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Singular They: The Best Epicene Pronoun

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English 304: English Language

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Abstract: The English language does not possess a third person epicene pronoun, and speakers must fill the gap, most commonly with *they*. Scholars understand the implications of a gender neutral pronoun for non-binary persons, but besides linguists, they do not thoroughly examine grammatical reasons for the resistance to new pronouns. This paper addresses the grammatical issues and options available to the language. Even with minor faults, *they* is widely used in both spoken and written English and should be adopted by Standard English.

American Standard English should adopt *they* as a third person epicene pronoun, also coined a gender neutral, gender-fair, or common-gender pronoun (Adami 281, Baranoski 379). Generic *he* has persisted since the 1850 Act of Parliament that declared it so, but is *he* truly generic (Zuber and Reed 519)? The use of *he* is sexist, excluding females and people who do not fall neatly within the male-female gender binary (Strahan 17). English also lacks a third person pronoun for instances when a person's gender is unknown. To combat this void, speakers use *they*, a plural pronoun which is grammatically incorrect when referring to a singular antecedent, making the usage non-standard. There are ways to avoid gendered pronouns and many people have suggested pronouns to add to the language. Pronouns are very resistant to change, though, and for the sake of convenience, third person gender neutral *they* should be allowed in Standard English.

First, a brief grammar lesson to define terms. In English, first person pronouns include *I*, *me*, and *we*; second person pronouns include *you* and *your*; and third person pronouns include *he*, *she*, *it*, and *them*. An antecedent is a noun or subject of the sentence, and the pronoun takes the place of the antecedent.

For example, in the sentence "Jamie bought her shirt at the store," the antecedent is *Jamie* and the pronoun is *her*. Grammatically, gender is a noun class, or a way to distinguish nouns. Unlike Spanish where words are feminine or masculine, English does not have grammatical gender but refers to humans and animals, which are animate, based on perceived gender (Adami 282). Sex is determined by biology and based on the male-female binary, but people who are intersex are born with both or neither sex characteristics fall between the spectrum (For term definitions, see Appendix 1). Socially constructed gender is separate from sex, and each individual chooses how to express gender. People who choose to express non-heteronormative genders refer to themselves as genderqueer or gender fluid, loosely meaning on the spectrum or changing across the spectrum, respectively. Since some do not characterize themselves as male or female because of their biology and others decide to express a gender different from their sex or outside the male-female spectrum, I will use the term *non-binary* throughout this paper.

First, why is *they* the best option for an epicene pronoun? *They* already exists in the language, so speakers are accustomed to hearing and using it. The scholars I cite examined texts from at least the seventies for pronoun usage; although *they* is rarely found in formal writing due to Standard English's proscriptions, their research shows uses of *he*, *she*, and he-she combinations, called paired pronouns, which can be awkward. Singular *they* dates back to the fourteenth century, and he was never fully accepted into informal language

(Baranowski 379, LaScotte 76). *They* has been used for six hundred years by authors including William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and Emily Dickens making it the "most natural candidate," (Darr and Kibbey 80, Zuber and Reed 520). *They* is commonplace for speakers and with more acceptance, especially by Standard English and style books, the gap in the language would be filled.

Zuber and Reed claimed pronoun usage doubles as a political statement and examined grammar handbooks' usages and rationales. Handbooks possess power to control the language in their attempts to conserve certain aspects without regard to language evolution. When a language changes to meet the needs of its speakers, prescriptive grammarians and their "bibles" refuse to budge. In the 1960s and '70s, grammarians and educators explained the implications of using *they* and the options available to writers as they came to a certain acceptance of the pronoun. However, in the '80s and '90s, they returned to prescriptivism. For example, *Little, Brown Handbook* declared *they* as "wrong" in 1986 although a previous edition stated the pronoun only contradicted readers' expectations (Zuber and Reed 525). Handbook authors continue to support class and gender divisions in language and perpetuate linguistic discrimination through similar proscriptions (Zuber and Reed 526).

