

The Issue of the English Singular Epicene Personal
Pronoun: Beginnings, Historical Debates and Usage, and Evolution

by Cheryl Anne Ruebner, 2010

The issue of the genderless singular third-person pronoun in English is a long and complicated one. For centuries such pronouns not only existed, but were used freely in spoken and written dialect as well as standard language. However, the end of the 18th century and the middle of the 19th century saw, for the first major time in English-language history, a development of a conflict between “the logic of grammatical ‘authorities’ and that of native speakers” (Wales 110). Since this time, the debate over what is proper has continued, with supposed authorities maintaining the importance of standardized grammatical regulation. However, by examining the historical usages of both standard and non-standard epicene pronouns, the etymology of these pronouns, and present-day analyses of usages and attitudes, it becomes clear that, like all aspects of language, change and variation are the rule, not the exception, and that the true determiner of what is “right” or “proper” in a language is above all the native speakers’ common use.

A Condensed Historical Framework for the Regulation of the Epicene Pronoun

We begin in the late 18th century in order to situate the modern reader: any student of English language or grammar is aware of the controversy over the proper usages of the singular epicene personal pronoun. It is important to point out, however, that this debate did not always exist. The prescriptive manual *Murray’s Grammar* of 1795 was the first time the singular *they* was protested (Baranowski 379): “Of this rule there are many violations to be met with... [such

as] ‘Can any one, on *their* entrance into the world, be fully secure that they shall not be deceived?’” (Murray 96, italics and brackets mine). About fifty years later, demonstrating the swiftness with which this prescription became the norm, an act of British Parliament in 1850 made *he* the official epicene pronoun, eliminating *they* as even a possibility under the law. By 1906, most American grammar books and guides followed suit, asserting *he* as the proper form and “condemning” *he or she* (Baranowski 379).

Historical Instances of the singular they

Despite these prescriptive recommendations and enforcements against the use of the singular *they*, revered canonical authors have used it throughout literary history. This brings up the question of whether the “rule” is valid at all. A more radical stance would be that grammar rules are irrelevant, and that the only valid references for what is permissible are, first, the usages exhibited by respected masters of the language, and the usages observable in populations.

Regardless of one’s opinion on its validity, one cannot dispute textual evidence of the use of the singular *they* (and its declensions). Chaucer uses the construction as far back as the 14th century: “And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich fame/They wol come up and offer in Goddes name” (442). Chesterfield’s usage from 1759 is quoted in the OED: If a person is born of a..gloomy temper..they cannot help it (“They, pers. Pron.”) Shakespeare uses it at least twice: Once in *The Rape of Lucrece*, “Euery one to rest themselues [ed. 1594 himselfe] betake,” and once in *Comedy of Errors IV.3*, “There's not a man I meet but doth salute me,/As if I were their well-acquainted friend.” Oscar Wilde and C.S. Lewis are more contemporary literary examples: “Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes” and “She kept her head and kicked her

shoes off, as everybody ought to do who falls into deep water in their clothes,” respectively. One author who is known for using constructions of singular *they* quite extensively is Jane Austen, tallying a total of 87 times in her entire body of work. (“List of examples”). Also notable are non-literary usages, such as the 1848 usage in a publication still in circulation today, *Vanity Fair*: “A person can’t help their birth” (Pemberton). That such examples have been noted in reference and research would indicate that they are anomalous, however, even if this is so, anomaly does not automatically point to incorrectness. Especially in post-1850 British examples, the usage could be attributed to writers’ intent to flout prescriptive conventions, or possibly to use the construction to create a more conversational tone or mood, as the singular *they* has almost without variation been more common and acceptable in spoken English.

Speech

In some English dialects, gender-neutral personal pronouns persist even today, despite the fact that they are considered non-standard. Nevertheless, their existence is worth pointing out, as they demonstrate not only English’s inherent history of and capacity for gender-neutral singular pronouns. Baron glosses the history of the evolution of these pronouns. He cites William H. Marshall, who in 1789 noted *ou*, “expressing either *he* will, *she* will, or *it* will.” He notes that *ou* evolved from Middle English *a*, which, according to the OED, was used for all three genders in the third person singular, all three genders in the third person plural, and additionally, the first person singular (197-8). This Middle English pronoun fused the Old English third person masculine and plural singular pronouns *he* and *heo*, which became “almost or wholly

indistinguishable in pronunciation” (OED qtd. in Baron 197). The pronoun *she* developed seemingly, in response to this ambiguity, to “maintain gender distinctions” (Baron 197).

Some of the forms in which these gender-neutral pronouns remain in various British dialects today are the following: *a* and *un*, *hoo* and *u* (which are direct remnants of Old English *heo*). In some of the relevant dialects they are even considered completely interchangeable with the supposed gender specific pronouns, an aspect that might have existed in the original Middle English dialects (Baron 197-8).

