

# Variation in English gendered pronouns

## Analysis and recommendations for ethics in linguistics

Kirby Conrod  
Swarthmore College

This paper describes an ongoing shift in the pronominal system of English that is primarily related to transgender and non-binary identities. Apparent time evidence suggests that this is an ongoing change, and metalinguistic comments support the indexical link between the change and the increased visibility of transgender and non-binary English speakers. Sociopragmatic variation enabled by this change shows that the pronoun system of English functions much less like a grammatical gender (noun class) system, and much more like a system of honorifics. The second half of the paper puts forward a position for social justice around pronoun use and gender autonomy, including advice for professional linguists who work in related fields.

**Keywords:** gender, pronouns, transgender, non-binary

### 1. Introduction

I take as a starting position the discursive construction of social gender; following theories of performativity I assume that speech acts are partially responsible for the existence and perpetuation of gendered social roles and gendered individual life trajectories (Butler 1990, 1993). For the purposes of this paper I will call *social gender* (which Ackerman 2019 calls *biosocial gender*) the system of social relationships where individual identities, presentation, and interrelationships interact. This paper examines the relationship between social gender and linguistic gender marking in English, particularly on third person singular pronouns.

Ackerman (2019) proposes that linguists need (at least) a tripartite system of discussing gender in its relation to language. The first, *biosocial gender*, refers to not only the system of identities and relationships I mention above, but additionally the biological components that contribute to gender (including for exam-

ple the effects of hormone balances, secondary sex characteristics, legal gender,<sup>1</sup> sex assignment at birth, and others). Biosocial gender is in this system the form of ‘gender’ that exists outside of the linguistic system; though it is important to note that Ackerman combines characteristics of sex and gender in this term – and importantly does not assume that any parts of biosocial gender exist pre-discursively or inherently. Gender *inside* the linguistic system, Ackerman proposes, consists of two related but independent systems: *conceptual* gender and *grammatical* gender. Conceptual gender refers to gender that is effected by the cognitive tendency towards categorizing exemplars into categories and relaying generalizations across those categories. Grammatical gender refers to “the formal syntactic and/or semantic feature that is morphosyntactically defined” (Ackerman 2019: 4).

Languages that mark “gender” morphosyntactically may be doing one of several things: the first option is that the gender marking may be a system of arbitrary noun classes, often referred to as grammatical gender, which have loose associations with conceptual gender notions but little link with biosocial gender; the second option is that the gender marking may be a presupposition or proposition about the biosocial gendered position of a referent, which is ‘filtered’ through the cognitive system of conceptual gender. Languages may also do both of these things, where both biosocial + conceptual gender are marked morphosyntactically, and conceptual gender feeds grammatical gender marking as well.

Importantly, Ackerman’s tripartite system does not speak extensively about indexicality of gender; however much other literature has investigated how linguistic forms *other* than grammatical gender may be indexically linked with the biosocial gendered positionality of the speaker (or hearer) (see Eckert 2014 for review). Unfortunately, the research investigating gendered indexicality and the research investigating morphosyntactic gender-marking need to cross-pollinate more; this paper is one among many new attempts to do that. My intention with this paper is to show how morphosyntactic marking (deploying grammatical gender) is part of the same system that drives indexical gendered differences such as pitch or vowel shifts.

Languages with morphosyntactic markers of social gender allow speakers to ‘do gender’ to themselves, to their interlocutors, and to third person referents who may or may not be present. Investigating the performativity of morphosyntactic markers may be somewhat hampered, however, by divisions between ‘grammatical’ and ‘semantic’ (or lexical/functional) elements of the linguistic system –

---

1. See Hutton (2017) for further details on the tenuous and recent innovation of “legal gender” – it is worth noting also that pronouns and gendered language contributed to the invention of these legal categories.

it is generally agreed that the internal grammar is largely unconscious, difficult for many speakers to intentionally control or alter, changes slower, and resists neologisms (Muysken 2008:215). However, it is not the case that these attributes excuse grammatical elements from sociolinguistic meaning: dialect features can be indexed through tense/aspect marking (e.g. differences between Standardized English and African American English aspectual systems); singular or plural verb agreements can mark formality (as with T/V agreement in Spanish), honorification can be marked morphologically (as in Japanese). I argue here that using (English third person singular) pronouns also already convey a significant amount of social information.

As I will show throughout this paper, the use of gendered pronouns in English *creates* gender just as much as they ‘reflect’ gender; this is an effect of the general sociopragmatic flexibility and sensitivity of pronouns even as a grammatical category. The ongoing grammatical shift towards new uses of singular *they* is an extension, rather than invention, of already-existing resources in the grammar. (1) to (3) show examples of singular *they*, all anteceded by definite NPs, which are broadly agreed by speakers to be grammatical. (4) shows an example of singular *they* anteceded by a proper name; older accounts of singular *they* claim this is ungrammatical (e.g. Curzan 2003), while more recent research suggests that it is an emerging form (Bjorkman 2017, Conrod 2019, Konnelly & Cowper 2020).

- (1) *Did that person forget **their** coat?*
- (2) *Did your student finish **their** exam?*
- (3) *Did your partner get **their** tax return?*
- (4) *Did Hayden get **their** tax return?*

This paper is organized in two major parts. Part 1 describes some important empirical phenomena regarding pronouns, and discuss the implications of these data. Part 1 includes three sections; the first presents production data of singular *they* in sociolinguistic interviews; the second presents results of an online acceptability judgment study; and the third discusses the pragmatics of singular *they*. Part 2 constitutes a position statement, in which I discuss the ramifications for the ethical linguistic study and social responsibilities held by linguists. Part 2 focuses on ways that linguists can communicate scientific observations about the language in a way that combats prejudice and exorcises the biases held subconsciously by ourselves, our colleagues, and our social connections.

## 1. Variation and change in the pronoun system

This part will describe experimental results that investigate how third person singular pronouns are being used, including particular attention to innovative uses of singular *they*. The first section will be a thorough summary of some recent work, and the second section will present more detailed analysis of individual examples and metalinguistic commentary. The main findings in Part 1 can be summarized as follows:

- a. Singular *they* used with proper names and specific antecedents is much more common than previous studies suggest
- b. The synchronic variation in acceptability judgments of singular *they* used with proper names supports an apparent time analysis, meaning the use is increasing over time
- c. Because singular *they* is featurally underspecified, it allows certain types of pragmatic work that are impossible in a binary *he/she* dichotomous system
- d. Speakers can and do switch pronouns mid-discourse in service of various pragmatic goals.

Section 1 below will discuss the experimental results of a sociolinguistic interview study; Section 2 following it discusses the results of a large online acceptability judgment study about singular pronouns. Section 3 presents a pragmatic analysis of some uses of pronouns in discourse context.

