The Case for Singular *They* and Implications for English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The singular *they* is hotly contested as a linguistic feature and receives much scorn as a social phenomenon. The most common arguments against singular *they* center around its being ungrammatical, confusing, and simply not 'proper' English. However, using the plural pronoun *they* to refer to a generic individual is a well-established feature of English, despite grammar-book proscription. Singular *they* is also increasingly popular as a personal pronoun for specific individuals whose gender is not accurately reflected by either of the existing third-person singular pronouns in English, pushback against which brings up concerns of discrimination. The significance of these debates for English language teaching (ELT) is therefore two-fold: the responsibilities of educators both to ensure learners understand the English language as actually used by native speakers, as well as to promote respect for gender diversity in English language learners as well as in the field of language education.

Introduction

> Again, the corrupt and unsound form of speaking in the plural number to a single person […] contrary to the pure, plain, and single language of truth […] which had always been used by God to men, and men to God, as well as to one another, from the oldest record of time, till corrupt men, for corrupt ends, in later and corrupt times, to flatter, fawn, and work upon the corrupt nature in men, brought in that false and senseless way of speaking […] which has since corrupted the modern languages, and hath greatly debased the spirits and depraved the manners of men. (Ellwood, 2004, p. 20)

If this impassioned argument for the sanctity of the English language seems familiar, you have probably heard similar diatribes about how 'kids these days' are destroying the language. One such oft-maligned trend is what is known as the singular *they*. Yet using the plural pronoun *they* to refer to a generic individual (one whose gender is unknown or irrelevant, making both he and she inaccurate) is well-established in the English language. Singular *they* has been attested in literature and in common speech for centuries, and continues to be used in spite of nineteenth-century pushback by prescriptive grammarians, because singular *they* fills the lexical gap in English where an epicene (grammatically unisex) third-person singular pronoun should be. Because of this, and because neuter (sexless) *it* is typically not used for human referents, singular *they* has come to be

used to refer to a specific individual for whom neither of the existing, gendered third-person singular pronouns (he or she) in English are accurate. This usage of singular *they* was voted Word of the Year by the American Dialect Society in 2015 (American Dialect Society, 2016), and has since become increasingly prevalent and common as cultural acceptance of transgender and nonbinary identities increases. However, this old pronoun's newfound inclusivity seems to also be one of the primary reasons for the renewed twenty-first century rejection of an enduring element of the English language. Gender nonconformity makes many people uncomfortable in America, and backlash against gender-neutral language is a common outward manifestation of cissexism, the prejudice against gender nonconforming people; this term shares a prefix with *cisgender*, which describes persons who identify with their gender assigned at birth, as opposed to those who fall under the umbrella of *transgender*, whose genders do not align with the ones they were assigned. The significance of the debates around singular *they* for English language teaching (ELT) is therefore two-fold: the responsibilities of educators both to ensure learners understand the English language as it is actually used by native speakers, as well as to promote respect for gender diversity in English language learners as well as in the field of language education.

The Case for Singular *They*

The history of singular *they* in the English language is a long one, stretching back into the fourteenth century—that is nearly seven centuries of singular *they*, compared to less than two of attempted proscription. Commonly cited as one of the earliest examples of singular *they* in literature is Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, specifically some versions of "The Pardoner's Tale," which was written around 1395 (McCulloch & Gawne, 2016), indicating singular *they* was likely in use in speech well before that time: "And *whoso* fyndeth hym out of swich blame, / *They* wol come up [...]" (Doyle, 2009, emphasis in original). Gabriel Doyle, assistant professor of linguistics at San Diego State University, explains that "*whoso* is a quantified expression, like *whoever*, that is syntactically singular, but then is paired to the syntactically plural *they*. So, since at least the beginnings of literary Middle English, 600 years ago, it's [sic] been all right to use singular *they*" (Doyle, 2009, emphasis in original). Examples of singular *they* can also be found in the works of Shakespeare, William Thackeray, George Eliot, Oscar Wilde down to C. S. Lewis, and even the King James Bible (Altieri, 2003, pp. 214-215; McCulloch & Gawne, 2016). Even the strictest grammarians may find it difficult to argue these well-known and respected writers were somehow ignorant of the fact that *they* is a plural pronoun or that pronoun-antecedent agreement is one of the most basic rules of English grammar.