The issue of the use of the singular *they* in modern speech is important to touch upon due to languages’ tendency to exhibit changes in speech before the written word adopts them. It is also important to note that what a population prescribes often is contradicted by its actual use. For example, in 1978, the majority of University of Oregon faculty was shown to consider the singular *they* as “non-standard.” However, half of these people used it in conversational speech with the researcher. The researcher suggested the possibility that this usage, common in speech, might eventually become accepted in written English. (Baranowski 381)

Neutral singular pronoun in formal writing

During the last quarter of the 20th century, many studies were done in analysis of the use of epicene pronouns in formal, that is, any published and/or academic, writing. A 1977 study of high school academic writing, mostly for English classes, found that about 25% of the writers used singular *they* to refer to “common-gender antecedents” (Baranowski 381). If one assumes that high school-aged writers often write as they speak, this indicates that the singular *they* is a common spoken usage that has carried itself over from youth spoken language to that age

group's writing. Operating on the assumption that colloquialism and spoken speech evolve into standard written usage over time, we can presume that this usage, as opposed to the prescriptive *he*, is becoming more standard in formal and academic writing across the board. Within only 13 years, academic writing showed a 100% increase in the use of singular *they*: A 1990 study done with Minnesota University students showed that students that among students that did not use avoidance strategies, the uses of singular *they* and prescriptive *he* were equally divided (382). Studies of publicly published writing outside of school settings further support this hypothesis.

Between 1971 and 1979, the American press (as according to a representative cross-section) was shown to have decreased considerably in its use of the prescriptive *he*. Common alternatives used were "*he or she* and similar forms" and "pluralisation of the subject." It is unclear whether the singular *they* was used, as they were not actively looked for (Baranowski 381-2). However, between 1971 and 1979, the singular *they* was found five times in three articles of *The Times Literary Supplement*. These instances were weighted toward the end of the timeline, however, happening all 1975 and after, showing a trend toward increased use over time. (381, 391) These occurrences present in such a highly respected literary publication is quite notable. This trend was not limited to literary publications, though - Baranowski notes that "the singular *they* is...the most favored pronoun in the American corpus [of *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*], as it constitutes the largest group (42%)" (391-2, brackets mine) Journalistic style sheets are commonly known to be concerned with a combination of efficient use of page space, consistency, ease of understanding, and a general pragmatic to-the-point tone. With singular *they* becoming preferred by journalistic publications,

we can only conclude that this pronoun increasingly fits the pragmatic efficiency-based needs of journalistic grammar more than prescriptive *he*.

A 2002 study of a 860,000-word corpus of *The Independent*, the London-based newspaper, found an astounding 68% of singular pronouns used generically to be *they*. *He* was used about 20% of the time, *he or she* 8%, and *she* 3%. The antecedent was shown to make a difference in these percentages, however. It was used 88% of the time in conjunction with antecedents such as *somebody* and *everybody*. Terms such as these are as gender-non-specific as one can get – they cannot be stereotyped or marked unless placed within a determining context (Baranowski 385-7). This seems to be because of the possibility of semantic plurality inherent in such words (even *somebody*, which has a singular referent, contains the possibility of the referent being one of any plural number of people). In other words, despite their singular declinations, the words conjure up an infinite number of potential people. Some of them could even arguably be naturally plural, specifically any with the prefix *every-*. (Evans qtd. in Baron 195). This percentage went down, however, to 50% when singular nouns that could be stereotyped in terms of gender were used. Some of the nouns in question were *general practitioner*, *composer*, *[financial] broker*, *coach*, *child*, and *housekeeper*. The only noun of this list that was referred to by a pronoun other than *he* was *housekeeper*. The singular *they* was used often, but often cases involving quantifiers, a singular noun applying universally, or reflexives: *each [sports] player*, *a fairly average PR woman*, and *a fool...themselves* serve as examples of each category, respectively (Baranowski 389-380).

What is the modern public's interpretive reaction of inherent gender bias when alternate epicene pronouns are used?

Madson and Hessling found in 1999 that the use of alternating *he* and *she* indicated to 56.9% of test subjects that the author was female, whereas the use of *he or she* seemed to be written by a woman only 26.9% of the time. Despite this, the majority of the test subjects felt that *he or she* was the most gender-neutral, displaying no favor toward either gender. The researchers suggest that this might be due to more frequent use of *he or she* as paired pronouns intended to avoid sexist language. Thus it is possible that the readers were able to recognize the usage as being intentionally gender-neutral in comparison with the less frequent alternated pronoun (569-70). One can conclude that the more commonplace a given gender-neutral pronoun construction, the less gender-bias is perceived in the construction; however, male-centric sociological mindset still assumes the male default in terms of authorship.

