ON THIS SIDE:
THE PRODUCTION, PROGRESSION, AND POTENTIAL OF CISGENDER
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Abstract
The word *cisgender* is in the process of emerging to fill in what was (and remains for some) a lexical gap for the meaning ‘not transgender or gender non-conforming’. I investigate the etymology, history, and current state of the word *cisgender* in a bid to predict its viability in non-specialized parlance, as well as how the variation that currently exists around this word will eventually settle. I undertake a historical and current exploration through Internet-based research, including document-based research, time-delimited Google searches, and a questionnaire, paying particular attention to the roles that academic, Internet, and activist communities have played in the spread of *cisgender*. Whatever its origins, the word is currently used primarily by people who identify as transgender, gender non-conforming, or queer — a population that includes some cisgender people but certainly not the majority — thus, I consider the effect that coinage of a word by a socially marginalized group to label a socially dominant group might have upon the acceptance of that word. Finally, I take into account the possible futures of *cisgender* by briefly considering the work of sociolinguists, queer linguists, and others who work with the role of identity in linguistic change. Eventually, I conclude that the scope of this paper is too narrow to properly make predictions about the future of *cisgender*, but that it is still useful as an exploration of the utility of looking at issues of language and identity from a marginalized perspective.

* I would like to express my gratitude to my thesis advisor, David Harrison, and to all the loved ones who have also supported me through the process of writing this thesis — you know who you are.
1. Introduction

The word *cisgender* ‘not transgender’, while not known by the majority of English speakers in the United States, has achieved enough prominence to have made its way into the U.S. edition of the online Oxford Dictionaries, where it is defined as “Denoting or relating to a person whose self-identity conforms with the gender that corresponds to their biological sex; not transgender.” It is primarily used by intersecting groups of people on the Internet, people who do activist work, academics, and among communities of people with marginalized sexual orientations and gender identities. As demonstrated by the Oxford Dictionaries definition, it fills in somewhat of a lexical gap, in that there are no common single lexical items that mean ‘not transgender’ — naturally, it also continues to be a lexical gap for some speakers.

A sharp rise in transgender activism and awareness since the end of 2013 has in turn led to *cisgender* becoming considerably more salient over the last year. Perhaps most visibly, the popular social media platform Facebook included such terms as *cisgender*, *cisgender female*, *cisgender male*, *cisgender man*, and *cisgender woman* among the 58 new gender identity categories it implemented in mid-February of 2014 (Goldman 2014). News outlets like *The Atlantic* and *The Huffington Post* have also run multiple articles about the emergence of *cisgender* as a new vocabulary term, as well as the concept of being cisgender, in 2014. Writers for these publications have taken varying attitudes towards this new word, from those who believe it is completely unnecessary to those who welcome its coming into existence. Notably, *Atlantic* writer Paula Blank wrote that *cisgender* might end up being at once “the linguistic sign of our times” and a word that the general population will potentially “forget about” (Blank 2014); that is, that it serves
as an important marker of what is important in the present day, but is not useful enough a term to survive beyond the near future.

My goal is to determine whether Blank’s latter claim is true: will cisgender survive? Furthermore, as a secondary objective, I also aim to determine how the variation that I will show to exist around the word cisgender will settle down in future. Before directly tackling this goal, however, I will explore the history and current usage of cisgender in order to give a thorough background to my later theorizing about what will happen to cisgender in the future, as well as to give documentation of a word about which not much is known beyond its very recent history. The social trends that show up in its historical and current usage, finally, will also prove to be useful to the discussions of how cisgender will progress in coming years; these include the types of communities that use cisgender, the attitudes that people tend to take toward it, and the competition between cisgender and other neologisms with similar meanings. Following these aspects of this paper, I will move on to considering the work of sociolinguists and others who work with identity-based — particularly queer — linguistics, and the utility of this work when it comes to looking at cisgender. In conjunction with my work in the rest of the paper, this will enable me to make some predictions about what the future of cisgender’s life cycle might look like.

Hence, in summary, section 2 will be dedicated to the historical background of cisgender, including its origins and its progression from the early 20th century until the present day; section 3 will feature an investigation of cisgender as it stands currently, based primarily on a questionnaire filled out by speakers on the Internet; and section 4
will delve into the work of looking into preexisting theories, considering their utility in this case, and predicting potential futures for this word.

