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Az egyesszámmú angol „ő”: egyeztetés és konkordancia

Singular “They”: Agreement and Concord

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on ‘singular “they”’. I differentiate between two types of ‘singular “they”’: ‘epicene “they”’ and ‘non-binary “they”’; and I examine their syntactic and morphosyntactic distributions. My findings are the following. Plural verb agreement is the unmarked form, and gender in the English language is natural and not grammatical. With the combination of these two factors lead me to claim that ‘singular “they”’ is indeed grammatical. I also argue that gender specification on pronouns should be optional, and that gender specification on proper names should be unlearned so that people of all genders can be addressed accordingly.

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1. Introduction

Personal pronouns are an incredibly important element of a language; they are generally used as substitutes of noun phrases. They stand in for the entities in our discourse without repeating the full noun phrases. Nowadays, they are even more important with the rising visibility of genderqueer people; in other words, of those people whose pronouns of reference differ from the ‘traditional’ “he/him” or “she/her”.

The topic of my thesis is ‘singular “they”’. There are two types of ‘singular “they”’ that I distinguish from one another, namely the ‘epicene “they”’ and ‘non-binary “they”’. Here, I will use “non-binary” as an umbrella term to refer to the pronoun that directly refers to those people whose pronoun of reference is “they/them”.

‘Epicene “they”’ or ‘generic “they”’ is the pronoun that is sex-indeterminate and refers to an unspecified person or an entity, as in (1). An epicene pronoun is a pronoun that may denote individuals of either sex.

- (1) Somebody left *their* drink; I hope *they* come back for it.

‘Epicene “they”’ has been used in the English language for centuries, the first record of it appearing in the language is from the 1300s. This use of the pronoun is certainly more accepted and more frequently used by people in general as opposed to ‘non-binary “they”’. It developed from ‘plural “they”’, just as ‘singular “you”’ developed from ‘plural “you”’. It is used to refer to a person whose gender is unknown to the speaker(s), is not relevant, or is deliberately hidden.

‘Non-binary “they”’, however, is relatively new. It is a gender-neutral pronoun of reference for specific individuals, as in (2).

- (2) Kai is a neurosurgeon; *they* operate on brains.

‘Non-binary “they”’ directly refers to a specific person whose gender identity is *known* to the speaker(s), and this person the speaker is referring to does not identify as a man (“he/him”) or as a woman (“she/her”). Many online dictionaries describe non-binary people as not identifying as male or female; however, I argue that this is not true. The words “male” and “female” refer to biological sex, while “man” and “woman”, and also “non-binary” or “genderqueer”, refer to gender identity. Personal pronouns that make a direct reference to one specific person nowadays refer to gender identity rather than biological sex. As Konnelly & Cowper (2020: 2) state, “Pronouns, along with proper names, are often among the first acts of linguistic self-determination a transgender person makes”.

Interestingly, back in the 17th century, the pronoun “it” was used by English laws to refer to those people who did not fit the gender binary, according to *Merriam Webster*. Although it was and still is dehumanizing to use the pronoun “it” for human beings, it was deemed as the most acceptable at that time. However, ‘singular “they”’ is obviously more preferable than “it”.

In my thesis, I will discuss the history of the pronoun to see in what form it came into the English language and how history shaped its form and usage; I will also describe its syntactic properties related to agreement and concord; and I will show the difference between the pronouns “they” and “you”. Furthermore, I will also examine the morphosyntactic features of the pronoun “they”; and talk about an interesting phenomenon in some dialects of Newfoundland English. After the conclusion, I will explain the reason for my research on this particular topic, placing the analytical discussion in a wider context.

2. History of the pronoun

This section focuses on the history of “they”, more specifically on its usage as a singular pronoun. “They” came into the English language from Old Norse “their” in the 1300s, according to *Merriam Webster* and *Oxford English Dictionary*. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* claims that the pronoun “they” was regularly used as a singular pronoun by the 1300s. However, grammarians of the 16th century attacked ‘singular “they”’ and encouraged the use of the singular pronoun “he”.

“He” was advocated for various reasons. The masculine gender was deemed worthier than the female (Poole, 1646), then Kirby (1746) claimed that the masculine gender included the feminine gender as well. In 1850, an Act of Parliament legally replaced the previous phrase “he and she” with “he”, officially including the feminine gender in the masculine. White (1880:416, cited in Bodine, 1975) claimed, “*His* is the representative pronoun, as *mankind* includes both men and women.” The inclusion of feminine gender in the masculine is also represented in the verb “to man” and the participle “(un)manned”, which are both used to express the provision of personal (or “manpower”), regardless of gender.

