[Theme music]

**Molly:** Welcome to Gender Reveal, a podcast where we ask intrusive, personal questions and hopefully get a little bit closer to understanding what the hell gender is. I'm your host and resident Gender Detective, Molly Woodstock.

[Theme song ends]

**Molly:** Hey, I’m back. I hope everyone had a good time last week listing to the Trans Specific Partner Partnership podcast. and Yasemin’s interview with Asher. This week we’re back to business as usual with an interview with linguist, Kirby Conrod. Kirby uses syntax and sociolinguistics to figure out why some people are so good at using singular they pronouns and some people are so bad at it. I learned so much and I’m stoked to share this interview with you. I did not sell any ads this week because I was on vacation. So until further notice this podcast is purely supported by our very generous Patreon donors. Your support is literally the only reason I am still able to make the show and I cannot express how much I appreciate your help. I was finally able to pay Liza for coding the first 9 episodes of the podcast, which felt awesome. And I’m excited to keep being able to give her money thanks to you giving us money. I really, really appreciate it. Because I appreciate you all so very much I want to send a special prize to anyone who donates $5 or more in the month of April. This prize was previously for folks donating $7 or more but I wanna open it up to anyone who donates $5 or more. If you’re already donating $5 or more and you’re bummed you didn’t get a special extra prize you can either bump your donation up a dollar. Or honestly just send me a message on Patreon that’s like, “Hey, what’s up?” And I’ll send you a little extra something. If you’re not able to support the show via Patreon that’s totally cool and I really appreciate you spreading the word anyway you can. So please just keep writing reviews, telling your friends and family, and coworkers and whatever. And we will keep making the show and it’ll all work out. And one more thing— I’ve had weird success with sticking Gender Reveal stickers in public restrooms of cool like queer or punk or vegan bars or restaurants or whatever. So if you have extra Gender Reveal stickers that I’ve sent you and you don’t know what to do with them try vandalizing things, I guess. And with that it’s time for a segment called This Week in Gender.

[Trumpeting news music]

**Molly:** This week in gender we’re talking about the transgender military ban, again! Trump withdrew his previous ban on trans folks serving in the military and issued a new policy that quote, “Transgender persons who require or who have undergone gender transition are disqualified for military service.” People have asked whether or not that only applies to new recruits or whether service members who have already transitioned will be discharged. We don’t know that yet. Even more disturbingly there’s another new part of the policy that bans any transgender person with a history or diagnosis of gender dysphoria. The reports states that quote, “Nothing in this policy precludes service by transgender persons who do not have a history or diagnosis of gender dysphoria and are willing or able to meet all of the standards that apply to their biological sex.” So basically if you’re not trans you can serve? Like if you’re a trans person but you’re not trans. Or if you go really, really deeply back into the closet. It just… It seems like they’re trying to make it sound like, “Oh, this is reasonable. Only trans people who have transitioned or who want to transition or have dysphoria are banned.” But isn’t that all trans people? Am I missing something? Anyway, the good news is that federal judges are currently blocking the ban until they can learn more about it. And as always I want to make sure that when we’re fighting more trans access to the military we’re also fighting for other ways for trans folks to get access to education and employment and housing and healthcare. This is important but it is far from the only important battle that transgender folks are facing right now. This has been This Week in Gender.

[Trumpeting news music]

[Music interlude beings]

**Molly:** Kirby is a PhD candidate at the University of Washington researching how and why people use pronouns the way that they do. Kirby is non-binary and uses they/them pronouns. As does their partner and most of their close friends. They are interested in working out how that fits into the larger picture of the way language is used in society and in the human brain.

[Music interlude ends]

**Molly:** So thank you so much for coming on the show. The way that we always start is by asking in terms of gender, how do you identify?

**Kirby:** Uh, so I identify as non-binary. Um, I, uh just joked on Facebook that I wish forms had an “It’s Complicated.” Um [laugh]—

**Molly:** [Laugh]

**Kirby:** — option for gender. Um, so… So non-binary is the way that I usually just sort of blanket explain myself to cis people. And then if I’m talking to somebody who knows what is going on then I will, if pressed, say, “You know, I’m kind of agender and butch.”

**Molly:** Gotcha.

**Kirby:** Um, whatever… whatever intersection of those things, that means.

**Molly:** Cool. Um, and what pronouns do you use?

**Kirby:** I use they/them.

**Molly:** Perfect. You said that you came into your non-binary identity while you were living in Taiwan?—

**Kirby:** Uh-huh.

**Molly:** — And I’m wondering what it was about living in Taiwan that facilitated that journey.

**Kirby:** Yeah, um, so I don’t… I don’t know if you’ve ever lived abroad before. Um, I had never lived abroad when I moved to Taiwan. I didn’t know Chinese. Um, so I was, uh… I was there to teaching English ‘cause that’s kind of the job that you get when you wanna —

**Molly:** Right.

**Kirby:** — When you wanna live abroad. And, um, I was, uh, in some ways very isolated and felt very alienated which makes sense ‘cause I was like literally an alien.

