Linguistic or gender prescriptivism?
Judgments of English gender-neutral pronouns.

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October 20, 2017
**A quiz!**

- When a student arrives at the conference, please make sure to give a copy of the program to ________.
A quiz!

- When a student arrives at the conference, please make sure to give a copy of the program to ________.

(a) him
(b) her
(c) them
• When the keynote speaker arrives, please make sure to set up the podium for ________.
A quiz!

- When the keynote speaker arrives, please make sure to set up the podium for ________.

(a) him
(b) her
(c) them
Gendered vs. Gender-neutral Pronouns

- English isn’t blessed with a gender neutral third-person singular pronoun, as are some languages.

Why would we want one?

- Clarity of meaning
- Avoidance of sexism
- Inclusivity
- Personal preference
Possible solutions
(not mutually exclusive)

default

generic *he*

- pick one gender (usually male)
- implies male is default, female is other?
- still perceived as gendered
  (Moulton et al., 1978; Stout and Dasgupta, 2011)

circumlocution

*he or she, one*

repurpose

singular *they*

new coinage
Possible solutions
(not mutually exclusive)

default
generic *he*

circumlocution
*he or she, one*
   - add/change words to avoid or cover more possibilities
   - awkward?
   - *he or she* assumes a binary

repurpose
singular *they*

new coinage
Possible solutions
(not mutually exclusive)

default
generic *he*

circumlocution
*he or she, one*

repurpose
singular *they*
  - expand the use of an existing word
  - a long history in English (Balhorn, 2004)
  - very common (68%) in practice (LaScotte, 2016)
  - possible because reference properties of definite plural pronouns are more vague? (Borthen, 2010)
  - “ungrammatical”? 

new coinage
Possible solutions (not mutually exclusive)

default
generic *he*

circumlocution
*he or she, one*

repurpose

singular *they*

new coinage

- invent a new word
- they’re called “closed” categories for a reason...
Graveyard of pronouns
Some are used, but none widely

Barron (2010)
ip, co, xie, per, en, ne, nis, nir, hiser, thon, hi, le, ons, e, ith, hesher, himer, heer, hie, ha, hesh, thir, himorher, se, heesh, hse, kin, ve, ta, tey, fm, z, ze, shem, se, j/e, jee, ey, ho, po, ae, et, heshe, hann, herm, ala, de, ghach, han, he, mef, ws, lim, ler, lers...
Strunk and White (1972)

- use generic *he*

Strunk and White (2000)

- **don’t** use generic *he*

American Psychological Association (2010)

p 79 “a pronoun must agree in number (*i.e.*, singular or plural) with the noun it replaces.”

p 74 “using plural nouns or plural pronouns” is a good way to reduce gender bias.

Associated Press (2017)

- singular *they* is OK
- *ze* not so much…
What is resistance to these based on?

- Grammatical conservatism?
- Gender conservatism?

Are generic and specific uses different?
Questions

1. What is resistance to these based on?
   - Grammatical conservatism?
   - Gender conservatism?

2. Are generic and specific uses different?
What is resistance to these based on?
- Grammatical conservatism?
- Gender conservatism?

Are generic and specific uses different?

Boland and Queen (2016) not really what they found...
Questions

1. What is resistance to these based on?
   - Grammatical conservatism?
   - Gender conservatism?

2. Are generic and specific uses different?

   For those interested in language reform, knowing the source(s) of these attitudes can help address them.
Goals

1. Determine which variations of number/gender mismatch in pronouns are more or less acceptable to English speakers.
   - Singular *they* vs. other strategies.
   - *They* as a generic vs. specific pronoun.

2. Determine how individual traits affect these grammatical judgments.
   - Personality
   - Gender ideology
Primary Sentence Types

1. Controls (Grammatical)
2. Fillers (Ungrammatical) [case errors]
3. Generic *He*
4. Generic *She*
5. Generic *He or She*
6. Specific *He or She*
7. Singular *They* (Generic)
8. Singular *They* (Specific)
9. *Ze* (Specific & Generic)
10. *It* (Specific & Generic)
11. Gender Mismatch [name vs. pronoun]

---

Yes, pronouns *could* be interpreted outside the sentence.
Primary Sentence Types¹

1. Controls (Grammatical)
   - John likes soccer so much that he plays every Saturday.

2. Fillers (Ungrammatical) [case errors]
   - When Sam arrived at work, him rode the elevator.

3. Generic  He
4. Generic  She
5. Generic  He or She
6. Specific  He or She
7. Singular  They (Generic)
8. Singular  They (Specific)
9. Ze (Specific & Generic)
10. It (Specific & Generic)
11. Gender Mismatch [name vs. pronoun]

¹Yes, pronouns *could* be interpreted outside the sentence.
Primary Sentence Types

1. Controls (Grammatical)
2. Fillers (Ungrammatical) [case errors]
3. Generic *He*
   - If a student has a problem, he should visit his advisor.
4. Generic *She*
   - If a child’s tooth hurts, she should go to the dentist.
5. Generic *He or She*
6. Specific *He or She*
7. Singular *They* (Generic)
8. Singular *They* (Specific)
9. Ze (Specific & Generic)
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Primary Sentence Types

