A Progressive prescription:
Epicene pronouns and style

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“It is doubtful that any one semantic gap in any language has ever received the attention that reformers over the years have lavished on our lack of a common-gender pronoun in English.”

- Dennis Baron
The Revival of Singular “They”
Words We’re Watching

Singular 'They'

Though singular ‘they’ is old, ‘they’ as a nonbinary pronoun is new—and useful

One common bugbear of the grammatical nitpicker is the singular they. For those who haven’t kept up, the complaint is this: the use of they as a gender-neutral pronoun (as in, “Ask each of the students what they want for lunch.”) is ungrammatical because they is a plural pronoun.

In an 1881 letter, Emily Dickinson wrote “Almost anyone under the circumstances would have called themselves.” Today, they is a gender-neutral pronoun that is gaining ground.

TRENDING NOW

1 Erin go bragh
An expression of loyalty that means...

2 gravamen
'The material or significant part of...

3 transom
'Over the transom'

4 gyro
Look it up

Talk about belated recognition. At its meeting in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 7, the American Dialect Society voted to make the 600-year-old pronoun "they" their word of the year for 2015. Or more precisely, a particular use of that pronoun that grammarians call the singular "they." This is the "they" that doesn’t care whether it’s


Pauwels, Anne and Joanne Winter. “Gender Inclusivity or ‘Grammar Rules OK’? Linguistic Prescriptivism vs. Linguistic Discrimination in the Classroom.” 2006


Paterson, Laura Louise. *British Pronoun Use, Prescription, and Processing: Linguistic and Social Influences Affecting ‘They’ and ‘He.’* 2014


Sczesny, Sabine, Magda Formanowicz and Franziska Moser “Can Gender-Fair Language Reduce Gender Stereotyping and Discrimination?” 2016
A History of Pronoun Usage
Linguistic roles of pronouns

- Content vs. Function words.
- Content = nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.
- Function = articles, prepositions, and pronouns.
Pronoun additions to English...

- *She* replaces *heo*, 11th century.
- *Its* becomes possessive, 16th century.
- Over 80 attempted additions for gender-neutral third person singular.
  - *Hisser*
  - *Hu*
  - *Thon*
  - *xe, xem, xyr*
“There is a tradition among some grammarians to lament the fact that English has no sex-indefinite pronoun for third person singular and to state categorically that the only course open is to use ‘he’ in sex-indefinite contexts.”

-Anne Bodine
Pre-prescriptive use of singular they...

“Singular they has a long history in Modern English, stretching back to the mid sixteenth century, and a distinguished one – it occurs in the works of Addison, Austen, Fielding, Chesterfield, Ruskin, and Scott, to cite only a few major English writers.” – Dennis Baron

Chaucer: “And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame, They wol come up”

Shakespeare: “God send everyone their heart’s desire.”

King James Bible: “So likewise shall my heavenly Father doe also vnto you, if yee from your hearts forgiue not every one his brother their trespasses.” (Matt. 18:35)
The introduction of prescriptivism...

- The Three Conords
  - Subject and Verb
  - Substantive and Adjective
  - Relative Pronoun and Antecedent

- These are the basis of all grammatical rules.

- Problem: Grammar is Latin, English is Germanic.
Kirby (1746) wrote Rule 21:

“The masculine Person answers to the general Name, Which comprehends both Male and Female; as Any Person, who knows what he says”

Murray (1795) wrote Rule V:

“Pronouns must always agree with their antecedents, and the nouns for which they stand, in gender, number, and person; ... Of this rule there are many violations. ‘Each of the sexes should keep within its particular bounds, and content themselves with the advantages of their particular districts.’”
He becomes a generic...

- 1850 Act of Parliament: “Words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females.”
- 1879: Female physicians are denied admission to the Massachusetts Medical Society on the basis that the bylaws used “he.”
- 1951: Howard B. Taylor and Jacob Scher wrote:
  - Pronouns: Faulty reference
    - WRONG – Everybody is invited to sit in their chair.
    - RIGHT – Everybody is invited to sit in his chair.

“It has frequently been argued that masculine pronouns cannot function generically because they exclude women. This in turn is dismissed as nonsense by supporters of the generic masculine, who at the same time reject generic feminine pronouns because such pronouns implicitly exclude men.”

-Dennis Baron
Studies demonstrate that *He/man* = male.

*He* drops out of favor.

Bodine, Lakoff and Spender and linguistic determinism.