**Molly:** [Chuckle]

**Kirby:** Um, and just, um, sort of the… in some ways it was very freeing. Um, because what I found is that it sort of ungrouped me from the women around me. Um, whereas in the States I had been trying very hard to sort of keep up with, um, my… my peers who identified as women. And, uh, found that I was just doing very badly at it. I was just not doing great either in the sort of gender presentation way, or the like trying to date people in college. And so going to a place where I, you know, was visibly a huge outsider and to the extent where that people socially sort of didn’t group me in with Taiwanese women. Um, and there are a lot of reasons for that. And the primary one is that I didn’t really, um, present in a way that like is legible. Um, and a big thing that I learned there, you know— I had known this intellectually but it’s really different living it— is that gender is relative.

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** Um, and when you go to different places gender mean different things. So going there and finding out that there wasn’t really like a category open for me because, um, I also didn’t fit in really well with the other, uh, foreign female teachers who were there who were all mostly, uh, thin, and straight and, uh, partying. And I tried partying a lot but um, what I found was that it was nice to be like, “Oh, I can just excuse myself from this. I can just say I’m not going to try anymore.” And, “I don’t have to try and look attractive because there’s no way that I can possibly look attractive, either to men or to women. And I don’t have to try and be legible because there’s no way that I can be legible in this sort of situation.” And so I found out that like I can just look weird and be fat and wear tank tops and, uh, it’s fine actually. And, um, that… that was what sort of made it like an option for me of like,”Oh, I can actually just be this un-gendered person or this person sort of existing outside of gender.” And it actually makes me really happy and I’m actually much happier doing this than I was trying to meet some impossible standards. Um, and… and I before that sort of, you know, as a teenager or something, I was not well-informed about trans issues and I always sort of toyed with the idea of like, “Am I trans?” Well… and the reason that I came up with “No” is that I couldn’t see myself as a man.

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** And I kept coming back to the like, “Well, I kinda wanna be both.” And I wasn’t aware that that was actually like a real option. So I had as a… as a teenager and younger just concluded that I was not trans because I didn’t want to be a dude.

**Molly:** Right.

**Kirby:** Um, so… so it was that and it was the fact that, um, in and after college I was making a lot more non-binary and agender friends. Where I was seeing this as a real option and getting a lot of positive sort of reinforcement of that, from them. Of just like, “Yeah, you can just decide to be that. If that’s something that you want you can just have it.” Like you don’t have to pass a test.

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** Um, you know? There’s no like licensing body. And once I felt like free enough to make that decision, um, it was sort of a private decision while I was still living in Taiwan. Because there was no way that I was gonna try and convince people to like use different pronouns for me or whatever while I’m living somewhere where, you know, English is not the dominant language. And Chinese doesn’t have gendered pronouns. So, you know, it’s kind of like a non-issue, uh, there. Um, and it was only when I came back to the States that I started, you know, asking my friends and family, um, to use these different pronouns for me. Coming back to the States was actually much harder than moving to Taiwan.

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** Because I got this huge reverse culture shock. And, uh, I was just starting grad school and I was having a lot of mental health issues at the time. And at the same time I was trying to go around and insist that, you know, that my parents and my professors and my students use these pronouns for me that I am not even totally used to hearing. And so it was very weird.

**Molly:** Yeah, definitely. It sounds weird. You and your partner and most of your close friends all use they/them pronouns and I’m wondering what it’s like to move between this world were being non-binary or agender and using they/them pronouns is like the norm. It’s really well understood. To—

**Kirby:** Uh-huh.

**Molly:** — To, you know, different spaces where folks don’t even know what that means. What is it like sort of living in both of those worlds?

**Kirby:** Yeah. It feels like I know ahead of time whether or not I’m gonna be able to be close friends with someone based on whether they can just accept, uh, my… my “non-binary”ness without making an issue of it or questioning it or struggling with it. Because I kind of just don’t have like the, uh, patience for that. You know, I’m a busy person and I’ve got a lot going on. And so I can’t sort of babysit people through the process. And so people that I end up being close with are the people that have personal experience with this. And so it just ends up of this like… I have this extremely tight knit group of, um, almost exclusively trans and definitely all queer friends. Uh, we have…. We have a joke that we have like a token straight friend.

