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Abolishing Gender on D

Kirby Conrod
Linguistics Department
Swarthmore College
Pearson Hall
500 College Avenue
Swarthmore PA 19081
Email: kconrod1@swarthmore.edu

Abstract

This paper presents a Minimalist syntactic analysis of sociopragmatically conditioned gender features on pronouns. To account for inter- and intra-speaker variation, I locate the parameter for social gender in the presence or absence of an unvalued gender feature on the phase head D. Supporting this analysis, I show that variation in English speakers' acceptability and use of definite, specific singular they (as in (1) below) is sensitive to reference; this sensitivity is robustly explained by the location of gender features on D.

(1) Taylor$_i$ is writing their$_i$ own autobiography.

For speakers who report (1) as ungrammatical, a crash results from the uGender on D remaining unvalued. For innovative speakers, uGender is not present on D and no crash results from a lack of gender features. This analysis explains why a pragmatic feature like social gender can cause true syntactic ungrammaticality, since the narrow syntax encodes certain pragmatic features as obligatory.

Keywords: gender, pronouns, syntax, singular *they*

1. Introduction

This paper provides a syntactic account for an ongoing change in the third person pronominal system, in which singular *they* – which has been previously restricted to indefinite or generic antecedents – has expanded for many speakers to allow use with specific, definite antecedents, including proper names. The first section reviews the evidence for this change and elaborates the different types of singular *they*. Section 2 outlines the syntactic proposal, which consists of two components: first, a head-raising

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analysis of pronouns; and secondly, a proposed microparameter that differentiates speakers who can and cannot use singular *they* for specific antecedents. Section 3 shows the consequences of this proposal, including confirmation of a previously-proposed typology of pronouns. Section 4 briefly compares this proposal with related alternative proposals, and Section 5 concludes.

1.1 Singular *They*

Variation in the grammaticality of singular *they* with different antecedents has been informally reported for some time, but linguistic analyses have typically been in psycholinguistic studies (Moulton et al. 1978, Hughes and Casey 1986, Hyde 1984 i.a.) which deal with potential processing cost, ambiguity, or the alternation between generic singular *they* and the generic use of *he*. More recent work on *they* has directly addressed the grammaticality of *they* with a singular, definite, specific antecedent. Bjorkman (2017) observed that speakers report different grammaticality/acceptability judgments for definite, specific uses of *they* in the singular (3). Bjorkman differentiated between these specific, definite uses and the (otherwise well established; see Curzan 2003 for thorough review) generic or indefinite uses (2).[1]

(2) A syntax professor$_i$ must always love their$_i$ job.

(3) ? That syntax professor$_i$ loves their$_i$ job.

Acceptance of singular *they* depends on context and specificity. Speakers may reject (3) but accept uses like (4), even though both antecedents are definite. Uses like (4)-(5) are well-attested and have been in use for much longer than those like (3). Curzan (2003) reviews the history of generic and indefinite uses like these, as well as the history of prescriptive grammarian pushback against those uses, and their alternation with generic uses of *he*.

(4) The ideal student$_i$ never forgets their$_i$ homework.

(5) Every student$_i$ should do their$_i$ homework.

What Bjorkman (2017) crucially observed is that the judgments for singular *they* become even more variable (and less generally accepted) when anteceded not just by a specific antecedent, but in particular by a proper name. Proper names seem to be the newest possible antecedent for singular *they*. I group proper names like 6 and definite specific antecedents like 3 together as definite specific singular *they*, or **dsT**.

[1] All example sentences in this paper were constructed by the author unless otherwise noted; unless otherwise specified, judgments reflect the author's own judgments, which are representative of a white middle-class West Coast United States speaker of English who is a native dsT user. All judgments were corroborated with at least one other native speaker of English. However, because this paper discusses a point of sociosyntactic variation, it is assumed that readers' judgments may vary from the ones marked here.

(6) % Jayden$_1$ loves their$_1$ job.

In a large-scale grammaticality judgment survey targeting *they* with indefinites, generics, and proper names, Conrod (2018) found that speaker age correlated with ratings of singular *they* only when used with proper names; their data support an apparent time analysis in which this variable is currently undergoing a change over time (Conrod 2019). The goal of this paper is therefore to propose a syntactic account of a single parameter that differentiates speakers who do and don't have dsT as part of their grammar of English, while accounting for particular restrictions on use of dsT and other English pronoun phenomena.

2. Proposal: uGender parameter on referential D

I propose that the synchronic variation found in English speakers who rate dsT as grammatical or ungrammatical is the presence or absence of a uGender feature on the D head in the pronominal DP complex. Innovative speakers who do allow dsT lack the uGender feature, while conservative speakers maintain the uGender feature on D. The presence of the feature on D requires valuation for referential pronouns in particular (as distinct from other types such as bound anaphors).

The core of this proposal is that for non-dsT speakers, what causes ungrammaticality for dsT (but not other types of singular *they*) is gender, not number. This is corroborated by metalinguistic comments from various speakers who lack dsT (e.g. Pullum 2003), and explains why the grammaticality variation is around specific referents, *not* all singular antecedents.

As a direct result of their participation in this grammatical change, this also implies that for dsT speakers, gender is always optional. This goes further to explain sociopragmatic variation where gender features can be ommitted or included to adhere to different Gricean maxims (Grice 1968).

In this section I show details for how this proposal can be operationalized; I am working within the Minimalist framework (Chomsky 2000, 1995) and assume the Borer Conjecture (Borer 2014, Chomsky 1995) for the purposes of the microparameter which I am proposing here. Head movement will be modeled after Matushansky (2006). I assume a Y-model grammar in which the narrow syntax first operates (Merge and Agree being the only available operations), after which syntactic structures are sent to the Conceptual-Intensional and Sensori-motor interfaces (CI and SM). I assume that Vocabulary Insertion happens either *at* or *after* the split into the interfaces.[2]

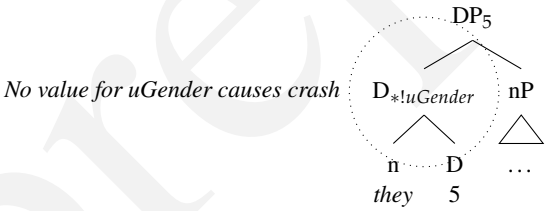
This proposal relies on an updated formulation of the three-part pronoun typology proposed by Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002). While the pronominal typology I

[2]I intentionally remain agnostic about the exact timing of VI, because a post-split VI precludes the possibility of a 'direct quotation' interpretation of depronominalizations, which I discuss only very briefly in this paper. I thank Byron Ahn (p.c.) for discussion on this matter.

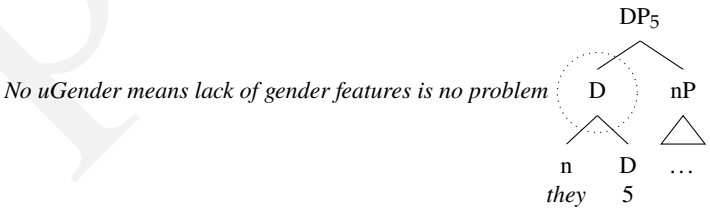
maintain here is very similar to Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002's, I assume that all pronoun types are full DPs (whereas Déchaine and Wiltschko assume that different pronouns represent different levels of projection, constituting nPs, ϕPs, and DPs). In order to reflect the same syntactic differences between more and less noun-like pronouns observed by Déchaine and Wiltschko, I instead analyze pronouns as starting lower in the nominal domain (at little *n*) and optionally raising to intermediate or higher positions in the DP structure.

