

Framing Gender:
Cognitive Semantic Analysis of Gender Expansive Labels

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Abstract

This research examines the conceptual frameworks and semantic inferences of gender structured through gender expansive labels in US English-speaking society. These labels are units of an emergent lexicon that reflect different beliefs about normativity and difference in comparison to the binary space-based model of gender. Gender is a powerful tool of differentiation that has become a prominent and contentious topic due to conflict between dominant and emerging ideologies of identity. The amount of gender labels to define gender expansion and variance has grown exponentially in the past few decades. I focus on several common gender expansive labels that create possession, additive, and contestation models of gender. Through cognitive semantic analysis of gender labels and natural language data of the labels in use, I highlight the effects and power of labeling and framing in promoting particular models of gender. I find that the binary space-based model of gender influences possession, additive, and contestation models of gender. The conceptualization of gender can be restructured through a framing shift in discourse and consistent repetition of that discourse. Gender expansive language is currently rapidly developing; the bidirectional influence of the labels used to define gender and the conceptual models used to understand gender are necessary to analyze and prioritize in the development of this emergent lexicon.

1 Introduction

Gender is a critical feature in the construction of identity yet the definition and meaning of gender is nebulous. The understanding of gender is arguably unique to every individual. It is clear that gender is a means of difference. Regardless of whether this difference is innate and biological or conceptual and socialized, the idea of gender is ingrained in our society and language. In American society, gender has become an increasingly contentious and complex subject due to conflicting ideologies of identity. The emergence and growing visibility of gender expansive labels and ideology fuels conflicting perceptions and policies surrounding gender.

Linguistic analysis of the conceptual framework of gender highlights the space-based model of the two bounded gender regions. Gender expansive labels challenge ideas of normativity surrounding the traditional binary of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. These labels can be used to frame gender to promote specific understandings of gender. The aim of the current research is to analyze the changes in conceptual frameworks displayed through gender expansive labels. It highlights possession, additive, and contestation models of gender. This research is a cognitive semantic analysis of eleven gender labels and natural language data of the labels in use in order to examine the effects of framing. Labeling and framing has the power to shift our conceptual understanding of concepts such as gender. The language we use to define and understand gender is fundamental in creating and portraying our conceptual models of gender.

2 Background

2.1 Gender Debate

The idea of gender is ingrained in US English-speaking society’s culture, language, and thought. We operate under the belief that people are differentiated into two groups– man and woman. Some believe that this division is innate and biological while others argue that it is

conceptual and socialized (Stokoe, 2005). This debate, in tandem with the increased awareness and visibility of gender expansive rhetoric, has caused gender to become increasingly politicized in English speaking society, specifically the United States. Opposing gender ideologies play a critical role in the current political polarization in the United States (Sapiro, 2022). American politics is riddled with terms such as *Culture Wars*, *gender panic*, and *American values* all hinting at the divide in gender ideologies and larger partisan polarization. The idea of *Culture Wars* as we know it in today's America emerged in the 1990s and was prompted by the movements for social liberation and social change of the 1960s and thereafter. Some believe that progressive movements destabilize traditional values, including notions of gender, which causes these movements to commonly be met with public backlash. This instinct to counter or resist change is consistent in the recent and growing prominence of transgender, non-binary, and other gender expansive people in American society. Gender expansive people and ideologies are confronted with questions of morality and biological naturalness fueled by *gender panic*. *Gender panic* is a term used to describe the negative feelings and moral panic some connect to people or ideologies that do not fit or follow idealized, traditional expectations of gender (Segal & Demos, 2017). Over the past two decades, *gender panic* and gender expansive ideologies have become mainstream in American public policy further creating and intensifying the conflict between opposing gender ideologies. It is necessary to understand the contentious nature of gender in order to effectively analyze gender expansiveness and its labels.