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** And uh, and there’s that and, you know, there’s this just like instinctive trust and comfort and closeness that we have with each other. And then like I go to grad school and I go to professional conferences and I find myself getting misgendered or having to explain myself a lot, or having to argue for non-binary being a real thing that people can be. Or having big public blog arguments with famous linguists about whether or not you should misgender people in print—

**Molly:** Yikes.

**Kirby:** And [laugh] um, and this sort of thing of just it’s— it’s very alienating. You know, I… I feel a lot like there’s this whole world that I can never really be a full participant in. And then there’s this like little private world that I have with my friends where I can be completely comfortable and not have to worry about, you know, explaining myself and people understand my feelings because they feel the same way. We don’t have to go through “feelings Kindergarten” as much—

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** Um, the way that I have to do in professional contexts or with like sometimes family members who just don’t have a lot of experience. And so I feel like I am, you know, sometimes walking them through this like stuff that… I don’t wanna call it like extremely beginner level because definitely there was a time in my life where I didn’t know this stuff but I didn’t go read a book to learn this stuff. I just kind of observed the way that people around me were finding themselves and finding their place in the world and I said, “Ah. So that’s a possibility.” And it’s weird to try and like explain it to people who don’t have those friends, you know.

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** If they… if their social world doesn’t have many other people like me then I’m gonna necessarily be an oddity in their landscape. And it’s hard to feel close or intimate when… when I feel like there’s just this basic part of me that they can’t wrap their heads around.

**Molly:** Yeah, absolutely. So you study syntax and sociolinguistics. And my question I wrote down for that is, literally what does that even mean?

**Kirby:** Oh, my god, yes! So I love talking about this. So syntax is the best thing ever. If you’re trained in the, uh, Chomskian tradition, syntax is the idea that we can write a very special, very precise algorithm of, you know, sort of how things fit together to produce all the possible sentences of a language and exclude all the impossible sentences of a language. So the idea is that we wanna write a… a[n] equation for how language gets put together. And on some level we’re interested in how the actual human brain is doing this. Um, and definitely there are linguists who are more into real meat brains than I am. But I’m more interested in this sort of abstract like… I, I find myself, uh, having a lot in common with like high-level mathematicians even though I’m like really bad at like real math. Um, I… I explain syntax as a kind of word math. So there’s certain things that can go together in math. And then certain things happen if you put those things together. And what it turns out is that language has these parts and you can think of them as like words but there are parts smaller than words that combine, too, so like suffixes and prefixes and stuff. Um, you know language all has these parts and they all go together in a regular and organized way. Um, and they do this unconsciously. This is not something that you learn in third grade English class. This is something that you know before you get to Kindergarten. Um, so there’s…. there’s something about the human brain that’s super ready to know about this organizational system. And syntax is trying to figure out what exactly is the organizational system that the human brain really likes to know. Does that make sense?

**Molly:** Yeah, that’s awesome.

**Kirby:** So sociolinguistics is looking at the way that language varies. Um, so I’m sure that you can think of times where you realize that somebody says something a little differently than how you would say it and it’s not just that they said it weird one time, it’s that they *tend* to say in a way that you wouldn’t necessarily say it. And sometimes these like… the reason that they do this is because they’re from a different dialect area than you. So there’s… there’s geological differences but there’s also differences that vary along a lot of social dimensions. So people will talk differently based on, uh, their gender identity. People will talk differently based on their socioeconomic status, you know. You’ll find that people talk differently based on ethnicity and, uh, the way that ethnicity intersects with all these other sort of social variables. So there’s a lot of dimensions of like ways that humans like to organize ourselves in a society. And part of the way that we present our identity and construct our sort of place in the world is to signal that by the way that we talk. So… so that’s kind of the, the typical sociolinguistics talk. Um, sociosyntax would be were the word order the sentence structure is different based on your social category.

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** A very fun example— do you find it normal-sounding or pretty weird-sounding to say, “Oh, yeah. It rains a lot anymore”?

**Molly:** That’s weird to me. [Laugh]

**Kirby:** Yeah, so, this is.. this is a geographical difference. So there are some parts of the, uh, sort of midlands area. Um, you know, certain people from like Ohio will say this and it sounds completely normal to them. And they’re obviously speakers of English. They’re speakers of American English by any measurement but they have this one particular construction that most Englishes don’t have. And it’s not like it’s breaking the rules of language. It’s just, uh, that the settings are little bit different on the algorithm. Does that answer your question?

**Molly:** Yeah, it totally does. Yeah.

**Kirby:** [Chuckle] Awesome.

**Molly:** So can you talk about like your main area of study and research right now? Like what specially you’re exploring?

