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Back in the days before Yale’s freshmen became “first-years,” one of my freshman advisees was a gay man who translated Tang Dynasty poetry; planned to learn Portuguese in order to read Clarice Lispector, his favorite author, in the original; and often got so caught up in books, assigned or unassigned, that he missed meals.

As a junior, while taking my advanced non-fiction writing class, my advisee began using *they/them* pronouns and announced a new name—or, rather, a new initial—on Facebook: “So I’ll be going by M, because inside the letter M is a boy & a woman, the two of us together.” M grew longer hair and started wearing makeup and sometimes a skirt and a bra—not an overstated bra, a modest athletic bra—stuffed first with socks, then with rice-filled tights, and finally with silicone mastectomy prostheses. Much of M’s writing that semester explored issues of gender and identity, culminating in a profile of a local drag performer who was *he* when out of drag and *she* when in: for the performer, drag was a costume, whereas for M, women’s clothes were neither drag nor a costume but a tentative step into a potential new identity.

M started taking estrogen, worked with a voice coach, moved progressively further from the boy and closer to the woman, and by the next year had become Mae. *They/them* became *she/her*. At the end of her senior year, on Class Day, Mae won a major prize for her writing. Wearing a long yellow dress with slits up the sides, she walked onstage to receive an envelope containing a large check and then curtsied to the audience, hammily but expertly, right in front of Hillary Clinton, who had just delivered the Class Day address.

The following afternoon, after commencement, Mae rushed up to give me a farewell hug and exclaimed, “Anne! You’ve known me through all my pronouns!”

Last year, the *New York Times* published the results of an online study conducted by its “research-and-analytics department” in which 4,151 subscribers answered the question “Do you separate your M&Ms and eat them by color?” Eighteen percent responded, “Yes, it’s great.” Eighty-two percent responded, “No, that’s weird.”

I haven’t eaten M&Ms for decades, but when I was ten or so, I belonged not only to the 18 percent but to a subset within it—for all I know, it was a subset of one—who not only separated by color but arranged the piles in descending order of quantity. Dark browns were always the most plentiful and therefore the least valuable; light browns (which, I’m sad to say, were replaced by blues in the mid-Nineties) were the least plentiful and therefore the most valuable. I’d eat the dark browns until their quantity was reduced to precisely that of the next most plentiful color (always red or yellow), continue in that vein until all the piles were the same size, and end with the last remaining light brown.

You might conclude any number of things from this little case history. One of the less pathological is that in the lumpers-vs.-splitter dichotomy (incidentally, a potentially promising topic for the *New York Times*’ research-and-analytics department), I am a splitter. That is, I am the sort of person who tends to make distinctions rather than find commonalities. Splitters enjoy taxonomy. Why say merely that you’ve seen a bird? How about a hawk? How about a *red-shouldered* hawk? Splitters enjoy organization. Before I wrote this piece, I sorted all my source materials into thirty-four folders and arranged them alphabetically by topic. Gosh, that was fun. And splitters enjoy grammar.

When it comes to language, splitters are almost always prescriptivists, who favor rules and standards (this is how people should talk) rather than descriptivists, who favor popular usage (this is how people *actually* talk). Prescriptivists and descriptivists have doubtless been fighting since words were invented, but they’ve gone at it with particular ferocity since the publication in 1961 of *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, a three-volume, sixteen-pound-six-ounce descriptivist pronunciamento that eliminated “colloquial,” “correct,” and “incorrect,” among many other labels, and declared that “like” could be a conjunction, a usage already enshrined in a cigarette jingle that made prescriptivists foam at the mouth: “Winston tastes good like a cigarette should.” The ruckus stirred up by W3, as it came to be known, was covered by nearly every major periodical in the country.

There is little love lost between the two camps. Prescriptivists have been called (usually by descriptivists, but sometimes, as a preemptive strike, by themselves) elitists, killjoys, curmudgeons, cops, cranks, peevers, fussbudgets, intransigents, old farts, linguistic nitpickers, usage nerds, compulsive pedants, logobullies, syntax snobs, and grammar fascists. Descriptivists have been called style smashers, corrupters, miscreants, barbarians, vulgarians, vandals, Neanderthals, and (by Kurt Vonnegut) boozed-up war buddies from Mobile, Alabama.

There’s some truth in each set of insults. Even David Foster Wallace, the most famously ardent prescriptivist I can think of, admitted, in “Authority and American Usage” (a revised version of a 2001 *Harper’s* essay), that his camp, whom his unrepentantly linguaphilic family called SNOOTS (Syntax Nudniks of Our Time), could be, well, snooty, not to mention arrogant, self-righteous, and inclined to circular reasoning (“It’s the truth because we say so, and we say so because it’s the truth”). But Wallace also mounted a defense of prescriptivism that still rings true for its devotees. He argued that language serves its community best when it is meaningful and clear; that the conventions of standard English aid clarity; that when we fail to honor those conventions, we place an “extra interpretive burden” on the recipient; that refraining from placing that burden is considerate, just as it’s considerate “to de-slob your home before entertaining guests or to brush your teeth before picking up a date”; that it’s “not just more considerate but more *respectful* somehow—both of your listener/reader and of what you’re trying to get across”; and that abandoning the rules of grammar and usage would make language impossible. “As in Genesis 11:1–10-grade impossible, a literal Babel. There have to be *some* rules and conventions, no?”

Yes. At least that’s what people like me have always thought.