Grammarians of the 18th century who were opposed to the use of ‘singular “they”’ argued that the singular use of the pronoun violated the traditional grammar rules, since the pronoun “they” was exclusively plural. If we interpret this as being about concord with the antecedent, then the problem with this argument is that if it is correct, then the same argument

should apply to “he” as well. If “they” is only accepted as a plural pronoun referring to a group of individuals and not as a third-person pronoun referring to people of unknown or non-binary gender because it fails to agree in number with a singular, sex-indeterminate antecedent, then “he” should not be accepted either as it fails to phi-agree in gender with a singular, sex-indeterminate antecedent, and it also fails to agree in number with a plural antecedent. However, if these traditional grammar rules are taken to be about agreement with the finite verb, then “they” is the only one that is problematic because its singular reference intuitively clashes with the use of a plural verb form.

In the 19-20th century, the masculine gender was no longer deemed as the worthier by the majority of the people; however, the use of “he” as an epicene pronoun was – and still is – widespread.

“He” as epicene pronoun clearly fails because of number.

- (3) a. Everyone knows each other.
- b. They know each other
- c. *He knows each other.

Doyle (2009) claims that “he” in (3c) is ungrammatical since it is singular, but “each other” must agree with a plural antecedent because it is semantically plural.

Now in the 21st century, the pronoun “they” is encouraged in order to respect the identities of all people, and also to avoid the clumsiness of the phrase “he or she”, even though it is deemed unacceptable when anaphoric to a morphologically singular antecedent by many people.

3. Agreement and concord, plural-agreeing singular noun phrases, “-s” inflection

In this section, I will discuss the Agreement and Concord phi-features of ‘singular “they”’, as well as its similarity to plural-agreeing noun phrases, and I will also examine the distribution of the present-tense third-person singular inflection “-s”.

Agreement and Concord

The main focus of this thesis is the Agreement and Concord phi-features of ‘singular “they”’. Phi-features in general are the following: person, number, and gender. Wechsler (2011) differentiates between “Index phi features”, which are features of referential controllers,

responsible for grammatical agreement, and “Concord phi features”, which are those features that are involved in adjective-noun concord, responsible for semantic agreement. One further difference between Index phi features and Concord phi features is that while Index phi features include the person feature, Concord phi features do not.

Wechsler (2011) claims that those verbs that show Index number agreement also agree in Person with the controller, making the following sentence grammatical.

- (4) He is a smart boy.

The subject pronoun is third-person singular, and the copula shows third-person singular agreement with the subject.

The agreement of finite verbs is treated as Index agreement. The inflections of finite verb agreement originate from incorporated pronouns. According to Wechsler (2011), the copula “are” does not carry a referential index, but it rather selects a subject with a plural number index. Finite verbs pattern with bound pronouns whenever the pronoun is in syntactic agreement with the verbs, and the pronoun bears a person feature that is exclusive to the Index phi features.

Pronouns are universally specified for Index features. As controllers of agreement, they trigger agreement on all the elements that are targets for Index features; however, according to Wechsler (2011), “nothing in principle requires a pronoun to have Concord phi features” (p. 4). Consequently, he claims that pronouns only have to be specified for person obligatorily, but not for number and gender.

The relevance of this for this paper is that ‘singular “they”’ controls plural agreement with the finite verb, but it does not show number concord with predicate nominals.

- (5) a. All dancers think that they are the best dancers ever.
b. Every dancer thinks that they are/*is the best dancer(*s) ever.

In (5b), “Every dancer” and “they” indicate plurality, but “the best dancer” has to be singular in order to be coindexed with “Every”.

According to Wechsler (2011), pronouns can serve either as targets or controllers of agreement. As targets, they are specified for Index phi-features, namely person, number, and gender. However, he also points out that targets that lack a person feature can vary in their number concord. Since the pronoun “they” is morphologically unmarked for any Index phi-

features that could trigger syntactic agreement, it can vary in its number concord, thus making the singular use of the pronoun grammatical.

Whitley (1978: 31) states that “*they* is neutral as to whether the speaker is referring to individuals in a group or to a group of individuals. If so, “singular” *they* might be said to neutralize not only sex, but also number”. See (6).

- (6) The dance ensemble is doing their best to entertain the audience.

Plural-agreeing singular noun phrases

Plural-agreeing singular noun phrases (Den Dikken (2001) refers to them as “plurilinguals” or “committee-type noun phrases”) show a difference in plural agreement between British and American English. British English allows a formally singular but collective noun to have plural agreement with the finite verb, but American English typically only accepts a singular verb, as in (7).

- (7) a. The committee has / have decided. – *British English*
b. The committee has / *have decided. – *American English*

(Den Dikken, 2001: 28)

The head noun of “plurilinguals” is uniformly unmarked for number, so it is ungrammatical to use a plural demonstrative with these type of noun phrases.

- (8) This / *These committee has/have decided.

Den Dikken (2001) argues that “plurilinguals” can only agree with a plural verb if they are headed by a silent pronoun (pro). That silent pronoun cannot be an associate of *there*, and in the absence of the silent pronoun, these types of noun phrases are singular which gives rise to singular verb agreement. This explains the ill-formedness of (6) with plural verb inflection.

- (9) There is/*are a committee in the room.

