make a profit by drawing enough of these people to their event. Hence, institutional privileging of certain forms of personal agency (around role, rather than around freedom of speech) serves the

institutional financial goal of attracting more paying customers. In order to achieve this goal, events must have staff who align themselves with inclusive discourses. When asked about the specifics of her code of conduct's guidance on language use, the interviewee below immediately pivoted to discussing her choice of staff.

(41) *I know some events recently have started sort of giving their instructors guidelines on things like for example how you talk in class have you thought about including any of that in [EVENT] or?*

yes (.) yeah (.) it's a big deal um (.) but I have also chosen staff very carefully (.) so the staff that I have reached out to (.) um (.) are all people who (.) either I know (.) or (.) I have seen effect in- a- a community in a way that I think is really (.) um (.) beneficial

…

yeah (.) and do you have like wording in mind for guidelines that you will (.) give to folks?

um (.) I do I am (.) taking it directly from someone else's code of conduct (.) that they have offered (.) freely um they have given permission for and um othe- things that are not included I would add in (.) uh the leader follower (.) having instructors specifically use leader and follower (.) versus ladies and gentlemen or whatever (.) um (.) these instructors also I don't even think that they need it to be in the- (.)I think it'll be just a "oh yeah of course" (E)

This interviewee chooses her staff on the basis of having seen them "make some type of positive impact" and on the basis of them being the sort of people who she expects to respond to language guidance with "oh yeah of course". She later specifies that having "a lot to contribute"

technically does not sufficiently recommend someone, if they are "refus[ing] to use gender-neutral language" (E).

That a discussion of language policy so quickly led to a discussion of staff choice in relation to ethical and inclusivity concerns (over say fame or high technical skills) furthers the notion that language reform is understood as being a positive force in the community. Moreover, it emphasizes the institutional role of organizers in selecting instructors who will participate in the language reform under the broader rubric of inclusivity. Regardless of an instructor's own preference in terms of language reform, being hired at this event—and likely other similar events—is contingent on their willingness to adopt reformed language.

As argued by Ehrlich and King (1992, 1994), such institutional forces undoubtedly play a key role in supporting language reform and promoting uptake. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the structural power that institutions hold to influence the behaviour of individuals within them; however, an additional element of importance is highlighted in excerpt 42 below. This participant, despite being a strong advocate of degendering and in fact a woman who dances almost exclusively as a leader, expresses hesitancy towards addressing gendered language use in classes. Because she doesn't feel that she holds that critical institutional power (she is not a teacher or event organizer), she is unsure as to whether or not she is in a position to take actions to promote the reform.

(42) like maybe I shouldn't be (.) um but like (.) for that I wonder (.) is it down to the community leaders of (.) the community itself? (.) right like is that something that (.) ch- like a student feels even power to say like should it be like is there something that the community should be like "hey" those who are teaching get together and discuss how are they going to approach that (.) so I don't know if it- like that is something that

(.) um (.) will s- other students even feel comfortable like should- (.) we take away that like (.) do they feel like that that power is taken away from them and it's like should we push it on to the community leaders more and be like "hey you need to set the tone" (.) 'cause I'm like I'm- 'cause if I- I feel even though I'm part of the community and I'm there and I'm dancing I just don't really feel like I'm a community (.) contributor I still feel like this outsider like "I don't- I don't know you guys- you guys do you thing I'm just like here to enjoy I don't want to poke the bear" (C)

She begins to suggest that students like her might be able to "push it on to the community leaders more", but seems to retreat somewhat from this idea by the end, claiming that she doesn't want to "poke the bear". While this explicit relocation of the responsibility for driving language change from the individual to community leaders is somewhat unique within the interviews, it is echoed in the excerpts that will be discussed in Section 4.6 below. In these excerpts, individual agency to contest gendered language use is often downplayed or abdicated in preference for a priority on civility, where community members assume gendered language was an honest mistake or are simply unwilling to speak up about it. The pervasiveness of this unwillingness to engage in conflict over language, as I will argue, supports the depoliticized, liberal approach to language reform. By the same token, however, such unwillingness to fight over a reform, which community members claim to support, makes it unlikely that the reform could have been so successfully advanced without institutional promotion, especially in the absence of a language policy from the World Swing Dance Council.

4.6 Civility

In Section 4.5 on inclusivity, I discussed how degendering was viewed as a way to avoid offending/excluding individuals, as well as the tendency for individuals to downplay their own

stake in these harms in favour of concern for hypothetical others. I also discussed cases in which inclusion was extended even to those who may not yet have mastered degendered language use. These discourses not only feed into an emphasis on inclusion but also speak to the high value placed on civility in this community, particularly with regard to the degendering movement. Such an emphasis on civility is highlighted in the (white) liberal language reform paradigm described by Cameron (1995), such that both the approach to presenting the reform and the motivation for the reform can be represented as "civil". In other words, reforming one's language is not a fight to change the power structures, but a decent act that one can do to be nice and to accommodate those who may prefer to be referred to in some new way.

Civility of this sort—also interpretable as conflict avoidance—is not universally valued, and has been linked to white middle-class north American values (Mayo, 2001, 2002; Patton, 2004). Thus, it's not surprising that in this largely white and middle-class dance community, the valuing of civility is illustrated abundantly in interviewees' references to their desires to be "respectful", to avoid being "offensive", and to find "polite" ways to go about linguistic interactions. For example, in excerpt 43, the interviewee—a local instructor—builds from a discussion of her challenges adapting to degendered language (e.g. struggling to remove what she perceives as gender-neutral GUYS from her vocabulary) to a broader consideration of how the language she uses in teaching might risk being inappropriate.

(43) um but I- even when (.) I'm being inappropriately humorous (.) I'm usually trying to be respectful at the same time (.) um (.) so like if I know (.) if I knew somebody was touchy about anything I would definitely (.) try and avoid (G)

Just as with gendered language, this interviewee's primary concern regarding her humour is whether or not her students might be "touchy" about it, i.e. potentially offended. While she finds

she sometimes slips into gendered terms, and enjoys somewhat risqué humour, ultimately, her biggest concern is being "respectful" to her students. Similarly, in excerpt 44, another local instructor reflects on how a world-famous old school instructor could say somewhat risqué, gendered things and be heard as funny.

(44) I've- and I've heard y'know again (.) I'm- I- I (.) sometimes quote people (.) that ar- have been great mentors to me like [NAME] when he's following he would say "well I'm a big girl" right and that comes out when it comes out of [NAME]'s mouth it's- it's funny (.) I don't want it to be (.) like (.) offensive to somebody else who's dancing and- and I call (.) a man a big girl right it may not be- it may not- he might not like that right (.) but y'know they- it's- it's- so- so yeah I'm- I'm just- I have to be- I have to be really sensitive to those kinds of things (K)

Whereas the old school instructor could get away with referring to himself as a "big girl" (wherein "girl" stands in for "follower"), this instructor is concerned that such a joke might be "offensive", and so she is very "sensitive" to such language. Here the question is not focussed on the accuracy or the pedagogical efficacy of such a phrasing, but instead the risk of it being heard as uncivil.

This focus on avoiding conflict and incivility is also present outside of the teaching context. In excerpt 45, an interviewee and activist reflects on how, when he first began to pursue degendering in the community, his "goal was not to put anybody on the defensive".

(45) and I started to (.) basically just have conversations with people (.) and (.) uh my goal was to not put anybody on the defensive y'know I just wanted to understand where they were coming from…so I basically just asked a lot of questions…not necessarily telling them how to think but just giving them other options of- of- of ways to

think and I think that was (.) fairly um (.) effect- I mean some people can't be reached (.) an- but other people who were sitting there on the fence (.) were really receptive to the fact that I wasn't forcing them to think anything (.) and I was letting them come to their own conclusions (M)

Instead of promoting his intended reforms through injunctive statements (cf. Bolsen & Thornton, 2024), he "just [had] conversations", "asked a lot of questions", and tried to "[let] them [people] come to their own conclusions." He expresses a belief that this civil, and non-forceful approach was, in fact, critical to the level of uptake he managed to achieve in the community. While a more radical approach might encourage a more challenging or confrontational approach to the use of degendered language (cf. Zimman & Hayworth, 2020), this more civility focussed approach may have avoided the "masculinity threat" (or arguably "heteronormativity threat") that Bolsen and Thornton (2024) suggest may have underlain the backfire effect they saw in response to injunctive appeals for anti-cis-sexist language practices.

Interestingly, this concern about civility even shows up in relation to more elaborated language routines that may challenge heteronormative assumptions while negotiating partnerships in social dance contexts. Despite the interviewee in excerpt 46 preferring to lead, she elsewhere notes that she generally leads women but follows men when they ask her to dance.[45] When asked about whether she attempts to negotiate roles, she responded as below.

(46) um (.) I haven't gotten to the point of "hey you want to do lead follow switch?" (.) um (.) mostly because I just don't know who (.) who does and I always feel weird that like well if they don't know both why am I asking? isn't that like rude? should I-? so it's

[45] Because she prefers to lead, she generally doesn't ask men to dance.

just like like I don't even know myself and where is the new accepted hey this is how this is the polite way of asking somebody to dance

right so politeness plays a big role for you?

yeah 'cause I don't want to offend I wanna still be aware of (.) their comfort as well like (.) for me my approach to dancing I want them to have a good time (C)

Because of the history of minimal invitations (e.g. securing a dance partner by eye contact and bodily orientation alone, or by asking only "shall we" or other similar phrases) in this dance scene and the heteronormative role assumptions that make such invitations possible (see Chapter 6), this interviewee is concerned that asking someone what role they want to dance for a given song might be "rude". Despite seeing the potential benefit of asking, she worries that she ought to know what role her partner typically does/is capable of, lest asking roles of a person who only does one is found offensive. Further, she seeks a "new accepted…polite way" to make the request. Hence, regardless of the potential for normalizing degendering through such a role negotiation—which would likely benefit her as a non-heteronormative dancer—she so values civility in the form of avoiding "offend[ing]" and focussing on the other's "comfort" that such an interaction is not yet comfortable for her.

This example is particularly significant because of the role that ritualized invitation conventions play in social partner dance communities (cf. Bosse, 2015). These conventions, which form a key component of dancers' habitus, mitigate the potential discomfort of approaching strangers or acquaintances and making a request of them (that they dance with you), through providing structures for appropriate initiation and acceptance as well as discouraging rejections or providing structural affordances for indirect rejections. For example, in Argentine Tango's cabaceo the leader attempts to make eye contact with a potential follower and if the

follower meets the eye contact, rather than looking away, they have agreed to a dance. That is, looking away constitutes a refusal without the need for verbal invitation and the attendant risks of verbal rejection. Under a heteronormative model of participation (wherein followers and leaders are visually identifiable by gender presentation), such routines serve to smooth the process of securing a partner for a dance and reduce the risk of facing rejection. Thus, even where such routines might fail to meet the needs of non-heteronormative dancers, because of the role they have traditionally played in ensuring the smooth conduct of social dancing and the comfort of heteronormative participants specifically, any challenge or change to these routines risks being seen as disruptive to the civil conduct of the dance. Hence, this interviewee avoids pursuing her own interests in the interest of avoiding upsetting the conventional practice of invitations. This downplaying of one's own interests to avoid potential conflict is further demonstrated through the ways that individuals demur in light of gendered language use.

4.6.1 Downplaying microaggressions to avoid conflict

As was mentioned in Section 4.5.1, while discussing the risk of microaggressions in the use of gendered language, many of my interviewees, even while articulating this risk, downplay the harm that they might experience and instead deflect to hypothetical others who might be negatively affected by such language. For some (see excerpts 47 and 48 below), this downplaying appears to be a straightforward articulation of their actual experience of hearing gendered language—it simply does not affect them.

(47) *and did it bother you that they used that term?*

no (R)

(48) um (.) and I mean I was called men for years (.) and it never bothered me (.) I just (.) °"aright"° y'know 'cause I- I- (.) I knew where I was at the time (.) and I knew what

side of the floor was on (.) and it was fine… um (.) so it was just (.) it never bothered me so it wasn't a big deal to me (G)

For the interviewee in excerpt 47, hearing gendered language used to refer to followers, while he was following, was noticeable, but when asked if it bothered him, he provided a simple "no". There was no further account needed; he was not bothered. By contrast, while the interviewee in excerpt 48 similarly insists that she was "never bothered" by being referred to with gendered, rather than role language (while she engaged in a non-heteronormative role), she provides an account of her thinking. Her account relies on the norms of the time when she began leading: she was "called men for years" and so it "never bothered" her. The fact that she provides an *account* suggests that she is aware that not being bothered by such language might require an account—it is the sort of thing that one could be bothered by and could want to contest.

This downplaying of offensiveness appears in several other interviews with one interviewee claiming that "I don't think it would have impacted me personally that much" (Q). Another, after mentioning that "when I'm following and they'll say "OK ladies let's do this" it- it's this like brief moment that's jarring" (O), only a few turns later pivots to claim "for me i- it's not so jarring I understand what they're trying to say" (O). While this interviewee explains that he is very sensitive to the potential harm that gendered language can have on others with different gender identities and histories than his, he contradicts his own initial expression of discomfort or "jarring"ness, downplaying it with a claim to be unbothered. In such cases, one must ask to what extent these individuals are avoiding stances that would justify or perhaps even require conflict. Being bothered may demand change in others' behaviour and demanding such change may incite conflict. Such conflict comes with heavy personal risk insofar as admitting to being bothered is admitting to being vulnerable to others' words.

This tension between one's visceral reaction to gendered language use—particularly in cases where an individual is misgendered—and the community's orientation towards civility is particularly salient amongst those interviewees who primarily dance in non-heteronormative roles. For example, as seen in excerpt 49, despite articulating a desire to contest gendered language use and recounting an experience of being "affected by it", a few minutes later, the interviewee concludes that she is not "offended really".

(49) u::m (.) I wish I was more vocal about it but I never know the right approach (.) u:h: most of the time if it's like (.) a slip up I'm like "oh they don't mean it and (.) I'm the only one being affected by it at the moment" cuz I'll like see everyone's happy to be in their gendered roles so (.) I like I don't say anything

…

um (.) but j- j- but in general I- I never get offended really 'cause (.) I'm just so used- I've just been so used to it (C)

It is notable that this interviewee accounts for her failure to live up to her wish to be more vocal by stating that she "never know[s] the right approach". Whereas she might wish to change the language behaviour of instructors she is interacting with, she doesn't know how to do it the "right" way. Given her orientation towards politeness and avoiding offense articulated elsewhere in the interview, we may assume that for her the "right" way would be one that is polite, civil, and inoffensive. However, since she is not sure how to contest language choices without the risk of conflict or being heard as uncivil, she ultimately recasts her experience not as having been "affected" but instead as "never get[ting] offended". Because she assumes "they don't mean it" and because she is "so used to it", she can avoid going against the preference for civility by downplaying her own discomfort.

4.6.1.1 Avoiding and mitigating call outs

In the same vein as those who downplay their own potential or actual discomfort with gendered language use, many in this community also discuss a preference for avoiding call outs, perhaps "just internally judg[ing] them" (F) without saying anything aloud. This is in stark contrast with Zimman and Hayworth's (2020) participants who were unhesitant in calling out inappropriate language even if the result was conflict. Instead, in this community, even where individuals do disapprove of language use, there seems to be a tendency to avoid addressing directly it in the moment. As one interviewee notes, "when you like hear problematic language in classes and when you see problematic behavior from pros (.) that's just kind of like accepted because they're the pros (.) y'know?" (N). This acceptance is further articulated by the interviewees in excerpts 50-52. All three are women who lead: two strongly prefer leading and only follow when dancing with someone who cannot themselves follow, and the third dances both roles to a nearly equal level and doesn't have a consistent preference between the two. While all attest to being bothered by gendered language in class environments, none engaged in call outs.

(50) I wish that (.) like the times where (.) I- I'm not the only one being- like where it is just me being affected like- maybe I should say something … maybe I should be more vocal to the teacher and be like "hey I know you didn't mean intentionally but you said this thing" (.) um (.) 'cause (.) it's still new…in West Coast Swing this concept of really degendering the dance is still so fresh (.) that knowing the right way to like clue it in (.) and I'm like am I an asshole if I tell them (.) that you're not being like (.) general enough (.) or you haven't- like you- you're g- falling back onto (.) y'know the old terminology please don't (C)

(51) I was very bothered by this um I did not speak up or leave um but I- I thought about it but I- but I didn't (.) so- I don't like to (.) draw attention to myself y'know I just like to (.) y'know not cause a scene I guess (D)

(52) I don't think I ever called them out (.) it's one of those things that like (.) I could call them out but like (.) and like that does you know help put a label- help put a (.) like (.) flashing sign or something in some way (.) but (.) y'know it's one of those things that like feels very disruptive (.) to the class and (.) feels like you're going to be told "oh well you knew exactly what they meant anyways so why do you care?" y'know (.) um (.) I wasn't exactly looking to- (.) to be quite that (.) uh visible ((laugh)) (B)

The first interviewee explains her resistance towards engaging in call outs as worrying that she'll be "an asshole" if she speaks up. While less explicitly framed as a question of civility, the latter two also orient towards an avoidance of incivility or conflict. In excerpt 51, the fear is one of "draw[ing] attention to [one]self" or "caus[ing] a scene"; in excerpt 52, it is of being "disruptive" or "quite that (.) uh visible". In both cases, the interviewees are concerned about the risks associated with drawing attention to problematic language—they may be perceived as rude or disruptive. The interviewee in excerpt 52 also highlights an important communicative consideration: "you knew exactly what they meant anyways". Because the role equivalent of a gendered term in WCS is generally recoverable from both historical norms and current context, to resist recovering that meaning and instead contest the language choice may be read as a violation of Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975). If you could recover the meaning, it is uncooperative and perhaps even uncivil to refuse to do so.

While the three interviewees considered above simply avoid call-outs, other interviewees discuss ways that they might deliver feedback in more civil or appropriate ways. For example,

as articulated in excerpt 53, a direct call out in class is not seen as "appropriate behaviour". Instead, a discrete conversation after the fact is presented as a possibly more civil strategy for addressing problematic language.

(53) I do it bothers me when people say (.) um (.) uh he and she (.) to describe leaders and followers…do I speak up about it? I wouldn't call out a teacher (.) in a class in front of their class (.) I don't think that's appropriate behaviour from one teacher to another I will take them aside later and say- things that are offensive which is (.) I don't think I've ever heard truly offensive anything in a dance class (E)

In a similar vein, another interviewee promotes a "friendly y'know no harm (.) in asking type conversation" (A) around the potentially contentious topic of language choices. If they are to be addressed, it must be done in a friendly, civil manner.

Beyond community members' own strategies for calling out (or not) language choices, another interviewee discusses how he works to mitigate the potential for conflict should others call out his professional colleagues. Using behind the scenes staff spaces, he reminds other professionals that corrections are "trying to help you not harm you".

(54) that's my opportunity to talk to staff kind of as a peer and say "hey if you're in a class and somebody corrects things if you're y'know using guys or whatever and they're like leaders then (.) y'know remember it's (.) the- the people are trying to help you not harm you" (.) "they're trying to help you get there not saying that you're wrong" (.) and so uh trying to help the professionals who are still making that linguistic transition (.) help them feel called in rather than called out (M)

That he expresses this as "not harm you" speaks to a perception that having one's language use corrected may be experienced as threatening or uncivil, validating the fears of the interviewees

featured in excerpts 50-52. If speaking back to an instructor's gendered language use is likely to be seen as harmful and to need another professional to frame such intervention as "help", then it is risky to engage in such behaviour in a community that so strongly values civility. In fact, for some, this valuation of civility goes so far as to proscribe any public corrections at all. As one younger instructor explains in excerpt 55, he "do[esn't] like" to see teachers corrected as he sees it as "a respect your elders kind of thing".

(55) um I wanna- I do wanna throw out there like from a- this is a- this is going off into a side category a little bit but like you have different generations of teachers here and there are definitely teachers (.) who still use that language (.) and for me I personally prefer to like give grace to what that generation is- for their norm (.) right so I know there are certain teachers won't name names (.) um but that still teach that way and then the audience will come out and correct them (.) and I actually don't like that um but part of that is like a- like a respect your elders kind of thing it's like their- their generation learned it that way (.) right (.) they shouldn't be (.) punished (.) for that (L)

The remark in this excerpt is particularly interesting because of its framing as something that the interviewee wants to "throw out" into the conversation. It was not a direct response to a question, but "going off into a side category" that he felt sufficiently strongly about to pursue despite clearly seeing it as tangential to the discussion at hand. This speaks to the overall valuation of politeness and civility in this community. Not only might one avoid speaking up oneself (perhaps out of fear), but for this interviewee, at least, it is important that others also refrain from such potentially disrespectful or uncivil forms of engagement, even if they are undertaken with the goal of furthering the uptake of the language reform which he supports.[46]

[46] This orientation may also be related to the preference for self-initiated versus other-initiated repair identified in conversation analytic research (Schegloff et al., 1977) and further discussed in Section 5.4.2.4.

4.6.2 Accounts for accepting gendered language

Running in parallel with the resistance to directly addressing gendered language explored above, interviewees often explain accepting gendered language use in terms of the cognitive labour involved in implementing language reform. While they do not argue, as has been seen in other research (e.g. Blaubergs, 1980; Hekanaho, 2022; Parks & Roberton, 1998), that the change is *too* difficult—in fact a number of interviews report that it was easy for them—they do acknowledge that such changes are difficult even if worthwhile (cf. Section 4.5.3). This difficulty, then, allows gendered language to be heard as "a slip" (C,E) that one "wouldn't (.) usually judge" (V). If changing one's language is hard, then one must be allowed room to learn and sometimes make mistakes.

Interviewees are particularly understanding towards those who are older or have "been an instructor for a long (.) time" (R) and therefore have likely spent more time using gendered language. Whereas "younger" instructors are suggested to have "been able to adjust more quickly" (B), as explained in excerpt 56, instructors who are "so used to the language" and who belong to "the generation where that [degendered language] wasn't really common" are understandably likely to occasionally "slip up".

(56) I always give like the instructor the benefit of the doubt I'm like "oh they're just like (.) they're just so used to the language they don't mean that they're (.) um it's like I know them it's- it's fine whatever" but I feel like maybe I should be speaking a little more just in case you never know you just could through showing up ((unclear)) happen right … um I feel like I would have a bigger issue if I (.) didn't emulate what I believe and am aware of (.) rather than people who were of the

> generation where that wasn't really common and if they slip up I'm like yeah I'll give 'em a pass (C)

These "relic[s] of (.) the way that they- the- the way that roles used to be defined" (O) are seen as forgivable because, as another interviewee claims, "y'know it's natural it's natural for it to take time" (P). Particularly amongst instructors, this need for time to change one's language habits is not just theoretical. As one such instructor reflects, it took "some of us you know longer than others to sort of make the adjustment" (T) regardless of their "intention" because "it's just that- it's our habit right" (T). Such personal experience of the power of "habits" informs a more generous interpretation of others' gendered language. Having spent many years teaching with gendered language "coming through the ranks" (P), these instructors had deeply entrenched habits that took time and repeated practice to break. Even when they firmly believe that degendered language is more accurate, more responsive to social change, and more inclusive than the gendered alternative, it was a change that could only take place by implementing it: "the more you teach the more it [reformed language] becomes natural" (P).

Ultimately, given their personal experience of the cognitive load associated with language change (see Section 5.4.3 for more on cognitive challenges to adoption of gendered language), instructors and even some non-instructors (who had prior experience with gendered language in WCS or other styles) are typically willing to give gendered language users the benefit of the doubt. As one interviewee puts it, after having reflected on her own struggles, "the (.) most anyone can do is try (.) um and if they screw up apologize" (G). Even here, the goal turns to civility as can be seen in the idea that, if one's "try[ing]" is insufficient, one ought to "apologize". Apologies, of course, are speech acts that serve to mend a potential breach and preserve civil interaction.

4.6.2.1 Exceptions to acceptance

Despite the broad willingness to extend grace and allow for slips into gendered language, there are some limited contexts when gendered language is not seen to be forgivable. In these contexts, gendered language users are understood to produce it "intentional[ly]". For example, as articulated in excerpt 57, repeated gendered language use in a class that had "a lot" of non-heteronormative dancers was experienced as "intentional", at least in part because of the presence of multiple visual cues—in the form of women leading and men following—that would presumably trigger non-gendered language. While the interviewee reported that this instructor did sometimes repair their gendered language, the repairs were not consistent and were often closely followed by unrepaired gendered language. Such use of gendered language was experienced as something quite different from the accidental slips generally attested.

(57) well I feel like there were a lot of people in the class that that (.) affected there were several men following and there were several women leading and y'know and she was watching us all it's not like we- it wasn't obvious y'know and it- it just felt intentional I guess I hate to say that but uh y'know uh you could have seen what was happening and- and chose to you know correct your language and you- and you didn't and that's what was most annoying (D)

Such "intentional" use of gendered language was also identified by another interviewee who experienced "active[] resist[ance]" to her request for instructors to use degendered language at her event from an instructor who did "not want their language policed" (E). This reference to language policing draws on freedom of speech discourses that have been attested in many prior studies of gendered language reform (Blaubergs, 1980; Hekanaho, 2022; Parks & Roberton, 1998; Vergoossen et al., 2020). Interestingly, however, in the WCS community, this argument

was not treated as valid. Instead, as discussed in Section 4.5.4.1, personal choice of role in association with inclusiveness was privileged over freedom of speech. In fact, this interviewee framed the potential violation of freedom of speech as a "small change" (E), whereas the inclusion and civility towards those included was "a very big (.) deal" (E).

This pervasive orientation towards civility is not only in contrast with the radical language reform approaches that Cameron (1995) describes as having more political potential, but also with the very forthright and confrontational approach found by Zimman and Hayworth (2020) in an online trans group. While, in that community, individuals readily called out "problematic" language use, "often lead[ing] to direct confrontation and, occasionally, spectacular conflict" (Zimman & Hayworth, 2020, p. 144), in the WCS community, as discussed above, such conflict is systematically avoided. I observed no such call outs in the field and only one interviewee reported having made any direct call outs himself (see excerpt 58).

(58) I actually called out an instructor about a year ago who did that and interestingly enough I was following (.) and- (.) and the instructor I think said something like ladies or something like that I was like "hey" ((laugh)) (.) they're like "oh followers" ((laugh)) (R)

Despite this relative paucity of direct call outs, even when the possibility of their occurrence is contemplated, they are the target of mitigation and often reframed as "call ins", as we see expressed by the interviewee in excerpt 54, when he describes his hypothetical interactions with other dance professionals. This difference may be attributable to the mixed nature of the WCS community (catering to both heteronormative and non-heteronormative dancers) versus the trans focussed nature of Zimman and Hayworth's (2020) community. Particularly in the context of the economic conditions discussed in Section 4.5.2, catering to both those who may be affected by

gendered language and those who may not is important for ensuring that the maximum number of people feel included and are thereby willing to invest in the community. By contrast, the community studied by Zimman and Hayworth is focussed on supporting primarily those affected by language change and is not directly involved in anyone's primary income stream.

It is also worth noting that as a social partner dance, WCS inherently requires individuals (often strangers) to be in intimate physical contact with each other and dancers do not restrict this intimate physical contact to a single partner. Some dancers even report trying to dance with every other dancer (or at least every other dancer in a complementary role) at events. But even for those that don't reach such extremes, the social norm within the community is that a partnership will typically dance only one song (maybe two) together before each partner moves on to another partner. This, combined with the emphasis on Jack 'n' Jill competitions in the community, which require one to draw multiple random partners to dance with over the course of a single contest, means that this is a community that prioritizes being able to dance with many different potential strangers. This makes interactions much more difficult if the (perhaps relatively shallow) norm of civility is breached. In fact, even without considering the specific context of degendering, this feature of the community is highly salient to some participants. As articulated in excerpt 59, many relish the ability to connect with people from varied backgrounds without needing to discover all the ways that their beliefs might conflict with such people.

(59) um particularly during COVID people got very political (.) um about dancing and about politics and whether they're liberal or conservative or Democrat or whatever (.) um and (.) and I just for me- I just like I just wanna dance (.) I don't really care what your politics are ((laughing)) y'know I don't care y'know I don't care about your y'know your other social convictions what I really care about is how we communicate

together at this point in time (.) in this dance (.) to this- to this music can we (.) can we communicate right can we- can we share- can we share a moment? (I)

As we see in the above excerpt, the very joy of the dance, for some, is in not having to know all the things about your partner that might ruin your ability to connect with them intellectually. Instead, the desire is being able to connect physically and to share a moment of humanity and non-verbal storytelling. It is interesting to note that this civility was threatened during the pandemic and the height of the #BlackLivesMatter movement when the political affiliations of participants became much more salient through their publicly expressed opinions on social media about masks, vaccines, racial equity initiatives, and President Trump. As hinted at in excerpt 59, some saw this as unnecessarily bringing politics into dance and threatening the treasured ability to connect with any individual through the dance. As a queer person and a firm believer in the need to improve conditions for marginalized people, not only in dance but in society in general, I personally found myself siding with those who felt that politics were in fact relevant, even in dance. Nonetheless, there is precedent both within WCS and beyond for understanding social dance and participation in it as fundamentally apolitical.

Bollen (1996) describes the way that dance is often seen as frivolous or trivial in their consideration of an annual dance party included in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Unlike the "high" arts that produce physical artefacts like paintings, sculptures, or novels, dance is ephemeral and of the body, not of the mind—privileged in many western societies (Craig, 2013). Furthermore, where stage/theatrical dance might earn some respect or be accorded some seriousness in line with its elevated cultural associations, social dances, as vernacular arts often associated with pure leisure, are relegated to the margins of serious life. As with many forms of serious leisure, even when such activities are highly valued and consume much of a practitioner's

time, they are nonetheless set off as distinct from "the real world" even as they interface with it (e.g. Gillespie et al., 2002). Hence, whereas politics might be appropriate in "the real world", dance, as seriously as it may be pursued, is just a hobby, a place to get away from politics and not worry about such serious concerns.

Indeed, the non-serious nature of dance, as described above, likely contributes to the preference for liberal over radical approaches to language reform in the WCS community. If dance is no place for politics, it's certainly no place for language politics or so-called political correctness. By the same token, everyone ought to be able to participate in the way they please (as discussed in Section 4.5.4.1) and instructors ought to use language that will avoid excluding people, because this isn't a serious place where freedom of speech or the sanctity of the family is at stake. In fact, several interviewees attest to the fact that they don't even notice whether gendered language is used or not. When asked about hearing gendered language while he was following, for example, one replied "I wouldn't have noticed if that was the case ((laugh))" (Q), while two more, when asked if they noticed gendered language in WCS classes, replied "probably not" (J) and "uh not really no" (K). Even though two of these participants regularly dance in non-heteronormative roles and attest to supporting the degendering movement, they claim that they do not even notice when gendered language is used—perhaps because for them, it's just not that serious. Again, while this apolitical approach is not universal, it is common and is well represented amongst the interviewees who, while expressing support for degendering, also enact that support in ways that are oriented towards civility, inclusion, accuracy, and responsiveness to social change.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how interviewees frame the degendering language reform within WCS in terms which closely align with Cameron's (1995) "liberal" language reform. This approach to reform, Cameron argues, focusses on promoting reformed language in non-confrontational terms. Amongst my interviewees, this "liberal" approach is manifested through a focus on language accurately describing the world; language responding to exogenous social change; reformed language as enhancing inclusiveness; and civility as being a key value both in terms of making language choices and managing those who use unreformed language. Interviewees make the argument that reformed language is more accurate by making the case for considering roles as *roles*, distinct from the gendered persons that embody them. This accuracy argument then blocks arguments against the reform that rely on cis-sexist refusal to acknowledge the presence of nonbinary persons (the reformed terms aren't about people, but roles); on the small number of people for which the reform might be directly relevant (it doesn't matter how many people dance non-heteronormatively, the roles are the roles); and on the idea that gender is a critical element of self-presentation (you can be a woman leader or follower, it is just the role not the person that is being degendered).

Discussion of the reform as responsive to social change frames the change as inevitable due to the inherent character of the dance and the community which dances it. While there are two instances that run counter to this notion, showing some evidence of language reform as politicizing (i.e. potentially working to change society rather than society changing language), these instances are fairly restrained and are much less frequent in my data than the responsive accounts. Continuing to follow the liberal paradigm, reasons for engaging in the reform are also very frequently presented in terms of the value of inclusion. That inclusion is a desirable

outcome seems to be taken for granted by participants who present it as an obvious good, which can be facilitated by degendering the language and the dance as a whole. Despite this taken for granted nature, it is also important to note that professionals and institutions within the dance are heavily incentivized to maximise participation to support their financial bottom line. Unsurprisingly, then, there is evidence that institutions like dance schools are particularly important in disseminating reform, and instructors—who, because of the nature of teaching large groups, have outsized public speaking rights—are heavily incentivized to use reformed terms.