On the current prescriptivist/descriptivist battlefield, nothing has occasioned more bloodshed than the humble pronoun, in particular the singular *they*. Although its evolution is still in its early stages, *they* has already proved as contentious as W3.

Lumpers sometimes glom all singular *theys* into one big hunk, to be loved or hated depending on one’s temperamental or grammatical or political druthers, but in fact there are two usages, quite different from each other.

The first is M's *they/them*: an identifier for a person whose gender does not fall into the *he/him* or *she/her* binary. That's the usage Goldman Sachs had in mind last year when it invited its employees to a panel on supporting "the transgender and gender-nonconforming community" (part of its Bringing Your Whole Self to Work initiative), where the company passed out four-by-six-inch laminated cards headed TIPS FOR BEING AN INCLUSIVE ALLY, with a list of feminine, masculine, and gender-neutral singular pronouns, complete with examples: "**They** went to the store," "I spoke with **them**." (The card also noted that some nonbinary people use *ze/zir*: "**Ze** went to the store," "I spoke with **zir**.") Last fall, Merriam-Webster (the publisher of W3) added a new definition to the entry for *they* ("used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary"), and the *Oxford English Dictionary* followed suit, with an online example from *The Cut* ("In 2016, they got a role on *Orange Is the New Black* as a wisecracking white supremacist"). Early this year, the American Dialect Society named the singular *they*, "particularly as a nonbinary identifier," as its Word of the Decade. (In 2000, the Word of the Decade was "web," and in 2010, "google," used as a verb: consequential cultural markers.)

The second usage of *they* is as a generic pronoun for an individual whose gender isn't specified or relevant, as in "Every reader of this essay undoubtedly thinks they are a grammar expert."

In 2016, when M was in my class, the first usage was already widespread at our university. Students were beginning to append their pronouns to their email signatures, as Elizabeth Warren (*she/her*) and Pete Buttigieg (*he/him*), among other Democratic politicians, now do in their Twitter bios; for those who used conventional pronouns, the choice was often a gesture of destigmatizing solidarity with those who used *they/them*. M was the first student I'd taught who said, "My pronouns are *they/them*," but I was surprised the moment hadn't come earlier. Yale has many students who identify as nonbinary, genderqueer, gender-fluid, gender-nonconforming, or transgender. (I'd originally assumed that all trans people would be eager to adopt the pronoun associated with their "new" gender—that is, *he* or *she*—but soon learned that the trapped-in-the-wrong-body model wasn't always quite so neat, and that many trans people identify outside the gender binary.) M permitted me a relatively easy crossing of the singular-*they* Rubicon because they actually felt plural to me: as they wrote on Facebook, at that time they were both "a boy & a woman." (Note that they said *boy*, not *man*, and *woman*, not *girl*: *boy* was their past, *woman* their future.) I remember telling my husband, "M really is a *they*! They contain multitudes!"

Also, I knew M. They weren't a topic in a cranky letter to the editor from someone who doesn't believe gender can be nonbinary or to whom the whole thing is a novel concept. (Apparently there are still such someones. In *A Quick & Easy Guide to They/Them Pronouns*, an etiquette book in comic-strip form, one frame shows two people, their hair standing on end and their mouths huge Os, over the caption JUST DISCOVERED THEY/THEM PRONOUNS EXIST.) But even if I'd never met M, I would have used the pronouns they'd requested. Of course I would have. (And if you wouldn't, you probably haven't spent much time on a campus lately.) M's pronouns were not just a preference but part of who they were, not an insolent flouting of grammatical convention but a widely accepted code that filled a hole in the English language. (As Goldman Sachs noted, there are other codes. But *ze/zir*, *ze/hir*, *xe/xem*, and similar neologisms have achieved much less traction than *they/them*.)

The experience of being misgendered is not some newfangled ultra-thin-skinned, special-snowflake conceit; it's painful. Students have told me that being called by the wrong pronoun inspires responses that can range from "niggling unease" to "discomfort" to "incredible wrongness" to "rage" to the sensation of being "split in two." The infraction is usually but not always deemed less serious when it's accidental. When M started using *they/them* pronouns, I was worried that I'd call them *he*, and on occasion I did, because their previous maleness was so thoroughly embedded in my mind. But M forgave me. "Don't worry about slip-ups," they wrote me in an email. "These processes are always gradual, & I've learned to be patient." It was more often other students, serving as well-intentioned but occasionally doctrinaire protectors, who ran short on patience. An online evaluation of one of my classes mentioned the time I invited a former student to discuss an essay they'd written on their nonbinary experience:

I found it offensive . . . that you introduced [the student] as "they/them" when they came to class (and didn't allow them the space to do that for themselves) but then turned around and used "he" in [a later] class.

The first part of that comment taught me something useful. I hadn't known there was a rule, but now I did—and like all prescriptivists, I like rules because they make me feel safe. This was part of a new social code into which I was being initiated: a matter of courtesy, like thanking a host or not interrupting. But the second part seemed a little unfair. Like M, this nonbinary student had used masculine pronouns when we'd originally met, and I sometimes stumbled.

I wasn't alone. When the poet Eileen Myles, who uses *they/they* pronouns, spoke on campus, the president of Yale used *she* in his introduction. The student who told me this, as an example of "an older cis-man flubbing pronouns," started off calling Myles *they*, but then, a minute or two into our conversation, realized that he was saying *she* himself. Later, when I recounted this to an alum who uses *they/they*, they told me they viewed these two instances of misgendering as significantly different in scale: in the second case, the student was trying hard but slipping up during an informal private conversation, whereas in the first, the president was "disrespecting" an esteemed guest at a public event and should have known better.