2. Historical Background

2.1. Origins

The prefix *cis*- originates from the Latin *cis* ‘on this side of’, and retains this meaning in some English words like *cisatlantic* ‘on this side of the Atlantic Ocean’. It is generally used contrastively with the prefix *trans-*, which originates from the Latin antonym of *cis*. Given that *cis(-)* and *trans(-)* are also used as opposites in fields like chemistry (as descriptors for types of isomers), geography (as mentioned above), and even linguistics (in *cislocative* ‘toward the speaker’ and *translocative* ‘away from the speaker’), it is unsurprising that the first documented use of *cis-* in relation to gender identity and expression was by a scientist, in the sexologist Ernst Burchard’s 1914 work *Lexikon des gesamten Sexuallebens* ([Lexicon of the Entire Sex Life], Williams 2013). Burchard used the word *Cisvestitismus* as an antonym to *Transvestitismus* ‘transvestitism’ — in other words, he used the word *Cisvestitismus* to refer to people who had “the inclination to put on the clothing of other ages, classes, or professions and the same gender for the purpose of sexual recreation” (as cited in Williams 2013).¹

The next documented use of *cis-* in relation to gender was by another German sexologist, Volkmar Sigusch, but this did not happen until 1991. Based on his readings of Burchard and another prominent early-20th-century German sexologist, Magnus

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¹ Original German: “die Neigung, die Kleidung eine anderen Altersstufe, Volks- oder Berufsklasse des gleichen Geschlechts zum Zwecke sexueller Entspannung anzulegen.”
Hirschfeld, Sigusch used the Zis- ‘cis’ prefix to form the word Zissexuell ‘cissexual’ in several articles from 1991 onwards, using it in a similar way to Burchard — that is, as an antonym to Transsexuell ‘transsexual’. Sigusch is adamant that he “was the very first and only one who spoke of ‘zissexuell’ and ‘Zissexualismus’ in 1991 . . . from which ‘cisgender’ then developed in English” (V. Sigusch, personal communication, November 14, 2014).2 The significant gap in time between Burchard’s 1914 *Lexikon* and Sigusch’s work is puzzling, but Sigusch was unable to shed light on this.

A 1994 post by Dana Leland Defosse to the Usenet group alt.transgendered is one of the first documented uses of the word *cisgendered* in English. This is both the first documented use of *cis-* as a gender-related prefix in English that was not a translation of Sigusch’s work, as well as the first time *gendered* was used as the root. Defosse states in her post that “Issues of interest are transphobia, hostility, general knowledge and understanding, attitudes of the queer community and *cisgendered* people, etc.” (Defosse 1994, emphasis mine). The phrasing of her post suggests that the word *cisgendered* was known to her before she wrote this post to the group. Furthermore, according to a post on the blog TransGriot (Roberts 2009), *cisgendered* was coined sometime around 1994 by a Dutch trans man named Carl Buijs. (I was unable to find original documentation of this coinage, but also found documentation of it in my perusal of Usenet group posts.) All told, the relationships between Sigusch, Defosse, and Buijs is unknown, so it is unclear whether either Defosse or Buijs ever read Sigusch’s work, whether Defosse and Buijs coined the word *cisgendered* independently of Sigusch and each other, or if there was

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some other type of knowledge transfer entirely between the three figures. Nonetheless, it is generally difficult to source the exact origins of any word, and the documentation given here already far exceeds that which can be found for many other neologisms, which is likely due to the community-oriented origins of cisgender.

A question raised by Sigusch’s use of cissexual, Defosse’s use of cisgendered, and the current popularity of cisgender is how many other competing neologisms there have been for this concept. Terms like Defosse’s cisgendered and Sigusch’s cissexual (which was somewhat repopularized by Julia Serano in her 2007 book Whipping Girl), in addition to lexical items of varying popularity like nontransgender, gender normal (Schilt and Westbrook 2013), bio-male and bio-female (Kailey 2010), and cis have also been attested. Given that transgender has emerged within the past decade or so as the preferred term for people whose gender identities do not align with those that they were assigned at birth (as opposed to transsexual or transgendered), it follows that cisgender, rather than any of the mentioned alternatives or another, different term, is the preferred antonym. Likewise, given a rise in the use of trans as an abbreviation for transgender and as an umbrella term for various types of gender identities, a corresponding shortening of cisgender to cis makes sense.

I will further address other synonyms and derivatives of cisgender in section 3, including a consideration of the productivity of the cis- prefix. However, for now, I will turn to an investigation of the use of cisgender on the Internet in order to determine the scope and rapidity of its spread in more recent years.

2.2. Progression

2.2.1. Methodology. In an effort to track the spread of cisgender in general, and
especially across the Internet, where it is widely used, I used time-delimited Google searches to collect data on how many times the word *cisgender* was used in Google-tracked websites in a given year. I obtained my data by using the advanced search tools in Google Search to limit each search by time from January 1 of the given year to January 1 of the following year. I limited my results to Google search hits from 2004 until 2013.