I review the three-way split of pronoun types in Section 3 below. Here I primarily focus on identifying the microparameter that differentiates dsT-users from non-dsT users who reject the specific form of singular *they*. In (7) below, non-dsT users are speakers whose grammar maintains an uninterpretable uGender feature on referential D (circled). This feature, when unvalued by the point of spell-out, causes a crash that results in non-dsT speakers reporting ungrammaticality *only when singular* they *is specific and referential.* This is an important distinction, because very few speakers overall find singular *they* truly ungrammatical in its non-referential (generic or indefinite) uses. The ongoing grammatical innovation, therefore, is by dsT speakers who have no issue hearing or producing singular *they* with a specific referent – these speakers have a grammar represented in (8) below, where the referential D head is crucially lacking a uGender feature. Thus, even when *they* raises to D without any gender features, no crash is caused.

(7) Referential dsT for non-dsT speakers



(8) Referential dsT for dsT-speakers

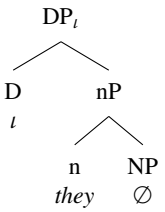


The numeral notation in (7)-(8) above, D_5, denotes specific referential determiner; this is a direct reference to an entity in discourse context, rather than an operator picking a set of entities out of a context. (The numerals are arbitrary; I use them for convenience of differentiable indexation.)

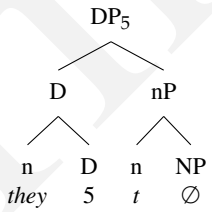
An important feature of this proposal is that the "problem" causing ungrammaticality for non-dsT users is not number, but gender; it is also important to note that loss of the uGender feature is facilitated by ambiguous uses of *they*, which I discuss further in Section 3.3. This follows the proposal from Bjorkman (2017), which is followed up by Konnelly and Cowper (2020), that singular *they* lacks gender (and number) features altogether. It also correctly predicts that metalinguistic comments about dsT will target gender, not number, which seems generally borne out in comments presented by Conrod (2019).

The structural difference between dsT in (8) above and an epicene singular *they* like in (4) is based on different syntactic/semantic types of determiner, compared in (9) below.

(9) a. Epicene with definite antecedent



b. Referential pronoun



In (9), ι signifies a definite determiner that quantifies over a set, which I take as distinct from specific referential determiner like D_5. Sentences like (4) can be produced by non-dsT speakers, even if the lexical antecedent contains some gendered meanings; I discuss this further in Section 3.1.[3]

I take the ι operator to be equivalent to a definite determiner like the English *the*; as such, it is an ι operator that appears in full DPs such as *'the teacher'*. The direct referential determiner, notated as D_5 in (9b), is distinct from the definite determiner; the only full DPs it would appear in would be proper names. Chapter 2 of Conrod (2019) discusses the relationship between proper names and pronouns more extensively.

In the next section I will briefly summarize how gender features are evaluated for appropriateness for referential pronouns. This is relevant to the proposal primarily because it diverges from most other work on how gender-matching is determined between pronouns and their antecedents (e.g. Sigurðsson 2018, Kučerová 2018 among many others).

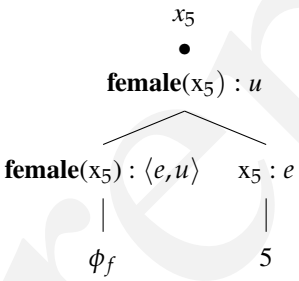
[3] A reviewer asks whether the structural difference between (9a) and (9b) – particularly the lack of head movement to D in (9a) – make different predictions. In English, they do not. The difference particular to dsT is a matter of evaluating use-conditions at the CI interface, which will proceed differently for a definite determiner and a direct referential index. See Elbourne (2013) for more extensive discussion of how the ι might be taken to operate.

2.1 How gender is evaluated

An important aspect of this proposal is that gender of pronouns is evaluated in different ways for different types of pronouns (the types are detailed further in Section 3 below). For this section I will differentiate between Condition B (free) pronouns, which I refer to as referential pronouns, and locally-bound variables including Condition A anaphors, which I refer to as variable pronouns.

Referential pronouns in this proposal are constructed from a specific, referential determiner that is directly indexed to a referent, denoted by numeral subscripts: D_5 in (7) and (8) is a determiner of this type. These determiners enter the derivation already indexed; their index is based on the speaker's intent to refer to a particular entity. If a pronoun successfully raises to D (see Section 3 below for more on head-raising), whatever features that pronoun carries are evaluated for *sociopragmatic appropriateness* with respect to the referent in discourse context. One possible formalization of this by Conrod (2019) relies on the use-conditional semantics detailed by Gutzmann and McCready (2014); that denotation is repeated in (10).

(10) a. $\textit{pronouns} = x + \phi$ (Gutzmann and McCready 2014: 63)
$\textit{she}_5 \approx$



b. **Paraphrase**: an entity x such that x is the entity indexed as 5 AND such that it is appropriate to refer to 5 as *she*

Crucially, computation of pronouns matching with antecedents is not a matter of syntax, but rather a matter of sociopragmatics in this model – as far as the syntax proper is concerned, the uGender feature simply needs *some* value if it is present, and pronouns do not need gender if the uGender feature is absent. I will discuss further the implications of this proposal in Section 4.3, as well as show why this is an advantage over previous proposals that attempt to determine gender-matching in the syntax.

For variable pronouns, on the other hand, gender is checked for matching or appropriateness based on an operator that locally binds a D_x determiner. This difference explains why non-dsT speakers are still very tolerant of what would otherwise be a gender-mismatch when the antecedent is indefinite or quantificational, rather than referential.

In Section 3 following this one, I show some of the important direct consequences of this proposal, and further delineate the types of pronouns and different empirical predictions made by each different structure.

3. Details and consequences

The proposal targeting uGender on D predicts that different types of pronouns (e.g. referential vs variable) will have different restrictions for necessity of feature valuation. This builds off of previous accounts of pronominal typology which separates pronouns into more N-like or more D-like. In order to robustly explain why uGender must be valued on referential pronouns, but not other types.

Under this analysis, all types of pronouns consist of a full nominal structure, including *n* (a low functional head, following programs like Borer 2005), Num (a number projection, along the lines of Ritter 1992), and D. The only element that pronouns lack is a lexical root below *n*; they are purely functional in this analysis.[4] In what follows, when I refer to *lexical nouns* I am referring to non-pronominal nouns that do have a $\sqrt{}$ node under *n* – and by contrast, *pronouns* refer to any nominal structure *lacking* that root node.