I've taught two students, Nat and Mara, who were already *they* when they applied to my classes, and although I wasn't infallible, I was therefore less likely to get their pronouns wrong. In fact, both told me they'd gone through a transitional period during which *they/they* sounded strange to them too. Their new pronouns took practice.

Nat had had top surgery, and they gave themselves a weekly testosterone shot—or, rather, gave themselves a shot. ("I am a singular person who is gender neutral," they explained to me, "so I use 'themselves.'") In high school, Nat had taken three years of Greek and four years of Latin. I once asked them if their knowledge of classical grammar made adopting the singular *they* more difficult. They said it was the opposite: "Homeric Greek doesn't even use the same third-person pronoun that Attic Greek does!" And thus they were already accustomed to what they called "linguistic flexibility."

Mara told me in an email that *she/her* started to sound wrong before *they/they* sounded completely right, but also that when they were referred to as *they/they*, "it felt like putting on a pair of shoes that fit really well (great arch support! room for my toes!) after years of wearing a size way too small." One of Mara's favorite garments was a sweater they had borrowed from the Qloset, an actual closet in Yale's LGBTQ office to which trans and nonbinary students donate clothes that aligned with their old gender and borrow clothes that align with their new one: a student-conceived solution to the problem of having to pay for a whole new wardrobe. Yale's bureaucracy was trying to get things right but didn't quite have its act together. The health-center computer system had somehow managed to confuse Mara's pronouns with their name, and they regularly received messages that began "Dear Pronouns: They Them."

When M announced their pronouns in my class, *they/they* seemed a relatively simple matter. The former student whom I preemptively introduced to my class as *they/they* has done their best to complicate it. After they graduated, they changed their name to Wren. Unlike M, Wren considers their gender not as both/and but as neither/nor (my they-contain-multitudes theory may have been a little too gee-whizzy in the first place and was definitely not, as they say, scalable); unlike Mae, Wren continues to use *they/they* rather than *she/her*. Wren views *they/they* not as a third category but as a way of resisting categories. In a recent email, they remarked on "the misleading tic that sees some people as 'he's,' some as 'she's,' and others as 'they's.'" (Uh oh, I thought. Guilty.)

I hear this kind of speech all the time around my parents and their progressive friends, and it's frustrating because it effectively creates a 'trinary,' which is to say a binary, plus an added dimension that effectively defeats, or at least misunderstands, the essence of nonbinaryness altogether.

Wren now works as an editorial assistant at an LGBTQ magazine called *them*—I was touched when they gave me a fanny pack that said THEM on one side and QUEERO, as in "queer hero," on the other—and has published an essay there explaining that some nonbinary people don't use *they/they* pronouns, that some binary people do, and that "allowing for this sort of complexity, in the end, ought to be the bedrock of progressive gender politics." They say that when they walk into a room, they want to disrupt everyone's assumptions about gender.

You may have noticed that I haven't mentioned what Mae, Nat, and Wren used to be called. (Mara hasn't changed their name.) All three of them asked me not to include their "deadnames" (a term for former names that have been changed to reflect a person's true gender identity). Although some trans and nonbinary people deem their former names an important part of their history, many consider deadnaming a particularly hurtful form of misgendering, since it's almost always deliberate and often the result of bias or misunderstanding (*That person isn't really a woman*). Some people go to great lengths to remove their deadnames from the internet. Nat told me that their blood boiled when colleagues at a summer internship referred to them as "Nat, FKA [formerly known as] N—," their obsolete female name.

In the preceding nine paragraphs, there are forty-three instances in which I used *they*, *them*, *their*, *themselves*, or *themselves* with a singular antecedent. Don't they bother me? Yes, but no. Of course, when I read "Nat told me that their blood boiled," I hear what grammarians call "disagreement," an apt word, as if it might occasion a tiny fistfight, right there on

the page, between “Nat” and “their.” But I also hear a louder voice, reminding me of two things: that “her blood boiled” would be inaccurate—Nat isn’t a *she*—and that whether it’s their names or their pronouns, people should get to choose what they’re called.

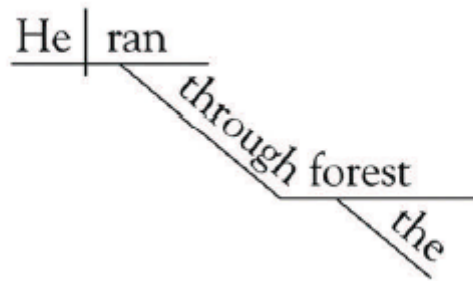
As for the second kind of singular *they*—well, that’s a more difficult matter.



I was raised by the sort of parents who substituted prescriptivism for religion (agnostic in the latter, fanatical in the former). My mother, the daughter of a librarian and a banker, regarded people who spoke what she called “bad English” as slovenly and unintelligent: anyone who said “between you and I” *deserved* to be disliked. My father, the son of lower-middle-class Russian Jewish immigrants who spoke with accents and made frequent grammatical errors, embraced standard, which is to say WASPY, English with a convert’s zeal. He was grateful to his teachers at Boys High in Brooklyn, whose extracurricular offerings included the Correct English Club, for providing him with such a useful tool; he never felt they had put him down, only lifted him up, by implicitly (and perhaps explicitly) disparaging the way he spoke when he entered the school. As an adult, he viewed twentieth-century America as a postapocalyptic wasteland, smoke still rising from the destruction wreaked by W3, strewn with adverbs used instead of predicate adjectives and obscenities used instead of pretty much everything. After his death, I found a despondent entry in his journal on the rise of the word *fuckin’*, which he called “the coital intensifier,” as “an all-purpose preceder of innocuous nouns.”

