Gender diversity and morphosyntax: an account of singular *they*

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Abstract

As one of the primary means of constructing gendered identities, language is a matter of central concern to transgender people (Zimman 2018). In this paper, we present an analysis of non-binary singular *they*; that is, *they* as used to refer to individuals whose gender identity is not, or is not exclusively, masculine or feminine. Despite singular *they*'s widespread usage and long history in the English language, not all speakers judge this most recent innovation to be grammatical, even if they do not object to singular *they* in quantified, generic, or otherwise gender non-specific contexts, and even if they produce the latter sort of examples natively. We argue that resistance to this new use of *they* can, at least in part, be attributed to speakers' level of participation in a grammatical change in progress. Further, we propose that this change can be categorized into three distinct stages, with *they*'s most recent broadening – that is, as a non-binary singular pronoun of reference – dovetailing with wider socio-cultural changes (as well as featural changes beyond the pronominal system) that underscore the difficulty in separating grammatical and social judgements. As we aim to show, linguists from all subdisciplines – both theoretical and applied – are especially well suited to leverage theoretical insights to advocate for trans-affirming language practice.

Keywords: singular *they*, pronouns, morphosyntax, English

1   Introduction

It has long been acknowledged by linguists, grammarians, and the public at large that the English language would benefit from an epicene pronoun: a singular pronoun that could refer to known human individuals without having to specify a binary gender.[1] Currently, the leading contender for this role is *they*, as in (1).

(1)   a.   *The professor$_i$ told me they$_i$ won't be holding office hours this week.*
         b.   *The right candidate$_i$ knows they$_i$ should bring a copy of their resumé.*
         c.   *Every author$_i$ knows they$_i$ should get an early start in the morning.*

They has a long history as a singular pronoun in English, and has occurred in constructions similar to (1) since at least the 15th century, used to refer to non-specific and quantified individuals. In recent years, singular *they* has expanded to yet another context: in addition to its long-standing usages, it is now also used to refer to specific individuals of known (but not necessarily binary) gender. *They* is not only a popular alternative to "generic" *he* and other more verbose but less sexist

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constructions such as *he or she* and *s/he*, but it is also the personal pronoun of reference[2] for many non-binary individuals – those whose gender identity is not, or is not exclusively, masculine or feminine. Yet not all speakers judge this recent innovation in the use of singular *they* to be grammatical, even if they would not object to singular *they* in sentences like (1) and would produce similar examples natively. In this paper, we argue that resistance to this new use of *they* can, at least in part, be attributed to speakers' level of participation in a grammatical change in progress. Further, we propose that this change can be divided into three distinct stages, with *they*'s most recent broadening – that is, as a non-binary pronoun of reference – dovetailing with wider socio-cultural changes (as well as featural changes beyond the pronominal system) that underscore the difficulty in separating grammatical and social judgements. We show how this legitimate grammatical change can be accounted for in feature-geometric terms,[3] and what it means for the English pronominal system – and the small set of English nouns that may also carry gender features – as a whole. Ultimately, we take the position that while this change may take time for some speakers, it is by no means insurmountable, and is either complete or well underway for an increasing number of individuals.

2   The social significance of pronouns

While a number of previous studies on singular *they* have focused on its generic or epicene use to refer to ostensibly binary-gendered speakers (Bodine 1975, Baranowski 2002, Balhorn 2004, LaScotte 2016, Bjorkman 2017, *inter alia*), few have centered the experiences or significance of pronoun usage for non-binary speakers specifically (though see Ackerman 2019, Conrod 2018, Hernandez et al. 2018). However, we contend that no analysis of pronouns and gender should proceed without due consideration of pronouns as forming the center of most discussions of transgender speakers' challenges to "the linguistic status quo" (Zimman 2016).

Pronouns, along with proper names, are often among the first acts of linguistic self-determination a transgender person makes. In light of the significance of pronouns and pronoun recognition for transgender communities, it cannot be denied that grammatical judgements regarding singular *they* are inextricably connected to social judgements of these communities. Hernandez et al. (2018) found that speakers' judgements of singular *they* as grammatical (both as an epicene pronoun and as the pronoun of reference for transgender individuals) were significantly correlated to their scores on an attitude test: individuals with negative attitudes towards transgender people were less likely to judge singular *they* as acceptable. Attitudes towards transgender people were the highest predictor of the grammaticality of non-binary singular *they,* but the grammaticality of generic singular *they* was correlated both to attitudes to transgender people and to prescriptive attitudes. Ackerman et al. (2018) likewise found a correlation between familiarity with gender diversity and acceptance of singular *they,* particularly with prototypically-gendered

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[2] We use the term *personal pronoun of reference* instead of *pronoun of preference*, since the term *preference* implies a degree of optionality between forms: for an individual who uses *they* as their personal pronoun, frequently neither *he* nor *she* is acceptable at all. In such instances, the term *pronoun of preference* wrongly suggests that *they* is simply preferred over other alternatives.