(Den Dikken, 2001: 32)

Verbal “-s” inflection

Kayne (1989) argued that the present tense third-person singular inflection “-s” is a number marker and not a person marker. I argue that the distribution of the suffix “-s” is controlled by subjects that are marked with the singular feature (“he”, “she”, “it”), whereas those subjects that cannot control the suffix (e.g., “they”) are unmarked for number.

- (10) She is a neurosurgeon; she operates on brains.

In other words, the verbal inflection “-s” is only available for those subjects that are marked for number, and that number is singular. The fact that “they” is unmarked for number in my analysis makes the pronoun “they” possible with reference to single individuals; it also explains that “they” consistently fails to combine with verbal “-s” inflection, even when it has a singular referent.

(11) This is my favourite character, Kai; they do research on neuroscience.

In light of the fact that the verbal “-s” inflection is only available for those subjects that are explicitly marked singular, I assume that in English the plural verb agreement is the unmarked form, since the plural agreement on verbs is typically identical with the infinitive and the bare stem.

Interim conclusion

In conclusion of this section, I claim that ‘singular “they”’ is indeed grammatical. Wechsler (2001) argues that pronouns are not required to be specified for Concord phi-features, which are number and gender; but they bear Index phi-features, which are person, number, and gender. From this, I can draw the conclusion that pronouns only have to be specified for the person feature, and not number and gender, which is in favour of the grammaticality of ‘singular “they”’.

Plural-agreeing singular noun-phrases are, as Den Dikken (2001) claims, uniformly unmarked for number, which I take to mean that they can combine with either a singular or a plural finite verb. I assume that ‘singular “they”’ is also unmarked for number (this will be discussed in one of the following sections), so that it can refer to both plural and singular entities. Evidence for ‘singular “they”’ being unmarked for number comes from Kayne’s (1989) discussion about the distribution of the verbal “-s” inflection. According to him, the suffix “-s” is a number marker, not a person marker, and it is only available for those subjects that are marked for singular: if one were to specify ‘singular “they”’ as grammatically specified for singular number, one would expect it to be able to combine with singular verb forms (in “-s”); but in actual fact, ‘singular “they”’ is incompatible with “-s”. Thus, I argue that the pronoun “they” is morphologically unmarked for number. I also claim that, based on the distribution of the verbal “-s” inflection, that the English plural verb agreement is the unmarked form, and singular verb agreement is marked for the singular number.

4. Similarities and differences between the pronouns “they” and “you”

In this section, I will talk about the similarities and differences between the pronouns “you” and “they”, focusing on the acceptance of these pronouns with certain antecedents and of certain forms of these pronouns.

There is an interesting difference between the acceptance of “you” and “they” in general. “You” is accepted with both singular and plural reference while still controlling plural agreement in copular sentences. “They” also controls plural agreement in copular sentences. In my theory, both “you” and “they” are unmarked for number. However, these two pronouns are not treated in the same way, but unlike in the case of “you”, the acceptability of reference to a single individual is subject to variation of “they”.

- (12) a. You / They are smart children.
- b. You / %They are a smart person.

The difference between the acceptance of these pronouns is even more striking with the reflexive “SELF” pronouns. The reflexives of “you” are “yourself” [singular] and “yourselves” [plural].

- (13) a. You have clearly overworked yourself. – *referring to a single individual*
- b. You have clearly overworked yourselves. – *referring to a group of individuals*

With the reflexive “SELF” forms of “they”, however, the tolerance for the singular form is much lower; the form “themselves” is rather stigmatised. The plural form “themselves” is perfectly fine.

- (14) a. They have clearly overworked themselves. – *referring to a group of individuals*
- b. They have clearly overworked %themselves. – *referring to a singular individual*

There are generally two types of personal reflexive pronouns: one in which the noun phrase “SELF” combines with a genitive pronoun, as in “myself”, “yourself”, “ourselves”, and “yourselves”; and one in which the noun phrase “SELF” combines with an accusative pronoun, as in “himself”, “themselves”, and “themselves”.

In the case where a genitive form combines with the NP, the genitive form serves as the possessor of “SELF”. Since “SELF” is a common noun, it gets number inflection in the case of

a plural antecedent, independently of the number features of the possessor: there is no phi-feature matching between possessors and possessed nouns in English. In the case of an accusative pronoun combining with “SELF”, there is a concord relationship between the accusative pronoun and “SELF” both for case (accusative) and for number.

When “self” takes a common noun or proper name as its possessor, combines with the Saxon genitive “s” that serves as a linking element between the common noun/proper name and “SELF”, as in “a person’s self” and “John’s self”. The reflexive pronouns “myself” and “herself” have no linking element between the genitive pronoun and “SELF”. Their structure is the following: [MY/HER + SELF]. For the third-person masculine reflexive, one would (on the analogy of “John’s self” and “a man’s self”) expect the form “hissself”, with the structure [HE + S + SELF]. Though the form “hissself” occurs in dialects of English, it is not the standard form. Instead, a non-possessive dependency between accusative “him” and “self” is established in the formation of the third-person singular masculine reflexive pronoun, delivering “himself”.