I specify that the uGender feature on D is uninterpretable (and the iGender feature on *n* is interpretable) for several reasons. First, I take uninterpretable features to be features that are not (yet) valued; strong uninterpretable features may act as probes for Agree, and must be valued before spell-out. The manifestation of gender-related morphology on determiners is frequently controlled completely by gender features on nouns (though see King 2016 for some interesting exceptions). This suggests that determiners should not have inherent gender that is pre-determined, but that it should be valued over the course of the derivation. Conversely, in languages that have robust systems of grammatical gender, it is clear that lexical nouns each have idiosyncratic gender features already present in the lexicon, and these are the features that may provide value to other nominal elements in their local context. Secondly, I take gender features on *n* as interpretable (and their counterparts on D as uninterpretable) because predicative pronouns (which remain in a 'low' noun-like position) maintain a semantically meaningful sense of gender, e.g. *'the other she'*. In those cases, it is clear that the low nominal use of *she* still contributes meaningful gendered information, which would not be explicable if the low nominal gender features were interpretable. This system is a departure from Kramer (2016) and others, but is the most advantageous

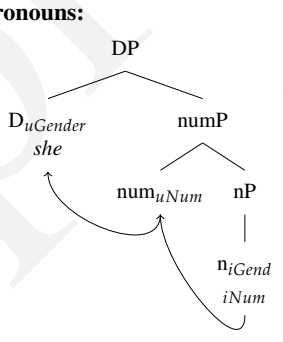
[4] If one were to adapt this analysis to a language where pronouns displayed more lexical properties, this analysis would still be possible if it included a $\sqrt{}$ merged under *n*, but would make different predictions regarding gender features especially; as such, languages like Thai are outside the scope of this paper for the time being.

for explaining the facts here and those described in Conrod (2019) and elsewhere.[5] For my purposes, in general uGender should be able to be valued by either Agree or movement – but I argue that in English pronouns, only movement values it (and the uGender feature only remains on *referential* pronouns, not variable or predicative or even definite ones).

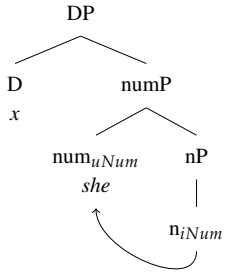
The three-way typology I use here is similar to that of Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) : the 'smallest' pronouns are the most noun-like, 'intermediate' pronouns can act either as predicates or as entities, and 'full' pronouns replace entire DPs. In my translation of this three-way separation, I will refer to predicative pronouns (which can co-occur with nominal modifiers, including external determiners); variable pronouns (which include anaphors and bound variables); and referential pronouns, which refer directly to an entity in the discourse context with or without a linguistic antecedent. The main difference between this analysis and Déchaine and Wiltschko's is that I assume that all pronouns are full DPs, rather than variable sizes of nominal projections. This more robustly explains the facts of English that I discuss here for two reasons: first, Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) cannot explain predicative pronouns like the one in (11c) and described in Chapter 2 of Conrod (2019). Secondly, unlike some of the differences shown by Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002), all three types of pronouns in English shown in (11) can occupy all positions in a clausal structure: they can all act as arguments, for example, and do not show obvious morphological differences. Thus, it is an advantage for the present analysis to assume that they are all full DPs, and that their differences are primarily internal.

The structure proposed in Conrod (2019) constructs this three-way division using head-raising, rather than differently-sized consituents. In (11), I give examples of each type showing the variable head-raising.

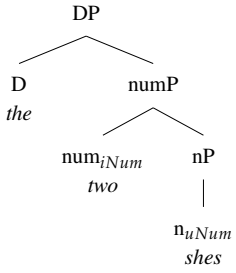
(11) a. **Referential pronouns:**



b. **Bound variables:**



c. **Predicative prns:**



Conrod 2019:232

[5]This is also a departure from Sigurðsson (2018); see Chapter 5 of Conrod (2019) for an extensive discussion of how his analysis varies from the present one.

I follow Matushansky's (2006) formulation of head-raising, which, when applied to the fully raised *n* in (11a) above, proceeds as follows:

(12) a. $[_{NumP}$ Num$[_{nP}$ *n*]] — Num is merged with nP.
n has gender features, nP is a predicate $\langle e,t \rangle$

b. $[_{NumP}$ *n* [Num' Num$[_{nP}$ t]]] — *n* moves to spec,NumP

c. $[_{NumP}$ n+Num $[_{nP}$ …]] — n+Num m-merger
Num has number features, NumP is a predicate $\langle e,t \rangle$

d. $[_{DP}$ D $[_{NumP}$ n+Num $[_{nP}$ …]]] — D is merged with NumP

e. $[_{DP}$ n+Num D $[_{NumP}$ t $[_{nP}$ …]]] — n+Num moves to Spec,DP

f. $[_{DP}$ n+Num+D $[_{NumP}$ t $[_{nP}$ t]]] — n+Num+D m-merger
Merging D (referential) triggers context-scanning – finds a referent; DP is an entity $\langle e \rangle$ and, once there is a referent, the entity is a point of evaluation for use appropriateness $\langle u \rangle$

Chapter 5 of Conrod (2019) discusses the details of the head-raising mechanism in significantly more detail; for my current purposes, any analysis of cyclic head-to-head raising should suffice.

In addition to the difference in head-raising, each type of pronoun is selected by a different (null or not) D head; the referential D head in (11a) is directly indexed to a discourse entity. The variable D head in (11b) represents a variable that must be bound by an operator, and lacks the uGender feature that's present on the referential D head. Predicative pronouns appear with overt, 'garden-variety' determiners like articles (11c).[6] For the purposes of this investigation, I will focus primarily on the differences between variable pronouns and referential pronouns in the structures in (11) above, since these are the structures that underlie generic singular *they* and referential singular *they* (dsT) respectively.

3.1 Variable vs. Referential structures of *they*

Because D_x lacks uGender in this model, it is predicted that variable pronouns will not cause a crash/ungrammaticality when there are no gender features on the pronoun to value uGender, as is the case with *they*. Variable pronouns in the three-way system proposed in Conrod (2019) include pronouns anteceded by indefinites or quantificational DPs, such as (13) below:

(13) Every syntactician$_i$ loves their$_i$ own analysis the most.

[6] The numeral *two* is represented as occupying the Num head in (11c), but numerals are often analyzed as occupying a specifier of Num, for example by Ritter (1992) and Borer (2005). The analysis given in Conrod (2019) places numerals in the Num head (not a specifier) specifically to block head movement from *n* to Num; however for the present analysis – that is, my current focus on the uGender parameter on D – either approach works.

It is important to note that this analysis also predicts that (singular) *they* should be possible and grammatical with quantificational antecedents even when the antecedents appear to have clear gendered denotation. This is also borne out:

(14) By some miracle, a woman$_i$ can feed a baby with their$_i$ body[7]

The example in (14) is not only attested – it is quite common. Zimman and Conrod (f.c.) present attestations of singular *they* used with gendered antecedents as part of ongoing real-time corpus work, which suggests that the variable pronoun itself does not need to fulfill an unvalued gender feature in order for the derivation to converge. Data like these (and many presented by Konnelly and Cowper 2020) also counter proposals (like Bjorkman (2017), Sigurðsson (2018), Kučerová (2018)) that gender features are valued by grammatical features on antecedents, particularly in the case of English which otherwise shows essentially no sign of grammatical gender features on lexical nouns in its contemporary use. I apply this further to English lexical nouns with apparent gendered morphology, such as *'stewardess'* – the same laxity of coreference is observed by Ackerman (2019).

(15) Ackerman 2019:2

a. # At the farmhouse, the cowgirl$_i$ left his$_i$ lasso in the kitchen.

b. At the Halloween party, the cowgirl$_i$ left his$_i$ lasso in the kitchen.

As Ackerman (2019) discusses, the anomaly observed in the use of pronoun for (15a) is ameliorated by context in (15b); the same effect can be observed for words like *'actress', 'bachelorette'*, and other uses of the *-ess* and *-ette* suffixes (among others). I take this as evidence that the remaining so-called gender effects of these nouns are purely social and pragmatic, rather than instantiations of a forced matching effect of grammatical features between antecedents and pronouns.

