Reviving Singular “They”
Contemporary Usage of Gender-Neutral Pronouns

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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

A History of Pronoun Usage

Slow and steady wins the race…
New pronouns have it rough...

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

- *She* replaces *heo*, 11\textsuperscript{th} century.
- *Its* becomes possessive, 16\textsuperscript{th} century.
- Over 80 attempted additions for gender-neutral third person singular.
  - *Hisser*
  - *Hu*
  - *Thon*
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
You ain’t cool unless you use singular they...

- 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 heauenly 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 Concord
  - 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.
Mr. Kirby, what went wrong in your head?

- 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.

The “generic” he...

“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
Feminism changes the world...

- *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
“They” is already among us...
• Three different studies.
• Four different areas of focus:
  • Spoken vs. written text
  • Indefinite pronoun vs. lexical noun phrase antecedents
    • Notional number
  • Sex-neutral vs. sex-stereotyped noun phrase antecedents
  • Sex of the writer/speaker
SINCE HALF OF THE INSTANCES OF THEY WERE FROM QUOTED SPEECH, THE FIRST SENTENCE UNDER QUOTATIONS IN THE NEWSPAPER BOOK READS: ‘EVER ALTER QUOTATIONS EVEN TO CORRECT MINOR GRAMMATICAL ERRORS OR WORD USAGE.’

‘OLDER STEIN’ WE CAN ASSUME THAT THE QUOTATIONS ARE ACCURATE TRANSCRIPTIONS OF SPOKEN WORDS AND CAN BE COMPARED WITH THE INSTANCES OF THEY USAGE FROM NONQUOTED SPEECH. THE FORMER CAN BE SEEN AS UNSELFCONSCIOUS THEY USAGE IN REAL-TIME LANGUAGE PRODUCTION, WHILE THE LATTER CAN BE SEEN AS THEY USAGE ACCESSIBLE TO BOTH THE SELF-EDITING OF WRITERS THEMSELVES AS WELL AS NEWSROOM EDITORS.


PERHAPS THE BEST EVIDENCE THAT THE RESULTS OF THE NONQUOTED DATA HAVE BEEN SUBJECTED TO SOME EXTRALINGUISTIC PRESSURES IS THE RATE OF DISJUNCTIVE HE OR SHE. EWMAN AND OAUWELS NOTE THAT IN SPOKEN ENGLISH THE DISJUNCTIVE PRONOUN IS RELATIVELY RARE, AND THE DATA HERE ARE CONSISTENT WITH THAT OBSERVATION. THE RATE OF HE OR SHE IN THE QUOTED DATA IS ONLY 4%.

UNIDIOMATIC PHRASES ARE RELATIVELY COMMON IN THE FIGURE: FREQUENCY OF THEY IN QUOTED SPEECH AND IN NONQUOTED TEXT IN FIVE NEWSPAPERS. INDE Finite QUANTIFIED ANTECEDENTS, PERCENTAGE HE, SHE, THEY, HE OR SHE.

Z SIGNIFICANT AT THE LEVEL.

Table 1: Female and male teachers’ use of gender-inclusive generic pronouns inside and outside the classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Female Teachers (%)</th>
<th>Male Teachers (%)</th>
<th>Female Teachers (%)</th>
<th>Male Teachers (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singular they</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 1: Pronoun proportions for antecedents (% of total surveyed)

Figure 2: Frequencies of epicene pronouns in *The Independent* corpus by antecedent

Too many irrelevant pronouns in which person was not the head of the phrase. Since specific definite lexical NPs occur with much lower frequency than indefinite pronouns, the sampling of epicene pronoun use with antecedents was extended over a three-year period. The most common lexical antecedents were a person. The search commands produced hits over the three years out of an immediate corpus of words. The hits contained reference chains relevant to the aims of this study. All other lexical NPs occurred with much lower frequencies.

Excerpts of a patient over the same three years yielded hits only of which were relevant. Two sets of lexical NPs were researched: an neutral set and a male stereotyped occupational set. Besides person, the neutral set included five other nouns: client, customer, employee, patient, and student. These nouns were thought to be both sex neutral and likely to be common. The male stereotyped set consisted of attorney, director, doctor, executive, lawyer, manager, physician, and surgeon. Although certain women are found in the positions designated by these occupational nouns, the words appear to retain a strong social gender association.

Through his students, he had his students write stories using similar words. The judge, police officer, attorney, and professor. He found that between 2004 and 2006, these words did decline in their degree of sex stereotype somewhat, but none except professor was anywhere near neutral.
Figure 4: Frequencies of epicene pronouns in *The Independent* corpus based on notional number

### Table 2: Antecedent type for incidents of singular “they” (quoted and nonquoted samples)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></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>

Figure 5: Sex-neutral vs sex-stereotyped NP antecedents (nonquoted).

- Sex-neutral NPs (N = 288)
- Sex-stereotyped NPs (N = 68)

Chart 1: Pronoun proportions for antecedents (% of total surveyed)

Table 3: Percentage of pronoun choice in nonquoted text with indefinite pronoun antecedents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>He</th>
<th>They</th>
<th>She</th>
<th>He or She</th>
<th>% of total incidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>61.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 2: Pronoun choices for antecedents by female teachers (%)

### Table 4. Teachers’ attitudes to students’ use of singular *they*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approve</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disapprove and correct</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disapprove and ignore</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: Frequencies of epicene pronouns in *The Independent* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* corpora

What the Style Guides Have to Say...
Stylebook review...