[3] The theoretical status of feature geometries has been challenged by Harbour and Elsholtz (2012), Harbour (2016), and Cowper and Hall (2019). Nothing in this paper hinges on whether dependencies among interpretable formal features derive from a feature geometry or from a contrastive hierarchy, as Cowper and Hall (2019) propose; for clarity, we use the more widely known of the two approaches.

names and nouns such as *Chloe* and *Jacob*: as speakers' frequency of interaction with transgender and non-binary speakers increased, so too did their acceptability of singular *they*. Thus, there is ample reason to posit that in the case of singular *they*, social and linguistic change are acutely imbricated.

As Conrod (2018) observes from a variationist sociolinguistic perspective, *they* is a unique change from above (Labov 1966); as is typical for changes of this nature, speakers are aware of it and engage in discussion on its use and merits. And yet, this change is unusual in that unlike most changes from above, it is not necessarily a prestigious one. Metalinguistic commentary on the use of singular *they* is mixed, as are the social consequences of aligning with it. In some communities (such as groups of younger speakers, LGBTQI2S+ speakers, or anywhere gender diversity is recognized and supported), fluency in this feature may be valued; elsewhere, it may be stigmatized. As a matter of central concern for transgender speakers, the change towards non-binary singular *they* originates (at least in perception, if not necessarily in reality) from groups who have a high social salience, but not necessarily a high status (Conrod 2018).

Though recent public discourse might suggest otherwise, it should be acknowledged that even outside transgender communities, pronouns and pronoun systems are not unchanging or inflexible: pronouns are used in socially meaningful ways with great attention to the social context.[4] Therefore, we will take no position on how singular *they* (or any other pronouns of English) ought to be used – rather, we seek to describe the pronoun system as it is already used by an increasing number of speakers, ourselves included. While describing the state of singular *they* necessarily involves describing the entirety of the English pronominal system, it is singular *they* in its non-binary usage that forms the basis of our analysis. Our questions at the outset, therefore, are: what does the pronoun system look like for speakers who already have non-binary singular *they* in their grammar, and how can a descriptive analysis of this system contribute to trans-affirming language advocacy?

Recently, Bjorkman (2017) presented an analysis of a relatively new variety of English, in which *they* can be used to refer to a singular definite individual of known gender, but where the distribution of singular *they* nonetheless exhibits some specific limitations not found in the variety we will report on. Both of these varieties expand the uses of so-called singular *they* beyond uses like (1), which, as previously noted, have been available since at least the fifteenth century. As Bjorkman (2017) is the first published account of the morphosyntax of definite singular *they*, we engage with her analysis in some detail.

The innovative data Bjorkman discusses are exemplified in (2), where the antecedent of *they* is "singular, definite, and specific, referring to an individual whose binary gender is known to both speaker and hearer" (Bjorkman 2017: 2, judgements as reported there):

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[4] A familiar example is the T/V distinction in Romance second-person pronouns, where the 'T form' is the pronoun of informal address, and the 'V form' the pronoun of formal address.

(2) a. %The professor$_i$ said they$_i$ cancelled the exam.
  b. %Our eldest child$_i$ broke their$_i$ leg.
  c. %I'll let my cousin$_i$ introduce themselves$_i$.[5]

Crucially, Bjorkman reports that while sentences like those in (2) are becoming commonplace, "even speakers who accept singular definite specific *they* as in (2) generally do not accept sentences like those in (3)" (Bjorkman 2017: 2, judgements as reported there). In these examples, the antecedent remains singular, definite, and specific, but is now a proper given name or gender-specific noun – though she does acknowledge in a footnote that "for at least some speakers, *they* is possible with given names if the referent is of unknown gender, or of known nonbinary gender" (2017: 2).

(3) a. *Janet$_i$ said they$_i$ cancelled the exam.
  b. *Thomas$_i$ broke their$_i$ leg.
  c. *I'll let my sister$_i$/father$_i$/aunt$_i$/ introduce themselves$_i$.

In this paper, we report on an even more innovative variety of English, which represents the judgements of six people we have consulted,[6] and which is also corroborated by the trends described by Conrod (2018). In this variety of English, singular *they* can be used to refer to definite, singular individuals of any gender (binary or non-binary), and can take antecedents like those in (3). In this context, we refer to the variety of singular *they* described by Bjorkman (2017) as Stage 2 of a grammatical change in progress, and the variety we report on as Stage 3. Stage 1 refers to the usage of singular *they* found in (1), which has long been well established in English.