**Kirby:** Yeah. So, um, when I came to grad school I had a lot of ideas about relative clauses and I still have a lot of ideas about relative clauses. But one thing that kept coming up, um, this question that sort of kept nagging at me was, um, just uh me existing in the world in grad school as a non-binary person. And I’m, you know, explaining my pronouns to my professors and my colleagues. And I’m noticing that some people have a really easy time calling me “they” with no problem—

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** — They’re not struggling with it. And some people have a really difficult time. Um, and the people who have a really difficult time are reporting, “This is actually ungrammatical for me.” So that… That feeling of sort of weird wrongness that you got when I gave you that positive “anymore,” people are getting that for singular “they.”

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** Um, and what that means… what that feeling means is that this is actually a measurable effect in the brain. We haven’t measured it for singular “they.” We don’t know if it’s exactly the same as other kinds of grammaticality. But we do know that people [who] are saying it feels the same. So that means that they have a different grammar, a different syntax in their brains, um, than the people are fine with it. And so my… my research question is kind of around pronouns and what kind of algorithm do we as syntacticians have to write to capture the people who can say singular “they” and have no problem with it and the people who can’t say singular they and have no problem with it. Um, and… and this is simplifying it quite a bit ‘cause it’s not just singular “they.” There’s a bunch of other stuff that pronouns do but singular “they” is the one that, you know, is sort of hot and spicy right now. Because people are writing blogs about it and having, you know, think pieces. Um, but also because it’s so relevant for me in my personal life that a lot of… a lot of my research questions tend to revolve around this because it comes up every day for me.

**Molly:** Do you have any ideas as to why like some people find it really easy and some people find it really hard, even when they’re from like sort of similar backgrounds?

**Kirby:** Yeah. So there’s some very technical stuff but, um, the part that would be interesting to you is, I think, whether you can find it appropriate to not attribute a gender to a person when you know their gender. That’s one part of it.

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** And then another part of it is the social aspect of whether you think somebody can just not have a gender. Whether you think that non-binary genders are fundamentally real and not fake.

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** Um, so people who struggle with the idea of just not being one gender or the other, uh, tend to struggle with singular “they.” Um, so that’s one thing. And then the other thing is that there are some systems of politeness where its actually rude not to pic one or the other binary gender when you’re talking about somebody. Um, and in that case “they” is sort of a last resort of like, “I really can’t tell and I… I know that this is kind of rude to use.” And so there are some people for whom using singular “they” feels rude or inappropriate. Um, and there are other people for whom, um, it’s impolite to guess. Um, and if you have to guess, it’s better to guess nothing rather than guessing wrong. So this is the side that I’m on—

**Molly:** Right.

**Kirby:** Of, if I can’t…if I can’t tell somebody’s gender I shouldn’t just guess. I would rather guess nothing rather than guess one of the binary genders and end up being wrong. So these systems of… of politeness sort of play into how we use pronouns because as it turns out, um, gender is fake.

**Molly:** [Giggle]

**Kirby:** [Chuckle] Um, that’s very glib. But, um, I… I think about gendered pronouns a lot more like, um, honorifics, um, in that—

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** — In that they’re, um, sort of flexible and they’re… what they’re encoding is not a static, physical property. What they’re encoding is a social relationship. So if you use, uh, you know, “tu” or “usted" in Spanish, this is… this is a social relationship you’re, uh, putting into the grammar. And what I’m finding is that gender acts a lot more like that, uh, when we’re talking about the gender of real human beings. And the reason that we’ve kinda acted like it’s encoding some sort of physical property is because linguists didn’t have any trans friends until 1996 or something.

**Molly:** [Chuckle]

**Kirby:** Um, it’s a problem of there not being any trans linguists. Um, the Linguistic Society of America did a big survey, uh, to try and find out, you know, the demographics of its members. And this is the main professional organization of linguists in the States. And, uh, I think there were seven people in the LSA that self-reported that they’re trans at all—

**Molly:** Wow.

**Kirby:** So this is out of, you know, a couple thousand people. Uh, seven people are trans. And so, and not all of them are working on pronouns. Um, some of them are working on, uh ya know, just completely unrelated stuff because they have their own thing that they’re working on. And some of them are working on trans stuff but it’s, you know, more on the phonetic side of how voices sound—

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** Um, so this sort of old-timey textbook idea that gender has to match some physical property is sort of inherited from philological traditions where we studied Latin and German a lot, and those have grammatical gender. And grammatical gender is not about social relationships. Grammatical gender is about sorting noun classes into specific sort of, “All my nouns sound like ‘this’ or like ‘this’. And if they sound like ‘this’ they have to have ‘this’, uh, adjective ending. And if they sound this other way then they have to this other adjective ending.” And that’s kind of, you know, that’s how Latin works. Uh, it’s not how English works. So it’s, it’s kind of, uh, we have this leftover residue from studying languages with grammatical gender where we sort of port over this idea to English that, uh, gender is like a static property and that it can just be one thing or the other. Rather than something that we’re continually trying to assess and perform and figure out and relate to each other through.