In retaliations against grammarians, *they* supporters claimed *he* was as ungrammatical as singular *they*; while *they* does not match the antecedent's number, *he* does not match the gender (Adami 283). They reminded

grammarians of the historical evolution of second person pronouns where *thou* was singular and *you* was plural and the fact that tenses condensed or disappeared through language change (Adami 283). Adami analyzed corpora of academic texts in an attempt to determine which pronouns were used and how frequently, since academic texts must cater to popular prescriptions of the time and editors. Before the "He/She Battle" of the '60s and '70s, generic *he* was the most popular pronoun. After the battle, *he* usages dropped considerably, while *s/he* rose. However, generic *she* still has not gained much notoriety except with stereotypical female roles such as *shopper* (Adami 290, 291). Her research proves that as a result of a conflict over sexist language, prescriptions and proscriptions have changed and are reflected in written English. *S/he* was the most common gender neutral pronoun, which is not as cumbersome as the full *she or he*, but in time may fall behind *they* for greater convenience still. In the 1990s, the American Psychological Association, Modern Language Association, American Medical Association, American Marketing Association, and Association of American University Presses instructed writers to avoid masculine constructions when referring to men and women, and the Chicago Manual of Style even endorsed *they* (Madson and Hessling 559-560, 571).

Of course, in informal language, *they* reigns. LaScotte conducted a survey for native English speakers to examine which pronouns participants used for the antecedent *student*. In the language, there are methods to avoid gender and awkward paired pronouns, including the use of *one* and *oneself*, repetition of the

antecedent, use of second person pronouns, and pluralization of the antecedent (See Appendix 2). First, the participant wrote an opinion on a great student, which would reveal the person's true usage of a particular pronoun and consistency. The remainder of the survey asked which pronouns sound best in formal and informal contexts, and *they* won, especially for informal situations. Opposition included the opinions that *he* is used for males and females, *she* is exclusive to males, and paired pronouns are cumbersome. Although several participants stated *they* is ungrammatical in formal language because it is plural, many reiterated its gender inclusion of women and non-binary people. Additionally, singular *they* is an important component of tag questions. In a sentence containing an indefinite pronoun like *anyone* or *everyone, they* is preferential to *he* (521). For example, the second sentence may sound awkward to most speakers, especially in informal speech.

> No one can disagree with us on this, can they?
> No one can disagree with us on this, can he? (521)

They is not flawless, and the reasons why style guides are reluctant to accept the pronoun are valid. A common way to avoid pronoun antecedent mismatching is pluralization. If a writer makes the antecedent plural, he can use the pronoun *they*, but the sentence's meaning can become unclear if the sentence contains multiple plural nouns like the example from Frank and Treichler: "Readers' perceptions of alternating text may be attractive to authors, depending on their goals" (Madson and Hessling 571). To whose goals is the sentence referencing? They can also alter the meaning of a sentence that "refers

exclusively to a singular referent" (Madson and Hessling 571). Still, I believe the advantages of the pronoun outweigh these issues.

Although this paper examines American English, examining other dialects' pronoun usage and inclusive language is useful. Since Australia changed the words in its national anthem from "Australian sons" to "Australians all" in 1984, inclusive language has been encouraged, and style books hold that singular *they* is correct "specifically to avoid using a gendered pronoun" or the repetition of *he or she* (Strahan 17, 20). She noted that Australians use *they* even when the gender (Strahan uses *sex*) of the referent is known because it may be irrelevant to the sentence or it may keep the referent anonymous (19, 22). Strahan makes a distinction that words can be dual- or triple-gendered if *he* and *she* can be used as pronouns or *he*, *she*, and *it*, respectively (18). First year university students were examined by Strahan and found to use *they* even in formal writing (18). From over a hundred papers, seventeen used *they*, but the usage was limited to the abstract, introduction, and methodology sections (22). The topic was child language acquisition, so students introduced the children they studied and used *they* to refer to *child*. Because child is triple-gendered, the correct gender-neutral pronoun was *it*, but *it* refers to inanimate objects, so the students used *they*. Strahan concluded *they* is common in Australian English not only as a third person plural and a third person singular pronoun, but as a "third person 'gender not relevant to discussion' pronoun" (27).

