Who is [not] expected to use singular *they*?

Social meaning [1,2] refers to inferences about the speaker's social identity or ideology that hearers may draw based on their utterances. A more recent turn within this research is exploring the relationship in reverse – do listeners attribute and predict features of a speaker's upcoming utterance on the basis of that speaker's identity and ideology? There is evidence that such expectations do exist [3,4], but the extent to which these expectations affect real-time language processing is still unclear. The present study is a direct follow-up to work presented at HSP 2023 [4], which examined gender-neutral vs. gender-marked role nouns in English (e.g., *salesperson* vs. *salesman*). In a forced-choice fill-in-the-blank task, participants attributed more gender-neutral role nouns to progressive speakers than to conservative speakers, consistent with this gender-neutral form indexing a progressive gender ideology. The self-paced-reading (SPR) results, however, did not find any evidence for an interaction between the speaker of the utterance and the form (gender-marked vs. -neutral) of the noun; they did, however, reveal a significant effect of participant-speaker alignment whereby participants read faster for speakers with whom they were ideologically aligned than for speakers with whom they were not.

The present study utilizes the same two-experiment methodology on a different linguistic feature with similar social associations – the use of singular *they*. Links have been established between an individual's ideology about gender and their espousal of singular *they* [5,6], and experimental evidence has indicated interindividual processing differences of singular *they* [7,8,9] – this marker, then, affords a more robust linguistic phenomenon for exploring social meaning in real-time language processing. This study features pronouns that refer to English role nouns from earlier in the sentence, systematically varied between some nouns that mark gender (e.g., salesman/saleswoman), some that have stereotypical associations with a specific gender (e.g., plumber/secretary), and some without strong gender associations (e.g., customer, child); the nouns were selected via a norming study that targeted these perceived associations. These role nouns are then placed into sentences in which they are referred to by a singular third-person pronoun (e.g., "I called my plumber and told him/them to come back on Thursday.")

Experiment 1 utilizes a forced-choice fill-in-the-blank task. Participants are introduced to fictitious characters (e.g., Conservative Carol, Progressive Pam) on opposite sides of a (simplistic) US political spectrum and instructed to guess how *that character* would fill in the blank, given the choice of pronouns presented above. It is strongly hypothesized, consistent with the notion of social meaning and *they*-related findings, that *they* will be attributed more often to the progressive characters than the conservative ones.

Experiment 2 is a SPR experiment using the same stimuli; participants are again introduced to one of the fictitious characters and read the SPR sentence as if it is an utterance from said speaker, who appears alongside the sentence. These will be compared to a baseline condition in which there is no hypothetical speaker. If this marker of social meaning is attributed to others predictively in real time, it is hypothesized that a conservative character using *they* will trigger a slowdown compared to a progressive speaker using *they*. Data collection for the noun associations norming study just concluded and data collection for Experiment 1 is scheduled to begin next week; thus no data for the two main experiments yet exists to present here, but it will be fully collected and analyzed by the time of the HSP meeting in May! Once collected (n=192 in Exp. 1; n=216 in Exp2), the results of these experiments (Experiment 2 in particular) will inform understandings of the real-time processing of singular *they* and of the attributions and predictions of social meaning more broadly.

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