As further evidence that lexical nouns lack gender features – in my proposal regarding singular *they*, dsT speakers are predicted to accept singular *they* for *any* lexical antecedent, no matter what gendered semantics exist – including proper names. However, even for non-dsT speakers, this insensitivity should also persist for any antecedents that are coindexed with variable (not referential) antecedents, again even for very gendered antecedents. The example above in (14) is one such example, but variable singular *they* can even coexist with (gendered) proper names – provided that the pronoun is still variable, not referential!

Since variable pronouns must co-occur with an operator to bind them, quantifiers and disjunction should license variable *they*, even when the members of the set being quantified over are all of the same gender. In (16), several speakers I consulted have shown a preference for *their* over *her*, even when they generally agree that *woman*

[7]Source: Jim Gaffigan, "Mr. Universe." Observed by Lal Zimman, p.c.

denotes a particular gender of person. In (17), consultants also preferred *their*, even though the antecedent contains two proper feminine names. In fact, when given sufficient context – informants were asked to construct this sentence using names of people they knew, so it could be established that the gender identities of both referents were agreed upon by consensus. Even still, with two universally-agreed-upon names of mutually-known female referents, the disjunction licensed *their* as perfectly acceptable in this construction.[8]

(16) Any woman$_i$ who wants to combat sexism should examine ?her$_i$/their$_i$ own internalized prejudices.

(17) Either Barbara or Alicia always assigns their/?her own papers (though I don't remember which)

In the analysis I am putting forward, *her* is *allowed* but not *required* by the binding antecedents, in contrast to the examples in (18) and those following below. If it were the case that lexical (non-pronominal) antecedents had grammatical gender features that controlled pronominal features, the data in (14)-(17) would be quite impossible to explain. For this reason, I generally discard the notion of grammatical gender features on (any) lexical nouns in contemporary English, again following Konnelly and Cowper (2020). Again, I am proposing that iGender persists (optionally) on pronominal *n* heads, but is not lexically specified by root nouns–however, in languages other than English with robust grammatical gender systems, gender features on *n* in lexical nouns would only be able to combine with the lexically-specified gendered nouns.[9]

However, this does call into question why any speaker of English would retain a uGender feature at all, even if only on a particular referential-pronominal D head. In fact, retention of the uGender feature on referential D, and its interpretable counterpart (iGender on *n*, which I have thus far largely glossed over) predicts that pronouns when coindexed with *other pronouns* should have significantly stricter matching requirements than pronouns anteceded by lexical nouns in English. And this does indeed turn out to be the case!

While lexical antecedents generally don't *clash* with pronominal gender (*"My son$_i$ ... she$_i$"* is very uncommon), they allow a non-match between gendered and ungendered elements (*"Any woman$_i$ ... they$_i$"*). Pronoun to pronoun matching has much stricter

[8] I thank the participants in the YYC Pronouns Workshop and (specific talk redacted for anonymity) for their lively discussion and contribution to these data points. The '?' in (16) and (17) reflect the majority opinion of the discussants present, although these were minor anomalies and not fully ungrammatical; they are not strictly ruled out by my analysis, however.

[9] This brings up some interesting possible routes for language changes ongoing in languages like Spanish, where neomorphemes like *-e* are gaining popularity. This is, alas, beyond the scope of this paper; I refer the reader to Papadopoulos (2019) for further discussion of these neomorphemes.

conditions, particularly on locally-bound pronouns such as reflexives. Even for dsT speakers, singular *they* cannot co-refer with other pronouns when bound locally:

(18) * He$_i$ likes themself$_i$

(19) * They$_i$ like himself$_i$

The locality is important, because locally bound anaphors in this proposal constitute variable pronouns (not referential pronouns). This does suggest that bound and predicative pronouns *may* retain gender features themselves, but based on data like (16) it is apparent those features are not obligatory. This also implies that, in addition to the matching requirement on bound reflexives as in (18), predicative pronouns may also be able to locally bind and force gender matching effects.[10]

(20) a. Every she loves her mother.

b. * Every she loves his mother.

c. ? Every she loves their mother.

Because the forced matching between pronouns with gender features appears to apply primarily to locally bound pronouns or anaphors, it is therefore also predicted that pronoun-to-pronoun matching requirements will be laxer between two or more free (Condition B) pronouns.In fact, switching between pronouns over the course of a conversation is well-attested in sociolinguistic interviews:

(21) RRA*: His partner at the time was also dating this other person that was in our group. Um, and* ***they*** *have a very, um,* ***he's*** *a very strong and kind of controlling personality, and so* ***he*** *had kind of taken over like the whole thing,* [...] *Ha. Yes. it kind of, that was kind of one of those things where it just- and that same person, I would see* ***them*** *more often than I would see [RRB] and* ***they*** *were trying to like convince me of these like negative things* [...]

What this suggests is that, firstly, variable pronouns and referential pronouns are indeed constructed differently in the syntax; and secondly, variable pronouns are dependent on their antecedents for feature valuation in some way – but this only manifests as ungrammaticality when the antecedent is also a pronoun. This, too, is further evidence that pronouns retain iGender in contemporary English but that lexical nouns do not, even when their denotation is directly gendered in some way.

The important takeaway from these data is that the rules for featural gender-matching are sensitive to binding, and that gender features do exist on pronouns (but are not *obligatory* on pronouns for all speakers).

[10] I thank the reviewer who suggested these data; their judgments are reported in (20), and are in alignment with my own.

3.2 Aside on predicative pronouns and *they*

I have thus far not discussed predicative pronouns in this typology, in large part because under the model from Conrod (2019) predicative pronouns don't act like pronouns at all – they behave more like nouns. Their denotation, however, is closely linked with the social meaning of pronouns, which is itself interrelated with the presence or absence of dsT in a grammar. Conrod identifies predicative pronouns in English as including depronominalizations (22) and pronominal relative clauses (which I leave aside for the purposes of this paper).

(22) I've never met a they before.

The denotation given in Conrod (2019) for depronominalizations (in which a pronoun is modified by an external determiner) can be paraphrased as "the kind of person who is called *they*." In order for this type of depronominalization to appear with *they* (rather than the much-more-common '*a she*' or '*a he*') the speaker must have a legible category of kinds of people who get called *they*.[11] Thus, the microparameter that I have proposed in this paper does not predict that dsT speakers and non-dsT speakers will have differing judgments about the grammaticality of (22), but rather that non-dsT speakers will lack a legible referent for the denotation given. Anecdotally, this seems to be essentially correct: when presented with (22), non-dsT speakers will volunteer comments instead about non-predicative uses of *they* (as with Pullum 2003 among other language commentators).

I will largely leave aside predicative pronouns for the remainder of this paper, except to comment that my proposal of the microparameter predicts infelicity, not ungrammaticality, of '*a they*' for non-dsT speakers – and that this is an advantage of the proposal generally.

3.3 Ambiguity enables extension

As I alluded briefly in Section 2, part of the proposal's strength for explaining variation in English is that many instances of the pronoun *they* are ambiguous, and thus provide a possible route for acquisition of the grammatical change that has been underway. Furthermore, desiderata of explanation for singular *they* generally includes why an apparent grammatical difference doesn't cause constant interspeaker conflict.

