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Oppression of Gender Non-conformity in Arguments Against Singular *They*

Changes in society and culture require changes in language, especially as a deeper awareness and better understanding of the social and ideological concerns regarding gender as performative, fluid, or non-binary emerge.

Often, the terms *gender* and *sex* are used interchangeably; while they may be somewhat related concepts, they are distinctly different identity markers. Sex is assigned by body traits, including genetics, hormones, reproductive organs, and secondary sexual characteristics. *Male* and *female* are the two most common sexual identity markers; however, a third sex marker, *intersex*, exists for people whose bodies contain chromosomes, hormones, or genitals with both male and female characteristics.

Alternatively, gender is both performance and identity; it describes how a person expresses their individuality based on personality characteristics that are culturally interpreted as either masculine or feminine. Hill defines gender as "a social construct [and] a tool used to communicate [based on] a set of social agreements [that is] simultaneously liberating and binding" (4).

Cisgender refers to people who currently identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, that generally matches their sex markers. However, gender exists beyond the traditional binary norms of cis-male and cis-female under the umbrella term *transgender*, which

encompasses the entire spectrum of gender identity that cannot be labeled as cisgender; common transgender identities include trans-feminine, trans-masculine, gender non-conforming, gender-fluid, and genderqueer (Hill 17-18). Gender is not always obvious, and a person's gender performance may not completely correlate to that person's actual or perceived gender identity; an example of this would be a butch lesbian who identifies as a cisgender woman.

Ideas about gender norms shift over time and may vary from culture to culture, but some attributes are generally categorized as falling under *masculine* — strong, aggressive, competent — or *feminine* — sensitive, passionate, graceful (Hill 4-5). Scott explains how these ingrained impressions affect the way people not only think about personal gender, but also how they conceptualize objects in languages that utilize grammatical gender; he illustrates this subtle bias with evidence from a study showing that German speakers describe a key (*ein Schlüssel*, male) as "hard, heavy, and jagged" while Spanish speakers describe a key (*una llave*, female) as "golden, intricate, and little".

Consequences can be dangerous for individuals who do not adequately conform to society's idea of accepted cultural gender norms. 2015 saw a record number in the murders of transgender people, mostly of trans women of color (Michaels; Tourjee). Although public school students across the United States are legally permitted to use the restroom matching their gender identity, several states, including North Carolina, have enacted or are working on passing laws that will require people to use public restrooms corresponding to their biological sex assigned at birth; legislation such as this provokes a rise in verbal harassment, physical assault, and higher risk for suicide (Khazan).

These strict assumptions for gender roles based on cultural norms can also be harmful to anyone who appears to fall outside those norms, whether or not those individuals are actually transgender. For example, when Willie Houston of Nashville, TN agreed to hold his fiancee's purse while she was in the restroom, he was ultimately killed by someone who initially verbally harassed him with anti-gay and transgender slurs (Southern Poverty Law Center; State of Tennessee v. Lewis M. Davidson, III).

As mentioned above, gender exists beyond the traditional binary, and some people fall outside the confines of pronouns such as *he* or *she*. People feel respected and validated when using a personal pronoun that reaffirms their gender identity (Hill). Ballou stresses that using *he* or *she* "erases [their] sense of self" and using *they* "is a way [they] survive [...] it is a celebration of being." Hess rejoices that singular *they* "feels a little bit like a shortcut on the way to acceptance."

Due to the change in gender perception, the American Dialect Society overwhelmingly voted singular *they* as the Word of the Year for 2015, representing a clear shift in the language based on usage by English speakers and a need for a gender-neutral, singular third-person pronoun. Although grammarians claim that English has no suitable third-person singular pronoun for individuals of no or unknown gender and criticize this deficiency, singular *they* is more than appropriate based on the actual grammar patterns of many native English speakers (Bodine; Fogerty).

Two types of grammarians exist on either side of the the controversy regarding singular *they*: prescriptivists, who theorize about and determine which features the English language should implement in order to be accurate and correct; and descriptivists, who analyze the

features of the English language in current use and document how those features are used to communicate (Finegan). Fabello refers to prescriptivists as "grammar snobs" who are more concerned about rules and procedure who implicitly support systems of oppression and hierarchy.

Prescriptivists are either unaware or unconcerned about the social and cultural implications of using singular *they*; these grammarians defend the current pronouns as an unmoving feature of the English language, rather than listening to the needs of actual English speakers who require a new usage (Bodine 141).

Descriptivists, on the other hand, observe and support changes in language based on its actual usage. When criticized for using singular *they* on their Twitter account, Merriam-Webster retorted "you're talking to the wrong dictionary — we're descriptivists. We follow language, language doesn't follow us 😬" (qtd. in Crum).

3rd Person Singular			**3rd Person Plural**
It	He	She	They

Figure 1: third-person pronouns, actual usage (Bodine 132)

3rd Person Singular			**3rd Person Plural**
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Figure 2: third-person pronouns, prescribed usage (Bodine 132)

Singular *they* is a natural and common aspect of the English language, whether referring to a group of people or a single, gender-unknown or gender-obscured person. Bodine gives several real-world examples of singular *they* in everyday speech (139), while Ballou and Shlasko

describe people casually and ironically using singular *they* as they adamantly argue against its usage.