Finally, building on the theme of inclusivity, participants regularly emphasize the importance of civility. That is, despite all of my interviewees attesting to strong support of degendering, very few were willing to directly confront users of gendered language, and a great deal of grace was reportedly given to most people who "slip" into gendered terms. While there were a small number of exceptional community members, who were seen to be intentionally using gendered language, even in encounters with these individuals, participants avoided conflict and either downplayed their own discomfort and/or distanced themselves from the user.

Alongside these liberal discourses, a neoliberal emphasis on the individual also emerges in my interviews. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) argue, neoliberalism has proven adept at commandeering social movements (e.g. feminism, unions) and fracturing them into alienated individuals who are offered personal liberation and the opportunity for self-fulfillment at the expense of collective protections and collective power. Bringing this together with Cameron's (1995) liberal versus radical reforms, we can better see the risk inherent in liberal reforms. While avoiding politicization and focussing on liberal approaches may help to mitigate or undermine many of the common arguments against language reform (e.g. freedom of speech, the importance of gender, the difficulty of change, the triviality of changes), such approaches, in their alignment

with neoliberal mechanics of individualization, may also risk undermining broader social movements. If language reform is about being civil to, and inclusive of, private individuals whose diversity is normalized and to whom language accurately responds, there may be a risk that the push for truly degendering the roles will be sublimated as individuals pursue individual self-fulfillment. Even if this approach does support greater uptake of degendered terms, can it promote degendered understandings? And, does it even support greater uptake?

While the interviewees discussed in this chapter largely place gendered language in the past and claim that great progress has been made—despite their own unwillingness to engage in conflict over it and some participants' seeming obliviousness to the use of gendered language—such claims demand further consideration. Hence, in the chapters that follow, I explore the extent to which degendered language reform has actually been taken up in the community in terms of language use (Chapter 5), as well as the extent to which this language reform is, or is not, accompanied by a breakdown of the heteronormatively gendered role dynamics traditional to the community (Chapter 6).

5 Lexical level reform?

"I just try to stick to lead and follow…and trying to avoid the use of pronouns altogether" (T)

5.1 Introduction

As was explored in the previous chapter, all of the participants interviewed in this project supported lexical reform and, further to that, they believed that the reform is in progress or has even come to completion. To quote one interviewee: "I don't really see that as an issue…even the traditionalist- (.) I have noticed some traditionalists trying really hard to um (.) keep up with the change of language as well" (Q). However, these perceptions aside, the question remains: to what extent has this reform progressed and how are participants actually enacting the reform, i.e. how are they coming to avoid using the gendered language of a prior era? In this chapter, I investigate the distribution of gendered nouns and pronouns, the canonical degendered neologisms (LEADER/FOLLOWER), gender-neutral pronouns (e.g. singular THEY, YOU), and other strategies for pointing to generic or non-specific instances of the roles without recourse to gender. Quantitative distributions are extracted from the recorded interviews, while observational data provide supporting insights from more naturalistic dance contexts.[47] Upon detailing these distributions, I investigate the patterns of gendered language avoidance and cases of its use to understand which tactics appear to be successful, as well as areas that may be blind spots or persistent challenges for the reform.

[47] Because the observational data is based on fieldnotes rather than full recordings, it is impossible to provide quantitative assessments of token distributions from this data. It does however provide valuable contextualization for the data collected in the relatively controlled and focussed environment of the interview.

5.2 Rates of gendered vs. degendered tokens

In a study I conducted in 2019, the two hosts of a then popular WCS podcast were found to use gendered language for 23.61% and 5.71% of generic references to the roles (in the form of nouns and pronouns), respectively (O'Neill, 2024). Upon initial calculations, the current dataset of interviews collected between 2022 and 2023 seems to show a similar range of rates of gendered noun and pronoun use with an average rate of 8%, a high of 28%, and a low of 2% (Table 5.1). However, due to the nature of the interviews, i.e. that they include explicit discussion of degendering and associated language change, a significant number of these gender tokens represent meta-discourse about past—often others'—use of gendered language (e.g. "[the workshop] was great but every- everything was ladies and men" (D)). This sort of meta-discourse is explicitly opposed to the use of such gendered tokens, and, unlike unreflective use, comprises primarily nouns rather than pronouns—a point which will become relevant later in this chapter when the breakdown of (de)gendered language use is considered. Thus, all such metadiscursive mentions were excluded from the calculation of rates of gendered language use to produce the rates listed in "Gendered (clean)" in Table 5.1. In these cleaned rates, while the participant with the highest rate of gendered use still exceeds 20%, no other participant exceeds even 10%, the average use drops to 3%, and ten participants use no gendered generic or non-specific references to the roles at all. Overall, then, the average for this entire group is lower than the rate found for the podcast host who was most supportive of degendering in 2019 (5.71%). Given that the 2019 data comes from only two participants, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the progression of the change but, given the accounts of historical use presented by many of these participants (see Chapter 4), it would seem to support participants' assessments that there is strong movement towards a fully degendered completion of this language change.

Table 5.1. Gendered v. degendered nouns and pronouns used in generic reference to the dance roles during interviews.

	Gendered		Gendered (clean)*		Degendered		
Participant	n	%	n	%	n	% (total)	% (clean)
A	5	9%	0	0%	52	91%	100%
B	10	3%	0	0%	279	97%	100%
C	10	4%	7	3%	247	96%	97%
D	3	9%	0	0%	32	91%	100%
E	11	10%	1	1%	98	90%	99%
F	3	8%	0	0%	33	92%	100%
G	9	7%	7	5%	122	93%	95%
H	3	4%	0	0%	71	96%	100%
I	3	2%	3	2%	137	98%	98%
J	3	3%	2	2%	84	97%	98%
K	31	**28%**	22	**21%**	81	72%	79%
L	10	3%	8	3%	284	97%	97%
M	13	14%	3	4%	81	86%	96%
N	7	8%	0	0%	80	92%	100%
O	10	5%	0	0%	206	95%	100%
P	12	8%	0	0%	144	92%	100%
Q	2	2%	2	2%	82	98%	98%
R	5	6%	1	1%	83	94%	99%
S	13	**16%**	7	**9%**	68	84%	91%
T	14	16%	0	0%	74	84%	100%
U	6	7%	0	0%	85	93%	100%
V	11	**10%**	9	**8%**	103	90%	92%
Average	194	8%	72	3%	2526	92%	97%

* Meta-discursive mentions (e.g. commentary on and critique of gendered language use) excluded

While there is not necessarily any demographic consistency across those who do not use gendered language—they range in age from the youngest to the oldest age cohorts, include both women and men, and are both gay and straight—the participants who use gendered language the most (21%, 9%, 8%, bolded in Table 5.1) are all in the two oldest age cohorts (45-54, 55-64). In fact, the participant with the highest rates of use is also the participant who has been involved in the community the longest. She has been dancing WCS since the mid-nineties and teaching the dance for over 20 years—in short, she has many years of experience using pre-degendering

terms which must now be overcome. Additionally, like the podcast host with higher rates of use, this participant reports a supportive orientation towards dancers who engage in non-heteronormative roles, while also aligning herself with more "old school" modes of WCS practice (excerpt 1).

(1) I like (.) telling some of the old stories because I like to (.) um (.) place myself in the universe in the West Coast swing universe that- that I'm somebody who's been dancing the dance a long time I'm not afraid to- to- to- to say that that might make me a little old school but it also means that I've had a lot of experience so- so y'know there's y'know that- there's a two edged thing like I'm not- I'm not- I'm not y'know the most- maybe the most current of dance teachers but I'm- but I've been doing it a long time (K)

This broader pattern of older, more "old school" aligned dancers with a longer history in WCS having higher rates of gendered language use was also reflected in my observation data where such individuals were found to use more gendered references to the roles than other participants. Indeed, gendered language was rare in other demographics outside of meta-discourse about the language reform. Because of the distribution of talk in public dance event spaces, in which instructors and MCs tend to do most of talking, this pattern was particularly noticeable amongst instructors.

Observations also suggested that instructors who are speakers of English as an additional language use more gendered language, particularly pronouns. It must be noted, however, that all of the very few such observed speakers were native speakers of French. This reflects broader trends in the spread of WCS—insofar as France has become one of the main centres of dancing outside of the US and Canada—as well as the nature of the study area, including areas of Quebec

and Canadian and US regions that are in close proximity to Quebec. While the small number of such instructors means that significantly more research is required to explore this possibility, several interviewees highlighted the idea that speaking a language with grammatical gender, such as French, might be a possible explanation for persistent use of gendered tokens in English (see excerpt 2), suggesting that this pattern has been observed by at least some participants in the community.

(2) I think a good example of that is (.) um teachers who are coming who originally speak French especially with French being uh like a gendered language right so you- you get a little bit of that coming across where (.) um where y'know is- is this a gender bias or is this like a French to English translation issue? (A)

Overall, then, the degendering of language referring to dance roles appears to be reaching near total adoption amongst many speakers; however, the persistence of a significant quantity of gendered language amongst a subset of speakers, and traces of gendered language amongst others of varied demographic characteristics, means that there is still room to explore precisely how degendering is being enacted (Section 5.3) and, further to that, precisely when and where gendered references to the roles are being used (Section 5.4) in WCS .

5.3 Degendered language

As discussed in the summary above, the vast majority of generic and non-specific references to the dance roles were in fact gender-neutral. In interviews, averaged over all participants, 97% of references were gender-neutral and only 3% were gendered. While the rate of gendered language does seem to increase in non-interview contexts as per the findings of the participant observation component of this project, overall, there appears to be very strong uptake of the degendering language reform across my research sites. In this section, then, I explore the

strategies that appear to be active in this transition away from gendered language and towards degendered (or in some cases, non-generic) alternatives.

5.3.1 Avoidance strategies

Before considering the types of gender-neutral alternatives that are deployed, it is important to acknowledge the role of avoidance in this language reform. While obviously gendered language is avoided when it is replaced by gender-neutral alternatives, in some classes, instructors were observed to avoid, not gender but generic reference. In such classes, pairs of instructors continued to use gendered language (mainly pronouns), but such gendered language was always used in reference to their specific partner, embodying a particular role. Even when responding to student questions which contained gendered tokens referring generically to the dance roles, such instructors tended to frame their response to refer to the instructors' own specific partnership, i.e. rather than talking about "the lady" an instructor might talk about "my lady" referring to their teaching partner (often also their romantic partner). While this strategy is constantly at risk of slipping into generic reference, a subset of instructors seem to rely upon it. They persistently use 1st person framing and maintain physical contact with their partner instructor while explaining movements such that any gendered pronouns can be heard, not as generic, but specific.

A more common strategy of avoidance is "just going to do leader follower" (P) or "try[ing] to stick to lead and follow…and trying to avoid the use of pronouns altogether" (T). While the interviewees quoted above do in fact use singular THEY,[48] that they see avoiding

[48] That Interviewee (T) uses only one pronoun in reference to the roles in his interview but does use pronouns in his teaching (as discussed in the interview) may contribute to cognitive accounts for pronoun usage. Under the lower cognitive load of an interview, this participant may be better able to focus on pursuing his particular approach to degendering (avoiding pronouns) whereas in the higher cognitive load context of teaching he slips into a more normative pattern of using pronouns for subsequent references (Fukumura & van Gompel, 2012).

pronouns, and focussing on the flagship degendered nouns, as a primary approach to degendering speaks to both the relative completion of the nominal reform (they don't worry about accidentally using a gendered noun) and the continuing perceived risk of "slipping" in their use of pronouns. For those who lack easy access to singular THEY (see Section 5.3.2.4 for further discussion), this generalized avoidance of pronouns may in fact be the only way to truly avoid gendering singular references. This is highlighted by interviewee (K) who discusses her own challenges with pronouns and resolves to do better, as seen in excerpt 3.

(3) it's just- it's- it's- it's- it's a struggle not to put the- put the gender and I- then whether that's just you know old school or whatever that I've just been teaching for s- for a long time doing it that way even though as I said I've been leading (.) almost right from the beginning um (.) it's- it's still (.) uh too easy to say him and her for leader and follower um and I'd like to (.) work on that personally (K)

This general trouble with pronouns is also visible in the patterns of repairs—i.e. language behaviour that marks a previous utterance as problematic and recasts it or appends alternatives or additions to the utterance—made to gendered pronouns. While some participants did repair to THEY, the majority repair to a split form (e.g. "He (.) or she") or to the corresponding dance role noun (e.g. "him- or the leader"). This may be in response to the lack of differentiation that results when THEY is used for both roles, as discussed above, but arguably can also be attributed to a broader strategy of just avoiding pronouns entirely.

Of course, "avoiding pronouns" as described above, unlike avoiding generic reference, does require the use of an alternative form to refer to the dance roles generically. In Table 5.2, below, I provide a summary of the strategies used to refer generically to the dance roles in the interviews.

Table 5.2. Distribution of strategies for achieving gender-neutral generic reference to the dance roles with comparisons to rates of non-metalinguistic* gendered language use.

Participant	G.Pro		G.Sg.N		G.Pl.N		D.Sg.N		D.Pl.N		D.Sg.Pro**		D.Pl.Pro		2p.P		Gerunds		Phrasal	
A	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	32	55%	7	12%	1	2%	4	7%	7	12%	4	7%	3	5%
B	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	99	32%	42	13%	32	10%	26	8%	81	26%	27	9%	6	2%
C	6	2%	1	0%	0	0%	91	32%	59	21%	26	9%	57	20%	16	6%	25	9%	1	0%
D	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	15	38%	6	15%	3	8%	4	10%	4	10%	7	18%	0	0%
E	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%	44	42%	27	25%	8	8%	4	4%	15	14%	6	6%	1	1%
F	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	18	38%	12	25%	1	2%	2	4%	0	0%	14	29%	1	2%
G	1	1%	1	1%	5	4%	41	30%	26	19%	20	15%	13	9%	23	17%	7	5%	0	0%
H	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	23	29%	8	10%	16	20%	12	15%	12	15%	8	10%	0	0%
I	1	1%	2	1%	0	0%	69	47%	24	16%	3	2%	6	4%	35	24%	6	4%	1	1%
J	1	1%	1	1%	0	0%	34	35%	15	15%	0	0%	14	14%	21	21%	9	9%	3	3%
K	20	18%	0	0%	2	2%	53	46%	16	14%	1	1%	8	7%	3	3%	11	10%	0	0%
L	0	0%	5	2%	3	1%	151	50%	47	15%	34	11%	28	9%	24	8%	13	4%	0	0%
M	0	0%	1	1%	2	2%	46	39%	23	19%	2	2%	7	6%	3	3%	30	25%	5	4%
N	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	43	45%	16	17%	9	9%	2	2%	10	10%	13	14%	3	3%
O	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	99	41%	47	19%	10	4%	11	5%	38	16%	33	14%	6	2%
P	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	98	64%	19	12%	7	5%	2	1%	18	12%	9	6%	0	0%
Q	2	2%	0	0%	0	0%	33	35%	14	15%	6	6%	20	22%	9	10%	9	10%	0	0%
R	0	0%	1	1%	0	0%	52	53%	18	18%	4	4%	5	5%	4	4%	15	15%	0	0%
S	4	5%	3	4%	0	0%	32	42%	11	14%	3	4%	9	12%	13	17%	2	3%	0	0%
T	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	55	68%	11	14%	1	1%	0	0%	7	9%	6	7%	1	1%
U	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	32	36%	12	14%	18	20%	17	19%	6	7%	3	3%	0	0%
V	3	2%	2	2%	4	3%	42	34%	32	26%	4	3%	6	5%	19	15%	13	10%	0	0%
Average		1%		1%		1%		42%		17%		7%		9%		12%		10%		1%

Degendered – **G**endered; **Sing**ular – **Pl**ural; **Pro**noun – **N**oun; Phrasal refers to noun phrases with internal CPs

*Because the interviews involved metalinguistic discussion of others' observed language habits, gendered language used as an example of others' behaviour in terms of the language reform were not counted here as they were clearly denoted as "what not to do" or "how things used to be"

**Only two instances of D.Sg.Pro were forms other than singular THEY: "what" (G), "she or he" (V).

The table shows rates of both gendered generic reference and a range of alternatives, including those alternatives used by individuals who try to avoid singular pronouns entirely. In addition to the canonical dance role nouns, LEADER and FOLLOWER and their variants, participants also used (1) plural nouns which allowed for the use of the unmarked for gender plural THEY; (2) gerund forms of the verbs TO LEAD and TO FOLLOW; (3) complex nouns phrases such as "people who primarily follow" (B); (4) 2nd person pronouns which in English are not marked for gender; and (5) singular THEY. In the sections that follow I discuss each of these alternatives and their patterns of use in turn.

5.3.2 Alternatives to gendered language

Where pronouns are avoided, the most common alternative is simply the use of degendered role nouns, FOLLOWER and LEADER, as seen in excerpt 4.

(4) I really wanted to dance with it and I looked arou- around the room and all the leaders were taken and I think you were there the- the leader follow ratio was really askew and I was like even the- the followers who I know can also lead were all already dancing (F)

As observed in my prior work (O'Neill, 2024), there seems to be a tendency amongst some speakers to repeat dance role nouns, or other neutral nouns such as PARTNER, SOMEONE, PEOPLE, rather than using pronouns for subsequent mentions. Accordingly, singular gender-neutral nouns were the most common way of referring to the roles in the interviews at an average rate of 42% of all mentions (see Table 5.2). This provides an interesting contrast to some older usage patterns wherein gendered pronouns (i.e. HE, SHE) did not need to be paired with nominal antecedents, since they were such well-established ways to refer to the roles within the context of a dance class. It also furthers the notion that singular THEY may lack the necessary capacity for

differentiation of the roles in some contexts and/or that, due to challenges with pronouns or lack of familiarity with singular THEY, members of the community often just avoid pronouns entirely. Parallel to the challenge of distinction, only 6% (n =107) [49] of all noun references to the roles were nouns that relied on context to determine their role referent (e.g. PARTNER, SOMEONE, PERSON). This suggests that relying on context may be less viable outside of class contexts. In a naturalistic class environment, the embodiment of the speaking instructor in relation to their teaching/demo partner communicates which role they are referring to in a given moment.[50] By contrast, in the context of an interview, where speakers are typically sitting one-on-one with the interviewer and no actual dancing (or even physical touch) is taking place, there is no way to use the relative position of one's body vis-à-vis one's dance partner's to indicate which role is being captured by an underspecified term like PARTNER. The primacy of these embodied elements of communication in dance spaces did occasionally arise in interviews with interviewees either using their bodies as props for explanations, or in one case asking me to create a hand-to-hand connection with them to "feel" something they were explaining. However, the lack of a structured class context in which teaching how to enact the roles is the primary activity, and in which one is using a partner as an extension of one's own teaching, seems to have limited the use of embodiment for disambiguating references to the dance roles.

Role nouns were also prominent as vocatives in teaching contexts where they were used to direct subsequent instructions to one role group or the other, facilitating the use of 2nd person reference (e.g. "leaders, do your styling") as will be discussed further below. Overall, however,

[49] Of the 1205 singular gender-neutral nouns, only 73 (or 6%) were words that were not variants of FOLLOWER and LEADER, e.g. PARTNER, SOMEONE, ONE, PERSON. Of the 492 plural gender-neutral nouns, only 34 (or 7%) were words that were not variants of LEADER and FOLLOWER.

[50] It is worth noting here that even in classroom environments, if the instructor was teaching solo and drawing on multiple demo partners or demo partners that could take on either role, I observed some instances of clarifying roles in classes (i.e. "I'm leading now"), particularly when the instructor or their demo partner was engaging in a non-heteronormative role.

there seems to be a perception that these role noun neologisms are, in fact, the language change itself with some participants referring to how they just stick to LEADER and FOLLOWER because these terms are "just more accurate (.) in general (.) right um so it's better language" (L) without addressing how they manage elements such as pronouns. This imbalance between having explicit strategies for nouns, but only an attempt to avoid pronouns, may go some way towards explaining the much higher rate of gendered pronoun versus gendered noun usage. In the case of nouns, an alternative for the same part of speech can be slotted in even once a syntactic frame is well under development or even partly uttered. For example, nouns like LADY and FOLLOWER can both be substituted for each other using the same verb conjugations. By contrast, the choice to avoid a particular pronoun without a ready replacement for the same part of speech and matching verb conjugation may make it much hard to recast on the fly. For example, SHE and THEY (even when singular) require different verb conjugations, and so, if SHE is to be replaced with THEY the verb must be re-conjugated. By contrast, choosing a different part of speech, a noun, likely embedded in a slightly more complex phrase structure, e.g. "the follower", to replace a gendered pronoun, enables the retention of the same verb conjugation. I suggest that the additional complexity in on-the fly recasting leads to gendered pronouns being more frequently uttered than gendered nouns—with those pronouns sometimes being recast after the fact through repair, often to a doublet (e.g. HE or SHE) or different part of speech (see Section 6.2.1.1).

5.3.2.1 Pluralization

In addition to just avoiding pronouns through repeated noun mentions, gendered pronouns can also be avoided through the use of plural forms of both nouns and pronouns. Though all interviewees used more singular than plural nouns, the balance of singular versus plural pronouns is substantially more varied. Of those participants with only limited use of

singular THEY, using it in less than 5% of cases, (see Table 5.2; A, F, I, J, K, M, O, R, S, T), all but two[51] have a higher rate of plural THEY than singular pronouns, suggesting that they are not necessarily avoiding pronouns entirely, but instead may be using plural forms to avoid gendered singular pronouns. This strategy is exemplified in excerpt 5 below wherein the interviewee begins a construction with a singular noun phrase "my person following-" but then stops short and repairs to "or followers" which allows her to complete the utterance using plural THEY rather than a singular third person pronoun.

(5) I usually have to (.) y'know greet my person followin- or followers uh to me 'cause otherwise they'll skip by me (D)

This use of plurals is likely particularly appealing for those who have grammatical qualms or habitual blocks towards singular THEY, which prevents them from comfortably using the singular form and leaves them with only the plural as a gender-neutral 3rd person pronoun option. The potential role for pluralization in navigating challenges with pronouns was demonstrated both in interviews and in class environments where speakers were often observed transitioning between plural and singular reference across the pivot point of a THEY pronoun (e.g. excerpts 6 and 7).

(6) other people (.) uh they just want to (.) provide the- (.) uh a good dance to to their follower (S)

(7) followers have control of their center (L)

These transitions between plural and singular allow for THEY to plausibly retain a plural reading while still being deployed to modify singular nouns or to refer to singular nouns.

[51] Interviewee (T) uses only one pronoun in generic/non-specific reference to the roles and it happens to be a singular THEY suggesting that he truly is avoiding pronouns. Interviewee (K) has a higher rate of gender-neutral plural pronouns than gender-neutral singular pronouns, but her relatively greater use of gendered singular pronouns means that overall her rate of singular pronouns is greater than her rate of plural pronouns.

Particularly when referring to a body part or one half of a partnership, these uses of THEY can be understood as distributed readings, "for each X, there is a Y", in accordance with the common ground assumptions about the shape of human bodies and that each follower is typically dancing with only one leader (and vice versa). However, they do not appear to be intentionally constructed as distributed plurals. Rather, their utility for licensing a gender-neutral 3rd person pronoun seems relevant. Even if the speaker ultimately frames their utterance in terms of the experience or embodiment of one individual, having begun with plural reference licenses the use of THEY rather than HE or SHE. Furthermore, a case like excerpt 8 below, where THEY co-refers both with "followers" (pl) and "follow" (sg), while potentially also amendable to a distributed reading, seems to suggest an underlying ambivalence to THEY such that, once it is introduced to co-refer with a plural referent, it can also access singular readings that allow it to co-refer with a later singular form of the referent.

(8) most of the good male followers are not trying to look feminine they're trying to be themselves dancing as a follow (G)

It is also worth noting that those participants with the highest rates of singular THEY, using it in more than 10% of cases (see G, H, L, U in Table 5.2), have lower (though in some cases nearly equal) rates of plural THEY as compared to singular THEY. This suggests that, for those who do have ready access to singular THEY, plural options may be less important or less frequently used than they would be otherwise.

5.3.2.2 Roles as actions rather than individuals

In addition to pluralization, some participants also regularly framed discussion of the roles using gerunds such as "leading" and "following". While pluralization avoids the necessity of engaging with singular gendered pronouns, the use of gerunds depersonalizes the roles,

framing them not in terms of the person doing them, but instead in terms of the act itself. Because the role need not be personified in these framings, they avoid the tendency for people to include gender in the personification of individuals (McConnell-Ginet, 2011). Thus, the *role* itself can be thought of as truly genderless even as many (if not most) speakers might struggle to conceptualize a truly genderless person (see McConnell-Ginet, 2011). The use of gerunds, then, alleviates the need for any animate pronouns at all—we're not talking about persons but behaviours. Furthermore, since in English non-animate pronouns do not have grammatical marking for gender, this allows for unproblematic access to, and in fact, necessary use of, genderless IT for subsequent mentions (e.g. "I do enjoy leading (.) but it does drain my batteries" (M)). Gerunds are less common than role nouns (see Table 5.2 for comparisons), perhaps partially due to their lack of utility as vocatives, which play a significant role in the teaching contexts that are the environment in which the greatest amount of linguistic socialization occurs in WCS. However, they align with a broader discursive shift away from seeing participants solely in terms of their gender identity and therefore role identity, to seeing participants as individuals who engage in one or both of the two possible sets of activities defined under the role categories (cf. Section 4.3.2).

Whereas, in the past, only instructors or very high level dancers would have engaged in dancing both roles (Lavin, 2019), in my interviews, 17 of the 22 interviewees danced both roles at least semi frequently and, of the remaining five, all had at least tried the other role.[52] Furthermore, increasingly many events have begun incorporating switch competitions, which require all participants to not only be able to dance both roles, but in fact to switch back and forth

[52] One of the men amongst this group seldom followed but had reached relatively good proficiency in both roles through a teacher training program; another follows very occasionally "as a lark"; while the third has followed only very rarely often in contexts where someone is demonstrating a movement to him. Of the two women, both have learned a few patterns; for one this has been mostly while filling in for role imbalances in classes.

between them. Hence, unlike in contexts where one's gender dictates one's role and the two can therefore become synonymous and equally viable in defining an individual, in this scene it is increasingly likely that one's potential mode(s) of participating in a partnership may not be definable in terms of a single role, let alone in terms of the individual's gender. Hence, the need to be able to split the role from the one performing it is further enhanced insofar as a single individual may be both a leader and a follower, or perhaps a "leader who's following" (M), a "follower[] who I know can also lead" (F) or even someone who "do[es] both [roles]" (T).

This trend is also exemplified in the less common but still present use of complex noun phrases using complementizers to frame participants as "Xs who do Y" rather than "Y-ers", e.g. "people who primarily follow" (B) or "people who are only leaders" (J). In the interviews, this complex noun phrase approach was more common in cases where gender was specifically relevant and being specified (e.g. "women who lead" (E), "a male who's following" (G)), but it did also appear in some true neutral cases both in the interviews and observations, as shown in the example from (B) and (J) above as well as those from (M) and (F) in the previous paragraph. Such true neutral cases appear to acknowledge the disjunct between individual identity and the capacity for participation in the role paradigm, perhaps extending beyond degendering to a broader move away from identifying with one's role(s), or enabling the articulation of engaging in a given role temporarily in instruction contexts, e.g. "people who are willing to lead on this side"; "followers over here- or people who are following today". What's more, such strategies of avoiding reference to an individual *as* role in favour of those that refer to an individual as one who may do the role may overlap with Carnaghi et al's (2008) findings that nominal descriptions (e.g. *Mark is a homosexual*) facilitate stereotype congruent inferences and inhibit non-congruent inferences to a greater extent than adjectival descriptions (e.g. *Mark is homosexual*). Should a

similar pattern hold in this case, one would expect to find that even though they may be gender-neutral, the terms FOLLOWER and LEADER might be more likely to facilitate heteronormative inferences and block non-heteronormative ones than those framings which avoid nominal reference and instead frame the role as an action or ability attributed to an individual referred to by a noun that does not carry any history of heteronormativity (e.g. PERSON).

However, some such cases speak to the need to still be able to manage a heteronormative past through the degendered terms of today. Interviewee O discusses the way that one's first role can influence how one dances the other role; note that he uses complex noun phrases featuring novel terms that he is "making up" on the fly (excerpt 9).

(9) when I'm dancing with a lead who is now learning to follow uh and has a longer experience as a lead and a shorter experience as a follow I think the style that they follow with is different than the following style of someone who is quote like a native follower let's call that ((laugh)) … so as I said because it tends to be that more males are quote n- I'm I'm making up my- this own terminology more males tend to be native leaders and more followers tend to be native- sorry more females tend to be native followers (.) um (.) I think that there are some stylistic differences that you feel when dancing…like if you watch them dancing you realize that there's a- you can tell with near (.) I would say like ninety-five percent accuracy whether someone started as a lead or as a follow based on the way that they dance (O)

In this excerpt (shortened here; the full excerpt spans over nearly 4 minutes), the speaker navigates the complex temporal relationships between a role one may have started with and the roles that one may dance in the present, through the description of one's first role as one's "native" role. Though he acknowledges that this broadly follows gendered patterns, his

systematic avoidance of gendered terminology means that a new term must be innovated to delineate this initial positionality, regardless of one's later development—whether later development means becoming equally proficient in both roles, or even dominant in the additional role, but still being influenced by the movement patterns of that initial "native" role. While this leads to greater complexity (e.g. "native leaders (.) um who are following" (O); cf. "men who are following" (B)) and some production errors that entangle the roles/genders (e.g. "more followers tend to be native- sorry more females tend to be native followers" (O)), such complex forms speak to a strong commitment to degendering and significant discursive level reframings. These reframings are being used to understand and articulate patterns that may appear to be gendered, as artefacts of dancers' histories of learning which merely coincide with gender due to historical heteronormativity instead. While this extreme approach requires further (in situ) innovations as well as a great deal of cognitive effort, as indicated by the production errors, pauses, etc. in excerpt 9, it nonetheless speaks to an ideology that insists on separating gender and role through the language that is used to articulate the latter.

5.3.2.3 2nd person pronouns

In addition to these complex, nominal constructions, and in contrast with broader strategies of pronoun avoidance articulated by interviewees, gender-neutral pronouns were also used in references to the roles. Perhaps drawing on the teaching context where role nouns are commonly vocative and paired with 2nd person pronouns, interviewees also drew on 2nd person pronouns as resources for degendered reference to the roles. However, unlike in class contexts where many of the utterances are directives from the instructors, and, thus, where 2nd person pronouns were understandably frequent as a mechanism to incite physical response from the students, in the interviews, 2nd person pronouns can be explained only by either a desire for

involvement or an attempt to avoid gendered language—perhaps both (e.g. “as a leader you- you craft the dance” (I)). As I argued in the case of podcasts (O’Neill, 2024), this 2nd person reference may serve to build rapport between speakers and create interspeaker involvement by drawing the interlocutor into the utterance (Chafe, 1982). This may be further facilitated by the fact that I, as the interviewer/interlocutor, was known to dance both roles and, hence, could be expected to be able to relate to the experiences of dancing either role. That said, it also serves as a very useful gender-neutral pronoun option for referring to the roles.

While in a non-teaching context, 2nd person pronouns may serve to help to both build rapport and avoid gendered reference, in teaching contexts they seem more oriented towards accomplishing instructional goals, i.e. telling YOU, the student, what to do. However, when instructors switch back and forth between demonstrating in 1st person and directing in 2nd person, gendered terms which may be heard as specific reference to the instructor’s specifically gendered partner during demonstration, often persist into the directing sequences. Here these gendered terms become generic, referring to the general class of “leaders” or “followers”, in correspondence with the generic applicability of YOU to all members of the instructed role. As such, while 2nd person may avoid gendering the role being spoken to, it can increase the risk of gendering the other role in the partnership.

5.3.2.4 Singular THEY

In contrast to the ambivalence of 2nd person pronouns, singular THEY seems to provide an unequivocally degendered option. This option, however, does not appear to be available to all speakers. While only one interviewee never used singular THEY, a further 16 used it in less than 10% of cases and, of those, 10 used it in less than 5% of cases. Additionally, 11 instructors were

observed making no use of singular THEY in their classes/workshops.[53] This is perhaps not surprising. In prior work (O'Neill, 2024), I found that two podcast hosts used singular THEY in only 6% and 4.5% of references to the roles, respectively. Furthermore, one interviewee reflected on her difficulty using singular THEY for a nonbinary person in her own life, accounting for this difficulty both in terms of the individual's presentation (which the interviewee experiences as feminine) and in terms of classic grammatical concerns with singular THEY (see Curzan, 2003; Saguy & Williams, 2022):

(10) I actually find it onerous and awkward in conversation language wise because there is (.) no plural (.) involved when I say "they went to the store" I expect to be talking about more than one person (.) so I find that difficult (.) that's where people my age also find it difficult (J)

This struggle has been reported in other work on singular THEY which has found that, while singular THEY is broadly accepted in cases where the referent is non-specific or gender is unknown (Balhorn, 2004; Bradley, 2020; Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 1997; Sanford et al., 2008), its acceptance in specific contexts or where it is used to refer to referents with "known" gender is more variable (Bjorkman, 2017; Bradley, 2020) and is often age graded (Conrod, 2020).

