

“Today I’m gonna show you how to use beep/boop pronouns”: viral TikToks, neopronouns and folk linguistic pedagogy

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Third-person pronouns are commonly described as “referring expressions that are syntactically equivalent to nominals” (Lyons 1977: 637) and function either deictically or anaphorically. In terms of meaning, pronouns are distinctive because they refer to entities that are “uniquely determined in the given situation” (Löbner 2016: 287). This “given situation” includes not only the situational context, but also the syntactic context of the utterance (Gajewski 2016: 76). Neopronouns are in turn forms that are not canonically part of the pronominal system of a language but function as such and have been coined and incorporated into the linguistic repertoire of a person or a group of people. As noted by Baron (2020: 128), coined pronouns tend to “capture much of the interest, both online and off”, even though, in the case of English, most trans and non-binary speakers use the pronouns *he*, *she*, or singular *they*. It is therefore not surprising that videos about these pronouns attract multiple views on TikTok.

This ongoing study examines a case of what I call a “folk linguistic pedagogy” of English neopronouns, using corpus-assisted discourse analysis methods to explore both how neopronouns are understood in the folk linguistic imaginary and how these forms are introduced to the audience adopting a folk pedagogy. As this analysis is still in progress, my contribution will focus on presenting the study design, including the data collection and analysis approach. In addition, I will make some observations regarding the problems of using TikTok data.

The corpus consists of ca. 600 short-form videos from a popular creator spanning from late 2020 to early 2025, which included the terms *pronoun* or *neopronoun*, or a construction in the format [neopronoun]/[neopronoun] (as in the case of *beep/boop*) in their video description. Using n-grams with different window sizes and their corresponding KWIC analyses, it was possible to identify repeating patterns in the introduction of neopronouns to the audience as well as the sets of neopronouns that were introduced in each video. Taking into account that these clips are, as a “mobile linguistic practice” (Heyd 2021: 131), predominantly oral, but also distinct from face-to-face oral interactions due to the intricate and multilayered nature of their multimodal setting, I will present a multimodal analysis of one of the ten most popular videos in the corpus. This analysis considers multiple elements, such as visuals, gestures, audio elements, camera angles, and outfit and make-up choices, to determine how different modes contribute to affect in meaning-making and audience engagement.

References

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