When I was in the sixth grade, I learned the rules of grammar from a small brown textbook called *Easy English Exercises*, by Ada Riddlesbarger and Nell Stillwagon. (Those were really their names. I recently found a copy on eBay.) Mss. Riddlesbarger and Stillwagon informed us that pronouns were “pinch hitters for nouns” whose purpose was to help us relieve the “overworked” nouns in such sentences as “Herbert and James’s mother had promised Herbert and James that Herbert and James might go to camp in August if Herbert and James could earn the necessary money.” They closed the

deal by appealing to our vanity: “A baby might say: *Baby* wants a drink. An adult says: *I* want a drink.” They also explained that pronouns always agree in number and gender with their antecedents, and that the “personal pronouns” include *I, me, we* (first person), *you* (second person), and *he, him, she, her, they, them* (third person). Finally, we were introduced to sentence diagramming, which hacked away at the unruly jungle of English syntax until it became a tidy French garden with its topiary sorted and arranged by function. The subject of a sentence, which could be either a noun or a pronoun, always came first, as in:



(When I showed that to my husband, he stared at it with a furrowed brow and said, “WTF?”)

No lumper could understand the intense joy I felt when I first saw that diagram.

And that’s pretty much how things were till I got to college, except that Mss. Riddlesbarger and Stillwagon ceded their position of scriptural authority to William Strunk Jr., E. B. White, and H. W. Fowler. I came to understand that good grammar and good writing were not synonymous, but I believed (and to some extent still believe) that the first was a necessary if not sufficient condition for the latter. It provided a swift, well-functioning, certified-by-*Consumer-Reports* vehicle for its glorious passenger. Why would anyone who cared about words settle for less?

There was just one problem. Our language was sexist.

The fall of my sophomore year at Harvard, there was a second-wave-feminist insurrection in a divinity-school class taught by a liberal, *Godspell*-endorsing minister named Harvey Cox. In an article headlined TWO WOMEN LIBERATE CHURCH COURSE, the *Crimson* reported that two divinity students, Linda Barufaldi and Emily Culpepper, had introduced a resolution in Cox’s class calling for a two-week ban on the use of “man,” “men,” and masculine pronouns “to refer to all people.” They also proposed that masculine pronouns not be used to refer to God. Cox approved a vote, the resolutions were passed, and Culpepper brought in an armful of party-store noisemakers (the kind with lizardlike paper tongues that make flatulent bleats when you blow them on New Year’s Eve), for which she and Barufaldi submitted a reimbursement request to Harvard that called their purchases “devices to impede the use of sexist language.” Every time anyone said “mankind” instead of “humankind” or called God “He,” out went the paper tongues. (Barufaldi and Culpepper were occasional offenders themselves.) Calvert Watkins, the chair (or, at the time, “chairman”) of Harvard’s linguistics department, wrote a letter to the *Crimson*, cosigned by sixteen colleagues, explaining the concept of “markedness,” in which one word in a pair of “lexical opposites” is used as the default; hence we say, “Each student shall discuss his paper with his section man.” (Watkins, of course, made no mention of section women.) He continued:

For people and pronouns in English the masculine is the unmarked and hence is used as a neutral or unspecified term. This reflects the ancient pattern of the Indo-European languages. . . . The fact that the masculine is the unmarked gender in English (or that the feminine is unmarked in the language of the Tunica Indians) is simply a feature of grammar. It is unlikely to be an impediment to any change in the patterns of the sexual division of labor toward which our society may wish to evolve. There is really no cause for anxiety or pronoun-envy on the part of those seeking such changes.

Newsweek covered the brouhaha, referring to Barufaldi and Culpepper as “distaff theologians.” Four decades later, Culpepper told the journalist Mike Vuolo that several male divinity students—future ministers—had asked her, “Do you just need a good fuck?”

In those days, the issue was that women felt excluded by men. It would have surprised us to hear that a half-century later, the issue would be that nonbinary people felt excluded by binary people. In my twenties and thirties, I simultaneously railed at the misogyny of English and was obviously complicit. In an article about visiting the Grand Canyon, I described a frog as “sitting in a perfect frog-sized niche in the rock wall, his throat palpitating and his eyes beady with frog curiosity.” I felt that “its” would fail to convey the ineffable marvelousness of this frog, and “her” never occurred to me.

In the mid-Nineties, I wrote an essay on the conflict between my two opposing semantic selves, one feminist and one reactionary. It was called “The His’er Problem.” I’ve heard that “The His’er Problem” is assigned reading in some college English classes, whose students must find it baffling. It was mostly about what Calvert Watkins called the unmarked pronoun, a topic that has been dead, or at least comatose, for at least a decade; today only a troglodyte would think, as nearly every usage manual maintained twenty-five years ago, that using *he* to mean *he or she* was standard. *His’er* (pronounced “hizzer”) was an invented pronoun, a precursor to *ze*, that had been proposed by the Chicago schools superintendent Ella Young in 1912 in a one-woman revolt against the linguistic convention that *Easy English Exercises* would later explain thusly, in Lesson 38, “Gender of Nouns and Pronouns”: “It is customary to use *he, him, his* in referring to a noun that may be either masculine or feminine.” (Examples: “A *child* takes *his* play seriously.” “Every *person* in the bus jumped to *his* feet.”) Instead of “to each his own,” Young suggested we say “to each his’er own.” I averred in my essay that I could never say “his’er” (hideous) but that I disliked “to each his or her own” (ungainly). I also disliked “to all their own” (off pitch), though I grudgingly endorsed the conventional work-around of casting sentences in the plural as worthwhile, because gender equality was so important, but costly, because plurals turned individuals into faceless throngs.