### 1.1 Production of singular *they* in sociolinguistic interviews

This section summarizes the results of a sociolinguistic study designed to elicit naturalistic third-person pronoun use involving referents who were present and absent; a full description of the study is available in Conrod (2019).<sup>2</sup> The study included 22 English-speaking participants in Seattle. The participants were grouped into pairs, and interviewed first in dyads together, then separately; some pairs were two participants who knew each other, others were strangers. After the

---

2. Informed consent was obtained in writing through physical or electronic signature from all participants whose data is reported here. Further information about the informed consent process for these studies is given in Conrod (2019). Experiment One was approved by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division, Study Number 00000277, under the title *Transgender Linguistics / Linguistics and Gender*. Experiment Two was approved by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division, Study Number 00004635, under the title *Grammaticality of Singular They*.

dyadic and solo interviews, the participants completed a film clip response task and survey instrument about attitudes towards transgender and LGBT identities.

The final component of the study asked participants to fill out a demographics survey, the answers to which were all free-response (and grouped into categories by the researcher later). Of the 22 participants, 13 were young (ages 18–29), seven were middle age (30–55), and two were older (over 56); six participants were masculine or male-aligned gender identities, eleven were female or feminine-aligned, and five gave gender identities that were not clearly aligned with either category. 17 participants were white/Caucasian, two Ashkenazi/Jewish, one half Chinese / white, one Spanish, one “other.”

The resulting corpus of data includes 13,891 pronouns, of which 3,708 were third person pronouns, and 3,066 of those were singular third person pronouns. In this data set, there were 255 tokens of singular *they*. Only 32 of the tokens of singular *they* were used with generic antecedents; the 223 other uses of singular *they* referred to definite, specific antecedents.

This result alone – that specific use of singular *they* far outweighs the generic use in naturalistic conversational context – is significant in light of previous studies which have generalized definite specific uses as marginal or minority uses (e.g. Foertsch & Gernsbacher 1997, Sanford & Filik 2007). It is also noteworthy that, of all the third person singular pronouns produced in these interviews, definite specific singular *they* constituted over 7%.

If it were the case that (definite, specific) singular *they* were primarily used by speakers to refer only to non-binary individuals, this rate would not be explained: it appears to be both under- and over-represented, by this logic. The Williams Institute estimates only 0.6% of adults in the United States are transgender (Herman, Flores, Brown, Wilson & Conron 2016), and the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey reports that 35% of transgender survey respondents identify as non-binary (James, Herman, Rankin, Kiesling, Mottet & Anafi 2016). While there are not currently reliable estimates of how many people in the general population identify as non-binary, these figures suggest that it is likely less than 0.01% of people; the use of singular *they* is not proportionate with this rate simply by rates of non-binarity in the general population.

That definite specific singular *they* constituted over 7% of the third person singular pronouns, then, might also be an effect of overrepresentation of non-binary referents in the study population, since transgender participants were intentionally recruited; indeed, five out of the 22 participants (22.7%) identified as non-binary.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, eight participants (36.3%) listed *they/them* as their first choice

---

3. The assignment of gender categories was done as part of the post-hoc analysis; see Conrod (2019) for details on how participants were grouped.

of pronoun for their own reference, and an additional six listed *they/them* as pronouns they would accept in reference to themselves (63.6% when combining both groups). However, this then suggests then that 7% is too low, rather than too high, if the pronoun use were predicted to reflect the gender identities or pronoun preferences of the speakers or referents.

Due to the relatively low number of participants, demographic categories were not significantly correlated with any individual speaker’s production of definite, specific singular *they*. Gender, ethnicity, and income had no relationship; age impressionistically appeared to have some relationship, but was not statistically significant. Figure 1 shows the production of tokens of definite, specific singular *they* by participant age.

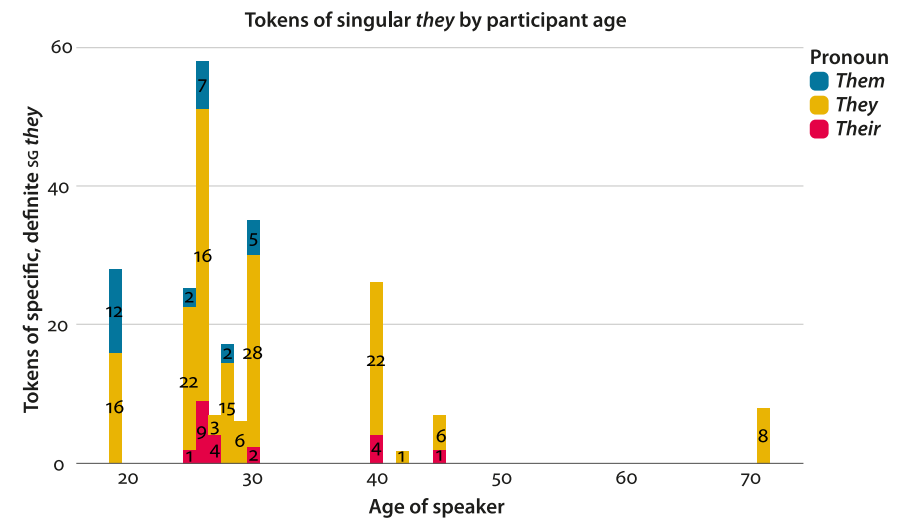


Figure 1. Tokens of singular *they* by participant age

Figure 1 shows token counts of specific, definite singular *they* by speaker age (with each cased form of the pronoun included). As Figure 1 demonstrates, the three most prolific producers of definite specific singular *they* were all 30 years old or younger. Conrod (2019) discusses the implications of this data further.

There was also not a significant relationship between each participant’s preferred pronoun and the rate at which they used singular *they*; however, it is worth noting that the biggest producers of definite specific singular *they* were those participants who listed *they/them* as their own first choice for pronoun of reference. Figure 2 shows the token counts of definite specific singular *they* by what pronouns were listed by the speaker (for their own reference).