2.2 Gender Labels and Identity

The recent prominence of gender expansive ideologies has brought with it a lexical boom in gender labels. These labels are parts of an emergent lexicon that is constantly expanding far beyond simply 'man' and 'woman'. Some labels are notably popular and widespread, for

example *non-binary*, and other labels are largely unfamiliar even to members of the gender expansive community. This results in comprehensive counts and lists of gender labels to be unfeasible. Labels and furthermore self-labeling are distinct and important features in gender expansive discourse and the construction of gender identity. Gender self-determination and self-identification through self-labeling position an individual as the sole authority on their gender and identity (Zimman, 2019). Zimman (2019) details how self-labeling invokes neoliberal personhood in which a person is autonomous and can “exercise agency in accordance with their own self-interest without regard for power relations or social subjectivity” (p. 171). Labels and the act of labeling are powerful in creating and enforcing identity. Additionally, Galinsky et al. (2013) found that reappropriation and self-labeling of a derogatory term, such as *queer*, by a minority group can weaken the stigma of the term and cause the self-labeler to feel and be perceived as more powerful. The reappropriation of derogatory terms is highly relevant in studying gender expansive labels because queerness is a fundamental concept in challenging normative gender. When speaking of gender and identity, it is necessary to address intersectionality and coexisting factors that influence identity such as race. While this paper aims to focus on the semantic frameworks of gender, the influence of race and ethnicity on gender labeling is noted in the data.

2.3 Queer Theory and Normativity

Queer Theory, born in 1990s academia following queer rights movements of the previous two decades, sparked renewed and critical analysis of binary gender and heteronormativity. The foundation of Queer Theory is “the deconstruction or blurring of two powerful binarisms stabilizing each other: female versus male and heterosexual versus homosexual” (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013, p. 520). The two binaries of gender and sexuality

create the normative yardstick by which we compare and measure people in society. Queer perspectives question ideas surrounding normativity and what society permits as ‘normal’. Another important queer perspective is the distinction between essentialism or biological determinism and social constructionism. Queer Theory rejects the idea that biological or physical factors determine gender and instead focuses on the social factors that construct and reinforce difference and, therefore, gender. The emphasis becomes how language defines gender and how gender determines our language. Queer linguistics is sociolinguistic research and theory informed by Queer Theory. Queer linguistics is larger than the study of queer speech and language; it is a critical linguistic approach to concepts of gender, sexuality, identity, and normativity. The central focus is the relationship between language and the construction of identity and non-normativity.

2.4 Theoretical Background: Cognitive Semantics

A cognitive linguistics perspective of linguistic meaning describes meaning as perspectival, dynamic, experiential, and non-autonomous (Geeraerts et al., 2006). Linguistic meaning, language usage, and experience of knowledge and the world cannot be separated. Frame semantics is a central concept of cognitive semantics which explains how a word evokes a web of semantic presuppositional knowledge needed for understanding its meaning. Simply, hearing a word triggers a network of knowledge used to understand that word. Semantic frames structure the way we understand the world and framing can then transform these understandings. Our cognitive processes and understanding of concepts can be shaped by framing which can lead to various possible interpretations of a single concept such as gender. Lakoff (2014) illustrates how “framing is about getting language that fits your worldview... the ideas are primary and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas” (p.2). Framing is a political tool wielded with

the purpose of promoting a specific ideology. The way concepts are understood can be altered through a framing shift in discourse and consistent repetition of that discourse. For example, the term *tax relief* has successfully reframed taxes from a duty or investment into an affliction in which the affliction of taxation is relieved from the afflicted party by a hero (Lakoff, 2014). Even those who oppose the framing of taxes as an affliction evoke the frame when they use the term *tax relief*. Lakoff details how “when we negate a frame, we evoke the frame” which is critical to be aware of if gender expansive language aims to challenge binary gender norms (p.1). Frames and framing emphasize how language used to talk about and understand concepts create and reinforce these concepts. Another important feature of cognitive semantics is conceptual metaphor theory. Conceptual metaphor explains how a concept is understood in terms of another. Lakoff (2006) explains how metaphor is a cognitive tool we use to address and understand abstract concepts by tying them to more concrete concepts. Conceptual metaphor as it relates to gender is present in a label such as *genderless*. In order to understand the idea of *genderless* we need to metaphorically understand gender as a physical object or substance that we can possess. Cognitive semantics, specifically frames, framing, and conceptual metaphor, are the theoretical basis for the present analysis.