In plural reflexives, the pronoun combines with the plural copula “R” (cf. “are”) which is the linking element between the pronoun and the NP. Their structure is the following: [PRONOUN + R + SELF]. In “ourselves”, the genitive combines with the noun phrase that gets number-inflected due to number concord. Its structure is [OU + R + SELF]. In the case of “yourself”, which I put under the ‘plural’ category because “you” is a plural pronoun, and “yourselves”, the pronoun “YOU” combines with the plural copula “R” which then combines with the NP “SELF”.

For the third-person plural pronoun “they”, the logic of the previous paragraph would lead one to expect [THEY + R + SELF], yielding “theirsself” (cf. “their car”). Though this form occurs in dialects, the standard language uses “themselves”, which differs from “theirsself” in three respects: (a) the form of the pronoun (“them” rather than “they”), (b) the absence of the copula “R”, and (c) concord between the pronoun and “self” (“selves”). These three factors combined indicate that “themselves” does not have a possessive syntax. Instead, accusative “them” and “selves” are in a predication relationship, observing case and number concord.

Despite the low tolerance of “themsself”, it is not ungrammatical, and it is widely used in various dialects of English, according to *Merriam Webster* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

“Their” is a genitive, just like in the case of “yourself”, and it is the possessor of SELF. Since most of the reflexive “SELF” forms contain a genitive + “SELF”, “theirsself” would

naturally fit in. The structure of it is [THEY + R + SELF]. R is explicitly pronounced. However, this pronoun is also only dialectal. One may reasonably conjecture that for those speakers who have “themselves”, it might be entirely fine to use “theirself”. I assume that the dialects which allow for “theirself” do not use “themselves”, along with the also dialectal pronoun “hissself”, since “theirself” is available to them.

To sum up, the acceptance of ‘singular “you”’ and of ‘singular “they”’ is different, despite both having evolved from plural forms. The pronoun “you” is accepted both with a singular and a plural antecedent, and even its singular and plural reflexive forms are accepted and widely used by people. The pronoun “they”, however, is not always tolerated with a singular antecedent, especially when it makes a direct reference to a specific person. The tolerance, or rather the lack of it, for the singular “themselves” is very different from the singular “yourself”.

I argue that, in light of the fact that “they” is unmarked for number, “they” should be accepted with both singular and plural antecedents as well as “themselves”.

In the following sections, I will discuss the morphosyntax of ‘singular “they”’ based on the works by Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002), Bjorkman (2017), and Konnelly & Cowper (2020).

5. Morphological structure of “they” in Déchaine & Wiltschko’s (2002) analysis

This section focuses on the morphology of “they” based on the work by Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002), and on an interesting phenomenon from dialects of Newfoundland English.

Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002) categorize pronouns into three different categories: pro-DPs, pro-ΦPs, and pro-NPs. They claim that English third-person pronouns belong to the category of pro-ΦPs, meaning that they can function as a bound variable and can be bound outside their local domains. However, they claim that third-person pronouns cannot function as determiners since pro-ΦPs do not make an overt constituent available, unlike pro-DPs. They based this claim on the following:

- (15) a. we linguists – us linguists
- b. you linguists – you linguists
- c. *they linguists – %them linguists

(Déchaine & Wiltschko, 2002: 421)

In English, first and second person pronouns can function as determiners; in other words, they can precede nouns, thus the grammaticality of the examples in (15a, b). By contrast,

*“they linguists” is uniformly ungrammatical in some varieties of Standard American English, “them linguists” is available. Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002) argue that “them” in these varieties is decomposed into a bound D-morpheme “th-” and a clitic Φ -morpheme “’em”. The evidence for this decomposition is that third-person pronouns, both singular and plural, have phonologically reduced clitic forms which are pro- Φ , namely *I like ‘im / ‘em*. However, “’em” is found in all varieties of English, not just in those where *them linguists* is available; so Déchaine & Wiltschko’s decomposition of “them” does not, as it stands, shed light on the variation regarding the acceptability of “them linguists”. The exclusion of **they linguists* is rooted in the fact that (unlike “them”) it cannot be decomposed into “th-” and a phi-element, since “’ey” as a reduced pronoun is ill-formed, and it also does not have a distribution outside “they”.

While the previous paragraphs have focused on number and the pro-DP/pro- Φ P distinction in Déchaine & Wiltschko’s approach to the English pronoun system, a note on the status of gender is in order as well. Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002) assume that gender is a grammatical feature in the English pronoun system. I suggest, however, that gender in the English pronoun system is natural, as it is in the noun system, and not grammatical. Since there is no gender inflection on pronouns, they function as generalized pronouns. Generalized pronouns refer to animate entities; however, a cat, for example, can easily default to “he”, whether it is male or female, since natural gender is less active for non-human creatures. For [+human] entities, natural gender is obviously more active, since people in general will automatically select the pronoun “he” for males, and the pronoun “she” for females. The selection of gendered pronouns also increases with the appearance of given names that are associated with only one gender; for instance, John will most likely be [+M], and Mary will most likely be [+F] for most people (I will discuss this further in example (24) in one of the following sections in connection with Bjorkman (2017)).