Avoidance strategies

A writer concerned with maintaining a neutral and unbiased image to readers can enlist certain techniques and practices in grammar and syntax. These are particularly useful when writing to an audience that could pass judgment on the writer's gender politics. According to Madson and Hessling, there are four ways that an author or speaker can avoid using the prescriptive pronoun *he*:

1. Use paired constructions (e.g. *he and she* or *s/he*)
2. Rephrase the text to avoid pronoun use at all

3. Rephrase the text to use a plural construction
4. Use the singular *they* (obviously this is quite a problematic option, as discussed prior)

One possibility that Madson and Hessling fail to mention is *one*. However, Baron explains that this pronoun suffers from a stigma, especially in American English, of being “pedantic” (192). Aside from very formal or academic writing, the use of *one* might be perceived as pretentious, especially when used in conversational speech. Despite this, it remains a useful, and common pronoun, albeit more appropriate when indicating a universal “someone” or “anyone,” as the colloquial “royal” *you* does.

In comparing British and American variation in usage, Baranowski is of the opinion that Americans take more care to use avoidance strategies than their British counterparts, noting that they used singular epicene pronouns only half as often in news publications during the 1970s (as discussed above). However, when epicene pronouns are used, Americans tend to favor *he or she* whereas the British favor *they* (394).

Proposals and Neologisms

Efforts to popularize new or derivative epicene pronouns did not, as might be assumed by a modern English speaker, begin only during the 20th century feminist movement. In fact, “proposals to revise the pronoun system appeared as early as the mid 19th century,” but these early proposals were not based in feminism at all – they were rather intended for “clarity and elegance” of language (Baranowski 379).

One of the earliest examples of neologistic epicene pronoun use that could be read as having been ground in feministic interests comes from a transcription of a speech given by Mrs. Ella Young, a Chicago school superintendent, to a meeting of school principals:

A principal should so conduct his'er school so that all pupils are engaged in something that is profitable to him'er and where the pupil is required to use knowledge in school in accomplishing his'er task...I don't see how one can map out the work for the fifth or sixth grade when he'er has always done the work in the grades above or below. (Baron 209)

It is unclear historically what Mrs. Ella Young's motivation was in using such an unconventional epicene pronoun, especially in light of her explanation: "...all you have to do to make the common pronoun is to take the masculine form and add '*er*'" (Baron 210). However, considering her position of power working outside the home as a school superintendent, it is reasonable to assume that she had inclinations toward feministic progress and equality. Also, purposely avoiding outright feminist agenda would have protected her against attacks from local critics, colleagues, and citizens who could have used such a stance against her. Looking back on the gender culture of the time from a modern perspective, it seems that Ella Young's skirting-around of feminist rhetoric was a smart career move in affected neutrality.

Suggestions for a "new" gender-neutral pronoun came come from many fronts throughout English history. Baron lists just a few: "...borrowings (French *on*, *le*, and *en*, as well as Old Norse *hann*), blends (*thon*, *he'er*; *shem*), clippings (*e*, *per*), and root creations (*na*, *ip*)" (196-7). *Thon*, supposedly the "most widely publicized" epicene neologism, was created in

1884 by Charles Crozat Converse in the interest of rapid ease of use. It is a blend of *that* and *one*, and purposely begins with *th* to reflect the beginning of *they*, enabling potential adoption of the pronoun to be easier “euphonically.” The pronoun was even accepted by Funk and Wagnall’s *Standard Dictionary* in 1898, remaining there until 1964 (Baron 200-202). However, the OED entry for *thon* does not indicate any historical use of the word used as a personal pronoun. Taking into account this lack even in the vast extensiveness of the OED, it is reasonable to conclude that *thon*’s life as an actively-used pronoun was short lived.

The time period of 1971 to 1979, referenced earlier as a span in which the singular *they* saw an increase in use in news publication, also saw a massive upsurge in the amount of proposed artificial, derivative, and borrowed epicene pronouns. According to Baron’s chronology of proposed epicene pronouns, there were at least 38 sets. This frequency is in stark contrast with only 23 sets in the preceding 121 years, and only 8 from 1979 until 1985, the date of the book’s publication. The connection to the cultural, social and political feminist movement that was so prevalent during this decade cannot be understated. Gender bias and the suppression of the feminine were issues in the forefront of culture during this decade, arguably moreso than in any recent time period, and linguistic issues were no exception. The sources given for some of the suggested proposals (on pages 206-208) attest to this:

1972 *tey, term, tem, him/herself*. Casey Miller and Kate Swift, “What about New Human Pronouns?”