While I originally attempted to use this method on years before 2004, searches in certain years led to high numbers of hits from more recent websites with inaccurate date marking that would have skewed the results. For example, the search for *cisgender* in 1995 gave a result from the microblogging website Tumblr, which was not even founded until 2007. While there are likely posts that showed up in the search results for each year from 2004-2013 that also were not necessarily posted in that year, there were more overall search hits for those years, meaning that the chances of inaccuracy were at least somewhat lower.

I chose the approach of using Google search results as an open corpus despite its potential for inaccuracy because the utility of collecting such large amounts of data about the use of *cisgender* on the Internet outweighs the disadvantages. Time-delimited Google searches give significantly more information than searches in closed corpora, even extremely large ones. For example, a search for *cisgender* on the 628 million-word Birmingham Blog Corpus gives 6 total hits, as opposed to Google’s 505,000, as of November 12, 2014. For comparison, on the same date, there were 479 instances of *transgender* on the Birmingham Blog Corpus and 9.1 million on Google. The need to delimit the search results by time only exacerbates the limitations of the paucity of results in closed corpora, further supporting the choice of an open corpus. The key to ensuring
the utility of results that are derived from such a research approach is to treat them more qualitatively than quantitatively, as suggested by Stefan Diemer (2012) in his argument that “Google is a suitable corpus tool.” It is true, furthermore, that this approach does only give results for the use of cisgender on the Internet rather than in speech or in published works; however, both speech- and text-based closed corpora do not contain enough samples of cisgender to be effective resources.

2.2.2. Results and Discussion. Given the limitations outlined above, and given Diemer (2012)’s suggestions, it is important to look less at the actual numbers of search hits derived from the time-delimited Google searches than how the data points relate. This can be achieved through looking at a graph like Figure 1, which depicts (using points joined with a solid line) the hits for cisgender every year between 2004 and 2013. It is clear from this graph that regardless of the actual numerical values of the hits, there has been a very rapid increase in the use of cisgender on the Internet in the past 10 years.

![Figure 1. Number of Google search hits for cisgender, by year, from 2004-2013.](image-url)
In fact, when adding an exponential trend line (the dotted line in the graph), it becomes apparent that the increase in Google search results for *cisgender* has been almost exponential. Even taking into account the potential fallibility of the research approach, it is at the very least clear that significantly more people have been using *cisgender* on the Internet every year since 2004. This means that whatever the actual origins of *cisgender*— if someone read Sigusch’s work in 1991 and decided to use it in English, or if the *cis-* prefix is particularly productive and thus made its way independently into English — it has been considered useful enough a word to have been picked up more and more, at least since 2004. This rapid increase may also have implications for the future of the word *cisgender* (see section 4 for a further discussion).

The posts found in the Birmingham Blog Corpus, mentioned in the previous subsection, may not have been useful in terms of spotting trends in the use of *cisgender* across time. However, all six hits for *cisgender* were from 2010 (by comparison, the first hit for *transgender* was from 1995 and the last was from 2011; further searches suggest that the corpus stopped being updated in early 2011). This information corroborates the suggestion from the time-delimited Google searches that despite its early coinage, *cisgender* only came into more widespread use fairly recently.

In addition, the Birmingham Blog Corpus results provide a naturally limited way to seek insight into the particular contexts in which the word *cisgender* has been found, without having to devise a way to randomize Google search results and select particular instances of usage. The content of the Birmingham Blog Corpus is comprised of posts from the top blogs ranked by Technorati (a search engine company that specialized in
blog ranking), daily top posts from Google Blog Search, and posts and comments from blogs hosted by the popular blog platforms Blogspot and WordPress. Table 1 shows the hits within the Birmingham Blog Corpus for cisgender, the sentences in which cisgender was used (with the search term in bold for clarity), the dates that the blog posts were made, and the titles of the posts, along with the names of the blogs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date posted</th>
<th>Title of blog post and name of blog</th>
<th>Sentence containing cisgender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/1/2010</td>
<td>“Feminism 101,” Shakesville</td>
<td>“If . . . queers move in a straight, binary-sexed, cisgender world . . . and straight, cis, able-bodied white men move in that world, too . . .”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/1/2010</td>
<td>“Feminism 101,” Shakesville</td>
<td>“The entire rest of the world, with its privileging of men and heterosexuals and cisgender people and thin (but not too thin!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/1/2010</td>
<td>“Shaxicon,” Shakesville</td>
<td>“A Dudebro is an extremely privileged man, typically white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied, and middle class or higher.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/16/2010</td>
<td>“GLBT Week,” Book Chic Club</td>
<td>“They're showing cisgender and transgender folk alike that gender is varied, and they make the world a safer and better place.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/19/2010</td>
<td>“Because I can’t lose this quote,” The Clue Batting Cage</td>
<td>“And if you don't believe me, that's because you're just in thrall to the reified paradigmatic hermeneutic cisgender phallocentric neo-colonial praxis.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/23/2010</td>
<td>“Transgender Houston Woman Thrown in Jail for Going to the</td>
<td>“Think of how a cisgender woman (a woman born female who identifies as</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Despite the size of the corpus, all of the posts are, as mentioned before, from the same year, and three of these posts are from the same blog, *Shakesville*, which is described on its home page as “a progressive feminist blog about politics, culture, social justice, cute things, and all that is in between.” This does provide strong evidence for the fact that one of the main communities of practice that uses *cisgender* is the activist community. One of the remaining blog posts from the Birmingham Blog Corpus also suggests this — the one from *Change.org*, which is best known for being a website that hosts petitions geared toward social change. The post “GLBT [Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender] Week,” from the *Book Chic Club*, is a guest post by a queer\(^3\) person on a book club blog, showcasing one of the main uses of *cisgender* that came up in the origins of the word described in section 2.1 — as a useful vocabulary item for queer and trans people talking about their experiences. Finally, the quoted section from the last remaining post obtained from the Birmingham Blog Corpus showcases another common use of *cisgender* — as a mocking term, combined with other instances of “academese” like *reified, hermeneutic*, and *praxis* to create an overall effect of derision and lack of understanding on the writer’s part. These blog posts, though comprising only a small sample of the spoken and written instances of *cisgender* being used since it was coined, do give insight into the varied ways in which it can be used. The rudimentary categories I

