

## Children's Interpretation of Ambiguous Singular *They*

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The English pronoun *they* is traditionally used in a 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural context. However, despite the prescriptivist views of some [1-2], there has been a recent overall increase of this pronoun's acceptance of use in a singular, specified context [e.g., *Skye<sub>i</sub> (a specific, known individual) had to leave early because they<sub>i</sub> have a dentist appointment.*]. This increase is attributed to the rise in acknowledgement of nonbinary and gender nonconforming individuals [3-4]. As such, the pronoun *they* has become potentially ambiguous between singular and plural interpretations in some cases: e.g., The example in (1), where Alex is known to use *they/them* pronouns.

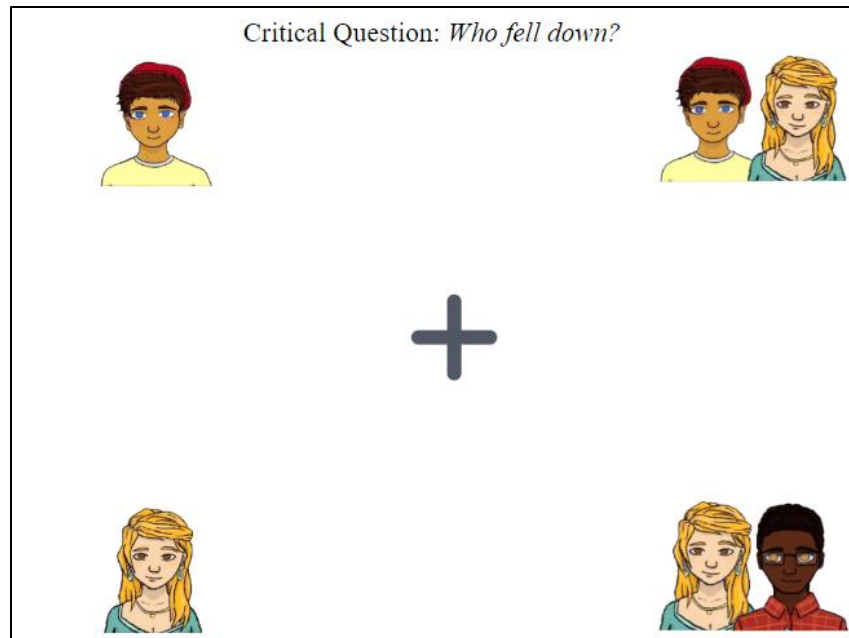
Recent work [5] explored how adults interpret singular *they* in these ambiguous contexts. Participants answered questions about a series of two-sentence stories [such as the story in (1)], and their answers demonstrated that (i) the pronoun *they* can be successfully interpreted as singular in One-person contexts but is less often interpreted as singular in Two-person contexts and (ii) explicitly stating one's pronouns as *they/them* promotes interpretation of singular *they* in ambiguous (Two-person) contexts. The present study expanded upon these findings by being the first to examine how children identify whether *they* has a singular or plural interpretation in ambiguous cases: Can children successfully map this pronoun onto a singular individual at all, and is how they resolve singular *they* any different than how it is resolved by adults?

We conducted a partial replication of [5]'s first experiment using only the Explicit condition (i.e., participants were informed which pronouns each character utilized) with 3 groups of English-speaking participants: 5-year-olds (N=24, mean: 5;0, range: 4;6-5;6), 8-year-olds (N=24, mean: 8;0, range: 7;6-8;6), and an adult control group (N=24, mean: 37;8, range: 19;3-59;10). The same 3 characters [Liz (*she/her*), Will (*he/him*), Alex (*they/them*)] and two-sentence stories as in [5] were used [see (1)]. Trials (n=35) were organized into 6 semi-randomized blocks. The first two blocks contained one-person training trials (n=12; 4 per character) to cement character / pronoun understanding. The remaining 4 blocks contained a combination of filler trials (stories never involving Alex, n=15) and critical trials (n=8). For the critical trials, each story had a One-person context and a Two-person context, which were distributed in a Latin square. Crucially, every story was followed by a *critical* question asking who did the action in the second sentence (e.g., *Who fell down?*); participants then selected their answer from 4 pictures given on the screen (Fig1) by clicking on it.

