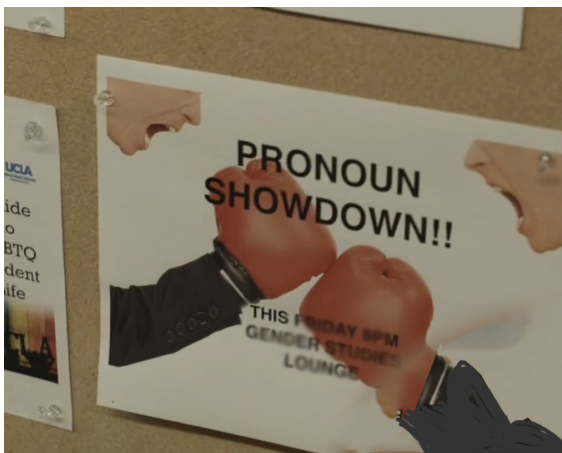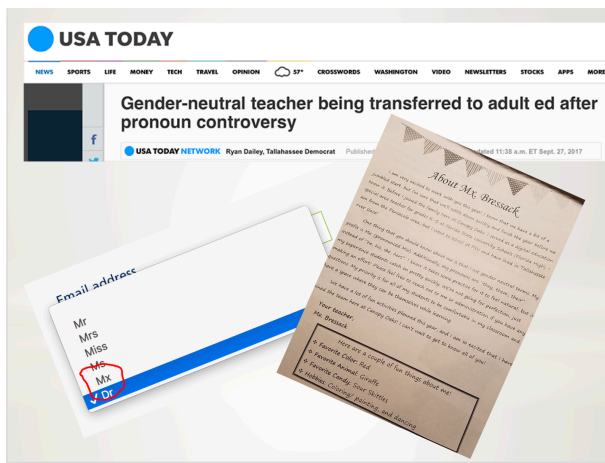# Pronoun showdown (2017 edition)

or, are nonbinary pronouns and singular *they* ruining the language or making English great again?

Dennis Baron
Professor of English and linguistics, University of Illinois
debaron@illinois.edu

[slide 1]

[slide 2]

Chloe Bressack, a transgender Florida teacher, was moved from their 5th-grade class to an adult education center for asking students to use the honorific *Mx* and the gender-neutral pronouns *they, them,* and *their*. Reacting to the news, Eric Miller, a local lawyer, complained that teachers have no right to impose their political ideas about gender on

unsuspecting students, nor do they have the right to teach impressionable fifth graders that singular *they* is correct English. But instead of recommending the traditional *he* or *she,* Miller suggested that a substitute pronoun, *ze,* "would create less confusion for the students." By the way, you can select Mx as a title option when you sign up with O2.

[slide 3]

	Subject	Object	Pronoun	Pronunciation
Gender Binary	she	her	hers	as it looks
	he	him	his	as it looks
Gender Neutral	they*	them*	their*	as it looks
	ze	hir	hirs	zhee, here, heres
	ze	zir	zirs	zhee, zhere, zheres
	xe	xem	xyr	zhee, zhem, zhere

*used as singular

In other pronoun news, when the Diversity Office at the University of Tennessee recommended that teachers ask students, "What's your pronoun?" the state legislature closed the Diversity Office and passed a law banning the use of taxpayer dollars to support gender-neutral pronouns—despite the fact that no one knows how much a pronoun costs.

[slide 4]

1	2	3	4	5
e/ey	em	eir	eirs	eirself
he	him	his	his	himself
[name]	[name]	[name]'s	[name]'s	[name]'s self
per	per	pers	pers	perself
she	her	her	hers	herself
sie	sir	hir	hirs	hirself
they	them	their	theirs	themself
ve	ver	vis	vers	verself
zie	zim	zir	zirs	zirself

Tennessee's inclusive pronoun initiative was controversial, but it was hardly unique.

Here's another pronoun card from the University of Wisconsin, a button from Berkeley, and one from the British National Union of Students; a name tag is from a piece on singular "they" in the Wall St. Journal, which printed it because pronouns are good business.

[slide 5]

Today I will set the current flurry of interest in nonbinary English pronouns at universities, in the press, and among our more unstable elected officials, in its historical context, because the call for such pronouns goes back over 200 years, and not surprisingly, so does opposition to changing the pronoun system.