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\(^3\) I use *queer* here as an umbrella term for all people of marginalized sexual orientations, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, and asexual people. Likewise, I use *trans* as an umbrella term for all people of marginalized gender identities, including but not limited to transgender, gender non-conforming, and Two-Spirit people.
have given here — used by activist communities, used by queer and trans people, and used in a mocking way — will be further addressed in section 3.

In this section, I have discussed the ambiguous origin of the word *cisgender*, with its potentially multiple roots in German sexology and early online transgender community groups, and noted the variation in words that have to do with gender identity and roughly have the same meaning as *cisgender*, but take different suffixes or which are entirely different. Beyond this, I have also used time-delimited Google searches to look into the spread of the word *cisgender* on the Internet from 2004 until 2013, finding that *cisgender* increased almost exponentially in use during those years. Finally, I used the few results from the Birmingham Blog Corpus’ documentation of *cisgender* to look more closely into the contexts in which *cisgender* was used in 2010, finding that there were three main categories of usage in the blog posts — usage by activists, usage by queer and trans people, and usage by people outside of those communities who wished to deride the use of *cisgender*.

In section 3, I will look to the present — that is, 2014 — and discuss an online survey I undertook in October 2014 to gauge the prevalence of *cisgender* among current users of English in the U.S., as well as an analysis of the sociolinguistic factors that show up in the results of this survey. This will give a clearer understanding of the current state of *cisgender* and how it is used, before I move on to making predictions about the possible future of *cisgender* in section 4.
3. Usage Today

3.1. Survey

3.1.1. Methodology. In an effort to determine the current state of the word *cisgender* and, potentially, other words that might occupy the same lexical space or similar lexical spaces, I designed an online questionnaire, the exact contents of which may be found in Appendix A. I created the questionnaire using Google Forms and disseminated it on October 4, 2014 through my Facebook and Tumblr accounts, on which I have over 800 friends and over 100 followers respectively, and explicitly asked these people to use the “share” and “reblog” functions on the respective websites to encourage large-scale snowball sampling. The links I shared were entitled “Gender Identity Label Questionnaire” and the posts that I made to share them stated only that this was a questionnaire for my linguistics thesis, without any further indication (other than the title) of what the questionnaire contained. This process yielded a total of 208 responses by October 21, when the last result came in. However, given that the scope of this study is limited to users of English in the U.S., I deleted responses from those located outside of the U.S. and those who did not say where in the world they were located, which resulted in a final total of 176 results. A selection of responses from these results can be found in Appendix B.

As well as asking where respondents were located, I also asked for other demographic information, including age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identities, and whether English was one of their first languages. Not all of this information ended up having a particular bearing on how I handled the data; however, given that all of the questions were optional in an effort to get even minimal responses from those who had
little time to fill out the questionnaire, there were no drawbacks to asking for slightly more information. The main portion of the questionnaire, meanwhile, contained the following questions:

1. Do you know the word 'transgender'?
2. How would you define the word 'transgender'?
3. As far as you can recall, in what context did you first learn the word 'transgender'?
4. Do you know any words to refer to people who are not transgender?
5. If you answered 'yes' to the above question, what is/are this/these word(s)?
6. If you answered the above question, as far as you can recall, in what context did you first learn this/these word(s)?