While singular *they* is a hot topic among non-linguists, lay metalinguistic commentary around dsT doesn't suggest that this is causing people significant grammatical conflicts except in very particular circumstances (such as

[11] Byron Ahn (p.c.) suggests that these uses may otherwise be analyzed as embedded sub-clausal quotations; for the purposes of this paper, I consider these to be syntactically roughly equivalent, but future work on the semantics of depronominalizations may benefit from comparing these approaches.

non-discrimination protections of nonbinary students[12]). What this implies is that there must be sufficient overlap in possible structures of utterances of singular *they* in ambiguous contexts to enable subtle extension and eventual microparameter resetting.

One important factor that occasionally masks grammatical conflict is that conservative non-dsT speakers will accept singular *they* in most contexts. Sociolinguistic data from Conrod (2019) show that singular *they* is not judged significantly worse when anteceded by a quantificational or indefinite DP, and in fact *they* was judged higher than other singular pronouns (*he, she*) in these contexts.

(23) Any person who wants to succeed ought to try **their** best.

Crucially, non-dsT speakers also accept *definite, epicene* singular *they* when it is *not referential*. It is for this reason that I have proposed the microparameter is based on *referential* D, not based on definiteness. Epicene definite NPs can contextually be quantifier-like, even though definite determiners aren't generally considered to be quantificational. The example in (24) is an instance of a definte antecedent ('*my math teacher*') which, due to world knowledge, may potentially refer to a set of possible entities rather than a specific entity; in this instance, such a reading is supported by a context where the speaker has different math teachers at different times (like when they advance from algebra to calculus). In this context, there is a readily-available construal that allows an epicene reading of *they* that doesn't refer to a specific individual.

A second reading of (24) is also supported, however, and this ambiguity requires only a context change, not a change in the utterance. If it is the case that discourse context allows a hearer to divine a particular math teacher bounded within, for example, the present semester, then a definite and specific referent whose gender is unknown may be the referent.

(24) **Utterance**: My math teacher always gives me a lower grade for doodling, they are so unfair!
No-dsT meaning: *No matter what math teacher I get, each math teacher grades me down for doodling – they (epicene) are unfair!*
Possible-dsT meaning: *This quarter my math teacher (whom you've never met, and don't know the gender of) graded me down every time I doodled – they (specific) are unfair!*

The distinction in (24) is ambiguous between a non-dsT meaning (definite epicene) and possibly-dsT meaning which is referential but pragmatically conditioned. This

[12]See, for instance, the case of a student and their parents suing their school district for prejudice around their non-binary identity; a school counselor cited the ungrammaticality of singular *they* as the reason why they could not gender the student correctly (source). The matter of misgendering students has been litigated elsewhere, including a U.S. federal court case in which the court ruled that misgendering students was not protected speech (Meriwether v. Shawnee State Univ. 2020; news story)

ambiguity can be captured in the syntactic/semantic structure with underlyingly different determiners – a true definite article in the non-dsT reading (as in Elbourne 2013), compared to a referential index with somewhat underspecified context in the dsT reading.

This distinction does contradict the proposal by Elbourne 2013 that all pronouns are themselves built upon definite determiners. However, based on the varying judgments by dsT and non-dsT speakers regarding definite *vs* truly-referential antecedents, this distinction is well-supported for the purposes of this proposal. Thus, the inventory of D heads which can contribute to the composition of pronouns must include, at least, a D_{def} that is distinct from a directly referential D_5 (where the numeral is an index to a discourse entity).

Furthermore, these overlapping and potentially ambiguous readings of (24) provide a potential explanation for why we do not see *more* conflict around singular *they* between speakers whose grammar does or does not include dsT. The overlapping ambiguous uses may also have given rise to the reanalysis that enabled resetting the microparameter to begin with, which would be necessary for both the synchronic variation and evidence for ongoing change observed by others (Bjorkman 2017, Konnelly and Cowper 2020, Ackerman 2019, Conrod 2018, i.a.).

In this section I have focused primarily on direct consequences of the proposed microparameter (presence or absence of uGender on D) that influences the (un)grammaticality of singular *they* within the framework of a pronominal typology that differentiates referential, variable, and predicative pronouns. In the next section I will compare my proposal with recent proposals regarding innovative variants of singular *they*, and discuss potential advantages of the present proposal.

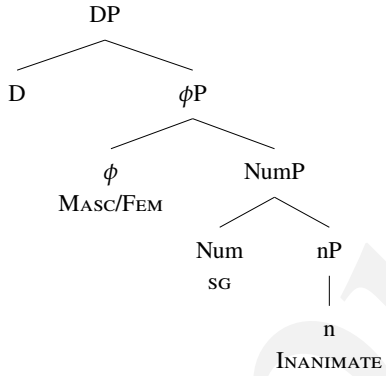
4. Comparison with alternative accounts

This section reviews two similar previous accounts of innovative singular *they*: Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly and Cowper (2020) use DM feature-based insertion rules and matching conditions between pronouns and lexical items.

Bjorkman (2017) proposes that the innovative form of singular *they* which allows it to co-occur with definite singular antecedents relies upon a reconfiguration of the morphosyntactic makeup of pronouns to allow gender features to either be present or absent. In this way, Bjorkman's proposal is similar to the one I make here: the conflict with speakers who reject (definite, specific) singular *they* is gender, not number. Bjorkman uses a Distributed Morphology framework for her proposal, and suggests that for innovative speakers, Gender has become an optional adjunct feature rather than an obligatory feature required for spell-out, citing Wiltschko (2008) for precedent of the existence of optional adjunct features.

Bjorkman assumes the structure for English pronouns roughly based off of the typology by Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002), though with the addition of a ΦP projection that hosts the gender features relatively high in the nominal spine, following Steriopolo and Wiltschko (2010). This structure is shown in (25), where each feature is hosted on a head along the nominal spine. In Bjorkman's account, features are privative and do not differentiate between interpretable and uninterpretable – they are simply present or absent.

(25) Bjorkman (2017):8



The insertion rules Bjorkman proposes for third person pronouns are given in (26).

(26) 3^{rd} person pronouns (Bjorkman 2017:7)
[feminine] [singular] ↔ *she*
[masculine] [singular] ↔ *he*
[inanimate] [singular] ↔ *it*
elsewhere ↔ *they*

As in Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002), different sizes of the structure shown in (25) spell out for different pronouns; quantifier-bound pronouns spell out as pro-ϕP or pro-NumP, and full (referential) pronouns are spelled out as DPs. Bjorkman (2017) proposes that the difference between innovative (singular *they*) speakers and conservative speakers is a difference in the featural makeup of the pronoun, wherein the obligatory [MASC]/[FEM] features instead are instantiated in the grammar as optional <*Fem*> and <*Masc*> 'adjunct features' (a la Wiltschko 2008). In the conservative system, absence of gender features is impossible; in the innovative system, absence of gender features results in a gender-neutral (but animate!) form. The conservative system therefore enforces a gender binary, where ¬[MASC] implies [FEM] (and vice versa).