**Molly:** Yeah. Thank you so much for explaining all of this. I feel like I’m not really adding anything but it’s really incredible to hear. So thank you so much.

**Kirby:** Oh, yeah. Totally. I mean I love talking about this stuff.

**Molly:** Cool, cool. Um, so there a lots of people who listen to this podcast, Gender Reveal, who love this podcast. They love the guests. They listen every week. But they’ll say something like, “Yeah, I listened to your podcast and that guy was so great. He’s just so funny.” And I’m like, “Hmm…. I haven’t interviewed anyone that uses he/him pronouns yet.” You know?—

**Kirby:** Yeah.

**Molly:** So like… so clearly they’re struggling to wrap their mouths around the language even though they’re supportive of non-binary folks like existing. Uh—

**Kirby:** Yeah.

**Molly:** — And I generally try not to ask folks on the podcast to do too much flavor for cis folks but since this is your actual area of expertise, I was wondering if you could share any advice for folks who are genuinely like trying but just really struggling with the grammar component.

**Kirby:** Oh, yeah. Absolutely. So first thing is I should send you my link. I have a… I have a medium post [Giggle].

**Molly:** Hell yeah. [Laugh]

**Kirby:** One of two medium posts that I have and this is the “How to do the absolute minimum with pronouns.”

**Molly:** [Laugh]

**Kirby:** Um, so I will send you that link—

**Molly:** Great.

**Kirby:** — But I can summarize it for you here. The first thing is: slow down.

**Molly:** Yes!

**Kirby:** You know? And this should be easy in print because you have time to go back and edit. But, um, if you know what the pronoun preferences of the person are and you know that you’re likely to mess up because you’re sort of still wrapping your mind around that, speak slower—

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** — Think before you talk. Take time to edit your text messages. You know? The way that people normally talk is very fast an unconscious. And, uh, if you think that you might offend somebody, uh, or hurt their feelings, uh, probably the wisest thing to do is to take extra care with your words. Um, so just slowing down and paying attention is a big thing. So when you’re talking to someone that you’ve just misgendered, uh, it’s important to not try and make excuses of why this is hard for you. Uh, first of all, they’ve definitely heard it before. Second of all, it doesn’t help them in any way—

**Molly:** Hmph!

**Kirby:** — You know me knowing that you have a hard time with they/them pronouns does not in any way make it hurt my feelings less—

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:**— when you misgender me. So telling me, “Oh, it’s just so ungrammatical for me,” like doesn’t mitigate the harm that you’re doing. You know, if you… if you say once, “Okay, this is, uh, a little bit different than sort of my… my unconscious grammar, but I’ll try my best.” After that you don’t have to make that excuse again. They know and hearing it over and… over and over, what it starts to sound like is, you know, “You can’t be mad at me if I mess up.” Um, and that’s dumb. [small laugh] You know, like if… if you’re messing up over and over and, uh, you’re making this excuse over and over, that sounds like something that you need to go practice.

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** I will say practice helps. Um, this is something that’s not in the medium post but I will say just here. Uh, when I’m really struggling with someone’s pronouns— and this happens to me when somebody uses like “ze” pronouns, where I have a hard time with those but I make my best efforts to use them— Um, a couple of things I will do: One, I will just avoid pronouns completely. Um, this is not always the best idea. Sometimes people find it hurtful. But for me, certainly I would rather you avoid pronouns rather than using the wrong ones. The other thing is there are ways to sort of train your brain to get used to it. Um, so one of things that I told my mom when I was first trying to help her with my pronouns was, you know, “Write little stories, uh, in your head about, you know— ‘Kirby went to the store and *they* picked up some milk.’ And ‘Oh, they forgot *thei*r wallet.’”

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** And just do that, um, alone on your own time. You know, don’t make it this person’s problem that you have to practice. But, uh, do it intentionally and familiarize yourself and make it a part of your normal sort of thought routine. So that it doesn’t feel so weird and uncomfortable next time because you have sort of trained your brain to be like, “Okay, we’re doing this. This is what we’re doing.” Um, and that goes a long way to help. And if you mess up, you should apologize right away. And, uh, sometimes what happens is, um, somebody will mess up and like not notice and keep talking. Um, and this happens to me constantly where I will actually verbally correct somebody. And they will continue speaking as if they haven’t heard me. So don’t do that. Uh, I know it’s hard to sort of, uh, like stop your train of thought in the middle but, uh, if you mess up and someone corrects you, you need to stop and acknowledge it and say sorry, briefly, and move on. The other thing is I would say is don’t go overboard with, “Oh my god, I’m so sorry. It’s just so hard for me,” over and over again.

