



HOW USING 'THEY' AS A SINGULAR PRONOUN CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

by [Davey Shlasko](#)

BY NOW YOU KNOW that calling people the pronouns they want to be called is a basic and necessary way to demonstrate respect for their identities. This includes learning to use nonbinary pronouns such as singular they. But using singular they is far more than a way to respect friends who have gender identities outside the binary. Singular they has exciting potential to be part of a radical shift in the dominant gender culture. Changing the culture may seem like a mighty task for one little pronoun. But actually, it wouldn't be the first time that a pronoun was near the center of a momentous cultural shift.

First, a quick review on singular they, for those who need to get caught up: Some people who fall under the [broad definition of trans](#) have gender identities other than man or woman. People describe these identities as non-binary, genderqueer, non-

gendered, gender-fluid, and many other terms – some recently coined, and some stemming from long-standing traditions in various cultures from around the world. Some (not all) people who experiences our genders in these ways ask people to avoid binary gendered language when referring to us, including the third person pronouns “he” and “she.” To replace “he” and “she,” people have coined a variety of new pronouns. These haven’t caught on much outside queer spaces, for reasons that linguists can explain better than I can. (It has to do with how slowly pronouns tend to evolve in languages - apparently, adjusting how we use a pronoun that already exists is more likely to catch on than adding a new pronoun to the lexicon.) Other people use “they” as a gender-neutral singular alternative, and this has proved comparatively easy for trans allies to respect.

Of course, some people still struggle with using they as a singular pronoun, or simply refuse to do it. One of the main excuses that people give for not using singular they, even when someone has specifically asked to be referred to that way, is that it is “grammatically incorrect.” This belief comes less from a nuanced understanding of grammar than from a felt sense that one is doing something wrong by using singular they. As someone told me recently, “It sounds like nails on a chalk board.”

Singular they might sound “wrong” because many of us were taught, corrected, and even disciplined in school to stop us from using they as a singular. Our teachers had to go to a lot of trouble to teach us this because otherwise, we would have used singular they all the time – because despite being frowned upon by so many middle school teachers, it is actually a totally normal thing to do in standard English. Since long before it started being adopted by trans communities, people have used singular they to refer to a hypothetical person whose gender is unknown. It’s especially common in reference to a noun that is syntactically singular but logically plural, like “someone,” “anyone,” and “whoever.” We say

things like, “Someone left their umbrella in the meeting room.” We *could* say, “Someone left his or her umbrella,” but using “their” is more common, easier to understand and not wrong. Published examples of this usage abound, from as early as Chaucer through the present day.

The rule against using singular they is enforced neither because it preserves some consistent, objective grammatical standard, nor because it serves our communication needs. It is enforced because enforcing language norms is a way of enforcing power structures. Our pronouns problem isn’t just about gender – it’s about power.

Practically everybody uses singular they in informal settings. (I’ve even heard people use it unconsciously while explaining to me why they refuse to use it.) The skill of avoiding it in formal settings is both a marker of privilege and provides access to further privilege.

It’s a marker of privilege because people learn it in school. Knowing the rule requires a level of access to formal education. Caring about the rule requires finding school safe, welcoming and relevant enough to sustain one’s engagement. Both are unevenly distributed across differences of race, class, queerness, dis/ability and so on. Following the rule provides access to further privilege because those who know to avoid singular they in formal situations come across as proper and educated, and stand to benefit from being perceived that way.

The rule functions to differentiate those who follow the rule from those who don’t, those with greater privilege from those with less – in other words, to reproduce power differences. So if you object to singular they on the basis of its correctness, you’re not only dropping the ball on an important trans ally behavior. You’re also supporting a language/power system that you probably don’t agree with.

There’s also another, more specific sense in which our pronoun problem is actually a power problem. It’s not only the way the

rule is enforced, but also how gendered pronouns work to begin with, that supports power structures.

