The Missing Words

by Ziqiu Wang

Volunteering at the Peking University Hospital, I am astonished by how populous Beijing's hospitals are. Uniformed people are swiftly rushing by—doctors in white, nurses in pink, and volunteers, like me, in green. The smell of nervousness and medical alcohol is permeating the air. No matter how sick or desperate you are, in this hall, you are a number, waiting to be called out on the huge announcement screen.

As a volunteer, my task is simple: to help incoming patients check in at the registration terminals. Swipe your healthcare card, and your name, date of birth, healthcare number, etc., all appear on the terminal. All I have to do is to verify the information. Throughout the weeks, I've scanned hundreds of healthcare cards and automatically asked "Is this information correct?" But one morning, an androgynous-presenting patient rushed in, stopped by my machine, and, pretending not to notice my existence, pulled their healthcare card from their pocket and scanned it. I stood aside quietly, peeking over to catch any signals that they needed assistance. Scrolling through their personal information, this patient did not go directly to their address and healthcare number like nearly every other patient, but stopped at the category of 'xingbié.'

Xingbié, in Chinese, incorporates the concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality. The underlying assumption of this term is that anyone's sex equates to their gender and sexuality, an idea that reflects the degree of identity expression that the Chinese language, and China itself, chooses to foster. In this patient's case, the word on their screen read 'nü,' a term that does not distinguish between female (sex) and woman (gender). Rather than verifying themselves as nü, the patient clicked on the dropdown to see what else they could choose, and found 'nan' (male/man) and 'intersex.' The last category indicates that xingbié, in this context, refers expressly to biological sex.

In a hospital setting, it makes sense that sex is more significant than gender. Yet the lack of alternatives for the term xingbié in the Chinese language restricts people's self-expression on a daily basis. As Western gender identifications spread to China, it is becoming possible to draw distinctions between biological xingbié and social xingbié, but people's mindsets are still largely wired into the binary of nan or nü. Because I have a Western upbringing, I am especially sensitive toward the limitation of the term xingbié: I believe that a person's sex and gender (for me, these are 'female' and 'woman') are independent of each other.

Sex does not equal gender. One is expressed through chromosomes, the other is socially constructed. But as a first-generation immigrant, my perception of sex, gender, and sexuality is a cultural shock to my traditional Chinese parents. My dad was astonished when I introduced him to the Genderbread Person: a diagram displaying the distinctions among gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation. Each of these identities has a spectrum with woman and man, feminine and masculine, female and male, and heterosexual and homosexual labeled on each side, expressing the possibility for people to identify different aspects of their identity anywhere between the binaries. My father's response: "Ting Ting says people can have eight kinds of xingbié!" I felt I had to correct him, to explain the power this diagram holds in acknowledging people's freedom to choose their identities and escape the restriction of one-dimensional sexuality. But I couldn't find Chinese words to explain this wonder.

What is missing from our vocabulary might reflect what we've forgotten from the past. Throughout the evolution of Chinese, the goal has always been to simplify the language. Four words are simplified to two, and two to one. In contexts where words express similar meanings, having two characters rather than four is efficient. But generalizing biological xingbié and social xingbié into a single term is inaccurate. Simplification should not equal generalization. The former is a conscious condensation that improves efficiency without distorting the meaning of the expression, while the latter projects ignorance, whether willed or not. Even though simplicity is driven by the hope of efficiency, language that preserves or fosters ignorance reveals the limits of the language's home culture. I used to wonder if reverse-engineering the language might solve the problem: would creating distinctive Chinese terms for sex and gender educate people about their freedom to claim different aspects of their identities?