**Molly:** [Chuckling]

**Kirby:** Um, especially if you’re messing up a lot. The more, you know, the more of a big deal you make out of it, the worse I feel. Especially if we were having a really important conversation. If I correct you and, uh, you say, “Oh, sorry,” and then correct yourself and then move on, then we get to continue having our important conversation. If you stop and have a melt down then now I feel like I’ve ruined the conversation for you and I feel guilty in addition to hurt. That’s not great. So, um, to sort of sum up, um, the way that people should try harder is: slow down and think about your words, don’t make excuses for yourself, um, acknowledge corrections but don’t go overboard with apologies. And practice. Practice is gonna go a long way to help.

**Molly:** I love that list. Thank you so much for sharing it.

**Kirby:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Molly:** Um, something that I like to point out also is that when you apologize, uh, for misgendering someone don’t keep apologizing until they say it’s okay or like it’s not a big deal or “I forgive you,” or whatever. Because it’s not like the burden of the person you misgendered to like grant forgiveness and say that everything’s okay ‘cause maybe it doesn’t feel okay.

**Kirby:** Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Yeah, um, that’s very much like the going overboard with apologies is one of the most annoying things I find because now it feel like it’s my problem to make you feel better—

**Molly:** Right.

**Kirby:** — and that’s just not helpful. Like that’s, that’s not what we were trying to accomplish here, you know? Um, so, you know, what you do is you say, “Uh, and then blah, blah, blah, she said— Oh, sorry. He—“ And then move on!—

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** — And then don’t. [Chuckle] Um, and if you’re doing that every time then you really need to look yourself in the eye and say, you know, “Am I… am I practicing enough. Am I really internalizing this or not.”

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** Or, “Am I just sort of, uh, putting on a show so I can’t get yelled at.”

**Molly:** Yeah. I know some people who are around 40, a little bit younger, who keep saying like, “I’m just really old. And this is really hard for me because I’m so old.”—

**Kirby:** [Chuckle]

**Molly:** — And like my best friends are like 33 and 34 and they get everyone’s pronouns right 100% percent of the time. So like [laugh]…

**Kirby:** Okay. So, um, I have a couple of questions about that. Are they getting binary [pronouns] wrong or are they getting singular “they” wrong?

**Molly:** Singular “they.”

**Kirby:** Yeah, so, okay. I’m presenting new data at a conference next month that says, “Oh, there’s actually a language change going on.”

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** Um, and the evidence for that is that younger people are doing it more than older people.

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** That said, that’s not an excuse. You know, my PhD advisors are both in the same generation as my parents, if not the same age. I don’t… I would never ask my advisors how old they are [laugh].

**Molly:** [Laugh]

**Kirby:** But… Oh, my god. I would die! But, you know, definitely like in, in— incomparable sort of brackets. And they never mess up. And, and one of them is a non-native speaker of English. You know, her native language is Polish and sh— I’ve never heard her mess up—

**Molly:** That’s rad.

**Kirby:** — So, uh, and this is over the course of four years. Like we obviously talk a lot and, um, you know, your PhD advisor has talk about you a lot. Um, and this is the sort of thing where, you know, if professors are misgendering me, I know about it. Uh, some of them really struggle with it and some of them have no problem with it and, uh, it is not a straight line, uh, correlated with age, you know. Some people… so this is part of, honestly, this is part of my research question of like, “It’s not just age.” There’s clearly other stuff going on. So there’s a lot of things that it could be where there’s some sort of like measures of cognitive flexibility or ability to learn new constructions in a language that’s kind of related to learning a second language. Um, learning language stuff as an adult is harder than learning language stuff as a kid—

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** — This is a thing that we know. So it could also be that just they don’t have other non-binary friends so it just doesn’t come up that much except about just you.

**Molly:** Yup. That’s 100% it.

**Kirby:** Uh, and that’s a— that’s a big one. Um, and, you know, my recommendation for those people is like, “Okay, go practice. Go write a story about a non-binary character. Go right a novel about a non-binary character.”

**Molly:** [Chuckle]

**Kirby:** “Don’t publish it. We don’t want that.”—

**Molly:** [Big laugh followed by long sigh]

**Kirby:** — “Just write it for practice.” [Laugh] Yeah. Um… Yeah, but like, you know, if, if… if it’s genuinely difficult for you, that’s on you to fix, you know. That is not somebody else’s problem. That’s your— that’s a “you” problem.