People with nonbinary gender identities continually face situations in which someone feels “forced,” by the language norms they’ve internalized, to call us either he or she – even if they’re not sure which one is right, and sometimes even if they have been told that neither is right. These moments, which seem to be about grammar rules, highlight a gender rule that doesn’t work for us – the rule that everyone must be either a he or a she, a man or a woman – that there are no nonbinary genders. Avoiding singular they when talking about someone who has asked to be called “they” contributes to the erasure and delegitimization of nonbinary identities, and implicitly supports the physical, emotional and structural violence that faces too many of us too much of the time.

The good news is, singular they is not only coming into more common use but also has the potential to help shift the harmful power structure of binary gender. To explain, it helps to go back to another time when what was considered standard usage for pronouns changed – and it had to do with power then, too.

Today, “you” is both a plural and a singular. Originally it was plural (the singular form was “thou”). Beginning in the 16th Century, “you” was also used for singular-formal address, when speaking to someone with high social status (i.e. royalty and nobility). Gradually singular use of “you” expanded, first to any time a speaker addressed someone of higher status than themselves, and then to any situation in which the speaker wanted to flatter or show respect for the person they were addressing. “Thou” gradually fell out of use until it was heard mostly in intimate settings, such as among family members, and in situations of obvious hierarchy, such as a wealthy employer speaking to their servant. To call a stranger “thou” became an insult, because it implied they were of lower status than the speaker.

The difference between “you” and “thou” was one of class status. One’s decision to say “you” or “thou” in a given situation had real consequences in terms of status and power. It could highlight and reproduce a status difference and power-over relationship, or it could downplay a status difference and create a tone of equality.

One driving force behind the drift from using “you” only for royal/noble address to using “you” for any respectful address was the relatively stable and powerful middle class in England at the time. Merchants and professionals increasingly saw themselves as entitled to respect of a kind that only the ruling class had previously been afforded. Using “you” with each other was a way to manifest that respect. Eventually, “you” became the only second person pronoun in general use.

As a result of this shift, the expression of class hierarchy in language became less mandatory. It became possible to construct a normal-sounding and easily understood sentence without knowing the status of the person one was addressing. The shift in language both resulted from and contributed to the shifting class structure.

We can use pronouns to shift the gender structure, too. Using singular they means we can construct a normal-sounding and easily understood sentence without knowing or announcing the gender of the person we’re speaking about. We can talk about gender diversity in all its nonbinary complexity, without constantly contradicting ourselves by using binary gendered pronouns.

So go ahead – use they. At least you can show basic respect to your genderqueer friends who want to be called they. At most, we might just change the world.

HOW SINGULAR THEY SOUNDS

“Someone forgot their umbrella on the porch after the party.”

“Chris enjoyed themselves at the party, but they forgot their umbrella.”

“Chris brought their friend Tracy to the party. They both enjoyed themselves.”

“Chris brought their friend Tracy to the party. They enjoyed themselves, but she didn’t.”

“Three people came to visit. They all enjoyed themselves, but one forgot their umbrella.”

As you can see, singular they is used with plural verb forms, just like “you.” We say “you are,” like “they are” and “we are.” We don’t say “you art,” as with “thou art,” even when we are speaking to only one person. Likewise we say “they are” whether talking about several people or one person, not “they is.”

However, most people say “themselves” rather than “themselves” when referring to one person.

Just like with “you,” we can use names and numerical adjectives (like “both,” “all,” and “one”) to clarify as needed.

In the fourth example above, the two pronouns - they and she - are both used singularly, and distinguish

between the two people named earlier in the sentence. Of course, that only works if the person you're speaking to knows Chris and Tracy and knows which pronouns they each use.

People often ask me about the "correct" way to use singular they, but the truth is, shifts in language don't happen all at once. You may hear people use singular they differently than outlined here, and only time will show which usage will become standardized as "correct." As long as you are communicating successfully, don't worry about it too much!

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