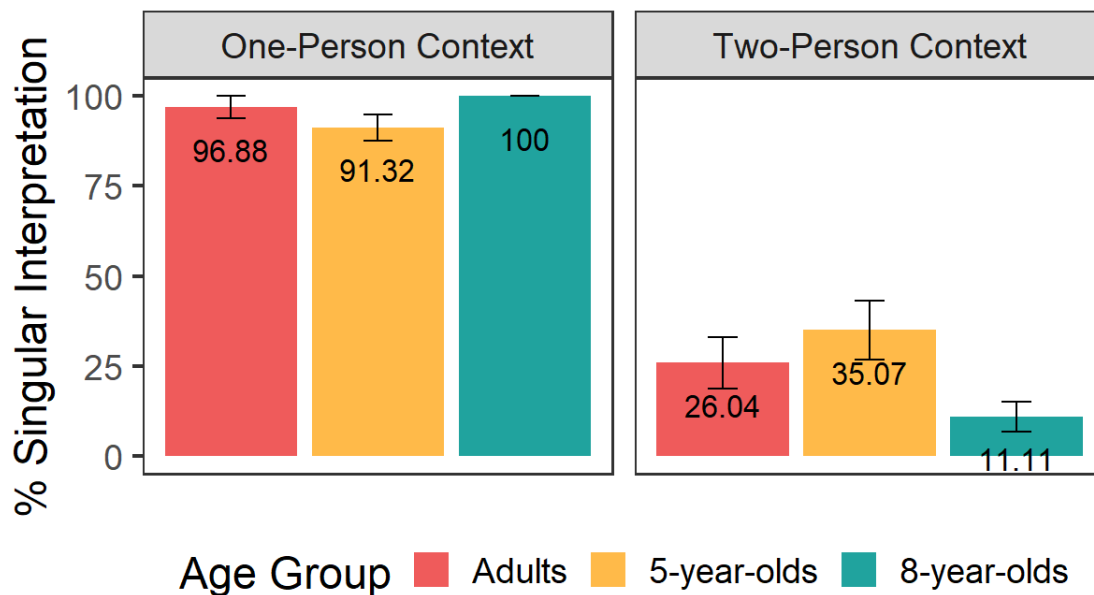
As Fig2 demonstrates, the singular interpretation of the pronoun *they* is prominent in a One-person context but less-so in an ambiguous Two-person context for all age groups ( $\beta=-3.59$ ,  $SE=0.40$ ,  $Z=-8.92$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Comparing all of the children to the adults, there was no significant difference in their interpretation ( $\beta=-0.26$ ,  $SE=0.48$ ,  $Z=-0.54$ ,  $p\geq 0.1$ ); children of both age groups can not only successfully map the pronoun *they* onto a singular individual, but they also interpret ambiguous *they* similarly to adults. However, while there was no significant difference between adults and children as a whole, significant differences between the child age groups were found: 5-year-olds had significantly more singular interpretations than 8-year-olds in the Two-person context ( $\beta=1.09$ ,  $SE=0.44$ ,  $Z=2.47$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This suggests that children may undergo a form of overregularization with regard to the pronoun *they* between the ages of 5 and 8 and have an increase of interpreting *they* as plural as a result.

Social factors were also investigated. Because familiarity is a known indicator of singular *they* production [6], information on familiarity with gender nonconforming individuals and singular *they/them* pronouns was attained for our participants via questionnaire. While familiarity was not found to be significant ( $\beta=-0.02$ ,  $SE=0.06$ ,  $Z=-0.37$ ,  $p\geq 0.1$ ), this could be due to how this information was gathered. Avenues for future study into how children acquire, use, and interpret this pronoun, as well as exploration of potential significant social factors, will be discussed.

(1) Alex went running with Liz. They fell down.



**Figure 1.** Example critical trial using the test story in (1) with its critical question and possible answers. The critical question is given in text form for clarity, but both stories and questions for all trials were given only verbally using child-directed prosody in the actual experiment.



**Figure 2.** Average percentage of singular interpretation of *they* in included critical trials, split by story context [One-Person (“Alex went running. They fell down.”) versus Two-person (“Alex went running with Liz. They fell down.”)] and age group.

**References** [1] Doll 2013. The Singular “They” Must Be Stopped. *The Atlantic*. [2] Strunk & White 1972. *The Elements of Style, third ed.* [3] Konnelly & Cowper 2020. *Glossa*. [4] Reuters 2020. Singular “they” voted word of the decade by US linguists. *The Guardian*. [5] Arnold et al. 2021. *PBR*. [6] Kramer et al. 2022. *PsyArXiv*.