2.5 Theoretical Background: Gender and Linguistics

Gender traditionally views people as either ‘man’ or ‘woman’; men and women being the only two distinct groups in which biological sex, gender, gender expression, and sexuality are usually conflated. This conceptualization relies on binary bounded regions in space (Lederer 2015). In this model, the containers have fixed borders with no space or movement between the binary bounded regions. These are framed as natural categories that people are born into depending on their anatomical characteristics. The binary space-based model evokes the frame of

CONTAINERS and the image schema of CONTAINMENT. In exploring metaphorical models of gender transition, Lederer (2015) describes how speakers operate under the established conceptual models of gender and how these models “do not allow for space in between the binary” (p. 115). The understanding of gender transition relies on the bounded regions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ and the journey from one bounded region to the other. It is clear that “gender seems to be one of the most powerful and readily available cognitive tools” we use to differentiate human beings (Marinucci et al., 2023). The perception of difference between men and women is prominent in linguistic research of gender. There is abundant linguistic literature detailing how men and women speak differently. Previous research on gender and language describes the distinct physiological features of men and women along with the social norms that influence linguistic distinctions (Tripp & Munson, 2022). Lakoff (1973) highlights the influence of social norms and context on language use and meaning in regards to ‘womens’ language’. She points to the performance of gender through language and explains how “language uses us as much as we use language” (p.45). Different ways of speaking signal and construct different identities. Gender, similar to race, is a feature of identity that can be indexed and enforced through language.

3 Methodology

The list of gender labels has grown to a point where a comprehensive analysis is impractical. Internet searches of gender labels reveal lists ranging up to 107 labels. Additionally, different societies and cultures have varying gender labels. Therefore, this study focuses on the common gender expansive labels in the context of American culture. Common gender expansive labels in American society were selected through Google searches of “gender labels” and “gender identities”. These searches resulted in lists defining common gender labels from online

American publications. The articles that labels are gathered from are as follows: “A Guide to Gender Identity Terms” (NPR, 2021), “20 Common Gender Identity Terms, As Defined By Psychologists And Sex Experts” (Women’s Health, 2023), and “68 Terms That Describe Gender Identity and Expression” (Healthline, 2022). Gender labels which appeared in two or all sources and that I was familiar with were selected for analysis. The eleven gender expansive labels analyzed are as follows: *agender*, *gender free*, *genderless*, *gender void*, *third gender*, *gender fluid*, *two-spirit*, *bigender*, *gender non-conforming*, *genderqueer*, and *non-binary*. The exclusion of *Transgender*, *Trans Man*, and *Trans Woman* as gender labels is intentional in that these terms usually (not always) refer to the transition from one binary gender to the other. The eleven labels and their definitions were analyzed in terms of semantic frames and framing of gender and their relation to gender ideologies. They were categorized by evoking possession, additive, or contestation models of gender. Natural language data from personal accounts of people and their relationship to these terms was collected and transcribed from Tik Tok videos. Tik Tok searches for individual terms, “*x term* identity”, and “what does *x term* mean” offered videos for natural language data collection. Twelve videos were transcribed and notable quotes from the transcriptions are used as data. Natural language data provided examples of the term in use and was analyzed for how it relates to possession, additive, and contestation models of gender. Due to some terms being used interchangeably, not every term has a natural language example.