The power of new words:
- *Sexual Harrassment*
- *Ms.*
- *Sexism*
“Language uses us as much as we use it.”

- Robin Lakoff

Usage Studies
Factors

- Indefinite vs. generic antecedents
- Spoken vs. written text
- Sex of the writer
- Indefinite pronouns (IP)
  - *-body, *-one, and *-thing* words
  - *every-, some-, and any-* words
  - Refer to indefinite subjects

- Indefinite noun phrases (INP)
  - Stand for a class or group of people with a singular form
  - *A person, a client, a patient, or an employee*
  - Often a hypothetical member of a given group

- Definite noun phrases (DNP)
  - Specific members of a class or group
  - *the person, the client, the patient, or the employee*
  - Often a specific, though unknown or of unknown/unimportant gender
Fig 1: Antecedent Type and Pronoun Use in Non-quoted Data.

Fig. 2: Distribution of Singular *They* and Generic *He* Tokens

Fig. 3: Consistent Use of Pronouns Used to Refer back to Singular, Genderless Antecedent “The Ideal Student”

- generic you
- indefinite one
- singular they
- he or she forms
- generic he

Table 1: Antecedent type for incidents of singular “they” (quoted and nonquoted samples)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antecedent type</th>
<th>Uses of singular “they”</th>
<th>Total incidents of antecedent</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Someone/body</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>61.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anyone/body</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone/body</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>89.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>419</strong></td>
<td><strong>560</strong></td>
<td><strong>74.8</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Spoken vs. Written Text

- Balhorn studied newspaper prose and compared quoted vs. non-quoted texts
- LaScotte surveyed participants regarding “appropriateness” within spoken and written context
Fig. 4: Pronoun frequency for indefinite antecedents in quoted and non-quoted text.
Fig. 5: Which of the Following Sounds Most Appropriate in an Informal Context?

- They: 28 responses
- He or she: 5 responses
- She: 3 responses
- He: 3 responses

Sex of the Writer

- Meyer (1990) and LaScotte conducted similar free response studies.
- Balhorn used corpus data.
Table 2: Pronoun Approach by Sex of Writer for "an educated person"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronoun Approach</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other than singular</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic he</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular they</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He or she</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic she</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 6: Pronoun Approach by Sex of Writer for "the ideal student"

Fig 7: Pronoun Approach by Sex of Writer for IP pairings

The Role of Style
As we in media use singular “they,” it becomes an accepted part of the lexicon.

- Sczesny, Formanowicz and Moser: education and exposure
  - Schoolbooks using generic he = acceptance
  - Methods using GFL = acceptance
“Our review suggests that - independent of language structure - GFL is more frequent and more accepted when it is backed by official regulations and when the use of biased language is sanctioned in some way”

-Sczeny et al.
Thirteenth edition: Prepped in late 70s and planned for release in 1981:

- Seybold planned for a footnote in 13th
- The Manual is not “a usage guide, a role [Seybold and Young] feel other reference books serve quite adequately” (Harty).
- “I persuaded my male colleague that we must “desex” our new text altogether or risk the dire consequences of offending more than half our readers. How? Well, we used a lot of plurals.” Seybold, 1984

Fourteenth edition: 1993

- “Along with these and other authorities, the University of Chicago Press recommends the “revival” of the singular use of they and their, citing, as do they, its venerable use by such writers as Addison, Austen, Chesterfield, Fielding, Ruskin, Scott, and Shakespeare.” (2.98)
“There was some regret at having written it, and we decided to abandon the idea for the fifteenth and sixteenth editions.” Chicago Manual of Style Online Q&A

“While this usage is accepted in casual contexts, it is still considered ungrammatical in formal writing.” (5.46 16th)
“Do not presume maleness in constructing a sentence but use the
pronoun his when an indefinite antecedent may be male or
female: A reporter tries to protect his sources. (Not his or her, but
note the use of the word reporter rather than newsman.)” (2012)
APA advocates for the use of singular *they* if it is the chosen pronoun of the antecedent.

However, it proscribes the use in general contexts (as in unknown or unimportant gender references).
What next?

- Generally accepted usage, in spite of style, suggests these uses are okay:
  - With indefinite pronouns, particularly any- and every- words
  - As the chosen pronoun of the referent

- For the bold:
  - When the gender of the referent is unimportant or unknown, such as INP and DNP situations like your child, the student, the speaker
Questions?


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