That a pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number is entirely logical, and this logical error is one of the simplest arguments against the acceptability of singular *they*. However, there are no laws of language that say a pronoun cannot be both singular and plural—there is even precedent for it in English, with the multimodal pronoun *you*. Recall the passage which began this essay. That impassioned rejection of the use of plural pronouns for singular antecedents was not, as one might think, a case against singular *they*. From an early eighteenth-century memoir, this excerpt in fact refers to the "evil custom" that was singular *you* (Ellwood, 2004, p. 20). English used to have a T-V distinction in the second person, but the various second

person pronouns in Early Modern English, including the singular object *thou*, subject *thee*, and possessive *thy/thine*, got collapsed into just Modern English subject-object *you* and possessive *your* —formerly used in the singular only in formal language—for both singular and plural referents regardless of register. This change in the language was totally organic, the centuries-long culmination of French influence, the fall of the feudal system, and the British cultural insistence on politeness (Stroud 2014, 12:18-24:54). Now in the twenty-first century, no native speaker of English would question the usage of *you* for both singular and plural referents, because it has become so thoroughly ingrained in the language—although many regional variants of second person plural do exist, to make up for the lack of a universally-accepted distinction (Stroud, 2014). For a long time, no one questioned the usage of *they* in the same manner.

Given all this history, what is there to say that *they* cannot follow in the footsteps of *you*, and fill both singular and plural functions in English? Most opponents will still say singular *they* violates the rules of English grammar, but this argument is inadequate simply because the concept of grammar itself is so flimsy. Grammar, like the words it governs, is made up by its users. In the case of singular *they*, those who campaign against it as the downfall of proper English grammar are attempting not to halt the intrusion of a new threat but to remove an element of the language that is already part of its foundation. It is a fact that all living languages change, by virtue of the fact that they are living (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 10). A language with a community of speakers will always evolve and grow as its speakers find new means and needs of communication, to serve the purposes of those speakers, until, over time "the variation becomes the norm" (Altieri, 2003, p. 216). The widespread and long-lasting usage of singular *they* is a significant contribution to arguments for its actual grammaticality. However, it is still necessary to examine some specific grammatical contexts in which singular *they* is said to violate the arbitrary rules of English grammar.

Singular *they* is often marked as ungrammatical in cases of disagreement with an indefinite antecedent. This recalls the Chaucer example used previously, of *they* in reference to indefinite *whoso* despite the apparent disagreement in number, because "the key point here is that it's [sic] not the syntactic number, but rather the semantic number that matters" (Doyle, 2009). Doyle borrows the following examples from Geoffrey Pullum (2008):

 (1a) Everybody knows each other.
 (1b) They know each other.
 (1c) ***He knows each other.**

Because *each other* must refer to more than one person, (1b) works with semantically plural *they* as the antecedent, but (1c) with semantically singular *he* is clearly ungrammatical; since (1a) is grammatical, indefinite *everybody* is proven to also be semantically plural, even though it is syntactically singular, and can therefore be acceptably paired with *they* (Doyle, 2009). It seems clear that singular *they* still works on a fundamental level, whatever one's opinion of its correctness. In contrast, because indefinite pronouns and quantifiers have no grammatical gender, the use of explicitly-gendered *he* as a generic pronoun—as promoted by male eighteenth-century English grammarians—makes no sense, and only serves to reinforce the "dubious 'logic'

of male dominance" (Altieri, 2003, pp. 212, 222), rather than any actual function of grammaticality.

This brings up one of Rosina Lippi-Green's linguistic facts of life: "grammaticality and communicative *effectiveness* are distinct and independent issues" (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 10, emphasis in original). Even if singular *they* was ungrammatical, which its long held and only recently proscribed place in English language usage contradicts, it still serves communicative effectiveness, and is thus valid. Where effectiveness might be diminished by singular *they* is in the potential for ambiguity, another common criticism, yet singular *they* resolves ambiguity just as often as creates it. Take the following examples from Doyle (2009):

(2) Everyone meeting the royal family said that they were gracious?

(3) Everyone meeting the new principal said that he was gracious?

Both are ambiguous, due to the syntactically singular-semantically plural issue discussed previously: in (2), *they* could refer to either the visitors or the royal family, and in (3), *he* could be each of the syntactically singular *everyone*, or the new principal. If (3) were rewritten with singular *they*, the ambiguity would be resolved, as the clear referent would be semantically plural *everyone* rather than the semantically singular *principal* (Doyle, 2009). Ambiguity due to multiple potential referents for a given pronoun is common, as can be seen in a phenomenon sometimes called the Gay Fanfiction Problem—so named because it occurs commonly in transformative fiction stories about existing media (fanfiction) which center around romance between male characters. According to linguist Gretchen McCullough this typically happens in "a narrative with multiple people using the same pronoun, [when] you have to figure out, with a sentence like 'he touched his hand,' who's touching whose hand" (McCulloch & Gawne, 2016). Singular *they* is unlikely to solve this particular issue, but the Gay Fanfiction Problem does show that singular *they* is not the sole provenance of ambiguity. Whether a particular pronoun introduces or avoids ambiguity is entirely dependent on context, which recalls the issue of communicative effectiveness. Utterances rarely occur in isolation, so potential ambiguities are often clarified by surrounding information, and communication occurs effectively.