We begin by describing the most recent stage of the change: singular *they* in its non-binary usage (Stage 3). Having delineated the data to be accounted for, we then turn to an assessment of Bjorkman's (2017) analysis of the Stage 1 and Stage 2 varieties, arguing that the status of grammatical gender features at Stage 2 in that account is incoherent, being at the same time contrastive and noncontrastive. We present an alternative analysis, and show how the progression from Stage 1 to Stage 2, and from Stage 1 to Stage 3, can happen. We also show how, once speakers have made the move from Stage 1 to Stage 2, the transition to Stage 3 may become more difficult.

3 The data at Stage 3

The speakers we consulted come from the extended networks of the first author, and include both self-identified non-binary speakers (N=4) and speakers who are binary-gendered but have at least one non-binary family member (N=2). Judgements were solicited via email. Consultants were presented with the sentences in (4)–(6) below, and asked to rate them on a scale of 1 to 3: a rating of 1 indicated that the sentence was fully grammatical and they would produce it themselves; a rating of 2 indicated that it was grammatical, but they would not produce it themselves; and a

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[5] As mentioned by Bjorkman, speakers differ as to whether singular *they*, when reflexive, appears as *themselves* or *themself*. We set this variation aside, as it has no bearing on the specific question under consideration here.

[6] Though this is a small sample, our intention here is not to provide a comprehensive cross-section of the population who share the grammar we describe, or to conduct a quantitative analysis. Rather, these additional speakers augment our own judgements, accord with Conrod's (2018) results, and show that the system we present is not exclusively our own.

rating of 3 indicated that it was not grammatical, and they would not use it. The judgements of all speakers were consistent with our own. For these speakers, *they* can be used grammatically in all of the sentences shown in (4)–(6).

(4) Stage 1 singular *they* (quantified antecedent, or antecedent of unknown gender):
    a. Anyone$_i$ who thinks they$_i$ need more time should ask for an extension.
    b. The person$_i$ at the door left before I could see see who they$_i$ were.

(5) Stage 2 singular *they* (antecedent of known gender, but ungendered description/name):
    a. Kelly$_i$ said they$_i$ were leaving early.
    b. The strongest student$_i$ will present their$_i$ paper next.

(6) Stage 3 singular *they* (antecedent of any gender, no restriction on description/name):
    a. Maria$_i$ wants to send their$_i$ students on the field trip.
    b. We heard from Arthur$_i$ that they$_i$ needed time to think about the idea.
    c. We asked [the first girl in line]$_i$ to introduce themself/themselves$_i$.
    d. Your brother$_i$ called to say they$_i$ would be late.

It must be emphasized that when we say that all of the sentences in (4)–(6) are grammatical for our speakers, it is of course not the case that any one of them can be appropriately used in all contexts. For example, if the person named Kelly referred to in (5a) is an individual whose pronoun of reference is *she/her*, it would be inappropriate (but not ungrammatical) for a speaker who knows that about her to use *they* to refer to her. Equally, if the person referred to in (6a) is someone whose pronoun of reference is *he/him/his*, it would be inappropriate (but again, not ungrammatical) for a speaker who knows this to use either *their* or *her* when saying (6a). The well-formedness of the sentences in (4)–(6) thus means that the sentences *can* be used under appropriate circumstances. This contrasts with the judgments reported by Bjorkman, according to which sentences like those in (6) are ill-formed and *cannot* be used.[7]

For Stage 3 speakers, while *they* is always available as a singular, third-person pronoun, the singular pronouns *he* and *she* are also available, and when used as in (7), may – or may not – indicate that the referent is of binary gender.[8]

(7) a. The professor$_i$ said he$_i$ wouldn't be giving us an exam.
    b. Kelly$_i$ said she$_i$ was leaving early.

For at least some of the speakers of Stage 3, singular *they* can also be used to refer to pets, as in (8), where in earlier stages of English *he* and *she* would have been used in lieu of *it*. However, truly inanimate objects, when singular, cannot be referred to with *they*, as in (9).

(8) a. Fluffy$_i$ didn't eat any of their$_i$ dry food this morning.
    b. Barkley$_i$ loves to chase squirrels, but they$_i$ never catch any.

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[7] For a more comprehensive and nuanced discussion on the relationship between world knowledge and coreference dependency formation, see Ackerman (2019) and Ackerman, Riches, & Wallenberg (2018).

[8] For some Stage 3 speakers, *he* and *she* should ideally only be used if the speaker knows specifically that the individual referred to uses those pronouns, but such a system currently remains aspirational.

(9)   I put my favourite watch$_i$ down somewhere, and now I can't find ✓it/*them$_i$.

Taken together, the judgements above represent Stage 3.