Here’s the thing that today’s students must find not only baffling but incomprehensible: I rejected “to each their own” without even seriously considering it (unbearable). It would have been *ungrammatical*.

The search for a gender-neutral singular third-person pronoun in English has spawned numerous neologisms, both before and after *his’er*. In his recent book *What’s Your Pronoun?*, the linguist Dennis Baron includes a chronological list of more than two hundred, from *E* (1841) to *thon* (1884) to *hor* (1890) to *hem* (1903) to *vey* (1920) to *shim* (1929) to *ha* (1932) to *hse* (1945) to *co* (1970) to *ghaH* (1984; that one was Klingon) to *fe* (1990) to *het* (2003) to *ee* (2014), many of them with subjective, objective, and possessive forms.

Baron also mentions neologisms in several other languages, the most successful of which is *hen*, a Swedish substitute for *han* (“he”) and *hon* (“she”) that was introduced by a progressive linguist in 1966. At first it met the same fate as every invented pronoun in the above list: failure. But after it was revived in 1994, it began to catch on in gay and feminist circles, though it is still used by only a small minority of Swedes. Some conservative media outlets have banned *hen*; some liberal ones have banned *han* and *hon*. At Egalia, a public preschool in Stockholm, everyone is encouraged to play with both trucks and (gender-neutral) dolls, and everyone is called *hen*: all part of a larger social experiment to change gender norms not only through what people do but through what they say.

According to Baron, there are twenty-one terms for gender-neutral pronouns, including “duo-personal,” “epicene,” “hermaphroditic,” and “masculor feminine.” He prefers “the missing word,” and concludes that in English, “It turns out that the missing word isn’t missing at all. It’s singular *they*.”

College students are bellwethers—or, if you’re a prescriptivist, canaries in the coal mine. Once a new usage becomes widespread on campus, in a few years it’s widespread everywhere. No new usage has been advancing with greater speed than the singular *they*. Ten years ago, I might have heard examples in the classroom but rarely in the statements of interest my department requires in applications for its creative-writing courses. These tend to be stiffly correct, because students don’t know whether the instructors are prescriptivists or descriptivists but fear the worst since, after all, we’re English teachers. Here are some sentences from the applications I received last fall:

If I’m asking a person to read something, it’s because I want to hear what they have to say.

It’s rare to get to ask an author questions about what they’ve written.

I don’t want to be that student who can’t stop talking about how their summer abroad changed them.

It’s an intimate experience to look someone in the eye and tell them how you’re struggling.

These applicants were neither more careless nor less deferential than their predecessors. They had undoubtedly proofread their applications with meticulous attention, but it’s a good thing that Mss. Riddlesbarger and Stillwagon weren’t reading them. (From Exercise 88, on number, person, and gender: “Choose the proper word in parentheses: One of the cooks (has, have) given me (his, their) recipe for cherry pie.”)

The students’ sentences, of course, all contained the second kind of singular *they*, the all-purpose generic pronoun. And they all made me wince.

Why did this kind of singular *they* make me want to put my hands over my ears when I'd been instantly willing to use the other kind of singular *they* with nonbinary students? Besides the fact that the nonbinary *they* had far higher stakes—fairness, courtesy, accuracy—there were two reasons. The first was that the nonbinary *they* was an example of splitting (into either the “trinary” of which Wren took a dim view or something more fluid, but at the very least, more than just *he* and *she*), whereas the other *they* is an example of lumping (*he* and *she* smooshed into a single pronoun). No one who separated her M&Ms into piles would like it. The second reason was that when I used the nonbinary *they*, I imagined a neon sign lighting up above my head, visible to all, that read THAT WAS INTENTIONAL. And then, in smaller letters, SHE'S MAKING A HUGE SACRIFICE. SHE'S PUTTING HER PROGRESSIVE PRINCIPLES AHEAD OF HER GRAMMAR TORYISM, AND UNLESS YOU GREW UP IN A FAMILY LIKE HERS, YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW MUCH THAT HURTS. If I were to say, “One of the cooks has given me their recipe for cherry pie,” no such sign would light up.

A college classmate of mine has likened a deliberate violation of linguistic convention to a blue note in jazz, which is sometimes intentionally off-pitch. The only problem is that when Miles Davis made an E-flat even flatter in “Summertime,” everyone knew he intended to do it, whereas only a telepath could divine the true motive behind a generic gender-neutral singular *they*.

My classes don't officially cover grammar, but like David Foster Wallace, who wanted to make sure that none of his writing students would have to face the adult world without knowing the proper placement of a limiting modifier, I include an occasional lesson on dangling participles or comma splices or restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses, with examples of errors from student work, newspaper stories, and—an inexhaustible mother lode—President Trump's tweets. I like to think of my tone as gently hortatory; unlike Wallace, I don't pretend to have a coughing fit when my students—all of whom are good, and in some cases exceptional, writers, but few of whom learned grammar in high school—make usage errors. I try not to sound too bossy or judgmental, distinguishing carefully (in good splitter fashion) among felonies (subject-verb disagreement), misdemeanors (split infinitives), and things I just happen to like (Oxford commas). I try to remember that although I am grateful for *Easy English Exercises*, there is a fine line between the mentee who becomes a mentor and the bullied who becomes a bully. Still, my students all know that beneath my mild-mannered exterior beats a strict-constructionist heart.