Currently, *they* is the best epicene pronoun because it is the most common and new pronouns have only been temporary. Thus, students should be taught gender inclusive language and preferred gender pronouns, or pronouns chosen by an individual, especially when the individual does not want to be referred as male or female. Gender inclusive language would teach elementary and middle schoolers respect and equality, while high school and college students should learn the grammatical aspects of epicene pronouns, including current usages of *they*, style guides' proscriptions, and the methods to avoid the pronoun. English educators shared their views and instructional beliefs on an online forum where Smagorinsky said the "problem can be overcome with persistence," just as the title Ms. evolved (Bystricky). Women wanted a term not based on marital status like Mrs. and Miss, and through continual assertion, Ms. became popular (Bystricky). LaScotte demanded English language learners also be taught the use of *they*, describing it as "an important aspect of descriptive language" (76). Educators should not only create a basis for correct Standard English, but demonstrate that in informal situations or for non-binary people, *they* is acceptable.

English does have other options besides *they*. The language's style guides and grammarians can attempt to keep it where it is, but speakers will help it evolve. Paired pronouns can be used more widely or grammarians could rule *she* an epicene pronoun. Adami iterated since *he* is a generic pronoun, it does not necessarily produce a male referent, or an image in the reader or listener's

mind of a male (301). *They* functions similarly by not concretely producing a male or female, but rather an androgynous figure or the preference of the reader or listener (301). However, *she* is a "marked term" that definitively produces a female referent and prevents the pronoun from being generic, but I disagree (Adami 301, Madson and Hessling 569). If a person generally imagines a referent similar to his or her gender, because gender is how the person expresses himself or herself rather than sex, a person identifying as female will picture a female and a male will picture a male. Each time I saw *he* in my life, I pictured a female, therefore causing *he* to become generic. If I can imagine a female for *he*, I believe males can imagine males for *she*, and society could render *she* a generic pronoun.

Rather than ditching *he* completely, alternating text is gaining popularity, especially in studies to determine perceived gender bias. Alternating text utilizes *he* and *she* separately throughout the piece, attempting to avoid sexist language, paired pronouns, and *they*. In Madson and Hessling's research, they stated feminine pronouns can only be used for females, and feminine pronouns are atypical in gender-neutral contexts, making feminine pronouns prominent and creating female bias in alternating text (562). In the study, a second text that used paired pronouns was perceived as somewhat favoring males, but still less gender-biased than the alternating text (569). Madson and Hessling mused that paired pronouns are the effect of an author deliberately trying not to be sexist, and the participants inferred the author was not biased rather perceived no bias

(570). Readers generally assume the author is female if female pronouns are used, but if alternating text were to be used more commonly, especially by men, it could be a viable alternative to sole *he* (567, 568).

New pronouns are also appearing, including a few from other languages like *hen* from Sweden, although none were officially accepted or retained in English (Baranowski 379, Braw; For a list of possible pronouns, see Appendix 3). Students at Mills College created personal pronouns and changed the school's chant to be inclusive, but new pronouns are used in isolation by a few people and do not gain full acceptance (Leff). Professors did not want to blatantly discourage students from using these pronouns but were irritated at the use in academic papers (Leff). Some proposed pronouns are too outrageous like *ghach*, or foolish like *h'orsh'it*. *H'orsh'it* is a humorous combination of *he*, *she*, and *it*, but it is not suitable for use in public or around children. More basic pronouns like *E* or *ze* still logically face opposition for the concerns they raise. Will one pronoun be used or will it be conjugated like *he/his/him/himself*? Who decides which pronoun or pronouns will be officially integrated into the language? Grammatically, pronouns are function words, while vocabulary and slang are content words. Content words are continually added to the language, but function words are rarely added. Anyone can create her own pronoun, but actually adding one to the language will be difficult, and that is simply for one! Adding multiple pronouns would undoubtedly fail. Sweden integrated *hen* into two nurseries in 2012, prompting other nurseries, schools, and European countries to participate in inclusion (Leff).