In her essay "Speaking of Nature," biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer wonders about the extent to which language can revolutionize our thinking. Drawing from the Native American language Potawatomi, Kimmerer proposes a new pronoun, 'ki,' for any living beings on Earth. As is, the pronouns 'he' and 'she' are "a grammar of personhood for both living and dead *Homo sapiens,*" while 'it' refers to everything else in the world, whether it be the birds and trees and stones or lifeless, human-made objects (Kimmerer). By proposing this new shared pronoun, Kimmerer suggests that humans are equivalent to any plants, animals, and living organisms on this planet; we are simply one of many species on Earth. She points out that the 'personhood' traditionally reserved for 'him' and 'her' has economic and political implications: if humans are a supreme species, other beings ('it') may be defined as exploitable resources (Kimmerer). Similarly, the simplified Chinese that most Chinese speakers predominantly use nowadays abandoned the distinctive pronouns that traditional Chinese employs for nonliving things, animals, and spiritual beings. Without these pronouns, the Chinese language has become more rigid, something that might be reflected in the political

rigidity of the larger culture. So, will reviving old pronouns or creating new ones solve the problem?

For Kimmerer, the solution is not that simple. When she consulted her Potawatomi language guide Stewart King about her hope to create new words to reconcile the human exceptionalism embedded in English grammar, King "cautioned [her] that 'our language holds no responsibility to heal the society that sought to exterminate it,'" even as he shares with her the word that provides her with root of ki (Kimmerer). As Kimmerer cautions, even if we adopt new pronouns for living beings, or specific terms for biological xingbié and social xingbié, the effort is futile if the culture remains rigidly non-inclusive. Kimmerer complicates things still further, wondering how we can see the flaws in our culture when "our minds have also been colonized" by "speak[ing] and liv[ing] with this language every day" (Kimmerer). Our languages, both English and Chinese, have refused to respect and grant rights to living beings by assigning them pronouns that suppress or refuse nuances of personhood. When we use language automatically, without critically reflecting on our words' underlying assumptions and implications, we risk unthinkingly accepting the language and culture as representations of how the world should be.

People are often unaware of the discrimination ingrained in a language, even down to the etymology of a word. For instance, when I came out to a Chinese friend about my sexual orientation online, he exclaimed, "I never expected you to be a fùnǚ!" Fùnǚ is a term adapted from Japanese to describe girls who are fond of homosexual relationships. But the fù here means 'helpless' or 'the forbidden ones/ failures of society.' I know my friend has no discriminatory intentions, yet the roots of this word are inherently homophobic. It worries me that in China—with a culture that takes such pride in the evolution of their Chinese characters—people can thoughtlessly adopt Internet-viral words like fùnǚ. To avoid being colonized by the languages we employ, we need to be consciously reflective of our words and their assumptions.

Beyond making conscious word choices every day, we can also advocate for using words and respecting cultures that should be adopted for a more inclusive humanity, including those from endangered languages. For instance, many Indigenous languages that express appreciation for living beings—such as the Potawatomi language that Kimmerer's grandfather spoke, one that "describe[s] the vital beingness of the world" with a "pulse of animacy in every sentence" were colonized by English and other dominating languages and all but erased (Kimmerer). Instead of creating new words to restore respect for all living, non-human beings, we might revive words that politics and economics have made us neglect, and honor the wisdom we have forgotten.

For cultures like China's that don't have a historical acknowledgment of gender diversity, we need to be critical of what is missing from the language and reflect on

what that absence suggests about the underlying culture. Then, we should advocate for change. It is only through reflective advocacy that we can both resist the persecution of queer people in China and promote language that expresses the wonders of embracing one's identities.

Though such advocacy may come with larger costs and dangers in some places than others, acknowledging change is an essential first step. By proposing a new pronoun to shelter respect for all living beings, Kimmerer offers a start to this change. And with collective, continuous criticism and activism, the patient I encountered at the hospital may one day be able to verify their personal information with confidence. Dropdown menus may come closer to reflecting the variety of beings in the world. And I will be better equipped to speak about its wonders with my dad. I know that he will listen when these words are no longer missing. And that will make them real.

Works Cited

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. "Speaking of Nature." Orion Magazine, 12 June 2017, https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature/.