The need for a common-gender third person singular pronoun becomes apparent when we look at sentences like this:

 1. Everyone loves _____'s mother.

Here's how you could fill in the blank:

 2. Everyone loves *his* mother.

—except the generic *he* is in a well-deserved decline—but more about that later.

 3. Everyone loves *their* mother

—raises the objection that singular *they* violates number concord — even though *they* has doubled as singular and plural since the 14th century, long before the dawn of singular *you*.

 4. Everyone loves *her* mother.

—generic *she* never achieved widespread use because of the grammatical glass ceiling.

 5. Everyone loves *his or her* mother.

—which is always clunky, plus if you're worried about saving taxpayer dollars, two pronouns cost twice as much as one.

 6. Everyone loves *one's* mother.

You're kidding, right? One doesn't say this even in England.

So what to do?

As early as the 1790s, writers complained that there was no pronoun for concealing gender. Others bemoaned the lack of a pronoun when gender was unknown. A few complained that generic *he* isn't generic. And purists grumbled that the generic masculine is ungrammatical:

Pronouns are supposed to agree with the words they stand for—their referents—in number *and* gender. But requiring pronouns to agree with their referents in *number* requires breaking the rule requiring pronouns to agree with their referents in *gender*.

Given the unsuitability of these options, some language reformers invented new pronouns to refer to either men and women, or to both men and women, and more recently, to refer to transgender, nonbinary, gender-fluid, or gender nonconforming persons as well.

We begin our tour of pronoun history with a word about that generic masculine.

[slide 6]

> Where note, That the Masculine Gender is more worthy than the Feminine, and the Feminine more worthy than the Neuter.

Generic *he*—the grammatical equivalent of manspreading—comes from the Latin myth of the worthiness of the genders. Here's how John Lyly described it back in 1567:

> The Masculine Gender is more worthy than the Feminine, and Feminine more worthy than the Neuter.

19th-century grammarians would occasionally say, snarkily, that the masculine *embraces* the feminine. You can just hear them snickering into their gerunds, like adolescent schoolboys.

[slide 7]
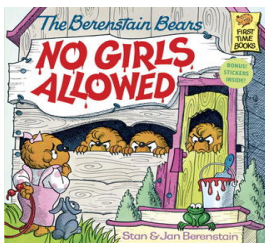
But from the start, it was easy to find examples where *he* clearly signaled, "no girls allowed."

For example, this anti-feminist, writing in 1895, believed women spend too much:

> *The American is noted for his wasteful propensities.* We say *his* but we mean *hers*.

He wanted a gender-neutral pronoun so he won't have to call women *men.* Think that's bad? It gets worse. He goes on,

> We may use the masculine pronoun . . . on the ground that "the men embrace the women," but if women spent less, "the men would embrace the women oftener than they do."

It's gonna take more than a nonbinary pronoun to solve this writer's woman problem.

[slide 8]

If that writer had also been a reader, he might have known that people had been coining gender-neutral pronouns for more than 100 years. Here are just a few:

ou 1792
ne, nis, nim ca. 1850
en, han, un 1868
se, 1874
um, ita 1877
e 1878, 1890
hesh, hiser 1879
thon, hi, ip, le, hiser, hersh, hae 1884
tha, zyhe 1885
ir, ze, de 1888
ons 1889
hi 1890
hizer, ith, zie 1891
hoo, en 1895
he'er, his'er, him'er 1912

Some of these are blends of *he* and *she.* Some are reduced versions of *he* and *she.* Some, like *ou* and *un,* probably come from unaspirated forms of Old English *he* and *hēo.* And some, like *ip,* are just cute little words hoping to be adopted.

The earliest coined pronoun that I found appears in 1792 (surely earlier ones will turn up). Scottish economist James Anderson suggested *ou,* a pronoun already found in dialect use. Anderson actually thought English would benefit from 13 genders instead of two. His suggestions were widely ignored.

Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune,* may have been behind *ne, nis,* and *nim,* thought to have been coined around 1850, as was the first *hiser,* a form invented over and over again.

But even though more than 100 of these invented words were coined *before World War I,* and many more since the 1970s, none succeeded.

Thon and *he'er*, perhaps the most popular—and they were never *really* popular— appeared in Webster's *New International Dictionary,* and you could look them up in your

Funk and Wagnalls. But they were eventually dropped because not enough people used them.