While the very point of degendering is that we cannot know the gender of all leaders or all followers, since people of any gender could be either, the long history of heteronormativity in this dance, and in Eurocentric partner dance styles more broadly, means that, at least for some participants, the generic categories of leader and follower may in fact be processed like referents of known gender. Hence, we see the continued use of gendered pronouns for the roles, and the

[53] While the absence of singular THEY in as little as one hour of observed workshops may not be indicative of instructors' broader patterns of use, it is nonetheless instructive when compared with other instructors who make heavy use of singular THEY in equivalent time frames/teaching contexts.

mixed access to singular THEY for the same. Moulton et al. (2020) argue that the use of gender-neutral antecedents can improve the acceptability of singular THEY (over cases with no antecedent) in contexts where the referent's gender is known. They argue that by using a gender-neutral antecedent, the speaker is (perhaps unintentionally) signalling the irrelevance of gender in the utterance. While this may not be the case for all participants (cf. users of FOLLOWER and LEADER alongside gendered pronouns as will be discussed in Section 5.4.2), it may be coming into play for those who do make regular use of singular THEY.[54] In fact, some participants used singular THEY so freely that they were observed using singular THEY (co-referring with "my partner" or "my follower") for specific referents (i.e. demo partners) who presented as women. When asked about this, one such instructor reported, not that he was uncertain of people's preferred pronouns or that he knew they preferred they, but instead said: "I can get ahead of myself … it's like I'll make a switch in my brain without saying 'OK and now I'm referring to ((soft laugh)) followers in general or leaders in general'" (T). This suggests that in the high cognitive load state of teaching, some have sufficient acceptance of singular THEY to apply it even to a specific gendered referent, perhaps facilitated by the concurrent use of gender-neutral antecedents. Such comfortable users of singular THEY seem less prone to slips into gendered language than those who do not seem to have access to singular THEY. This is likely because gendered pronouns remain the most troubled element of this language reform and, so, having access to a non-gendered alternative pronoun allows this challenge to be more smoothly avoided. By contrast, if singular THEY remains uncomfortable to access, the need for efficiency in

[54] That some participants still use the degendered nouns in concert with gendered pronouns, under this analysis might also suggest that for those participants the degendered neologisms are not quite so degendered as they may seem and instead are understood to refer to a certain type of gendered person as much as they may pick out a genderless role. See Chapter 6 for further discussion.

conversation and especially in teaching may make one vulnerable to slips into gendered pronouns in subsequent mentions or even as shorthand for the roles generally.

It is worth mentioning that, while most individuals who do not seem to have access to singular THEY are older, in line with other work on singular THEY (Conrod, 2020; Hekanaho, 2020; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020), not all older individuals lack access. In fact, the interviewees with the highest rates of singular THEY use (20%) are in the 45-54 and 55-64 years old cohorts, respectively, while the other three interviewees with high rates of use (10% or higher) are in the 25-34 and 45-54 years old cohorts. While this small sample size in no way contradicts the findings of age-gradedness reported in prior research, it does provide hope that even older individuals may be able to acclimatize themselves to the use of singular THEY and/or break down long standing associations between social roles and gender identity.

In addition to the uptake of singular THEY for generics that are unmarked for gender, some of the interviewees I spoke to demonstrated even further adoption of singular THEY when they used singular THEY to co-refer with generics that are marked for gender (see excerpts 11-12), a development which corresponds with the emerging acceptance of singular THEY for specific antecedents of known gender (Bjorkman, 2017; Conrod, 2020; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020) if not always for named individuals.

(11) the man [following] is just stronger so it depends on how they're- they're- (.) y'know I'm gonna have to control the- the energy and the- the momentum of it better um so it's maybe a little extra to think about…and they're also often (.) practicing their- their following as well whereas if I'm leading a- a female they're already used to be- to following um so (.) ((laughing)) they can help me a little bit right yeah (H)

(12) I don't usually dip a- a- a male follower just because they're a lot heavier (S)

In these excerpts, the generic is initially referred to using an explicitly gendered singular noun phrase specifying the gender of a generic participant engaging in a specific role, but then in subsequent reference, singular THEY is used. In excerpt 13 below, this goes even further. As the interviewee recalls another dancer talking about historic norms, he uses the (likely accurate to the original speaker) gendered nouns "guy" and "girl" in place of LEADER and FOLLOWER, but then, despite replicating this gendering of the roles, proceeds to use singular THEY in subsequent reference.

(13) he just made a remark once- it was actually at [EVENT] very recently where he said like um (.) so like a- a guy bringing a girl into shadow position and then leading them back and forth and basically touching them all over their body and like going high and low and down towards the hips and things that would- (.) like you know even back of them were considered inappropriate (L)

As for the broader progression of THEY as an acceptable option for even specific gendered reference, some previous psycholinguistic work has suggested that this may be accounted for by the underspecification of THEY such that it can, without additional processing costs, serve as an "Institutional they" referring to a stereotypic member of a group (Sanford et al., 2008) or refer to "non-referential" (i.e. generic) noun phrases such as "anybody" or "a truck driver" even if that noun phrase is stereotypically gendered (Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 1997). However, were this the case across the community, one would expect to find everyone making use of singular THEY for all generic reference to the roles. Instead, due to the history of the roles being gendered and referred to with gendered pronouns, a further explanation for such individual variance is called for. I find a compelling account in the combination of (a) broad avoidance of (gendered) pronouns (as discussed in Section 5.3.1) and (b) increasing exposure to, and use of, singular

THEY referring to generics that may retain strong cognitive gender biases in accordance with historical associations and continued broadly observed distributions (see Chapter 6 and (O'Neill, 2024) for further discussion). That is, in such a context wherein HE and SHE are being generally avoided, but THEY is being made available to categories which may for some still be marked for gender (leaders, followers), it may be the case that a pragmatic (in the ideological not linguistic sense) option is to simply use singular THEY for all generics. Under this scenario, HE and SHE are reserved only for specific, named men and women (the context most likely to be unamenable to singular THEY in other accounts (Bjorkman, 2017; Conrod, 2020; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020)), a path which, under the psycholinguistic research cited above, ought to be possible with only limited processing cost. Whether or not this corresponds to an orientation towards individual semantic authority around pronouns, a topic discussed by only two participants (both gay men), is difficult to know, but it does seem to point to a possible future in which THEY is used for all referents until specific individual indicators of preference for HE, SHE, or other pronouns are made available to the referrer.

5.4 Gendered language

Despite the overwhelming shift towards degendered forms of generic reference to the dance roles, gendered forms of reference nonetheless emerged both in my interviews and observations. Hence, in this section, I discuss the distribution of gendered forms of reference in terms of their particular forms, who seems to use them, and when they seem to be used. As was found in my prior work in this community (O'Neill, 2024), gendered pronouns were more frequent than gendered nouns. While in the interview data this was primarily borne out by the one speaker who used gendered language in 21% of cases, all but two of which were pronouns (see Table 5.3), it was also more broadly represented in my observations of classes and

workshops. Before discussing pronouns, however, I turn to the use of gendered nouns. Though they were less commonly used by participants, they seemed to attract greater attention in the commentary on degendering and, as seen in the discussion of the use of "ladies" in excerpt 31 in Chapter 4, may be experienced as particularly egregious and intentional.

Table 5.3. Distribution of nouns vs. pronouns as a percentage of all gendered tokens used for those interview participants that used gendered language.

Participant	Gendered Pronouns		Gendered Sg Nouns		Gendered Pl Nouns	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
C	6	86%	1	14%	0	0%
E	0	0%	0	0%	1	100%
G	1	14%	1	14%	5	71%
I	1	33%	2	67%	0	0%
J	1	50%	1	50%	0	0%
K	**20**	**91%**	**0**	**0%**	**2**	**9%**
L	0	0%	5	63%	3	38%
M	0	0%	1	33%	2	67%
Q	2	100%	0	0%	0	0%
R	0	0%	1	100%	0	0%
S	**4**	**57%**	**3**	**43%**	**0**	**0%**
V	**3**	**33%**	**2**	**22%**	**4**	**44%**

5.4.1 Gendered nouns

Across the observed classes and workshops, gendered nouns used to refer to the roles (e.g. LADIES, GENTLEMEN, GUYS, GIRLS) were relatively rare and generally restricted only to instructors who fit within the demographic outlined in Section 5.2, namely, instructors who were older, had spent a longer time in the scene, and were more "old school" aligned. Such gendered nouns (i.e. LADIES, MEN, GIRLS, GUYS) were used both when addressing and referring to dancers, but tended to be particularly prevalent where gender remains a salient feature of the majority of participants in a role. When spoken by instructors in classes/workshops I observed, these

contexts were primarily: descriptions of styling for followers; discussion of specifics of body size; and analogies that draw similarities between dance and life partnership.[55] In the case of both styling and body size, gendered bodies were at issue and, in the case of these optional stylizations of the body, they did not serve a functional, but instead an aesthetic purpose in the dance. Hence, the shapes that followers were being instructed to make as "ladies" or "girls", e.g. pointed toes, lifted (i.e. accentuated) hips, "ladylike hands", and strutting like female fashion models or pop stars, may be more closely linked to broader aesthetic stylizations of the body (e.g. clothing, hair, makeup, posture) which have traditionally varied along gender lines and which align with the traditional gendering of the roles. Meanwhile, body size can be relevant to the functionality of the dance, and so gendered assumptions about relative size may be particularly salient when, for example, teaching a move where the height of one's follower or leader could significantly impact the ease of enacting a move. Since the majority of dancers are still engaging in heteronormative roles, the relationship between leads' and followers' bodies remains particularly freighted with gendered expectations about how body size and stylization affects movements and aesthetic values, etc. and as such may trigger more use of references to "the guy" or "the girl" in place of leader or follower.[56]

[55] Extensive (and sometimes even systemic) use of gendered nouns was observed amongst some dancers who were not instructors, e.g. referring to leading as "the man's part" or only referring to followers as "ladies". Often these participants were older and in at least one case was established to be a ballroom dancer—a genre that has been less ready in adopting degendered language. While these participants are interesting to consider, only two were observed in the focal community for this study (from which most of the interviews were drawn) and both were deemed peripheral to the community as they were not observed taking part in socials and were seen only at a limited number of classes. Hence, they were not solicited for an interview, and so only limited data is available for their usage patterns. Those few encountered in passing at weekend events may be more embedded in their local communities, but nonetheless are relatively few and far between and so are likely to represent a somewhat peripheral pattern of language use.

[56] Though see discussion in Section 7.4.1 about the way that degendering opens up possibilities for less normatively bodied participants to engage even in heteronormative roles.

Beyond the discussions of dancers' bodies, gendered language also seemed particularly common in contexts that drew on hegemonic expectations of women and men, this time in terms of their heterosexual relations with each other. In several instances, gendered language arose in contexts that drew on stereotypes of (modern) women as overthinking and as being resistant to waiting for a man when describing how followers ought to behave and/or be managed by leaders. Gendered language was also more likely to arise in cases where the dance partnership was analogized to romantic partnership. Entangling the dance roles with non-dance identities and relations, these allusions to relationships seem to condition greater conceptual overlap between dance partnership and heteronormative partnership and so may facilitate the use of more gendered language. While these gendered utterances make sense in the context of their use—they are drawing on shared meanings around gender and/or heteronormative interaction—they speak to an underlying resilience of gendered models of the dance roles (see Chapter 6 for further discussion).

In addition to the cases outlined above, gendered nouns also appear in cases where the entanglement between role and gender is highlighted precisely by non-heteronormative participation. For example, of Interviewee (M)'s three instances of gendered language use, one referred to the speaker's own experience as a leader/man who follows (and was in fact also repaired), "I didn't (.) want to follow like a guy- follow like a leader" (M). The other two both appeared in a context where homophobia was feared (see excerpt 14), and one of these mentions in fact referred to (presumably male) followers using the term "men".

(14) I would always be watching the floor (.) and have an awareness of like (.) who are the men who are dancing with other men (M)

(15) I'll go start asking leaders to- if I can follow them ((laugh))

and how do you (.) navigate that (.) interaction?

I do still feel there is this like just a little bit of like awkwardness (.) of asking another guy to dance (L)

Here we see both Interviewee (M) in excerpt 14 and Interviewee (L) in excerpt 15—two men who follow (one occasionally, one primarily)—using gendered terms when articulating how they identify possible partners when they want to follow. While the question (M) and (L) are responding to in these excerpts was framed in terms of how they find someone to lead them, it was notable that both articulated their decision-making process in terms of identifying which "men" or "guys" were showing signs of being okay dancing with men such as themselves. (M) articulates this explicitly, as looking for "men who are dancing with other men", whereas (L) initially frames it as simply "asking leaders" if he can follow "them" using neutral terms, but then, when asked about how he actually navigates that interaction, pivots to concerns about the awkwardness of asking "another guy" to dance.

Despite the successes of the degendering movement, the majority of followers are feminine presenting, and the majority of leaders are masculine presenting. Thus, given the history of homophobia within the community,[57] when a man wants to follow, what is salient about prospective leaders is not so much their role but rather their likely gender and their potential to respond to an invitation from another man with homophobic violence or aggression. Arguably, this dynamic is similar to that which motivates the use of gendered language when

[57] In addition to the two interviewees who speak to their concern about homophobia in excerpts 14 and 15, another participant (P) reflects on having faced both subtle and explicit homophobia including being referred to as the "token homosexual" by a man leader who refused to dance with him in a class. Other participants also reflect on having been refused by people of the same gender, and (R) talks about having to "tone down" his expression when following one specific individual due to what he identifies as that individual's homophobic leanings.

discussing the bodies of imagined individuals engaging in each role, given that the majority of dancers are still engaging in heteronormative roles. Thus, while the degendering movement may posit a future in which gender is no longer relevant for WCS dancers, this future has not yet been reached—and may never be reached (see Section 4.4.4). That is, as we see in these two excerpts, gender remains an important concern when considering potential dance partners, a concern about which dancers are not unreflective.

5.4.1.1 Orienting to gendered trends in participation

As shown in excerpt 16 below, and also observed in the field, the statistical regularities in terms of leaders' and followers' gender are consciously oriented to by participants. That is, while speakers mark that they know that the dance role is distinct from gender, they nonetheless, because of the pervasive alignment between gender and role, choose to at least occasionally draw on gendered terms of reference to articulate dynamics within the dance and the broader dance community.

(16) right so I see a lot of (.) leaders but just (.) guys in the co- because- because most of them are men … where a lot of guys- or leaders bot- like (.) um are being criticized for not looking like they're dancing (L)

It is notable that, in the discussion surrounding excerpt 16, the interviewee is speaking of an overarching frustration with leaders/men being sidelined as a result of followers/women being given more opportunities not only in the dance, but also in terms of paid teaching opportunities. Hence, this case is one in which not only is the statistical regularity identified, but the relationships between leaders and followers in WCS are said to mirror the perceived tensions between men and women in society more generally (see also excerpt 27 in Section 5.4.3). This

is not unlike those cases highlighted in Section 5.4.1 where gendered language is used in cases where WCS partnership is being analogized to heterosexual romantic partnership.

While excerpt 16 is quite explicit about its deference to statistical regularity, some uses of gendered language are less explicit, while still relying on the same underlying patterns. For example, in excerpt 17, the dynamic of who asks whom to dance is explained in terms of the tendency for dance spaces to be more populated by women than by men.

(17) like when you would first ask someone to dance (.) um because it- it's been very common since the beginning of time that women are doing all the asking because (.) just numbers right like there's so many more women in a dance community than there are men (G)

The idea that the interviewee (a woman describing her experience of following) needs to provide an account for asking someone to dance suggests that this is marked behaviour, i.e. that leaders (or men) might be expected to be the ones doing the asking. That the account is then framed in terms of gender (i.e. an imbalance of women and men) is consistent with the assumption that partnerships are comprised in heteronormative ways and ultimately seems to equate the categories of woman and follower, man and leader, in line with gendered participation patterns in WCS.

As was discussed in Section 5.3.2.2, some participants do manage to avoid using gendered generics, even in such cases where gender is relevant, through complex noun phrases which specify the relevant gender of a participant and their degendered role. However, for others, the continued observable link between gender and role and its relevance in terms of how heteronormative ideologies shape participation patterns and social risk (e.g. homophobia), seems

to condition the use of some gendered nouns in places where gender remains a salient feature of the majority of participants in a given role.

5.4.1.2 Choice of gendered nouns

While gendered nominal references to followers included WOMAN, GIRL, LADY, GALS (in observations only), and even FEMALE in relatively even distributions (Figure 5.1a), commensurate references to leaders tended to coalesce around GUY or MAN and only very occasionally MALE or GENTLEMAN (Figure 5.1b).

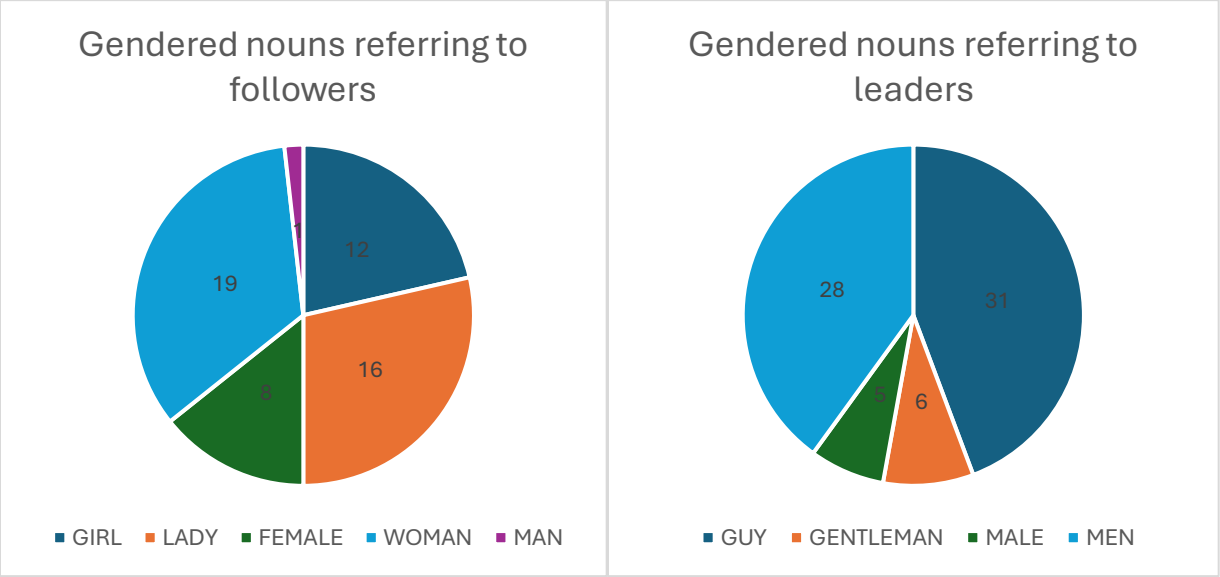


Figure 5.1. Gendered nouns used for (a) followers and (b) leaders in interviews. Singular and plural forms are grouped under a single lemma. Note: the MAN reference to followers is a single instance from the discussion of finding "men" (leaders) who will dance with other "men" (followers) in excerpt 14 above.

This pattern is interesting not only because it reflects the greater use of diminutive (GIRL; BOY was never attested) and honorific (LADY was more frequent than GENTLEMAN) forms for roles typically associated with women, but also because it speaks to the prevalence of the use of GUYS

as a gender-neutral term. Indeed, some in this community argue that the term is gender-neutral and, it is, in fact, used in this way, in some cases even referring to the entire class (of men and women).

The use of GUY becomes even more interesting when only the non-metalinguistic gendered nouns are considered. While references to followers remain fairly evenly distributed across FEMALE (2), GIRL (3), LADY (1), WOMAN (3), and a single token of MAN (see excerpt 14), non-metalinguistic references to leaders include only MAN (7) and, with over twice as many tokens, GUY (16). While the number of tokens from the interviews are relatively low, the same pattern was observed during my participant observation, with GUY being substantially overrepresented in gendered nominal reference to the roles, specifically leaders.

As argued by Martin and Papadelos (2017), GUY bears a strong resemblance to so called masculine generics of the past like MAN. Many have claimed that such masculine generics (in English and other languages) are in fact neutral (when used as such); however, such terms are explicitly masculine and can also be used to communicate the masculine gender of referents. This pattern is replicated in the WCS community's use of GUYS. As seen in excerpt 18, at least some participants claim to use it as a gender-neutral term for everyone.

(18) um but I mean (.) I s- (.) I don't struggle so much with leaders and followers (.) um but because my language as far as (.) um (.) guys and stuff like that um I've always called everybody guys like a group of people is guys right I- I don't care what their gender is um (.) so now (.) that people are touchy about it (.) it's- it was never a slip before but now it's considered a slip even though it's something I've always done (G)

Interviewee (G) reflects on how, for herself, "guys" is a gender-neutral term that she uses to refer to groups, but which she is cautious of as she does not wish to offend anyone who

experiences it as gendered. Yet, in many instances, speakers repaired "guys" to "leaders" suggesting that they interpret GUY as at least potentially gendered and, cognizant of the preference for degendered language, they choose to repair it. It is also worth noting that GUYS does appear as a neutral vocative addressing an entire class (i.e. a mixed group of women and men) as is attested in other work (Metcalf, 2019). However, whereas Metcalf (2019) attests to GUYS also being used for groups of exclusively women, in the data collected for this study, GUYS is never used to refer to followers generically. While I want to be clear that the generic group of followers is not necessarily only women, the fact that GUYS is used only for mixed groups of followers and leaders or groups of only leaders suggests that it retains an androcentric bias—it can only be used for categories that are understood as likely to contain at least some men. That is, in the WCS community, the category of leaders is still amenable to being conceptualized as masculine (or perhaps neutral), while the category of followers is not. Furthermore, GUYS was also used in contrastive structures, juxtaposed with feminine nouns or "followers" when referring to the roles generically (e.g. "Followers if you're dancing with a guy who you think is more advanced..."; see also, excerpt 19), and with feminine nouns when specifically picking out gendered subsets of each role grouping (e.g. "there are less women that are- lead pre- (.) predominantly than guys that follow predominantly" (L)). This further emphasizes the androcentric bias that remains linked to the term as a (masculine) generic.

That said, because of the bivalent use of the term and the plausible deniability of its gendered reading under the "guys as neutral" framing, this may be a term that more easily slips into degendered discourse. For example, even amongst participants who are extremely diligent about avoiding gendered language, and who make use of singular THEY, GUYS can serve as a reference for leaders in a way that seems to be neutral (see excerpt 19), taking the form "these

guys" as a contrastive group to the "you" that they are directly addressing. Nonetheless, the term was never heard similarly applied to a group of only followers.

(19) most of my speeches to my followers and my leaders in my early classes are (.) "I'm going to tell these guys what to do (.) if they don't do it your job is not to listen to me and force them to your job is to listen to your leader" (E)

Thus, though the term can be seen as a repairable, likely on the grounds that it is problematically gendered, it can also pass under the radar in some cases and is perhaps less likely to be experienced as misgendering vis-a-vis terms like LADIES or GIRLS given its common "neutral" use in constructions like "you guys" (cf. Heyd, 2010, Kleinman et al., 2021). Arguably, this contributes to the pattern, both observed and attested by interviewees, that it is often easier for women to participate as leaders than for men to participate as followers,[58] in line with broader patterns of transmisogyny in society. If masculinity (and associated behaviour) is unmarked both socially and linguistically, then there is far greater room for non-men to aspire to and engage with masculine associated roles than for men to pursue marked (and typically less prestigious) feminine associated roles.

5.4.2 Gendered pronouns

While only one interviewee was observed to make significant use of gendered pronouns, it was the case that, during my participant observations, pronouns were generally much more common than gendered nouns, and in fact appeared alongside, and in partnerships with, degendered nouns (as shown in excerpts 20 and 21 drawn from fieldnotes).

(20) "Followers, if he's not giving you what you need…"

(21) "Leaders look where she is, you're going to bring her back there"

[58] See Chapters 6 and 7 for further discussion of this and other reasons.

This tracks with my prior work on podcast data which found that, for the host who used the most gendered language, the vast majority of instances were pronouns (O'Neill, 2024). Like gendered nouns, gendered pronouns are most common amongst older and more old school aligned dancers as well as native speakers of French (though as discussed above, note the limited number of such participants), but unlike gendered nouns they seemed more likely to appear across demographic groups in my observations of teaching contexts like classes and workshops.

This greater prevalence of gendered pronouns is not entirely surprising. As members of a closed class—and one that, by requiring verbal agreement in English, has reverberating effects across the lexicon—pronouns are more resistant to neologistic uses than are nouns.[59] As one interviewee puts it, first there is replacing gendered nouns with "leader" and "follower", "then there's layer two which is (.) referring to leaders and followers as (.) "they" instead of "he" or "she"" (M). Another interviewee (B) recalled that the relatively young and progressive undergraduate students who were her first teachers, while being very good with the nouns, had not yet fully jettisoned "he" and "she".

This challenge of changing pronoun practices (vis-à-vis other parts of speech) has been identified as far back at 1868, by a self-proclaimed amateur who, in a letter to an American newspaper, noted that "it is easier to incorporate "a hundred new nouns and adjectives and fifty new verbs" than one new pronoun" (*L*, 1868 as cited in Baron, 2020, p. 86). This difficulty may in part be attributed to the agreement effects mentioned above or to the sheer frequency of pronouns as compared to open class parts of speech, but it is also worth considering their relative semantic weight and speakers' consequent attentiveness to them. Given the relatively greater

[59] While there remains on-going debate about whether and how closed and open class items are meaningfully different in terms of processing in the lexicon or syntactic theory (Biassou et al., 1997; Cann, 1999; Echeverría, 2022), the vast majority of neologisms associated with social movements more broadly belong to so called open classes such as nouns, verbs, or adjectives (e.g. cis, BIPOC, nonbinary).

semantic load of open vs closed class words, open class words like nouns are likely to be more attended to than the relatively semantically light closed class words. Hence, it seems likely that reforming open class tokens may in fact be more easily achieved than reforming pronoun use—a fact that seems supported by the long history of attempts to develop and promote a third person singular gender-neutral pronoun which, as documented by Baron (2020), dates back to 1792, with only very limited uptake of all but singular THEY. Additionally, in the broader social discourse on the specific topic of third person singular pronouns, there has been substantial meta-linguistic resistance to the use of singular (gender-neutral) THEY on grammatical grounds, arguing that it creates ambiguity of number (Baron, 2020; Curzan, 2003; Saguy & Williams, 2022).[60] Hence, dancers who align with such resistance to singular THEY in general may—in the WCS community as in their daily life—be unwilling, unable, or perhaps both, to reach "layer two" as they have no ready singular alternative to HE and SHE. Of course, in some cases, split forms (e.g. HE OR SHE) are observed, but these are not common in the data collected here.

Perhaps an important consideration is that, in addition to the potential ambiguity of number that has been cited in resistances to singular THEY, in this community the term also fails to perform the same task of distinguishment achieved by HE and SHE. Under a heteronormative understanding of the roles, HE becomes shorthand for LEADER and SHE for FOLLOWER. This is most profoundly demonstrated by cases where the pronouns are used without any nearby antecedent (e.g. an instructor introducing a new pattern says: "we both rock and she goes" in which "she" refers to the follower).[61] Here the, now perhaps outdated, norms of the community allow an instructor to communicate who is doing what with just a single syllable, "she", in

[60] See Section 5.3.2.4 for further discussion of this challenge in the use of singular THEY as an alternative to HE or SHE.
[61] See also another move involving alternating turns often called "he goes, she goes".

reference to the imagined third person follower. Thus, while I observed no cases of uses of singular THEY leading to role ambiguity, it clearly cannot be used in the same way as HE and SHE. Only pronouns with a two-way distinction can be used without clear antecedents to distinguish the roles. Furthermore, several interviewees said that the habit of using SHE and HE in this way developed in their teaching register prior to degendering as a quick and easy shorthand for referring to followers and leaders, respectively. Hence, the habit has been, for some at least, hard to break (see excerpt 22).

(22) I work very hard- it's- it's really hard not to use (.) the um the gender pro- uh pro- um pronouns him and her talking lead and follow (.) um just because that's the way the dance was taught- has been taught for so long (K)

5.4.2.1 Specific-generic slippage

In addition to the challenge of overcoming old habits and finding alternative ways to communicate distinctions, gendered pronouns also frequently feature in contexts where specific and generic reference occur in quick succession. Instructors sometimes shifted between referring to the role they were demonstrating (e.g. the leader) with a 1st person generic pronoun and a 2nd person pronoun, while retaining gendered 3rd person pronouns (e.g. SHE for a follower) throughout. This meant that the gender of the specific woman follower or man leader ended up extended across the generic category of followers or leaders, for example, "she comes right back to you…now I can let go and catch her…just keep her...".

This kind of extension is very common in teaching contexts where instructors were observed referring to their own partner with non-gendered terms (e.g. "my leader", "my partner"), while demonstrating with the partner, then switching into directing students how to engage with "your partner" or "the leader" retaining the same gendered pronouns that were

accurate in their specific case. This creates a slippage between gendered 3rd person pronouns as specific and as generic. Because these two framings often occur in quick succession while teaching, it may be that the speaker is simply not keeping up to their own rapid rate of switching (a possibility highlighted by (T) in his interview) and so unintentionally retains a gendered pronoun across both an appropriate (specific) and inappropriate (generic) framing (or vice versa).

This is further complicated by the use of pronouns to elicit movement from the specific partner. In such cases, "he does X" or "then she goes Y" were observed to serve not only to instruct the class as to what the follower or the leader ought to be doing, but also to elicit a particular movement demonstration from the instructor's teaching or demo partner who was picked out by a specific reading of the pronoun. Because teaching is ultimately improvisational and responsive to the particular students at hand, this need for unrehearsed collaboration between instructors is common and there is often neither time nor privacy to discretely explain the problem to one's partner. Hence, the retention of the specific gendered term even in generic framings may serve the additional purpose of structuring the embodied demonstration of movement that accompanies the instructor's verbal explanation of the same, a finely tuned interplay between verbal and embodied semiosis as discussed by Keevallik (2010, 2013, 2015).

Interestingly, such slippage is seldom repaired by replacement. In some cases, a return to 1st person terms returns the generic reference to a clear specific case, but often there is no repair at all. Hence, it is plausible that these instances are cases where speakers understand themselves to be engaging in specific (and therefore justifiably gendered) reference even when the surrounding discourse is in fact generic. That said, clearly not all instructors are under this impression as one of the instructors I interviewed explains in excerpt 23. He is aware that he sometimes slides between specific and generic reference, sees it as a "trap", i.e. a problem, and

accounts for it with cognitive factors, explaining that sometimes his brain gets ahead of his mouth, and he may mix up specific versus generic reference as a result.

(23) sometimes I also switch very quickly in my brain about talking going from the general to the specific … yeah I- I can get ahead of myself that's been known to happen that's probably the easiest trap for me to fall into it's like I'll make a switch in my brain without saying "OK and now I'm referring to ((soft laugh)) followers in general or leaders in general or now I'm referring to the other (.) part" um (.) especially when I get excited about something 'cause when I start to go talking faster with it yeah (T)

This is perhaps not surprising given that teaching is a highly cognitively demanding activity, particularly in the context of dance where the instructor is not only giving verbal instructions but also demonstrating with their own and others' bodies while concurrently monitoring the bodily performance of the students. The effect of any increases in this cognitive strain does, in many cases, appear to lead to an increase in the use of gendered terminology for generic cases (see Section 5.4.3 for further discussion).

5.4.2.2 Accommodation

In addition to these broader patterns of use, gendered pronouns also show up when speakers respond to interlocutors using gendered language.[62] I will begin with cases in which interlocutors are the ones to introduce gendered language. In such cases, there was a tendency towards convergent accommodation, i.e. using the same terms as the interlocutors. So, for example, where students were observed using generic gendered pronouns such as "him" for leaders, instructors often replied using the same gendered term even if the instructor used only

[62] I observed a few cases of accommodation to degendered singular THEY in class interactions, while these were important moments of behaviour change for instructors who were not regular users of singular THEY, they were relatively infrequent and once gendered terms were introduced into a given question sequence shifts back to equivalent degendered terms were not observed.

degendered terms throughout the rest of the class. Hence, even in a class that has successfully avoided gendered language in the teaching discourse, the incursion of a student question framed in terms of "her", "him", "the lady" or "the guy" can result in the instructor also using gendered language in their response. Given the middle-class white preference for "civility" in interaction (Mayo, 2001, 2002; Patton, 2004) as discussed in Chapter 4, the possibility of being heard as "correcting" a student's language by failing to converge may be undesirable and perhaps even dangerous to an instructor's popularity and therefore income.