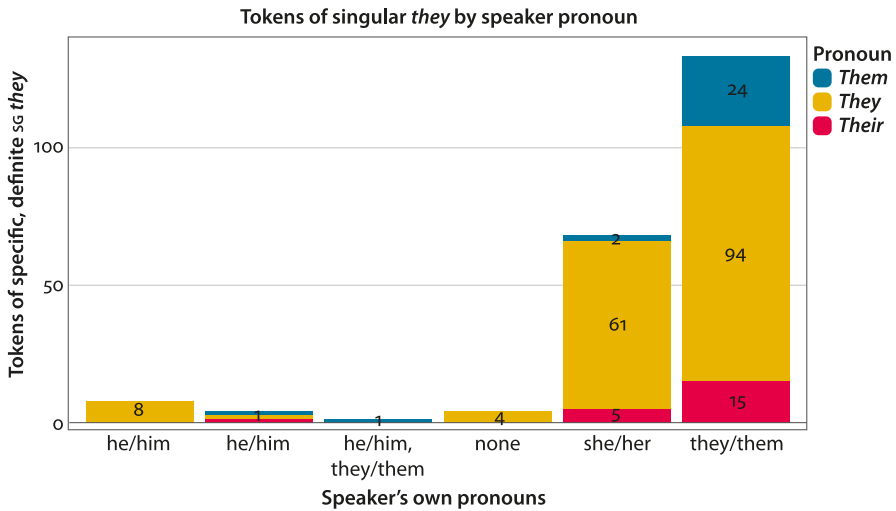


Figure 2. Tokens of singular *they* by speaker's own pronoun of reference

The second-most productive category – participants who preferred *she/her* – was also strongly influenced by a single participant who spoke extensively about her non-binary friend, who was her interview partner. (These participants were 29 and 30 years old, notably.)

There are two important takeaways from this study: first, definite singular *they* is being produced in naturalistic conversational contexts at a frequency that is both surprisingly high (considering the general population rate of non-binariness, and previous linguistic literature suggesting that this use is marginal) and surprisingly low (compared to the number of non-binary participants in the study). Secondly, there are individual 'super-producers' of specific singular *they* who have relatively very high token counts of the variable; the existence of these 'super-producers' is consistent with the analysis of specific singular *they* as a sociolinguistic variable in early stages of change (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968). Additionally, the social identity of these super-producers may be compared to Eckert's notion of the stylistic icon—an early and prolific adopter of a sociolinguistic variable whose flamboyance, 'big' personality, and social connectedness contribute to the diffusion of the variable throughout their community of practice (Eckert 1996); future treatment of these data must include closer analyses of the ways that adoption of the incoming specific singular *they* variable are related to social capital in these contexts.

The next section provides more data supporting this analysis of specific singular *they* as a variable undergoing change, with a much larger number of partic-

ipants allowing for quantitative analysis that supports some of the findings I have reported here.

## 1.2 Online acceptability judgment study

This section summarizes the results of a large online acceptability judgment study designed to elicit judgments of singular pronouns (including *he*, *she*, and *they*) with different types of antecedents; a full description of the experiment is available in Conrod (2019). The study included 754 participants who were recruited online via social media. Participants were asked to rate naturalness of sentences with singular *they*, *he*, *she* and different antecedents from 1 (least natural) to 7 (most natural). The acceptability judgment task was followed by a demographic survey and a field for open comments about the stimuli.

The target stimuli were constructed in a three by three design: each of the three pronouns (*he*, *she*, and *they*) appeared in combination with three different antecedent conditions (proper name, quantified NP, and generic definite NP). Additionally, proper names included masculine, feminine, and neutral names. Each item included two sentences (and filler items were constructed similarly); generic definite and proper name antecedents were not in the same sentence as the target pronoun, but quantified NP antecedents were. (5) to (7) below show examples of target stimuli that were presented to participants.

- (5) *John(/Mary/Jordan) is very forgetful. He(/she/they) never remember(s) library due dates.*  
(Name + *he/she/they*)
- (6) *Students are very ambitious. Every student tries to write her essay perfectly.*  
(Quantifier + *he/she/they*)
- (7) *The perfect spouse is very thoughtful. He will always try to remember anniversaries.*  
(Generic definite + *he/she/they*)

The task was not timed. Further information about the stimuli, including a complete list of target and distractor items, is available in Conrod (2019).

The main findings of this study show that demographic variables – namely age, gender, and transgender identity – did significantly correlate with the acceptability ratings of singular *they* when used with proper names only. No correlations existed for ratings of *she* or *he* in any conditions, nor with *they* in other antecedent conditions. The correlation between age and rating of *they* with proper names was present regardless of the stereotypical gender of the name; older speakers rated singular *they* lower with proper names. For Figures 3, 4, and 5, I show the relationship between the age of the participants and how acceptable they rated sentences with singular *they*. Figure 3 shows that the acceptability ratings for *they* was differ-



ent depending on participant age for proper names (left), while the age effect was weaker for all other antecedents (right) (Conrod 2019).

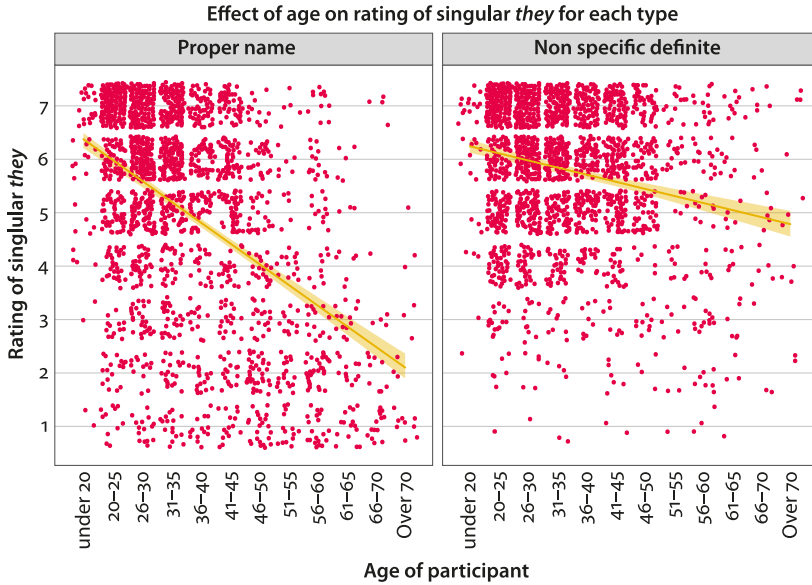


Figure 3. Effect of age on rating of singular *they* for proper names and other antecedents

The study also found that there was not an age effect for ratings of singular *they* among trans participants only (shown in Figure 4), and that the age effect existed for men and women but not for other genders (Figure 5).

