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Exploring the use of the ‘they’ pronouns singularly in English

Standard English textbooks state that when the gender of a referent is unknown, the default pronoun to be used is the masculine one, and that such usage is actually gender-neutral. A common example in textbooks is “*Everyone* must bring *his* book to class.” Today, however, this usage does not in the mind of some speakers truly convey an image of both males and females being included. Instead, it sounds like the class is filled with only males.

Several strategies have been suggested and used to try to avoid usage that some feel sounds sexist. The most commonly used method in somewhat formal settings is to say *his or her*. This has had fairly widespread acceptance, but it can be quite cumbersome when used multiple times: “A student should bring *his or her* book to class if *he or she* wishes to use it during *his or her* test so that *he or she* may get a better grade on *his or her* report card.” A few writers have chosen to alternate between using *he* gender-neutrally and using *she* gender-neutrally, but this has not become very popular and certainly doesn’t occur in everyday speech. In writing, some people use a composite form, such as *(s)he*, *s/he*, or *he/she*, or the genitive *his/her*, but these forms are not used in speech. Writing is usually expected to reflect speech, but in this case, it does not. In fact, it is actually hard to express the composite form *(s)he* verbally when reading it, as I just tried to do. A very common method of handling the gender-neutral pronouns is to avoid them completely. This is done by making the antecedent plural, as in “*Students* must bring *their* books to class.”

There is one other method of expressing gender-neutrality – the use of the singular *they*. Though frowned upon by prescriptive grammars and avoided in formal writing, it is possibly the most common method used in everyday speech, and it has been used since the times of Middle English. It is common when the antecedent is *everyone, someone, anyone, or no one*. For example, “Has *anyone* brought *their* camera?” or “*Someone* has left *their* book on the table.” It is also somewhat common when the antecedent is a common noun, as in this example: “A *journalist* should not be forced to reveal *their* sources.”

A typical chart for the third person pronouns in English would appear as follows:

Number	Gender	Nominative		Accusative		Genitive		Reflexive
		Plain		Plain		dependent	independent	Plain
singular	masculine	<i>he</i>		<i>him</i>		<i>his</i>		<i>himself</i>
singular	feminine	<i>she</i>		<i>her</i>		<i>her</i>	<i>hers</i>	<i>herself</i>
singular	neuter		<i>it</i>			<i>its</i>		<i>itself</i>
plural		<i>they</i>		<i>them</i>		<i>their</i>	<i>theirs</i>	<i>themselves</i>

(source: Huddleston and Pullum, p. 426)

It is interesting to note that when any form of the pronoun *they* is used singularly, the subject-verb agreement will not agree in number, so the verb will still conjugate like a plural. For example: “*One student* in the class got an F. I bet *they are* not happy about that.” This is similar to what happened in English when the pronoun *you* became used singularly, replacing the former singular pronoun *thou*.

In addition to using forms of *they* when uncertain of gender, these forms may also be used to hide gender, as in this example: “A *friend of mine* asked me to go help *them* with an assignment.”

I have recently encountered several instances of the singular *they*, so following are some real-life examples. On a printed advertisement for a Billy Graham program: “Share the love of Jesus Christ with *someone* you care about. Encourage *them* to watch the one-hour Billy Graham

telecasts in March!” From the KCET television program *Psychology: The Human Experience*, I selected three examples out of dozens of instances: “Your reaction to *a person* depends on your perceptions of *them*.”, “You look at *their* hair and judge what kind of *person they* might be.”, and “We’re looking at everything about *the person* from *their* appearance to...” A high school English teacher who did not want her books lent to students wrote the following on the substitute teacher’s lesson plans (I was the substitute teacher): “If any student tells you *he/she* does not have one, please do not loan *them* one of mine because my book will disappear.” Even though the teacher attempted to use one of the other methods of expressing a third person gender neutral singular, she still used a form of the singular *they*.

In some instances, the word *one* may act as a third person singular, such as, “*One* can’t be too careful in these matters, can *one*?”, which would be analogous to “*A person* can’t be too careful in these matters, can *they*?” However, there are many instances when the word *one* cannot be used, such as the impossible sentence, **“A politician* shouldn’t take *oneself* too seriously.” In such an instance, one of the other third person gender-neutral singular strategies must be employed. The use of the word *one* is also becoming less and less common. Just consider this, for example: “*One* sounds quite strange when *one* speaks this way, doesn’t *one*?” as opposed to: “*A person* sounds quite strange when *they* speak this way, don’t *they*?”

Different languages make different choices as to how to express third person gender-neutral singular pronouns, and some languages don’t even have pronouns at all. English lacks a word whose primary meaning is that of a third person gender-neutral singular pronoun. The singular use of the various forms of *they* is clearly a secondary meaning. Speakers and writers of English currently have several strategies to express third person gender-neutral singular pronouns. The singular *they* has been used since Middle English times and has therefore passed

the test of time to show that it is an integral part of English. Scores of authors and works may be cited as using the singular forms of *they*, including Shakespeare: “and every one to rest *themselves* betake.” In its main entry for the word *they*, the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary says, “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.”

The other strategies used to avoid Standard English’s seemingly sexist use of forms of *he* as third person gender-neutral singular pronouns have been relatively recently employed, largely due to the resistance of prescriptive Standard English to accept the singular *they*. Aside from the awkwardness inherent in these other strategies to avoid sounding sexist, there is actually still a hint of sexism remaining in them. This is because in the various forms, such as *his or her*, *he or she*, *he/she*, and so on, it is always the masculine version that comes first. No native speaker would say **her or his*, or **she or he* (although some writers do actually use *her or his*, but only for effect). If, therefore, the goal is to avoid sounding sexist, these methods seem to be self-defeating.

Among the competing strategies to express third person gender-neutral singulars, one strategy may or may not eventually become accepted as the standard for Standard English. For the time being, the singular *they* is the preference for many English speakers, and based on the evidence, I would suggest acceptance of the singular *they* before recommending any of the alternative strategies thus far employed.

References

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