• • • •

Generic and Nonbinary Pronouns: Usage, Acceptability and Attitudes

LAURA HEKANAHO

The author defended her doctoral dissertation *Generic and Nonbinary Pronouns: Usage, Acceptability and Attitudes* at the University of Helsinki, Faculty of Arts, on December 8, 2020. Professor Scott Kiesling (University of Pittsburgh) acted as the opponent and Professor Minna Palander-Collin (University of Helsinki) acted as the Custos. The dissertation is available at https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/321581

1. Why pronouns?

During the past 5 years, I have often been asked: why do you study pronouns? While there are many more detailed answers to this question, at a very general level, my personal interest stems from being a native speaker of a language that does not have gendered pronouns — Finnish.

Pronouns are some of the most fundamental building blocks in language, we use them often and they serve important functions. Why is it then, that some languages have an additional feature of marking gender in pronouns, while other languages manage perfectly fine without doing so? We might also ask: does it make a difference if a language has gendered pronouns?

My dissertation explores two main issues in English that are unique to languages that have gendered pronouns. The first main issue is one that has been widely acknowledged and discussed for several decades already: When a language has gendered pronouns, is a general person a *he* or a *she*? (examples 1–3).

1. *He* who laughs last, laughs best
2. *She* who can, does; *she* who cannot, teaches
3. Each to *their* own

For a long time, the supposedly correct answer to this question was *he*. The use of *he* was widely prescribed in grammar books, dictionaries and even in law (Evans & Evans, 1957: 222; discussed by e.g. Baron, 1981: 84; Bodine,

1975: 136). However, this usage is deeply problematic, as has been shown in previous research (e.g. Martyna, 1978; Gastil, 1990; Miller & James, 2009).

In essence, the question concerns which gender is considered to be the ideal representative for humankind. Behind this problem is a broader phenomenon in language and society, where masculinity has often been set as the norm (e.g. Silveira, 1980; for examples see Bailey & LaFrance, 2017: 683). For example, in many languages we have words like *chairman* and *fireman* describing professions (e.g. Hellinger & Bußmann, 2001).

In present-day English, more inclusive alternatives are commonly used (e.g. Balhorn, 2009; Curzan, 2014: 117–118; Paterson, 2014). With pronouns, a general person can also be represented by *she*, or *he or she*, but the most common option is singular *they*, as in example (3).

However, despite of centuries of use, singular *they* has not always been considered to be "grammatically correct". Indeed, while the use of *he* was previously prescribed, the use of singular *they* was prohibited by grammar books and style guides alike (e.g. Adami, 2009: 283; Newman, 1997: 43–48). Only in recent years has this trend changed, and singular *they* is now widely accepted even by the most prescriptive language institutions (e.g. American Psychological Association, 2019).

The other main issue with gendered pronouns has become acknowledged more widely only in recent years: What pronouns should be used for someone who does not identify as a *he* or a *she*? While nonbinary people have existed for much longer, many languages have only recently adopted specific nouns and pronouns to describe them (e.g. Gustafsson Senden, Bäck & Lindqvist, 2015; Scelfo, 2015).

Just after having finished my Master's thesis on gender exclusive language in 2015, pronouns were suddenly appearing in the headlines of many major newspapers. What prompted the wide-spread media attention was the new, more inclusive registration policies that some American Universities had adopted by allowing their students to freely specify their gender and pronouns (e.g. Scelfo, 2015). This brought the general public's attention not only to new uses of *they*, but also to neopronouns, i.e. relatively new pronouns like *ze* and *ey*. The often-heated public discussions that followed were not surprising. After all, changes in existing pronouns or completely new pronouns is not something that we witness every day. These public discussions raised new

questions that I had not been able to explore in my Master's thesis, leading me to explore pronouns further in my PhD.

2. Study design

In the focus of my dissertation are English 3rd person singular pronouns in both generic and nonbinary contexts. Broadly, the thesis explores the following questions:

Which pronouns are used in present-day English?
Why are some pronouns accepted while others are rejected?
What kind of attitudes do people have towards English pronouns?
What do pronouns mean to people?

In this study, generic pronouns are understood as nonspecific references to a class or group of people (as per the broader definition for "generic", e.g. Leslie & Lerner, 2016). In other words, these pronouns refer to the class or group of people in general, instead of any specific individual. In addition, of interest were grammatically singular references, as this is the context in which gendered pronouns may appear. In these contexts, the study focused on the pronouns *he*, *she*, *he or she* and singular *they* (examples 4–7). Included were also two examples of neopronouns, *ze* and *xe* (example 8).