The first three questions were mostly intended to set up contexts so that I could read the responses to the last three questions in light of the general amount of knowledge the respondents had about transgender issues. Furthermore, the fifth question was purposefully phrased as it was in order to elicit the word *cisgender* or other similar words, rather than feeding respondents the word *cisgender*. This phrasing also reduced the risk of participants looking up the definition of *cisgender* — while the instructions specifically instructed respondents not to do so, the fact that this was an Internet questionnaire meant that quickly opening a new window and searching for the terms provided in the questionnaire was a definite possibility.

Finally, it is important to discuss why I chose to use a questionnaire at all, rather than other methods of eliciting speech from people, such as interviews. Because all of my research up to this point was, by necessity, based on how people used *cisgender* in writing, particularly anonymous people on the Internet, I wanted my research on the current use of *cisgender* to be more centered around the individuals who use (or do not
use) *cisgender*. That said, interviewing speakers would have provided me with a smaller range of information while taking a greater amount of time than this questionnaire, which was why I eventually settled upon the questionnaire as a method of collecting data from speakers. A limitation that exists for both of these possibilities — that is, a limitation of this part of my study — is that my social networks are primarily comprised of people similar to me. They include many queer and trans people, activists, and people who attend higher education institutions where gender identity issues are a salient topic of discussion — in other words, the sample is skewed towards people who would likely have heard of the word *cisgender*. There were respondents who had not heard of it, however, and the results as a whole are still very useful.

3.1.2. Results.

**Transgender.** As stated in the last subsection, there were a total of 176 questionnaire results that made up the eventual sample. All of the respondents answered positively to the first question, “Do you know the word ‘transgender’?” and all were able to provide definitions in response to question 2. Respondents who were relatively young — under the age of 25 — tended to have first heard of the word *transgender* when they were in middle school, high school, or college, while older respondents were first exposed to it through the news. A few described their first experiences with the word as hearing it being used in a pejorative sense, such as one respondent who stated that she had first heard *transgender* used on “[t]he news. And it was very negative,” and another who said that she “first learned the word in some sort of mocking arena [sic].” Furthermore, six respondents stated that they had learned the word *transsexual* before learning *transgender*. 
**Attempting to elicit cisgender.** One hundred and fifty-five respondents answered the fourth question, “Do you know any words to refer to people who are not transgender?” with “yes,” and then answered the fifth question, “What is/are these word(s)?” with *cisgender* or some variation thereof. Ten respondents said that they did not know any words to describe people who are not transgender, while the remaining 11 said that they did, but their answers did not contain the word *cisgender* or any word with the *cis-* prefix. The responses of the latter 11 participants, in addition to responses from participants from whom *cisgender* was successfully elicited, but who also gave additional answers, are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Responses to question 5 that did not contain the prefix *cis-*; broken down by category and listed in alphabetical order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientations</td>
<td>bisexual, gay, heterosexual, lesbian, queer, straight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender identities</td>
<td>bigender, boy, female, gender anarchist, genderqueer, girl, male, man, Two Spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronouns</td>
<td>he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/them/theirs, ze/hir/hirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>faker, intersex, normal, not transgender, transtrender</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This set of responses includes some terms for gender identities that fall outside of the gender binary; that is, outside of the idea that male and female are the only two genders. Examples of these are *bigender, gender anarchist, genderqueer,* and *Two Spirit.* With the exception of *Two Spirit,* which is a gender identity term that has been used by Native Americans for quite some time, these terms are very young and are similarly, if not less well-known to the majority of English speakers in the U.S. than *cisgender.*
There were interesting trends among the 11 respondents who did not give *cisgender* as a word for people who are not transgender, as well as among their responses. For example, there were 14 respondents who were either over the age of 35 or did not indicate their ages; out of these, six did not give the word *cisgender* or a variant as parts of their answers to the fifth question. In terms of general trends in the data, race and ethnicity did not appear to have an influence on respondents’ knowledge of gender identity terms; that said, 130 of the respondents identified themselves as white, so an influence would be somewhat difficult to discern. Nonetheless, there is little reason for there to be any strong correlation between race or ethnicity and knowledge of gender identity terms, so this result is not unexpected.