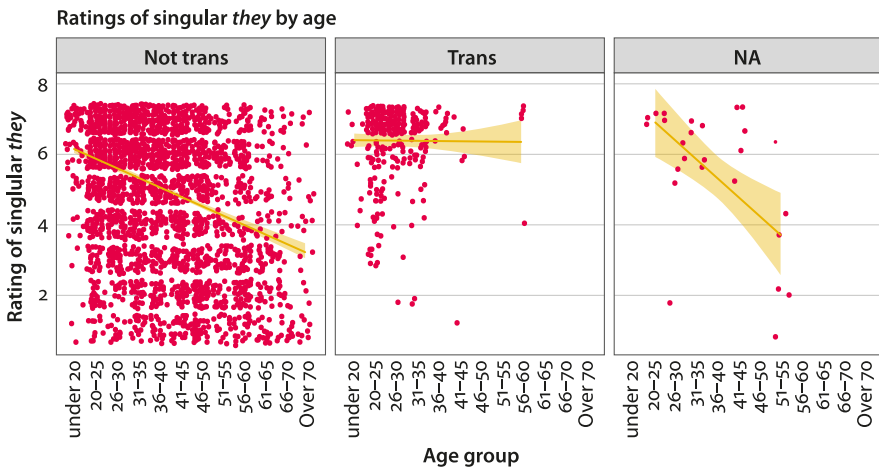
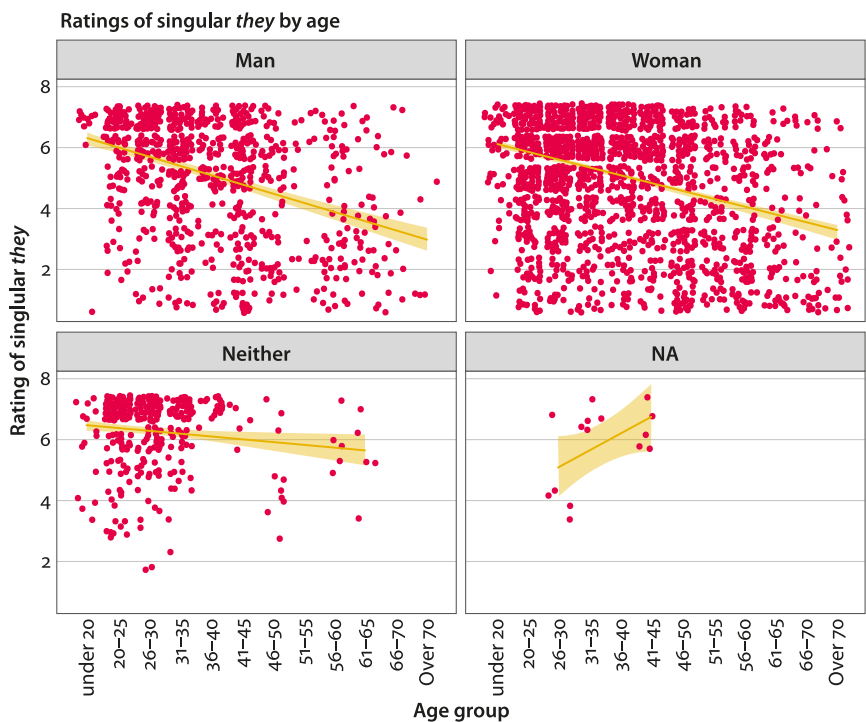


Figure 4. The age effect on ratings of singular *they* is not present for trans speakers



**Figure 5.** Age effect on ratings of singular *they* for men and women, but not other genders

The age effect for ratings of singular *they* only when used with proper names supports an analysis of singular *they* as a sociolinguistic variable undergoing change; under the Apparent Time Hypothesis (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968), this may be interpreted as a synchronic ‘cross-section’ of a change that is happening over time.

The two studies presented here indicate that singular *they*, when used for specific definite antecedents, is a feature that is widely accepted and used by some speakers, though there is considerable interspeaker variation in the rate of acceptance and use. The next section delves into some types of intraspeaker variation that show that, like many sociolinguistic variables, singular *they* can appear in variation with other related forms (mainly, but not exclusively, *he* and *she*) depending on sociopragmatic discourse context.

### 1.3 Pragmatics of pronominal choice

Because singular *they* is morphosyntactically devoid of gender (and possibly number) features, it appears as an ‘Elsewhere’ case (in terms of lexical insertion in Distributed Morphology; see Bjorkman 2017, Konnelly & Cowper 2020). Compared to pronominal systems that convey social information, such as in/formal pronouns (T/V in Romance or Germanic) or honorific pronouns (Thai, Japanese, and many others), the availability of a truly-unmarked ‘Elsewhere’ pronoun is relatively unusual. The featurelessness of *they* therefore allows for some perhaps-unique applications of certain pragmatic principles; in this section I will show that Gricean maxims, Face-theoretic models of politeness, and stance alignment can all robustly predict intraspeaker variability in the use of singular *they* – and that all the predicted variability is attested.

Because *they* gives no information about gender (or number – since it can be singular or plural), the use of *they* may be a way of withholding information strategically. Gricean maxims call to both maximize Quantity (‘give as much information as possible’) and also minimize it (‘...but not too much’). When deciding what pronoun to use when referring to a referent, minimizing Quality may be a way of excluding irrelevant details:

(8) *I have a student this quarter who keeps forgetting their backpack...*

The inclusion of information about the gender of the student in (8) may be viewed by some speakers as unnecessary inclusion of detail; while the antecedent is specific (but not strictly definite) in (8), the gender information is optional. Utterances like (8) are widely attested and produced by speakers who might otherwise reject the use of singular *they* with, e.g., a proper name. Attempts to minimize Quantity may, however, possibly override even that restriction.

(9) *Dr. Smith in engineering keeps forwarding me their spam emails.*

As with (8), speakers who may accept or utter sentences like (9) may be attempting to minimize the amount of unnecessary information. Such utterances are often also driven by considerations of Quality (‘don’t lie, don’t guess’) and Relevance (‘include all/only relevant information’). If, in (9), the speaker does not know Dr. Smith’s gender, *they* allows the speaker to avoid making a (potentially rude) guess.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, if the speaker does not feel that Dr. Smith’s gender is rele-

---

4. This use (or rather avoidance) of gender features may also introduce an implicature of social distance – if the speaker did know Dr. Smith personally, they would use a more specific pronoun – that results in a particular use of *they* referred to by Leah Velleman (p.c.) and others as *distal* ‘*they*.’

vant to email habits, *they* allows the speaker to avoid introducing gender information into a conversation that otherwise would not include it.

Each of the considerations driving an utterance like (9) – avoiding guessing, avoiding introducing irrelevant information, or excluding information for efficiency’s sake – also likewise introduce implicatures if a speaker chooses *not* to use *they*:

(10) *Dr. Smith in engineering keeps forwarding me her spam emails.*

Because *they* is an option, the choice to use *she* (or *her*, in this case) takes on added meaning: it may be implied that Dr. Smith’s gender *is* relevant to her email forwarding habits, for example – because why else would the speaker include that information? The related implicatures around Quality (the speaker knows Dr. Smith well enough to feel that using *she* is a safe guess, and not a lie) also touch upon the fundamentally social nature of gendered pronouns: when you use a pronoun about any given person, what makes you feel confident enough to justify that use? It is the social relationship of some kind: either you are in a social context where Dr. Smith’s first name, or personal appearance, make you feel confident that *she* is a safe bet; or you know Dr. Smith personally and know that her friends all use *she* for her.