[slide 9]

he'er, 1 hi'er, 2 he'er   He or she   a suggested personal pronoun, third person, singular number, indicating a common gender   Compare HIMER, THON
    There has ever seemed to exist a general surprise among all English-speaking peoples that their language contains no form of the personal pronoun in the third person singular expressive of the common gender
    As illustrative of the elimination of our present awkwardness and often incorrect use of the English language I give you the following: 'Nearly if not every writer, whoever *he'er* may be, has a style of diction peculiarly *his'er* own (or *his'er s*) which distinguishes *him'er* from all others '
            F S POND in *Letter to Standard Dict* Feb 8 '12

Brit. physicist.]   See ATOMIC THEORY.
thon (thŏn'), *pron. sing. & pl.; nom.* THON; *poss.* THON'S (thŏnz); *obj.* THON.   [Contr. of *that one.*]   A proposed genderless pronoun of the third person.
thon (thŏn), *pron. & adj.*   That yonder.   *Scot., N. of Eng., & Ir.*
thon (thŏn).   Var. of THEN.   *Obs. exc. Dial.*
thon'der (thŏn'dĕr), *adv. & adj.*   Yonder.   *Chiefly Scot. & N. of Eng.*

Here are entries for *he'er* from Funk and Wagnalls, 1913 and *thon* from *Webster's Second,* 1934; *thon* was dropped in *Webster's Third.*

[slide 10]

MRS. ELLA YOUNG
INVENTS PRONOUN
——
"He'er, "His'er" and "Him'er"
as Combination of Genders
Used in Address.
——
MAKES PRINCIPALS GASP.

He'er was coined in 1912 by Ella Flagg Young, Chicago's superintendent of schools. It turns out that Young stole the word from Fred S. Pond, who invented it a year earlier, but she got all the credit.

You think Florida educators overreacted to pronouns? Young's pronoun actually made school principals gasp.

Some people liked Young's proposal: lexicographer Isaac Funk wrote to the *New York Times* that *heer, hiser,* and *himer,*

> like Wagner's music, are better than they sound.

Funk preferred *thon*, but he did add both pronouns to his dictionary.

[slide 11]

"Man" Includes Women

Mrs. ELLA FLAGG YOUNG has invented a new third person singular personal pronoun of common gender, "his'er" and "him'er," to take the place of the awkward "his or her," "him or her."—*New York Tribune.*

It won't work. By current usage "his" is used as a pronoun of common gender to include "her." There is no very lively prospect of bettering our language in that particular. It cannot be done by any arbitrary exercise of authority. "His" includes "her" (though less distinctly), as "man," used for the human race, includes women. When "man" ceases to include women we shall cease to need a language, and won't care any more about pronouns. There is a better chance to bring about a better understanding of the sense of "his," when used to include "her," than there is to win acceptance of new pronouns.

But Ben Blewett, Young's counterpart in St. Louis, thought generic *he* was just fine—why mess with success? However, Blewett was gracious enough to admit that when women came into their own, politically, they could impose generic *she*.

And for George Harvey, the influential editor of *Harper's Weekly, he'er* signaled the death of language:

> When 'man' ceases to include women we shall cease to need a language, and won't care any more about pronouns.

[slide 12]

judgment and delicacy. How ungenerous it is to pitch upon some one of our acquaintance, tell private stories of them, and then industriously report them to be the author! This conduct we do censure

With regard to our using the plural pronoun " *them*" in conjunction with the definitive pronoun " *one,*" as we wished to conceal the gender, we would ask the DON to coin us a substitute.

Now let's consider singular *they,* found in written English since the 1390s, which suggests it existed in spoken English much earlier.

The earliest attack on singular *they* I've found occurred in 1794, when a writer styling himself Don Alonzo attacked the form as ungrammatical in this passage—the top example on the slide:

> How ungenerous it is to pitch upon some *one* of our acquaintances, tell private stories of *them*, and then industriously report *them* to be the author!

Here is how "Belle Assembly," who wrote that passage, defended their choice—the second example:

> With regard to our using the plural pronoun "them" . . . — as we wished to conceal the gender, we would ask . . . Don [Alonzo] to coin us a substitute.

Don Alonzo did not take the bait, but in 1808, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge proposed ditching generic *he* for the pronoun *it,*

> in order to avoid particularising man or woman, or in order to express sex indifferently.

Fortunately, Coleridge's readers responded to *it* indifferently.