As for the responses of those who gave responses other than *cisgender*, some clearly came from knowledge of queer and trans identities. These included, on the one hand, the listings of sexual orientations, which make sense when considering the co-occurrence of *transgender* with sexual orientations in the common acronym LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender), as well as the listings of pronouns — particularly *they/them/theirs* and *ze/hir/hirs*, which are sets of pronouns often used by individuals who identify outside of the gender binary. On the other hand, the terms *faker* and *transtrender* were also driven by a knowledge of queer and trans identities, but with an added animus towards, in the respondent’s own words, “[p]eople trying to claim the transgender struggle for their own when not really being a part of it.” Finally, words like *boy, girl,* and *normal* suggest that the participants who submitted these words have less knowledge of queer and trans identities. This suggestion is confirmed by the response of one participant, whose entry of *normal* was accompanied by *cisgender* and *not*
transgender, as well as by an explanation that he uses each of these terms in different conversational contexts, with normal being for "discussions with most other people (if the topic even comes up)," with "other" referring to people who are not activists, academics, queer, or trans.

I have referred several times in the preceding discussion to "cisgender and other related terms." Furthermore, in section 2.1, I mentioned that there were synonyms and derivatives of cisgender. The questionnaire results bear this out, with each of the following terms being used at least once by respondents: cisgender, cis-gender, cisgender, cisgendered, cis-gendered, cis, cissexual, cisman, ciswoman, cis-male, and cis-female. While some of these terms simply differ in orthography, others are fairly distinctive and potentially have different meanings. One respondent, for example, stated with their answer of "cisgender and/or cissexual" that "these are used interchangeably by many, but it is my understanding that they are different." This variety of terminology speaks to the productivity of the cis- prefix. While anything more than a brief discussion of this productivity is beyond the scope of this paper, an investigation of the productivity of this prefix and why, especially, it became productive in this context rather than in the context of other words with the cis- prefix, such as cislunar and cisatlantic, could be very useful. Moreover, the proliferation of varying terms for cisgender and, in particular, the popularity of cis as an abbreviation, may also be indicative of a pattern for relatively new words as they begin to enter a language. Trans is also a popular abbreviation for transgender that can also serve as an umbrella term for all people who are not cisgender — that is, inclusive of people with non-binary gender identities. Adding to this the fact that trans and cis are prefixes used to describe organic compounds in some subfields of
chemistry, which several respondents to the questionnaire had studied, the corresponding use of *cis* and *cisgender* to *trans* and *transgender* is very natural. One instance of this productivity actually occurred in a participant’s response to question 6, where she asked, “[I]s cisgender a thing?”

*Where respondents learned cisgender.* Table 3 summarizes the first recalled context in which respondents who had heard of the word *cisgender* and its variants learned of these terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social media</td>
<td>Reddit, Tumblr, YouTube</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Internet</td>
<td>Online articles (e.g. <em>Jezebel</em>, <em>xoJane</em>), online “social justice” spaces, Wikipedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other media</td>
<td>Books (e.g. Judith Butler and Julia Serano), columns (e.g. “Savage Love”), radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real life</td>
<td>Activist/advocacy groups, classes, conversations with acquaintances and friends, workshops</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I do not consider exact numbers of respondents whose answers fit into particular categories here, both because some respondents gave answers that fit into multiple categories because they were unsure of where they had first heard of the word *cisgender* and its variants, and because it is the variety of environments in which people learned these terms that interests me, rather than how many people learned them in which environments. What is most remarkable here is that most respondents were able to state where they had learned the word *cisgender* or its variants, with many able to cite particular media, such as Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* or articles on the online
magazine xoJane. At least 27 respondents were students from Swarthmore College, and there was likely a fairly significant contingent of college students or recent graduates in general. Out of the Swarthmore students, some mentioned having first learned *cisgender* on the Internet, but the majority said that they had learned it from peers, both during orientation workshops and in casual conversations. This gives evidence for the somewhat specialized status of *cisgender*, as it is more like a vocabulary word that needs to be taught rather than being like a slang word that circulates fairly organically.

Through the lens of this questionnaire, I have explored in this section the current state of the word *cisgender* and where speakers who currently use it learned it, as well as investigating variations in the particular word that is used — *cisgender* versus *cis* versus *cis-male* or *-female*, for example — and looking into speakers who do not have *cisgender* as part of their vocabularies. In section 4, I will look at the prior work of other linguists, including sociolinguists and queer linguists, in order to determine the viability of *cisgender* in coming years.