Perhaps to avoid the risk of being heard as "correcting", even instructors that did not replicate students' use of gendered language were seldom heard explicitly responding to a question asked in gendered terms with degendered alternatives for the same part of speech (i.e. responding to a gendered noun with a degendered noun or a gendered pronoun with a degendered pronoun). Instead, some were observed to avoid using gendered generics by framing the gendered language as specific, for example by moving to touch or demo with their own relevantly gendered partner as they replied in gendered terms, or in some cases even by switching the determiner from "the" to "my", e.g. "the lady" changed to "my lady". Others switched to degendered framings, either changing possessive pronouns to unmarked determiners (e.g. "the wrist" rather than "her wrist"), or switching from pronouns to nouns (or vice versa) and dropping gender marking along the way (e.g. using "follower" rather than "her").

What is perhaps even more interesting, however, is the presence of cases in which a student asks a question using gender-neutral terms (e.g. person, partner, they) but receives a response using gendered terms (typically pronouns). Indeed, in such cases, the student was almost universally observed to subsequently converge on the instructor's use of gendered terms resulting in the following sequence: Student – degendered; Instructor – gendered; Student –

gendered. While this last case may result from the relatively higher social standing of instructors versus students, that convergent accommodation seems more likely to apply to gendered (rather than degendered) terms for both instructors and students is meaningful. It suggests that, continuing to use degendered terms after one's interlocutor has introduced gendered terms may be heard as an other-initiated repair—i.e. an interlocutor correcting the original speaker's utterance (Schegloff et al., 1977). Other-initiated repairs are already more face threatening (i.e. less preferred in conversation analytic terms) than self-initiated repairs. What's more, in the context of the degendering movement, degendered terms may be understood to be more socially desirable, and hence any such repair is not merely repairing a speech error but repairing a socially-mandated term. That is, this sort of repair, in drawing attention to the repaired term, positions the first speaker as having erred in their use of gendered language. Given the rarity of repairs of this nature, it seems likely that, regardless the individual's own allegiance to degendering, such a face threat is seen as intolerable, particularly when the first gendered language user is an instructor (in a relatively higher social position than a student). Though a mistake or slip into gendered language may be seen as forgivable since it takes cognitive effort to reform one's language (see Section 4.6.2), explicitly drawing attention to such an error through an other-initiated repair may be seen as unforgivably uncivil, especially when doing so might bring embarrassment to a respected instructor.

5.4.2.3 Voicing effects

Another factor that seemed to make gendered language particularly likely (both in interviews and observations) was that of voicing effects, i.e. the production of direct reported speech attributed to someone other than the speaker as their present self (see excerpts 24-26).

(24) he just made a remark once- it was actually at [EVENT] very recently where he said like um (.) “so like a- a guy bringing a girl into shadow position and then leading them back and forth and basically touching them all over their body and like going high and low and down towards the hips and things that would-” (.) like you know even back of them were considered inappropriate (L)

As seen in excerpt 24, such voicing effects can occur when speech is attributed to a specific named individual. Here, the reported speech is framed as the actual words uttered by a specific person in a past experience where the current speaker was present. Hence, it is plausible that these gendered terms were in fact the actual words spoken. However, more commonly, voicing was observed where speakers produce speech (or thoughts) of either a generic or hypothetical other.

While observing in classes, I heard speakers attribute hypothetical speech/thoughts to either the recipient of the utterance (“you”) or some generic third party (“they”). In both cases, while voicing these “others”, there seemed to be a greater likelihood of the speaker producing gendered reference to the roles, even when the speaker did not use gendered terms as a general rule. In excerpt 25 below, reported speech framed as hypothetical and as actual come together in a single sequence. The interviewee synthesizes her past experiences with leaders’ and followers’ complaints about problematic partners and produces both hypothetical leaders’ and followers’ utterances as well as one which is attributed to “a leader”, presumably a specific named one, though the name wasn’t mentioned in the interview.

(25) when it’s from the leaders’ side they’re usually just judging on the follower and it’s not like “oh my god she like threw herself and almost threw my shoulder” once there was a leader who said that but for the most part they’re like “yeah my gosh she wasn’t

getting my lead oh my god like she can't do oh she's like all over the place oh" whereas the follower's like "oh my god he al- like almost ripped my arm off there was this one time like you gotta be ca-" (C)

Importantly, while the utterances attributed to (hypothetical) others are full of gendered pronouns, the framing utterances use only degendered terms—both nouns and pronouns—even when referring to the specific leader to whom the second piece of reported speech is attributed. So, while it seems very likely that the speaker does know the gender of the specific person to which this actual speech is attributed (or at least could make an informed guess), she elects to refer to them using "a leader" and "they're" rather than terms that are marked for gender. This seems to suggest that, while one might avoid gendered nouns and pronouns entirely in one's own speech, the framing of speech as produced by someone other than the speaker in the moment of speaking may license the use of gendered language, both in utterances represented as having actually occurred or in utterances that are represented as hypothetical.

Moreover, the relative distance between the animator (the actual speaker) and the principal (the one who will be held responsible for using the gendered language) (Goffman 1981) seems a likely contributing factor to this licensing of gendered language. If one is referring to language habits of some imagined dancer, one need not worry so much about the social desirability of that imagined dancer's word choices as the animator is not accountable for the use of gendered terms and, if pressed, can attribute their use to the language habits of others.

Interestingly, however, voicing a distal version of the self (either past, potential, or synthesizing over one's general/generic perspective), as in excerpt 26 below, also seems to increase the likelihood of gendered language use. While this interviewee does use some gendered language in her interview, it is very minimal (only 2% of her total references to the roles; 3

tokens including the one in excerpt 26), but here, where she is voicing her internal thoughts, she (a primary leader) refers to her hypothetical partner (a follower) using "she".

(26) I just really want to dance and feel the music and express myself and not have to worry about "oh I should do this move because this is an easier move or if I do this move she may not get-" y'know what I'm trying to say like (I)

In cases of reporting one's own past speech, the challenges of past norms and cognitive habits (see Section 4.6.2; or Section 5.4.3) could provide a context for the gendered language. However, this fails to fully explain cases like excerpt 26, wherein the speaker provides a generic/hypothetical voicing of their current/future thought process.

To understand these sorts of utterances, and to enrich the account of other or past self-voicing, I think it is important to consider the interaction of historical heteronormativity and the ways that linguistic concepts may be instantiated or imagined by speakers as they voice hypothetical reported speech. Because voicing effects, like those discussed above, are often used to enliven a scene, they are likely to correspond to personifications of the characters at play in the memory or imagining. Instead of a disembodied generic, then, a follower or leader becomes a person engaging in following or leading. As McConnell-Ginet (2011, pp. 200–201) argues "personal identity, personality, is in our culture closely tied to sexual identity…Live human beings are generally perceived as women or as men, not as androgynes" and thus the characters referred to in performances of past selves or imagined others are more likely to be imagined as gendered rather than in truly generic category terms. Given the history of heteronormativity in the dance and the continued imbalance in the distribution of heteronormative vs non-heteronormative dancers, as I have argued elsewhere (O'Neill, 2024), a hypothetical dancer is likely to be imagined based on past exemplars developed by the speaker as they have engaged in

a largely heteronormative dance community. As a result, when imagining what a leader might say or think about a follower or vice versa, the leader is likely imagined as a man and the follower as a woman, and they may be linguistically gendered accordingly. These patterns of imagining may hold even when it is an imagined version of the self doing the talking.

As seen in excerpt 26, then, despite a general avoidance of gendered language in the interview as a whole, when performing a distal version of herself, the speaker moves into an imagined scene in which, even though she is a woman who leads, her imagined follower is a woman, in line with the overall distribution of followers' gender and likely her own experience of leading followers. Whether due to the likely features of an imagined dancer or to the relaxing of attentiveness to language reform that one is arguably less accountable for, the result is the same: the majority of cases of voicing are accompanied by gendered role language.

5.4.2.4 Repair

Regardless of the specific context of their appearance, gendered generic and non-specific terms are often repaired. Repair is a conversation analytic category that encompasses interactional sequences wherein an utterance is made, is marked as problematic either by the utterer or a recipient, and then is recast or amended by either the utterer or recipient (Kitzinger, 2013). Most frequently in my data, repairs are self-initiated and self-repaired and take the form of either expansions to a split pronoun set (e.g. "He (.) or she") or replacements of gendered pronominal forms with the degendered noun form, (e.g. "she -or the follower can..."). Such repairs seemed to be particularly likely in cases where non-heteronormative dancers were directly available as visual cues to the inappropriateness of the gendered terms. During my fieldwork, the non-heteronormative dancer was often me as a feminine presenting person leading. Instructors seemed most likely to repair gendered pronouns not only when I was in a

class, but also within their field of view while they were speaking. Indeed, I frequently noticed instructors physically orienting towards me, and even making eye contact, when making such repairs. Combined with my participants' explicit discussion of the need to reform pronoun use, these repairs show a clear awareness that generic gendered pronouns are socially undesirable, particularly when individuals who may be misgendered by them are present (see Section 4.5.1 for further discussion of microaggressions; see Section 6.2.1.1 for further discussion of repair).

5.4.3 Cognitive factors

Across both nouns and pronouns, cognitive strain appears to be an important consideration in the rates of gendered language use. For example, during observations, I noted that when things began to go wrong in a class (e.g. students were not getting the content, time was running short, the instructor was having difficulty remembering or working out a specific component of the movement to be taught) many instructors seemed increasingly likely to use gendered pronouns. Gendered nouns—which were vanishingly rare in the focussed context of interviews—also seemed to be more likely to arise in teaching contexts where instructors' attention was split between delivering information, providing energy and entertainment, and assessing the students' performance of the material and needs for further instruction.

This may also begin to provide a possible account for the greater use of gendered pronouns by native speakers of French, as they already have a greater cognitive load in order to teach in a language that is not their primary language. On top of this increased cognitive load, their primary language (French) is one in which grammatical gender (typically corresponding to social gender for terms referring to people) is marked on multiple parts of speech, including nouns that might be gender-neutral in English. Broadly, this corresponds to the notion articulated in Section 4.6.2 that language change takes active cognitive effort and attention and so slippages

can be forgiven as accidental production errors rather than explicit bias. If such language use is a slip (rather than an intentional choice), then it seems likely that increased cognitive load might contribute to the greater likelihood of such errors occurring.

Interestingly, the role of cognitive strain also appears in an interview, where, after generally avoiding gendered terminology, the interviewee (S) slips into using gendered pronouns and nouns towards the end of the interview (when some fatigue might have begun to set in) with gendered nouns only appearing when discussing frustration with how credit for good dances is apportioned between the roles.

(27) um (.) the man is- man has always been the- the frame for the picture kind of thing…when the compliments are always about uh the- the follower being such a great dancer it's like well the guy's just there to (.) hold your hand (S)

While the interview context remains focussed and relatively less cognitively demanding than the teaching context, in excerpt 27 a transition to a topic about which the interviewee has strong feelings, and which resonates with contentious broader discourses gendered discourses (also drawn on by (L), see discussion of excerpt 16) about men being disadvantaged by efforts to offer greater opportunities or credit to women, seems to similarly elicit gendered language. It is worth noting that this discussion arose, not from my questions, but in fact from my invitation for interviewees to speak on any topics or share any stories that they felt we had missed earlier in the interview. For this interviewee, this was a highly charged topic which may have increased the cognitive strain and the likelihood that gendered language would emerge.

Such effects of habit and cognitive load are not the only factors conditioning gendered language use, but they do seem to be significant contributors to slips amongst those who are trying to reform their own language. To quote one of my interviewees, "the intention might have

been there but then the- it's like oh you- you catch yourself using language that you don't necessarily (.) uh even want to promote it's just that it's our habit right" (T).

5.4.4 Summary of gendered language use

Having now spent many pages on the occurrence of gendered language in the WCS community, it is important to recall that overall rates of gendered language are quite low. Gendered nouns, in particular, are vanishingly rare in most speakers' discourse and appear to show up primarily amongst those who are both older and more old-school aligned. While gendered pronouns were more common in my observations than in the interviews, they were also far from the majority of terms used to refer to the dance roles. As was discussed in Section 5.3.2, community members make use of a wide variety of alternatives to gendered references, which enables many to avoid gendered language in the vast majority of cases and even allows some to completely avoid gendered language outside of specific references to particular individuals.

This decrease in the use of gendered language since the popularization of the degendering movement around 2014/2015 has no doubt been influenced by activists in the community and by event organizers beginning to include instructions about the avoidance of gendered language in their guidance for the instructors they hire. While many may appreciate the broader equity and inclusion goals of this language change, none who make their income in the community can ignore the possibility that the use of gendered language may impact their reputation, hireability, and ultimately their income. Hence, as was found during my interviews and participant observations, the most obvious instances of gendered language use, i.e. gendered nouns, seem to have been the site of significant reform and seldom appear—often being repaired to gender-neutral terms when they do appear. At the same time, the less obvious, and perhaps more difficult to reform, pronouns also seem to be decreasing in frequency and, where they do appear, are

sometimes subject to self-repairs. This provides clear evidence of the desirability of degendered language use, even if its adoption is not total. The incomplete adoption of reformed language, as I've shown, may be hampered by gender and role entanglement, slippage between specific and generic reference, voicing, cognitive factors, and convergent accommodation.

5.5 Conclusion

As discussed in this chapter, across both interviews and observations, most of my participants have transitioned to using gender-neutral terms for most of their references to dance roles, most prominently the so called "degendered" nouns LEAD(ER) and FOLLOW(ER). This distribution is indicative of a largely successful language reform effort at the lexical level, which aligns with the impressions of the reform reported by interviewees (see Chapter 4). However, there are some individuals who still make regular use of gendered pronouns, and even a few gendered nouns. Perhaps because of this tendency to gender pronouns, interviewees described a general strategy of avoiding pronouns, though some of these same interviewees also demonstrated a pattern of using singular THEY in teaching contexts.

In general, while gender avoidance strategies varied across participants with no identifiable correlations between strategy and demographic characteristics (e.g. frequent users of singular THEY ran the gamut of age, gender, and role), reduced use of singular THEY did seem to correlate with possible increases in the use of plural forms (which alleviate the need for gendered pronouns) and, for some participants, with greater use of gerunds. The use of gerunds depersonalizes roles, which, in turn, removes the risk of gendered pronoun use, as English inanimate pronouns are not grammatically marked for gender.

Additionally, while strategies for degendering may not align with any demographic characteristics, the propensity for greater use of gendered language seems more likely among

those who are older, have longer engagement with the community, and who align themselves with an "old-school" identity in relation to the dance (cf. Deborah's greater use of gendered language in (O'Neill, 2024)). Greater gendered language use was also observed amongst Francophone instructors who were generally younger than the Anglophones who used a high proportion of gendered language. Due to the small number of Francophone instructors in the sample, though, further research is needed in this area. A final correlate of increased rates of gendered language use was the presence of increased cognitive strain (e.g. students not picking up a move, instructor making an error), which may also go some way in accounting for the patterns amongst the Francophone instructors teaching in English, which is not their primary language.

As suggested by participants in the data discussed in the previous chapter, mastering language reform takes time and practice: it requires cognitive effort to rebuild the relevant neural pathways that make using novel (in this case degendered) language feel natural. Hence, it is perhaps unsurprising that (1) those who are older (have more experience in heteronormative space generally), have spent longer in the community (have more years of repeated practice using gendered forms), and align themselves with an "old-school" identity (are likely to move in spaces with others that have similar linguistic baggage from years in the community), (2) those who are working in their non-dominant language (particularly when their dominant language has more grammatical gendering than English), and (3) individuals under cognitive strain will be less likely to reliably produce the novel forms. In all these cases, there is either a larger barrier to surmount or reduced availability of the cognitive resources required to surmount it, and thus falling (back) into (old) habits is more likely.

Outside of these individual considerations, gendered language also appears to be licensed by interactional concerns such as convergent accommodation—particularly students accommodating to an instructor, but also instructors accommodating to students—and voicing effects. Where one is voicing an imagined average dancer (or even one's past or imagined self), that voiced persona was often found to use heteronormatively gendered terms (mainly pronouns) to refer to imagined partners. These interactional factors were also observed in my prior work on a WCS swing podcast (O'Neill, 2024) and, so, may speak to a pattern that extends across the WCS scene.

Across both the interviews and the observations, no explicit resistance to degendering was encountered, though one dancer was observed systematically using only gendered language. This may speak to a level of resistance, but also must be understood in the context of his peripheral position within the community—he was primarily a ballroom dancer who mainly only danced with his ballroom partner in classes rather than rotating as did the majority of other students. Overall, the use of singular THEY seemed to correspond to high levels of nongendered language use broadly, though it is impossible to know whether it was the access to singular THEY that facilitated the language reform, or a commitment to the language reform that facilitated the acquisition of singular THEY. This inter-relationship is also illustrated through the metadiscourse of participants. For example, one interviewee, who is a school teacher, reflected on how she has had to change her language use in her professional life in accordance with current pedagogical standards for diversity and inclusion (excerpt 28). This pattern also seemed to be reflected in the heavy use of singular THEY by an instructor at a weekend event who mentioned that they were a school teacher in their non-dance career.

(28) I as a teacher also have been trying to change my language somewhat because (.) I- I mean it's- (.) it's s- society as a whole is evolving and you want to be very present for that and so I- I have a horrible habit and I still do it sometimes I'll catch myself be like "gah" but I'll say guys referring to my whole class and it's just like my casual all you people kind of a- a speak and I- I'm working on not saying that but then it's hard to say (.) like (.) young people doesn't sound so hip or cool right (F)

By contrast, another interviewee (K) framed her efforts to improve her pronouns, in part, as the result of having recently been to an event where she met nonbinary dancers and was concerned about ensuring their inclusion. Though this particular interviewee was not a regular user of singular THEY, her concern for the inclusion of gender diverse participants was echoed in a conversation with a pair of weekend event instructors who demonstrated strong uptake of singular THEY in their teaching, having been inspired at least in part by the queer and gender diverse people that they knew personally. Hence, while a study of this nature—a snapshot in time based on observational rather than experimental methods—cannot answer the chicken or the egg question, my work does indicate that singular THEY seems to be an important lexical element for supporting the completion of the degendering language reform movement, which is already well underway.

6 The persistence of heteronormativity

Even though I lead and I led multiple women multiple times tonight, in the role balance calculus, I am still a woman and it seems, therefore, a follower as default.

6.1 Introduction

While I had previously led in classes before my participant observation, often when we were short of leaders, during my participant observation I made a concerted effort to lead in all of the classes I could. In doing so, I encountered something I'd never met when following: while rotating partners in class,[63] I was not always seen as a viable leader. Occasionally a follower would seem as if they were going to skip over me—moving directly to the next, usually masculine, leader—but more commonly a follower would simply fail to rotate to me, seeming to see me as another follower awaiting a lead (or perhaps having not rotated to the next lead yet), but not a potential partner for them. It did not seem to matter for these followers that I was oriented facing the same direction as all the rest of the leaders—the issue was that I was not a man. And so, lacking a masculine body, I instead had to mark myself as a leader by gesture or verbal greeting, after which the follower would seem to realize my role and move to partner me.

While this kind of misfire wasn't necessarily a problem in every class, it was common enough to merit consideration and other women I interviewed who primarily (or at least very often) led in classes also spoke of it: of the need to greet each follower, using additional gestures or words to ensure that rotating followers saw them as viable partners in class rotations.

[63] "Rotation" refers to members of one role moving to the adjacent member of the other role (in a circular or linear formation of couples) in order to try the class material with the maximum number of partners.

Otherwise, they risked being seen as another unpartnered follower, even when facing the same direction as the rest of the leads, waiting patiently for the next follower. Borrowing from Jack Halberstam's (1998) "the bathroom problem", though admittedly with much lower stakes (I have never heard any stories of physical violence related to women leading or men following in contemporary WCS), I call this "The Rotation Problem", the moment in which, despite being surrounded by degendered language, often in a class that opened with an explicitly degendered framing of the roles, others' perception of one's bodily gender marks one out as not quite belonging. Whereas the bathroom problem speaks to the moment that one is seen as inappropriately different in a space set out for one gender, with the rotation problem, one becomes marked as inappropriately the same through a distinctly and persistently heteronormative lens. No commensurate problem was reported by men who follow, but this is likely due to the traditional mechanics of rotation in which leaders stay in place and followers move to a new partner. Hence, the arrival of a man follower in front of a leader serves to mark the arriving man as intending to follow. While this was true generally, I did see some evidence of men seeming to struggle to establish themselves as followers (see Section 6.3.1.2 for further discussion).

In these cases (i.e. when women are unintelligible as leaders, and men, as followers), failing to be legible in one's desired role represents not only a logistical challenge (how to secure dances/partners), but also an identity challenge. Identity is not merely a matter of identifying oneself, but also of being recognized thusly by others—in short, identity is intersubjective (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Hence, the rotation problem doesn't just hamper one's ability to engage in the dance in one's desired role, but also one's ability to establish one's desired identity within the community. If heteronormative logics continue to render women as illegible as leaders and

men illegible as followers, then people who take on these non-heteronormative roles face regular microaggressions that take the form of repeatedly *being called out of one's name* (Bucholtz, 2016),[64] having to account for one's failure to ascribe to heteronormative expectations, and ultimately having to engage in additional interactional labour to render oneself legible.

As I will go on to show in this chapter, the rotation problem is not the only indicator that degendering has yet to successfully reform attitudinal and behavioural practices. Despite the relative success of the linguistic reform, particularly in terms of the role nouns (discussed in the previous chapter), there is unfortunately abundant evidence that heteronormative ideologies persist in the community and play important roles not only in how roles are discussed or explained, but in how participation is organized. I begin this chapter by considering evidence of persistent heteronormativity in the linguistic forms used by participants, from the patterns of "errors" and repairs that occur, to modifier and metaphor choice, and to persistent entanglements between gender and role terms. In the latter half, I explore how heteronormativity emerges in interactional dynamics such as the negotiation of partnerships and the management of role balance wherein one's role and/or gender comes to the fore in ways that suggest continued reliance on heteronormative assumptions.

6.2 Heteronormativity in language use

Despite the broad shift away from using gendered nouns and pronouns to refer to the roles of follower and leader, evidence of underlyingly heteronormative understandings of the roles persists in community members' patterns of language use. I begin by considering how the consistent patterns in the (albeit decreasing) use of gendered pronouns, and occasionally nouns,

[64] Bucholtz uses this term to discuss the mispronunciation of names as a form of injurious speech (Butler, 2021) imbricated with raciolinguistic issues. I use it here to point to a similar form of mislabelling, but in this case in terms of one's appropriate social (dance) role.

points to underlyingly gendered concepts of the roles, and how repairs of these terms often further feed into cis-sexist binary understandings of sex and gender.

6.2.1 Gendered lexical slips

While, as shown in Chapter 5, the use of gendered terms for the roles was very uncommon in my interviews, they did occasionally occur in interviews and were somewhat more frequently heard during participant observation. When gendered language *was* used to refer to the roles, with only one exception (in an interview with a non-heteronormative dancer), all instances were used in heteronormative ways. WOMEN, SHE, and other feminine terms were used to refer generically only to followers; by contrast, MEN, HE, and other masculine terms were used only for generic reference to leaders (with one exception). Of course, as discussed in the previous chapters, such slips directly reflect the norms that the degendering movement has sought to reform. As such, they can be understood as the effect of longstanding habits, but this does not negate the fact that such a consistent pattern of errors points to underlyingly heteronormative models for the roles: followers are prototypically women, leaders are prototypically men.

It is also notable that the only case of a gendered term I found being used in a non-heteronormative way in this entire project was produced by an openly gay degendering activist. In excerpt 1, this participant refers to followers as "men" while discussing how he picks potential partners.

(1) I would always be watching the floor (.) and have an awareness of like (.) who are the men who are dancing with other men (M)

Even in this case, however, it is notable that this is not a generic reference to roles in general; instead, this is a nonspecific reference to roles in the context of a man seeking to follow other

men and needing to assess possible partners for safety. In other words, this is not a case in which the prototypical follower is understood to be a man, but instead a case in which the relevant exemplar of a follower is a man. In fact, this same participant also makes a more heteronormative slip as seen in excerpt 2.

(2) I didn't (.) want to follow like a guy- follow like a leader (M)

Here, despite being one of several interviewees who argued that seemingly gendered differences in quality of movement are actually the result of one's first learned role which just happens to overlap with gender in most cases (i.e. men typically learn to lead first and women typically learn to follow first), the interviewee slips into gendered language. He didn't want to "follow like a guy". Though he goes on to repair this to "follow like a leader"—marking the use of "guy" as problematic—it is notable that even for someone so invested in degendering, when articulating a concern with his own attempts to engage in his preferred (non-heteronormative) role, he slips into articulating that concern in gendered terms. While this may be reflective of others' discourse (i.e. the fear of following in a non-follower-y way likely emerges from hearing such criticisms from others), that it has remained even in this very committed activist's vocabulary speaks to the insidiousness of the heteronormativity which persists in the WCS community's conceptions of the roles. To follow inappropriately is on some level to follow in a way that is not like a woman but instead "like a guy".

6.2.1.1 Repairs

While not all gendered terms used to refer to roles were repaired, many, as in the case of excerpt 2 above, were, with the repairs almost always both initiated and completed by the

original speaker.[65] Such a self-initiated self-repair speaks to an awareness of the potentially problematic nature of gendered language—it is seen as a potential trouble source and recast in ways that are understood to resolve the problematic elements. What is particularly interesting in cases where gendered terms referring to roles are repaired, however, is how the repair is typically done. When gendered nouns are repaired, they are almost always recast as the degendered nouns LEADER or FOLLOWER as in excerpt 3 and 4 below.

(3) "I know how the guys feel or I should say leaders"

(4) I think there's been more classes where oh if you're a female uh if you're a follower um y'know um (.) cross over and take these- take this workshop (I)

In contrast, gendered generic *pronouns* see a wider range of repair strategies. In many cases they receive the same repair solutions as gendered nouns. As seen in excerpt 5, "him" can be repaired to "the leader" and, as seen in excerpt 6, "she" can be repaired to "the follower".

(5) "him- or the leader"

(6) "she -or the follower can..."

This repair tactic results in a relatively neutral recast that arguably achieves the gender-neutral goals of the degendering movement. Though the problem source may point to a heteronormative concept of the roles, the repair aims to counter such implications by avoiding problematically gendered pronouns entirely. Of course, this is only one mode of repair. Another mode which retains pronouns in the repair is the use of singular THEY. In my observations, this was one of the less common repair types, but as seen in excerpt 7 it was nonetheless represented.

(7) "the leader takes the follower past hi- past their left side"

[65] The lack of other initiated repair (even for those utterances left unrepaired) seems likely to be related to the community's emphasis on civility and hesitance to engage in direct call outs or confrontation over gendered language use (see Section 4.6)

Similar to the repair of nouns, this results in a neutralization of the gendered term. And, like the repair of gendered nouns, this repair of a gendered pronoun is consistent with efforts to degender the roles. It should be noted, however, that gender-neutral role nouns have been found to retain the gendered associations that were tied to the unreformed terms that such neutral nouns aim to replace (Lassonde & O'Brien, 2013). Similarly, singular THEY has, in some studies, been found to carry male bias when used generically (Lindqvist et al., 2019; Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986). Hence, when an overtly gendered term is repaired to a gender-neutral term, it is unclear whether hearers will parse it as truly gender-neutral or simply as an alternate term for a nonetheless gendered category. This is, of course, the risk of gender-neutral approaches to language reform more generally—if there is no direct contestation of the gendered stereotypes that are tied to a gendered term, there is always a risk that those stereotypes will simply be carried over to the new reformed terms, which, in their neutrality, are still able to support gendered interpretations.

In contrast with the neutral repairs highlighted above, another frequent repair pattern was an X or Y repair in which another gendered pronoun was appended to the initially uttered pronoun to provide a "he or she" or "she or he" doublet (e.g. "she will- °or he will°..."). While comparatively uncommon, a similar pattern was also observed in two cases of gendered noun repair with an originally heteronormative noun being repaired by appending a relevant counterpart of the opposite gender, usually with an AND rather than OR (e.g. "mommas (.) and daddies"). This pattern of OR between pronouns and AND between nouns is likely because gendered pronouns are singular and hence the repair is adding an option, whereas the relevant gendered noun cases were plural and, as such, were enumerating the multiple categories that might be included in the referent group of leaders or followers respectively. These forms of repair which append an alternate gendered option, unlike the previously explored neutralizing

repairs, do succeed in challenging the gendered assumptions inherent to the trouble source. That is, the possibility of a non-heteronormative dancer is made explicit and, as such, the framing of the category is challenged or perhaps, to borrow from Butler (1993), queered. In fact, this possibility was sometimes explicitly oriented to by the addition of phrases like "whoever's leading" after a repair had already been performed by appending the unrepresented gender (e.g. "he (.) or she"). By specifying the role rather than just providing two pronouns, such repairs may serve to preclude a possible interpretation of the instruction being given to both leaders ("he") and followers ("she"). Such uses of "she" and "he" ("whoever's leading") instead enumerate the genders of participants dancing a given role, rather than use participants' *genders as roles*—in such cases, the repair communicatees an awareness that either a woman or man could be dancing either role.

Such a visibility approach—marking gender inclusivity by including both masculine and feminine terms, rather than by using a single gender-neutral term—(Mucchi-Faina, 2005) may have potential for challenging the heteronormativity that the initially gendered utterances mark as persistent in participants' conceptual models of the roles; however, it is not without its own risks. As has been highlighted by trans language activists (e.g. Ansara & Hegarty, 2013; Zimman, 2018), such binary modes of "gender fair" language, are not so fair for individuals whose gender does not fit within the two nodes of the binary. Hence, even as they may "queer" understandings of the roles, these repairs perpetuate the idea that all dancers are "he"s or "she"s and continue to exclude or misgender potential nonbinary participants. Such cis-sexist binarism is common in contemporary North American society, and thus it is unsurprising to see it arise in WCS as well; it succeeds in contesting existing heteronormative models of the roles even as it fails to contest the cis-sexism inherent to such heteronormative models. If gender-neutrality risks retaining

heteronormative assumptions unchallenged, and visibilization feeds into binary models of sex and gender, how then ought one to proceed? Though very unusual and, in fact, I only observed the framing once, a potential alternative is shown in excerpt 8.

(8) "He- she or I guess they"

Here, repair is not just the appending of "she" but also "or I guess they". While the hedging ("I guess") may suggest some apprehension about including "they" as a third gender possibility, it points to the possibility of framing "they" not as a neutral generic but instead as a generic pronoun for people who are not correctly referred to as "he" or "she".[66] However, the rarity of such an approach, as well as the hedging, suggests that the community members who I observed repairing their slips into gendered language (using the X or Y form) may not be comfortable with or even considering the potential for people who are neither women nor men to participate in the WCS community.

Notably, repairs seem more likely to be triggered if a non-heteronormative dancer is visually available to the speaker. In several cases, instructors framed repair with a nod to the possibility that one's own partner might be of the sort that is not described by a gendered term, through utterances like "the man…or your leader depending on who you're dancing with". Often, such repairs were made while I (a feminine presenting person leading) was in the instructor's line of sight. The salience of a visual reminder was also prominent in framings which specifically alluded to my presence either through eye contact made while delivering the repair, or even in some cases the appending of a singular feminine term when referring to leaders in plural (e.g. "Guys... and... gals or guys and gal"). In such cases, repair seems not to point to a

[66] Of course, a gender trinary comprising man, woman, and nonbinary (as gender identity rather than refusal of binary identities) is still a limiting model of gender. Cf. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizomatic understandings of sex, further developed with regard to gender by Linstead and Pullen (2006) .

gender-neutral framing of the leading role, but instead to explicitly avoiding misgendering a specific individual (cf. Section 4.5 on inclusivity). Hence, the idea that the dance roles are not constrained by gender may not yet be fully assimilated, and some individuals may require a visual reminder to avoid strictly gendered formulations of the roles.[67]

Ultimately, while the presence of repairs, as discussed above, speaks to an awareness of the desirability of degendered language, that such repairs are needed and that gendered utterances—both those that are repaired and those that are not—are almost universally in accordance with heteronormative understandings of the roles points to the persistence of cognitive models under which followers are expected to be women, and leaders are expected to be men.