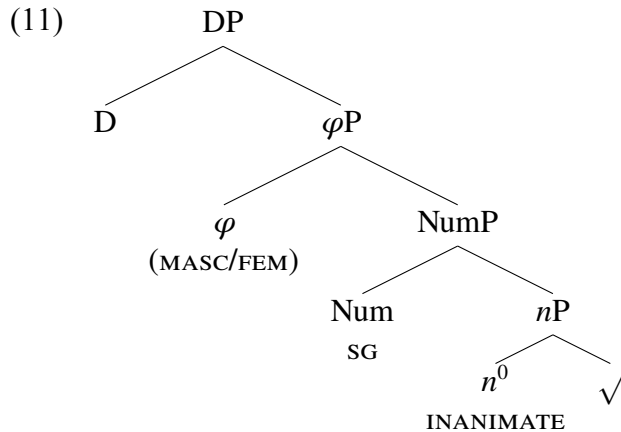## 4   The morphosyntax of singular *they:* Bjorkman's (2017) account

In this section we briefly summarize Bjorkman's proposed analysis of Stage 1 and Stage 2 *they*, assessing the merits and shortcomings of the account, both empirical and theoretical, and considering how it fares in accounting for Stage 3 *they*.

4.1   Stage 1

Using a realizational model of morphology, Bjorkman argues that in the Stage 1 system (Bjorkman's *Conservative* variety), there is a contrastive three-way gender distinction, with marked masculine (MASC) and feminine (FEM) contrasting both with each other and with an unmarked neuter. Other features in the system are singular (SG) and INANIMATE. Third-person pronouns are realized as in (10) (Bjorkman 2017: 7).

(10) a.   [FEM] [SG] ↔ *she*
     b.   [MASC] [SG] ↔ *he*
     c.   [INANIMATE] [SG] ↔ *it*
     d.   *elsewhere ↔ they*

All of the features shown in (10) are contrastive, and marked on the syntactic heads shown in (11), adapted by Bjorkman from work by Steriopolo and Wiltschko (2010) and Déchaine and Wiltschko (2015) (Bjorkman 2017: 8).

(11)

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              DP
            /    \
           D      φP
                 /   \
                φ     NumP
            (MASC/FEM) /   \
                     Num    nP
                     SG    /   \
                          n⁰    √
                       INANIMATE
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For Bjorkman, bound variable pronouns like those in (12) optionally realize either φP or NumP. If the pronoun realizes φP, then if the quantified antecedent is animate and either masculine or feminine, either *he* or *she* will be spelled out, as in (12a) and (12b). Bjorkman assumes that if neither [MASC] nor [FEM] is present, an unspecified φP can receive an epicene interpretation, as required in (12c). However, since a bound variable can also be a bare NumP, it can lack gender specification entirely, even if its antecedent is singular and of known gender, as in (12e). The pronouns in (12c) and (12d) are thus in principle ambiguous between an epicene φP with no gender

specification on φ and a bare NumP, while the pronoun in (12e), with an antecedent marked with [MASC], can only be a bare NumP.

(12) a.   Any girl$_i$ who needs help should speak to her$_i$ teacher.
     b.   Every boy$_i$ who does his$_i$ best will pass the course.
     c.   No teacher$_i$ who mistreats their$_i$ students will be promoted.
     d.   If any wine$_i$ is left after the party, it$_i$ will be thrown out.

     e.   There's not a man$_i$ I meet but doth salute me / As if I were their$_i$ well-acquainted friend
          (Shakespeare, 1623, *A Comedy of Errors*)

At Stage 1, then, English has a fully contrastive, ternary gender system. A singular pronoun whose antecedent is marked as MASC or FEM must be realized as *he/him/his* or *she/her*, respectively. Epicene *they* arises with singular animate referents of unknown or non-unique gender, realizing a φP bearing neither MASC nor FEM. The only exception is with bound pronouns, which can, for Bjorkman, consist of a bare NumP with no gender specification.

While Bjorkman's account, by our estimation, correctly describes the distribution of pronouns at Stage 1, the claim that bound pronouns optionally spell out either φP or NumP is theoretically worrisome. Ideally, it should be possible to identify some other properties that fall out from the syntactic category of the pronoun in these instances; if there are none, then the account is *ad hoc*.

We turn now to Bjorkman's account of Stage 2, where further problems arise.

2.2   Stage 2

At Stage 2 (Bjorkman's *Innovative* variety), the contexts in which singular *they* appears have expanded, to include a wider range of animate antecedents of known gender, as in (13) repeated from (2) above.

(13) a.   %The professor$_i$ said they$_i$ cancelled the exam.
     b.   %Our eldest child$_i$ broke their$_i$ leg.
     c.   %I'll let my cousin$_i$ introduce themselves$_i$.