The social considerations that inform pronoun choice are also deployable for im/politeness; in addition to the ‘simple’ regulation of the flow of information, interpersonal relationships around the respect of positive and negative face needs may be impacted by pronoun choice. For example, it is not a stretch to suggest that using a pronoun inconsistent with the referent’s gender identity is an imposition on the referent’s positive face needs – to be esteemed and respected. It may also, however, be a potential imposition on a speaker’s negative face needs – to be autonomous and free of obligation—if a speaker gets corrected, or feels otherwise coerced into using a pronoun they generally would not choose. In a blog post about singular *they*, Geoff Pullum covertly identifies that imposition on his negative face:

I don’t want to offend anyone. But it’s a bit much to expect me to start saying things that are clearly and decisively ungrammatical according to my own internalized grammar. I’ll do my best, but it will be a real struggle. (Pullum 2017)<sup>5</sup>

---

5. Pullum makes some other, more linguistic-oriented claims in this blog post which, I think, have since been essentially disproven – it is clearly *not* the case, for example, that singular *they* with proper names will take “decades” to become widely accepted, as the data in this article and elsewhere show.

What Pullum identifies here is that singular *they* when used with a proper name is outside of his grammar; and therefore, being asked *not* to misgender a referent is an imposition on his own negative face needs.

Competing face needs are, of course, not the only factor that leads to misgendering. Stance towards a particular referent, or identity-related groups of referents, also impact pronoun use. For example, Conrod (2017, 2019) presents corpus data showing that speakers (or online posters, in this case) who express transgender-negative sentiment are more likely to misgender a transgender referent. The corpus data presents tweets about Chelsea Manning, an activist, using different names and pronouns to refer to her; tweets that were negatively referring to Manning were more likely to use *he* to refer to her, while tweets that were neutral or positive were more likely to use *she*. Another study on misgendering, which included sociolinguistic interviews, found that speakers were also more likely to misgender actual referents (interview partners and others) if they endorsed transgender-negative views (Conrod 2018, 2019).

Misgendering may also be a matter not just of a speaker's stance towards the referent, but also the alignment of the speaker's stance with the stance of the interlocutor towards the (third person, absent or present) referent. Conrod (2019: 183–187) gives two examples of how speakers alignment of stance in relation to their interlocutors can influence third person reference. In the first, a speaker adjusts the pronoun from *they* to *he* in a conversation when assisting a sick friend through a border crossing; this adjustment is made because using *they* (addressed to the border guard; referring to the sick friend) confused the hearer, and had the potential to invoke further scrutiny and possible harassment. In the second example, the speaker usually uses *she* to refer to a transgender friend, but uses *he* when speaking to the friend's transphobic parents. As with the first example, this speaker's adjustment is related not towards their own feelings towards the referent, but instead is focused on aligning with the interlocutor's (parent's) feelings towards the referent – in this case, 'outing' the transgender friend to her parents could also lead to potential repercussions.

There are three main takeaways from the data and examples I have presented in Part 1. First, these data go further to describe the true range of how English speakers use pronouns in naturalistic contexts, including findings that are novel: definite, specific singular *they* is much more common than previously reported, and is undergoing a change currently. Second, these data give more ways of reasoning why speakers use any given pronoun in a given context: reasons include modulation of quantity, politeness, stance and stance alignment, and identity.

Finally, these data show that English third person pronouns are not solely dictated by 'reflecting' the gender of a referent but have a complex and multifaceted relationship to social gender. That is: social gender of a referent is one

among several factors that determine pronoun choice in various discourse contexts. Instead, it is more accurate to analyze the morphosyntactic instantiation of gender ‘features’ as meaning-making in a way that is abstracted from gender, or rather that many different social and pragmatic meanings can be symbolized by use of ‘gender features.’ This discussion of pragmatic factors influencing pronouns is an introductory approach; future work will include more recent pragmatic theoretical frameworks, as well as focus on the ways in which these explanations are culturally specific and sensitive to sociohistorical contexts.

The goal of Part 1 was to provide a broad (but by no means comprehensive) review of relevant data describing the ‘state of the pronoun,’ particularly around the innovations in the English third person system. Part 2 will be more prescriptive than descriptive; I will aim to outline a general position oriented towards equity and justice, including suggestions for how linguists can communicate with the public and with personal acquaintances about linguistic science while uplifting transgender and gender diverse people in a language community.

## **2. What should we do about it?**

Part 2 will consist of three sections, which are organized with the intent to address some basic problems with the way that linguists (and the field of linguistics, and our literature) currently talk about gendered morphosyntax in general, and English gendered pronouns in particular. The first section will make recommendations for better methods of observation (and relay some critiques of common methodologies), oriented particularly toward improving our understanding of morphosyntactic gender marking and pronouns. The second section outlines best practices for public-facing communications by linguists, and discuss some problematic and better examples of public communications by linguist educators. The third section recommends better practices for teaching language and linguistics in a way that respects and values transgender and gender diverse people, as well as giving more accurate information for students of linguistics and language education.

### **2.1 How to start noticing**

The first basic problem with the way that linguists tend to talk about gendered morphosyntax – and gendered English pronouns especially – is that some well-known members of our profession have gotten into the habit of disseminating scientifically inaccurate information, sometimes as a result of personal biases and sometimes as a fault of narrow methodology. To return to an example from Part

1, Pullum (2017) reports in *Language Log* that singular *they* with a proper name is generally considered ungrammatical:

[...] you can't alter your syntactic intuitions overnight. It has taken fifty or sixty years for purportedly sex-neutral *he* to start looking old-fashioned and silly (and plenty of usage book writers like Simon Heffer still recommend it), and **it could be decades before the use of singular *they* with male-associated or female-associated personal names starts sounding natural and feeling grammatical to the majority of speakers.** (Pullum 2017, emphasis added)

Pullum makes this claim (which I have bolded above) based on no survey data, but in fact solely on his personal grammatical intuition. While it is the case that syntacticians' own grammatical judgments are frequently consistent and verifiable by surveys and other psycholinguistic methods (Sprouse, Schütze & Almeida 2013), this is not always the case – and crucially, Pullum fails to take into consideration the effect of sociolinguistic variation. In making this judgment, he assumes that his own intuitions are representative of the intuitions of the general population – which, as I showed in Part 2, does not appear to be true.