Evidence of singular *they* in written English, and therefore presumably also spoken English, can be found throughout history, including the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Austen, and Shaw (Bodine; Fogerty; Hess; Shlasko). Historically, it has referred to a person of unknown gender, but in recent years, it has been embraced as an alternate pronoun for genderqueer individuals who renounce the traditional gender binary. Refusing to accept singular *they* disrespects and erases the gender identity of non-binary individuals and contributes to their emotional and physical oppression (Hill; Shlasko).

The prescriptive arguments against using *they* as a third-person singular pronoun began in the early nineteenth century, based on the incorrect analysis of *they* as strictly a plural pronoun (Bodine 133). Since prescriptive grammar is the brand taught in schools, people grow up with the inaccurate belief that using singular *they* to refer to one person is grammatically incorrect; those people who do use it are seen as less educated, and therefore not as worthy. Finegan argues that "languages [...] reflect the social identities of their speakers" and that, at least culturally but not linguistically, the dialect spoken by those in power, such as highly educated, middle- to upper-class groups, is more desired — those dialects most "stigmatized" belong to marginalized groups, such as the lower class, women, and minorities. Refraining from using singular *they* and observing the rules of so-called correct grammar maintains privilege, and adopting this pattern of speech can open pathways to privilege for those in minority classes. Therefore, the people in the ruling class fight to preserve what they perceive as proper pronoun usage as part of the fight to preserve the status quo (Fabello; Shlasko).

Due to this privilege, many people, including prescriptivist grammarians, wrongly insist that *they* should only be used as a third-person plural pronoun and not in reference to a single individual. That said, Bodine maintains that singular *they* fulfills a need in the English language, and it was widely used and accepted as a gender-neutral third-person pronoun until the prescriptive grammarians began their fight against it in the early nineteenth century. The issues these grammarians have with singular *they* as a gender-neutral pronoun include the claim that this pronoun presents a disagreement in number to the antecedent, and therefore should not be used in this manner; however, those grammarians also dissent with phrases such as *he or she*, claiming it to be "clumsy, pedantic, or unnecessary" (133) — contention they do not have with similar phrases such as *one or more*. McCawley further contends that the phrase relegates women to a "special category" (qtd. in Bodine 138), adding to the sexism that others insist is inherent in the phrase (Bodine; Fogerty).

He or she also assumes adherence to the traditional gender binary, that people will identify as one or the other, but this is not the case with agender, non-binary, or genderqueer individuals who do not feel comfortable or safe labelling themselves as *he* or *she* (Ballou; Hill; Scott).

Interestingly, the grammar rules of the English pronoun *you* did change over time based on actual usage. In Old and Middle English, *thou* was the singular second-person pronoun and *you* was the plural form. Influenced by French language and grammar, people began using *thou* to address those of the same social class or lower, and *you* to address those of a higher social standing. Eventually the meaning of *you* — originally a plural pronoun — broadened as

emphasis on social hierarchy diminished, leading *thou* to fall into obscurity (Bodine; Crystal; Shlasko).

Because *it* is regarded as "dehumanizing" (Scott), many grammarians argue that *he* is the pronoun to use when the gender of the antecedent is unknown. While none have self-described their points as androcentric or misogynistic, their base arguments prove otherwise. Some have explicitly stated the priority of men, such as Roberts — "grammatically, men are more important than women" (qtd. in Bodine 139) — but others do so more covertly; for example, maintaining that *he* includes women as well as men, in the same way that *mankind* refers to both men and women (Bodine 137; Hess).

Nonetheless, this pronoun by its nature excludes women and people who fall outside the traditional gender binary (American Dialect Society, Bodine; Fogerty). Beginning with second-wave feminism in the 1970s and continuing today with emerging gender issues, such as transgender identity, the use of generic *he* to describe people other than men reflects an androcrentric view that centers cisgender men as more important or more worthy than women or genderqueer individuals. Bill Walsh of *The Washington Post* asserts that generic *he* is no longer "palatable" (qtd. in Fogerty) due to the progress in understanding gender, and advocates for singular *they* in that medium's style guide.

Other objections, such that generic *he* can be confusing with female or non-binary antecedents, are countered with protests that singular *they* can be just as confusing; however, Foertsch and Gernsbacher conducted a study of reading comprehension, using sentences with either generic *he* or singular *they*, and concluded that comprehension of singular *they* was just as instantaneous, or in some cases much more immediate, than using generic *he*.

The arguments of prescriptive grammarians against singular *they* illustrate the inherent androcentrism of not only those grammarians but also of society at large, ignoring the actual use of English speakers who require another alternative and the arguments of descriptive grammarians who document the current and real language, with all its uses and changes. In their rigid insistence on the grammatical fault of singular *they*, prescriptivists contribute to a misogynistic culture by, as Bodine emphasizes, "failing to confront, if not implicitly subscribing to, the androcentric motive" (139). Enforcing rules is meaningless when there is an immediate cultural need for a change. Bodine points to changes in second-person pronoun usage over time offer "convincing demonstrations" (142) on how pronouns have, can, and should change.

Defending singular *they* and advocating its use not only promotes language change, but also establishes an environment where respect for people and their identities are a priority, and advances the activist movements behind social and cultural change (Ballou; Crum; Hill). Validating and respecting gender identity is more important than adhering to strict grammar rules, and as Shlasko articulately expressed, "go ahead — use they. At the least, you won't be an asshole to your genderqueer friends. At most, we might just change the world."

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