Three years ago, I distributed a grammar handout whose topics included the singular *they*. I said that it was useful in the case of nonbinary people (I approvingly quoted the *New Yorker* contributor bio of Eileen Myles, the poet whom Yale's president misgendered: no older cis-female pronoun-flubber I!), but that in most other cases, gender neutrality was best achieved by using plural forms throughout the sentence: my grudging recommendation in “The His'er Problem.” This was the class's final handout, eight single-spaced pages, a proud lineal descendant of *Easy English Exercises*, and we read it aloud, with the students correcting each error in turn, at an end-of-term dinner. There was laughter, bonhomie, and pizza. In a nerdish sort of way, you could almost have called it a party.

We arrived at the singular *they* about two thirds of the way through the evening. The example on the handout, from a student piece about the campus computer-science lab, otherwise known as the Zoo, was “Why would anyone ever subject themselves to four years in the Zoo, if not for the promise of a Silicon Valley paycheck upon graduation?”

I asked my students if “themselves” sounded wrong to their ears—in fact, if the all-purpose singular *they* sounded wrong in general.

There was a long silence, and then Luna, an excellent writer who had lived in several countries and spoke three languages, said, “No.” She went on to say—in a voice that, when we discussed the evening later, we both recalled as testy—that the insistence on pronoun/antecedent agreement was an example of prescriptive grammar (a term I hadn't mentioned in my class); that prescriptivism was linguistically void, since linguistics as a discipline was entirely descriptive; and that, historically, prescriptivism was part of an apparatus of oppression, because it codified and valorized one dialect while declaring others wrong (uneducated, lower class, “other”).

The other students looked at me, or perhaps tried not to look at me, as my face reddened. These arguments were not unfamiliar. I'd read about them in books. But I'd never expected them to be applied to *me*. The party atmosphere left the room like air from a balloon. I felt dissed, awkward, and old.

I said, “But you'll never say ‘they is.’ You'll always say ‘they are.’ So won't ‘they’ always sound plural?”

Luna responded, “Language changes.”

Let me ask: Do you think Luna sounded annoyingly Thought Police-ish? That's not how *I* feel about my students. At all. I love them for their wit, their intelligence, their sweetness, and their social consciences. I respected Luna. Nonetheless, at that moment I felt that much of what I held dear about the English language had been damned as immoral and tossed out the window.

I lay in bed that night, unable to sleep. Do all teachers have nights like this, in which they worry that they've metamorphosed from lovable curmudgeons into oppressors, though they're not quite sure how? I wish I could say that as I tossed and turned I was pondering what I would later come to see as the eloquence and cogency of Luna's arguments, but I was just feeling shitty.

And then two words floated into my mind: "You are."

You are.

If I've ever been tempted to shout "Eureka!" it was then. "Eureka!" is supposed to be reserved for Archimedean breakthroughs, which, alas, this did not turn out to be. I later discovered that many others had had exactly the same idea. At that moment, however, I thought I was the first. A genius, basically. The mortifying pizza party faded.

This was my idea: I'd spent my whole life saying "you are," whether I was talking to one person or fifty. When I was talking to one person, the plural verb didn't sound wrong. It just was.

Had *you* once been exclusively plural? And had it evolved to be singular as well, though retaining its original plural verb? Might *you*, in fact, be a lot like *they*?

The answers turned out to be yes, yes, and yes.

Here's the short version of what I learned about *you*.

Most other Indo-European languages have two versions of *you*, one singular and one plural. English used to as well. In Old and Middle English, the second person singular was *thou* (subject) and *thee* (object), as in "Thou lovest me, and I love thee"; the plural was *ye* (subject) and *you* (object), as in "Ye all love me, and I love all of you." Around the thirteenth century, English speakers added a French-influenced fillip by starting to use *you* (like *vous*) with their social superiors, both singular and plural, and *thou* (like *tu*) with intimates, children, and social inferiors. (The use of plural pronouns for nobility lives on in the royal *we*, as in "We are not amused." Queen Victoria—who may or may not have said that—really *did* contain multitudes.) When knights were knights and peasants were peasants, it was hard to screw up your pronouns, but by the sixteenth century, with the rise of a prosperous middle class, it was alarmingly easy to put your foot in your mouth. What if the fellow you were talking to sounded lower class because he'd started out that way, but he'd made a killing in the cotton trade and expected to be addressed with respect? If you called him *thou*, he might be at least as offended as a nonbinary person in the twenty-first century whom you'd called *he* or *she*. In fact, there were few more efficient ways to dishonor a man than to "thou" him. When Sir Walter Raleigh was tried for treason in 1603, the prosecutor uttered the worst insult he could think of: "I *thou* thee, thou traitor."

In such a climate, the safest course was to call everyone *you*.