Bjorkman's proposal has a few crucial differences from the proposal I have presented in this paper. First, the use of privative features is based upon the common insight that singular *they* is ungendered and lacks gender features in English; in my proposal, however, I locate interpretable gender low in the nominal spine (on *n*)

and uninterpretable gender much higher (on D); thus, in order for a derivation to converge, the uninterpretable feature must be valued locally (via head movement) when it is present. Second, Bjorkman does not differentiate between definite epicenes and definite referential pronouns – both are full DPs in her system, and should therefore be subject to the same constraints; additionally, Bjorkman reports some judgments based on 'mismatches' between lexically-gendered antecedents and singular *they* which do not reflect the empirical findings of later work (Konnelly and Cowper 2020, Conrod 2019[13]). Ultimately, the insights from Bjorkman (2017) are retained in my current proposal, but the syntactic structure and microparameters I give in Section 2 more robustly predict some of the finer-grained distinctions between different uses of singular *they* than Bjorkman's original squib.

Konnelly and Cowper (2020) provide an important follow-up to Bjorkman's 2017 squib; in their paper, Konnelly and Cowper not only adjust for some of the irregularities in Bjorkman's reported grammaticality judgments, but also propose three distinct stages of development in the grammar of singular *they*. These stages are paraphrased in (27).

(27) Konnelly and Cowper (2020):4

a. **Stage 1**: speakers use and accept singular *they* with quantified, generic, or indefinite antecedents.

b. **Stage 2**: speakers use and accept singular *they* with definite or specific antecedents *so long as the antecedents lack lexical gender denotations*

c. **Stage 3**: speakers use and accept singular *they* with any antecedent, regardless of lexical gendered meanings

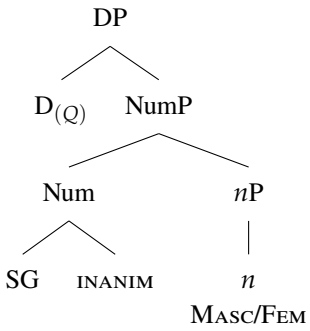
Konnelly and Cowper note that not all speakers participating in the grammatical change progress through all three stages; while Stage 1 describes the 'conservative' starting point, they argue that speakers can and do pass directly from Stage 1 to Stage 3 without the Stage 2 intermediate step. Their description of Stage 2 is largely based off the judgments reported by Bjorkman (2017), which do seem to reflect a general state for some speakers and not an idiosyncrasy of Bjorkman herself.

Like Bjorkman, Konnelly and Cowper's proposal also works within a DM framework based on the assumption that morphonological form will be determined by (mostly post-syntactic/post-spell out) lexical insertion rules based on grammatical features; also like Bjorkman, Konnelly and Cowper take singular *they* to be lacking gender features (and take gender features to be optional adjunct features). However, the syntactic structure they propose differs from Bjorkman's in the location of these

[13]Bjorkman (p.c.) has reported that the judgments reported in her 2017 paper no longer reflect her current grammaticality judgments; in the terms set out by Konnelly and Cowper (2020) she may have been in an intermediate stage of lifespan change at the time of writing.

features on syntactic nodes in the nominal spine, shown in (28) – this structure is intended to represent the grammar of their Stage 1 speakers.

(28) Konnelly and Cowper (2020):8



In Stage 1, features of the Num head are copied to D_Q for quantifier-bound pronouns; like in Bjorkman's (and my) proposal, MASC/FEM are *not* binary, obligatory features in innovative varieties (Stages 2 and 3).

The similarity between all three analyses here is that all three propose some kind of route wherein singular *they* loses its gender features in innovative varieties. For Bjorkman (2017), MASC/FEM are contrastive and obligatory in the conservative variety, but non-contrastive in the innovative variety. However, Bjorkman retains an insertion rule wherein pronouns must spell out a superset of the features of its antecedent - thus, if the antecedent is explicitly gendered, then pronominal gender features become effectively obligatory.

For Konnelly and Cowper (2020), in Stages 1 and 2 the MASC/FEM gender features are contrastive, and must be present on a pronoun that is anteceded by a gendered antecedent. The difference between Stages 1 and 2 is that, for Stage 2 features, fewer antecedents carry gender features, and thus force agreement less frequently. Because Konnelly and Cowper attempt to explain ungrammaticality purely through features of antecedents, their analysis cannot explain why conservative speakers will still reject dsT when used without a linguistic antecedent. In Stage 3, they propose that the M/F features lose their contrastive status throughout the system, both for pronouns and lexical nouns.[14]

The difference between Stage 2 and 3 for Konnelly and Cowper, then, is that gender features for Stage 3 speakers are not only optional on pronouns, but also optional

[14]I owe a debt of gratitude to Elizabeth Cowper (p.c.) for feedback refining this section. There is also an (essentially) notational difference between these analyses: for Konnelly and Cowper, these are posited as non-contrastive features, following Hall (2007), Dresher (2009) (a.o.) rather than Bjorkman's model of these features as 'optional adjunct features' after Wiltschko (2008). The two approaches make slightly different predictions regarding the possibility of *multiple* gender features on a single item; I discuss this further below.

on all lexical items – for innovative speakers gender represents "*completely optional modifier features*" altogether (Konnelly and Cowper 2020:15).

Translating the three stages to the microparameter I propose here, Stage 1 speakers are non-dsT users, meaning they retain uGender on referential D, while Stage 2 and 3 speakers are dsT speakers, meaning they have lost the obligatory uGender on referential D.

The differences between my account in this proposal and the account in Bjorkman (2017) also largely apply to Konnelly and Cowper (2020); while the latter makes a stronger distinction between quantificational determiners and non-quantificational determiners, they still do not differentiate between definite and specific uses, and still explain grammatical crashes using gender features on lexical nouns for more conservative speakers. In the next section I will investigate this particular difference in more detail, and show evidence that lexical features are not necessary to explain the variation found. However, as with Bjorkman, many of the valuable insights made by Konnelly and Cowper (2020) are compatible with the present proposal.

4.1 Lexicalist approach

An important commonality in how Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly and Cowper (2020) explain conservative speakers is that both accounts rely on the presence of gender features on lexical nouns in contemporary English, including (or especially) on proper names. In both accounts, singular *they* can only appear (for some speakers) with a proper name if that proper name lacks gender features. This does correctly predict the judgments reported in (29) - (30), which are representative of the Stage 1 or 2 speakers for Konnelly and Cowper, and the innovative variety for Bjorkman.

(29) a. Mary$_i$ likes herself$_i$
b. * Mary$_i$ likes themself$_i$

(30) a. Taylor$_i$ likes herself$_i$
b. Taylor$_i$ likes themself$_i$

In this approach, which I refer to as the Lexicalist Approach, the contrast between (29b) and (30b) is due to lack of gender features on certain lexical nouns and names; *Taylor* is a gender neutral name, so doesn't have any gender features and doesn't conflict with *they*. (Notably, Konnelly and Cowper's Stage 3 speakers lack (obligatory) gender features altogether, which is one of the major differences between their and Bjorkman's approach.)

There are a few issues with the Lexicalist Approach, which I will first outline, and then show how my microparametric proposal relieves singular *they* from the entanglement of lexical gender features altogether. First, it is not clear how proper names get assigned gender features in the first place – this is a bit of an issue because, as Ackerman (2019) has pointed out, not only do proper names often show considerable

synchronic variability in gender assignment, but the gender frequency of some proper names change over time. If it is the case that proper names carry formal features denoting gender (even if they are optional features!) the synchronic and diachronic variation in proper names presents significant difficulties for explaining the role of those features in grammaticality judgments like those shown in (29 - (30).