To avoid such gaffes, it is imperative that linguists (and especially those without sociolinguistic training) verify empirically whether their statements reflect the behaviors of larger populations. My recommendations to authors and researchers are (hopefully) straightforward: double-check your grammatical judgments with several people other than yourself; learn and use survey instruments to get more nuanced data on acceptability and grammaticality when possible; and do not make broad generalizing statements about linguistic facts without actually collecting any empirical data. This is both a matter of intellectual responsibility and implicit bias: Pullum's (grammatical) judgment is fundamentally informed by his (social) judgment of the epistemology of gender. He had stated previously that he views gender as fundamentally binary:

I would now say that although \*Chris left their pen still sounds dreadful for some reason (perhaps because **whoever Chris is, he or she really does have a gender**), nonetheless it is possible to have a singular *they* with a singular proper name antecedent. (Pullum 2003, emphasis added)

Pullum's subsequent writing (in communications responding to the 2017 commentary cited above) is also concerned with the ideological ramifications of pronoun use, and this conflation must be made explicit in order to be challenged or criticized. Linguists who find themselves in his position – that is, trying to generalize their own grammatical intuitions in order to evade criticism – are both misrepresenting linguistic facts and muddying the already-fraught waters of public commentary around pronouns and misgendering. Both problems are eminently

solvable by simply collecting data; I hope that linguists continue to investigate the claims made by Conrod (2019) with large-scale studies, either through replication or expansion of questions unanswered by the original study.

For those who do not research or write about pronouns professionally, there are some more informal ways of establishing an empirical grounding; these strategies are recommended for linguists-in-training, and can be used by such persons from very early points in their education (K-12) well into graduate training. I here suggest a few ‘soft survey’ methods which need neither Human Subjects approval nor a graduate degree to carry out.

The first method I recommend is to count pronouns for an entire day. This takes a considerable amount of focus and cognitive effort at first, since humans have a psycholinguistic tendency to ‘delete’ or mentally de-emphasize function words (like determiners – and including pronouns). A simple counting exercise, without recording referent or morphosyntactic differences (like case or number) can go a very long way towards ‘turning on your ears,’ or bringing otherwise-backgrounded linguistic elements to the fore. You may start to notice significantly more (definite, specific) uses of singular *they* simply by getting into the habit of noticing pronouns at all.

Another method, which may still be cognitively taxing but requires less all-day vigilance, is to keep note (again on paper or mobile device) of each use of singular *they* you encounter throughout a day (or week, etc.), and mark down who the speaker is, and who each use of *they* refers to. Turning your attention towards uses of singular *they* does require you to be attentive to pronouns in general, and each token in this exercise requires a little bit more information (speaker, referent), but at the end of the exercise you will be left with a usable data set that allows you to informally perform a miniature replication of the sociolinguistic interviews in Conrod (2019). In your miniature corpus, how many tokens of singular *they* are generic, and how many are referring to a specific referent? Are some speakers using singular *they* at much higher rates than others? Are some referents referred to by *they* sometimes, but by other pronouns at other times? Much of the analysis that I presented in Part 1 can be reproduced by these mini-corpora.

Finally, my recommendation for increasing your own awareness of pronoun variation (and use of innovative pronouns, including but not limited to *they*), is to intentionally put yourself in social proximity with transgender, non-binary, or otherwise gender-diverse people. If you, the reader, are in one of these groups yourself, this is possibly already the situation you find yourself in; transgender people are more likely than cis people to have a majority of trans friends (informal



poll by the author,  $n = 413$ ; Boyer & Galupo 2018).<sup>6</sup> If you are cisgender, you should not necessarily go out and find some trans people to befriend for science – however, if you have already-existing relationships with trans and non-binary people, putting yourself into social situations that are majority-trans will be illuminating. I recommend that, if you do succeed in joining your friends' majority-trans Dungeons and Dragons group or other community of practice, you should passively observe without keeping formal documents. Pay attention to how trans and non-binary speakers (especially in majority-trans spaces or conversations) gender each other: do you notice speakers switching pronouns in certain contexts? Do you notice conversations carried out where two interlocutors are using different pronouns for the same referent? Can you observe any in-group instances of pronoun corrections, where a trans person corrects a fellow trans person about someone's pronouns?

This strategy is, of course, less about collecting quantitative data and more about exposing you to social norms and practices which you otherwise might not experience. This is likely to be a long-term project, and will (hopefully) result in the deepening or development of friendships that are based in shared interest and respect. I also ask readers to carefully look at your own social network composition: whether you are trans or not, do you only have one or two trans friends? Are they close friends? If your own social network includes fewer than about 20% trans or non-binary, or if your trans friends aren't also friends with each other, it is highly unlikely that you are privy to in-group norms even casually.

To briefly summarize this section, a major issue with the discussion of pronouns and gendered morphosyntax is that commentators, including trained linguists, tend to make statements that are not supported by empirical evidence. I have given some suggestions about how to collect sufficient evidence to better inform communications with other linguists and with the public. In the next section, I discuss further how communication of linguistic science to the public and in one's own private relationships can be effective, accurate, and respectful.

## 2.2 How to talk about it

While the last section proposed some ways for linguists and non-linguists alike to raise our own awareness of pronoun variation, this section focuses more on how to share that information with others. I will first discuss best practices for public-

---

6. Boyer and Galupo (2018) surveyed transgender participants, and did not compare them to cisgender peers; they found that transgender people in their survey had fewer trans friends than cis friends, not that cis people were more likely to have trans friends than trans people were.

facing (or non-linguist-facing) science communication around issues of pronouns and singular *they*, and will then turn towards field-internal communications.

When speaking with non-linguists, we (especially academic or teaching linguists) tend to have the urge to educate people by teaching them terminology, showing them a bunch of graphs, or simply declaring what we know to be true. However, neither jargon nor quantitative reasoning nor unilateral declarations tend to be very effective, if the goal is for our non-linguist interlocutors to leave the conversation (or webinar, or brochure) with a lasting and intuitive understanding of the phenomena. Part of the problem is that as science communicators we need to be clear in our *learning goals* for what we want people to retain. In the case of singular *they*, the learning goals might look like this:

- (11) *Did you know that people use pronouns as a way of communicating social content, not just who we're talking about?* (Here are some examples....)
- (12) *The social content that pronouns can communicate can be a lot of different stuff. When people use they to refer to a person, that could be communicating different social meanings depending on context.* (Here are some examples....)

Note that these learning goals are not aimed at ‘correcting’ non-linguists about anything, nor imposing knowledge that may conflict with their previously existing knowledge base. The learning goals are not to force anyone to use singular *they*, nor to teach anyone about a deep morphosyntactic analysis of pronouns – neither of those things are useful to a non-linguist. What is useful, and what people enjoy learning, is just “*here are some things people are doing, and some ways and reasons they’re doing that stuff*”. With that in mind, here are some particular rhetorical strategies for approaching these learning goals.