6.2.1.2 Entanglement

The persistent overlap of gender and dance role was not only observed in patterns of reference to the dance roles. In fact, in a number of cases, reference to gender categories seemed to become entangled with reference to the roles. Some years prior to beginning this fieldwork (around 2018), I observed t-shirts being marketed as being for "leaders" or "followers". The content printed on the shirts was largely the same across both categories, but the cut or styles of the shirts were not: "followers'" shirts were in traditionally feminine cuts, while "leaders'" shirts were masculine or unisex styles. While I am certain that this labelling was well intentioned, it seemed to suggest a fundamental misunderstanding of the degendering movement. Instead of being about making the dance roles available to people of all genders, the t-shirts seemed to be responding to the move away from using gendered language entirely—don't say "men's" or

[67] This idea of the importance of visual cues is also reflected on by (G) in her interview: "because I'm an out of sight out of mind person (.) so if I don't- if I have (.) a male follower (.) in my line of sight (.) I'm good (.) but (.) if I- if there's either none in the class or (.) um (.) if I have my back turned or where it's not in my face (.) I forget"

"women's", say "leaders'" or "followers'"—but, in doing so, neatly overlaid the reformed category terms over the very gendered categories that reformers aimed to delink from the dance role categories. A similar dynamic is visible in Figure 6.1 below. These two screenshots were captured on March 2, 2023, from two different pages of a single WCS professional couple's website.



Figure 6.1. Two images from a professional WCS couple's website highlighting a promotion on a video bundle (available for online purchase) that includes three styling videos for "followers" and/or "ladies". Screenshots captured 2023-03-02. Instructor's face and name obscured for anonymity.

Here an instructional video bundle about styling is marketed both as "Follower Styling" and "Ladies Styling" on different parts of the website. While this could be argued to be for search engine optimization (capturing more possible search queries in the text and metadata of the page to attract more potential buyers), it is meaningful that these articulations of who a

certain way of styling the body might apply to continue to conflate the roles with heteronormative gender (i.e. followers' styling is ladies' styling). Interestingly, the counterpart to the bundle shown in Figure 6.1, taught by the man in this professional couple, was marketed (at the time these screenshots were taken) not as *leaders'* styling at all, but as "Dance like a Dude: Men's styling for West Coast Swing".[68]

As similarly suggested in Section 5.4.1's discussion of the greater prevalence of gendered language when teaching stylizations (i.e. optional ways of articulating and positioning the body for aesthetic goals which go beyond the basic mechanics of moves), there does seem to be some remaining ambiguity around whether styling ought to be determined by one's dance role or one's gender. Some interviewees pointed to a lingering association between dance role and heteronormatively gendered styling that could both limit and facilitate styling that was more or less congruent with their gender expression. Others argued that styling is purely a personal choice driven by the music, one's own storytelling goals, or one's personality, and some even claimed that at least some elements of bodily stylization are actually driven by the mechanical requirements of leading and following, respectively, and have nothing to do with gender. Despite this range of opinions, however, interviewees also marked an awareness of the greater strictures on men's participation and movement choices vis-à-vis women's. This sentiment is articulated in excerpt 9, below.

(9) I think (.) there's more limitation on the males because like "if you're male then you should this is definitely male gen- this is male styling" right otherwise that looks too- that looks too- too feminine (.) so I'm not sure if we've evolved enough in that direction with respect to (.) um (.) leader styling (.) but more so like for non-traditional

[68] As of 2025, the marketing with "ladies" is no longer present on the website and this DVD series is marketed entirely as being for "followers", but "Dance Like a Dude: Men's styling for West Coast Swing" remains.

roles (.) um I think- I think um (.) I think women have a little bit more (.) um have a little bit more (.) freedom (I)

Drawing on themes that speak to the concept of transmisogyny (Serano, 2021), this interviewee explains that, in contrast with her own freedom (articulated earlier in the interview) to choose masculine or feminine styling in accordance with how she feels the music both leading and following,[69] "there's more limitation on the males". In other words, in line with broader transmisogynistic biases in society, behaviour associated with women and femininity is systematically devalued and is especially reviled when people assigned male at birth are seen to engage in it, rendering such individuals particularly abject. Thus, while a woman can take on masculine roles under the aegis of engaging in more socially valued and high status activities, men engaging in feminine roles are understood as deviant and even as a threat to the transmisogynistic patriarchal system (Serano, 2021). And this dynamic appears to be active in WCS in that the limitation on "males" is then understood to have implications for "leader styling", as we see in excerpt 9.

Such entanglements, however, are not limited to styling or clothing choices. When discussing the participation of given gendered groups in the community, a number of instances emerged wherein interviewees first used a dance role term before repairing to a gendered term (e.g. excerpts 10-13). As exemplified in excerpt 10, these entanglements often become visible in contexts where non-heteronormative dancers are at issue.

(10) like y'know generally speaking uh women's center of balance is more towards the hips whereas leaders are- guys sorry uh males it's more towards the shoulders so a male

[69] "I think it- it- it depends on the song so if I feel like um I'm dancing to the song where it requires a more let's say masculine leader or y'know then maybe I'll- I will incorporate more masculine movements (.) um and vice ver- and vice versa so I- it really it depends for me on the song and how I want to express that song" (I)

leader is going to be slightly different because there's a higher centre (.) to move than a- than um a female follower sorry I meant male I'm sorry ((laughing))

((laughing)) that's OK

a male follower is going to be slightly different to move than a female follower and vice versa (L)

In excerpt 10, the interviewee is explaining how men and women feel different to him when they are following him. He begins by discussing how women followers feel before turning to discuss how "leaders are- guys sorry uh males" feel. This extended repair sequence first marks "leaders" as a trouble source, repairs to "guys" and then ultimately marks "guys" as a trouble source, repairing to "males"—a clear indication that the actual intended referent is the category of male bodied people, not leaders, nor even the potentially ambiguous "guys" (see Section 5.4.1.2). Articulating gender and dance role as distinct phenomena, despite being something that this interviewee advocates for on the theoretical level, nonetheless proves delicate for him—this is further evidenced by the category formed error "a female follower sorry I meant male" which follows later in this same excerpt.

In a similar vein, the interviewees in excerpts 11 and 12 produce a dance role term that is in conflict with the dance role that they later specify in their repair.

(11) followers- like women (.) that are leading (G)

(12) the leader uh y'know the guy's following (C)

Here, we see that "women (.) that are leading" are initially cast as "followers", while "the guy [that's] following" is initially cast as "the leader". Despite these initially stated roles being in conflict with the intended referent, they are, however, stereotypically associated with the gender of their intended referent. In short, in some cases, it appears that these gender-neutral terms are

just new words for women and men, i.e. they refer to underlyingly unchanged categories. Similarly, as seen in excerpt 13, when asked about whether she adjusts her teaching in response to the presence of non-heteronormative dancers, the interviewee begins her description of a potential source of challenge as a "really really large large bodied [role noun]".

(13) *when you do have somebody dancing in a non-traditional role in your class which of course you've got a lot of lately because I've been there (.) does that- uh (.) do you- does that change anything for you in terms of your thinking or how you teach class or anything like that?*

um only if- only if uh th- the size issues right if we've got- if I- if I've got really- like really really large large bodied leader ((laugh)) or- or like a gu- (.) um follower uh man um (.) then yes then- then um I have to make sure- (.) I don't know if I change the content but I want to- I keep an eye on how it's working and if I can come up with ways to make it work better (K)

Such a framing using role nouns and descriptions of bodies could have easily avoided any explicit gender reference, instead focussing on the mechanical challenges of relative body size—a theme also brought up by other interviewees. Instead, the use of the role noun "leader" triggers a repair sequence in which the reference is corrected to "a gu- (.) uh follower" and ultimately "uh man". This sequence points to an entanglement between role and gender. When referring to a man follower, she initially labelled this referent a "leader" in accordance not only with a preference for degendered language, but also with the heteronormative man-leader association. Though the imagined referent's gender need not have been specified if role nouns were to be used, this misfire then requires repair which ultimately makes the intended gender of the referent

explicit as “man”, in line with the original premise of non-heteronormative dancers, if not with the original phrasing choice.

Across all of these examples, dance role terms seem to be preferred over gendered terms even when the intended category seems to be based on gender, not dance role. This is likely a result of the push to avoid gendered terms when referring to the roles. Just as some participants attest to avoiding pronouns, as discussed in Section 5.3.1, these participants appear to be avoiding gendered terms in general—even when those gendered terms are legitimate for referring to the specific category they wish to refer to—perhaps exhibiting a form of hypercorrection. Additionally, since the dance role nouns used align with the intended gender of the referent rather than their role, these examples (and others like them) suggest that dance role terms may be as strongly associated with the traditionally linked gender as they are with the dance role itself.

While the presence of repair shows that participants are aware that such conflations of gender and role are inappropriate, their persistence points to the limitations associated with the introduction of degendered neologisms such as these. As highlighted by Lassonde and O’Brien (2013), the use of gender-neutral terms does not necessarily challenge or break down existing gender associations with professional roles nor does it necessarily reduce broad male bias (Lindqvist et al., 2019). Instead, stereotypes about who is likely to be engaged in a given role are likely to persist despite the use of new gender-neutral labels. So too is the case in WCS, where it appears that even those who are engaged in non-heteronormative dancing themselves, may, at least to some extent, simply overlay new labels on existing cognitive categories. And, this occurs without those categories necessarily losing their gendered associations, leading to degendered terms being used in place of gendered terms even when the category at issue is in fact gendered.

This entanglement between categories also emerges in contexts wherein a role term is juxtaposed with a gender term as if they are functioning along the same axis of differentiation (excerpts 14 and 15).[70]

(14) when it is an opposite gender I'm asking to follow I will usually (.) go in onto what role they want whereas followers I still just like uh assume immediately and be like "oh you are female (.) therefore you must want to follow so I when I ask you to dance I'm just being like "I'm leading you"" (C)

(15) most (.) uh (.) uh most leads that are (.) men (.) generally like- like they're (.) um what's the right word? (.) they're (.) slower ((laugh)) I think slower is the right word like- like ((clears throat)) um y'know like the responsiveness I get from followers (.) like they respond a lot better with a lot less (.) energy (.) uh like lighter connection and- and they know what I'm asking for (R)

As seen in excerpt 14, when answering a question about how she negotiates roles with men versus women who she would like to lead, the interviewee juxtaposes "an opposite gender" with "followers" which are subsequently specified to be "female". In this case, "an opposite gender" refers to men who are framed as distinct from the category of "followers", even though, both "an opposite gender" and "females" refer to categories of people which the interviewee is engaging with as potential "followers". Interestingly, in excerpt 15, both juxtaposition and the conflation of role and gender come together as the interviewee describes the feel of leading men versus women. He begins by talking about "leads that are men", which is interesting given that he is talking about these individuals' ability as followers, before going on to contrast them with

[70] It is worth noting that these cases seem not to be subject to the same degree of repair as those discussed before which may imply that when placed in these juxtaposed structures the combined force of heteronormative logics and explicit comparison obscure the category collapse, making it less noticeable and therefore less likely to be repaired.

"followers". As in the previous excerpt, it seems that "followers" is standing in for "women" as both categories, "leads that are men" and "followers", are being discussed in the context of their actions as followers, and hence the axis of differentiation appears to be their gender not their dance role. While it is possible that the intent is to distinguish between individuals who primarily lead and those who primarily follow, the addition of "men" suggests that gender is still entangled here. Furthermore, that such "men" are juxtaposed with an unmarked reference to "followers" seems to suggest that the default "followers" are not men (but women). This excerpt may also, at least in part, point to a complication addressed by several other interviewees: how to articulate histories of dance role participation that have been conditioned by traditional heteronormativity.

In excerpt 16, an interviewee contrasts the behaviour of "a leader who (.) um has been a follower" with "male leaders".

(16) a leader who (.) um has been a follower will be a lot more attentive (.) they're way more aware of (.) body anatomy parse how things work what to ask what to ask they will usually be softer though (.) they will ha- give a lighter connection (.) um they'll be more tentative (.) um (.) male leaders are (.) got a lot more ego ((laughing)) and will just throw you through stuff and be like (.) and make faces of "why didn't you get that god" (C)

While the initial framing might be understood to include both men and women who have previously followed—a phrasing that is attentive to the efforts to degender the dance—that this category is compared with "male leaders" strongly suggests that the former category is actually referring to women leaders. Even as the initial phrasing might have sought to attribute characteristics of being a "softer" and "more attentive" leader to that leader's role history rather than gender, it ultimately becomes clear that the category in question is nonetheless gendered in

accordance with heteronormative histories, such that a history of following is likely to point to a woman, even if she is now leading.

Similarly, the interviewee in excerpt 17, who goes out of his way to innovate the terms "native follower" and "native leader" on the fly to enable himself to discuss individuals' role histories without making direct reference to gender, becomes entangled in the relationship between gender and roles, using "followers" where he intended to say "females", as made clear by the repair.

(17) more followers tend to be native- sorry more females (O)

Thus, even those most dedicated to breaking down heteronormative assumptions seem to be susceptible to the occasional misfires that seem to result from overlaying a new set of terms on the old conceptual categories of women-followers and men-leaders.

It is important to note that this is in no way an indictment of these individuals. As discussed in Section 5.4.2.3 since our social worlds here in Anglophone North America have long been organized in terms of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1993), which requires all legible persons to be slotted into the categories of either women or men, it may be difficult or even impossible for individuals raised in this culture to imagine a human referent that is truly "gender-neutral" (McConnell-Ginet, 2011). Hence, even if individuals are open to the categories changing, when imagining a (human) exemplar of the role category (i.e. a referent), that exemplar is likely to be imagined as gendered, and considering the discussion above, as heteronormatively gendered in accordance with the history of the dance roles. In short, despite efforts to label the roles without involving gender, conceptualizing the roles in noun form (i.e. LEADERS, FOLLOWERS) may, for many individuals, require that the conceptualized individual

have a gender assignment which is likely to be influenced by prior (largely heteronormative) encounters with people in that role.

6.2.2 Discourse level phenomena[71]

In addition to the heteronormative patterns observed in the nouns used to refer to the dance roles, heteronormatively gendered patterns were also observed in the discourse that surrounded these terms. As will be discussed in the sections that follow, adjectival modification of the nouns referring to the dance roles, as well as the adjectives and metaphorical structures used to describe the members of each role group (and/or their desired behaviour/movement) pattern in ways that reinforce heteronormative understandings of the roles. I first consider the use of gender stereotyped adjectives, before moving on to explore how adjectival phrases *mark* specifically gendered members of the dance role groups. Following these considerations of adjectival use, I consider the use of figurative language to describe the dance roles, their movements, and their relationship to each other—often in ways that draw on heteronormative and gendered themes.

6.2.2.1 Adjective choice

Dating back to Lakoff's (1973) work on women's language, so called "empty adjectives" such as "lovely" have been associated with women's speech. While it is not the case that only women use these terms, and there is intense interspeaker variation even within gender groups (Baker, 2014), the feminine associations of one of these empty adjectives, "lovely", are still significant in terms of the most likely referent of the term. While used by both women and men in the WCS community, "lovely" was only ever heard referring to followers—never leaders.

[71] I follow Cameron (1998b) in drawing a line between the "language" as the typical target of reforms, i.e. specific words or turns of phrase, and the discourse level, i.e. how words are combined and used communicatively, which Cameron argued was in need of greater attention.

Because of the long association of this term with women and its continued tendency to be used to refer to women significantly more than men (Moon, 2014), it seems meaningful that it is only used to describe the dance role that has traditionally been limited to women. Furthermore, and even more strikingly, the (arguably not so empty) adjective "beautiful" was frequently applied to followers, (e.g. "follower's beautiful frame"), but was never heard in reference to leaders. In some cases, the term beautiful was coordinated with other adjectives such as "wonderful" or even "correct". These coordinations, appearing in assessments of followers' performance of a newly taught movement, suggest that for followers, correctness or wonderfulness (i.e. goodness) is intertwined with the stereotypically feminine feature of beautifulness.

As with "lovely", this unipolar use of "beautiful"—only ever applied to followers—continues to burden the gender-neutral role language with gendered stereotypes. Given broader social value systems under which women are often encouraged to cultivate visual attractiveness whereas men are encouraged to cultivate physical power and monetary resources, this emphasis on the beauty of followers speaks to a persistent association between the values of a "good follower" and the values of a "good woman". This feminization of "beautiful" and, accordingly the dance role to which it is applied, was further amplified by the fact that when it was applied to men, it was done so only in a joking way. These jokes (which often involved nothing more than applying the term "beautiful" or "beautiful follower" to a man) took place when men who did not primarily follow were acting as followers (to demo, or to balance the roles in a class) and typically elicited at least some laughter from students. That juxtapositions of male bodies and the idea of "beauty" were treated as jokes points to the unexpectedness or potential disjunct between men and beauty and also suggests a disjunct between men and following. In short, such jokes

reinforced the notion that, in WCS, as in broader society, "beautiful" has feminine connotations. Thus, its frequent use to describe "followers" implicitly marks the follower role as feminine.

Further to this, desirable movements for followers were sometimes described as "ladylike", "pretty", or "delicate dainty", while desirable body shapes were described as "slim" and "pretty", all adjectives which have more or less explicitly feminine connotations (Moon, 2014). This persistent association between following as a role and feminine coded movements is also reflected in one interviewee's discussion of how he feels when he follows, as can be seen in excerpt 18.

(18) sometimes I will do feminine movements as a lead (.) because I'll- I- I'll have fun with it but as a follower I would say that I will- I feel much more confident (.) putting in like more (.) feminine like movement and gesture and stuff uh (.) so I will do some things that are a little bit more out- but I feel like I- I feel (.) more (.) liberated as a follower (R)

While other interviewees explicitly contest the idea that following is inherently more feminine, this interviewee understands it as licensing more feminine movement for him as a cis man. This is ultimately in line with the historical tendency noted by Lavin (2019) for non-heteronormative dancing to be treated as an opportunity for (often ludic) gender crossing in so-called "bookends" contests, with men dressing up as women and performing caricatures of femininity while following, and vice versa. Although such contests are no longer usually so camp, and there are other spaces for non-heteronormative dancing to be showcased, this history of limiting participation in a given dance role to a given gender and linking the role to gendered performance seems to persist in the adjective choices discussed above. Moreover, this may contribute to some participants' continued understandings of the roles as associated with

gendered types of movement and styling, which may, in turn, license the use of gender-non-congruent movements and styling when engaging in non-heteronormative roles.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the markedness of the feminine and the nonmarkedness of the masculine, leaders did not tend to be described with overtly gendered adjectives, though they were occasionally described as "strong". Such patterns of markedness, within which followers' movements are coded as feminine whereas leaders' movements seem to be less likely to be coded for gender, not only correspond to broader societal transmisogyny (Serano, 2021) but also to the pattern observed by several interviewees and in my own experience of the community, namely, that it seems easier for women to start leading than for men to start following. Perhaps in the same way that women pursuing traditionally masculine professions (e.g. doctors) tend to be seen as particularly high achievers (gaining prestige formerly limited to men), whereas men pursuing traditionally feminine professions (e.g. nurses), may experience challenges to their masculinity (Lupton, 2000), so too leading does not threaten participants' femininity in the way that following threatens masculinity (see Section 6.3.2.1 for further discussion of leading being seen as evidence of a particularly skilled woman dancer).

6.2.2.2 Specification for gender

To return to the analogy of professional role nouns, adjectival modification that specifies the gender of the referent offers a proxy for understanding gender stereotypes in terms of markedness. For example, that women in the nursing field tend to just be called "nurses" whereas men in the same field tend to be called "male nurses" is generally treated as evidence that women are seen as the unmarked or default representative of the category of nurses. Similarly, that women CEOs are more likely than men CEOs to be described using adjectival specification (i.e. "woman CEO") suggests that women are seen as marked representatives of the

category of CEO. Similarly, in WCS, generic role nouns are sometimes specified for the gender of the generic referent, e.g. male lead, female lead, male follower, female follower. And, as expected based on the examples above, Table 6.1 shows that the rates of heteronormative (i.e. follower = woman; leader = man) gender specification are significantly lower than rates of non-heteronormative (i.e. follower = man; leader = woman) gender specification. In fact, five interviewees only ever specified the gender for degendered role terms when referring to non-heteronormative dancers.

Table 6.1. Comparison of incidence of adjectival gender specification of role nouns by both role and gender in interviews

Role	Gender	Total	% of gender specified references to the role
Follower	Woman	25	33.3%
Follower	Man	50	66.7%
Leader	Man	14	25.9%
Leader	Woman	40	74.1%
Total Heteronormative		39	30.2%
Total Non-Heteronormative		90	69.8%

This distribution provides evidence that, despite efforts to degender the roles, followers are still more likely to be conceptualized as women and leaders as men. When a dancer does not match these existing conceptual models, there is more impetus to specify their gender, just as is seen in cases like male nurses and female CEOs.

The unmarked status of heteronormative dancing is also reflected in more complex specification structures, e.g. “women who predominantly lead” (L), “a follower who’s a man” (F) (see Table 6.2)

Table 6.2. Comparison of incidence of phrasal gender specification of role nouns by both role and gender in interviews

Role	Gender	Total	% of gender specified references to the role
Follower	Woman	1	3.3%
Follower	Man	29	96.7%
Leader	Man	12	36.4%
Leader	Woman	21	63.6%
Total Heteronormative		13	20.6%
Total Non-Heteronormative		50	79.4%

As Table 6.2 shows, these more elaborated structures, though fewer in number, are even more skewed towards non-heteronormative combinations of gender and role overall. While specifications of leaders are slightly less imbalanced (36.4% n=12 to 63.6% n=21), the extreme bias of follower gender specifications (3.3% n=1 to 96.7% n=29) means that overall, nearly 80% of tokens of roles with complex phrasal gender specification refer to non-heteronormative combinations. Across both types of gender specifying structures, 72.9% (n=140) refer to non-heteronormative gender/dance role pairings while only 27.1% (n=52) refer to heteronormative pairings of gender and dance role. It is also important to note that some of these heteronormative instances may be appearing because some participants ended up discussing comparisons between men and women in a given role. Had there not been occasion to discuss such comparisons—I asked interviewees to reflect on any patterns they noticed in how different types of followers or leaders felt—it seems likely that these gender-specified numbers would be even more skewed towards non-heteronormative framings. Hence, like the adjectival modification discussed above, these patterns of specification strongly suggest that many participants continue to conceptualize the dance roles in ways that retain heteronormative stereotypes even as they use degendered language to refer to them. What's more, these patterns of markedness are likely perceptible to

other dancers who may be discouraged from participating in a role they might prefer because of a fear of being perceived as a marked member of that category.

6.2.2.3 Metaphor and allusions to gendered bodies

In addition to being modified by gendered adjectives, features of and instructions for enacting the dance roles are often articulated through gendered metaphor and allusions to gendered bodies. Given the challenges of putting tactile and kinaesthetic experience into words, it is not surprising that metaphor is often invoked to help communicate such experiences. Further, in teaching contexts, metaphor can translate the dance context into other quotidian experiences that might be more familiar to students. Such metaphors are not always gendered, but there are numerous cases where they are, particularly when discussing styling and even more particularly when discussing followers' styling. Such metaphors can include references to women's clothing/accessories—opera length "glove[s]", "necklace[s]", "manicure[d nails]", "rings"—as inspiration for arm movements or hand positions. With these metaphors, a follower is framed as someone wearing the accoutrements of femininity, or at least someone who is so familiar with these feminine items that they will be able to use them as inspiration for their body movements in the dance.

Along with references to feminine clothing and accessories, followers' movements are also analogized to the movements of female and typically sexualized characters. For example, references were made to female characters or celebrities famous for their sex appeal (e.g. Jeannie in *I Dream of Jeannie*, or Beyoncé), and even to walking as if you were on the "Victoria secret runway" where you need to "sell it". All of these allusions further emphasize a model of followers' movement that is fundamentally tied to feminine sex appeal.

Another allusion that was observed was that of a "figurehead on a ship" to encourage followers to stand up tall and proud with their chest pushed out. While the visual similarity of the pose to such a figurehead makes this a very effective metaphor, it is notable that the source domain of the metaphor is a character that is almost always a woman. A similar posture could be described as being like superman or a soldier at attention, but for followers such metaphors were not heard—instead the feminized (and again, often sexualized) image of a figurehead on a ship was invoked. It is noteworthy that most of these explicitly feminized metaphors were delivered by older/more old school instructors (see also, Section 5.4.1), but their continued presence in the community suggests that, even as these instructors may be using degendered terms, they are still constructing the roles in ways that reinforce heteronormative understandings of the roles.

In addition to feminized metaphors being used to advise followers what they *should* do, I also observed several cases where followers were advised what *not* to do in ways that presumed the presence of breasts on the followers' bodies. For example, followers were cautioned against losing their posture in ways that might risk a front close bra opening and against running their hand over their breasts (rather than over their upper chest, near the "necklace" area) lest this cause others to "look" at the breasts. Such instructions assumed that all followers have breasts or at least can understand the experience of wearing a certain type of bra. Given that jokes about men being unable to figure out how to undo a partner's bra before sexual intercourse remain a comedic standby,[72] it seems likely that this understanding of the risks of certain movements while wearing a bra and exactly how a bra is likely to accidentally open are understood to be within the province of women. In fact, the mere mention of bras and the allusions to breasts in

[72] See for example, https://www.instagram.com/alloramomo/reel/Ctju77aA0ei/ ; https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/j9saxn/you_are_getting_the_opportunity_to_unhook_bras/ ; https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/t6s0kh/i_think_its_locked/

these warnings summon a woman follower into being as the presupposed addressee. Such injunctions, then, further the notion that the canonical follower is, in fact, a woman.

While less frequent than the metaphors and allusions used in teaching followers' styling, leaders were occasionally subject to veiled allusions to masculine genitals, such as comments about leaders' not sitting with tightly closed legs and crossed ankles because of the need for "leg room". Such a conflation of masculine characteristics and the role of leader also emerged in the comments that several women followers made about my "swagger" when I danced as a leader. Such a term evokes images of masculine toughness and was offered to me as a compliment on my ability to embody the leading role.

This analogy between role and gender was also reinforced by allusions to heteronormative relationship dynamics. For example, when leaders' movements were described with gendered metaphors, these descriptions tended to draw on images of flirtation in which the leader was to "check out" or woo their partner or even get close to their partner like Joey from the TV show, *Friends* (a character who famously hit on every attractive woman that entered the scene). Even patterns within the dance were at times framed with analogies to men's romantic pursuit of women. A double haircomb (a dance position which takes the couples' hands behind their heads) was analogized as the "the yawn"—which was explained in class as being what a guy might do on a date to get into a cuddling position. And, the basic dance pattern called the sugar push was said to have come from men (often specifically sailors) pulling a woman partner in saying "gimme some sugar" in response to which the woman pushes away (resisting giving the man any sugar).

This heterosexual dynamic of men/leaders pursuing and women/followers resisting was also played out in instructions directed to followers. Followers were told to "tease" and not "give

it all away", while some instructors modeled behaviour that mapped onto "hard to get" or "coy" understandings of women's sexuality when embodying the follower role. Of course, such understandings of the follower's role as that of the coy, the withholding, the tease imbricates the role within a heteronormative vision of femininity. That is, the terms used to name the roles (e.g. FOLLOWERS, LEADERS) may be neutral, but the way they are presented to students is not.

Another common metaphor-based joke in the WCS community is that of "boinging", exemplified in a phrase like, "It all matters how you boing your partner". In the target domain, "boing" refers to the elastic nature of the connection between partners at the end of one pattern and the beginning of the next; hence the source domain is the "boing" of an elastic band. However, in the community "boing" is often delivered with a wink and a nod, perhaps relying on its phonological similarity to the euphemism for sex, "boink", to suggest that there is something sexual about WCS partnership. The idea of partnership as sex is often brought into the learning environment as a lightly transgressive joke. For example, "was that good for you?" is something said after dancing with a demo partner; allusions to sexual swinging are invoked through reference to "switching partners" and the idea that "it's not called swing for nothing"; and sometimes even sexually connotative terms like "hooker" (referring to a desired hand shape), "loose" (referring to an undesirable frame), and "going all the way" (referring to travelling to the end of the movement) are used. While such explicit references to sex were less common amongst younger instructors, they remain a notable feature of the way that WCS partnership is articulated by some instructors who continue to provide education and, for some, leadership in the community. Notably, this metaphorical link between WCS partnership and sex was on several occasions even invoked by those who were engaged in non-heteronormative roles. In fact, one gay woman interviewee who primarily leads articulated her initial choice to lead as being

"because I wanted to dance with women um y'know" (D). This suggests that even for people dancing in non-heteronormative roles, sexuality can be a key component of the dance, and the gender of their potential partners (in this case followers) is expected to track heteronormatively with role.

This persistent analogizing between the dance and elements of typically heteronormative gender and sexuality not only challenges the idea that the successful degendering of terms is associated with a degendering of the categories they name, but also creates an environment in which the interaction between partners may be understood as somehow sexual even when one or both partners may not intend it to be so. This sexual connotation was occasionally brought up by women who felt uncomfortable dancing in close movements with other women—often me.[73] Thus, while the interpretation of dance as an analogy for sex may be explicitly contested by many in the community (see Section 4.3.2.1), the regular reinforcement of this model of partnership—through metaphor and allusion—may make it harder for some individuals to participate in non-heteronormative roles, or to comfortably dance with those who do. This may be because they understand the partnership as analogous to sexual relationships and are uncomfortable engaging in non-heteronormative relationships.

Not all participants produce gendered/sexualized metaphors for the dance roles nor modify them with gender stereotyped adjectives. Nonetheless, the persistence of such patterns amongst participants who support the degendering movement and have adopted degendered nouns for the role terms means that the use of degendered nouns in and of itself is not enough to avoid potential microaggressions towards non-heteronormative dancers. Nor is it enough to

[73] Such discomfort was highly variable. Some women seemed to have some discomfort around dancing with another woman, presumably because of potential sexual connotations, but many women seemed to feel *more* comfortable dancing with other women, seeming to see them as non-sexual and therefore safer because they were women not men.

prevent the propagation of discourses that might discourage participants from trying such implicitly gendered roles that are at odds with one's own gender identity.

To summarize, alongside the use of gendered adjectives, allusions, and metaphors, the persistent bias towards specifying the gender of non-heteronormative gender/role pairings but not that of congruently heteronormative gender/role pairings, observed in 18 out of 22 interviewees, suggests that even those who avoid gender-stereotyped articulations of the dance roles, are nonetheless, on some level, still conceptualizing the dance roles as being heteronormatively gendered. In other words, non-heteronormative participation remains marked.[74] These heteronormative biases, while visible in discourse, are even more prevalent in the ways in which dancers manage partner selection and respond to encounters with non-heteronormatively gendered partners, as I demonstrate in the next section.

6.3 Heteronormativity embodied

During my fieldwork, I spent many hours in classes, at socials, and at weekend events that comprised workshops, competitions, and all-night social dancing. While I saw more non-heteronormative partnerships than I would have in years prior, the majority of partnerships were still a man leading and a woman following. In fact, I also regularly observed women who seemed to prefer leading (or attested that they did) but followed when a man asked them to dance. Likewise, I observed men who preferred following, leading when asked by a woman. While the ratios varied somewhat from event to event, context to context, what was clear was that despite the degendering movement—including the shift towards degendered language, and the increase

[74] It is not lost on me that by using the terms "heteronormative" vs. "non-heteronormative" I am reproducing this relationship of markedness. See Chapter 1 for discussion of my choice to use these terms.

in dancers competing in non-heteronormative roles in response to recent rule changes[75]—WCS partnership is still a predominately heteronormative formation at the level of actual embodied participation in the dance. While it could be the case, as suggested by one of my interviewees (see Section 4.4.4), that there is some natural affinity between women and following and men and leading, I also observed a series of interactional patterns that seem to reinforce the normativity or nonmarkedness of heteronormative participation, at the expense of those who may wish to dance in non-heteronormative roles. In the sections that follow, I explore how heteronormativity manifests in the ways that participants (1) choose and invite what are perceived to be viable partners, (2) identify appropriate next partners in class partner rotations, (3) navigate imbalances in the dance roles, and (4) make sense of individuals who are actively participating in non-heteronormative roles in their class, competition, and social spaces.

6.3.1 Role assumptions

Despite broad support for degendering, and even participation in non-heteronormative roles, the majority of my participants attested that they tend to assume that a feminine presenting person is a follower and a masculine presenting person, a leader. This is the case unless they have some other evidence to the contrary, for example, if they have observed the individual frequently dancing in their non-heteronormative role, competing/taking workshops/classes in their non-heteronormative role, or wearing role buttons or competition bibs (see Figure 6.2). While these signifiers have great potential in small local communities where a woman can become a known and established leader or a man, a known and established follower, they may fall short at weekend competition events—an important component of participation in the broader WCS

[75] Specifically, the rule change which allowed competitors to compete in both roles in a single weekend which made space for people who were primarily invested in their heteronormative role to also compete in their non-heteronormative role in a lower division.

scene where hundreds of people come together to learn, compete, and social dance with each other, often as strangers.