1. Controls (Grammatical)
2. Fillers (Ungrammatical) [case errors]
3. Generic *He*
4. Generic *She*
5. Generic *He or She*
   - If a person is intoxicated, he or she shouldn’t drive.
6. Specific *He or She*
   - After the sculptor finished the statue, he or she took a picture of it.
7. Singular *They* (Generic)
8. Singular *They* (Specific)
9. *Ze* (Specific & Generic)
10. *It* (Specific & Generic)
11. Gender Mismatch [name vs. pronoun]

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1 Yes, pronouns *could* be interpreted outside the sentence.
Primary Sentence Types

1. Controls (Grammatical)
2. Fillers (Ungrammatical) [case errors]
3. Generic He
4. Generic She
5. Generic He or She
6. Specific He or She
7. Singular They (Generic)
   - If a carpenter wants a nail, you should give it to them.
8. Singular They (Specific)
   - When the student had a problem, they called me.
9. Ze (Specific & Generic)
10. It (Specific & Generic)
11. Gender Mismatch [name vs. pronoun]

\(^1\) Yes, pronouns could be interpreted outside the sentence.
Primary Sentence Types

1. Controls (Grammatical)
2. Fillers (Ungrammatical) [case errors]
3. Generic *He*
4. Generic *She*
5. Generic *He or She*
6. Specific *He or She*
7. Singular *They* (Generic)
8. Singular *They* (Specific)
9. *Ze* (Specific & Generic)
   - That student told me *ze* doesn’t need a ride.
10. *It* (Specific & Generic)
    - If your friend is a librarian, *it* probably likes to read.
11. Gender Mismatch [name vs. pronoun]

---

Yes, pronouns *could* be interpreted outside the sentence.
Sentences

Primary Sentence Types

1. Controls (Grammatical)
2. Fillers (Ungrammatical) [case errors]
3. Generic *He*
4. Generic *She*
5. Generic *He or She*
6. Specific *He or She*
7. Singular *They* (Generic)
8. Singular *They* (Specific)
9. *Ze* (Specific & Generic)
10. *It* (Specific & Generic)
11. Gender Mismatch [name vs. pronoun]
   - Charles wanted a piece of fruit, so she was happy to find an apple in the fridge.

---

Yes, pronouns *could* be interpreted outside the sentence.
66 total sentences

- Agreement/disagreement (5-point scale).

1 How *grammatical* is this sentence? (is it “correct English”?)

2 How *offensive* is this sentence? (is it a problematic way to talk?)

---

1 Yes, pronouns *could* be interpreted outside the sentence.
Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI)
John and Srivastava (1999)

1. Conscientiousness
2. Agreeableness
3. Neuroticism
4. Openness
5. Extraversion

- Agreement/disagreement (5-point) with 44 self-descriptive items.
- Agreeability $\rightarrow$ higher & Extraversion $\rightarrow$ lower tolerance of grammatical and spelling errors (Boland and Queen, 2016).
- Personality may contribute to prejudice/sexism (Ekehammar and Akrami, 2007).
Gender Role Attitude Scale
García-Cueto et al. (2015)

- Agreement/disagreement (5-point) with 25 items:
  - men/women “It is worse to see a man cry than a woman”
  - families “The husband is responsible for the family so the wife must obey him”
  - employment “Only some kinds of job are equally appropriate for men and women”

- Bipolar factor: sexist vs. transcendent views.
Survey

- Deployed using Qualtrics.
  1. Sentence ratings
  2. BFI
  3. GRAS
  4. Demographic questions
- Advertised via campus, subject pool, social media.
- Data collected March & April, 2017
• 215 began the survey (104 finished)
• 96 were native English speakers (94 USA, 1 Canada, 1 UK)
• 16–72 years old (M = 31.9, SD = 15.3)
• 63 Female, 31 Male, 2 Other
• ANOVA $F(11, 84) = 41.90, \ p < .001$
• generic *he or she* = controls
• controls $>$ generic *they* ($t(95)=4.59, \ p<.001$) = generic *he, she*
• generic *they* $>$ specific *they* ($t(95)=4.80, \ p<.001$) = mismatch
• specific *they* $>$ *ze & it* $>$ fillers
ANOVA $F(11,84) = 26.63, p < .001$

Gendered generics $> \text{generic they}$ ($t(95)=2.90, p=0.004$)