**Molly:** Definitely. So you obviously study English. That’s the language you work in. But do you know like anecdottaly how folks in other languages with like really intense gendering in their languages are tackling the idea of non-binary pronouns. Or they/them pronouns specially.

**Kirby:** Oh, yeah. Okay, I have, um, two linguists to refer you to. Uh, Lal Zimman is professor at UC Santa Barbara, who wrote about, um, Hebrew speakers. Um, and what some of them are doing is switching between different endings—

**Molly:** Interesting.

**Kirby:** — Masculine and feminine, uh, every other one. And some of them only speak in the present tense—

**Molly:** [Chortle]

**Kirby:** — ‘Cause it’s past-tense verbs that have the gender endings. So, or like brackey stuff like that—

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** — Or some of them will pick the… pick a gender, a binary gender, but it will be the opposite of their birth assignment to just kind of reinforce like, “Stop it. I’m gender nonconforming. Don’t… don’t do that.” Um, so there’s a few different strategies, um, that I know of in Hebrew. Um, there’s also a PhD student at… oh, I think Toronto but don’t quote me on that, uh, Lex Connelly who is working on, uh— and we don’t have data on this yet as far as I know but— they are working on, I think, French, um, and probably one other one that I’ve forgotten about. And when I talked to them at a conference it was really interesting. One of the things that they said people are doing is they’re just using English.

**Molly:** Oh ooh.

**Kirby:** Yeah. So there’s a really rich vain of research to be done there about what is going on. And if it’s the case that a lot of non-binary people are just using English, then that says something about the sort of social value of English as a way to communicate queer identities that for whatever reason the other language, their native language, is not workable for. And that research, as far as I know, is not completed. A lot if is… is very, very new, you know. We’re just starting to look at this.

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** Um, I have one friend who is a, uh, native Spanish speaker who’s non-binary. They’re bilingual. Um, their pronoun that they use is, uh, “elle.” Um, so it’s like E-L-L-E.—

**Molly:** Oh, okay.

**Kirby:** — Um, which is, is sort of in-between, between “el” and, uh, “ella.”—

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** — Um, so it’s, it’s like a novel pronoun but it’s close enough to Spanish’s sort of native like what pronouns are like in Spanish that it’s like not super weird. Um, using “E” as an ending instead of “A” or “O”, um, is, is a pattern that I’ve heard and seen, uh, with this person and sort of around on the internet. Um, there are typographical traditions where people will do stuff in, uh, in written Spanish online. Like, um, do the “@“ symbol—

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** — Or an “X” instead of either having in, uh, an “A” or an “O.” Um, so, so there’s some ways where a lot of socialization on the internet is happening as if it was speech but it’s happening in print.

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** And that’s really interesting to me and it’s something we need to look at more. But I don’t know that much about spoken… spoken gendered languages right now in terms of non-binary identities. That’s one of those things where what we really need is a linguist who is non-binary and a native speaker of one of those languages.

**Molly:** Right.

**Kirby:** People who are English speak[ing], monolingual linguists are not the people who should be doing that research because, frankly, we’re gonna make stupid mistakes.—

**Molly:** Absolutely.

**Kirby:** — Um, we’re not gonna have the kind of insider insights that are really needed to do good social science.

**Molly:** Totally. So your research is obviously like pretty intertwined with your personal identity at this point and we live in a society that tends to see cis, white, able-bodied male people as inherently objective and everything else as like inherently biased. So I’m wondering if anyone ever accuses you of being like too close to your subject matter or serving an agenda or anything like that.

**Kirby:** [Chuckling] Not to my face.

**Molly:** Great. [Laugh]

**Kirby:** Um, [laugh], I mean one of things is that I, um, I did my undergrad at Santa Cruz, which has a very, very strong, uh, generative syntax program and I was VERY into syntax. And I didn’t start doing sociolinguistics until really my second year of grad school at University of Washington. So, uh, one of things is that I’m coming from the, the syntax academic family and, um, sytacticians are known for being pretty… feisty?

**Molly:** [Giggle]

**Kirby:** Um, you know, we get rowdy. And so one of the things is that like I think just the sort of way that I was brought up in, in my education to comport myself as very like, I sound authoritative when I tell people what’s going on in a… in a noun phrase. Um, and the other thing is that, um, there aren’t cis linguists doing the research that I’m doing. And I’ve gone on public record a couple times as saying, you know, “They shouldn’t.”