Whatever rules for the correct form of language may have been developed by the writers of eighteenth-century grammar books (Altieri, 2003, pp. 215-216), English is not an inviolate monolith. The population of native speakers of English is widely variable, and there are multiple Englishes spoken worldwide just among those groups for whom English is their first and only language. Linguistically speaking, these varieties are "all equally efficient as languages, although they do not enjoy the same degree of wider social acceptance" (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 12). Indeed, Altieri points out that although "the grammarians of eighteenth-century England may not have been the first to try to stay the normal course of language development," as it has already been established that living languages will always evolve as their speakers use them, "they certainly were among the most successful" (Altieri, 2003, p. 216). The widespread acceptance of grammar 'rules' means they are often used to distinguish the mythical form of English called Standard (American) English, which is something of a misnomer (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 53). "Standard" English is not inherently more correct, or somehow more accurate to the true spirit of the language; it is, like prescriptive grammaticality, determined largely by arbitrary

characteristics. Many definitions rely on the qualifications of the theoretical speakers of Standard English, like advanced education (Lippi-Green 1997, pp. 54-56). This serves more to reinforce social distinctions within speaker populations rather than unifying those populations through a common, accepted variety as the name would imply (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 59). Lippi-Green proposes the reason a small handful of men's prescriptions and proscriptions are allowed to determine what is 'proper English' (of which, there is truly no such thing), is largely that "we want language to be structured and rule-governed and clear. Something as important as language cannot be left to itself: normal people are not smart enough, not aware enough, to be in charge of their own language" (1997, p. 60). For this reason alone, singular *they* is still considered ungrammatical despite all the evidence supporting it as a valid linguistic feature of English, and despite the fact that it is so commonly used that it is supported by three of the most popular English dictionaries (Sager, 2019; Baron, 2018; Merriam-Webster.com, 2019). This clear disjunction between prescriptive grammar and actual usage leads us to the question of "who has the power to decide how people should use their language? We have seen that history is not on the side of those who would ban singular *they* from written texts; neither is logic; nor is majority rule" (Altieri, 2003, p. 226). English has no equivalent to the Académie française, to arbitrate the officially-accepted form and content of the language, so grammarians have no authority beyond what they have conferred upon themselves. In this vein, some authoritative figures (though not necessarily of grammar) have embraced the people's use of singular *they*: highly-reputable American newspaper *The Washington Post*, considered a "publication of record" meeting exceptional standards of journalism, in 2015 changed its style guide to reflect the paper's acceptance of singular *they* in its publications going forward. The Post's chief copy-editor Bill Walsh called the change "the only sensible solution to English's lack of a gender-neutral third-person singular personal pronoun. (Everyone has *their* own opinion about this.)" (Walsh 2015, emphasis in original). However, whether or not there is support from authorities, the native speakers of various Englishes will continue to innovate, and effective communication will establish the forms and features they use as accepted and unremarkable elements of their variety.

If grammaticality and acceptability are disproved as valid reasons to reject singular *they*, "since singular and plural *they* existed peacefully alongside singular and plural *you* until the late eighteenth century, the sudden proscription of singular *they* seems to have been inspired by other motives" (Altieri, 2003, p. 223, emphasis in original), and cissexism remains as the clearest motivation for alleged grammarians' objections in the twenty-first century. Singular *they* as a gender-neutral personal pronoun is most commonly used by nonbinary people, and other trans folks who are uncomfortable being referred to with pronouns that reflect the Western male-female gender binary (McCulloch & Gawne, 2016)—specifically, the place peers and strangers believe an individual has on that binary, often without respect to their actual gender. Many arguments against singular *they* seem to be a reaction to the ambiguous space it allows for queer genders, and the discomfort many cisgender people feel about this. The epicene singular *they* allows people to refer to individuals in such a way that gender is not at all salient, as opposed to the gendered third-person singular pronouns *he* and *she*, which center gender as a defining characteristic of the individual they reference. Epicene singular *they* as a personal pronoun is one

of the only pre-existing options in English for a gender-neutral singular third-person pronoun. The other is the neuter third-person singular *it*, which some queer people do use, but which many both in and outside the queer community feel is dehumanizing because *it* is almost exclusively used for nonhuman referents. "We're left with two choices: import or create a brand new [sic] epicene pronoun or legitimize the one native speakers of English have been using for over 1,000 years—singular *they*" (Altieri, 2003, p. 226, emphasis in original). Facebook now allows its users to choose from "male," "female," or "neutral" pronouns; for those who choose the latter, friends will receive messages like "Wish *them* a happy birthday!" [emphasis added]. Usage of epicene singular *they* for nonbinary individuals is growing even in mainstream media, with many pop culture characters explicitly identified as nonbinary and referred to with singular *they* pronouns (Figures 1-5). As the English-speaking world becomes more socially aware of the needs of its minority groups, there is more reason now than ever to support the usage of singular *they*, because as awareness increases, acknowledgement and acceptance must also be encouraged.