$it > \text{ungrammatical}$ ($t(95)=3.85, p<.001$)
Grammaticality & Offensiveness

moderately correlated (r=-0.53)
- Weakest between generic *they* and *ze/it*.
- Strongest between specific *they* and mismatch (*r*=.7).
Specific *They*

it depends on who “they” is?
Gender-neutral Grammaticality
regressed on Gender, GRAS, BFI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generic They</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.82454</td>
<td>1.55962</td>
<td>0.529</td>
<td>0.598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
<td>0.06303</td>
<td>0.30193</td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td>0.835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAS</td>
<td>0.27489</td>
<td>0.24037</td>
<td>1.144</td>
<td>0.256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>-0.05726</td>
<td>0.20897</td>
<td>-0.274</td>
<td>0.785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>0.18265</td>
<td>0.25060</td>
<td>0.729</td>
<td>0.468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>0.25342</td>
<td>0.18532</td>
<td>1.367</td>
<td>0.175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>0.23126</td>
<td>0.25653</td>
<td>0.901</td>
<td>0.370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>-0.15496</td>
<td>0.17794</td>
<td>-0.871</td>
<td>0.386</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• adj-R2 = 0.03345, F(8,87) = 1.411, p = 0.2033.
**Gender-neutral Grammaticality**

regressed on Gender, GRAS, BFI

### Specific They

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-0.23417</td>
<td>1.15543</td>
<td>-0.203</td>
<td>0.839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
<td>0.62028</td>
<td>0.22368</td>
<td>2.773</td>
<td><strong>0.006</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAS</td>
<td>0.47327</td>
<td>0.17807</td>
<td>2.658</td>
<td><strong>0.009</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>0.14400</td>
<td>0.15481</td>
<td>0.930</td>
<td>0.354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>0.19366</td>
<td>0.18565</td>
<td>1.043</td>
<td>0.299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>0.25526</td>
<td>0.13729</td>
<td>1.859</td>
<td>0.066</td>
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<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>0.00329</td>
<td>0.19005</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>-0.29992</td>
<td>0.13182</td>
<td>-2.275</td>
<td>*0.025</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- adj-R2 = 0.2038  
  F(8,87) = 4.04, p < .001.
## Gender-neutral Grammaticality

regressed on Gender, GRAS, BFI

<table>
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<th>p</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-0.55007</td>
<td>1.31639</td>
<td>-0.418</td>
<td>0.677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
<td>0.86826</td>
<td>0.2548</td>
<td>3.407</td>
<td><strong>&lt;0.001</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAS</td>
<td>0.26882</td>
<td>0.20288</td>
<td>1.325</td>
<td>0.188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>0.30889</td>
<td>0.17638</td>
<td>1.751</td>
<td>0.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>0.13484</td>
<td>0.21151</td>
<td>0.638</td>
<td>0.525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>0.18460</td>
<td>0.15641</td>
<td>1.180</td>
<td>0.241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>0.00838</td>
<td>0.21652</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>0.969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>-0.28533</td>
<td>0.15019</td>
<td>-1.900</td>
<td>0.060</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- adj-R2 = 0.1388, f(8,87) = 2.914, p = .006.
Gender-neutral Grammaticality
regressed on Gender, GRAS, BFI

Ze

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-0.62554</td>
<td>1.62987</td>
<td>-0.384</td>
<td>0.702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
<td>0.07026</td>
<td>0.31553</td>
<td>0.223</td>
<td>0.824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAS</td>
<td>0.40274</td>
<td>0.25119</td>
<td>1.603</td>
<td>0.112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>-0.05163</td>
<td>0.21838</td>
<td>-0.236</td>
<td>0.813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>0.58502</td>
<td>0.26189</td>
<td>2.234</td>
<td>*0.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>0.22119</td>
<td>0.19367</td>
<td>1.142</td>
<td>0.256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>0.09242</td>
<td>0.26809</td>
<td>0.345</td>
<td>0.731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>-0.49011</td>
<td>0.18596</td>
<td>-2.636</td>
<td>**0.009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- adj-R² = 0.169, F(8, 87) = 3.415, p = .002.
The gender-neutral uses seem to have three statuses:

1. (almost) everybody likes them
   - singular **generic** *they*

2. (almost) everybody hates them
   - *it* & *ze*

3. opinions differ
   - singular **specific** *they*

\[2\text{probably for different reasons.}\]
Summary

The gender-neutral uses seem to have three statuses:

1. (almost) everybody likes them
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2. (almost) everybody hates them
   - *it* & *ze*

3. opinions differ
   - singular specific *they*

Hypothesis

- Everyone is willing to let *they* refer to a generic person
  - *They* is a bit vague, inherently (Balhorn, 2004).
  - The antecedent is not marked for gender.

- Not everyone does this with a specific antecedent...
  - Those with more fixed/binary gender views assume that all specific individuals must have a gender (and that the gender must be male or female).
  - Those with more flexible views either don’t require gender to be assigned, or tolerate gender conflicts.

\(^2\)probably for different reasons.
Summary

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2^probably for different reasons.
Future Work

These ideas will require further testing...

- We’re currently looking deeper into *they*.
- Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick and Fiske, 1996)
  - Hostile Sexism
  - Benevolent Sexism
- Specific awareness of and experience with trans identities and pronouns.
- A new “Prescriptivism Inventory” to measure attitudes and attributions about language.
- You’re welcome to take/distribute our new survey:

bit.ly/GrammarSurvey
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References