4 Data and Analysis

4.1 Possession Model

4.1.a *Agender, Gender Free, Genderless, Gender Void*

The labels *agender*, *gender free*, *genderless* and *gender void* all center around the idea of not any gender or no gender present. They evoke the possession model of gender in which

gender is a possession that is alienable. Gender is an object or substance owned by a person. The labels enforce the conceptual metaphors of BODY IS A CONTAINER and GENDER IS A SUBSTANCE IN THE BODY. *Agender* and *genderless* imply a neutral space without gender or the gender binary. There is no gender present and this is neither positive nor negative. *Gender free* infers that gender is something unpleasant that is not or no longer present in the body. It connects to ideas of ‘cancer free’ or ‘disease free’. The label also denotes freedom from the confinement of the binary. There is no gender present and this is positive. It triggers ideas of intentional deviance from confinement because becoming free of something is an intentional process. *Gender void* relates to something necessary missing. It creates an empty, void space away from gender and the binary. There is no gender present and this is negative. The label provokes ideas of unintentional deficiency because lacking or being void of something is simply a state that one is unintentionally. In these labels, gender exists in a space completely away from or outside the binary space universe.

4.1.b Natural Language Data

The model of gender as a possession is clearly expressed by the speaker in example (1) below:

- (1) “I feel like a million things but not that [genderless]... I’ve always told people like, you know, I think **some people are genderless** and some people are **genderful**? Because I feel **full to bursting with gender** all the time... [I’m] someone who's just **too big to fit**.”

In this video, the speaker addresses the *genderless* label and details how they are the opposite, they are full of gender— **genderful**. This evokes the metaphors of BODY IS A CONTAINER and GENDER IS A SUBSTANCE IN THE BODY. They possess so much gender that they are **full to bursting with gender**. The idea of **too big to fit** alludes to the image of CONTAINMENT fundamental to the traditional model of binary gender. They do not fit into the confinement of the

binary genders or the binary model. A similar idea of existing outside of the confinement of the binary is expressed in examples (2) and (3) through description of the *agender* label.

- (2) “Basically I’m **agender**. I don’t feel like I **have a gender**. I feel **outside of the gender binary** but I like dressing **androgynously**. I like looking like a **girlboy** so I just combined them.”

The speaker in (2) expresses a similar idea of being **outside of the gender binary** due to their lack of gender, not because of their abundance of gender. They also evoke the DIVIDED SELF metaphor in which people or their bodies are containers or shells for internal contents. There is an external self that is shown to the world, the container or shell, and there is an internal self and identity hidden from view that is the container’s contents. Internally, the speaker does not **have a gender** but externally they display **girlboy**. They present themselves **androgynously**, combining features perceived to be of a girl and a boy.

- (3) “For me **agender** means like I don’t **identify within gender** at all. I think it’s like a silly concept in the first place. I think all it does is like put **people into boxes**...like in my mind I think that agender very much means like to feel **gender apathy**, to feel **outside of the system**, to just be like I don’t care and you know.”

In example (3), the *agender* speaker also does not **identify within gender** and describes themselves as **outside of the system**. This calls on the CONTAINMENT image of the binary space based model of gender. They further enforce this image by stating that gender places **people into boxes**, in which they presumably do not fit. They highlight an important and recurring notion of **gender apathy**. They are apathetic towards gender and the notion of possessing or not possessing gender. They do not have a gender and they are indifferent to it. A related feeling is described by the speaker in example (4) below:

- (4) “I don’t **care about my gender**. I’m just a **blob in space**. I’m **genderless**. I really never cared about my gender to be honest. I don’t care how people perceive my gender either like gender isn’t a really big thing to me, it isn’t something I really care for so I honestly think I’m **agender**.”

The speaker describes themselves as **genderless** and **agender**. They point to the notion of gender apathy through detailing their lack of **care about** their **gender**. They also evoke the space based model of gender by describing themselves as a **blob in space**. They are not within the bounded binary region of gender but they exist, as a blob, somewhere outside of it.