Crucially, in each of these sentences, the gender of the antecedent is known to the speaker, and may be binary. Under the Stage 1 system, in this situation the epicene interpretation of singular *they* would not be available, and the pronoun would obligatorily realize contrastive MASC or FEM, as applicable. There must therefore have been some change in the status of these gender features between Stage 1 and Stage 2.

At the same time, the gender features seem not to have not lost their contrastive force entirely, since Bjorkman points out that sentences like (14) remain ill-formed for Stage 2 speakers.

(14) a.   *My father$_i$ said they$_i$ were leaving tomorrow.
     b.   *Janet$_i$ left their$_i$ book here.

She proposes that for speakers with these judgements, the gender features *<masc>* and *<fem>* are no longer contrastive in the grammar, but are optional, interpretable, adjunct features in the sense of Wiltschko (2008).[9] Such features carry meaning, but their absence in a given context carries no implication that the referent does not have the semantic property in question. The absence of both *<masc>* and *<fem>* on φ thus does not imply that the referent of φP is neither masculine nor feminine, and thus does not restrict such a φP to epicene contexts.

This account correctly predicts that sentences like those in (13) are well-formed, but does not explain why those in (14) are unacceptable. If the gender features are truly optional adjuncts, they should pattern as other optional semantic content does: omitting them should never cause ill-formedness. This means that the sentences in (14) should be at least as acceptable as those in (15).

(15) a. My father was a wonderful person. (*cf.* a wonderful man)
    b. Janet is an interesting human being. (*cf.* an interesting woman)

Essentially, the difference between *they* and *he* as the realization of a pronoun co-referential with *my father* should be analogous to the difference between *man* and *person* in the same context.

Given this analysis, the account of the ill-formedness of the sentences in (14) will not be found in the grammar itself. Bjorkman proposes that it follows instead from a dynamic condition on feature matching in discourse, which requires that "referential pronouns can only be interpreted as referring to a previously-introduced referent if they bear a superset of the features that have already been associated with that referent in a discourse. In other words, a pronoun can add to the linguistic features associated with a referent, but it cannot underspecify them." (Bjorkman 2017: 11). The effect of this proposal is essentially to smuggle contrastive gender features back into the system. By definition, adjunct features cannot be required. If Stage 2 speakers do not have grammatical, contrastive gender features in their pronoun systems, then the choice of gender-marked pronouns like *he* and *she* cannot be enforced by the grammar.

It must be noted that this requirement holds only of the featural structure being spelled out, and not of the vocabulary items themselves, since Stage 2 speakers have no trouble using the underspecified vocabulary item *they* to refer to a plural, gendered antecedent like *women*, as in (16).

(16) The women$_i$ said that they$_i$ were leaving.

In (16), the effect of Bjorkman's proposed dynamic requirement here is that the φP spelled out by *they* must bear the feature *<fem>*. But since there is no vocabulary item in the system that spells out *<fem>* without also spelling out the contrastive feature [SG], *they* is inserted.

There is a possible problem with the requirement, however. Consider the sentence in (17).

(17) *The women$_i$ said that she$_i$ was leaving.

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[9] We use [SMALL CAPS] for contrastive features, and *<italics>* for non-contrastive, modifier features.

Assume, with Bjorkman, that singular is marked relative to plural in the pronoun system, and that *women* bears a gender feature *<fem>*. Featurally speaking, *the women* is specified as *<feminine>*, and *she* is specified as *<feminine>* and SINGULAR. The pronoun therefore bears a superset of the features of its antecedent, as required, wrongly predicting that (17) should be acceptable.

There is another problem with the proposed dynamic condition on feature matching: it is not, in our opinion, reasonable to suppose that such a condition is subject to parametric variation among languages, or among varieties of a single language. What this means is that it should be applicable, in this particular case, even in the English of Stage 3 speakers, as long as (a) these speakers still have the pronouns *he* and *she* in their system, spelling out optional adjunct gender features, and (b) these speakers also have, in their lexicon, some nouns (like *stewardess, policewoman, actress, chairman*, etc.) that can only felicitously refer to individuals of known binary gender. As we will see in the next section, this prediction is not borne out. Furthermore, though Bjorkman describes the judgements we have reported as our Stage 2 as the *Innovative* pronoun system, we claim that this is not in fact the most innovative variety in current use.

4.3   Stage 3, revisited

Recall that at this stage, *they* is completely unrestricted in referring to third-person, singular antecedents. In particular, it can be used in sentences like (18), where the antecedent is a proper name with strong gender association (18a) or a semantically gendered noun (18b).

(18) a.   Sir Paul$_i$ has always played their$_i$ guitar left-handed.
   b.   My grandmother$_i$ always liked it when we asked them$_i$ about their$_i$ childhood.