6. Newfoundland data

During my research, I discovered an interesting phenomenon in some dialects of Newfoundland English via personal communication with a native Newfoundland English-speaker (K. F. Wheeler, personal communication, September 28, 2023). In some of the dialects, accusative pronouns are preferred over nominative pronouns in subject position, as in (16).

- (16) a. her is a doctor

- b. him is a teacher

With reference to a non-binary person, the subject pronoun may default to the accusative¹ form with singular verb agreement. See (17).

- (17) a. them is a student
b. Do them study linguistics?

An explanation for why the default accusative Case is preferred over the nominative for third-person pronouns might be that in this case they function as common nouns. The reason why it has a singular verb inflection is because “her”, “him”, and “them” are singular nouns, denoting a singular [+human] entity.

However, some dialects of Newfoundland English are not only peculiar for using an accusative pronoun as a subject pronoun, but they also sometimes use “them” in combination with the nominal plural marker “-s” and a singular “-s” form of the finite verb, as in “thems is smart”. In the phrase “thems is smart”, “them” functions as a common noun; the evidence for this is that the plural inflection “-s” can be added to it, since pronouns do not occur with nominal plural “-s”. The fact that it can combine with an “-s”-inflected finite verb is the result of the Northern Subject Rule² that allows for plural subject noun phrases to occur with finite verbs that are inflected with the present-tense third-person inflection “-s”. The Northern Subject Rule allows for the following combinations to happen:

- (18) a. the boys is smart
b. the pizzas is cold

I have also found “thems” used as a subject pronoun in the following sentences from the book called *The World of Ice* by R. M. Ballantyne.

- (19) “Thems is go to bed”
(20) “Thems must get up then come abroad”

Ballantyne, R. M.. (1859). *The World of Ice*.

¹ In Dutch, the gender-neutral pronoun is “hen”, which was historically an accusative third-person plural pronoun. Now “hen” occurs as a subject with third singular verb inflection. See the following examples: “Marta werkt in het dierenasiel, hen is een echte dierenvriend” – “Marta works in the animal asylum; them is a real animal friend”. “Daan kan goed voetballen, hen heeft hun techniek het afgelopen jaar geperfectioneerd” – “Daan is good at soccer; them has perfected their technique last year”.

(Source: <https://www.transgendernetwerk.nl/thema/media/inclusieve-taal/>)

² The Wikipedia page on Newfoundland English explicitly points out the Northern Subject Rule.
(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newfoundland_English)

Ballantyne was a Scottish author from the 19th-century. What is interesting about Scots English that it explicitly follows the Northern Subject Rule, along with Hiberno-English. Newfoundland English shows several clear linguistic parallels with Hiberno-English³.

7. ‘Singular “they”’ in the works by Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly & Cowper (2020)

In this section, I will discuss the works of Bjorkman (2017) and of Konnelly & Cowper (2020) in connection with the uses of the pronoun “they”.

Bjorkman (2017) calls the new use of “they” as ‘innovative “they”’ that has specific, definite antecedents, as in (21).

- (21) a. %I like their hair. – *while pointing someone out*
b. %Somebody left their wallet on the table.
c. %Your teaching assistant said that they will be joining us later.

Generally, younger speakers accept the examples in (21), but older speakers may find “they” with a singular antecedent pragmatically wrong or unacceptable.

The hypothesis of Bjorkman is that gender specification would be optional even on pronouns, meaning that the difference between plural “they” and singular “he” and “she” would be lost, making the use of “they” as a pronoun of reference for non-binary individuals grammatically possible. Speakers of ‘innovative “they”’ accept proper names with “they/them” pronouns. Naturally, the acceptability of “they” with a specific, definite antecedents rise with proper names that are associated with more than one binary gender or with last names with non-gender specific titles.

- (22) a. %Look, there’s Kai; their costume is so cool!
b. %Professor Shepherd left their coat on the back of the chair.

Bjorkman (2017) assumes that “they” occurs where the absence of the necessary number and gender features would trigger or require another, gender-specific pronoun. She claims that “they” cannot be specified for number, gender, and animacy. However, I assume that it is humanness rather than animacy, as animals and extra-terrestrials may easily default to “he” even when their sex is visible to the eye, and that “they” is not [+singular].

³ See the Wikipedia page on Newfoundland English: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newfoundland_English

Bjorkman (2017) also speculates that if gender in English is not a contrastive feature, then “they” would be possible with quantificational antecedents. If gender is contrastive, then bound variable pronouns would be obligatorily marked for gender if their domains are restricted to be either feminine or masculine.

