## Chapter 10: Pronoun wars

In our analysis of handedness, we saw an often overlooked “excluded middle”— a sizable population who are neither strictly left- nor strictly right-handed. The survey questions about sex and gender follow the same methodology as the handedness questions, and similarly allow “both” or “neither” responses to the questions “Do you identify as female?” and “Do you identify as male?” In the graph below, these ambiguous responses are represented by the “Both or neither female/male” curve.

Unsurprisingly, we find an excluded middle here too. As with handedness and sexual orientation, we’re entering a territory where biology, medicine, environment, language, and culture all intersect in complex ways. For handedness, though, the signs of stigma and discrimination are largely encoded in linguistic clues from the past, whereas sex, gender, and the stigmas of their excluded middles are a red-hot topic today. This volcano is active, with the eruption of major debates in the media about non-binariness and trans rights seemingly every week. The cultural landscape is being reshaped before our eyes.

In addition to “both or neither,” the graph above also includes the percentage of people who use the pronoun “they” exclusively, that is, who answer “yes” to “Is the right pronoun for you “they”?” and “no” to all of the other pronoun questions. As we can see, both of these are much more common among the young, and unsurprisingly, there’s considerable overlap among these populations. About 1 in 250 people of age 65 don’t identify as either strictly male or female, making this a rarity, though a number of comments from older respondents suggest that it might have been otherwise, had they been born later:

I wish I had understood gender fluidity better when I was young.[[1]](#footnote-21)

I’m glad I was born when gender identity was much simpler. You have too many choices today and it would be too hard for me to decide what to be.[[2]](#footnote-22)

At age 18, among those who indeed have “many choices,” something like 1 in 40 people don’t identify as strictly male or female— that’s sixfold higher. In the same vein, fewer than 1 in 1,000 65 year olds use “they” exclusively, but at age 18, it’s likely above 1 in 100— a tenfold change. In the 2021 data alone, the figure is [[XXXXXXXXXX]]. These are dramatic shifts, and they’re likely still in progress. We can see that both from the steepness of the change by age, and from a number of comments from younger respondents suggesting that many are still figuring it out:

I mostly present as female— I’m not out as [nonbinary]/genderfluid/genderqueer. […] I’m generally somewhere in between genders, rarely being 100% male or female. I’m glad I was given a name with a gender-neutral nickname because it makes everything a bit more comfortable. I have never had the courage to reveal my gender identity in relationships.[[3]](#footnote-23)

This was a “hard” survey for me. The closest I’ve come to defining my gender identity is “cis by default.” It’s just easiest and most comfortable to present as a woman for me, but I don’t intrinsically feel like a woman or feminine. And I don’t feel comfortable saying I’m non-binary or using pronouns like “they” because I do present as a woman. So yeah, just the normal difficulties with society’s rigid gender structure, I guess![[4]](#footnote-24)

The increasingly common use of “they” as a singular non-binary pronoun, and the cultural significance of this shift, inspired Mirriam-Webster to make it the 2019 Word of the Year. Like many people of my generation, when I first heard “they” used this way, it sounded odd, both impersonal and ungrammatical. Yet its use as a gender neutral pronoun isn’t a modern innovation; singular “they” can be found in English as early as the 1300s, only a century after the introduction of the *plural* “they.”[^5]

Criticism of the usage by style commentators is a much more recent development, dating back only to the mid-18th century, though it has remained in common use. Long before it became a pronoun non-binary people could apply to themselves, it served a useful grammatical function in situations where we need to refer to someone of unknown gender. Although style guides cloak their guidance in arguments about usefulness, under the surface they’re about stigma, that is, in- and out-groups. Human languages aren’t like computer languages, which are rigidly engineered and have a strict syntax, with objective “rights” and “wrongs.” Our languages are messier than that, and this is a good thing. The messiness allows language to adapt to the changing needs of different populations, and to evolve over time; like anything that lives and propagates, languages are the Darwinian cumulative sum of many generations of such tinkering.

Of course if languages didn’t evolve, there would be no call to try to regulate them. Those who try to do so tend to be arguing (or, when emboldened enough, mandating) from a position of privilege. By asserting that certain usages are right and others wrong, they’re policing a social boundary and enforcing a value gradient across it— a right and wrong side of the tracks. Often this is a class boundary.