4.2 Additive Model

4.2.a *Third Gender, Gender Fluid, Two-Spirit, Bigender*

The labels *third gender*, *gender fluid*, *two-spirit*, and *bigender* highlight the additive model of gender in which gender can consist of more than one factor. *Third gender* describes a gender that is neither or both ‘man’ and ‘woman’ and exists in a bounded region between binary ‘man’ and ‘woman’. It evokes a COUNTING frame and incites questions of how many genders exist. *Gender Fluid* refers to a gender that is not fixed; it fluctuates and changes over time or in specific situations. There are an undefined amount of genders that one can be at different times and situations. This creates the view of gender as fluid and scalar. It evokes the frames of FLUID MOTION, CONTAINERS, and the image schemas of CONTAINMENT and SOURCE-PATH-GOAL. The *gender fluid* label relies on the conceptualization of fluid motion along a path. *Two-Spirit* is an indigenous term that describes a gender that is both ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Similarly, *bigender* indicates a gender defined by two different genders simultaneously. *Two-spirit* and *bigender* both evoke the binary conceptualization of two genders. Instead of being one of the two genders, *two-spirit* and *bigender* are both simultaneously.

4.2.b *Natural Language Data*

The model of gender as additive is displayed by the speaker’s description of the *two-spirit* label in example (5) below:

- (5) “I identify as **two-spirit** which means I am **both a man and a woman at the same time**. I have a masculine, feminine energy, masculine and feminine spirit and so I don’t conform to any Western idea of the binary.”

The speaker is **both a man and a woman at the same time**. They are fully masculine and fully feminine simultaneously. This evokes an evolved version of the binary model of gender in which someone can exist in both bounded regions at the same time. In this example, it seems that the masculine and feminine have fully merged to create a whole. This idea is slightly different in the description of *bigender* in example (6):

- (6) “I’m **bigender** umm but yah like I’ve always felt masculine a lot of my life but like I’ve done a lot of healing and I am now comfortable with my feminine and like it’s just a **balance** for me like I can’t **have one without the other**... I’m just a **fine middle** or sometimes I **lean** one way or sometimes I lean another way.”

The speaker explains how they are both masculine and feminine and that they cannot **have one without the other**. The masculine and feminine exist in a **balance** and the speaker is a **fine middle** of this **balance** which evokes the image schema of EQUILIBRIUM. If they **lean** more masculine then they are less feminine and vice versa, similar to the classic image of a balance scale. In this example, the masculine and feminine work to balance each other to create a whole. Similar to example (6), this is an evolution of the binary model of gender in which someone can be both masculine and feminine. In the description of *two-spirit*, there is no balance of masculine and feminine; they both coexist in totality. The speaker in example (7) expresses an idea slightly different than the two previous additive examples while describing the *gender fluid* label:

- (7) “To me, **gender fluid** means **possessing both in one**. It’s like a **two for one deal** almost. In my identity **there’s a masculine and a feminine that lives inside**, predominantly, I lead with the feminine. In my soul, I just think there are these two **coexisting** beings that love being there.”

The speaker details how they **possess both [genders] in one**. There are masculine and feminine parts **coexisting** inside of them which is based on the binary model of gender. They evoke the metaphor of BODY IS A CONTAINER and gender is something that exists inside the body. The use of **possessing** and **two for one deal** hints at the possession model of gender. **Two for one deal** triggers our framework of commercial events as a way of obtaining possessions. For this speaker, there are two genders that seem to exist independently within them. The masculine and feminine are individual parts that create a whole.

(8) “Personally, I identify with being **gender fluid** so much because I **feel fluid**. I don’t feel like my gender is **stagnant**, I constantly feel like I’m changing.”

Example (8) also details the *gender fluid* label but heavily relies on the frame of FLUID MOTION. The speaker states that they feel **fluid** and that their gender is not **stagnant**. Their gender is constantly changing; they can move between genders. This evokes the image schema of SOURCE-PATH-GOAL in which gender is a fluid that can flow freely between different gender CONTAINERS.