Figure 6.2. Physical signifiers of dance role such as role buttons (left) which some weekend events provide for dancers to wear during the event to indicate which role(s) they wish to perform and competition bibs which are typically worn on the upper or mid-back when a dancer is leading (centre) and on the lower back or seat when a dancer is following (right).[76]

Furthermore, as will be discussed in Section 6.3.2, even when one is known to dance one's non-heteronormative role, there is often still an expectation that one *can* dance one's heteronormative role and should be willing to do so with someone of the opposite gender. For example, we see assumptions such as those articulated by a woman who predominately leads in excerpt 19.

[76] As more dancers compete in both roles, often in adjacent divisions, this tradition of different bib placements now often leads to moments of frantic repinning between divisions—some of which run immediately one after the other. The bib images provided are stills from my personal collection of videos of my competition dances.

(19) whereas followers I still just like uh assume immediately and be like oh you are female (.) therefore you must want to follow so I when I ask you to dance I'm just being like "I'm leading you" (C)

Despite preferring a non-heteronormative role herself and being highly sensitive to the need to promote degendering, this interviewee states that she assumes "female" dancers "must want to follow" and so she assumes she will be leading them. Thus, if even non-heteronormative dancers are still relying on gender to indicate one's preferred role, this speaks to a persistent heteronormativity in the community. If these gendered assumptions are not questioned, but simply acted upon—as in, "I'm just being like "I'm leading you""—quite assertive resistance from a potentially misrecognized individual may be required to assert their preferred role. While the participant in excerpt 19 goes on to express a need to begin checking her biases as more people "come out" as being able to dance both roles, she also reflects on how she has been affected by the same sorts of assumptions when held by others in excerpt 20.

(20) I would go to the floor moms when you're checking yourself in [for competition] and they're immediately looking at the follower list I'm like "ohh right I'm a leader" ((laugh)) (C)

This interviewee's complex relationship to gender/role assumptions, as both potentially microaggressive insofar as they may lead to mislabelling of dancers like her and as a standard way that she navigates the community and understands the dance role of potential partners, point to the still evolving state of degendering. While the community may be creating room for participants to move outside of heteronormative structures, these structures seem to remain the commonsense foundation (or the heterosexual matrix, cf. Butler (1993)) on which the sense-

making of the community is founded; we expect to be able to look at someone and know how they will be participating.

This visual expectation was also observed in classes, where instructors at times seemed to estimate the role balance of the class by perceived gender rather than by asking for role identification. These kinds of assumptions about the relationship between perceived gender and role, i.e. that feminine presenting persons will follow and masculine presenting persons will lead, were frequently observed either after a solo warm up or even at the very start of class before any dancing had taken place at all and sometimes even explicitly in response to latecomers who were verbally identified as representing a particular role in line with heteronormative stereotypes. Given the size of workshops at weekend events, it seems improbable that the instructors actually know the role preference of all, or even the majority, of students. Nonetheless, such assumptions about perceived gender and role seem to guide the practices of instructors and, while they may seem relatively harmless and can be corrected in the actual process of pairing students up, they often extend beyond initial assessments. In some cases, instructors were seen to manage participation in the roles based on the assumptions they made about which participants did or did not comprise a partnership. Often this meant that lone dancers were asked questions that highlighted the heteronormative role, e.g. "(are you a) follow?" to women, while women standing together as partners were seen as two followers and instructors invited them to spread themselves out so that they would get to rotate to a leader sooner. In such cases, even women who had already agreed to dance together were seen not as a viable couple but as two unpartnered followers who ought to move, so that after the first partner rotation they would each get to have a leader.

While this problem can be resolved by the women specifying that one of them is leading, such directions to "spread yourselves out" were never observed to be directed to pairs that consisted of a man and a woman standing next to each other. As a result, it was only non-heteronormative dancers who had to explain themselves to instructors in front of entire classes or workshops, and only non-heteronormative dancers who were seen as potentially unpaired—or invalid as a pair. In a few observed cases, where dancers replied to instructors' explicit identifications (e.g. "another leader") to indicate that they were actually dancing the non-heteronormative role, apologies or self-deprecating remarks were issued by the instructors. While such responses indicated that instructors recognized their error and understood it to be potentially problematic, that these assumptions occurred at all suggests that these instructors' conceptual models for WCS participation remain, at least to some extent, heteronormative.

This sort of small invalidation and the subsequent need for additional accounting or explanation can be understood as a microaggression and as a potential factor in discouraging people from engaging in (or continuing to engage in) non-heteronormative roles. As one interviewee puts it, "maybe somebody has picked the [heteronormatively] gendered role 'cause they're like 'I'm uncomfortable not [picking the heteronormatively gendered role] and I wanna (.) um (.) I wanna y'know be in the accepted spot'" (C). She goes on to discuss how something gendered "the teacher said…is now (.) u:m (.) solidifying that person's choice" (C). Her concern here is that even if there is no visible or verbal evidence of a dancer wishing to participate in a non-heteronormative role, the use of gendered language might be reinforcing the perceived gendered constraints around who ought to dance what role. Hence, participants dancing heteronormatively in response to feeling constrained by gendered expectations may continue to do so, even if it isn't in line with the role they would genuinely prefer. Furthermore, these

systems of assumptions extend beyond identifications by teachers or other dancers to the kinds of interactions that are initiated with people and the positions that are deemed viable for them.

6.3.1.1 Social invitations

For many dancers, the primary reason for participating in the WCS community is the opportunity to social dance. Social dancing in many ways resembles barn dances or tea dances of prior eras where participants dance improvised dances with a number of other dancers (some known, some not known) over the course of several hours to live or pre-recorded music. In WCS, most of the songs are contemporary pop songs of three to five minutes in length and partners typically only dance one song together before thanking each other and moving on to new partners. This means that, over a night of social dancing, participants will dance with a significant number of different partners, and, for each, some sort of interaction is required to invite or consent to a new partnership. While some interviewees (often those with a background in ballroom dance) attest to preferring a more formal invitation, as we see in excerpt 21 below, invitations are often very economical in their enactment. They can be as little as mutual eye contact, an extended hand, or a touch on the shoulder, particularly once one is already on the dance floor and is looking for a new partner immediately after the previous dance has ended (see excerpt 22 below).

(21) usually it's a lot more verbal I (.) because I have uh ballroom as my first introduction of the (.) way in which you ask … y'know we'll escort our partner onto the floor so it's y'know uh (.) taking the hand out and being like "will you dance with me?" y'know eye t- verbal eye contact and gestural all in one (C)

(22) eye contact's a big one when it comes to (.) finding social dances … when somebody is looking for a dance not necessarily with you but just with anybody like they'll start

> walking and then they see an open body and they'll start flash lighting towards them I think that that's a big indicator and then eye contact's the next line and then there is a little bit they like establish eye contact, lean in, approach (.) and then tha- it's interesting because that sort of ritual (.) in our dance is so established that you can actually not even ask the person (.) ((laughing)) like if all of those set-up and you put out your hand and they grab- like you don't even have to ask ((laughing)) you can just go dance (L)

While such minimal asks may be a response to the often loud and low-lit spaces where social dances typically take place, they rely on participants being able to identify a viable partner by appearance alone. Rossi (2014) argues that reduced interactions (e.g. solely gestural requests) can signal solidarity and intimacy, and that verbalizing that which could be assumed to be mutually accessible to both parties, by contrast, may seem infelicitous to participants or may create distance or even offense. Hence, in a traditionally heteronormative space where gender and role always coincide, such minimal invitations may be not only viable and efficient, but in fact a sort of solidarity marking—we need not verbalize, because we both know how this interaction is going to go and we agree to engage in it together as members of a shared community of practice. Such minimal interactions, however, fall short in a space where roles cannot be assumed from bodily appearance.

Some interviewees discussed using hand and body position to establish their desired role, for example, offering the left hand palm up as a signal they wished to lead (Figure 6.3a) versus the right hand, palm down as a signal that they wished to follow (Figure 6.3b) or taking one's partner in closed hold as a way of expressing a desire to lead (Figure 6.3c) versus positioning one's body in a follower's closed hold to mark a desire to follow (Figure 6.3d). These patterns

also appeared in my fieldwork in the community where I often found myself assuming my partner's intent by the way they extended their hand to me. It is possible that these meaning correspondences between hand/body positions and desired role are not universal and that my interpretations were less accurate than I believed. If this were the case, my partners seemed not to want to cause conflict when I positioned myself in accordance with my assumption. Nonetheless, that my assumptions did not lead to conflict or apparent confusion and that these postural signals were also highlighted by my interviewees suggests that they are widely, if not universally, shared.



Figure 6.3. Bodily communication of intended role. Left to right, top to bottom: a. an interviewee demonstrates an upturned left palm signifying an offer to lead; b. the interviewee demonstrates a downturned right palm signifying an offer to follow; c. the interviewee demonstrates picking up a partner in closed hold as a leader with right arm extended to connect with the follower's left shoulder blade and left hand extended to connect palm to palm; d. an interviewee demonstrates "follower form" with right hand extended to connect palm to palm and left arm positioned to rest on the leader's right arm.

As an alternative to these postural signals as a way of communicating desired role, some participants have begun, in some cases, to invite partners to dance by role, (e.g. "do you want to

lead?" or "can I follow you?"), or, following invitations to dance, to ask potential partners their preferred role, (e.g. "lead, follow, switch?"). In the first type, dancers sometimes communicated what role they wanted the invitee to take in partnership ("do you want to lead?"), but in other cases, dancers were also observed to ask by specifying what role they wanted to take, e.g. "could I follow you" which, in some cases communicated a desire to invert the heteronormative roles such that the asker (a man) would dance as a follower while I (or another woman) would lead him. While invitations of this type communicate a specific role preference from the individual initiating the invitation, another emerging type of invitation style defers to the preference of the addressee. In such cases inviters first ask an invitee to dance and then offer them both roles (e.g. "do you want to lead or follow?") and sometimes also the potential of switching between roles within the course of a single dance, communicated by appending "switch" to the options offered—a common form of this offer is the concise "lead, follow, switch?".

What is particularly notable about these role negotiations, for my purposes here, is that they are significantly more likely to appear when two people of the same perceived gender invite each other to dance, when one member of the potential partnership wishes to engage in a non-heteronormative role, or when both partners are known to be capable of both roles. Many of my interviewees attested to the same, reporting that they only engaged in role negotiations in non-heteronormative partnership dynamics or with people who they knew were able to and enjoyed dancing both roles.

In fact, despite some interviewees expressing a desire to ask partners' role preference more frequently or even at the start of every dance, this was an extremely rare practice in my focal community. In an interview with one dancer, he drew attention to the fact that some

dancers, particularly those who only dance one role, seemed to be irritated by being asked their role preference each time they danced (excerpt 23).

(23) uh lead follow switch even- and some people (.) and this might be interesting for your- for your study some people get offended (.) yes because they're like "you know what my answer is" and I'm like "yeah (.) ((laughing)) it doesn't mean I'm not going to ask you"…yeah and there's some people that would be like "I don't lead" (.) and I'm like "OK (.) I'm still gonna ask you the question" (.) "I don't care" ((clears throat)) (R)

The potentially radical act of asking all of one's potential partners their preferred role was also highlighted by two other interviewees (M and N)—both men who prefer to follow—who had begun using role negotiations to contest the heteronormative assumptions of women who asked them to dance, presumably wanting them to lead. We see one of these interviewees (N) in excerpt 24. Interestingly, both said they had realized that in doing so, they were similarly engaging in heteronormative bias (i.e. only asking women about their role preference) and so indicated that they were trying to ask roles of everyone who invited them to dance.[77]

(24) *Can you tell me about some of the reactions you've received to that [asking role at the start of dances] sort of what's the majority reaction? are there any notable reactions in addition to that woman you mentioned who was like "yeah switch" and great?*
um (.) so (.) it's really like one of two reactions (.) so (.) the- when guys ask me to dance (.) it's almost- I mean it's- that's never a weird situation right because they're asking me therefore they know that I'm someone who will either follow them (.) or lead them (.) right like they- they've seen me dance they know that that's what I do (.)

[77] In an interesting flip of the script one stated that he would never ask the question to an older woman he knew who led, since she had always only ever led and would "fuckin' dropkick [him]" (N) if he ever suggested she might follow.

> when it's (.) uh a woman asking me to dance it's one of two situations it's either (.) a really (.) hesitant (.) "uh yeah we can switch like I don't really know how to lead very well" um and I'm like I don't give a fuck like it's dance let's just like see what happens (.) or it's like kind of incredulous and like kind of like why would you ask me? like I'm obviously a woman and obviously a follower (.) um now and again there will be like the "oh my god yeah let's switch" but like that's kind of like (.) bell curve (.) outlier like it's usually either (.) incredulous or hesitant (.) um (.) and like yeah either outlier of like "yeah let's switch" or outlier of like "I only follow I hope that's OK" (N)

That this simple mechanism for ensuring that one has a say in the role one will dance is seen as transgressive and sometimes leads to confusion or even discomfort from heteronormative dancers, as discussed in excerpts 23 and 24, speaks to the persistent heteronormative logics at play in the community. If a woman finds someone asking her role preference as marked, because, as articulated in excerpt 24, "I'm obviously a woman and obviously a follower", that is evidence of the privileged position of heteronormative dancers: they assume that they will be legible within their heteronormative roles without needing any verbal negotiation.

This privileged position of heteronormativity in WCS no doubt led to some of my participants discussed above (e.g. excerpt 19) falling into heteronormative structures and expectations. And, despite my best intentions and overt awareness of the elements of gender and language within the community, I found myself doing the same thing. For example, if I was looking for someone to lead, I asked a person who I perceived as a woman and, while I did typically ask them by role (i.e. "can I lead you?"), I nonetheless never found myself asking a masculine presenting individual to dance when I intended to lead. Similarly, when I was asked

by a man, or asked a man to dance, I very seldom summoned the chutzpah to break the expected chain of events and ask about the roles we would dance; rather, I simply followed unless asked to lead. Only with women (and very occasionally men who I knew preferred following) did I find myself asking about roles. Hence, even for myself, the desire for smooth conventionalized interactions frequently outweighed my desire to engage in linguistic activism. On some level, I just wanted to dance and not cause a stir.

Arguably, this reliance on heteronormativity comes not only from a desire for a smooth interaction, but also from the natural human desire to avoid rejection. On the whole, more men lead and more women follow than vice versa in WCS today; hence, by asking a woman, I increased my likelihood of asking someone who follows or at least knows how to follow[78] and, by asking a man, increased my likelihood of asking someone who leads. This understandable preference for smooth, rejection free interaction, however, does not negate the potential harms that such assumptions represent for the broader project of degendering the dance roles in WCS, and further emphasizes the relatively superficial effects of the lexical level reform. We can consistently use the terms LEADERS and FOLLOWERS, but if we look for leaders in male bodies and followers in female bodies, it is an indicator that our categories, despite appearing more egalitarian in their labelling, are still fundamentally heteronormative.

6.3.1.2 Rotation problems

In addition to the prevalence of heteronormative logics in social partner selection, class contexts offered another case study of the persistence of heteronormativity despite the use of degendered language. As highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, being seen as a viable member of a particular role group in classes is often a significant challenge for non-

[78] Many women who lead have also learned to follow because either they started in the heteronormative role or have had to learn to manage the many men who have asked them to dance and expected them to follow.

heteronormative dancers, particularly at weekend events where one is less likely to be known by all of one's partners in a given workshop. This challenge is most clearly demonstrated by what I previously dubbed "the rotation problem", in an allusion to Halberstam's (1998) "bathroom problem". As shown in excerpts 25 and 26, this problem was not limited to my own experiences relayed in the introduction.

(25) over the years that I've had countless uh ((laugh)) interesting comments y'know (.) or and I usually have to (.) y'know greet my person followin- or followers uh to me 'cause otherwise they'll skip by me and go to the next man y'know (.) so I usually have to (.) um (.) make sure to catch them otherwise they- ((laugh)) y'know keep- keep going by… or they give you like a double take (.) or like look you up and down y'know (.) it's like no I'm- I'm really leading (D)

(26) I mean I definitely like (.) have had people get confused in the rotation for a class (.) where they like rotate to me and then they're like looking around (.) and I'm like "hi" and uh y'know that's when I jump in and I'm like "hello" y'know with the classic like everyone else has been doing this when you rotate to them so I do it too I'm like "hello" and they're like (.) "oh" and then y'know they get it they're like "are you leading?" and I'm like "yes I am" and they're like "OK" um (B)

Both of these women, one who almost exclusively leads, and one who both leads and follows to an equal skill level, reflect on experiences of being illegible as leaders. In order to avoid problems in partner rotations in classes and to ensure that they are recognized as leaders, both discuss having to "greet" incoming followers to ensure that the follower sees them as a viable leader rather than another partnerless follower. This additional interactional labour is not demanded of male bodied leaders; instead, the followers seem to automatically read them as

viable partners and move to connect with them without issue. Meanwhile female bodied leaders often have to initiate verbal interaction, and sometimes even verbally verify their role, before their new follower will recognize them as a partner and connect with them.

This problem showed itself quite viscerally during my participant observation where I not only had to engage in these greeting rituals myself—soliciting followers in classes by stating that I was in fact leading and needing to greet them in rotations to ensure they rotated to me—but also witnessed other women leaders being misrecognized. Female leaders were sometimes read by followers as other partnerless followers who were "just waiting" in a gap in the array of leaders, rather than as the leaders they were. In some cases, other dancers or instructors even tried to helpfully point them towards "free leaders" who were invariably men who did not at that moment have a partner. This misrecognition of women leaders as partnerless followers persisted even when the followers doing the misrecognizing had already danced (or even were currently dancing) with other women leaders in the same class. It seemed that even where women were able to establish themselves as leaders—by gesture, posture, verbalization, or simply taking the follower into a dance hold—women who had not yet established themselves as leaders through these kinds of direct connections were still often assumed to be followers and had to explain their presence in the partner-less gap, when "free leaders" were visible. While my data is biased towards women leaders due to my own positionality, as well as the generally greater number of women leading versus men following, I did see some evidence of men followers facing similar rotation challenges. Moreover, on occasion, men followers were even less able than those of us women leaders to establish themselves as legible in the role they preferred, often being pulled into the leading role by followers eager for a partner.

In addition to dancers not being legible in their preferred role—and the accompanying interactional work necessary to achieve legibility—the rotation problem is complicated by the potential for dancers to be read as belonging to the opposite (heteronormative) dance role. I regularly watched non-heteronormative dancers be approached by individuals of the "opposite" gender who they then had to turn away by announcing their intended role, if they wished to maintain it. In some cases, it seemed that the dancer intending to dance a non-heteronormative role simply gave in and danced the heteronormative role, particularly if they were asked by multiple people of the opposite gender. I personally experienced this form of misrecognition on multiple occasions, typically at the start of workshops I intended to lead in, while the leaders attempted to secure viable partners. Once again, further interactional work (often verbally stating that I was intending to lead) was needed to establish myself in the role I had chosen to dance in that workshop.

Even in cases where non-heteronormative dancers were successful in establishing their role preferences, partners often responded with surprise, treating the role choice as marked. The emblematic "oh!" of surprise occurred again and again in response to my establishing myself as a leader. And, even where the role choice was explicitly celebrated—such celebration often marked by utterances such as "yay"—it was still in many cases prefaced by the "oh", indicating surprise or a potentially problematic first part to an interaction, i.e. the appearance of a woman where a man (leader) was expected (cf. Heritage, 1998 on "oh" prefacing). This pattern was also illustrated in a woman leader's reflection on how people respond to social dance invitations (excerpt 27).

(27) well usually yeah when I'm asking someone they'll be like "oh are you are you- y- are you- I'm shj- are you leading?" and I go "yeah I'm leading I'm asking you as- I'm asking you as a leader" (I)

While impressionistically, these "oh" responses are not the majority in classes (many partners just connect without issue), their persistence and frequency point to the need for further progression in the degendering of the roles such that a woman leading is no longer cause for surprise. Such interactions, even when positive, are often microaggressive, implicitly questioning one's position in the role by responding to it as marked and therefore as non-normative and potentially less valid than a more normative position. Unfortunately, these patterns of misrecognition and potential microaggressions also extend to instructors who, in their attempts to ensure that the maximum number of students have partners, may misrecognize non-heteronormative dancers on the basis of perceived gender.

6.3.2 Role balance

While there is a general difficulty in becoming legible in a non-heteronormative dance role (as we have seen), such legibility often exists in relation to the so called "role balance" of whatever event or context one finds oneself in. Ideally, partner dance classes, socials, and contests should have an equal number of followers and leaders so that everyone can have a partner at the same time. Such perfect balance, however, is hard to come by. Likely because of the feminization of dance in many Eurocentric societies (Craig, 2013), many dance communities find themselves with significantly more women than men, and in a heteronormative system, that tends to mean more followers than leaders. This problem is so pronounced that many European WCS weekend events have registration systems which manage the balance of the roles through requiring people to register in pairs or only selling a limited number of tickets for single dancers

of each role so that they can ensure that they have a roughly equal number of leaders and followers. This approach has not been adopted in most North American events, but the imbalance within the community as a whole, and the focal community of this study, in particular, was frequently remarked upon in my interviews, as seen, for example in excerpt 28.

(28) and I would like to not have to fight so hard to get dances ‘cause there are always more (.) followers than there are leaders (E)

Such commentary in the focal community was frequently provided as an explanation for why women began to lead. Women not only attested to their own choice to lead as having sprung from wanting to have more dances but also attributed this same motivation to other women leaders. Specifically, they pointed to the particularly high number of followers (sometimes framed as women) in the focal community as driving a sharp decrease in the number of women who *only* followed.

This balance issue, then, can be a strong facilitator for women exploring non-heteronormative dancing. Even women who still predominately follow reflected on learning to lead to improve the balance of lower-level classes (e.g. A). And, in the case of the interviewee in excerpt 29, she reports beginning to lead at socials and parties (as opposed to just in classes) as a direct response to the shortage of leaders that would cause her to miss chances to dance to songs she really liked.

(29) a song came on and I really wanted to dance with it and I looked arou- around the room and all the leaders were taken and I think you were there the- the leader follow ratio was really askew and I was like even the- the followers who I know can also lead were all already dancing and I was like “I want to dance to this song” so I found somebody and I asked them to dance and so I led (F)

Even though she was still predominately a follower and preferred that role, it was the limitations of the role balance in the local community that drove her to begin developing her leading skills. This sort of narrative was also offered by women who were already established as leaders in advance of my project. One such interviewee, who leads and follows roughly equally as often, reflected on starting to lead so she didn't have to "sit down" (i.e. could dance more) and so that she could "provide another leader to the community" (H). This idea of being able to "provide" leaders to the community was echoed by a woman who still mainly follows but finds it easier to ask women to dance (i.e. initiating leading another woman). She notes that trying to find a leader can involve "competition"—fighting for the few leaders available. And, so, by contrast, offering to lead another woman is easier as it is not competitive but instead generous—"offering some type of value" (E) to another woman rather than fighting against her for access to a leader.

For some women, leading began through role switching in imbalanced classes. Anytime they themselves were in a rotation gap and "not following", they switched roles to lead "lone follows" (excerpt 30). For the interviewee in excerpt 30, this ultimately grew into taking on the leading role at least as frequently as the following role, particularly in environments like European events where role balance is mandated and leading gave her greater access to registration spots at events.

(30) and I mean part of why I started leading regularly in club (.) was because there were just more follows than leads in this space (.) and so once I started to realize like "oh I can (.) lead" (.) I would just like- it started out as like anytime I'm not following I just ask one of the lone follows to dance ((laugh)) (B)

Even amongst women who now primarily lead, role balance often featured in their early experiences. In excerpt 31, the interviewee identifies the role imbalance not as the impetus for

her taking on the lead role, but instead as a facilitator for her taking on the role she had identified as “way cooler”. For both this woman and others who primarily lead, the shortage of leaders made their choice to lead more viable.

(31) but I didn’t hate partner dancing whatever something with my mom (.) we both really enjoyed it I found out the leading was way cooler so ((laugh)) and they always need leaders I’m like “alright” (C)

This ability to ‘dip into’ the leading role to accommodate balance issues was almost certainly facilitated by degendering: (1) in providing terms that would enable a woman to engage in leading without having to place herself in the position of the “men” (and likely endure social consequences or at least teasing) and (2) in providing more and more exemplars of women leading which to some extent normalized the choice to switch in order to balance a room.

Given the previously highlighted tendency for dance communities to have more women than men and, therefore, due to the history of heteronormativity in the community, more followers than leaders, opportunities for men to follow for balance were less prevalent. For example, the interviewee in excerpt 32 attributes his choice to start learning to follow to a role imbalance, but at the same time emphasizes repeatedly that this is “contrary to what’s normal” and “nine times out of ten this never happens”.

(32) *and* what *happened to make you think “hey I want to start learning to follow”?*

(.)

sure yeah it started off with a uhm: uh: a role imbalance in the class (.) um contrary to what’s normal the studio that I was in was heavy on leaders and nine out of ten times this never happens um but yeah it was very recurring in the studio at the time so there

was just one class where I just decided "hey I'm going to pick up following" because just to balance the roles of the class and then that's how it started (L)

During my fieldwork I observed several other cases where men were able to follow to balance a room (typically at weekend event workshops, often with women having chosen to lead). But, within my focal community, this was seldom the case.

Ultimately, due to the tendency for communities to be short on leaders, men more often told me stories of how role balance pushed them back into leading and created barriers to them following—even if they were actively pursuing following as their primary role. This is particularly well exemplified by the story told in excerpt 33.

(33) despite having (.) um such a teacher [a woman who danced both roles] (.) the balance of the room (.) would push me into leading (.) or and y'know it's (.) if you have (.) uh let's say you have three leaders (.) five followers (.) and I'm one of those five (.) we need somebody to balance the room (.) and you know that the eyes are on you as a male presenting person to jump over to the leader side (.) and you know so there's just this inner pressure (.) of conformity that often pushed me (.) to jump to the other side even though I didn't necessarily want to learn that side like I did want to learn both sides but like when I was sitting there I want to follow (.) I was always the first one to give in and go over to the lead side (M)

Despite this man preferring to follow and having come up in a community that was supportive to non-heteronormative dancers (led by a woman who danced both roles), the shortage of leaders in the room would "push [him] into leading". As he puts it, "the eyes are on you as a male presenting person to jump over to the leader side", and so he did, despite wanting to learn to follow instead. While I earlier showed examples of women leading to balance a room, it is

notable that here the interviewee specifically frames the pressure in terms of his "male presenting" body—women *can* lead to balance a room, but he was *expected* to.

Such expectations were also oriented to by another interviewee who explained his relatively limited dancing as a follower in part through the issue of role balance (excerpt 34).

(34) um but usually this- in this- it- it's not because of a gender role it's just a matter of numbers I'm in a room where they're typically more followers than leads and every time I get up to dance as a follower (.) I feel like (.) I'm sort of not there to lead someone now I'm taking myself out o- and I'm- I'm further imbalancing (.) the- the numbers in the room (T)

Though he is an instructor and is highly competent in both roles, he feels that choosing to follow even in a social dance environment (rather than a class) is "taking [him]self out and… further imbalancing (.) the- the numbers". While he claims that this is "not because of gender role", his framing is notably different from the women considered in excerpts 28-31 above. Whereas they talk about learning to lead in response to their own desire for more dances (or for the role), both men cited in the excerpts above (33-34) articulate their choice to lead as relating to others' desires. When the balance of the room is uneven, a dancer whose heteronormative role is over-represented can choose to dance in a non-heteronormative role in order to secure more dances for themselves, but a dancer whose heteronormative role is under-represented is pressured to undertake that role in response to others' perceived desire for dances.

Though these pressures affected women significantly less often and were not mentioned by any of the women I interviewed, I did observe several occasions wherein women had set themselves up to lead in a workshop, but ultimately ended up following when the workshop ended up having more leaders than followers. In one workshop I attended, we began with a

handful of women attempting to lead, but most switched to following after multiple rounds of men approached them and tried to establish a partnership. In several other classes, I found myself as one of only very few women leaders in a class with a substantial excess of leaders. In such classes, unpartnered men often attempted to partner with the unpartnered women (who were intending to lead) but did not approach other unpartnered men. Similarly, while unpartnered women leaders were sometimes asked by instructors if they were followers in such imbalanced classes, unpartnered men never were (see section 6.3.1). I nearly always ended up persisting in my role,[79] partly because I was there for fieldwork and was determined to fully experience dancing in a non-heteronormative role, but, as I reflected in my fieldnotes, on one occasion, I was actually "scared". It was clear that in leader heavy classes, I, as a feminine presenting person, was expected to be a solution to the imbalance, not a contributor to it. Had I not been conducting research, I may very well have 'caved to' the pressure of these encounters and returned to my heteronormative role as I both witnessed and heard of men frequently doing when leaders were in short supply.

Despite some instructors clearly trying to support dancers in choosing their preferred roles—de-emphasizing any potential obligation to balance the room (e.g. "we'll be uneven either way") or highlighting personal agency (e.g. "I want you to do you")—the pressure for non-heteronormative dancers to dance in their heteronormative roles when needed for balance remained strong. Furthermore, even when balance did facilitate the exploration of non-heteronormative roles, this discourse of balance seemed to encourage a reading of non-heteronormative dancers as not authentic members of their role category but just as helpers,

[79] As a notable exception, I followed whenever needed in local beginner classes as that is often the agreement by which more advanced dancers are allowed to stay for the beginner class for free. The notion being that more advanced dancers can help make sure that all the new dancers stay dancing and having fun throughout the class.

filling in for the benefit of all, and always able to switch "back" if needed. As one interviewee puts it in excerpt 35:

(35) like there's very few who see me in class (.) or even in class they just assume I'm just picking up 'cause it's like "oh we never have enough leaders oh [C]'s so nice she's just leading for the sake of ((unclear))" (C)

6.3.2.1 Non-heteronormativity as additional

As shown by the pressures exerted on dancers to perform their heteronormative role when that role is under-represented in a given class or social, there is a broad expectation that all dancers will be capable of dancing the role which is heteronormatively congruent with their gender. As a consequence of this, dancing in one's non-heteronormative role is systematically treated as additional and is often associated with becoming an instructor or having already reached a high level of mastery in one's heteronormative role. This is not entirely unfounded as learning both roles is, in fact, a key aspect of a ballroom and WCS teacher training program that a number of dancers in my focal community had partaken of (even if they did not ultimately end up teaching professionally). Furthermore, several participants reflected on starting to learn the other role in environments where a lower-level class was offered between a higher-level class and a social and was free for those who took the higher-level class. It is also the case that instructors were heard to encourage learning "the other side" in order to be better able to help one's partner when dancing in one's own preferred role.

Further to this, since contest rules have been revised to allow competitors to dance in both roles (dancing their additional role one level below their dominant role), I observed a general trend of dancers competing in their heteronormative role at a higher level and non-heteronormative at a lower level. That is, even though they could have competed in their non-

heteronormative role prior to being allowed to compete in both at a single event, most dancers nonetheless are more highly skilled in their heteronormative role (as attested by their higher competitive status) and treat it as primary (having competed in it more to reach a higher level). These patterns of participation are reflected in the ways that dancers tend to respond to non-heteronormative participation, in particular, women leading.[80]

In my own experience leading, other women who I was leading often treated my choice to lead as a sign of greater skill in general. Inherent in this is the idea that if I am leading, I must already be a skillful follower. In such cases, there was no consideration that I might just be a beginner dancer, only just learning to lead. Instead, it was taken for granted that if I, in my feminine body was leading (doing "the guy's part", as some dancers put it to me), I must already know how to follow and how to do so at a high level. These assumptions were also held by women followers who commented on my "bravery" in taking on what they identified as the "hard" role of leading. In fact, some would also attest that they couldn't or wouldn't learn the leading role, because they already find following sufficiently difficult.

This idea that leading is harder than following was also commented on by one of my interviewees who claimed that she began following because it seemed like the better role for a beginner "I need instruction in order to do this thing I don't need to already be the person trying to figure out how to make those decisions" (J). However, it is notable that the supposedly easier nature of following does not mean that everyone is encouraged to begin by learning to follow. In excerpt 36, another interviewee reflected on a beginner man entering her WCS class for the first time and self-selecting as a follower by joining the followers' side of the room.