For non-innovative speakers, “they” is unacceptable with a gendered antecedent, and gender is obligatory on referential pronouns, meaning that gender must be expressed whenever the gender of the referent is known to the speaker. For innovative speakers, the expression of gender is optional since for them gender is not a contrastive feature of pronouns, and if gender is absent on a pronoun, it does not mean that the gender of the referent is indeterminate or unknown.

- (23) a. I like {her/^otheir} hair. – *while pointing someone out*
 b. My friend left {his/^otheir} wallet in the restaurant.
 c. Your teaching assistant said {she/^othey} will be joining us later.

Bjorkman (2017) claims that for innovative speakers, the gender is an adjunct feature on referential pronouns, namely $\langle f \rangle$, and the gender features are notated as $\langle masc \rangle$ for masculine and $\langle fem \rangle$ for feminine.

However, most proper names are associated with gender, so sentences in (24) are deemed ungrammatical for people, even most innovative speakers do not accept it.

- (24) a. *Mary_i accidentally left their_i sweater at the restaurant.
 b. *John_i said that they_i will join us later.

The ungrammaticality of the sentences in (24) suggests that there is a linguistic property of “Mary” that is [+F] and of “John” that is [+M]. Bjorkman (2017) suggests that there is a contrastive gender property of names, and this is why conservative “they” users would find the sentences in (4) incorrect. She advocates that in order to accept “they” as a singular pronoun of reference, people should unlearn the gender features that are syntactically associated with given names.

According to Konnelly & Cowper (2020), the new meaning of “they” is to refer to “specific individuals of known (but not necessarily binary) gender” (p. 1). They suggest that “they” would not only be an alternative to ‘generic “he”’, as it was used as an epicene pronoun, but it would also be a pronoun of reference.

Konnelly & Cowper (2020) argue that there are three stages of “they”.

- (25) 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 who they_i were.
- (26) 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.
- (27) 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 need time to think about the idea.
 - c. We asked [the first girl in line]_i to introduce themself_i/themselves_i.
 - d. Your brother_i called to say they_i would be late.

(Konnolly & Cowper, 2020: 5)

Stage 3 speakers are those who are called innovative speakers by Bjorkman. For Konnolly & Cowper, “he”, “she”, and “they” are all available as singular, third-person pronouns. For them, “they” is not only available when the speaker is of non-binary gender identity, but also used to refer to those whose gender and pronouns are not known to the speakers. They use “they” in order to avoid accidental misgendering, thus avoiding social, psychological, and emotional harm (McLemore, 2015).

For my study, stages 2 and 3 are the most interesting. There is no change in the status or position of gender features in the pronoun system between Stage 1 and Stage 2; gender is a contrastive feature ([MASC] for masculine, [FEM] for feminine, [INANIM] for inanimate). The feature [INANIM] is not a proper gender feature at Stage 1 because it is not realised on the same syntactic head as [MASC] and [FEM], but all three features are in complementary distribution. The features [MASC] and [FEM] are obligatorily realised on the nominal head *n*.

The only differences between stages 1 and 2 is that nouns are specified differently in the speaker’s lexicon, and whether the gender-nonspecific nouns that refer to humans are obligatorily assigned a binary gender feature. At Stage 2, there is only a certain set of nouns and proper names that carry contrastive gender features; and the singular pronouns must either be “he” or “she” if the antecedent of the pronoun carries gender, no matter if the gender feature is lexical, assumed, or known.

Konnelly & Cowper (2020) also take into consideration Bjorkman's (2017) argument that for Stage 3 speakers, the gender feature becomes optional. This would mean that "they" can be used to refer to any animate singular individual, no matter if the nominal bears a semantic gender feature, and that "he" and "she" would only be used if the speaker knows the referent's correct pronouns. This would mean that the sentences in (28) are grammatically correct.

- (28) a. My mother left her coat here.
b. Your mother left their coat here.
c. Your mother left his coat here.

(Konnelly & Cowper, 2020: 16)

(28a) is quite traditional; "my mother" uses "she/her" pronouns. In the case of (28b), "your mother" is of unknown gender or of known non-binary gender. In my opinion, the sentence in (28c) is the most controversial; in that case, "your mother" can either be a transgender individual whose pronoun of reference is "he/him" or the phrase can refer to the parent of a male homosexual couple who represents the traditional mother role in the family but is not transgender; and who is the mother if the addressee in the sentence.

The gender feature-adjunction theory of Stage 3 would not only allow 'singular "they"' to be grammatically correct, but it would also allow people who use any/all of these pronouns to be addressed grammatically by any pronouns they wish to use.

In conclusion, this subsection argued that the gender feature of 'non-binary "they"' is optional. Bjorkman (2017) refers to 'non-binary "they"' as 'innovative "they"', and her hypothesis concerns the gender specification on pronouns. She speculates that if the gender specification on pronouns was optional, pronoun "they" would be grammatical when directly referring to a specific person whose pronouns of reference are "they/them" and not the traditional "she/her" or "he/him". She also claims that for conservative "they"-users, certain proper names like Mary or John have contrastive gender specifications. She suggests that people should unlearn the gender features syntactically associated with certain given names so that the pronoun "they" can be accepted as a singular pronoun of reference.