In 1839, a writer in the New York *Mercury* called for an invented pronoun because there's no correct way to fill in the blank:

> "We say, 'If any lady or gentleman shall buy this article _____ shall have it for five dollars.' The blank may be filled with he, she, it, or they; or in any other manner; and yet the form of the expression will be too vulgar to be uttered.

With no sense of irony, this writer then employed generic *he* to address potential word-coiners:

> If anybody will get us well out of the difficulty . . . *he* will be entitled to the thanks of all persons who love to talk.

By the mid-19th century, generic *he* had become political. In 1845, the abolitionist Lysander Spooner argued that a woman couldn't be president because the Constitution always refers to the president as "he."

But Wendell Phillips, another abolitionist, disagreed:

> In grammars, as well as law, the rule used to be, that the masculine pronoun . . . included the race. . . . The Constitution itself, in the 5th Amendment, has, 'no person shall be compelled to be witness against *himself* . . .' But, alas! according to Mr. Spooner, none of these shields cover the defenceless heads of the women!

[slide 13]

> 4. Be it enacted, That in all acts words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females, and the singular to include the plural, and the plural the singular, unless the contrary as to gender or number is expressly provided;

Interpretation of certain words for future acts.

> eral persons or things; words importing the plural number may include the singular; words importing the masculine gender may be applied to females; the words "insane person" and "lunatic" shall include every

To forestall any questions about who *he* refers to in the law, in 1850 England passed the "interpretation act":

> in all acts words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females . . . unless the contrary . . . is expressly provided.

Note that gender inclusion is NOT reciprocal—it's that old double standard—in law, as in grammar, the female never includes the male.

But law or no law, English courts held that *he* meant *she* for obligations like going to jail or paying taxes, but *not* for privileges like voting or holding office.

A similar act, passed in the US in 1871, provoked questions about the politics of *he*.

[slide 14]

In the 1860s, American women's rights advocates were agitating for the vote.

In 1869, a Chicago writer remarked that the Illinois constitution restricted voting to "male citizens." So women could get elected, they just couldn't vote for themselves.

That same year another writer cited the need for a common-gender pronoun, and who better to invent one than the "women's-rights women"?

> As the laws of the grammars stand, the use of 'he,' when 'she' is meant, is an outrage upon the dignity and an encroachment upon the rights of women. It is quite as important that they should stand equal with men in the grammars as before the law—so we hand this duty of amending the language over to Mrs. Stanton and Miss Anthony. [That's the suffragists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony]

And in 1879, an anonymous writer complained that a new Texas law stipulating that the masculine includes feminine and neuter effectively abolished gender by making

> all the avenues of political preferment . . . open to all the sexes, masculine, feminine, and neuter.

> [It was a common rhetorical tactic at the time to make fun of your political enemies by labeling them 'neuter.' Sexual innuendo remains alive and well in American political discourse.]

The battle of the generic *he* continued with an 1881 report on the denial of a petition by Mrs. Belva Lockwood to be admitted to the Maryland bar. Although the newspapers dismissed Lockwood as "the Washington lawyeress," she was the first woman to argue before the U. S. Supreme Court and twice ran for president on the ticket of the National Equal Rights Party.

To support her case, Lockwood cited a Maryland law providing that

> the masculine shall be held to include all genders except where such constructions would be absurd and unreasonable.

In response, the Maryland supreme court ruled

> that it would indeed be 'absurd and unreasonable' in the exact words of the code, to apply the pronouns 'he' and 'him' to a woman.

Maryland didn't allow women lawyers until 1902. However changing the language of the law didn't necessarily change attitudes: women were not admitted to the Maryland Bar *Association* until the 1950s.

That suggests that changing pronouns won't change social attitudes today, either, but that didn't deter women from seeking the vote or running for office.

In 1909, a Denver civic leader, Sarah Platt Decker, considered running for Congress in Colorado.

One skeptic wondered whether the use of the masculine pronoun in the Constitution might derail her candidacy:

Strict adherents to the letter of the Constitution maintain that the presence of the masculine pronoun, and the absence of any other, obviously renders ineligible any person of the feminine persuasion.

Platt Decker didn't run, but the issue came up again in 1916, when Jeanette Rankin, of Montana, became the first woman elected to Congress. (American women got the vote nationally in 1920, but the state of Montana enacted woman's suffrage in 1914).