[80] As will be demonstrated in the examples below, there does seem to be a unique conception of leading being harder and therefore of women leaders being exceptional, but I cannot know exactly how men followers are received as, given my feminine presenting body, I was not able to elicit responses of this nature, and my men interviewees did not volunteer any such stories (cf. the stories relayed by women leaders later in this section).

(36) I did unfortunately tell the one guy who said he's going to follow I said "no I think you wanna lead" ((laughing)) but y'know I- but I- I think just because I don't think that either one of those guys when they came in knew what they were coming into um but- (.) but yeah otherwise- otherwise it should just be "yeah do whatever you want"

yeah I'm curious actually if you could say a little bit more about that and like the- (.) uh the decision making process like how did you decide "oh no I need to change what's happening"

yeah yeah yeah um (.) I just- I ju- I just (.) think they were- ah uh they were drug there right they were- they- somebody brought them to the class (.) um (.) never taken- they've never taken dance classes before (.) they- they're- kind of have a little bit of swagger because they've been told when they're out (.) soc- y'know (.) freestyling that they're good dancers and (.) they were not prepared for (.) how hard it was going to be (K)

In this case, it is notable that the instructor intervened because she "d[id]n't think that either one of those guys when they came in knew what they were coming into" (K). While dancers are encouraged to learn both roles, there seems to still be some expectation that one needs to "kn[o]w what they [are] coming into" in order to make an appropriate choice. This interviewee undoubtedly had her students' best interests in mind—she was trying to ensure that they learned the role that would be most comfortable for them—and it is notable that she framed her intervention as "unfortunate[]" in light of her overarching notion that "it should be "yeah do whatever you want"", which indicates her conscious support of degendering. However, in the heat of the moment, and because the man did not appear to have prior dance training, his choice to follow was marked as potentially misaligned with his actual preference and he was redirected

to learn a heteronormative role first. In short, he was encouraged to become educated in his heteronormative role—and the dance in general—before opting to learn the non-heteronormative role as an additional skill. That he kept coming to class and kept leading may indicate that leading was in fact his preference.

A similar impetus to ensure students were educated in the tradition of the dance roles also arose in two other interviews where interviewees stated that they felt it was important to give students "the background of tradition" (G) before having them choose roles. This can be "a simple answer for those that don't want to make a choice" (L), but its importance also went beyond that. As one interviewee puts it in excerpt 37, she doesn't want people to feel they weren't given the non-heteronormative option, but at the same time, she doesn't want them to feel that they weren't given the opportunity to align themselves with the norm.

(37) um I think people should be (.) entitled to know [the traditional role allocation] so that like a year down the road they're like "oh wait this is weird?"…I wouldn't want it to come back the other way of (.) um (.) the same way as I wouldn't want someone to come back and say "oh well I wanted to lead and you made me follow" I wouldn't want that but I also wouldn't want "oh well traditionally a female should follow (.) and I don't feel I was given the full information to know that" (G)

These interventions, while motivated by care for students and the goal of ensuring they make a choice of role that they will be happy with in the long term, nonetheless recirculate traditional heteronormative ideas and may nudge beginning dancers towards choosing to learn the heteronormative role first.

The question of dancers' likely or appropriate first role also emerged in the gratitude that was often directed to women leaders for balancing or "helping out" a class (cf. excerpt 35,

expanded in excerpt 38 below). I am in fact a better follower than leader, having spent far more years training as a follower and generally still preferring to follow. But, for interviewees who are dominant in their non-heteronormative role and strongly prefer that role, assumptions that they were leading as a courtesy, in order to balance the class, or were just learning to lead as an additional role, while being essentially a follower, were treated by my interviewees as mildly frustrating at best and actively upsetting at worst. In excerpt 38, the interviewee reflects on being misapprehended as "nice" or generous for "leading for the sake of" balancing the class when in fact, as she puts it, "no it's actually my prime".

(38) like there's very few who see me in class (.) or even in class they just assume I'm just picking up 'cause it's like "oh we never have enough leaders oh [C]'s so nice she's just leading for the sake of ((unclear))" I'm like "no it's actually my prime" (.) so so few people know even that that like when they're asking they're always like "is it OK that you lead is that- is that OK with you? do you wanna lead?" ((soft laugh)) I'm like "yeah actually I do" even some of my instructors are like "oh yeah you- you like leading?" (C)

Despite the fact that this interviewee mainly leads both in socials and classes, the misrecognition of her as essentially a follower is apparent when followers ask her if it's "OK that you lead" or ask if she "wan[ts to] lead". "Actually [she] do[es]" want to lead, even if it seems to evince surprise, both from other followers and her instructors who she reports asking her incredulously, "you- you like leading?". While these reflections are delivered lightly and with laughter, the underlying theme is one of being repeatedly misrecognized, having to provide accounts for her preference because it is non-heteronormative when it is in fact her primary and preferred role. In

short, she is not fully legible as a leader even though her main form of participation in the community is through leading.

While the interviewee featured in excerpt 38 did not explicitly identify this treatment as bothersome or microaggressive, another woman interviewee who learned to lead first and strongly prefers it provided an account in which the surrounding microaggressive context resulted in misrecognition "ma[king her] even like more upset than it normally would" (excerpt 39).

(39) and then uh- a follower rotated to me (.) and (.) said something like "oh my gosh I can't believe you can lead this" or something not assuming that I'm traditionally a leader and- and it made me even like more upset than it normally would 'cause I was already bothered by just the class in general y'know so I don't know
do you find you have those sorts of interactions with other students often like where they're surprised that you're leading or they're impressed somehow?
oh man over the years I can't tell you how many people have said "oh you must be a teacher" or "you're learning to lead because you want to be a teacher" no I'm just leading I'm just leading in this workshop y'know that- that happen- happens all the time (D)

The context in question was a class in which the instructor repeatedly used gendered terms, repaired them, and then used them again despite the presence of several non-heteronormative dancers (see Section 4.5.1). This behaviour was experienced as intentional and microaggressive by the interviewee and, as a result of the repeated misgenderings in the class, when a follower was shocked that she could lead (even though the shock came in the form of a compliment to her skill), it was experienced as particularly upsetting. What's important to note, however, is that

this experience "made [her] **more** upset that it normally would" (emphasis added), suggesting that such misrecognitions are always at least a little upsetting, a fact which is not surprising as such misrecognitions are microaggressions of a sort. The interviewee is seen as something which she is not and her validity in the role she actually embodies is questioned regardless of the compliment to her skill that might be available on the surface of the comment. As perhaps predicted by my own experience reported earlier in this section, this interviewee reports that such microaggressions "happen[] all the time". She "can't tell [me] how many people" have assumed she must be a teacher, because why else would a woman learn to lead?

As has been illustrated in this section, regardless of whether it is the "the guy's part" or "leading" and, despite how welcome a woman leading might be when a class needs balance, or how praised a woman might be for learning to lead, she is still regularly subject to the assumption that she must *actually* be a follower. This assumption arises because she is, in fact, a woman and, under heteronormative logics, women all know how to follow, so they can be assumed to do so when needed for balance or when a man wants to lead them.

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown a variety of ways that gender stereotyped conceptions of the dance roles appear to persist, despite the highly successful uptake of gender-neutral terms for referring to the roles as outlined in Chapter 5. I began by showing how, where gendered language did appear, it was almost always used in heteronormative ways (i.e. masculine terms for leaders and feminine terms for followers) before considering the forms of repairs used to revise such gendered terms. In the majority of cases, gendered terms were repaired to degendered nouns (i.e. FOLLOWER or LEADER) but in the remaining cases, a tendency towards repairing by appending AND/OR [other gender pronoun] to the utterance was observed. This approach to repair, while

highlighting the possibility for both binary genders to participate in a given role, also points to a cis-genderist tendency to imagine people as either men or women, as well as a cognitive bias towards imagining human referents as gendered (as opposed to gender-neutral) (McConnell-Ginet, 2011). I also found that repairs seemed to be more likely to appear when non-heteronormative dancers were identifiable within the speaker's visual field, suggesting that, as I argued in Chapter 4, a significant motivator for language change is the prioritization of civility which aims to avoid offense and conflict.

In addition to repairs, I also observed a number of cases of entanglement wherein gender and role terms became confused, and a participant used the role term when, based on context or repairs, they had intended to use the gender term (i.e. saying FOLLOWERS when intending to refer to the class of women). This phenomenon suggests that, even some of the most diligent users of degendered terms, may still have significant overlap between the ostensibly degendered role terms and the gender groups that previously subsumed them. This tendency to entangle followers and feminine referents and leaders and masculine referents was also observed in adjectival choices, which tracked with the gender stereotypes associated with the roles and also appeared in metaphors which not only replicated gender stereotypes but also models of heteronormative romantic partnership. Further to these more figurative discourse phenomena, specification of gender when referring to a role generically or non-specifically (e.g. female followers vs male followers), showed a tendency to treat non-heteronormative combinations (i.e. women leaders, men followers) as more marked. On the linguistic level then, this chapter demonstrates that the WCS community is not as degendered as the uptake of degendered terms might suggest.

Moving beyond talking about WCS to the dynamics of participation in WCS, similarly persistent heteronormativity emerges. Across classes and social dancing spaces, there was an

overwhelming tendency to assume unknown individuals' role preference on the basis of their perceived gender. Even non-heteronormative dancers attested to presuming heteronormative role assignments unless otherwise indicated. Such assumptions then led to imbalances in invitations to dance such that verbal negotiations were substantially more frequent in non-heteronormative pairings. As a result, when a man and a woman get up to dance together, in most cases I observed they take on heteronormative role assignments without any verbal negotiation.

Gendered assumptions also emerged as important in partner rotations in classes. Multiple women leaders I spoke to volunteered stories of an experience that I myself also experienced while leading: followers failing to rotate to dance with us because they perceived us as other followers in accordance with our female-coded bodies. As a result of this "rotation problem", non-heteronormative dancers often have to engage in additional discursive labour to be recognized as a viable partner in class rotations, and in some cases, may find themselves consistently ignored or misrecognized in their role. This misrecognition is in some cases facilitated by an imbalance in the number of followers and leaders in a given context. Wherever one role category has fewer participants (usually leaders), there is greater room and even incentives for dancers to engage in that role whether their doing so is heteronormative or not. By contrast, the role that has more participants is even harder for individuals to engage in non-heteronormatively (e.g. as a man following or woman leading).

These pressures around role balance also point to a final element of heteronormativity that I observed in the community and which my interviewees commented on: the assumption that a non-heteronormative role is additional. While this perception is reflective of a history of heteronormativity in which many dancers did in fact learn their heteronormative role initially (before learning the other role and for some taking it as their preference), it also results in

harmful microaggressions to non-heteronormative dancers who are regularly reminded that they don't quite fit in their preferred role or aren't seen as natural to it.

This persistence of gender stereotyped conceptions, despite the introduction of gender-neutral terms, is perhaps not surprising, given related findings (some of which were referred to earlier) around androcentric bias and professional role nouns. For example, Bailey and LaFrance (2017) show that "genderless neutral words, like human" still lead to androcentric choices amongst men. In a similar way, Lindqvist et al (2019) report that neutral terms like "the applicant" still elicit a male bias in responses. In addition to the broader problem of male bias, Duffy and Keir (2004) found that mismatches between the stereotypical gender of a professional role noun (without lexical gender marking) and the gender of a pronoun used in co-reference led to processing slowdowns unless the gender of the referent was prespecified, suggesting that role nouns activate gender stereotypes unless explicitly contested by preceding information. This effect of stereotyped role bias was also observed by Lassonde and O'Brien (2013) even when gender-neutral neologisms were used (e.g. FIREFIGHTER instead of FIREMAN). Ultimately, then, the persistence of gendered categories under gender-neutral labels in WCS corresponds to what has been seen in research that investigates gender bias associated with professional roles and the reformed and unreformed nouns used to refer to them. To borrow Lucy's (2005) term, *habitual cognition,* in the form of stereotypes, seems likely to persist even if language undergoes change, and based on the findings reported on in this chapter, may be quite delayed in responding to linguistic changes to gendered terms or other stereotypes, if it responds at all.

While one may contest one's own internal biases, the persistence of gendered ways of articulating a given role and one's suitability for it, as well as the continued reliance on gendered logics of participation in the WCS dance space, seems likely to continue to reproduce

heteronormative understandings of the roles. I argue that these patterns point to the need for interventions that reach beyond the initial success at the lexical level. As will be discussed in the concluding chapter, such interventions may include initiating role negotiations with every partner (e.g. excerpts 23 and 24) and finding ways to introduce new dancers to the roles without encouraging heteronormative participation. At present, the former intervention is only being enacted by a small minority of community members, and the latter remains complicated by individual preferences and the pervasiveness of gender as an organizing category in society more broadly. In addition, the persistence of the largely heteronormative distribution of roles in classes—perhaps a result of participants' other experiences with dance—seems to belie instructors' attestations that you can do whatever role you want.

7 Discussion & Conclusion

I also need to start thinking about my own relationship to the dance as alluded to by my colleague's student today. I need to account for why I'm still here.

I was like "oh why do you- why do you do this? and why am I doing ((laugh))?" because I spent- I spent a lot of money just like going to different events but it's like I really enjoy (.) having the- that connection with- with people (I)

7.1 Introduction

Early in my fieldwork, I gave a guest lecture on language reform in a colleague's undergraduate language and gender class. During the lecture I talked about my research in the WCS community and shared some very preliminary results. In the Q&A following my presentation, a student asked me why I was even involved in partner dance when it was so heteronormative. This is not the first time I've been asked as much. Many years ago, a queer friend got quite annoyed with me for engaging in a hobby (though at that time it was mainly country dancing) that, to them, seemed so regressive in terms of heteronormative gender standards. Both times the answer was the same: because I love how it feels to communicate through touch alone, moving together with my partner and the music. I think this is why many of us stay. Many of my interviewees have busy, hectic lives, but they value dance—deeply. While some participants may start dancing to meet potential romantic or sexual partners or to appease a romantic partner (all of these were attested amongst my participants), they stay year after year because there is something deeply rewarding about moving together with another. As one

interviewee puts it when describing his first encounter with WCS in excerpt 1, “this is the coolest thing ever”.

(1) in that moment [learning to stay connected while shifting from foot to foot] I was like “hhhhhh this person has become an extension of myself (.) we are now four legs” but what was really cool was like through that hand connection and through sharing a center (.) I could feel (.) where I could kn- I could tell what foot my- my partner was on (.) how much of their weight was on the foot where the foot was in space I was like “this is the coolest information ever I want to like take this secret power (.) and put it into all the really cool things I’m going to eventually learn” … and so I was hooked right away I was like “this is the coolest thing ever I’m going to learn it” (M)

Even as this interviewee elsewhere talks about fearing homophobic reactions to asking men to dance with him and spending his early competitive years never getting to compete with anyone he was attracted to (on account of heteronormative gender rules), WCS just felt so “cool” and “genuinely naturally ma[de] sense to [him]” (M) and thus he stuck with it. That participants find so much joy in partner dancing is not surprising as research has shown dancing (including partnered styles) to be beneficial for both mental and physical health outcomes across multiple age cohorts (e.g. Clifford et al., 2023; Fong Yan et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023). Thus, while my final chapter of analysis (Chapter 6) shows a community still entangled with heteronormativity, even after a largely successful language reform effort (see Chapter 5) that has seen broad community support (see Chapter 4), this is not a reason to declare WCS incurably tied to heteronormativity. Instead, my interviews reveal a community of dancers eager to make the dance ever more inclusive, freer, and more welcoming to people of all genders and sexualities so that ever more people can experience the joy (and wellbeing benefits) of dance. This will

undoubtedly take time—and significant effort and innovation—but it is underway. While I and other dancers I know worry about the revanchism of the ongoing 2024-2028 Trump presidency bleeding into American dance spaces (and a more general alt-right revanchism stealing into communities across the globe), in the two years since my fieldwork, I have at the same time witnessed a new dance social night emerge in my local community, which is loudly queer friendly and seems to be attracting ever more non-heteronormative dancers, and ever more dancers competing in non-heteronormative roles at weekend events. So long as there are organizers, instructors, and dancers willing to do the work, there is space for WCS to move towards a less heteronormative future.

Thus, in this concluding chapter I begin with a brief summary of my findings before moving on to the implications of my research: what do my findings mean for these passionate reformers? Where might they turn their energy next? And what inspiration might be drawn from other modes of degendering taking place in other communities? Following this, I discuss some further issues that arose in my research, but that, because of space constraints, I was not able to develop further. I end by suggesting future research directions in the WCS community, a community which I hope my research shows is a fascinating and important community for understanding not only language reform but also the ways that society constructs gender and social roles more broadly.

7.2 Summary of findings

Drawing on both interviews and fieldnotes from roughly eleven months of participant observation, in this dissertation I sought to understand how language reform was being undertaken and understood within the context of WCS's degendering movement. I was specifically interested in: (1) how participants talked about the reform—whether for or against it,

(2) the ways and the extent to which the reform was being enacted, and (3) the extent to which language reform seemed to be contributing to, or entangled with, the broader social change targeted by the reform—i.e. the contestation of traditional heteronormative models of participation such that any dancer can participate in either (or both) of the two dance roles.

I addressed the first of these questions in Chapter 4 where I reported on my findings that degendering seemed to be universally supported by my participants and within the sites where I conducted participant observation. This support is closely aligned with Cameron's (1995) liberal (as opposed to radical) approach to language reform, which frames the reform as enhancing the accuracy of language and its responsiveness to an exogenously changing society while also prioritizing the use of reformed language as a mode of enhancing civility and inclusion. In the case of WCS, reformed language is seen as more accurate both because non-heteronormative dancers do, in fact, exist, and because dance roles are largely presented *as roles* rather than as gendered practices within the community. Unlike traditional conceptions of dance as an environment for learning appropriately gendered behaviours, in WCS the roles are seen to be a personal choice available to everyone regardless of gender. Such changes in participation are also understood as emerging organically in response to broader social changes outside of WCS. That is, if people are already dancing non-heteronormatively, then language reform is merely correcting the language to respond to the actual state of the world.

The idea that reformed language is more inclusive was also prominent within the community with a general orientation towards inclusion as an unambiguous social good. I argue that this is, in part, because the financial viability of the WCS community (and professionals working within it) is contingent on having enough dancers to pay entry fees and buy instruction. Hence, in addition to any general orientation towards wanting to avoid microaggressions and

make the community welcoming, there is also an economic imperative to enhance the inclusivity of the community.

Finally, civility was found to be an important value in the community such that interviewees not only chose to use degendered language because it was civil, but also avoided explicitly calling out gendered language use so as to avoid conflict or being seen as uncivil. Dancers often attested to forgiving gendered language use on the grounds that users were still breaking old habits or had just "slipped" into the problematic language. In short, there was a clear awareness of the cognitive challenges of language change, particularly after repeated, long-term use of unreformed terms. This apparent dispreference for addressing gendered language in the moment further points to the critical importance of reform at the institutional level as, if gendered language is not contested in the moment, the reform must rely on policy and hiring decisions to enforce a preference for degendered language.

In Chapter 5, I addressed the second question: how effective has this reform been in changing language? Overall, rates of gendered language used to refer to the roles were extremely low, with many interviewees using such language only metadiscursively (i.e. to discuss cases of gendered language use either by others or by their past selves). Impressionistically, gendered language was more frequent in the naturalistic context of the field, but it was unfortunately not possible to quantify this. Interviewees made use of a range of strategies to avoid gendered language, the most common of which was the use of the flagship degendered nouns LEADER and FOLLOWER. They also explicitly highlighted the challenge of using third person singular pronouns which had traditionally been used as stand ins for the roles (SHE = FOLLOWER; HE = LEADER), with many claiming that they just tried to avoid pronouns in general. This avoidance of gendered third person singular pronouns seemed to be enabled by the use of singular THEY

(though this form did not appear to be available to all interviewees), second person pronouns, plural constructions, gerunds, or more complex phrasal constructions that framed the role as an activity undertaken by an individual rather than as a category label for individuals.

Where gendered language did appear (in both interviews and observations), it seemed to coincide with participants having a more "old school" orientation or having spent a longer period of time in the community (particularly as instructors), having developed habits of gendered language use in advance of the move towards degendering. Elements of cognitive strain, whether as a result of the mental challenge of teaching and coordinating a class, working in one's non-native language, or expressing frustration, also appeared to increase the likelihood of slips into gendered language. Gendered language also seemed more likely to appear while discussing bodies and embodiment or when instructors switched rapidly between specific (e.g. referring to their teaching partner) and generic reference during teaching and occasionally retained gendered pronouns across the shift from first person (e.g. I do X to her) to second person (e.g. you do X to her). I also considered the ways that repairs took place, showing that they tended to prefer either a recasting using a neutral role noun or an appending of the binary gender that had not initially been included. This latter form may point to persistent cis-sexist bias in the community such that even when participants are trying to be inclusive, they may not be conscious of the need to include people whose gender is not captured by either HE or SHE. Additionally, I found that participants tended to accommodate to each others' use of gendered language though they sometimes did so while shifting the framing such that the gendered utterance became a reference to a specific gendered dancer as opposed to a generic. And lastly, voicing actual or hypothetical other dancers (and one's distal self) seemed to create more affordances for gendered language use, perhaps due to the vivifying effect of voicing, which moves abstract discussion into more

concrete enactments that may be conceptualized in gendered ways. Overall, the reform, which I argued in Chapter 4 was supported by what Cameron (1995) termed a liberal approach, appears to have been very successful in changing dancers' language habits. While gendered language does still arise, it is relatively limited, and the presence of repairs shows that users are aware of the social desirability of avoiding gendered language and using degendered alternatives instead.

In the final chapter of my analysis, I considered the extent to which this successful language reform has or has not facilitated the reform of the conceptual categories and mental models which the reform ostensibly targeted. In short, does the use of degendered language mean that the categories so named are equally degendered? While there has certainly been an expansion in non-heteronormative participation within WCS, with ever more women leading and men following, there is also significant evidence that heteronormativity plays a persistent role in the ways that the roles are conceptualized and how the physical conduct of the community is carried out. Firstly, where gendered references to the roles do appear, they are almost invariably heteronormative. Further, while many instructors do avoid gender stereotyped articulations of the roles, a substantial number make use of heteronormatively gendered metaphors and allusions to conceptualize the roles and the relationship between them. Even amongst those who were heavily committed to degendering, entanglements occasionally occurred such that the speaker used a degendered role term when intending to refer to the gender group instead (e.g. saying "followers" when the intended category was "women"). Entanglements such as these suggest a certain conflation of gender and role categories such that, while the new labels are systematically employed, the concept that they point to may still overlap with gender. There is also evidence that non-heteronormative dancers remain marked insofar as, where gender specification of the

roles appeared, it was far more likely to be in reference to non-heteronormative combinations of gender and role (e.g. male followers or female leaders) than to heteronormative combinations.

Beyond the linguistic patterns, the persistent role of heteronormativity was also observed in the way that roles are navigated in both class environments and social dancing. In the former, roles are often assumed by perceived gender, and both instructors and other students may mis-identify non-heteronormative dancers and attempt to position them in the other role in ways that they do not misidentify heteronormative dancers. Similarly, when social dancing, even dancers who themselves dance in non-heteronormative roles—including me!—attested to at times relying on perceived gender as an indicator of role when dancing with new people. This pattern extended to a tendency to only explicitly negotiate roles when either two people of the same gender were dancing together or both partners knew each other to be capable of both roles. A small number of dancers talked about explicitly asking about roles with every partner, but this remains a minority. Further to this, there appears to be greater pressure on non-heteronormative dancers to switch to a heteronormative role to balance a class or social—a pressure which may rely on the tendency to assume that even if one is dancing non-heteronormatively, one is able to perform one's heteronormative role and is likely better at that role or at least learned it first. Together these patterns suggest that the superficially degendered references to the roles, may in fact obscure the continued role of heteronormativity—or to borrow from Butler (1993) the heterosexual matrix—in organizing participation in the dance community and conceptions of the dance roles.

7.3 Implications

The first critical take away from this work is that, as seen in Chapter 4, liberal approaches to language reform can be highly successful in securing uptake and seem to be less likely to attract the kinds of resistance that have been attested in other work on language reform. Thus,

where the goal is to introduce new terms that will prevent misgendering or other microaggressions, at least in CoPs that value inclusion, this may be a particularly valuable approach. By presenting the reform as motivated by a desire for greater accuracy in terms, responsiveness to exogenous social change, and support of a civil and inclusive shared environment, it may be possible to avoid resistance on the grounds that the change is not politicizing language or trying to force change on an unwilling community.

Of course, this approach does have limits. Firstly, it must be running in parallel with at least some successful social reform in order to enact the social change that the language can be framed as responding to. This points to another important factor in facilitating social change: the presence of visible exemplars. A number of my interviewees made it clear that what had really opened their minds to degendering was seeing non-heteronormative dancers. While the research on such counter-typical examples outside of dance—specifically on children's career aspirations—is mixed (Olsson & Martiny, 2018), there is evidence to suggest that long term exposure to such counter-typical role models may have a positive impact on children's interest in and stereotypes about formerly gender stereotyped professions. Hence, in the interests of creating such long-term exposure for WCS dancers—particularly those that are new to the dance—I would suggest that WCS dancers, with the time and the will, consider learning and practicing both roles. Not only does this create benefits to one's overall skill as a dancer but also provides yet another visual cue that it is appropriate, and perhaps even good, to dance outside of the expectations of heteronormativity.

A second weakness of the non-conflictual liberal style of reform characteristic of the WCS community is the sense that successful language change in WCS does not seem to have necessarily degendered dancers' conceptual categories of leaders and followers. As I illustrated

in Chapter 6, heteronormative assumptions and entanglements appear to remain amongst many WCS dancers, even those who are committed to degendering and use exclusively degendered terminology for the roles. Unlike radical reform efforts which explicitly politicize language and draw attention to the harmful systems that they intend to contest, more liberal reform efforts may be more likely to paper over these systems, leaving underlying biases and power structures unchecked. As noted earlier, linguistic relativity-based approaches to language and culture view language as potentially influencing speakers' conceptions of the world. However, a language change that does not explicitly challenge underlying gendered categories but rather just overlays such categories, may fail to challenge gendered conceptions of dance partnerships. In such cases, contra Duranti (1992, p. 95) it is not the case that "words mediate between different versions of the world," but instead different words point to a fundamentally similar version of the world, still heavily indebted to heteronormative concepts. As Cameron (1998a, p. 10) puts it, "words on their own are not everything", but, at the same time, "you do not have to be a Whorfian to accept that languages can be sexist [and heterosexist], and that this matters" (p. 11). Hence, I propose that further, perhaps more radical, steps will need to be taken to move from just avoiding the misgendering of participants to actively degendering the way that dancers understand and engage with the roles. One promising avenue for such progress may be in the reform of specific language routines, particularly those around dance invitations and the practice of dividing a class into the two dance roles.

7.3.1 The importance of reforming routines

As I have argued in this dissertation, reforming lexical items, particularly by using a neutralization strategy within a liberal reform framework, may be done in ways that do not directly challenge existing mental models of many speakers. As shown in Chapter 6, there is

evidence that the categories labelled with the reformed terms FOLLOWER and LEADER often remain stereotypically gendered in accordance with pre-reform labels and conceptions. This is one of the benefits of the kind of radical reform highlighted by Cameron (1995): it explicitly draws attention to problematic assumptions and power structures and challenges their naturalization. Thus, if the lexical language reform efforts of WCS have been largely successful, but have been so without leveraging radical power against relevant conceptual models, then where to next? As suggested by both feminist language reformers (Cameron, 1998b) and trans language reformers (Zimman, 2017), reforms are not just limited to changing a few words or phrases, they can (and perhaps must) rise to the level of broader discursive practices—e.g. being mindful of how agency and blame is framed with regard to sexual violence (Clark, 1998; Ehrlich, 2001) or developing more precise methods of speaking to avoid using gender as a shorthand for certain bodily particularities (Spade, 2012; Zimman, 2017). In other words, in tackling a "multifaceted phenomenon taking different forms in different representational practices" (Cameron, 1998a, p. 11), language reform must make use of similarly varied and multifaceted approaches. Such higher order reforms are also possible in WCS, and their radical potential appears to be most prominent in the reform of language routines, particularly around (1) establishing roles in classes, and (2) establishing roles in social dances.

7.3.1.1 Introducing dancers to roles

The instructors (or people who dabbled in or aspired to instruction) who I interviewed generally fell into two camps in terms of how they introduced the idea of the leading and following roles to new dancers. While neither group promoted roles as inherently gendered, one group did feel that it was important to tell participants the gendered history of the role. This historical recounting was not only to provide more information about the dance to students, but

also to ensure that they know whether they are "go[ing] with tradition or…go[ing] against tradition" (G). In contrast with this approach, the other group focussed on trying to remove any link between gender and role and, in some cases, even spoke about an imagined future where they wouldn't need to mention gender at all. One interviewee emphasized that such a gender-free introduction of the roles would be his preference, but that he found it necessary to mention gender (and discount its relevance) precisely because students tended to naturally organize themselves into groups by gender as much as by role (excerpt 2).

(2) like my dream is that one day I don't have to clarify gender doesn't matter like I would love to not have to say that but (.) where things are right now I do have to specify that because if I do just say leaders over one side followers over the other side (.) um people will start to split some people will know kind of like where they generally fit and where they don't and just because in a typical space (.) women will go to one side and men will go to another side (.) you'll see where the majority is and you'll conform and you'll have the- the (.) uh (.) the pressure to conform and so they'll just conform whether they want to or not so that's where I feel I have to explicitly state um y'know that it doesn't matter (M)

This represents a particular challenge for the notion of degendering the roles: so long as binary gender assignments remain highly socially salient in the broader society, they are likely to be so in dance contexts as well. And, since there are only two dance roles, the mapping of gender onto role is only too easy. Thus, I suggest that instructors' introduction of the roles must emphasize that the roles are not gendered but instead dependent upon what kinds of responsibilities a given individual wants to take on. While some instructors report drawing on personality traits when introducing the roles (presented in a somewhat tongue in cheek way in

excerpt 3 below), given the persistent social expectations of women and men, namely that men *ought* to want to be in charge and women *ought* to want to be responsive, such an approach may also feed into the naturalized overlap of masculinity and leading and femininity and following.

(3) you ask “who wants to be a leader?” “well I don’t know if I want to be a leader or follower” “do you have control issues? yes then you’re a leader” (P)

By contrast, I see considerable potential in an alternative approach to instructors’ framings of the roles, one exemplified in excerpt 4.

(4) we would often describe leaders as initiating moves followers (.) um (.) following through with moves while both roles have the opportunity for exploration creativity (.) um musicality um and that both roles are (.) good both roles are valuable both roles are fun (.) um (.) and so there’s no- you can’t make a wrong choice but uh just make a choice for the sake of the lesson ((laugh)) and you can learn the other one in another day (O)

These framings emphasize the specific relevant tasks (e.g. initiating and following through) while at the same time emphasizing the similarities between both roles and the opportunity to change roles later if you prefer. Choosing to lead or follow is not about being a certain kind of person, but instead about wanting to engage in a specific type of action. While there is still some risk of students getting caught up in gendered associations with certain kinds of actions, i.e. being proactive versus being passive, the neutrality of the delivery in excerpt 4 seems promising.

In keeping with the above approach, I (albeit rarely) heard some instructors dividing classes, not in terms of “leaders over here” or “followers put up your hands”, but instead in terms of “people who are willing to lead” or “people who are following today”. In other words, the dividing of dancers into roles resisted turning the choice of role into a choice of identification.

This kind of framing further denaturalizes the idea that a leader is a certain kind of (often masculine coded) person or a follower, a certain kind of (often feminine coded) person and instead conceptualizes the dance role as an act that can be chosen on a more temporary basis.

Another possible way of delinking the roles from gendered biases was discussed by one of my interviewees: that of teaching everyone both roles from the very start of their WCS journey. Opinions on the efficacy of this approach varied greatly among my interviewees. For example, one reported that a professional, providing feedback on a competition routine where the interviewee both led and followed, advised her to "just pick a role you stick to it you just do your one role 'cause y'know (.) it y'know there's a lot y'know put into the craft of each one and therefore you stick to" (C). But, teaching all dancers both roles was also reported to be the default approach of an instructor in a Canadian city outside of the study area and several interviewees aspired to apply it in their own teaching. What's more, I observed a similar strategy in more conceptual classes, where knowledge of particular patterns was not required, and placing dancers in pairs that alternated leading and following ensured that all dancers got more time to work with the class material. The upshot of such an approach is that, in addition to denaturalizing any tie between a specific gender and a specific role, it also ensures ample visual representation of people of multiple genders dancing each role. As I have noted, this was a factor which frequently arose in interviewees' discussions of what motivated them to try learning a non-heteronormative role.