For a while, the gender-neutral “they” tended to be looked down on as colloquial, informal, or even uneducated, not unlike the Southern American “y’all” (which is also popular in spoken English, and also serves a useful grammatical function, distinguishing the plural from singular “you”). On the other hand, disallowing the gender neutral “they” in formal writing without falling back on “he” as a catchall meant introducing awkward constructions like “he or she,” which had trouble catching on. So, rising acknowledgement of male privilege, and the backlash against that acknowledgement, turned pronouns into a culture wars issue long before most people were thinking about non-binary or trans identity. Conservative computer scientist, painter, and self-appointed style authority David Gelernter wrote in a 2008 jeremiad entitled *Feminism and the English Language*,[[5]](#footnote-25)

The fixed idea forced by language rapists upon a whole generation of students, that “he” can refer only to a male, is (in short) wrong. […] He-or-she’ing added so much ugly dead weight to the language that even the Establishment couldn’t help noticing. So feminist authorities went back to the drawing board. Unsatisfied with having rammed their 80-ton 16-wheeler into the nimble sports-car of English style, they 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.

Can the damage to our mother tongue be undone?

Setting aside any critique of Gelernter’s own rather steroidal writing style and its mixed automotive/equestrian analogies, this policing follows a familiar pattern. It circles the wagons to protect a virtuous “us” from an invading “them,” positing “our way” as an unquestioned, it’s-always-been-this-way default and “their way” as radical, foreign, and threatening:

Why should I worry about anyone’s ideology? […] Who can afford to allow a virtual feminist to elbow her way like a noisy drunk into that inner mental circle where all your faculties (such as they are) are laboring to produce decent prose?

But even as he wrote, language was already moving on, as it always does. With the rise of “they” as an identity pronoun for individuals, David Gelernter’s son Josh took up the mantle (along with the anger and aggrievement), arguing in the *National Review* in 2016,[[6]](#footnote-27)

Trying to depluralize “they” is an asinine effort, stemming from a stupid misunderstanding made by stupid people whom the [American Dialect Society] has chosen to indulge rather than to correct. […] You might ask why it matters one way or the other. Aside from being wrong, and sounding wrong, using “they” as a singular steals precision from the language. It is destructive.

On reading their critiques, it’s hard not to conclude that the concerns of the Gelernters, while couched in grammatical and logical arguments, are fundamentally political and rooted in identity; where David’s beef was with feminists, Josh’s was with the new threat: trans and non-binary people. Their desire for language to “stay as it is,” which is to say, return to the way it was, is hard to separate from their larger desire for the rest of the world to go back to the way it was too, perhaps in the 1950s or 60s.[[7]](#footnote-29)

Many modern style commentators harbor more moderate beliefs, and understand that language is always evolving to suit new needs. Steven Pinker, in his 2014 book *The Sense of Style*, wrote,

Only a minority [of the Usage Panel] accepts *A person at that level should not have to keep track of the hours they put in*—though the size of that minority has doubled in the past decade, from 20 percent to almost 40 percent, one of many signs that we are in the midst of a historical change that’s returning singular *they* to the acceptability it enjoyed before a purist crackdown in the nineteenth century. A slim majority of the panel accepts *If anyone calls, tell them I can’t come to the phone* and *Everyone returned to their seats*. The main danger in using these forms is that a more-grammatical-than-thou reader may falsely accuse you of making an error. If they do, tell them that Jane Austen and I think it’s fine.

The hat tip to Jane Austen might be a bit embarrassing to David Gelernter, as Gelernter has held up Austen as a paragon of style— yet she was herself a frequent user of “they” as a gender-neutral singular pronoun. (A recurring theme in this chapter: being too committed to an ideological position can interfere with one’s ability to do good research!) Still, in Austen’s day, “they” would never have been used for a specific, known person, or in referring to oneself, because gender ambiguity in an individual would have seemed strange, perhaps even freakish. While it certainly existed, it wasn’t acknowledged in polite society.

