

The patriarchal use of the genderless he versus the singular they

The singular they has a long and contested history in its viability in the English language. The word they, the concept of they, is plural and means more than one person. But what if a person's gender isn't known, what if a singular antecedent can apply to more than one person? The accepted practice since the eighteenth century has been to revert the masculine form, "he, him, his." By using this in everyday language or instruction, we as a society are implying that the masculine is the default. As a culture, by using this language and not adapting a genderless singular pronoun, we encourage an underlying sexist tone in our everyday language. Encouraging the patriarchal idea that men are the doers and women are the ones having things done to them. Even if this is not the intent of those encouraging the destruction of the singular they concept; it is something that genderless he, the least cumbersome of the replacement singular pronouns, encourages.

The singular they was an accepted form of the word, great literary figures such as C. S. Lewis, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, had used the singular they for centuries before it was deemed incorrect. Jane Austen, Oscar Wilde, and many others used it in their writings even after a rule was placed against it.<sup>1</sup> These are writings that have been accepted, from a literary standpoint as some of the greatest works of our time. These are works of art that can stand alone, and are held as some of the best uses of our language. Yet, they have what is seen as one small issue. They use the singular they. One of Wilde's high class, and educated characters, Lady Bracknell, is quoted having said: "that will encourage conversation, particularly at the end of the season when everyone has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not much." If Lady Bracknell isn't grammatically correct, and proper in all that she says than who is?<sup>2</sup> By throwing the singular they into a space of contention, grammarians are changing the ways that people look at language, and how these people look at some of the literary

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<sup>1</sup> Gabe Doyle, "Singular "they" and the many reasons why its' correct," *Motivated Grammar*, 10 September 2009, <http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2009/09/10/singular-they-and-the-many-reasons-why-its-correct/>.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Pullam, "Dogma vs. Evidence: Singular They," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 January 2012, <https://d2l.msu.edu/d2l/le/content/121749/viewContent/1443563/View>.

greats, some could be so caught up in how the grammar is used that the purpose of the text is surpassed. Thankfully, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and all of the early authors who used the singular they were in the clear during their time period. It wasn't until the eighteenth century when grammarians decided that English needed to follow similar rules as Latin, and that the singular they was incorrect.<sup>3</sup> This is an ideal that grammarians have held onto ever since, and it wasn't until sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that the singular they began to make a resurgence among literary authors and well educated individuals.<sup>4</sup>

The most commonly used option to avoid the singular they is a genderless he, which can lead to just as many difficulties in comprehension as the singular they. There was a time in the English language where it was socially acceptable to defer to the masculine form. But now, using a genderless he, or referring to everyone in the masculine form is not as accepted. Saying, "Everyone in the class turned in his term paper" implies that the entire class was male, when chances are almost half of that class is in fact female.<sup>5</sup> Using the genderless he removes half of the population from any given statement. There is no logical reason for the use of the genderless he, other than the 18<sup>th</sup> century grammarians claim that the English language cannot have a singular they. That using a singular they is ungrammatical, and the fall back should be on the already singular masculine pronoun.

The constant use of a genderless he encourages a sexist way of thinking, as the language we use is not only formed by societal expectations but forms these expectations. The constant use of a genderless he will often remove women from the equation, and can alienate people and society as a whole. For

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Chivers, "If someone tells you singular they is wrong please do tell them to get stuffed," *The Telegraph*, 11 October 2012, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tomchiversscience/100184652/if-someone-tells-you-singular-they-is-wrong-please-do-tell-them-to-get-stuffed/>

<sup>4</sup> Henry Churchyard, "Everybody Loves THEIR Jane Austen," *Dissertation*, <http://www.crossmyt.com/hc/linghebr/austheir.html#X1x>