While I do not advocate for any one specific approach and recognize that local priorities and possibilities may vary, it seems clear that the point of first contact with WCS dance roles provides an opportunity to more actively promote degendering (even though most WCS dancers tend to enter the dance with prior experience of (often heavily gendered) partner dancing).

Further to this, given the importance that interviewees attributed to institutional forces in promoting degendering (see Section 4.5.4), it will likely be particularly important for such concerns to be explicitly integrated into the education of dance teachers. While WCS does not currently have a single set syllabus or certifying body for dance instructors, I would encourage all those who aspire to training dance teachers to explicitly address strategies for presenting the dance roles in ways that do not reinforce heteronormative assumptions or stereotypes.

7.3.1.2 Social role negotiations

Perhaps even more important, due to its relative frequency in a dancers' experience of WCS, is the mode by which social dances are secured and the roles each dancer will enact within a given dance are negotiated. As highlighted in Section 6.3.1.1, the long history of heteronormativity in WCS has enabled the community to develop very abbreviated modes of dance invitation, in some cases as little as making eye contact and then dancers moving towards each other. However, such brief invitations rely on assumptions of role (whether based on gender or past habit) and leave little room for dancers to engage in non-heteronormative roles or to experiment with a new role. In some ways, this could be analogized to the way that pronouns have traditionally been assumed on the basis of perceived gender. While such norms are comfortable and validating for those whose perceived gender aligns with their gender identity, they make it substantially harder for people whose gender identity does not fit within stereotyped binary models to be recognized and addressed in their preferred terms. Indeed, emerging norms around pronoun declaration might map onto what I argue is an important emerging practice in WCS: that of negotiating roles.

As discussed in Section 6.3.1.1, a number of my interviewees spoke about practices of asking a partner's preferred role before dances. While such negotiations—often in the form of

the question "lead, follow, switch?"—were common when two dancers of the same perceived gender partnered, the use of such questions in mixed gender pairings were very rare indeed, generally only appearing when dancers both knew the other to be capable of both roles.[81] The practice of negotiating roles in mixed gender pairings (or all pairings) was understood as radical, with two dancers reporting that they initially deployed it to contest assumptions that they would always be available and willing to dance in their heteronormative role. Another dancer expressed some hesitancy in using the practice due to the risk of potentially offending someone who only dances one role, and another—who systematically asked every partner—noted that it did occasionally lead to people becoming annoyed that he would not merely assume their role on the basis of a constellation of gender and past practices (i.e. women who mainly followed). The very unsettlingness of this practice speaks to its greatest potential. By opening the door to the possibility that a dancer may not wish to fall into heteronormative roles or even that they might want to try a different role than they have previously engaged in, such routines push against heteronormative assumptions and denaturalize links between identity and role, instead framing roles as activities that may be chosen and changed at will.[82]

Despite their promise for unsettling assumptions, such negotiations may not be viable for those who are only comfortable dancing one role (or who are seeking to dance a particular role in a given dance). Even so, drawing on the practices observed amongst same gender dancers, one might implement a practice of asking by role regardless the gender of one's potential partner, e.g.

[81] This may also be understood as analogous to the use of pronoun circles *only* when a perceptibly gender non-conforming person is present or only asking pronouns for people perceived to be trans, which are generally deemed to be problematic (Zimman, 2017).

[82] Unlike asking for pronouns which may force an individual to out themselves prematurely or misgender themselves (a point highlighted by one of my interviewees who is trying to implement better pronoun practices in his classes), asking roles points to an already public behaviour set that is critical to the action at hand (cf. trans language reformers' push to choose phrasings that do not focus on sex or gender but instead on the specific bodily features or concerns at hand (Spade, 2012; Zimman, 2017)).

"would you like to lead me?" rather than "would you like to dance?". This means that choosing potential partners would not be done on the basis of perceived gender, but by either watching them dance or, even better, asking them what role they prefer before proposing to dance with them at all. This latter option was reported by one interviewee to be more common in queer dance spaces, as illustrated in excerpt 5.

(5) it's (.) less transactional (.) in the gay dance community it's much more social (.) so it's much- like in the mainstream dance community (.) it's very much- it is transactional right like I don't know you let's dance to this song (.) ((click)) goodbye and it's just very like what role do you do? but in the gay dance community it's a lot friendlier there's a lot more conversations between everybody (.) like I can confidently say that at (.) the- the gay dance- the gay dances if there's a hundred people there at one point I will talk to seventy or eighty people in that room in the straight dance community if there's a hundred people I'll talk to like ten or twenty um (.) so it's very much (.) like you kind of already have a feeling of what people do and if not like it's not weird to have a whole conversation about it (N)

In contrast with what he sees as the "transactional" nature of WCS events, where dancers are focussed on getting as many dances as possible without necessarily getting to know each other, in queer dance spaces he values the greater emphasis on verbal socializing and getting to know other dancers beyond an individual dance. While this is in stark contrast with other interviewees' enthusiasm for being able to connect with people on a purely physical level, without the complications of politics or history (cf. Section 4.6.2.1), it does present an interesting question for the WCS community: if we do not want to get to know each other verbally (as dancers in queer spaces seem to want), how do we go about communicating role

preferences/capacities beyond gender expression? As briefly discussed in Section 6.3.1, buttons, t-shirts, or wristbands all represent role signifiers that are already in use at some events and in some communities. Indeed, effective (and systematic) use of colour and/or text to allow identification even in low lit, busy ballrooms may have potential as a means of communicating role preferences/capacities. But, failing that, dancers may have to just get much more comfortable with the prospect of rejection (both giving and receiving) in order to avoid anyone feeling obligated to dance in a heteronormative role that does not align with their preference.

7.3.2 Alternative modes of degendering

Throughout my discussion above, I have taken for granted that WCS necessitates the enactment of two distinct roles as this division of dance labour is dominant across the WCS spaces I studied. But, this is not the only way to conceptualize partner dance. Contact improvisation—a style of partnered or group movement developed through experiments by Steve Paxton in New York's modern dance scene in 1972 (Novack, 1990)—offers an alternative mode in which dancers do touch and use that touch to inspire each others' improvised movement, but do so in a relatively freeform way with no one leader or follower. While the extreme freedom of such a practice is very appealing to some dancers, it represents something fundamentally different from most social partner dances and often requires a level of dance skill (or bodily freedom and confidence) that is beyond the average beginning dancer. Nonetheless, a similar concept has made its way into ballroom dance (and from there into some other related styles including salsa and tango) in the form of "Liquid" or "Liquid lead" developed by Jeff Fox and Trevor Copp (Craggs, 2019).

The idea behind liquid lead is that both partners are both following and leading within the same dance, having a bodily conversation that is negotiated constantly through the connection

(Copp & Fox, 2015). WCS dancers engage in a related activity called “switch dancing”, but this is only a subtype of participation in the WCS community and, in my personal experience, requires a very different type of attention and focus than just leading or just following. Liquid afficionado and academic, Irén Annus, has suggested that the retention of two distinct and complimentary roles in WCS may make it, in some sense, more prone to persistent heteronormativity than other modes of dancing, like liquid, in which all dancers engage in both leading and following in each dance (personal communication). I agree that liquid has been far more successful in contesting heteronormativity than WCS, arguably, queering the roles even further by refusing to persist in separating them into different bodies. But, at the same time, the result is a quite different artform that requires a distinct skillset from either leading or following. Hence, while I remain enthusiastic about the potential of forms like liquid and switch dancing to challenge heteronormativity within partner dancing, I see it as equally vital to pursue the degendering of roles as *roles* so that dancers are not constrained by the strictures of heteronormativity, even as they may prefer to dance primarily in only one role.

7.4 Other considerations

In my efforts to maintain a clear focus in this dissertation, I have had to set aside a number of fascinating topics, or touch on them only briefly in passing. These topics do, however, intersect with degendering in interesting and important ways. Hence, in this section, I briefly touch on three of these topics which I see as particularly worthy of consideration: bodily diversity, the changing role of gender in WCS, and the question of trans and nonbinary inclusion.

7.4.1 Diverse bodies

Around 2015-2016, as degendering was entering the public consciousness in WCS, if not public practice more generally, I had a discussion with a dancer in which they proposed that as

alternative to dividing roles by gender, we could divide by body size. As a physically larger person who still prefers following and, at that time, was almost exclusively following, I remember being annoyed. Why should I be limited in my role choice by the accident of nature that made my body the particular size and shape it is? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the theme of body size appeared throughout this project. The challenges of tall/large followers or short/small leaders came up in interviews, classes, and even social dancing where leaders occasionally referred to my height as a potential source of challenge (or humour). Instructors provided adjustments for unusually tall followers or unusually short leaders[83] which, while mechanically necessary and helpfully provided, also speak to the history of a dance that relied on an average height difference between roles that maps onto the average height difference between genders.

That the dance is structured around an expectation of leaders being taller than followers was also prominent in several women interviewees' approach to the roles. For the taller woman highlighted in excerpt 6 below, getting to dance with someone taller than her was a rare treat, in response to which she would "for sure want to follow" because it's more "comfortable" for her to follow someone who is taller than her.

(6) if I'm (.) dancing with somebody who's taller than me if I have the opportunity to dance with somebody who's taller than me I for sure want to follow 'cause it's way more comfortable um ((laugh)) it doesn't happen that often mostly it's about the same height or shorter (F)

She also reflects on dancing with a much shorter woman who likes to lead and who she often ends up switch dancing with, as can be seen in excerpt 7. Again, because of the structural

[83] In a rare inverse of this, back to back turns tend to be easiest when partners are close in height so in these cases tall leaders were given adjustments.

affordances of the dance, if her partner is much smaller, she finds it more "comfortable" to lead than follow.

(7) because I'm so much taller than her I feel more comfortable leading her but then she likes to lead (.) so it's- it's- sometimes we're switching back and forth a lo- I think like we're both fighting to lead ((laugh)) (F)

Other interviewees also speak of the challenges of "flipping" the size script though often with a focus on the ways that they manage their own bodies to compensate. For example, a man who likes to follow talks about "keep[ing his] posture up and then just like bend[ing his] knees" (N) to manage the challenges of passing underneath the raised arm of a shorter partner who is leading in an underarm turn, while in excerpt 8, a woman talks about "work[ing] on" stability as a leader due to her smaller size.

(8) um as a lead (.) uh (.) stability is definitely something I've had to work on (.) um (.) I will say there are certain things that just like followers will not try with me they will not try to pull with me which is nice because I've heard from some leads who are bigger that sometimes followers will like try to pull dips or things on them…it- it can be hard in some ways because like there are some (.) points at which you want them to give you a certain kind of weight and (.) you can handle it but they- but it's still not given to you because someone thinks you can't (B)

While she has developed the ability to "handle" her partners' body weight, she nonetheless finds that sometimes her partners do not trust her to be able to because "someone thinks you can't" due to smaller stature. Other dancers, particularly those who mainly dance in their heteronormative role, also talk about managing atypically sized partners—often framing it in terms of broad

tendencies across gendered groups. As one interviewee puts it in excerpt 9, when describing how it feels to lead men, “there’s just more mo- more momentum there more- more mass”.

(9) there’s just more mo- more momentum there more- more mass there so (.) um (.) I don’t usually dip a- a- a male follower just because they’re a lot heavier and (.) um (.) it’s just a little more- little more difficult (.) uh so there’s- there’s some moves that I probably shy away from (.) with men more so than women just because of the (.) difference in size (S)

While accurate at a population statistical level, some men who follow are in fact smaller than some women who follow, but the association between gender and size persists and drives differential decision making in terms of what moves one will or won’t try with a partner.

At this intersection of body size, role, and gender, I heard comments such as: “it’s easy to be small as a follow” (B), “so as a leader people love [that I’m tall]” (N), “the bigger girls gonna have to work twice as hard to (.) get anywhere” (G). Such utterances speak to the ways that bodies are valued in the dance: small followers/women and tall leaders/men are rewarded to a greater degree both socially and competitively than their differently sized counterparts. Interestingly, however, while some contest the idea that degendering has helped to unsettle the expectation for large leaders and small followers, others see it as providing crucial diversity within competitive divisions.

In the lead up to excerpt 10 below, the interviewee talks about how WCS judges only have a few seconds to look at each dancer in a heated contest (i.e. multiple couples on the floor at one time) and how this short amount of time means that they tend to end up rewarding people who are “thin and pretty strikes a really nice line” (G) over those who have larger bodies that don’t fit as well into standard expectations for, e.g. “feminine line[s]”. In response to being asked

if degendering was affecting this tendency around judging, she hypothesized that it is "equaliz[ing] things a little bit" insofar as the gender diversity in a given role makes it harder for judges to rely on gendered conceptions of "perfect feminine line[s] or perfect masculine line[s]".

(10) *right and do you think that is (.) affected at all by the increasing numbers of people- like men following and women leading?*

mm (.) I actually think it's starting to equalize things a little bit um because you're not necessarily looking for (.) that perfect feminine line or that perfect masculine line because it's all been kind of blurred a little bit um so (.) I think it's actually helping them (.) where they have to look outside what that (.) initial visual is um (.) there's (.) yeah I- I think- I think it's starting to help a little bit because (.) like a- a male who's following (.) isn't going to have that same (.) feminine line that (.) the judges were originally looking for at any size right so it's always going to have that little (.) dot of color within the grays so um (.) so I- I actually think that that's probably a good thing to (.) um (.) kind of make things (.) a little bit more subjective (G)

Where all women followers seem to be expected to have a certain kind of "feminine line" that may not actually be attainable for all bodies, this interviewee proposes that men followers could not be held to the same metric because of their belonging to a different gender category. In other words, the presence of greater gender diversity in the roles might make way for greater bodily diversity for all dancers engaging in each role—i.e. if both men and women compete as followers, then perhaps being stereotypically attractive in a slim, feminine way will be less important for all followers. Whether or not the majority of judges are actually changing how they assess dancers in this way would require further research, but it points to a possible

beneficial side effect of degendering: if the roles are not circumscribed by gender, then they cannot be circumscribed by gendered standards of physical attractiveness.[84]

While it was not a focus on this dissertation, the interactions between dance, gender, body size, and aesthetic value are important ones. High rates of eating disorders amongst dancers and particularly ballet dancers (Arcelus et al., 2014; Silverii et al., 2021) are testament to the need for more expansive standards of bodily excellence not only in WCS, but in dance more broadly. Perhaps loosening up the strictures around gendered participation can be a first step.

7.4.2 The role of gender

Another fascinating element which emerged in this research project was the way that gender was conceptualized within the dance space. Whereas, in the past, gender served as a structuring principle of the dance (ladies follow; gentlemen lead), with gender, role, and stylization all being packaged tightly together, my interviewees broke this mould in various ways. For several, the roles provided license for men to access femininity (through following) or women masculinity (through leading). A man interviewee described "feeling much more confident putting in like more feminine movement and gestures and stuff" (R) as a follower, while a woman interviewee explained that "leading was more masculine to [her] therefore [she] felt more comfortable…cuz [she] do[es]n't identify as being girly and feminine" (C). Others refused any association between gender and movement, either attributing the movement to the mechanical requirements of each role or drawing on reference to "personality" as the driver of movement choices, as in "I wanted my influence of the dance to be my personality not to be my gender" (M). Finally, a few others seemed to delink gendered movement from both roles and the

[84] This is a hopeful outlook. It is equally possible that such gendered aesthetic values might remain for some judges and result in them being especially harsh in their assessments of non-heteronormative dancers, forcing them to "have to work twice as hard" (G), just as "the bigger girls" (G) were said to.

dancer's gender identity, instead suggesting that it can serve as a portable semiotic resource for self-expression, storytelling, and creating art through dance. As one interviewee puts it in excerpt 11, "it depends on the song", and as she says elsewhere, she values dancing "in a way that makes sense to the music and that- that you're telling- that you're telling the story" (I).

(11) I think it also depends on the song right I think if (.) if the song requires me to have a more masculine role then I think that's my interpretation someone can interpret that song differently but I feel that it's better to do let's say male styling (.) um for my interpretation of the song then I'll- I'll do that and if I feel that a more feminine (.) um (.) I guess styling is required then I'll- I'll do that but that's really based on (.) my interpretation of the music (I)

We see here that the perceived genderedness of a given movement becomes a resource for creating a particular sort of story or expressing certain sentiments.

Whereas gender once served as a structural pillar in WCS, dictating one's role and stylistic presentation in the dance—such that even where role swapping took place, it often used to be accompanied by parodic gender crossing enactments as well (Lavin, 2019)—it is now regularly set aside entirely, and where it is used, it appears as a semiotic resource rather than an embodied diktat. One interviewee even went so far as to question the naturalization of certain movements as "gendered" altogether, preferring to frame movements as "soft" or "powerful" and arguing that "we have preconceived ideas that those two words sometimes have a gender associated with them I don't think they should" (T). While I do not have space to do justice to it here, this shift in the perception of gender and gendering seems promising as an avenue to understand not only how gender functions in WCS movement choices, but also how bodily

stylizations may be more or less (dis)entangled with gender in dance in general and perhaps even day-to-day life.

7.4.3 Trans and nonbinary inclusion

To an outsider, degendering may seem to be a problem limited to queer participants, but it should be noted that, in my interviews, the majority of women leaders were actually straight (cf. men who primarily followed were all gay). Moreover, in considering the injunctions to "learn…both roles" and the efforts to desexualize the dance (see Section 4.3.2.1), it becomes clear that, while queer resonances are always available, this movement has actually been enacted in a relatively sexuality blind way. That is, the framing of the reform is (at least at the present moment) primarily about an individual's personality and preference for direction (leading) or response (following), respectively. Hence, while in some ways the reform has been hugely helpful in allowing queer people to participate without necessarily needing to out themselves, there remain some gaps in the ways that trans and, particularly nonbinary, people can fit themselves into the dance. While some dancers have assimilated singular THEY, a nonbinary friendly option, into their vocabulary, many still rely on binarily gendered terms even when articulating a degendered norm (cf. repairs to "he- or she").

What's more, I only witnessed pronoun circles taking place in one session (represented at two events hosted by the same organizer) at weekend events. In classes and workshops, when instructors used pronouns to refer to individuals in class, they seemed to presume a gender binary and select pronouns on the basis of individuals' outward presentation. This meant that masculine presenting people were "he" and feminine presenting people, "she". To some extent this may be preferable to putting people on the spot by requesting pronouns, as this can risk forcing individuals to either out or misgender themselves (Brown, 2019). But, it also spoke to the

broader binary expectations of the community. While using singular THEY for any person whose pronouns are unknown has been contested (particularly in the context of trans feminine people being misgendered as THEY (Hanna et al., 2019)), in a community like WCS, which is so bound up with heteronormative gender, challenging the gendered binary by using THEY, second person pronouns, or perhaps switching to noun phrases (e.g. “this dancer”, “your partner”) could be a valuable step in marking the WCS community as friendly to gender diverse individuals.

7.5 Future work

While the current study represents a first exploration of how language participates in social change within WCS, other important areas for further linguistic exploration include both the consideration of gender diversity in WCS and the consideration of other languages in which WCS is taught and navigated. With respect to the first of these, while nonbinary and trans representation remains limited in WCS, understanding the experiences of those dancers who are members of these gender groups has potential to expand our understanding of how degendering does or does not facilitate their participation and how that participation is navigated within persistently heteronormative dance spaces and dynamics.

With respect to languages other than English, while WCS is an American dance which is still quite heavily centred around US events and communities, it continues to spread globally with France, in particular, having developed a well elaborated and highly respected community. What this means is that degendering is coming into contact with languages that have very different grammatical affordances from English—many of which (e.g. French, German, various Slavic languages) require grammatical gender marking on all nouns and adjectives. Thus, even if “neutral” terms such as LEADER and FOLLOWER were borrowed from English into a language with grammatical gender as described above, they would necessarily be assigned grammatical

gender. Research on anti-sexist language reform in these languages has suggested that so called visibilization or feminization strategies seem to be more common vis-à-vis neutralization approaches (Mucchi-Faina, 2005; Sczesny et al., 2016) and that such visibilization approaches (often paired forms which include a masculine and a feminine form) may be effective in reducing gender bias in professional role nouns (e.g. Horvath et al., 2016; Horvath & Sczesny, 2016; Stahlberg et al., 2001; Vervecken et al., 2015). Despite the potential efficacy of paired forms for decreasing androcentrism, work on nonbinary speakers of French and German (who are also bilingual in English) has found that many such individuals prefer the affordances of English (over German or French) for expressing their gender identity (Hord, 2016). Hence, the specifics of how the gender-neutralization of roles is or isn't being accomplished in such grammatical gender languages poses a range of fascinating research questions.

Furthermore, these languages are also always in contact with English insofar as the bulk of WCS media (social media produced by professional dancers, e.g. podcasts, YouTube videos, educational DVDs/online trainings) is produced in English and the terminology of the dance itself was developed in English. Thus, there is also room for work on language contact and international flows of language, identity, and cultural capital in the vein of Britta Schneider's work on transnational salsa and Spanish (Schneider, 2013a, 2014) with the additional factor of degendering. As just a brief sampler of the potential for such crosslinguistic research, when I took a WCS class in France in early 2019, the roles were referred to using the explicitly gendered terms *Mesdammes* (followers, lit. ladies) and *Messiers* (leaders, lit. gentlemen) whereas in Quebecois contexts I have heard more code switching for the roles, though I have not managed to catch exactly how singular (i.e. gendered) articles for the roles have been treated. Similarly, I have heard that the English terms tend to be used in Germany, but I have not been able to get a

sense from those I've spoken to of how such terms are treated in terms of their grammatical agreement, though they would necessarily be assigned grammatical gender in order to become integrated into the grammatical system of German.

Spreading the circle of potential crosslinguistic and cross-cultural research even further, WCS has also become quite popular in Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia, which host the WSDC's only weekend events outside of North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand (1 in each of Korea and Malaysia, 2 in Singapore).[85] Singapore, in particular, has proven to be a rich site for the consideration of multilingualism and language as cultural capital (e.g. Alsagoff, 2010; Lee, 2022; Sim, 2023; Vitorio, 2023) and, as such, creates a valuable opportunity for considering how such linguistic concerns interact with degendering in a transnational dance form. In short, WCS and, particularly degendering in WCS, offers an especially rich site for the exploration of language, gender, embodiment, and social activism across transnational flows and within multi-generational CoPs (cf. my interviewees ranged in age from 26-64).

7.6 Conclusion

I began this dissertation by telling the story of how I first came to WCS, a dance that has now been part of my life for over 15 years. I end by envisioning a future for WCS that will no longer be bound by heteronormative expectations. While, as I have shown in the pages that have come before, we are not yet there, I believe that such a future is attainable through discursive reform, institutional support, and individual dancers' commitment to breaking down their own and others' assumptions and expectations regarding heteronormativity. This could be accomplished in a variety of ways, whether it is by not assuming what role other dancers might

[85] https://www.worldsdc.com/events/ Events have previously been hosted in South America, but these events are either no longer taking place or no longer have WSDC status perhaps as a result of COVID-19 pressures.

want to dance, wearing role identifying accessories, or even dancing non-heteronormatively oneself.

At a societal level, the structure of gender is undergoing significant changes with increasing awareness (if not always acceptance) of trans and nonbinary people alongside ever more queer visibility in popular media. WCS has the potential to both benefit from these larger shifts and contribute to them, especially as dancers work to promote WCS through social media. Perhaps we can not only expand our dance community and attract more interested potential dancers but also do so in a way that highlights and celebrates the potential for gender and role diversity in this dance. In WCS we often say there are two leaders in the dance: the person dancing as a leader and the music. We've always danced to the contemporary music of the times; as music makes more room for gender and sexuality diversity, perhaps we can let it lead us forward even as we lead those in our circles (both dance and otherwise) into a more open future for gender expression and social roles.

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9 Appendix: Laypersons' Summary

Drawing on both interviews and fieldnotes from roughly eleven months of participant observation, in this dissertation I aimed to understand how language reform was being undertaken and understood within the context of WCS's degendering movement. I was specifically interested in: (1) how participants talked about the reform—whether for or against it, (2) how and how broadly the reform was being enacted, and (3) how greatly language reform seemed to be contributing to, or entangled with, the broader social change targeted by the reform—i.e. challenging traditional heteronormative participation so that any dancer can participate in either (or both) of the two dance roles.

In terms of the first of these questions, degendering seemed to be essentially universally supported by my participants and within the dance spaces where I observed. This support was founded in arguments which align closely with Cameron's (1995) liberal (as opposed to radical) approach to language reform. This type of approach frames the reform as enhancing the accuracy of language and its responsiveness to an exogenously changing society and prioritizes the use of reformed language as a way of enhancing civility and inclusion. In the case of WCS, reformed language was seen as more accurate both because non-heteronormative dancers do, in fact, exist, and because the dance roles are generally understood *as roles* rather than as gendered practices within the community. Unlike traditional conceptions, which may understand dance as an environment for learning appropriately gendered behaviours, in WCS, the roles were seen to be a personal choice available to everyone regardless of gender. Framings of the WCS community as inherently progressive and of changes in participation as emerging organically in line with broader social changes outside of WCS supported arguments for language reform as responsive.

If people are already dancing non-heteronormatively, then language reform is merely correcting the language to respond to the actual state of the world.

The idea that reformed language was more inclusive was also prominent and inclusion was presented as an unambiguous social good that was valued in the WCS community. I argue that this is in part because the financial viability of the WCS community (and professionals working within it) is contingent on having enough dancers to pay entry fees and buy instruction. Hence, in addition to any general orientation towards wanting to avoid microaggressions and make the community welcoming, there is also an economic motivation to enhance the inclusivity of the community. This is also reflected in the role of institutional forces in the community (e.g. dance schools, competition events) which were able to encourage the use of reformed language through how they educated dancers/instructors and what they required of the dancers they hired to work at an event.

Finally, interviewees not only chose to use degendered language because it was civil, but also avoided explicitly calling out gendered language use so as to avoid conflict or being seen as uncivil. Dancers often attested to forgiving gendered language use on the grounds that users were still breaking old habits or had just "slipped" into the problematic language—in short there was a clear awareness of the cognitive challenges of language change, particularly after repeated, long term use of unreformed terms. This apparent preference for not addressing gendered language in the moment further points to the critical importance of institutional forces as, if gendered language is not contested in the moment, the reform must rely on policy and hiring decisions to encourage language change amongst those who may be resistant or even just apathetic.

In answer to the second question (how effective has this reform been in changing language): overall, rates of gendered language used to refer to the roles were extremely low, with

many interviewees using such language only metadiscursively (i.e. to discuss cases of gendered language use either by others or by their past selves). In general, gendered language was more frequent in the naturalistic context of my participant observations (as compared to interviews), but it was unfortunately not possible to quantify this. Interviewees made use of a range of strategies to avoid gendered language, the most common of which being the use of the flagship degendered nouns LEADER and FOLLOWER. They also explicitly highlighted the challenge of third person singular pronouns which had traditionally been used as stand ins for the roles (SHE = FOLLOWER; HE = LEADER), with many claiming that they just tried to avoid pronouns in general. This avoidance of third person singular pronouns seemed to be supported by the use of singular THEY (though this form did not appear to be available to all interviewees), second person pronouns, the use of plural constructions, and the use of gerunds or more complex phrasal constructions to frame the role as an activity undertaken by an individual rather than as a category label for individuals.

Where gendered language did appear (in both interviews and observations) it seemed to coincide with a more "old school" orientation as well as participants having spent a longer period of time in the community—particularly if that time was spent teaching. Elements of cognitive strain, whether as a result of the mental challenge of teaching and coordinating a class, working in one's non-native language, or expressing frustration, also appeared to increase the likelihood of slips into gendered language. Gendered language also seemed more likely to appear while discussing bodies and embodiment or when instructors switched rapidly between specific (e.g. to their teaching partner) and generic reference during teaching. I also considered the ways that repairs took place showing that they tended to prefer either recasting using a neutral role noun or adding a word to represent the binary gender that had not initially been included. This latter form

may point to persistent cis-sexist bias in the community such that even when participants are trying to be inclusive, they may not be conscious of the need to include people whose gender is not captured by either HE or SHE. Additionally, I found that participants tended to convergently accommodate to each others' use of gendered language, though they sometimes did so while shifting the framing such that the gendered utterance became a reference to a specific gendered dancer as opposed to a generic. Lastly, performing reported speech of actual or hypothetical other dancers (and one's prior or hypothetical self) seemed to create more affordances for gendered language use, perhaps because such voicing dramatizes the story and moves it from more abstract discussion into more concrete enactments which may be conceptualized in gendered ways. Overall, the reform supported by the liberal approach appears to have been very successful in changing dancers' language habits. While gendered language does still arise, it is relatively limited, and the presence of repairs shows that users are aware of the social desirability of avoiding such gendered language and using degendered alternatives instead.

Finally, I considered the extent to which this successful language reform has or has not facilitated the reform of the conceptual categories and mental models which the reform targeted. In short, does the use of degendered language mean that the categories so named are equally degendered? While there has certainly been an expansion in non-heteronormative participation, with ever more women leading and men following, there is also significant evidence that heteronormativity plays a persistent role in the ways that the roles are understood and how actual teaching, learning, and dancing takes place. Firstly, where gendered references to the roles do appear, they are almost always heteronormative. Further, while many instructors do avoid gender stereotyped descriptions of the roles, a substantial number make use of heteronormatively gendered metaphors and allusions to describe the roles and the relationship between them. Even

amongst those who were heavily committed to degendering, entanglements occasionally occurred such that the speaker used a degendered role term when intending to refer to the gender group instead (e.g. saying "followers" when the intended category was "women"). Entanglements such as these suggest a certain conflation of gender and role categories such that, while the new labels are being used, the concept that they point to may still overlap with gender. There is also evidence that non-heteronormative dancers remain marked (i.e. seen as not the norm) insofar as, where gender specification of the roles appeared, it was far more likely to be in reference to non-heteronormative combinations of gender and role (e.g. male followers or female leaders) than to heteronormative combinations.

Beyond the linguistic patterns, the persistent role of heteronormativity was also observed in the way that roles were navigated in both class environments and social dancing. In the former, roles were often assumed by perceived gender and both instructors and other students may mis-identify non-heteronormative dancers and attempt to position them in the other role in ways that do not appear to apply to heteronormative dancers. Similarly, when social dancing, even dancers who themselves dance in non-heteronormative roles—including me!—reflected on their tendency to rely on perceived gender as a likely indicator of role when dancing with new people. This extended to a pattern of only explicitly negotiating roles when either two people of the same gender were dancing together or both partners knew each other to be capable of both roles. A small number of dancers talked about explicitly aiming to ask roles with every partner, but this remains a minority. Further to this, there appears to be greater pressure on non-heteronormative dancers to switch to a heteronormative role to balance a class or social—a pressure which may rely on the tendency to assume that even if one is dancing non-heteronormatively, one is able to perform one's heteronormative role and is likely better at that

role or at least learned it first. Together these patterns suggest that degendered lexical references to the roles, may in fact obscure the continued role of heteronormativity in organizing participation in the dance community and conceptions of the dance roles.

While I commend the WCS community on the incredible work that has already taken place, I see room for more efforts to challenge the underlyingly heteronormative logics of the community. For example:

- **Asking dance roles for every partner, regardless of gender:** there is evidence that such negotiations can draw attention to heteronormative assumptions, and in bringing them to the fore, perhaps contest them.
- **Being mindful of how we manage partnering in classes:** if there are solo dancers and there is concern that some may not have understood the partnering instructions, they should *all* be asked which role they are intending to dance instead of only asking women if they are following, men if they are leading, or adjacent same gender individuals if they want to split up so they get a partner sooner. Such challenges can perhaps be headed off by splitting dancers by role (either sending to opposite sides of the room or having people dancing in one role raise their hands) and trusting dancers to apportion themselves in accordance with their preference.
- **Paying attention to how we describe the roles:** avoiding explicitly gendered metaphors, allusions, or adjectives may be facilitated by recent moves towards more physics or kinesiology-based teaching registers, but it may also be a case of using more references to objects or natural phenomena rather than gendered bodies or roles.

- **Continuing to refine modes of introducing students to the roles:** while it may not be feasible to start everyone learning both roles, wherever possible, introducing students to the mechanics of the roles and allowing choice based on that experience may hold promise. Additionally, emphasis on the fact that anyone can learn any role and that the choice of a role is never final seems likely to continue to be a key tool for challenging the assumptions that students may already bring into class.
- **Dancing non-heteronormatively:** for many participants, seeing people dancing non-heteronormatively was more compelling than the language change. Hence, while the language change is important and has had an important role in reducing misgendering, simply providing more examples of non-heteronormative dancing seems likely to play an important role in challenging the idea that all women can/do follow and all men can/do lead.

Notably, due to the demographic characteristics of the focal community I studied, I was not able to explore concerns related to nonbinary or trans dancers' experience. This is an important gap that deserves careful attention and detailed research in collaboration with such dancers.