First, I recommend starting with familiar knowledge – establishing a common ground is important to ensure buy-in, and needn’t invoke any ideologically sensitive issues such as transgender identities at all. Instead, your audience or interlocutor will likely agree if you ask them if they’ve noticed certain non-standard pronoun uses:

- (13) *Did you ever notice how we call ships and cars ‘she’? Why do you think that is?*
- (14) *What do you call a cute dog if you see one out in your neighborhood? Have you noticed how your niece calls all doggies ‘he’ and all cats are ‘she’?*
- (15) *What do people do if you ask to pet their dog, but you use ‘he’ and the dog is actually a girl? Has this ever happened to you?*

These (and other) familiar social scenarios are documented in the literature on pronouns in linguistics (McConnell-Ginet 2013), and are easy to agree about. Invoking familiar social scenes also allows your audience/interlocutor to feel like

the knowledge they bring to the conversation is valuable (which it is!) and feel more comfortable participating in the conversation.

Once some of this common ground is established, you can draw connections between pronouns and other social markers in grammar. These can include things like titles – many non-linguists will happily recognize the value of newer titles like ‘Ms.’ or gender-neutral titles, like people preferring to be called ‘Dr.’ They may even have heard of the gender-neutral honorific ‘Mx,’ which may be even newer than singular *they* and offers a convenient segue towards gender issues. Some grammar or literature fans are also likely to be familiar with formal and informal pronouns, including cross-linguistic examples (*Usted/tu* in Spanish, etc.) or older varieties of English (*thou/you*). Talking about *thou/you* also allows for a smooth transition towards talking about language change – you can discuss how *you* was previously plural, but became singular because of a grammar change driven by changing social norms. And doesn’t that sound familiar!

When communicating with the public about singular *they*, you are also in danger of encountering bad-faith discussants who will try to take over the conversation in service of prejudicial aims. When conversing (especially in public, *especially* online) about pronouns and singular *they*, you should make a point of curating your space and audience to include only discussants who are starting from a place of good faith and genuine respect. You should not continue a conversation if it becomes apparent that your interlocutor is a troll (especially in public, *especially* online) – because people who view the matter as an issue of supposedly-dangerous pro-transgender ideology will use your conversation as a way of persuading witnesses towards their own ends.

In order to carry on a *productive* conversation with someone who has misgivings about a potential ‘pro-trans’ agenda, I recommend instead steering the conversation away from transgender issues wherever possible. As I have outlined above (in the learning goals), you can start from a position of neutral descriptive linguistics and move eventually towards conversations about politeness as an aspirational goal. Always frame pronouns and politeness with language of positive possibility: using pronouns (singular *they*, but any other pronoun, as well) is a very effective way of showing how you feel about someone.

As with before, I recommend starting with the familiar – it is usually safe to assume, for example, that analogies with titles are reliable. Almost all speakers will agree that it is impolite to address someone as *Miss* when they prefer *Ms* or *Mrs*. With this established common ground, you can also appeal to personal experiences: you can ask how your interlocutor would (or does!) feel when someone uses the wrong pronoun for them, then ask them to consider how that feeling would be amplified if this were a daily occurrence. Again, the ‘learning goals’ are not to convert your interlocutor to a singular-*they* user, but rather to describe how

and why it is already a part of English, and what social meanings it carries for people who use it. These recommendations can be generalized to many different linguistics science communications purposes, and in my experience scale relatively well from audiences of one person (say, a reporter or a relative) to a couple hundred or thousand (say, a public lecture or podcast).

The other matter of how to communicate about and around pronouns and gendered morphosyntax is a field-internal matter: how can this issue be effectively communicated to cisgender linguists who just don't 'get it'? I will briefly discuss some suggestions here, and otherwise refer the reader to the Linguistic Society of America's guidelines.

First and foremost, it is necessary in discussions of pronouns to separate abstract research questions from the matter of professional respect. It is not okay for a linguist to misgender their colleagues, students, friends, enemies, or indeed anyone. This includes using a person's name as a 'teaching example,' or referring to a person in past times. Some patience may be budgeted for mistakes or speech errors, but after a certain amount of repeated errors that tolerance will run out; even considering whatever grammatical constraints we may have, as linguists, we can and should commit to the very simple principle of not using language to harm people. Misgendering someone harms them; so we should have enough of our wits about us to not do that, and to especially not do it over and over.

Secondly, as linguists I optimistically believe that we are a clever enough bunch to entertain a number of strategies to avoid misgendering. While Pullum (2017) did include an apology in his blog post, he and colleagues did not seriously address any effort towards avoiding similar harm in the future, regardless of the state of his (or anyone's) grammar. If, as Pullum says, *they* is simply not possible within the restrictions of his mental syntax when anteceded by a proper name, several alternatives exist – such as avoiding pronouns entirely, an option which he declined to use in the original blogpost (though he showed he is perfectly capable of it in subsequent posts addressing a nonbinary linguist). Discussing workaround strategies such as pronoun avoidance must be a bare minimum expectation in response to repeated misgendering related to differing grammars.

Crucially, we must seriously commit as members of a field to the promise that grammatical constraints are not an excuse for harming someone; and additionally, that describing sociolinguistic variation is not an attack or refutation on one's own grammatical intuitions. Furthermore, arguments around grammatical constraints only 'explain' (and do not excuse) one kind of misgendering – cases where misgendering is due to use of an innovative pronoun, such as *they* or neopronouns. There is no defensible 'grammatical' argument that would permit misgendering, for example, a referent who uses *she* or *he*.

Finally, as professional colleagues who owe each other certain standards of respect, linguists must all commit to establishing a culture of accountability – even when there are no ‘witnesses’. If a linguist misgenders someone alone in a room, and no one is around to hear it, this still warrants correction and improvement. If a linguist misgenders someone when there *are* witnesses, it is the professional responsibility of all witnesses to correct the error. We must correct the error every single time it happens, even if it means interrupting someone. We must also have zero tolerance for abuses of seniority or power over more vulnerable people (students and others) in the service of escaping accountability. It is all of our duty to speak up, every single time, until misgendering simply does not happen among linguists. This should not be a problem we have to deal with.

### 2.3 How to teach it

While the last section discussed communications about pronouns with linguists and non-linguists, this section turns instead towards one specific social relationship: namely, teaching. As linguistics teachers, we have two primary responsibilities. The first is to teach accurate linguistic science informed by up-to-date research, and the second is to make our classrooms a safe learning environment for our students, free of harassment and without added sources of stress, anxiety, or trauma. The suggestions I have made in the last two sections all also apply in the classroom – this section will focus only on outlining some teaching-specific concerns to be aware of in addition to those guidelines.