<sup>5</sup> Your Dictionary, "Sexist Language," *LoveToKnow Corp*, 2014, <http://grammar.yourdictionary.com/style-and-usage/sexist-language.html>

example the sentence, “At the funeral, everyone was dressed to the nines, each wearing his swankest tie or nicest dress” implies that the guests of the funeral were all male, despite the fact that wearing dresses is seen as a very feminine choice<sup>6</sup>. This does not provide a clear picture to the reader or listener, and effectively removes the women from the funeral. Language and by extension the grammar of that language is, if we mean it to be or not, inherently political, an introduction to a glossary of ableist terms put it best, “Both as individuals and as larger social and cultural groups, it is self-evident that the language we use to express all sorts of ideas, opinions, and emotions, as well as to describe ourselves and others, is simultaneously reflective of existing attitudes and influential to developing attitudes.”<sup>7</sup> By continuing to use the genderless he in everyday contexts, such as school forms, or reports referring to a group of people as a single entity, we as a society are inadvertently saying that there are things she can’t do. There are places and contexts where she shouldn’t be, she doesn’t belong. There are actions that she shouldn’t partake in. The sentence “How much can you tell from someone by his choice in Wellington Boot?” implies that the only persons who wear Wellington Boots are male, and this is not at all the case<sup>8</sup>. This sentence removes women from having the opportunity to wear the Wellington Boot. Which is not the idea that the author was going for. In this instance “he” was being used to represent all of humankind, but it does not do that. At least not anymore, and this is especially dangerous because time and time again we are told that is not the case, and it has been accepted as a norm not to question it, because the most important thing in grammar is agreement, that the pronoun agrees with the antecedent in number, and not that language is as inclusive it can be. This is ultimately what the singular they is about, until English adopts a genderless singular pronoun it is the most inclusive pronoun that the language has.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2009/09/10/singular-they-and-the-many-reasons-why-its-correct/>

<sup>7</sup> Lydia Brown, “Ableism/Language Note from 16 June 2013,” *Autistic Hoya*, 11 October 2014, <http://www.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html>

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Soanes, “Faceoff: ‘he’, ‘he or she’, ‘he/she’, ‘s/he’, versus ‘they’”, *Oxford English Dictionary Words Blog*, 6 June 2012, <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2012/06/he-or-she-versus-they/>

In the eighteenth century grammarians decided that English needed to be more exclusive, that it should be more like Latin, and less like the hodgepodge of German, French, and Latin that it was. According to the book, *Grammars, Gramarians, and Grammar-Writing in eighteenth century England* by Ingrid Tieken-Boon the grammarians of the eighteenth century liked to use Latin to describe the English language, and to do this they needed to find a way to make English more resemble Latin<sup>9</sup>. These grammarians decided that the singular they was incorrect, and that sentences that had a singular antecedent needed to follow with a singular pronoun, or that the whole sentence needed to be changed to allow for the plural pronoun. In most cases this removes the options of inclusiveness by reverting back to the genderless he. This is something that is becoming more recognized as a sexist way of speaking, and as the stigma of sexism surrounding sexist language and nature grows societies language is changing and the singular they is becoming a more acceptable pronoun. People are using them to signify a person whose gender doesn't affect their actions, and is therefore unimportant to the context of the piece such as saying: How much can you tell about someone from their choice of Wellington Boot? As sexism is a keynote issue right now, many are trying to combat it through any avenue available, they don't want to fall back on the masculine norm because it will anger those listening to them, and they will be seen as bigoted. Those in the fight against sexism know that language so much of our ideas come from our language, the way that we learn societal norms comes from our language, and to revert back to the masculine pronoun in all instances where gender is not specified does not lead to a healthy society.

The singular they has a long history, from being an accepted form of grammar from many among the literary community to being banned by grammarians, because they wanted English to be more like Latin.

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<sup>9</sup> Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, *Grammars, grammarians, and grammar-writing in eighteenth century England*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008, ebook [https://web-b-ebshost-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAwMHhuYV9fMjQ3NTc0X19BTg2?sid=552e1cc0-4998-4cef-8047-b3a8e5ecd230@sessionmgr115&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp\\_vii&rid=0](https://web-b-ebshost-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAwMHhuYV9fMjQ3NTc0X19BTg2?sid=552e1cc0-4998-4cef-8047-b3a8e5ecd230@sessionmgr115&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_vii&rid=0)

This was mostly accepted by many users of English, using a genderless he in the place of a singular they when the gender of the antecedent was unclear. This was an accepted way to refer to all people, regardless of gender until society asked why, why was everyone male until stated otherwise? Many asked for a new solution, to come up with a new genderless pronoun. But instead, society and language decided to move back in time, and pick up the singular form of they, where it was left in the eighteenth century, dust it off a bit, and bring it back into use. This has been accepted by many educated and intelligent individuals, not just because it makes sense to have a singular genderless pronoun, but because it has been used before. Because because the bard used it before it was deemed unacceptable, and because Lady Bracknell, and Jane Austen, continued to use the singular they after it was deemed ungrammatical. English as a language has Latin influences, science still uses Latin names, but English is not Latin. English, and the English speaking community, should not be held down by outdated ideals from a community of people trying to make English a more exclusive language by instilling new rules for the educated and wealthy to use. This is something that society has decided to push back against, to establish a singular they again. While there are those who hold onto the belief that the eighteenth century grammarians held, and refuse to see how something as simple as a genderless he could be and is, sexist and increases sexism throughout our society, the singular they is here to stay.