Under Bjorkman's analysis, the difference between Stage 2 and Stage 3 speakers cannot be in the contrastive status of the gender features MASC and FEM in the pronoun system, since even at Stage 2 the features are optional and non-contrastive. Nor can it plausibly be that Stage 3 speakers have lost the dynamic condition on feature marking in discourse, since that condition should not be parametric. Nor can it be that gender features are entirely absent from the Stage 3 pronoun system, since even at Stage 3 *he* and *she* are optionally available. The difference can therefore only be that words like *grandmother* and *Sir,* and proper names like *Paul* have lost their gender feature specification altogether. However, even for Stage 3 speakers, nouns like *grandmother* and *chairman* are still strongly gendered, though they can serve as antecedents to singular *they* when the occasion calls for it.

5   The morphosyntax of singular *they:* an alternative account

In this section we propose an alternative analysis, which accounts for all three stages of singular *they*, and does not blur the distinction between contrastive features and optional adjunct features as Bjorkman's account does. In addition, the proposed account provides a plausible explanation for the fact that some speakers seem to strongly resist the move to Stage 3, while others make the move much more quickly. Specifically, we argue that at Stage 2, the pronoun system remains essentially unchanged from Stage 1; what has changed, for Stage 2 speakers, is the proportion of nouns and proper names that carry a contrastive gender feature. Gender features remain contrastive in the pronoun system, but as the number of gender-unspecified animate nouns increases, so does the distribution of singular *they*. At Stage 3, on the other hand, it is the pronoun system that has

been restructured, with the gender features becoming completely optional, leaving *they* as the default spellout for singular, animate referents. Stage 2 individuals who have accommodated to singular *they* by retaining contrastive gender features but revising the specifications of nouns and proper names still have a strongly contrastive, but vestigial, gender system in the pronouns. Moving from this grammar to Stage 3 requires as significant a grammatical reorganization as does the move from Stage 1 to Stage 3 directly, but, as we will argue, the empirical evidence for such a move is significantly weaker for Stage 2 speakers than for Stage 1 speakers.

At Stage 1, we follow Bjorkman in assuming that there are three privative, contrastive gender features: masculine [MASC], feminine, [FEM], and inanimate [INANIM], and that singular [SG] is the marked number feature. However, we follow Ritter (1993) in placing gender features either on the nominal categorizing head *n*, or on the Number head. We assume that the φ head above Number, where Bjorkman places [MASC] and [FEM], is the locus of person features like [PARTICIPANT] and [AUTHOR]. Third-person pronouns either have no marked features on φ, or lack the φ projection altogether.

The third-person pronominal vocabulary items are given in (19). These are essentially the same as those proposed by Bjorkman (2017: 7), the only difference being the syntactic position of [FEM] and [MASC].

(19) a. [SG] [FEM] ↔ *she*
     b. [SG] [MASC] ↔ *he*
     c. [SG, INANIM] ↔ *it*
     d. Elsewhere ↔ *they*

As Bjorkman notes, the features [MASC] and [FEM] behave differently from [INANIM] at Stage 1. Specifically, for bound pronouns like those in (20), [MASC] and [FEM] are realized only optionally. In contrast, as shown in (21), [INANIM] must be realized.
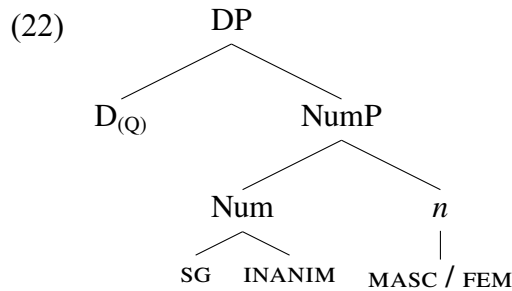
(20) a. There's not a man$_i$ I meet but doth salute me / As if I were their$_i$ well-acquainted friend. (William Shakespeare, 1623, *A Comedy of Errors*)
     b. Every girl$_i$ is responsible for completing her$_i$ homework on time.
     c. No mother$_i$ should be forced by federal prosecutors to testify against their$_i$ child. (Billy Martin, Los Angeles Times, 1998)
     d. Any boy$_i$ who thinks he$_i$ is ready may take the test.

(21) Every book that needs ✓its / *their cover replaced should be sent to the bindery.

Recall that this is accounted for in Bjorkman's account by placing [FEM] and [MASC] on φ and [INANIM] on Num, and stipulating that bound variable pronouns can optionally be either φP or a bare NumP. If no φP is present, then singular animate pronouns will be spelled out by *they*.

We propose the structure in (22) for Stage 1 third-person pronouns.[10]

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[10] Following van Gelderen (2013), we assume that third-person pronouns are DPs, while participant (first– and second-person) pronouns are φPs.