**Molly:** Right.

**Kirby:** Um, and certainly not without a trans co-author or without serious collaboration with their trans subjects. And this is a conversation that I am having at conferences and, uh, in emails of, you know, “It’s great that you’re studying this stuff but you cannot be using trans people for a line on your CV. Especially, if you’re not really bringing any new knowledge to the trans community that we didn’t know already.”

**Molly:** Totally.

**Kirby:** Um, so I guess if somebody tried to say that I’m not objective because I’m too close to my subject matter, what I would say is that people who aren’t this close to my subject matter can’t possibly know what’s going on.

**Molly:** Totally. Um, is there anything else about being a non-binary person in academia d— that you feel like is worth sharing?

**Kirby:** [Sigh] You know, there’s the bathroom stuff.

**Molly:** Mm.

**Kirby:** And the sort of weird social stuff. It’s easy to feel very alone, uh, in academia. Um, and one the things that I, I do wanna say is that I am so, so grateful for the linguists around the world that are my friends on Twitter.

**Molly:** Hmm.

**Kirby:** Um, they are absolutely a huge reason that I’ve been able to stay in grad school because they are… just knowing that there are people like me out there and they’re not at my university because we’re very rare but, um, they are accessible by DM. Um, and I wanna see more sort of formal structure around that because I think young, queer linguists do need mentors, not just in the sense of how to do research, but in the sense of how to be a person, you know? Um, this is, this is something that’s not like talked really openly about in grad school. But, um, if you are intending to go into an academic job, you’re looking at your advisors as like your future. And when your advisors are straight and cis and married and have just very different lives than you, it can be hard to see a future in academia that you could possibly live up to. Um, so having… having queer mentors is really, really, really important. Um, and… and I, I cannot say enough how amazing my advisors and my, all my committee members have been. And they’re so supportive and grad school is like a really emotional undertaking.

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** Um, like… it’s like hard or whatever [chuckle].

**Molly:** [Laugh]

**Kirby:** Um, so… so, you know, you need advisors that you’re not scared of and you need advisors who are like not gonna be weird at you if you’re gonna go cry in their office. Um, and you need advisors who are not gonna be like mad at you if you had an off week. Um, and this is stuff that’s true for anybody, not just for non-binary academics. But, you know, non-binary academics I think are in this especially vulnerable position of feeling really alone and misunderstood and getting excluded because people kind of can’t understand how to interface with us.

**Molly:** Totally. In addition to the riddles of they/them pronouns, are there other intersections of gender and queerness and language that you want to explore over the course of your career?

**Kirby:** Oh, my god. Absolutely. So um, the they/them pronouns, like I said, is sort of a small piece of like a larger thing that’s going on with pronouns and this is now new. But, um, you know, have you ever had a conversation where people start the conversation using a particular pronoun about a person and then mid-conversation they’ll switch the pronoun that they’re using about that particular person?

**Molly:** Yeah.

**Kirby:** Yeah. It’s much more common than I think syntacticians are aware of. And, uh, it’s this sort of thing of like, it makes total sense once we decide that these are social relationships. And there’s a lot more ways besides just pronouns that we encode these social relationships in our language. And so I’m really interested in looking at how people use gender as like a dynamic, alive tool to position themselves relative to their conversation partners. ‘Cause it’s not just, you know, “I’m a ‘this’ and you’re a ‘that.’ And so we have to talk like this.” Um, you know, we move around and do a dance in language. Uh, there’s a lot of creativity and flexibility and if we want adequate, abstract models of how language works our models won’t be adequate unless we can explain the kind of movements that people do within language.

**Molly:** So the way we always end the show is by asking, what do you think the future of gender looks like or what would it look like in your ideal world? But for you, specially, what does the future of gender, grammar, and language look like?

**Kirby:** It looks a lot more messy and colorful. You know?

**Molly:** Mhm.

**Kirby:** Um, I am excited to see more variation, more options, and more ways to play with it. Yeah, that’s what I’m looking for in the future.

**Molly:** Great. Thank you so much for coming on the show. I learned so, so, so, so, so much. [Laugh]

**Kirby:** Oh, my god. Well, thank you so much for having me. This was a lot of fun.

[Gender Reveal theme plays]

**Molly**: That’s gonna do it for this week’s show. If you had a good time please tell a friend, write a review, or maybe throw a couple dollars in the Patreon. If you have questions, comments, feedback, ideas for This Week in Gender— you wanna give me a bunch of money to sponsor the podcast— any of the above, you can reach me at gendereveal@gmail.com, which is Gender Reveal with one “R” or on Twitter. This episode was edited by me, Molly Woodstock, and Liza Yeager. Our logo is by the talented Michelle Leigh, and our theme song is by the legendary Breakmaster Cylinder. We’ll be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[Gender Reveal theme ends]