4.3 Contestation Model

4.3.a *Gender Non-Conforming, Genderqueer, Non-Binary*

The labels *gender non-conforming*, *genderqueer*, and *non-binary* elicit the contestation model of gender in which gender is defined by deviation from norms of gender. *Gender non-conforming* is a label for gender that defies cultural gender norms. The word conformity evokes ideas of authority. People conform to some authority; they do so by following rules, laws, and standards. Whether this authority is ethical or unethical, the refusal to conform has consequences. Non-conformity is intentional deviance; one does not conform to what they disagree with. Non-conformity generates ideas of competence, autonomy, and bravery. This label relies on the social constructionism perspective and defines gender as societal expectations to be

conformed to. In this view, cultural or societal gender norms are the authority that non-conforming genders intentionally refuse to follow. *Genderqueer* is a label for gender that is different from the expected societal norms. *Queer* indicates a non-traditional gender, one that is different from the binary model. The word *queer* has semantic origins relating to ‘strange’ and ‘odd’. It then became a derogative used against people with non-traditional genders or sexualities and it has now been reappropriated as a neutral-positive self identifier. This label calls on the social constructionism perspective of gender in relation to societal norms. *Genderqueer* places gender in relation to and difference from societal norms. The *Non-binary* gender label denotes a gender that is not (exclusively) binary ‘man’ nor ‘woman’. There is the freedom for the gender interpretation to mean neither man nor woman or both man and woman. The negation of the binary concept of gender through the *non-binary* label evokes that concept. The non-binary gender exists somewhere unspecified outside or between the two boundaries.

4.3.b Natural Language Data

The contestation gender model is expressed by the description of *gender non-conforming* in example (9) below:

- (9) “So the gender binary is male and female, right, I am literally **somewhere in between** so I feel like I’m **not on the male side**, I’m **not on the female side** but I’m literally somewhere in between.”

The speaker rejects the gender binary stating that they are **not on the male side** and they **are not on the female side**, instead they exist **somewhere in between**. The negation of the binary evokes the binary model of gender. They are not within the confines of ‘man’ nor ‘woman’ but they are in an unspecified space between the two binaries. The same concept is expressed in example (10):

- (10) “I’m **genderqueer** and I don’t feel like I’m a man and I don’t feel like I’m a woman. I feel like I’m **kinda somewhere in between**.”

The speaker describes their *genderqueer* label in the same manner as the *gender non-conforming* speaker of example (9). They are not a ‘man’ nor a ‘woman’ but they are **kinda somewhere in between**. The speaker in example (11) also details their *genderqueer* label but they focus on ideas that connect back to examples (1-3) of the possession model.

- (11) “I’m **genderqueer**, right, but I’m very much still a Black woman, keyword Black woman. Regardless of how I feel **internally**, I will always be a Black woman because that is how I am **perceived by the outside world** with the **vessel** that I’m in and how I look and how I **present** myself. To me, I **never fit into that mold**. I never fit into the acceptable version of womanhood.”

The speaker is **internally genderqueer**. They acknowledge the DIVIDED SELF metaphor by explaining that the **vessel** they are in is **perceived by the outside world** as a Black woman despite internal feelings of **never fitting into the mold** of ‘woman’. They externally **present** themselves as a Black woman despite not feeling like they fit into the CONTAINER of ‘woman’. The speaker in example (12) also utilizes the idea of outside perception of one’s external self in the DIVIDED SELF metaphor.

- (12) “So **non-binary** can include people that feel like some of- **a bit male and a bit female**. They can **feel nothing**. They can **feel all of it**. It can change. It’s kinda just saying that like there is **more than male or female**. So for me as a non-binary person I just feel more relaxed when people don’t **try and gender** me at all.”