Konnelly & Cowper's (2020) work is based on Bjorkman's (2017) paper. They claim that there are three stages of "they", the last stage being 'innovative/non-binary "they"'. In stages 1 and 2, gender is contrastive, but at Stage 3, following Bjorkman (2017), gender is optional, allowing for 'non-binary "they"' to be grammatical when referring to a specific person.

8. Three types of “they”

I propose that the English language differentiates between three types of “they” as a personal pronoun, namely ‘plural “they”’, ‘epicene “they”’, and ‘non-binary “they”’. This proposal is based on the works by Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002), Wechsler (2011), and Konnelly & Cowper (2020). It is important to note that, according to my previous proposals throughout my thesis, the pronoun “they” is unspecified for number and gender; and gender in the English language is natural and not grammatical.

‘Plural “they”’ is the ‘traditional’ type of the pronoun. ‘Plural “they”’ makes a direct reference to multiple specified entities, and it controls plural agreement with the finite verb. See (29).

(29) Those kids were my students; they all have brilliant minds.

‘Epicene “they”’ refers to a singular, unspecified, indeterminate entity that bears a [+human] feature. The speaker refers to a person whose person, identity, and gender is unknown to them. It is used to avoid discrimination (used instead of the pronoun “he”), dehumanization (used instead of the pronoun “it”), and misgendering (used instead of “he or she”). ‘Epicene “they”’, just like ‘plural “they”’, controls plural agreement with the finite verb, as in (30).

(30) Someone left their drink; I hope they come back for it.

The third and the most recent type is ‘non-binary “they”’. It refers to a singular, specified, [+human] person whose person, identity, and gender is known to the speaker. It is used to directly refer to a single person whose pronoun of reference is “they”, and to respect this particular person’s identity and pronouns. See (31).

(31) Kai is a talented musician, and they play several instruments with incredible skill.

Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002) differentiate between three types of pronoun categories: pro-DPs, pro-ΦPs, and pro-NPs. Pro-DPs can function as arguments, they are definite, bear referential properties, they cannot function as bound variables, and they can function as articles. Their structure is the following: DP– ΦP–NP. First and second person pronouns belong to this category. Pro- ΦPs can act either as arguments or predicates, they can be bound variables, so they can be bound outside their local domains, and they bear referential properties. Their structure is ΦP–NP. English third-person personal pronouns are categorized as pro-ΦPs. Pro-

NPs can only function as predicates, and they are not bound variables. Their structure is only an NP structure. English impersonal “one” belongs there.

Wechsler’s (2002) work is important here because of how he differentiates between Index and Concord phi-features. Index phi-features, namely person, number, and gender, are grammatical features. Concord features, namely number and gender, are semantic features. In the presence of Index phi-features, it is almost impossible to have concord; however, in the absence of Index features, Concord phi-features can be present.

I propose that all three types of “they” have the same morphological structures, belonging to the pro- Φ P category, as in the Déchaine & Wiltschko analysis. All three types can function as bound variables, and they bear referential properties, as in (32). They must be pro- Φ P pronouns so that they can be bound outside their local domains and support coreference.

- (32) a. The boys think they are smart, and the girls do, too. – ‘plural “they”’
b. Look at that person over there; they have a cool baseball hat. – ‘epicene “they”’
c. Kai always brings great energy to the team, and they help keep everyone motivated. – ‘non-binary “they”’

There is, however, a small difference between their phi-features. They all have a third-person feature, but ‘plural “they”’ is unmarked for animacy or humanness, while ‘epicene “they”’ and ‘non-binary “they”’ are restricted to a [+human] feature. It is important to differentiate between the [+animate] and the [+human] features, since ‘epicene “they”’ and ‘non-binary “they”’ typically cannot refer to an animal whose biological sex is not visible to the eye (in such cases usually, the English language defaults to “he”).

In summary, I propose that there are three types of the pronoun “they”: ‘plural “they”’, ‘epicene “they”’, and ‘non-binary “they”’. ‘Plural “they”’ refers to plural entities, while both ‘epicene’ and ‘non-binary “they”’ make reference to a singular person. The difference between them lies in their morphological features and structures: all three types are pro- Φ Ps, as Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002) argued, but while ‘plural “they”’ is unmarked for both animacy and humanness, ‘epicene “they”’ and ‘non-binary “they”’ have a [+human] feature.

9. Conclusion

Throughout my thesis, I have shown the difference between two types of ‘singular “they”’, namely ‘epicene “they”’ and ‘non-binary “they”’. ‘Epicene “they”’ is a sex-indeterminate pronoun that refers to a non-specified person, and ‘non-binary “they”’ is a gender-neutral pronoun that directly refers to a specific person whose pronoun of reference is “they/them”.