Clearly this is now changing, but the strict gender binary is still very much with us as a cultural default. “Boy or girl?” is still the first question a new parent is likely to get, and the genderedness of language, customs, bathrooms, and so on means that in our daily interactions we continually model each other’s gender in ways that are hard to sidestep. This can be frustrating to many people, even when their responses to the survey questions about sex and gender are unambiguously masculine or feminine: “I hate gendered restrictions and enforcement of binary gender norms”[[8]](#footnote-30); “I wish we would eliminate gender from identifying ourselves”[[9]](#footnote-31); “gender is exhausting and most of my life trying to present as female in the US has been stressful and uncomfortable, I prefer to just exist without thinking about it and just being ME.”[[10]](#footnote-32) These sentiments are often expressed by women, for reasons that become increasingly clear as we consider who has historically gotten the short end of the stick.

While “they” is an increasingly popular way out of the binary, it’s by no means the only alternative brewing in our language’s evolutionary cauldron. A few years ago we saw something of a Cambrian explosion of gender neutral pronouns. “Ze,” “ey,” “hen,” “thon,” “xe,” and even, especially controversially, “it,” all have their partisans. Then, there are the nigh-infinite combinations and nuances of usage preferred by individuals. One 26 year old from Wilkes Barre, PA, wrote,

I identify as both she and he pronouns, never they. They is too much like erasure to me, and sometimes I feel like both she and he, so I don’t mind either.

Another wrote,

I identify as gender queer and use she/they pronouns. I do not mind if someone uses “he” but I did not want to select that it was the “right” pronoun.

The responses include many, many more variations.

It may be that this is our new normal: a complex and ever-expanding maze of words between the old traditional neighborhoods of “he” and “she.” Future students of English as a second language may need to master such nuances in order to speak respectfully, much the way foreign students of Japanese must struggle through the many honorific forms of address that characterize that language. Or, over time, English usages may settle and “they” (or some alternative) may become commonly enough accepted to displace its competitors and simplify the excluded middle. Or maybe, in the end, “they” will simply become the default pronoun for everybody, with “he” and “she” becoming archaisms like “thee” and “thou.” This would certainly make life simpler. With my engineering hat on, it’s probably the option I’d pick, if I could make up the rules. But of course that’s not anyone’s prerogative, because language is not an engineered thing. And for now, many people are rolling their own personal pronouns.

This can create a bit of a linguistic minefield. The older or more traditionally minded of us, even those not as ideologically opposed as the Gelernters, tend to be bemused, puzzled, or even fearful about misstepping, and can be resentful about suddenly needing to deal with it all. This attitude is typified by a man from Sicklerville, NJ:

I think that there is so much political correctness in the current time period that it is a little absurd. If someone mistakes someone as a “guy” and they want to really be identified as a “she” how can someone be offended and angry at someone for this? It used to be so simple 50 years ago.

Ah, the good old mid-twentieth century.

Unsurprisingly, this can lead to differing presentations in different contexts, perhaps to avoid such uncomfortable interactions; the truth is that most gender-nontraditional people don’t relish this kind of confrontation either. As a 20 year old from Austin, Texas put it, “I use multiple pronouns (she/they) and identify as nonbinary or female depending on who I’m talking to.” In addition to making things even *more* complicated (relative forms of address once more recall Japanese honorifics), one of the effects of this dependence on context is that older or more traditional people often dramatically underestimate the size of the excluded middle. They aren’t confronted with it, even if they’re in contact with it. Just as in Jane Austen’s time, nuances in gender aren’t seen, so, in a self-fulfilling way, they remain invisible.

All of this raises profound questions that have become highly charged in today’s political and cultural climate, such as: is this rising ambiguity in gender identification a reflection of an underlying reality that has been with us all along but has been long suppressed, or is it a social trend— even, as some have claimed, a fad? (Recall that for sexual orientation, we’ve seen evidence of both long-suppressed realities emerging into the open *and* social contagion.) Can we draw a clear line between sex, which many authorities today define as purely biological, and gender, which is often considered cultural? Are either sex or gender innate properties, and are either of them inherently binary? Are they fixed for an individual, or can they change (or be changed) over time, or depending on context and environment? There are a variety of strongly held and opposing beliefs regarding all of these questions. If we set aside ideology as best we can, though, we can make real headway in answering them by delving more deeply into the what the data tell us about the excluded middle, just as we did with handedness.