**4. Looking to the Future**

Thus far, I have put together a narrative of the word *cisgender* that spans the first use of *Zisvestitismus* in 1914 to the ways that speakers use *cisgender*, *cis*, and other variants today, a century later. In this final section, I use the theories of some prominent sociolinguists who work with gender, as well as those of queer linguists, to imagine what might happen to *cisgender* as time goes on. This is a difficult question to answer because within the already-limited academic realm of linguistic work on identity and identity labels, there has been even less scholarship on identity labels for groups that are not
marginalized. Given that these groups are seen as the norm, as evidenced by examples like Schilt and Westbrook (2013)’s use of the term *gender normal*, they go unstudied, while attention is paid to marginalized and minority groups. I do not wish to say that this attention is undue; however, when it is taken into account that a word like *cisgender* is often used by the marginalized group to describe the dominant group, it becomes clear that the majority of the scholarship around marginalized identities comes from a dominant perspective. Thus, the paucity of work around labels like *cisgender* and the concepts they represent correspondingly suggests that work from the marginalized perspective is sorely lacking. Regarding heterosexuality, another identity concept that is, like the idea of being cisgender, dominant within society, Wong et al. (2002) state that it is “[u]nstudied and naturalized” (Wong et al. 2002:12) — that is, that heterosexuality is so normalized within society that it goes unexamined. They go on to assert more generally that “care has been exercised much more extensively on non-normative identities than normative ones” (Wong et al. 2002:12), a claim that certainly also applies to *cisgender*, whose non-normative relative *transgender* has been far more frequently analyzed. Nevertheless, preexisting work on identity and language can still be useful in this section. I will consider two main ideas: that of the community of practice and that of polysemy.

In their work on language, gender, and power, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) develop Lave and Wenger (1991)’s idea of a community of practice — that is, a community of speakers that is based around what they do, or practice, in common, rather than one that is based around their geographic proximity to each other like Gumperz (1982)’s notion of a speech community. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet go on to describe a
community of practice as a group of people who have a “mutual engagement in some common endeavor” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992:100). From here the question arises: to what extent do people who use the word *cisgender* form a community of practice — that is, to what extent do they mutually engage in a common endeavor? Considering this question in light of the results and discussions from sections 2 and 3 of this paper, I propose that some people who use *cisgender* form a community of practice, while others are part of a different community of practice. As a specific example, I consider some of the bloggers from the Birmingham Blog Corpus results in section 2. On the one hand, the feminist and activist bloggers from *Shakesville* and *Change.org* share a common practice — that of bringing attention to social injustices and using blog posts as a platform for doing so. Thus, they and other social justice bloggers can be considered to be a community of practice. On the other hand, the mocking blogger from *The Clue Batting Cage* can be considered alongside others who mock the need for words like *cisgender*. They, too, engage mutually in a common endeavor: making the claim that the work of the aforementioned social justice bloggers is unnecessary. Thus, taking into account this concept of communities of practice clarifies the fact that it is not a monolith that uses *cisgender*.

The fact that there are multiple communities of practice that use *cisgender* in different ways becomes significant when we take into account the fact that “synchronic semantic variation … is considered a necessary condition for semantic change (McMahon 1994) and makes meaning contestation possible in social discourse” (Wong et al. 2002:6). Furthermore, the variety of meanings and attitudes used by the varying communities of practice, according to Wong et al. (2002), are indicative of a general
trend when it comes to social category labels. They state that “[a]s far as social category labels are concerned, meaning is often the result of social struggle and the politics of signification is always contested” (Wong et al. 2002:9). This is in line with Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992)’s assertion that meanings and how communities of practice create them are always “changing and expanding” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992:102).

The implications of this transformation could go either way when we return to Atlantic writer Paula Blank’s question of whether or not the word cisgender is here to stay. The adoption of cisgender by those who have heard of it and choose to use it is part of the changing and expanding, but there is also backlash. Moreover, there is no telling whether the future course of this changing and expanding means that cisgender will spread beyond the communities of practice that currently use it and eventually enter the mainstream, or whether it means quite the opposite — that it will continue to be seen as specialized vocabulary, and eventually be displaced by change and expansion from other communities of practice using other labels.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have investigated the history, current state, and potential future of the word cisgender. Given the limited scope of this paper, it was difficult to draw completely solid conclusions about my ultimate research question of whether or not cisgender will survive beyond the next few years, and whether it will ever enter mainstream parlance. Of course, as with all questions of the future, there is no one right or wrong answer. However, I hope that if nothing else, this paper has at the very least
revealed the importance of looking into social category labels for dominant identity
groups, as well as the significance of doing work from a marginalized perspective.
References


Appendix A:

Gender Identity Label Questionnaire

Introduction

This questionnaire is a component of the research for Joyce H. Wu's undergraduate linguistics thesis at Swarthmore College. The purpose of this questionnaire is to establish how language around gender identity is currently used.

Please do not use Google or other search tools while answering the questions in this questionnaire.

This questionnaire will take about 10 minutes and poses no risks to you. While your full and thoughtful participation is greatly appreciated, your participation is completely voluntary, and you may skip any questions or discontinue at any time without penalty.

There is a completely optional page at the end of the questionnaire for the collection of demographic information. Should you choose to fill it out, none of this information will be used to identify you.