I have explored how ‘singular “they”’ has evolved throughout the centuries, from the 1300s until today. In the 16th century, ‘singular “they”’ was attacked because the pronoun “they” was claimed to be plural, and grammarians encouraged the use of the singular third-person masculine pronoun “he”. The pronoun “he” was used as an epicene pronoun for centuries, thus including the feminine gender into the masculine. However, the use of “they” as an epicene pronoun has been encouraged since the second half of the 20th century thanks to the feminist movement and the rising visibility of genderqueer and transgender people.

In connection with the morphosyntax of the pronoun “they”, I argue that the pronoun only has to be marked for third person, and not for number and gender. Evidence for the pronoun “they” being unmarked for number and gender is that the present tense third-person singular inflection “-s” is only available to those subjects that are marked as singular. Since the verbal inflectional suffix “-s” is only available for the pronouns “he”, “she”, and “it”, I argue that “they”, along with the other personal pronouns, are unmarked for number. Based on the distribution of the verbal “-s” inflection, I claim that the plural verb agreement is the unmarked form in the English language, as the plural agreement on verbs is usually identical with the bare stem and the infinitival form of the verb.

There is a certain stigma that surrounds the pronoun “they” when it is used in a singular way, and that stigma is very apparent when the similarities and the differences of the pronouns “you” and “they” are looked at. “You” is accepted both in its singular and plural use, despite having plural verb-agreement – which I argue to be the unmarked form. Furthermore, both its singular and plural reflexives are accepted. The pronoun “they” does not receive the same judgement. It is universally accepted with a plural antecedent along with its plural reflexive form. However, ‘singular “they”’ might be judged as ungrammatical, but the objection against “themselves” is even more striking.

Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) differentiate between three types of pronouns: pro-DP pronouns, pro- Φ P pronouns, and pro-NP pronouns. They claim that English third-person personal pronouns belong to the pro- Φ P pronoun category. However, I argue that, while all three

types of pronoun “they” have the structure of a pro- Φ P pronoun, they differ in their phi-features, as ‘plural “they”’ is unmarked for animacy, and ‘epicene “they”’ and ‘non-binary “they”’ are restricted to a [+human] feature.

The appearance of third-person singular accusative pronouns in subject position in some dialects of Newfoundland English is certainly an interesting phenomenon. I argue that it might be because in such cases, the pronouns, namely “him”, “her”, and “them”, function as common nouns and thus they can control singular verb agreement. What is even more interesting is that “them” can combine with the nominal plural marker “-s” and the singular verb inflection “-s”, as in “thems is smart”. The explanation for this is that “them” functions as a common noun, so it can combine with the plural marker “-s”. The Northern Subject Rule allows subject noun phrases to occur with finite verbs that are inflected with the “-s” inflection.

I propose that there are three types of “they” that should be differentiated: ‘plural “they”’, ‘epicene “they”’, and ‘non-binary “they”’. ‘Plural “they”’ which directly refers to multiple specified entities; ‘epicene “they”’ which refers to a singular, unspecified entity; as well as ‘non-binary “they”’ which makes a direct reference to a singular, specific person whose pronouns are “they/them”, have a Φ P–NP structure. However, while ‘plural “they”’ is unmarked for humanness and animacy, ‘epicene “they”’ and ‘non-binary “they”’ have a [+human] feature.

Bjorkman (2017) and also Konnelly & Cowper (2020) argued that gender specifications that are traditionally associated with certain given names should be unlearned in order to achieve complete gender neutrality. They also argue that gender specifications on pronouns should be optional so that ‘singular “they”’ would be grammatical.

All in all, I argue that both types of ‘singular “they”’, so both ‘epicene “they”’ and ‘non-binary “they”’, are grammatically correct. The pronoun “they” itself is unspecified for number and gender. Gender in the English language is natural and not grammatical since there is no gender inflection on verbs or nouns. Plural verb agreement is the unmarked form as it is typically identical with the infinitive form of the verb and the bare stem. Singular verb agreement is specifically marked by the present tense third-person singular inflection “-s”. I also argue that gender specification should be optional on pronouns so that everyone can be addressed by the pronouns that fit their identities the most. Furthermore, gender specifications on names should be unlearned, as Bjorkman (2017) suggested, so that genderqueer, non-binary, and transgender people can be addressed accordingly despite having a name that is traditionally associated with the gender binary.

10. Epilogue

The importance of ‘singular “they”’ is not only to avoid using the pronoun “he” or the phrase “he or she”. The acceptance of ‘non-binary “they”’ – and also of neopronouns like “xe/xem/xyr”, “ze/hir/hirs”, or “ey/em/eir” – is crucial step in achieving equality and equity for all people of all genders. Above all, people should respect people, no matter if someone thinks that using a certain pronoun in a certain way is ungrammatical; giving respect to those people whose pronoun of reference is something other than “she/her” or “he/him” should be first and foremost for everyone.

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