(22)

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                    DP
                  /    \
              D(Q)     NumP
                      /     \
                   Num        n
                  /   \        |
                SG  INANIM  MASC / FEM
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We assume that for quantified antecedents like those in (20) and (21), there is a close relationship between the quantifier, which occupies a D_Q head above Number, and the Number head itself. We propose that the features of the number head are copied to D_Q, and thus become features of the quantified nominal as a whole, while features of the *n* head lower in the structure are only optionally copied to D_Q. The referential properties of a definite, non-quantified DP presumably require that the gender features of *n*, when present, are obligatorily copied to the D level. Under this view, if a quantified antecedent bears the feature [INANIM], that feature will always be accessible to the binding relation between the antecedent and the bound pronoun, and will have to be spelled out, while the lower gender features on *n* may or may not be accessible. We believe that an account of Stage 1 bound pronouns along these lines, while it needs further support, is preferable to assuming that bound pronouns are sometimes φPs and sometimes NumPs.

At Stage 1, then, all three gender features are contrastive. Many nouns, like *actor, actress, mother,* and *brother,* and proper names like *Susan* and *David*, carry contrastive gender features. Except for pronouns bound by quantified antecedents, as described above, coreference requires that the features of the pronoun match those of its antecedent. Singular non-bound *they* is thus possible only when the gender of the antecedent is epicene or unknown; in all other cases, either *he* or *she* is required.

Let us turn now to Bjorkman's *Innovative* variety, which we refer to as Stage 2. We claim that in fact, there is no change whatsoever in the status or position of gender features in the pronoun system between Stage 1 and Stage 2: all three gender features remain contrastive, and for nominal antecedents bearing gender features, Stage 1 and Stage 2 are identical. The difference between Stage 1 and Stage 2 lies in the nominal lexicon. We assume that at Stage 1, nouns referring to people are, in any given sentence where the gender of the referent is known or assumed, systematically assigned either [MASC] or [FEM] corresponding to that referent. At Stage 2, however, nouns like *teacher* and *friend* need not be assigned gender features even if the gender of the referent is known or assumed. However, there remains at Stage 2 a subset of nouns, like *mother, father, sister, brother, actress,* and *policeman*, as well as certain proper names, that *lexically* bear contrastive gender features. Since gender features are contrastive, a singular pronoun whose antecedent carries either [MASC] or [FEM] – either lexically or based on the known or assumed gender of the referent – must be spelled out with *he* or *she*. Individual speakers will differ as to which nouns, and which proper names, lexically bear contrastive gender features. In addition, the possibility exists that a Stage 2 speaker may encounter an individual of non-binary gender whose pronoun of reference is *they* but whose name (e.g., *Mary*), carries a contrastive gender feature in

that Stage 2 speaker's lexicon. Recall that, according to Bjorkman (2017), such speakers would, in a neutral context where the referent of *Mary* is unknown, mark a sentence like (23) as ill-formed.

(23)   Mary$_i$ explained that they$_i$ had to leave early.

A Stage 2 speaker has several options in this situation. First, they could adjust their lexicon by deleting the contrastive gender feature from that particular proper name. *Mary* would then join the class of given names like *Kelly*, *Alex*, and *Morgan*, which are not marked for gender, and (23) would be grammatical. This predicts, somewhat implausibly, that, once a Stage 2 speaker has accommodated their lexicon as just described, any instance of *Mary*, regardless of the gender of the referent, should be able to serve as the antecedent to *they*. A second, more plausible, option would be to add a new lexical entry for *Mary* to their lexicon, homophonous to the existing entry, but with no marked gender feature. This new lexical item would be specified as denoting an individual whose pronoun of reference is known to be *they*, or might even be restricted to refer only to the non-binary individual in question. A sentence like (23) would thus remain ungrammatical, unless it referred specifically to the individual in question, or to some other individual with the relevant property. Essentially, this amounts to marking well-formed uses of (23) as exceptional.

A third option – which we will set aside as unhelpful (and even bigoted) but nonetheless a logical possibility – would be for the Stage 2 speaker to simply refuse to use the individual's correct pronoun, on the grounds that to do so would be grammatically ill-formed.

The final option would be to change the status of gender features altogether, making them optional modifiers *<masc>* and *<fem>* rather than contrastive features whose absence carries meaning, moving the speaker fully to Stage 3. At this stage, which is to our knowledge the last stop on this trajectory, *they* can be used to refer to any non-inanimate singular individual, whether or not the antecedent is linguistically present, and whether or not the antecedent is a nominal bearing semantic gender features. *He* and *she* are also available, spelling out *<masc>* and *<fem>* respectively, but their use is always grammatically optional, since the gender features they bear are non-contrastive. This stage aligns most closely with our own judgements, and the judgements of our consultants.