4. The average person believes *he* watches too much TV
5. Any student who feels *she* might be getting sick should stay home
6. When a child learns to read, *he or she* can do more at school
7. Each person is the center of *their* own universe
8. The average person believes *ze* watches too much TV

In contrast, nonbinary pronouns are understood as specific references to known nonbinary individuals. The term nonbinary broadly refers to all identities that fall beyond the binary. These identities include agender, bigender and genderqueer identities, for example.

While some nonbinary individuals go by *he* or *she*, many do not. Instead, they use pronouns that are not associated with female or male identities.

These pronouns include singular *they* and many neopronouns, of which *ze* and *xe* were used as examples (examples 9–10).

9. Chris likes *their* coffee black
10. Clo loves *zir* mother
11. Neo is walking *xir* dog

While these pronouns have distinct functions, what connects generic and nonbinary pronouns is their relevance to gender equality and gender fair language use. Pronouns can be seen as identity building tools at both an individual and group level, as pronouns designate identities to specific individuals but also signal group membership (Figure 1). Questions of inclusivity are important when referring to groups of people, as the pronoun can either include or exclude people from the reference. Linguistic representation is important to both groups and individuals. The role of pronouns for representation has become particularly visible through transgender and nonbinary experiences.
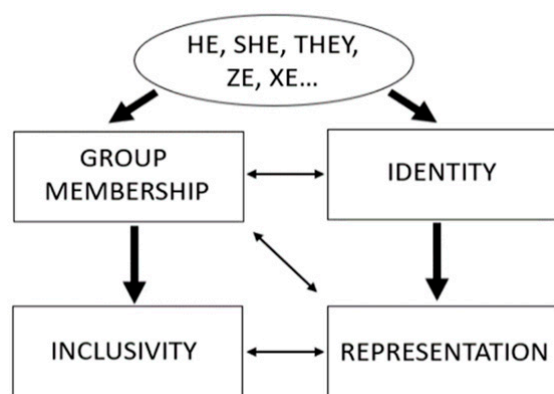

Figure 1. Pronouns, identity and group membership.

To explore these pronouns, I conducted a survey study, focusing on three related aspects: Usage, acceptability, and attitudes. Roughly, present-day use can help investigate what types of changes are occurring in pronouns, while studying acceptability and attitudes may help explain *why* such changes are happening. Attitudes in particular may also explain why different pronouns are accepted or rejected.

3. Results

The survey gathered responses from 1128 participants, of whom 411 were cis-female, 611 were cis-male and 101 were transgender. The transgender participants included 79 nonbinary individuals. The participants also comprise both native (about 75%) and non-native speakers of English, since speakers of different languages may have different views on English pronouns. Finnish and Swedish speakers were chosen since these languages differ from English in important ways. While Finnish has no gendered pronouns, Swedish has a similarly gendered pronoun system as English, with the crucial distinction that Swedish has recently adopted a neopronoun, *hen* (e.g. Gustafsson Senden, Bäck & Lindqvist, 2015). Finnish speakers make up 16% and Swedish speakers 5% of the participants; the rest (4%) were bilingual speakers. Furthermore, the participants best represent college or university educated (75%), politically liberal (82%) individuals under the age of 40. In other words, the sample is not representative of the broader population and the results may not generalize beyond the sample.

3.1 Generic pronouns

In the survey, the participants completed different types of writing and multiple-choice tasks, as well as responded to open questions. The main results with generic pronouns highlight the triumph of singular *they*. Singular *they* was both the most commonly used (about 80%) and most commonly accepted (94%) generic pronoun. In contrast, gendered pronouns were used rarely (about 20%), and most participants found using only *he* or only *she* unacceptable (65%). However, the combination *he or she* was still found acceptable by many (71%). The neopronouns were generally rejected (73%).

While the analysis revealed many interesting trends, only a few key aspects are highlighted below.

First, there was a difference based on native language. Proportionally more native Finnish and Swedish speakers used gendered pronouns (25–40%) than did native English speakers (5%–27%). This trend seems to reflect relying on now-outdated prescriptive rules, which may have lingered in non-native English-speaking countries longer.

Second, nearly all transgender participants used singular *they*, and only four ever used gendered pronouns. In other words, gendered pronouns were mostly used by cisgender participants. With acceptability, there was also a clear difference in how the participants reacted to the construction *he or she*: the majority of cisgender participants accepted this expression (76%), while the majority of transgender participants rejected it (57%). Remembering that most of the transgender participants are nonbinary, this result may reflect feeling excluded from the expression *he or she.*

Indeed, I am not suggesting that gender in itself affects pronoun use or acceptability. Instead, the detected differences are likely due to personal experiences with pronouns and inclusive language. Transgender people may be more aware of the social significance of inclusive language because they have not only needed to consider their own gender and pronouns but have likely also experienced both exclusive language use and misgendering.