## Bibliography

Brown, Lydia. "Albeism/Language Note from 16 June 2013." *Autistic Hoya*. 11 October 2014.  
<http://www.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html>

Lydia is an autistic woman who created a glossary of terms to avoid when talking and why. In her introduction to this glossary she makes some very persuasive claims about what language is and how it is not only affected by the culture it is used in but the culture using it is affected by how it is used.

Chivers, Tom. "If someone tells you singular they is wrong please do tell them to get stuffed." *The Telegraph*. 11 October 2012. <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tomchiversscience/100184652/if-someone-tells-you-singular-they-is-wrong-please-do-tell-them-to-get-stuffed/>.

Tom Chivers is an assistant comment editor at The Telegraph. I chose to use this article as a source because it explained the singular they was deemed incorrect in the eighteenth century, and what the social and political ramifications of this were.

Churchyard, Henry. "Everybody Loves THEIR Jane Austen." *Dissertation*.  
<http://www.crossmyt.com/hc/linghebr/austheir.html#X1x>.

Henry Churchyard was a graduate student at the University of Texas for linguistics. In his dissertation he touches on examples of the singular they being used in Austen's writing, after it was deemed unacceptable.

Doyle, Gabe. "Singular "they" and the many reasons why its' correct." *Motivated Grammar*. 10 September 2009. <http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2009/09/10/singular-they-and-the-many-reasons-why-its-correct/>.

Motivated Grammar is a wordpress blog run by Gabe Doyle who is a graduate student and doctoral candidate in Linguistics at UC San Diego, he's received his masters in linguistics from UCSD and bachelors in math from Princeton. I decided to use this source because I felt that it broke down both sides of the issue in a concise and easy to understand manner, so I was able to expand off of his points and draw my own conclusions within the paper.

Pullam, Geoffrey. "Dogma vs. Evidence: Singular They." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 5 January 2012. <https://d2l.msu.edu/d2l/le/content/121749/viewContent/1443563/View>.

Geoffrey Pullam is a contributor to the blog *Lingua Franca*, as well as a professor of linguistics at the University of Edinburgh. I decided to use this source because he not only talked about the common usage of the singular they, but he brings in authors, books, and characters that are held to a high literary value. And makes the point that the singular they has been around for years, if the grammarians believe in it or not.

Soanes, Catherine. "Faceoff: 'he', 'he or she', 'he/she', 's/he', versus 'they'". *Oxford English Dictionary Words Blog*. 6 June 2012. <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2012/06/he-or-she-versus-they/>.

Catherine Soanes is an ex-lexographer and EFL teacher as well as a contributor to the OED's blog. This source had an example of how the genderless he doesn't actually make much more sense than using they, it is also affiliated with the Oxford English Dictionary which is the largest English dictionary.

Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid. *Grammars, grammarians, and grammar-writing in eighteenth century England*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 2008. Ebook. [https://web-b-ebshost-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAwMHhuYV9fMjQ3NTc0X19BTg2?sid=552e1cc0-4998-4cef-8047-b3a8e5ecd230@sessionmgr115&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp\\_vii&rid=0](https://web-b-ebshost-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAwMHhuYV9fMjQ3NTc0X19BTg2?sid=552e1cc0-4998-4cef-8047-b3a8e5ecd230@sessionmgr115&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_vii&rid=0)

This book is a complete history of the progression of English grammar in the eighteenth century. It touches on grammarians desire to make English more like Latin, and their reasoning behind that desire.

Your Dictionary. "Sexist Language." *LoveToKnow Corp*. 2014. <http://grammar.yourdictionary.com/style-and-usage/sexist-language.html>.

Your Dictionary is an online dictionary that breaks down the common usage of language in the everyday, as it is used by your average speakers of English. I used an example used by this source on their webpage, and their explanation of what sexist language is was comprehensive.