Pollution: They are one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse from Amazon Prime's 2019 *Good Omens* mini-series, an adaptation of the novel by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett. Most of the primary nonhuman characters in this series are canonically genderless, but use the pronouns associated with their gender presentation; however, Pollution is referred to by the narrator with *they* pronouns (Gaiman & Mackinnon, 2019), and has been confirmed as nonbinary by Gaiman (Neilhimself, 2019).

Figure 1. Use of singular *they* in the series *Good Omens*

Stevonnie (left), Smoky Quartz 2.0 (center), and Rainbow Quartz 2.0 (right): All are fusions (bodies and minds merged into a single amalgamation) of the male main character Steven, from Cartoon Network's *Steven Universe* cartoon, with different female-presenting characters. All three are nonbinary and use *they* pronouns; Stevonnie is also explicitly identified as intersex (Cartoon Network, 2019; Sugar, 2013).

Figure 2. Use of singular *they* in the cartoon *Steven Universe*

Syd: The love interest of one of the main characters of the Netflix sitcom *One Day at a Time*—Elena, who identifies as a lesbian—Syd is nonbinary and uses *they* pronouns. Other characters sometimes refer to them as Elena's 'girlfriend,' but Syd and Elena both use 'significant other' (Miller, 2018; Kellet & Royce, 2017).

Figure 3. Use of singular *they* in the sitcom *One Day at a Time*

Frisk: the protagonist and player character of the indie video game *Undertale*. Other characters use exclusively *they* pronouns for Frisk (Fox, 2015).

Figure 4. Use of singular *they* in the video game *Undertale*

Calliope (left) and Roxy Lalonde (right): Both characters from the popular webcomic *Homestuck* come out as nonbinary and request their friends use *they* pronouns for them in the alternate epilogue path "Meat" (Hussie, 2018).

Figure 5. Use of singular *they* in the webcomic *Homestuck*

Implications for English Language Teaching

Singular *they* is important as both a linguistic feature and a social phenomenon, and English language educators are in a prime position to strengthen support for this new old feature of the language in the classroom. Of course, English language teachers must take into consideration their students' learning context when making decisions about their course content, for any given feature of language. The clearest and most compelling reason for English language instructors to teach students that *they* can also be a singular pronoun, and encourage them to use it as such, is,

of course, that it already is one and has been for centuries. If the goal in ELT is for learners to develop communicative competence, then it would be more useful to teach learners commonly used forms and structures even if they do not adhere strictly to prescriptive grammar rules. However, a valid concern, and one shared by native English speakers, is that not following the taught rules of grammar, arbitrary though they may be, or not speaking the standard variety, difficult as it is to define, might be taken as for a lack of education or intelligence by one's audience (Altieri, 2003, p. 222; Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 57, 112). Although all varieties of English are equally efficient and functional for communication, they do receive varying levels of respect (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 12). While this is not indicative of an actual difference in linguistic value, it does affect social value. Because the imagined Standard English is considered the language of the educated (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 54-56), speaking or writing in a variety that does not align with the expectations of one's audience is likely to lead to bias. This concern is paramount in ELT because some speaker groups, not only ELLs but also native speakers of 'non-standard' English varieties, may already be subject to higher expectations of linguistic proficiency in order to prove the same level of competence as a native speaker of a more 'standard' variety, or be denigrated for their dialects (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 68). Learners and teachers must then weigh whether and when it will be more socially valuable for ELLs to speak the "language of power" (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 185) as determined by grammar rules or to make use of more native-like structures of debatable grammaticality in order to assimilate into native speaker communities. Other learner needs will also impact a teacher's choice to explicitly teach about singular *they*. For college-bound ELLs who need to develop scholarly writing skills, it is important to note that while the APA Publication Manual announced at the end of October 2019 that its seventh edition will endorse the generic use of singular *they*, both the MLA Handbook and the Chicago Manual of Style disallow generic singular *they*, for reasons of formality and grammaticality. All three however, do explicitly note that singular *they* should be used in reference to a specific individual for whom *they* is the correct personal pronoun (Lee, 2019; MLA, 2018; Chicago, 2017). For the usage of *they* as a personal pronoun, and other nonstandard personal pronouns, acceptance must be the norm in language education. It is critically important during this phase of flux in American culture for educators to create inclusive spaces in classrooms and class content, not only for those students who might be queer, and need that support, but also so that students who are not queer have the linguistic resources to respect people unlike themselves.

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