[slide 15]

Argue That "He" in Constitution Might Bar Miss Rankin From House

Special to The Washington Post.

Chicago, Nov. 11.—Is the Constitution of the United States so eternally masculine that the personal pronoun "he" may not be interpreted as "she?"

If it is—and may be it is—Miss Jeanette Rankin, Congressman-elect from Montana, may be prevented from accepting the prize of her victory.

This ungallant question was brought up today by students of the Federal Constitution, who quoted the following passage:

"No person shall be a Representative . . . who shall not, when elected, be an inhabitant of that State in which he shall be chosen."

Judge Barton Payne, an authority on the Constitution, said:

"The opponent of Miss Rankin might, of course, contest the election. In that event Congress would ultimately decide the matter. The laws of Montana would be taken into consideration. As for the 'he' in the Federal Constitution, I don't believe it would be construed so as to prevent Miss Rankin from accepting the seat in Congress."

During the campaign, the *Washington Post* reported, "students of the Federal Constitution" are warning that the masculine pronoun might prevent Rankin from being seated if she won.

The relevant part of the Constitution reads, "No Person shall be a Representative . . . who shall not, when elected, be an Inhabitant of that State in which *he* shall be chosen."

Rankin did win, and she had no problem being seated. But Rankin's win didn't deter the snarks from weighing in on what to call the new congressperson:

the "lady from Montana," the "person from Montana," or "the member from Montana"?

Constitutional pronouns did not come up when Hillary Clinton ran for president a century later, but some commentators saw fit to wonder whether, if she won, she would be a *woman president* or a *female president.* As the linguist [Deborah Cameron](#) asked, why not just *president?* Plus I wouldn't be surprised if some Breitbart pronoun-birther added that to Benghazi and the emails.

[slide 16]

> But *when both Genders are implied*, it is allowable
> to use **the Plural**: 'let *each* esteem other better than
> *themselves*'.
>
>   Grammarians frequently call this construction an error: not
> reflecting that it is equally an error to apply 'his' to feminine
> subjects. The best writers furnish examples of the use of the
> plural as a mode of getting out of the difficulty. '*Every
> person's* happiness depends in part upon the respect *they* meet in
> the world' (Paley). '*Every one* must judge of *their* own
> feelings' (Byron). 'If the part deserve any comment, *every
> considering Christian* will make it to *themselves* as *they* go'
> (Defoe). '*Everybody* began to have *their* vexation.' '*Every-
> body* around her *was* gay, *was* busy, prosperous, and important :
> *each* had *their* objects of interest, *their* part, *their* dress, *their*
> favourite scene, *their* friends and confederates.' 'Had the
> doctor been contented to take my dining tables, as *anybody* in
> *their* senses would have done' (Miss Austen).
>
>   Sometimes strict grammar is preserved thus : '*Everybody*
> called for *his* or *her* favourite remedy, which nobody brought'.
> But this construction is felt to be too cumbrous to be kept up,

But enough about the politics of *he*. Here are some early comments in favor of singular they:

In 1879, Alexander Bain wrote one of the few nineteenth-century grammars to approve of singular *they* when both genders are implied:

> Grammarians frequently call this construction an error: not reflecting that it is equally an error to apply 'his' to feminine subjects. The best writers furnish examples of the use of the plural as a mode of getting out of the difficulty.

Bain observed that the conjoined *his or her* preserves strict grammar, but he warned, cumbrously, "this construction is felt to be too cumbrous to be kept up."

Also in 1879, the *Atlantic* pointed out that, if the pronoun *you* could serve as both singular and plural, "then why not they?"

> It would be easy to adopt this idiom, for we are continually struggling against its use, and how delightful it would be for once to make wrong right!

Another concerned citizen said this in 1884:

> Many persons who are by no means ignorant accept, in conversation at least, the plan of using the plural common gender pronouns, 'they, their, theirs,' etc., indifferently as singular or plural. And in this they are not without authority of good usage.

And in 1891, the writer Forrest Morgan argued that singular *they* is better than "such atrocious inventions as 'thon' or 'hizer.'"

[slide 17]

And in 1902, the social radical Bertha Moore rejected generic *he* as "prejudicial, detrimental and unjust." Instead, since *you* can be both singular and plural, it's

>   equally as proper to use the pronouns they, their and them, both in the singular and plural number.