A second issue is that the nature of lexical storage for gender neutral or gender ambiguous names is problematic if it is assumed that lexical entries (for proper names or indeed any common nouns) include formal MASC/FEM features – again, even if these features are optional! There are two possible explanations for how a name like '*Taylor*' would have to be stored in the mental lexicon if lexical nouns and names did indeed carry gender features. The first option is that '*Taylor*' (and other ambiguous names) would need to be underspecified in the lexicon, even for the most conservative speakers – because even Stage 1 or non-dsT speakers will generally accept such names with either *he* or *she* – meaning there must then be some additional mechanism that allows conservative speakers to apply gender features to lexical items. The second option is that gender ambiguous names like '*Taylor*' would need to constitute multiple homophonous lexical entries (up to three!), and speakers would need to determine whether a male, female, or other type of Taylor is under discussion when determining whether the pronoun is matched appropriately or not. Both of these possibilities are not only computationally somewhat cumbersome, but fail to robustly explain why conservative speakers would in fact object to the use of *they* with gender-neutral names.

A third issue with the Lexicalist Approach is that featural mismatch does not robustly explain why even non-dsT speakers will occasionally produce (and accept without comment) singular *they* with explicitly gendered generic or quantificational antecedents like (14), repeated below.

(14) By some miracle, a woman$_i$ can feed a baby with their$_i$ body

If it is the case that any lexical nouns carry gender features whatsoever, it is not clear why those gender features should influence pronominal matching for proper names but not quantified antecedents – and, again, it is worth noting that neither Bjorkman (2017) nor Konnelly and Cowper (2020) make a syntactic differentiation between definite antecedents and specific definite antecedents. Data from Lal Zimman (p.c) also suggest that examples like (14) are not at all rare, nor are they restricted to speakers who would accept dsT otherwise. I include here one more such attested example to show that this restriction does not explain a great many actual utterances from otherwise conservative speakers.

(31) I'm **the kind of man** that likes to know who's buying **their** drinks. [15]

[15] Source: "The Shining," 1980, observed by Lal Zimman, p.c.

Any formation of the Lexicalist Approach, and indeed any proposal that gender features persist on lexical nouns in contemporary English, cannot account for utterances like (14) or (31) without apparently stipulating that sometimes, such features are optional or can be ignored. The lexical items in question, '*woman*' and '*man*,' would not be reasonably described as gender ambiguous either generally or in the contexts in which they were spoken.

Under Konnelly and Cowper's account, utterances like (31) and (14) are only possible under the assumption that the speakers are in Stage 3, because the antecedents contain explicit gendered material; indeed, their Stage 2 was modeled after the judgments given by Bjorkman (2017). My own account leaves open several possibilities to explain Stage 2 type judgments. First, it is possible that Stage 2 speakers do retain a uGender feature on D, and are potentially valuing that feature with a value like GENDER:*neutral* – which can only fulfill that feature for sufficiently gender-neutral referents. The second possibility is that the ungrammaticality reported by Stage 2 speakers is in fact an error in the use-conditions: that is, that Bjorkman's judgments (in 2017) were actually a matter of inappropriateness, rather than morphosyntactic ill-formedness. The third possibility is similar: it is possible that Stage 2 speakers find *they* inappropriate or semantically infelicitous when a more specific pronoun (like *she* or *he*) would be allowable. This third possibility is essentially an instantiation of *Maximize Presupposition!*, as formulated by Heim (1990). For extended discussion of variability (within and between speakers) of how semantic or pragmatic constraints such as this are ranked, see Ch. 4 of Conrod (2019).

In the next section, I will discuss briefly the alternative explanation that Konnelly and Cowper put forward to explain dsT/Stage 3 speakers, and discuss some of the (mainly theory-internal) disadvantages of that approach within the context of the Lexicalist Approach for their Stage 1 and 2 speakers.

4.2 Radical feature-free Lexicalist approach

For Konnelly and Cowper (2020), the difference between Stage 1 and 2 speakers versus Stage 3 speakers is that the most innovative speaker group always allows *they* as an option, regardless of antecedent; in their system, this is an effect of the non-contrastive status of gender features on both lexical nouns and pronouns.

> "The change in the English pronominal system at Stage 3 ... is subtle. In fact, the pronominal system 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" (Konnelly and Cowper 2020:16)

While this approach, which I refer to as the radical feature-free Lexicalist approach, solves the problems of the Lexicalist approach which I discussed above, there are some issues in how Stage 3 might be operationalized in the same general language

system as Stage 1 and 2. These issues are primarily theory-internal, as the feature-free Lexicalist approach does make otherwise very generous empirical predictions that do not conflict with the data I have presented here so far.

The first issue with the feature-free Lexicalist approach is that Konnelly and Cowper do not give a model for how adult learners might travel between stages; if speakers do often start out in Stage 1 and move eventually to Stage 3 (with or without an intermediate period in Stage 2), this would require speakers moving from 1 to 3 to reanalyze gender features on both pronouns and lexical nouns as non-contrastive. Speakers who do move through Stage 2 (either from 1 to 2, or from 2 to 3) would also need to significantly reorganize their lexicon, so that lexical items that once carried (contrastive) gender features lost those features. This change in the course of an overall grammatical change in the syntax of a language is plausible, but predicts a greater amount of intervening idiosyncrasy. At present there is very little empirical data on the particulars of individual speaker change over the lifespan with respect to singular *they*; future work should probe individual lifespan change in order to test whether that change could be robustly explained by eventual radical loss of gender features that were previously present in a speaker's grammar. Nevertheless; it is to the advantage of my own proposal that I have not relied on the presence of gender features on lexical nouns in the first place, and therefore do not need to explain how or why they might be erased by an individual (adult) speaker.

One additional consequence of featural explanations, which is shared by the present proposal as well as Konnelly and Cowper (2020) and Bjorkman (2017), is that non-contrastive gender features in innovative varieties are not necessarily privative. Thus, all three analyses allow for the possibility not only of items that carry *neither* Masc nor Fem, but potentially *both* Masc and Fem appearing on a single item. In a Lexicalist Approach, where these features could potentially coincide on lexical nouns, this may arguably be the case for certain lexical items (which I will not print due to their transphobic connotations). In all three approaches, a doubly-gendered pronoun might consitute 'mixed' forms (if one wishes to analyze "*he/she*" or "*s/he*" as a single pronoun).

Alternatively, it is possible that doubly-gendered pronouns are obligatorily spelled out as *they* in English–and that this is a matter of syncretism in plural *they*. Languages with more robust gender morphosyntax, such as Spanish, do show apparent gender marking on plurals, and languages tend to have idiosyncratic patterns of marking the gender of a mixed group of plural referents.

In the system I have proposed here, Masc and Fem are *values* of an interpretable iGender feature rather than privative. Thus, it is not *necessarily* predicted that there should exist items with both Masc and Fem present. Indeed, the valuation-of-iGender system that I use implies that iGender could ultimately attain possible values other than Masc and Fem; for example, iGender:NonBinary is a logical possibility in such

a situation where NonBinary becomes a legible and widely-recognized 'answer' to the gender 'question.' This may also extend to neopronouns like those discussed by Miltersen (2016): pronouns like *fae/faer/faeself* could potentially develop an iGender valuation of a Fae feature. Neopronouns in English are underexamined, however, and I hope that future research in both approaches incorporate more data relating to these.