The speaker explains how the *non-binary* label can be used to describe various feelings of gender. *Non-binary* can be used by someone who feels **a bit male and a bit female**, someone who **feels nothing** in regards to gender, or someone who **feels all of it** in regards to gender. *Non-binary* is used to describe someone who is both male and female evokes the additive model of gender. The speaker details how the label means there is **more than male or female**; this could be the feeling of existing in a space between the binary regions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’

which aligns with the previous examples of the contestation model of gender. This could also highlight the COUNTING frame in which it means there are more than two genders. The speaker states that they prefer when others do not **try and gender** them which elicits the DIVIDED SELF metaphor. The perception others have of their external self may not match their *non-binary* internal self.

5 Interpretation and Discussion

The influence of the binary space-based model of gender is clear in the three models presented in this analysis. The CONTAINMENT image of the traditional model of the binary is evoked by natural language data in each model. Additionally, the BODY IS A CONTAINER and the DIVIDED SELF metaphors are a recurring theme throughout the data.

The possession model of gender relies on the metaphors BODY IS A CONTAINER and GENDER IS A SUBSTANCE IN THE BODY. The natural language data reinforces the idea that gender is an alienable possession one does or does not own. A consistent sentiment that appears in the data of the possession model is the concept of being ‘outside of the binary’ or not ‘fitting into the binary’ based on one’s abundance or lack of gender. The CONTAINMENT image schema is strong in this model of gender. The DIVIDED SELF metaphor emerges in the data which also connects to the frame of CONTAINERS. The concept of gender apathy is unique to the possession model of gender.

The additive model of gender heavily evokes the binary model of gender and the metaphors BODY IS A CONTAINER and GENDER IS A SUBSTANCE IN THE BODY. Within the additive model, several versions of the additive concept surface through the natural language data. Each version of the additive model builds on or shifts the concept of the gender binary. The first version is defined by a full merging of the masculine and feminine parts to

create one whole. One can be fully masculine and fully feminine simultaneously. The second version is characterized by EQUILIBRIUM in which the masculine and feminine parts balance each other to create one whole. The more masculine one is, the less feminine they are, and vice versa. The third version is the existence or collection of independent masculine and feminine parts that create one whole. The fourth version is the fluid model in which one can move freely between different gender regions.

The contestation model of gender also evokes the binary model of gender and the CONTAINMENT image of the bounded binary regions. A recurring sentiment in the natural language data is the feeling of being ‘in between the binary’. This model creates an undefined space between the masculine and feminine bounded regions of the binary. The frame of CONTAINERS persists in the use of the DIVIDED SELF metaphor throughout the contestation data.

The possession model frames gender as an alienable possession that seems to place people completely outside of the confines of the binary. It also highlights an apathetic perspective towards gender. The additive model frames gender as a merge, balance, collection, or fluid movement of parts. It accentuates the connection between the masculine and feminine. The contestation model frames gender in relation to the traditional binary and seems to place people between the confines of the binary. It centers the societal expectations of gender.

6 Conclusion

The analysis of eleven gender expansive labels offers insight into the changes in the conceptual frameworks of gender when we attempt to separate it from the confinement of the binary. As the data depicts, the traditional space-based model of the gender binary builds the framework we use to shape new models of gender. Lederer (2015) details how “speakers are

beholden to their conceptual system and cultural understanding of gender” (p. 115). Even under the constraints of our traditional conceptual system, we can frame gender through the use of labels to promote particular perspectives. Gender expansive labels and the way we talk about them can foster possession, additive, or contestation models of gender. The reflexivity of language highlights the social and political consequences of the words we use. According to Lakoff (2014) “the world reflects our understanding through our actions, and our understandings reflect the world shaped by the frame-informed actions of ourselves and others” (p.35). Framing can affect our understanding of the world. Gender expansive labels are units of an emergent lexicon which makes it increasingly important to understand the role of language in the construction of identity and the bidirectional influence of the labels used to define gender and the conceptual models used to understand gender. The current development of gender expansive language in a highly politicized environment requires us to highlight the influences of framing on promoting particular conceptual models of gender. It is imperative to continue to examine the labels we use to define gender and the way we talk about these labels if we wish to deconstruct or challenge traditional gender.

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