[slide 18]

Word coiners continued to invent common-gender pronouns in the 20th century, particularly in the 1970s and 80s, a period that saw a lot of interest in nonsexist language. Even so, there's no general agreement over which invented pronoun is best.

The issue of common-gender invented pronouns goes beyond English. The Swedish coinage *hen* (blending the masculine *han* and the feminine *hon*) was coined around 1996 and received official approval in 2015, when it was added to the dictionary of the Swedish Academy.

Even so, *hen* remains controversial. The slide shows a montage of screen caps from the Swedish/Danish television series *The Bridge*. Hanne Thomsen, on the left, sardonically tags Saga Norén's use of *hen* as "politically correct." Spoiler alert: Thomsen is killed shortly after that, though presumably not for making fun of her Swedish colleague's pronoun choice.

[slide 19]

> Certain.e.s usager.ère.s d'une communication égalitaire ont développé leurs propres formes de pronoms neutres :
>
> ■ il et elle devient « iel » ou « ille » ;
>
> ■ ils et elles devient « iels » ou « illes » ;
>
> ■ celles et ceux devient « celleux » ou « ceulles », etc.

And last month the French Academy made headlines when it came out against gender-neutral French, including the invented pronouns *iel, iels, celleux.* The Academy argued that such inclusive writing signaled the death of French, which would surely lose out to other languages in the race for world domination—although everyone except the French knows they lost that race a long time ago.

Despite recent attention to invented pronouns, singular *they* is fast gaining official acceptance.

Singular *they* is approved by many style guides and dictionaries.

The fourteenth edition of the prestigious *Chicago Manual of Style* actually advised writers to choose singular *they,* but facing resistance from readers and editors, the current *Manual* walks back that advice:

> Many people substitute the plural *they* and *their* for the singular *he* or *she.* Although *they* and *their* have become common in informal usage, neither is considered acceptable in formal writing. [16e., (2010) 5.227]

The *Manual* tersely rejects common-gender blends like *s/he* and invented pronouns:

> they won't succeed. And those who use them invite credibility problems.

Bryan Garner's *Modern American Usage* disapproves of singular *they* but calls it "commonplace" and

> the most likely solution to the single biggest problem in sexist language . . . the generic masculine pronoun.

But the *American Heritage Book of English Usage* (1996) calls singular *they* "the alternative to the masculine generic with the longest and most distinguished history" (p. 178).

British reference works are much more accepting of singular *the*y*:*

The *Oxford English Grammar* (1996) notes that singular *they* is readily accepted in Britain, "even in formal style" (19ff.).

And *the* British authority on usage, *The New Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Burchfield 1996), dismisses objections to singular *they* as unsupported by the historical record and observes that the construction is "passing unnoticed" by speakers of standard English as well as by copy editors. Burchfield finds this trend "irreversible" (776).

The *New Oxford Dictionary* (1998) not only accepts singular *they,* they use the form in their definitions.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2000, s.v.) accepts singular *they* as "well-established in speech and writing, even in literary and formal contexts."

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* (2010) calls singular *they* "generally accepted" with indefinites, and "now common but less widely accepted" with definite nouns, especially in formal contexts.

The *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (Peters 2004) says that singular *they* with indefinites has become "unremarkable—an element of common usage."

Even though some people still dislike singular *they,* to the *Cambridge Guide* tells us, "that kind of response . . . is no longer shared by the English-speaking population at large," and it counsels, "Writers who use singular *they/them/their* are not at fault" (538).

[slide 20]

Clearly there's a sliding scale of acceptance for singular *they.* The form is reasonably uncontroversial when used for people in general, as in

> Everyone loves *their* mother.

But when the referent is a specific individual, and more narrowly, a named person, some may hesitate:

> If a student wants to change major, *they* should contact an advisor.

> If a student wants to change *their* major . . .

> Meet Dylan. *They* prefer the pronouns *they, them,* and *their.*

> Dylan prefers *their* burger medium rare.

> Dylan prefers mustard; they want ketchup, but no onions.

Those who object to pronoun change must acknowledge that the pronoun paradigm changes anyway, although slowly. And a plural pronoun can become singular, no problem.

Here are three pronoun changes in English since the middle ages:

- Singular *they* appears ca. 1370 in writing, surely earlier in speech.