These conclusions are also supported by the participants' open responses. While the participants described their views on pronouns in many different ways, only a few examples of key themes are provided below (examples 12–14).

12. "Using just he or just she seems deliberately exclusive of others."
13. "Male as the default pronoun seems very dated and slightly offensive to me as a woman, as though being male carries more significance."
14. [*she*] "[…] is grammatically correct but does not sound natural at all to me. I would naturally use 'they' here"

As implied earlier, the inclusivity of the pronouns was an important factor. While gendered pronouns in general were described as *exclusive*, the use of he was considered most problematic since this standard has supported a patriarchal worldview. Singular *they* on the other hand was most commonly lauded for being *gender inclusive.* As such, the participants' responses clearly demonstrated values related to gender equality. Indeed, as society becomes more equal, this is also reflected in language becoming more gender fair and inclusive. Visible in the responses were also standard language ideologies, notions of correctness, of good and bad language use. However, these

arguments about grammatical correctness were typically secondary, and being inclusive was more important.

3.2 Nonbinary pronouns

As regards nonbinary pronouns, the results demonstrate clearly that *they* was acceptable to more participants (67%) than the neopronouns (33%). Overall, it seems it is easier to accept a familiar pronoun being used in a new context, than to accept completely new pronouns.

As with generic pronouns, there was a clear difference in the responses based on the participants' gender. Nearly all transgender participants (97%) accepted nonbinary pronouns, which is not surprising considering most of them were nonbinary themselves. The cisgender participants were more divided, as cis men opposed nonbinary pronouns the most, 39% rejecting *they* and 80% rejecting the neopronouns. In contrast, 73% of cis female participants accepted *they*, and 54% accepted the neopronouns. As before, I suggest different experiences with language are behind the difference in cisgender participants. Because English and many other languages are male-biased, women have likely had personal experiences with exclusive language use, and these experiences may make it easier to relate to nonbinary people's need for linguistic representation.

Indeed, the participants' orientation towards transgender individuals was identified as an important factor. For example, negative attitudes towards transgender people often led to rejecting the pronouns, while positive attitudes and personally knowing transgender people supported finding the pronouns acceptable. In other words, it seems that sympathy and support for transgender people extended to accepting nonbinary pronouns.

This was also evident in the participants' open responses. While many participants supported these pronouns and considered pronouns a matter of personal choice, others loudly opposed, most commonly arguing that *he* and *she* should be enough (examples 15–17). As such, the participants' reactions often depended on gender ideologies, i.e. on whether they believed gender to be binary or *non*-binary. Human rights and language rights were also visible, the question concerning the right to self-identify and choose one's own pronouns.

15. "If those are a person's pronouns, then of course xe/ze should be referred to with those pronouns"
16. "Lee and Chris are either male or female."
17. "These are not real pronouns"

The participants also often appealed to other aspects when arguing against nonbinary pronouns. For example, many participants challenged the realness of the pronouns (example 17), arguing that they are grammatically *incorrect*, *weird*, or *confusing*. However, it may be that even behind such seemingly straightforward views lie other ideological reasons, and these arguments function as a justification for rejecting nonbinary identities.

This seemed particularly evident in the data on singular *they*. While the participants nearly unanimously accepted singular *they* in generic use, many of the same participants rejected *they* in nonbinary use. Whereas generic *they* was often described as *inclusive*, *ideal*, *natural* and *common*, nonbinary *they* was rejected as *weird* and *confusing*. The difference between the reactions was most clear with arguments relating to the number of *they*, which was one of the most common overt reasons provided for the rejection of nonbinary *they*, but not with generic *they*. What might be the reason behind such seemingly contradictory views?

In linguistics, it is a well-known phenomenon that language attitudes are rarely simply about the forms of language, but instead they are connected to the people who are imagined to use such language (e.g. Garrett, 2010). Nonbinary pronouns are of course associated with nonbinary people, who face a lot of discrimination. This may explain why the otherwise acceptable pronoun might be rejected when it is specifically a nonbinary person's pronoun.

3.3 What do pronouns mean to nonbinary people?

Last, the nonbinary participants elaborated on what pronouns mean to them. Overall, their responses highlighted the importance of using correct pronouns. When other people use a nonbinary person's correct pronouns, this signals respect and acknowledgment of nonbinary identities. In contrast, incorrect pronoun use, or misgendering more broadly, signals disrespect and invalidation of nonbinary identities.