By the end of the seventeenth century, *you* had pretty much supplanted *thee* and *thou*, at least in London, which was always on the cutting edge of social change. (*Ye* had fallen by the wayside as well.) The Quakers were a notable exception. Just as they refused to doff their hats or bow to those who considered themselves socially superior, they insisted on addressing both princes and paupers as *thou* (that was the singular; they retained *you* for the plural) in order to emphasize everyone's spiritual equality, which was one of the reasons they were stoned, beaten, kicked, smeared with excrement, and imprisoned. George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, wrote that when he called a person of rank *thou*, it was "a fearful cut to proud flesh." And because the Quakers were so roundly hated, their use of *thou* may have hastened its exit: Who wants to sound like a member of a reviled out-group?

In 1660, two of Fox's followers, with input from their leader, wrote an entire book devoted to rectifying the problem of the singular *you*, titled *A Battle-Door for Teachers and Professors to Learn Singular & Plural*. The arguments in this curious volume are based not only on the Quakers' dislike of social deference but on their high regard for truth telling. If it would be a lie to say "books" when there was just one book, would it not also be a lie to use a plural word—*you*—to

address a singular person? Ergo, everyone should use *thou* and *thee* when addressing one person, *you* when addressing more than one. *Battle-Door* sounded an awful lot like the 2019 letter to the *New York Times* that said, “Singular ‘they’ is an oxymoron. ‘They’ has a meaning, and it means two or more of something.”

By the nineteenth century, aside from the Quakers and a few obstinate geographic pockets, mostly in northern England, *thou* was all but gone. *You*, still trailing its plural verb, had won the battle, which had been all about evening out power and status, or at least pretending to—with the all-purpose, fancier *you* raising everyone up to the same level, just as the Quakers’ humble *thou* reduced everyone to the same level.

As Luna said, language changes.

“**Y**ou are” made me feel entirely different about the singular *they* as a generic gender-neutral pronoun. I could see that *they* was undergoing exactly the same evolution as *you* had, from exclusively plural to both singular and plural—an evolution that in both instances was driven by social change. (And it occurred to me that “themselves,” which Nat preferred to “themselves,” was no different from “yourself.” There was a time when “yourself” undoubtedly sounded strange, too, to ears that had heard only “yourselves.”) It was all just happening a lot faster with *they*.

Which is not to say that I immediately jumped on the bandwagon. Two years passed between the pizza party and the course applications that made me wince. But I winced from habit, not from principle. “I don’t want to be that student who can’t stop talking about how their summer abroad changed them” still *sounded* wrong, but I no longer thought it *was* wrong.

Nevertheless, obstacles remained. My parents. *Easy English Exercises*. My favorite writers in my own genre, John McPhee and Ian Frazier and Joan Didion and E. B. White, whom I'd never caught using the singular *they*. Ambiguity. (My brother told me, "If someone said, 'They killed them,' how would I know whether one person killed a hundred people or a hundred people killed one person?") Loss of stylistic grace. Loss of the ease that comes from writing and speaking in the way to which one has become accustomed.

But I've been considerably swayed by the many reasonable arguments in favor of the singular *they*. Here are a few.

It's been used by writers from Chaucer ("And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame, / They wol come up and offre in Goddes name") to Shakespeare ("God send everyone their heart's desire!") to Fielding ("Every body fell a laughing, as how could they help it") to Shaw ("It's enough to drive anyone out of their senses"). A friend of mine mentioned that Jane Austen used it routinely. *She did?* She did. I found an Austen website that lists thirty-six instances in *Mansfield Park* alone.

It was used in the King James Bible (Philippians 2:3: "Let nothing bee done through strife, or vaine glory, but in lowliness of minde let each esteeme other better then themselues").

Many languages—including Turkish, Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian, Basque, Armenian, Bengali, and Tagalog—have no gendered pronouns.

English *needs* a gender-neutral singular pronoun, and as Winston Churchill said about democracy as a form of government, *they* is the worst option, except for all the others. I used to find *they* so grating, and I worried that it would cause so much confusion, that I said I'd prefer a neologism. But I now realize that if I were working at Goldman Sachs—an unlikely prospect, for more reasons than I care to name—and, upon being queried about a colleague's whereabouts, were expected to say, "Ze went to the store," I'd try to comply but would have a far harder time than I've had with *they*, and also might feel railroaded into an alternate universe in which my language didn't sound like my language (which I understand, of course, is exactly how many people feel about *they*).

It's generational. The young are more likely to use *they* than the old. The eighty-five-year-old former tennis player Renée Richards, a transgender woman who uses *she*, has said that she is almost as bewildered by current discussions of pronouns as her father was when his new telephone didn't have a cord attached to it. I am much closer in age to Richards than to my students, but I feel I should learn how to use the phone.

It's political, but in a good way. My students endorse the singular *they* not because they're snowflakes but because they're activists. The nonbinary *they* appeals to them because even if they're not nonbinary themselves, they wish to support those who are; the generic *they* appeals to them because they wish to be inclusive: Why would you say "If someone has a question, he or she should stand up" when there might be a *they* in the room? As long as my students don't completely write off those who fail to fall in line, that's an admirable thing. It's what the Harvard Divinity School students did with their noisemakers and what the Swedes are doing with *hen*. In the late Sixties, Wilma Scott Heide, the president of the National Organization for Women, wrote,

In any social movement, when changes are effected, the language sooner or later reflects the change. Our approach is different. Instead of passively noting the change, we are changing language patterns to actively effect the changes.

I might not have split that last infinitive, but Heide reminds me of a late friend of mine, a disability-rights activist who told me I should never say that someone was "confined to a wheelchair" unless I also said "confined to a pair of eyeglasses." I never said it again.