My first strong recommendation is to assume that in any given class, at least one student will be transgender and/or nonbinary. You will not necessarily know which student(s) are trans – neither by appearance nor by previous acquaintance with students. Students may transition, or become aware of their transgender identity, over the course of their degree (at any level), including in the middle of the semester. Being as you can safely assume that there is a trans student in the room, you have certain ethical responsibilities to ensure their safety and learning along with their peers.

First, it is your responsibility to conduct class procedures in a way that does not ‘out’ any student, or force or coerce a student to out themself. This should inform how you partake in practices like introductions, pronoun sharing, class surveys, group assignments, peer reviews, or any other situation where students are asked to share personal information. Sharing information about gender identity must always be opt-in, and not penalized or coerced through ‘participation’ grades.

Second, it is your responsibility to make the classroom *not actively dangerous* for your trans students. This means you must not expose your students to trauma-

tizing content without warning; that you must intervene in peer discussions that veer towards transphobia, that you not assign transphobic readings without suitable framing and criticism, and that you not allow other students to misgender or harass any of their peers in any way.

Third, you must not allow a transgender student's safety or identity become a topic of class debate. Fourth, you must not require any transgender student to take on the responsibility of educating you about transgender linguistics research at the expense of doing your own research. This is an added burden on trans and other minoritized students, and is not an adequate replacement for the reading and self-education you should constantly pursue as an educator.

My next several recommendations are aimed towards situations that arise particularly in language instruction. In teaching any language, you should aim to teach grammar from a descriptive perspective. You should endeavor to research how transgender and/or non-binary native speakers use the language; this is especially true for languages where any gender marking is present in the morphosyntax (like noun or verb morphology for speaker gender, etc.). You should also include information on language variation and change as a constant part of the language curriculum. Finally, you should practice on your own as a model speaker of the target language to become flexible and fluid in your use of morphosyntactic gender marking – if, as a Spanish teacher, a student comes out as trans during the semester, you should be completely ready and able to accommodate and model the appropriate noun morphology and pronouns for that student and their peers.

In general, my advice to linguistics and language instructors alike is that honest, robust descriptive linguistic science is the best way to avoid harming your students. Speakers in all languages are adept at using the grammatical resources at their disposal for a variety of gender expressions and relations; your job is to convey what people are already doing.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to accomplish two goals in two parts. The goal of the first part was to describe existing variation in the English pronominal system as an example of how grammar can be deployed for gendered purposes. In the first part I showed that an innovative form of singular *they* is already part of the language. The goal of the second part was to give recommendations for how linguists can talk about gender and grammar, using this innovative form of singular *they* as an example for discussion. In the second part I show strategies for further data collection, science communication, and pedagogical best practices.

## References

- Ackerman, Lauren. 2019. Syntactic and cognitive issues in investigating gendered coreference. *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics* 4(1): 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.721>
- Bjorkman, Bronwyn M. 2017. Singular *they* and the syntactic representation of gender in English. *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics* 2(1): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.374>
- Boyer, C. Reyn & Galupo, M. Paz. 2018. Transgender friendship profiles: Patterns across gender identity and LGBT affiliation. *Gender Issues* 35(3): 236–253. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-017-9199-4>
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. London: Routledge.
- Conrod, Kirby. 2017. Names Before Pronouns: Variation in Pronominal Reference and Gender (Paper presented at Northwest Linguistics Conference, University of British Columbia; May 6, 2017).
- Conrod, Kirby. 2018. Pronouns and Misgendering (Paper presented at New Ways of Analyzing Variation, New York University; October 18–22, 2018).
- Conrod, Kirby. 2019. Pronouns Raising and Emerging. Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington.
- Curzan, Anne. 2003. *Gender Shifts in the History of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511486913>
- Eckert, Penelope. 1996. Vowels and nail polish: The emergence of linguistic style in the preadolescent heterosexual marketplace. In *Gender and Belief Systems*, Natasha Warner, Jocelyn Ahlers, Leela Bilmes, Monica Oliver, Suzanne Wertheim & Melinda Chen (eds), 183–190. Berkeley: Berkeley Women and Language Group.
- Eckert, Penelope. 2014. The problem with binaries: Coding for gender and sexuality. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 8(11): 529–535. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12113>
- Foertsch, Julie & Gernsbacher, Morton Ann. 1997. In search of gender neutrality: Is singular *they* a cognitively efficient substitute for generic *he*? *Psychological Science* 8(2): 106–111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1997.tb00691.x>
- Herman, Jody L., Flores, Andrew R., Brown, Taylor N. T., Wilson, Bianca D. M. & Conron, Kerith J. 2017. *How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?* Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute.
- Hutton, Christopher. 2017. Legal sex, self-classification and gender self-determination. *Law and Humanities* 11(1): 64–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2017.1320037>
- James, Sandy E., Herman, Jody L., Rankin, Susan, Kiesling, Mara, Mottet, Lisa & Anafi, Ma'ayan. 2016. *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality.
- Konnely, Lex & Cowper, Elizabeth. 2020. Gender diversity and morphosyntax: An account of singular *they*. *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics* 5(1): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.1000>
- McConnell-Ginet, Sally. 2013. Gender and its relation to sex: The myth of 'natural' gender. In *The Expression of Gender*, Greville Corbett (ed), 3–38. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110307337.3>
- Muysken, Pieter. 2008. *Functional Categories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511755026>

- Pullum, Geoff. 2003. Postcard from Vegas, 2: Syntactic data collection on the strip. *Language Log* (blog). <<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000172.html>> (January 31, 2022)
- Pullum, Geoff. 2017. A letter saying they won. *Language Log* (blog). <<https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=35641>> (January 31, 2022)
- Sanford, Anthony J. & Filik, Rurth. 2007. "They" as a gender-unspecified singular pronoun: Eye tracking reveals a processing cost. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 60(2): 171–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470210600973390>
- Sprouse, Jon, Schütze, Carson & Almeida, Diogo. 2013. Assessing the reliability of journal data in syntax: Linguistic inquiry 2001–2010. *Lingua* 134: 219–248. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2013.07.002>
- Weinreich, Uriel, Labov, William & Herzog, Marvin. 1968. *Empirical Foundations for a Theory of Language Change*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

## Address for correspondence

Kirby Conrod  
Linguistics Department  
Swarthmore College  
Pearson Hall  
500 College Avenue  
Swarthmore, PA 19081  
USA  
[kconrod1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:kconrod1@swarthmore.edu)

## Publication history

Date received: 18 December 2020

Date accepted: 11 April 2022

### Author Queries

- Please provide a complete reference for the citation '(Herman, Flores, Brown, Wilson & Conron 2016)' in this article.
- Please provide a citation for the reference id "CIT0013 (Herman, Jody L., Flores, Andrew R., Brown, Taylor N.T., Wilson, Bianca D.M. & Conron, Kerith J. 2017)" since citation is missing in the article.