- singular *you* pops up in the 17th-century (pushing out *thou, thee, thy,* and *ye*)

- *its,* the possessive form of *it,* appears in the 17th century, replacing the earlier uninflected *it* or *his;* it's spelled *it's* in the U. S. Constitution., but students today who do that will be marked wrong.

[slide 21]

In 1660, George Fox, founder of the Society of Friends (Quakers), wrote an entire book devoted to the "error" of singular *you,* calling anyone who makes this mistake "a Novice, and Unmannerly, and an Ideot, and a Fool."

[slide 22]

Fox lost that battle to the "unmannerly" English of the "idiots" and "fools," though Lowth, Murray, and the major 19th century grammars continued to show *thou* as the correct second-person singular, and *you* as the plural, and students were tested on *thou, thee,* and *thy* long after it had disappeared from standard English.

Yes, singular *you* creates ambiguity, but English speakers solve that with disambiguating plural forms of *you:*

　　y'all; youse; yins;

and most recently, *you guys,* particularly in speech;

and then there's *all y'all,* common enough in the American South, a double plural just in case *y'all* has started acting like a singular.

[slide 23]

OK, time to sum up. Here are some of the advantages of invented pronouns:

- They fill a gap in the pronoun paradigm
- They are high profile, calling attention to the emerging politics of the nonbinary
- They recognize a person's right to control how they're spoken or written about

Disadvantages:

- They are high profile, calling attention to the emerging politics of the nonbinary.

  - In a more positive light, they're useful for now, but when gender nonconformity becomes more ordinary, politicized pronouns may just get in the way.

- Invented pronouns are unfamiliar, hard to pronounce.
- They can be perceived as strident, or a waste of taxpayer dollars.
- There are a lot of them, rather than just one, and there's no clear mechanism for selecting a finalist, or even a short list

[slide 24]

Here are some advantages and disadvantages of singular *they:*

Advantages;

- It's a natural pronoun with a long history.
- Those who object to singular *they* use it when they're not paying attention.
- Objections to the form's ungrammaticality are easy to ignore, since singular *they* is pretty universal, even among those who object to it.
- Singular *they* is easier to use when referring to an unidentified specific person or a person in general.
- But increasingly, singular *they* appears as a referent for named persons as well.

[slide 25]

Disadvantages:

- Singular *they* drives the sticklers nuts. (that may actually be a plus)
- People aren't so comfortable using singular *they* for specific, named, individuals, especially when the referent is in the same syntactic unit as the pronoun.

So what do we make of all this?

Pronoun systems change slowly, but they do change.

The pronoun changes of the past didn't ruin the language: it's not dead. Nor did they make English great. That was done by writers like Shakespeare and Austen, though not without the help of the Royal Navy, GI Joe, fast food, and rock 'n roll.

The generic masculine pops up, zombie-like, from time to time, but for all intents and purposes, generic *he* is pretty much stake-through-the-heart dead.

Invented pronouns like *thon* and *ze* have yet to catch on, but still, people keep on trying, which suggests there's a need for them. The problem is, not enough people are paying attention to these new words for them to get traction. The coiners of nonbinary pronouns might do well to consider making a YouTube.

I've called these invented pronouns "the words that failed." But unlike the generic *he,* they're not dead yet. Are invented pronouns any more likely to succeed now that they're being used by some members of the gender-nonconforming community?

> Probably not, given that there's still a relatively small number of speakers adopting them;
>
> there isn't a single invented pronoun, but several;
> and non-users may be either puzzled by or resentful of these new words.
>
> Plus several high-profile transgender persons (Caitlyn Jenner, Chelsea Manning, some transgender American prisoners petitioning the courts to assert their rights), are adopting traditional binary pronouns that match their gender identity. Though Florida teacher Chloe Bressack did recently opt for singular *they.*

Unlike invented pronouns, singular *they* continues to spread and gain the approval of dictionaries, editors, and usage guides.

Singular *they,* which arose naturally rather than through fiat or formal agreement, appeals to speakers and writers looking to use nonbinary, inclusive language, and it appeals to those who don't give these matters much thought at all. And there's Baron's Law: Even

people who hate singular *they* because they think it's ungrammatical or it heralds the death of the family, if not the end times, use singular *they* when they're not paying attention.

So now it's your turn to answer the question: Are invented nonbinary pronouns and singular *they* killing the language or are they making English great again? Or better yet,

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"What's your pronoun?"