1973 *It’s/he*. “A Woman’s New World Dictionary.”

1974 *she* (includes *he*). Gena Corea, “Frankly Feminist,” reprinted as “How to Eliminate the Clumsy “He.”

1976 *he or she*, to be written as *(s)he*. Elizabeth Lane Beardsley, “Referential Genderization,” *Women and Philosophy*.

General Statements on the invalidity and validity of singular they

Common statements arguing against the use of singular *they* are summarized well by Baranowski: “the costs of prescribing *they* are too serious to warrant recommendation: ambiguity, loss of precision, distancing and dehumanizing connotations, and a possible disruption for the plural dimension in English” (380).

Despite prescriptive manuals, legal motions, and debates within various discourses, there has been a consistent active string of defense of the singular *they*. Wales points out that

lay native speakers...show an overwhelming preference for it in contemporary spoken English, non-formal written English and an ever-widening spread of non-informal written registers, from journalism to administration and academic writing. (125-6)

One analyst, Newman, even claimed in 1992 that the singular *they* is the predominant form present in English today (Baranowski 385). Some style sheets and canonical references officially consider the usage as grammatically correct and permissible: as of 1993, the Chicago Manual of Style and the American Heritage Dictionary both approved of the singular *they* as an acceptable and standard usage (Madson and Hessling 561).

Besides official approval, it is also important to look at the opinion of laymen. The internet allows us not only to study formal and informal written text, but it exposes us to the thoughts of those who truly determine what language is, the thoughts of the speakers of the

everyday language in question. A blog writer's sentiment is brusque but effective: "But you're just making a fool of yourself when you go around telling users of singular they that they're wrong, because they're not." The writer uses valid arguments (historical usage, acceptance by authorities, singular/plural syntactical disagreement, inherent male-centricity of *he*), some similar to those I've used, to support the claim, further strengthening it. This opinion, and opinions of common speakers of the language in general, is notable simply because true language change happens from within, through common use that spreads outward.

Conclusions

Considering all of the historical efforts to create and integrate new epicene pronouns into the English lexicon, as well as efforts to extend the accepted usage of the plural *they* to the singular, there has been at best active resistance and at worst complete failure, as evident, for example, by the complete lack of even a single reference to the personal pronoun *thon* in the OED. Baron points out that

...it is difficult for new pronouns which arise naturally, like *its*, to make their way into the paradigm. It is more difficult still for an artificial pronoun to succeed. Despite the popularity of he-she blends with word coiners, their acceptance by the general public is further hampered by the fact that *hesh*, *himmer*, and *himher* are American slang terms for the effeminate male. (Berry and Van den Bark 1942, 372, qtd. in Baron).

However, some critics are optimistic for singular *they* making its way into accepted use, not just common use. Baranowski states, "singular *they* is now the predominant form. *He* is being used less and less, and is now probably demoted to very formal contexts." (395). Today's

youth generation and its colloquial speech and writing is observable in any public or digital arena as supporting this claim. In fact, there are movements in some youth cultures that have not only forsaken the masculine-centric *he*, but have completely broken apart the gender binary inherent in the *he/she/neuter* formula used throughout English history. The use of the Spivak gender in online virtual reality fantasy communities is one such example (Dery). Also, as possibly one of the most successful redefinitions of gender pronouns, the transgender community has created a system of new “[personal] pronouns ...[including] “ze” instead of “he” or “she”; “hir” instead of “him” or “her” (Bernstein). Despite these pronouns’ thus-far restriction to this one community, that the pronouns have caught on and achieved common and accepted use within that community at large is an indication that, given time, new epicene pronouns, or even more likely, the common-but-still-frowned-upon singular *they* could eventually become standard.

Language and pronouns are not only experiencing this sort of splitting and elaboration – the movement toward simplification of spelling due to technology is a topic on the minds of grammarians, linguists, and scholars of English today. O’Conner and Kellerman, New York Times Magazine writers, believe that, through technological media that, through character limits, the interest of simplicity, and logistical difficulties, media like Twitter might be integral in the evolution of *they* into an even more commonly-used and accepted pronoun than it is presently.

What can we predict based on the evidence and information uncovered here? It would not be unreasonable to predict that singular *they* will eventually evolve completely and universally into a gender-neutral third person singular pronoun. Similar evolutions have occurred in the history of the English language. For example, *you*, originally only used to indicate the

plural, is now used universally in the singular (Baron 193). Perhaps, through modern cultural and technological changes, we will see a condensing of the forms into a *they* applicable to both singular and plural nouns. It's also possible that the pronoun lexicon will expand with anti-gender-binary movements becoming more socially influential. Either way, as is the only guarantee with the dynamic and fluid nature of language, we can safely say that the evolution will continue.

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