Finally, the radical feature-free Lexicalist approach presents an issue for parsimony in a Minimalist framework (which I recognize neither Konnelly and Cowper nor Bjorkman were particularly striving for): namely, in my proposal, the microparameter proposed is consistent with the Borer Conjecture (Borer 2014). This does not necessarily make different empirical predictions from Konnelly and Cowper's, but provides a slightly easier explanation for lifetime change, since resetting a featural parameter on a single functional head (referential D) is less burdensome than rewriting one's entire lexicon.

In the next section, I will detail further how the approach I take in this paper does not rely on features of lexical nouns, and can additionally much more robustly explain sociopragmatic variation in gendered pronouns in addition to the presence or absence of dsT in any given speaker's grammar.

4.3 Reference approach

In Section 2 I showed that my proposal is specific to referential pronouns, and depends on the presence or absence of a uGender feature on D. Crucially, what causes ungrammaticality for non-dsT speakers is not an insufficient match in features between a pronoun and its antecedent, but rather that there simply must be *some* kind of gender feature on referential pronouns, regardless of whether it is 'correct' or not. What this predicts is that non-dsT speakers will err on the side of misgendering referents rather than using dsT; this does in fact happen with great regularity (e.g. (Pullum 2017)).

My proposal also reflects the metalinguistic commentary made by Pullum (2017): the difference between dsT grammars and non-dsT grammars is that gender features are either optional or they are obligatory. For referential pronouns, the pronominal gender features enter the derivation independent of an antecedent; indeed, neither Konnelly and Cowper nor Bjorkman much discussed the possibility of a pragmatic (not linguistic) antecedent. The features are then evaluated with regard to the referent, based not on "match" but rather on appropriateness.

In other words, dsT speakers will occasionally avoid or reject singular *they* based not on grammatical constraints but on social relational knowledge about what pronoun is appropriate to the context. Likewise, non-dsT speakers will be making their own best attempts to use a pronoun that is appropriate to pragmatic context – but non-dsT speakers, as Pullum self-reports, are at a disadvantage, since their grammar constrains them to a forced binary choice. As such, non-dsT speakers will also occasionally hyper-correct by switching pronouns mid-conversation for the same referent, especially

when faced with potential uncertainty or difficulty in expressing an appropriate gender for the context (see Conrod (2019):169 for examples of this from sociolinguistic interviews).

One important aspect of this proposal is that, in discourse contexts where gender is not already clear, a pronoun can do the work of *introducing* gendered meaning into that discourse context. In the case of Pullum (2017), Pullum introduces *'he'* into a discourse context where no precedent otherwise existed – except, as Pullum notes, the gendered bias introduced by a first name. This proposal also robustly accounts for instances of pronoun-switching, by dsT and non-dsT speakers alike, throughout a conversation; since gender-mismatches are not here considered grammatical anomalies but rather sociopragmatic ones, there is no grammatical constraint that forces matching for even the most conservative speakers under my proposal.

This proposal captures the same insights made by Konnelly and Cowper and Bjorkman using a different mechanism: an unvalued uninterpretable feature (gender) causing a crash is, in some ways, a different way of saying that certain (contrastive/privative) features are obligatory. Rather than have grammar-external metafeatural information of obligatoriness, this is represented directly in the syntax (specifically on the specification of D)

Besides those already detailed above, this approach has several advantages. First, the matter of proper names is much more flexible under the Reference approach – there is no need to worry about names changing in gender frequency over time, and learning new proper names depends on social world knowledge about the referent rather than formal features. Speakers needn't have multiple lexical entries for gender ambiguous names – instead, appropriateness of any given pronoun depends on the sociopragmatic context (e.g., are we talking about Taylor Swift or Taylor Lautner?). No formal features for lexical nouns or proper names need to be learned or unlearned by speakers as they undergo change throughout their lifetime – what pronoun to use depends entirely on who we're talking about, not the particular words or morphemes we're using to talk about them.

A second advantage is that the single microparameter I've proposed here explains very robustly why conservative (non-dsT) speakers will reject or avoid singular *they* ONLY with proper names, but not with other definite antecedents. Since the difference between D heads is, in my account, a difference between referential D and all other Ds, definite antecedents needn't cause a crash unless they pick out a sufficiently specific referent. This microparameter also very cleanly explains how individual speakers can move between stages in the grammatical change without significantly reorganizing their lexicon or rewiring their featural inventory – only a single D head needs to be reanalyzed for a single feature.

Finally, I believe a significant advantage of the proposal I have made here is that it maintains the validity of the important insights made in previous work on singular *they*.

While I have framed it in the terms most familiar to those working in Minimalist spaces, this microparameter may also be transliterated into other frameworks so long as the core proposal I have made can be maintained: what differentiates dsT speakers from non-dsT speakers is whether gender features are obligatory on referential pronouns – that is all.

5. Conclusion

With this article I have proposed a new account for existing synchronic variation among English speakers whose grammaticality judgments vary with regard to singular *they* when anteceded by a proper name or specific referent. This account proposes that the deciding factor is not the presence or absence of gender features (either on pronouns or on lexical nouns that may antecede them) but rather on the presence or absence of an uninterpretable Gender feature on referential D heads. The proposal is made within the context of a three-way pronominal paradigm that differentiates referential pronouns from variable or definite ones (and from predicative pronouns).

The core of this proposal is that reanalysis of ambiguous singular *they* has allowed speakers to acquire the pronominal system of English without uGender on D, and that the absence of uGender on referential D is what has allowed singular *they* to expand to more specific uses than were previously observed. This formulation of the proposal shares the insights from Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly and Cowper (2020) – namely, that grammatical anomaly around definite singular *they* results from a crash due to lack of gender features – but has some advantages over these previous accounts. One such advantage is that the (micro)parameterization may more robustly explain the sociolinguistic variation observed by these and other authors (Conrod et al. 2016, Ackerman 2017 i.a.). An additional advantage of the particular division of the pronominal typology is that the head-raising account given here correctly explains the different restrictions on different types of pronouns, without over-restricting or erasing existing sociopragmatic variation.

Finally, this analysis provides support for some more general proposals about pronouns and syntax given elsewhere. The three-way distinction used here maps very closely onto the pronominal typology proposed by Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002), and is largely compatible with their observations cross-linguistically. The analysis also supports the framework of use conditional semantics as in Gutzmann and McCready (2014), wherein syntactic structures can be evaluated for sociopragmatic anomaly in a way that does not over-attribute all anomaly to the narrow syntax, but still appropriately reflects the compositional nature of use-semantic meaning.

Future work focusing on dsT and pronouns more generally can build off of two major aspects of the present proposal. First, the predictions made by the microparametric proposal suggest that lifespan change of individual speakers from non-dsT to dsT

users may occur relatively quickly, since only a single parameter needs to be reset – if the microparametric approach is correct, speakers should not show slow development of lexical remapping, but rather should be able to wholly master dsT within a year or two. Second, the predictions made by the Reference approach suggest that speakers who do acquire dsT will *not* be significantly different in terms of how and when they deem pronouns to be appropriate or inappropriate in a given context, *except* that dsT speakers will have an unmarked option at their disposal and non-dsT speakers grammatically do not. Thus, non-dsT speakers may employ alternate strategies such as pronoun-avoidance in contexts where a dsT speaker might use *they*; and dsT speakers are unlikely to start using *they* for any and all referents unless it is deemed socially appropriate. Sociosyntactic work may verify either of these predictions.

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