I already say plenty of things that aren't grammatical just because everybody does and I'm used to them. I wouldn't say "I aren't," but I say "Aren't I?" I wouldn't say "Me is it," but I say "It's me" even though—as per *Easy English Exercises*, Lesson 60, "Case Forms of Pronouns"—"me" should be "I" because it's a predicate nominative, not a direct object.

Sometimes *they* just sounds better. If, instead of "If you love someone, set them free," Sting had sung, "If you love someone, set him or her free" or (following the suggestion in my grammar handout to make the whole sentence plural) "If you love people, set them free," fans worldwide would have torn up their concert tickets.

They can be useful when anonymity is important. The whistleblower who set off President Trump's impeachment inquiry might have been even harder to identify if reporters had referred to him as *they* instead of *he*.

Following the principle that says the enemy of my enemy is my friend, I feel favorably disposed toward the singular *they* because a lot of people with whom I disagree about other things dislike it. The conservative computer scientist David Gelernter, whose other peculiarities include his denial of Darwin’s theory of evolution, believes that feminist ideologues have “proceeded to shoot the legs out from under grammar—which collapsed in a heap after agreement between subject and pronoun was declared to be optional.” (Actually, he meant “antecedent,” not “subject,” but never mind.) The Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, who has also said that white privilege is “a Marxist lie” and Islamophobia is “a word created by fascists and used by cowards to manipulate morons,” has stated that he does not recognize the right of other people to tell him what pronouns he should use to address them. Why should I agree with those guys about anything?

The most powerful foes of the singular *they* aren’t prescriptive grammarians, who, like me, have a hard time with the generic gender-neutral pronoun, but leaders of the Christian right, who have a hard time with its use by nonbinary people because they believe that God made human beings either male or female. For them, it’s not a grammatical issue; it’s a religious issue. I beg to differ.

The most important argument for the singular *they* is that English is just too damn gendered.

Twenty-four years ago, when I wrote “The His’er Problem,” I thought the goal was to change the way we spoke so that the genders could be linguistically equal. I was willing to sacrifice a modicum of stylistic felicity in order to achieve that goal, but I wasn’t willing to break any grammatical rules. Now I’m wondering why it’s so important to mention gender at all.

For more than six decades, I’ve accepted without thinking that when we say that someone went to the store, we don’t have to specify whether that someone was old or young, rich or poor, fat or thin, tall or short, but we do have to specify whether the someone was a “he” or a “she.” Now I’m starting to think that’s a little weird. Gender is so ingrained in our heads. In his later years, when he was referring to his youngest son, my father-in-law would often cycle through as many as five names—Harry, Georgie, Neddy, Blue, Teddy—before arriving at Mark. The first three were his other sons. The last two were long-deceased male dogs. He never named any women. Gender was more essential even than species.

That just doesn’t make sense. So I’m in favor of changes that take gender off the table, or at least make it less central. I welcomed my university’s adoption of “first-year” instead of “freshman.” I used to think the point of the change was to make the term less male; I now think it’s to make it less anything. Similarly, I approve of “chair” instead of “chairman” (even the Fed made the switch last year), “ancestors” instead of “forefathers,” “workforce” instead of “manpower,” “actor” and “host” and “server” for everybody. I’m partway there with *they*.

In M&M fashion, I have sorted the use of the singular *they* into a hierarchy of five categories, from most conservative to most revolutionary:

1. Refusing to use it in any way, shape, or form.
2. Using it only for nonbinary people.
3. Using it with indefinite pronouns, like *anyone* and *everybody* (“Does everybody have their mittens?”).
4. Using it in other situations in which gender isn’t known or relevant (“A driver should know how to park their car”).
5. Using it for everyone, an idea proposed last summer in a *New York Times* column by Farhad Manjoo, a self-described “cisgender, middle-aged suburban dad” who wrote, “Call me ‘they,’ and I’ll call you ‘them.’ I won’t mind, and I hope you won’t, either.” (Manjoo’s column received 2,251 comments, most of them negative, including “Nonsense,” “Grow up,” “How far have we fallen,” and “Are you kidding?”)

I used to be in the second category. I’ve now moved cautiously into the third, at least sometimes, though only in conversation.

Am I on a slippery slope? As I slide down the pronoun hill, trailing a hand behind me to make sure I don’t go too fast, I wonder whether I’ll start to bend on other linguistic matters beyond pronouns. Maybe. I used to spell “email” “e-mail,” and now I don’t. I can see a lowercase *g* in “to Google” looming in my future. But that’s just spelling. It’s not grammar,

which—even though I know I’m wrong—I still like to think of as resting on principles as trustworthy and immutable as the law of gravity.

I wrote most of this essay in a rented one-room cabin without internet, a landline, cell service, television, radio, or hot water. (I mention these not to solicit props for my Thoreauvian asceticism but to emphasize how retrograde I am.) On my birthday, I was sitting alone at the writing table, which faces a large window. It was early evening. I glanced up from my work and saw a large, dark shape. I switched from this essay to my journal, and wrote:

A black bear just walked across the meadow from left to right and is now snuffling around by the edge of the woods. Are they eating something? Yes, they have something in their mouth! Now they’re climbing up the bank. Now they’re in the woods. Wow.

Not exactly deathless prose, but a milestone: my first Category 4. It was the training-wheels version of the singular *they*. I wasn’t even talking about a person. No one was listening, so I didn’t have to worry about the neon sign. Still.


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