Please feel free to contact the researcher with any questions, comments, concerns, or compliments at jwu3 [at] swarthmore [dot] edu.

Questions

Do you know the word 'transgender'? (Y/N)

How would you define the word 'transgender'?

As far as you can recall, in what context did you first learn the word 'transgender'?

Do you know any words to refer to people who are not transgender? (Y/N)

If you answered 'yes' to the above question, what is/are this/these word(s)?
If you answered the above question, as far as you can recall, in what context did you first learn this/these word(s)?

**Demographic Information**

**Introduction.** Each of the questions in this section is completely optional. In addition, should you choose to fill in any of the information below, none of it will be used to identify you.

**Questions.**

Age:

Race and/or ethnicity:

Gender:

Sexual identities:

Is English (one of) your first language(s)? (Y/N)

Where in the world are you located?
## Appendix B:

Selections from Questionnaire Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you know the word ‘transgender’?</th>
<th>How would you define the word ‘transgender’?</th>
<th>As far as you can recall, in what context did you first learn the word ‘transgender’?</th>
<th>Do you know any words to refer to people who are not transgender?</th>
<th>If you answered ‘yes’ to the above question, as far as you can recall, what is/are this/these word(s)?</th>
<th>If you answered the above question, as far as you can recall, in what context did you first learn this/these word(s)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Someone whose self-identified gender does not match their biological sex.</td>
<td>... in the context of someone discussing the difference between gender and sex.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Transgender is a label to describe a male to female transition, or a female to male transition. It does not have to be a complete transition, meaning surgery and hormone replacement therapy, but simply the desire and expression of desire to appear as the opposite gender than what society would traditionally label as going along with your sexual organs.</td>
<td>I wrote a thesis on LGBTQ immigrant identity a couple of years ago. To complete this research, I participated in a social activism group that fought for LGBTQ rights. I spent a day at a workshop learning the correct terminology for referring to the trans community and how to be a good trans advocate. Prior to this, I had heard the word &quot;transgender&quot; before, but this was the first time I felt like I really knew how to use it correctly.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Someone that is confused about their own sexual identity.</td>
<td>The news. And it was very negative.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Belonging to a gender other than the one assigned at birth, especially but not limited to the opposite gender</td>
<td>During many sessions of Internet based soul searching</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Agender, cisgender, bigender, gender fluid, genderqueer</td>
<td>Conversation with other people in the queer community, as well as online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Transgender can describe any person who does not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth.</td>
<td>I don't recall specifically, though I know it happened during college. It gradually came to replace other, less appropriate words in 'cis' or 'cisgender'</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>regardless of physical characteristics.</th>
<th>my lexicon which I had heard during my childhood, such as 'transsexual' and 'cross-dresser'. These words were not useful in discussing gender due to their limited definitions and the ignorant contexts where I had learned them.</th>
<th>the 'trans' and 'cis' prefixes in various high school science classes. It seemed only natural that this would be the word to describe people who are not trans.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>A person who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.</td>
<td>As a child, one of my friend's parents transitioned.</td>
<td>Dialogue about gender politics over tumblr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>It refers to people who transgress the normative, traditional &quot;rules&quot; of gender in expression or identity. It can refer to people who are transsexual, but can also include others who challenge the notions that gender is fixed, that it is innate, and that there are only 2 genders.</td>
<td>I know I was aware of the term before this, but my recollection of learning and understanding the term was my first contact with the book GENDER OUTLAW by Kate Bornstein. It would have been circa 1998.</td>
<td>My acquisition of this term is more recent. I don't recall the moment of learning, but I'm certain I first read the term in some gender studies material circa 2005, 2006.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>someone whose psychological gender identity doesn't match the gender they would traditionally be identified with by others based on their biological sex</td>
<td>discussions with LGBT activists or academics</td>
<td>cisgender: discussions with LGBT activists or academics, especially those in queer studies, women studies, and related fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>An individual who does not feel represented by their sexual identity.</td>
<td>Possibly listening to This American Life's story about a transgendered children conference--perhaps in junior high or high school.</td>
<td>Learnt cis-gender on public radio this summer. Straight I feel like has just been a catch-all for anyone not-queer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Someone who was born one sex but identifies with another and takes measures to adjust their physiology and/or mannerisms/clothing to better fit their identification.

An individual who has chosen to identify themselves as different gender than what was assigned to them at birth.

Being physically one sex and mentally and/or emotionally belonging to the opposite sex.

college, when I asked what the T in LGBTQ meant.

In school.

Not sure, but probably on the evening news.

Gay lesbian bisexual straight

man, woman

straight, normal

anyone that isn't transgender is basically everyone that is not transgender, right?!

As a young child, probably that men and women are supposed to be different.

In high school.