SINGULAR SPECIFIC 'THEY' IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Although the singular pronoun 'they' has been used in English since the 14th century (Balhorn, 2004), prescriptivist censure from the 1800s continues to colour discussions today (Bodine, 1975). Previous literature shows that singular 'they' is highly prevalent for nonspecific, singular referents (Balhorn, 2004), as well as specific singular referents of an unknown gender (LaScotte, 2016). Singular 'they' is also used, although less frequently, for specific referents of known gender, in cases where gender isn't salient to the topic at hand (Strahan, 2008). My study investigates the frequency and distribution of 'they' (as compared to other pronouns) for singular, specific referents in conditions which vary in regards to the referent's gender identity, gender explicitness, and gender relevance. Participants are still being recruited, however, preliminary data suggests singular 'they' is even more widespread in more situations than previously studied.

In the experiment conducted, subjects are given three tasks to complete online under the deceptive topic of 'leisure activities' to prevent self-policing. In order to elicit pronoun use in the first task, subjects describe three sets of comics, where each set features a character visually coded as masculine, feminine, and non-binary, and follows one of the following conditions: (1) Gender is unspecified and irrelevant to the topic (2), Gender is specified and irrelevant, and (3) Gender is specified and relevant. Preliminary results show that singular 'they' is overwhelmingly the most common pronoun elicited for referents coded as non-binary under all three conditions, followed by pronoun avoidance. Singular 'they' is also the most common pronoun for referents of all genders under condition (1), followed by 'he' or 'she' depending on whether the referent is coded as masculine or feminine respectively. 'They' is furthermore the most common pronoun for condition (2) although to a lesser extent than (1), with a higher percentage of 'he' or 'she'. Although less common than gendered pronouns, singular 'they' still crops up in a significant amount even under condition (3).

In the second task, participants fill in the blanks where a pronoun would go for four sets of sentences, each set corresponding to one of the following conditions: (1) No information regarding the referent's gender (2) The referent's gender is made explicit in the sentence (3) The referent is given a name generally considered gender-neutral. (4) The referent is given a name generally considered gendered. Singular 'they' was used by the vast majority of respondents for condition (1), followed by 'he', then 'she'. Only gendered pronouns corresponding to the gender given in the sentence occurred under condition (2). Singular 'they' is also the most common for (3). Although gendered pronouns corresponding to the stereotypical gender of the name form the majority of responses, singular 'they' is the next most common response.

During the third task, participants were asked to rate how positive and correct they felt the use of singular 'they' was, with the majority giving it a high score. No correlation was found between the rating of 'they', and the frequency of its use. There was some difference found in responses based on gender, with non-binary participants using singular 'they' more frequently, and in more situations than women, while men use 'they' the least. There is also a minor difference in terms of age, with participants over 50 using singular 'they' the least. Currently, there are no patterns found in terms of participant nationality or second language speaker status.

The experiment confirms the prevalence of singular 'they'. It also shows 'they' is used more frequently than previous studies found, in cases where gender is explicit but not relevant, and further widens its usage to situations where a referent's gender is explicit and relevant. As singular 'they' gains global recognition, particularly in the context of gender inclusion and non-binary identities, this study provide insight on its use and surrounding ideologies.

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