An important point to be made here is that this fourth option is also available to a Stage 1 speaker faced with data like (24), repeated from (5).

(24) Stage 2 singular *they* (antecedent of known gender, but ungendered description/name):
    a. Kelly$_i$ said they$_i$ were leaving early.
    b. The strongest student$_i$ will present their$_i$ paper next.

We suspect that many Stage 3 speakers, and in particular those who have greater familiarity with non-binary individuals (e.g., those who have non-binary acquaintances, friends, or family members; *cf.* Ackerman, Riches, & Wallenberg 2018) may actually never have passed through Stage 2 at all, having instead simply changed the status of the features [MASC] and [FEM] to optional adjuncts *<masc>* and *<fem>* in the first instance.

For those speakers who have instead made changes to the nominal lexicon and are Stage 2 speakers, it would seem that shifting into Stage 3 involves making a separate conceptual leap

towards rejecting the cultural assumption that all persons can be categorized according to a gender binary, a leap that. requires engaging with wider socio-cultural changes regarding gender and gender identity. But no matter which path is taken, at Stage 3 the morphosyntactic and the sociocultural changes dovetail.

However, for a Stage 2 speaker, faced with a single situation that their grammar does not accommodate, the second option described above – creating homophonous entries for a single form like *Mary*, one with a gender feature and the other without – has the smallest effect on the grammar as a whole, and this is plausibly the option that a Stage 2 speaker would choose in such a situation. We speculate that this is where many speakers of English are currently situated: effectively marking exceptional cases to accommodate non-binary individuals of their acquaintance, but without making overall structural changes to the status of gender in their grammars. In the long run, however, given the increased visibility of individuals of non-binary gender, this approach leads in principle to a less efficient lexicon, rife with homophonous pairs of lexical entries, one member of each pair carrying specific idiosyncratic pragmatic constraints. At the same time, these same exceptional cases, having expanded the distribution of singular *they*, reduce the empirical pressure for a systemic change in the status of the gender features in the pronoun system.

6 Implications

Under the account proposed above the only change required between Stage 1 and Stage 3 is in the status of the masculine and feminine gender features: the syntactic structure of the pronouns is otherwise completely unchanged. Since *they* can always refer to an animate, singular individual, the presence or absence of gender in the denotation of a specific noun is less important, and has no consequences for the well-formedness of pronoun-antecedent pairs. In fact, all three of the sentences in (25) are in principle well-formed at Stage 3, though the pragmatic conditions on their use are different.

(25)   a.   My mother$_i$ left her$_i$ coat here.
             My mother refers to an individual whose pronoun of reference is *she/her*.

       b.   Your mother$_i$ left their$_i$ coat here.
             Your mother refers to an individual of any gender, binary or not, which may or may not be known to the speaker and/or the hearer.

       c.   Your mother$_i$ left his$_i$ coat here.
             Your mother refers to an individual (possibly transgender) whose pronoun of reference is *he/him/his*, and who is the mother of the addressee of the sentence.

Under the account we have proposed here, the change in the English pronominal system to accommodate this new use of singular *they* is subtle. In fact, the structure of the pronominal features remains exactly as it was; all that changes is the status of the gender features themselves, specifically, whether they are required contrastive features or optional modifier features. It is possible that this relative subtlety may explain why some speakers find the change in usage difficult to acquire with fluency, despite their best intentions. The nuance of our analysis for Stage

2 accounts for those speakers who consider themselves to be in solidarity with gender-diverse communities, but may still struggle to abandon a more conservative system.

While some speakers find the use of singular *they* in the innovative Stage 3 contexts described here to be unworthy for social reasons, as linguists know all too well, these objections are often packaged as an effort to defend the grammar itself. Singular *they* – and non-binary singular *they* more specifically – provides an apt example of how grammar and social meaning are not so neatly separated. With respect to pronouns, there is no apolitical stance (Zimman 2016): as one of the primary linguistic tools that speakers use to refer to other individuals and implicate them in social categories and relationships, pronouns may very well be especially susceptible to modification in response to social movements (Bodine 1975).

As linguists, we are often tempted to apply a putatively objective lens to our study of language. But it is crucial that we not operate in a vacuum or assume that even our theoretical analyses are entirely divorced from the social context in which language is used. In studying innovative gender pronouns, this segregation of inquiry has historically led linguistic researchers to ask very different questions from those that matter to the communities impacted by that research, focusing more on the probable 'success' of a given pronoun and hypothesizing about its odds for universal adoption (e.g., Baron 1986, Balhorn 2004, *inter alia*). Instead, we would do well to direct our attention to how pronouns are actually used, leveraging our theoretical insights to advocate for trans-affirming language practice, and bringing a scientific perspective to bear on what precisely is at stake.

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