Using an epicene pronoun with younger children shapes their views of the world and creates a generation of speakers who use the pronoun. In addition to *hen*, use children rather than boys and girls, and children's books even feature gender-neutral characters (Leff). The goal is to combat labels and division in general, not solely sexist language; many supporters also believe toys and clothing are not gendered (Leff). Sweden's plan worked because it created policies at the nurseries, and they pronoun was taught to young children. In America, policies could work, and teaching gender inclusive language to young children in nurseries, preschools, and schools by teachers and parents would likely cause new pronoun usage to increase.

Twin Oaks is an intentional community founded in Virginia in 1967 that incorporates feminist values into their rules (Flanigan 31, 27). The residents resist sexism by using *co*, a third person pronoun created with a goal of "ceasing to use masculine pronouns generically, not [of] replacing gendered pronouns entirely" (Flanigan 34). Residents, or Oakers, are expected to use gendered pronouns when gender is known, but use *co* to reinforce their feminist beliefs (34). The bylaws state *co* means *he or she*, *cos* means *hers or his*, and *coself* or *co's self* means *herself or himself* (Flanigan 31, 33). Since the founding of the community, *co*'s usage has widened. *Co* functions to keep a person's identity or gender confidential and to replace the suffix *-man* as in "*snowco*" to dispel the norm that objects, like *cowgirl boots* that are now *cowco boots*, are not inherently gendered (Flanigan 32, 35-36). Additionally, some Oakers allow *co* to replace

generic nouns such as *person* (Flanigan 38). This community serves as an example of people banding together to combat sexist language, and it proves with conscious thought, people can change pronouns in their thoughts and language.

He is losing popularity because it is exclusive while *they* is gaining momentum. *They* is a large feature of descriptive language that needs to be taught to native and non-native speakers. Languages change, and English has a serious gap that speakers are trying to fill. For clarity, the language can accept a new pronoun or for convenience, *they* should be adopted into Standard English.

Appendices

Appendix 1:

- Gender fluid: A person who does not identify with a single fixed gender; a person who has or expresses a fluid or unfixed gender identity ("Glossary of Terms").

- Genderqueer: Genderqueer people possess identities which fall outside of the widely accepted sexual binary ("LGBT Terms and Definitions").

- Intersex: A person whose sexual anatomy or chromosomes do not fit with the traditional markers of "female" and "male" ("LGBT Terms and Definitions").

- Non-binary: Describes a gender identity that is neither female nor male or beyond the traditional concepts of female and male ("Trans, Genderqueer, and Queer Terms Glossary").

Appendix 2:

To avoid gender or paired pronouns, a writer can use:

- One: To be an ideal student, one must be committed to learning and challenging oneself.

- Repetition of the antecedent: To be an ideal student, a student must be committed to learning and challenging the student's self.

- Second person pronouns: To be an ideal student, you must be committed to learning and challenging yourself.

- Pluralization of antecedent: To be ideal students, they must be committed to learning and challenging themselves. (LaScotte 66)

Appendix 3:

a/un/a's, ala/alum/alis, ae

co, che/chis/chim, e, en/ens/enself, en/es/ar, ey/eir/em/eirs/eirself, et/ets/etself,

E/E's/Em, e/ris/rim, de/deis, den/din, fm, ghach

heshe, han, hann, herm, ho, hir, hiser, hizer, heesh/hizzer/himmer, hse, hie, ha,

hesh, heer, he-she, him-her, his-her, her'er/him'er/his'er, heris, herim, heor,

hisor, himor, hie/hiez, ho/hom/hos/himself, h'orsh'it, hi, himorher, heshe, har,

ha/hez/hem, hey, hon, hen

ip, ith, ir/iro/im, je, jhe, jee, kin, le, liser, lim, lerm, lers, mef

na/nan/naself, ne/nem/nir/nirs/nemself, nis/ner, nim, ons, per, po

se/ser/sim/simself, she/shis/shim, shey/shem/sheir, se/sis/sim, shem, su, she'er,

thon, thone, thir, ta, tey/term/tem, tha/thar/them, uh

ve/vis/ver/verself, ws/wself, xie, xe/xem/xyr/xyrs/xemself ye, yo, z, zon,

ze/zir/zirs/zirself

(Baron)

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