There are a number of roughly analogous gender terms for what we’d call “ambidextrous” in the context of handedness. “Non-binary” is the most common, but other variations in common use include “gender fluid” and “gender queer.” As with ambidexterity, we’re not defining the terms in the survey, so we should think of them for now simply as communities people identify with that suggest something nontraditional about a person’s gender.

As we can see in the graph, there’s overlap between these populations, but it’s far from complete, since like gender neutral pronouns, these terms all have their partisans. Hence the total— meaning, people who answer “yes” to any or all of the three questions “Are you non-binary?,” “Are you gender fluid?,” or “Are you gender queer?”— is larger than any of these individually, but smaller than the sum, ranging from 5% to 8% depending on age.

In the breakdown by age, we see the expected rises in nontraditional or minority identities among the young. Some surprising things happen after middle age, though. This is most obvious for the non-binary curve, which is under 3% from ages 40-50, but rises to about 5% for both younger *and* older people! The total for these identities by age 72 rises past 8%, which is significantly above the 6.5% or so for 20 year olds. What’s going on here?

The mystery deepens if we break down the non-binary population into three distinct sub-populations: non-binary women (for our purposes, those who answer “yes” to “Do you identify as female?” and “no” to “Do you identify as male?”), non-binary men (“yes” to “Do you identify as male?,” “no” to “Do you identify as female?”), and non-binary people who answer “yes” to neither or both of “Do you identify as female?” and “Do you identify as male?”

We can see that the curious U-shape of the non-binary curve is actually a sum of three very different components. First, let’s consider the component drawn in black: people who are both non-binary and respond ambiguously to the questions about their sex (“yes” to both or neither of “Do you identify as male?” and “Do you identify as female?”). Like exclusive users of “they,” this curve is high among the young, and low among the older population. For people over 50, the sex binary seems to reign absolute: that is, even among older non-binary people, *everyone* answers “yes” to exactly one of “Do you identify as male?” or “Do you identify as female?” As we look at younger people, though, we see an increasing number who are both non-binary and answer “yes” to both or neither male/female. Among 20 year olds, this applies to about 1 in 60 people. The “both” and “neither” populations appear to be roughly equivalent in other respects. As a 27 year old non-binary person from Spokane, Washington put it,

I consider myself non-binary, so that’s why I answered “yes” to both identification as male and female— but I feel equally correct saying “no” to both as well.

What are we to make of the other components, though— and especially the fact that the number of people who answer “yes” to “Are you non-binary?” but also identify as male (and not female) *climbs* from about 1% at age 20 to 2.5% by age 65? This is the opposite of the age pattern we’ve come to expect.

To understand what’s going on here, we need to delve into the complex topic of intersexuality. Intersex people are the *biological* “excluded middle” of sex— falling somewhere between male and female. If this is new to you, you’re not alone. Many survey respondents noted that they had never heard of intersexuality, with some expressing surprise when they Googled it to learn more.[[11]](#footnote-33) Your odds are somewhat higher of having encountered the word “hermaphrodite” at one point or another— a historical and still often-used term for intersex. Even if you’re familiar with the concept, however, you likely think of this as a rare anomaly— perhaps even if you’re intersex yourself. This is because our highly gender-binary society has rendered intersexuality so taboo.

1. A 60 year old woman from Grand Junction, Colorado. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
2. A 66 year old man from Canyon, Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
3. A 30 year old from Concord, California. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
4. A 36 year old woman from Glendale, California. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
5. [Link](https://web.archive.org/web/20080510073058/http://weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/014/783lvmtg.asp?pg=1). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
6. [Link](https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/10/gender-pronouns-job-titles/). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
7. Even the Gelernters would be unlikely to argue for a return to the 19th century. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
8. A 35 year old woman from Philadelphia, PA. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
9. A 56 year old woman from Winterville, GA. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
10. A 33 year old woman from Winston Salem, NC. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
11. It was especially interesting to find this term disproportionately singled out as obscure given the many other niche and in some cases far more recently coined terms on the survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)