The responses also revealed that for many nonbinary individuals, pronoun use is more complex than a cisgender person might expect. Most notably, some nonbinary individuals may use different pronouns in different situations. For some, this variation may reflect their different genders, but for others, the reason might be practical. For example, some participants reported using *they* only because this seemed more reasonable than asking others to use neopronouns. Another important concern was safety. Revealing one's pronouns to be other than *he* or *she* also often means outing oneself as nonbinary. The participants explained that when revealing their pronouns, they always need to be prepared for hostile reactions (examples 18–19). To protect themselves, they might need to cut contact even with close people if they react badly. In contrast, using binary pronouns and passing as cisgender provides safety. This is also why others need to be careful not to reveal someone else's gender, if they are not out as trans or nonbinary in public or in some other context, for example among family.

18. "I don't tell people I'm nonbinary, or what my pronouns are,
    if I think they're going to react poorly and I can't afford to
    cut them out of my life if they do."
19. [in some contexts people] "[...] may cause me harm
    if I were to give my correct pronouns"

As these responses demonstrate, language really does matter, and so do pronouns. Language matters because it is not only about what words or pronouns we use, but it is also about the values that we communicate through language. With inclusive and respectful language use we can, for example, make the lives of minorities a little bit easier. N

LAURA HEKANAHO

UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

References

ADAMI, Elisabetta 2009. "To each reader his, their or her pronoun". Prescribed, proscribed and disregarded uses of generic pronouns in English. *Corpus Linguistics – Refinements and Reassessments*, eds. Renouf, Antoinette & Andrew Kehoe. 281–308. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789042025981_016

AMERICAN Psychological Association 2019. *Singular "They"*. APA style. Retrieved from: https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/grammar/singular-they.

BAILEY, April & Marianne LaFrance 2017. Who Counts as Human? Antecedents to Androcentric Behavior. *Sex Roles*, 76 (11/12): 682–693. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0648-4

BALHORN, Mark 2009. The Epicene Pronoun in Contemporary Newspaper Prose. *American Speech*, 84, (4): 391–413. https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-2009-031

BARON, Dennis 1981. The Epicene Pronoun: the Word that Failed. *American Speech*, 56 (2): 83–97. https://doi.org/10.2307/455007

BODINE, Ann 1975. Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: Singular 'They', Sex-Indefinite 'He', and 'He or She'. *Language in Society*, 4 (2): 129–146. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500004607

CURZAN, Anne 2014. *Fixing English, Prescriptivism and Language History.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139107327

EVANS, Bergen & Cornelia Evans 1957. *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage.* (2nd ed.). New York: Random House.

GARRETT, Peter (2010). *Attitudes to Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511844713

GASTIL, John 1990. Generic Pronouns and Sexist Language: The Oxymoronic Character of Masculine Generics. *Sex Roles*, 23 (11): 629–643. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00289252

GUSTAFSSON Senden, Marie, Emma Bäck & Anna Lindqvist (2015). Introducing a gender-neutral pronoun in a natural gender language: The influence of time on attitudes and behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00893

HELLINGER, Marlis & Hadumod Bussmann 2001. The linguistic representation of women and men. *Gender Across Languages. Volume 1*, eds. Hellinger, Marlis & Hadumod Bussmann. 1–25. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1075/impact.36.01hel

LESLIE, Sarah-Jane & Adam Lerner 2016. Generic Generalizations. In: Zalta, Edward (Ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* 1–21.

MARTYNA, Wendy 1978. What Does 'He' Mean? Use of the Generic Masculine. *Journal of Communication*, 28 (1): 131–138. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1978.tb01576.x

MILLER, Megan & Lori James 2009. Is the generic pronoun he still comprehended as excluding women? *American Journal of Psychology*, 122 (4): 483–496.

NEWMAN, Michael 1997. *Epicene Pronouns: The Linguistics of a Prescriptive Problem.* New York and London: Garland.

PATERSON, Laura 2014. *British Pronoun Use, Prescription, and Processing: Linguistic and Social Influences Affecting 'They' And 'He'.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

SCELFO, Julie 2015. A University Recognizes a Third Gender: Neutral. *New York Times.* Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/education/edlife/a-university-recognizes-a-third-gender-neutral.html.

SILVEIRA, Jeanette 1980. Generic masculine words and thinking. *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 3 (2): 165–178. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-0685(80)92113-2