• Trends:
  • Generic *he*
  • Awkward or cumbersome nature of *he or she, s/he*
  • Alternatives (or Avoidance)
  • Singular *they*
  • Interesting pieces of advice

• Most recent editions of the four major style books:
  • Associated Press
  • American Psychological Association
  • Modern Language Association
  • Chicago Manual of Style

• Plus some other notables…
To *he or not to he*...

**AP**

- “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.*)”

**CMS**

- “Using *he, his*, and *him* as a common-sex pronoun is now widely considered sexist, and picking the gender of the nearest antecedent may be misleading.”
- “Because *[he, him, and his]* are also masculine-specific, they have long been regarded as sexist when used generically, and their indeterminate-gender use is declining.”
That is the question...

APA
- “Remember that gender refers to role, not biological sex, and is cultural.”
- “Alternating between he and she also may be distracting and is not ideal; doing so implies that he or she can in fact be generic, which is not the case.”

MLA
- “Careful writers of research papers avoid language that implies unsubstantiated or irrelevant generalizations about such personal qualities as … sex, or sexual orientation.”
- “Many writers no longer use he, him, or his to express a meaning that includes women or girls.”
Whether tis nobler...

• “The use of he as a pronoun for nouns embracing both genders is a simple, practical convention rooted in the beginnings of the English language.”

• “No one need fear using he if common sense supports it.” – Elements of Style
He or she is socially awkward...

APA

• “Replacing he with he or she or she or he should be done sparingly because the repetition can become tiresome.”
• “Combination forms such as he/she or (s)he are awkward and distracting.”

CMS

• “Employing an artificial form such as s/he is distracting at best, and most readers find it ridiculous.”

Elements of Style

• “Substituting he or she in its place is the logical thing to do if it works. But it often doesn’t work, if only because repetition makes it sound boring or silly.”
A pacifist guide to the problem...

AP

• “Frequently, however, the best choice is a slight revision of the sentence: Reporters try to protect their sources.”

CMS

• “There are many ways to achieve gender-neutral language, but it takes some thought and often some hard work.”
• “A good writer can usually recast the sentence to eliminate the need for any personal pronoun at all.”
Alternatives (a.k.a. Avoidance)

APA

- “There are many alternatives to the generic he, including rephrasing…, using plural nouns or plural pronouns…, replacing the pronoun with an article…, and dropping the pronoun.”

MLA

- “[Problems] can often be avoided through a revision that recasts the sentence into the plural or eliminates the pronoun”
- “Another technique is to make the discussion refer to a person who is identified, so that there is a reason to use a specific singular pronoun.”
What about *they*?

**MLA**
- “*They, them, their,* and *theirs* cannot logically be applied to a singular person”

**Elements of Style**
- “Do not use *they* when the antecedent is a distributive expression such as *each, each one, everybody, everyone, many a man.*”
“Because he is no longer accepted as a generic pronoun referring to a person of either sex, it has become common in speech and in informal writing to substitute the third-person plural pronouns they, them, their, and themselves, and the nonstandard singular themself. While this usage is accepted in casual contexts, it is still considered ungrammatical in formal writing.”

“When referring impersonally to anyone or someone, the writer will find a construction that does not rely on his or her but also resists the conspicuously plural they.”
AP

“Do not use coined words such as chairperson or spokesperson in regular text. Instead, use chairman or spokesman if referring to a man or the office in general. Use chairwoman or spokeswoman if referring to a woman. Or, if applicable, use a neutral word such as leader or representative. Use chairperson or similar coinage only in direct quotations or when it is the formal description for an office.”

The New York Times

“Sexual equality is no longer exotic, and its advocacy does not necessarily warrant the label feminist or feminism; apply the term only to those who choose it, and deftly indicate what they mean it to signify. When referring to the women’s movement, be specific about the goals and actions involved. Avoid the outdated women’s liberation, except in a historical reference. Lib and libber are condescending.”
What to do?
Awesome earth shattering conclusions...

- Here.
For real, what needs to be done...

- Style and usage manuals: reflect usage.
- Merriam-Webster: “English lacks a common-gender third person singular pronoun that can be used to refer to indefinite pronouns (as everyone, anyone, someone). Writers and speakers have supplied this lack by using the plural pronouns. The plural pronouns have also been put to use as pronouns of indefinite number to refer to singular nouns that stand for many persons. The use of they, their, them, and themselves as pronouns of indefinite gender and indefinite number is well established in speech and writing, even in literary and formal contexts. This gives you the option of using the plural pronouns where you think they sound best, and of using the singular pronouns (as he, she, he or she, and their inflected forms) where you think they sound best.”
It’s all been done before...

- Especially in language, the only thing that stays the same is change.

- *Thou* art displaced
  - Feudalism and pronouns
  - *Ye-you*
  - *You* as dual purpose pronoun
  - “Although the second-person pronoun you is both singular and plural, it always takes a plural verb, even if only a single person or thing is addressed.”
  - CMS
“They has been the default epicene pronoun in English for some time and its statistical prominence relative to he in current published English is not innovation but ‘restoration’ in the absence of direct prescriptive pressure favoring he.”

– Mark Balhorn
Editorial Input
Food for thought...

• How do you address singular “they” in your work?
• How do you, your company, or your style manual approach gender-neutral pronoun usage?
• How do you feel “they” compares to other options for singular, epicene pronouns?