

Pragmatic and Grammatical Factors that License Singular *they*

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The use of singular *they* with quantified antecedents, in reference to an individual of unknown gender, or in reference to a non-specific antecedent dates back to the 1400s [1]. More recently, a subset of English speakers seems to show acceptance of singular *they* when bound to a specific, definite antecedent of known gender; additionally, singular *they* has emerged as a personal pronoun of reference for individuals who identify as gender non-binary. The expanding distribution of singular *they* use among English speakers has raised questions regarding the grammatical features of singular *they*, and the syntactic representation of gender features in English pronouns. Based on informant intuitions, [2] claimed there are two groups of singular *they* users. Users who accept *they* with singular definite antecedents (“My friend forgot *their* jacket”) are considered innovative, while those who reject it in that context are considered non-innovative. Konnelly and Cowper [3] proposed a third group for whom gender features are completely optional and non-contrastive, allowing *they* to be used even with grammatically gendered antecedents. In both of these theories, acceptance of singular *they* is explained by reference to the specific grammatical gender features that singular *they* holds for different groups of users. An additional potential factor is pragmatic. By Maximize Presupposition [4], speakers who use *they* rather than a more specific gender marked pronoun are potentially signaling that they do not know the antecedent’s biological gender or that it is not relevant to their current goals. This factor predicts that socially close antecedents (e.g., named referents, family members, friends) would be less likely to be felicitously referred to with *they*.

The present study used a cluster analysis approach to experimentally investigate whether there are different uses of singular *they* across speakers, and to what extent their acceptance of singular *they* is mediated by grammatical gender and social distance. Participants (N=148) were asked to judge sentences containing a variation of the pronoun *they* and one of nine antecedent conditions (Table 1). Critical conditions (1-8) were pseudorandomly intermixed with 15 controls where the antecedent was inanimate (9). Each participant saw 40 items, 5 of each experimental condition distributed using a Latin square design. To investigate how individual differences between speakers influenced acceptance of singular *they*, participants completed a survey of demographic information, such as age and gender identity, as well as measures of familiarity with and openness to non-binary individuals.

If the presence of grammatical gender on the antecedent influenced acceptability of singular *they* use, then ratings for conditions in which the antecedent a grammatical gender (conditions 4, 6, 8) should be lower than those without an explicit grammatical gender (3, 5, 7). If social distance between the speaker and the antecedent influenced acceptability, ratings of conditions in which the distance between the speaker and antecedent is closer (5, 6, 7, 8) should be lower than conditions in which the social distance is farther apart (3, 4).

Results were consistent with the prediction that both grammatical gender and social distance influence acceptability judgments of singular *they* (Figure 1). Measures of individual differences found that factors such as age and acceptance of non-binary individuals were correlated with rating: Younger participants and participants who were more accepting of/familiar with non-binary individuals rated singular *they* as more acceptable in gender marked and name conditions (Table 2). Additionally, three distinct clusters best accounted for variation within our data (according to a majority of 30 metrics for determining the optimal number of clusters using the nbclust package in R). Figure 2 shows a gap statistic comparison of intracluster variation for k clusters. Analyses of these clusters broadly mirror the predicted distribution of responses outlined in Konnelly and Cowper’s three stages of singular *they* users (Figure 3). Within each cluster, greater social distance between the speaker and antecedent rendered singular *they* more acceptable: Referring to friends and family members with singular *they* was less acceptable than referring to antecedents that were more

distant. This was independent of morphosyntactic marking: it was true for both explicitly gender marked NPs and non-marked NPs.

These findings indicate that there are in fact three coherent groups of speakers with separate grammars for singular *they*. Further, correlations between rating and individual differences indicate a general trend for younger individuals and individuals who have more familiarity and experience with people of non-binary genders to accept singular *they* in more situations; this could be indicative of a larger shift in the acceptability of singular *they* in future generations of English speakers.

References

- [1] Balhorn, M. (2004) The rise of epicene they. *Journal of English Linguistics* 32(2), 79-104.
- [2] Bjorkman, B. M. (2017). Singular they and the syntactic representation of gender in English. *Glossa* 2(1), 80. 1-13, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.374>.
- [3] Konnelly, L. & Cowper, E. (submitted) The future is they: the morphosyntax of an English epicene pronoun. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- [4] Heim, I. (1991) Articles and definiteness.

Table 1: Experimental conditions and sample item.

My friend said that they would be coming late to dinner.
How naturally does “they” refer to “my friend” on a scale of 1 (1 naturally at all) to 7 (completely naturally)?

Condition	Example
1 Plural NP	<i>the dentists</i>
2 Quantified NP	<i>every dentist</i>
3 Non-gendered Noun	<i>the dentist</i>
4 Gendered Noun	<i>the stewardess</i>
5 Speaker Knows	<i>my friend</i>
6 Gendered Family Member	<i>my sister</i>
7 Non-gendered Name	<i>Taylor</i>
8 Gendered Name	<i>Sophia</i>
9 Inanimate NP	<i>the cup</i>

Table 2. Effect of individual difference measures.

Correlation coefficients for condition vs. individual difference measures					
Condition	Trans-prejudice score	Gender Essentialism Score	Gender Identity	Acceptance of Non-Binary/Transgenderism	Age
Plural Noun Phrase	0.081	0.041	-0.037	-0.025	-0.06
Quantified Noun Phrase	-0.018	0.122	0.010	-0.013	-0.009
Non-gendered Noun	-0.142	-0.026	0.088	* 0.163	-0.119
Gendered Noun	-0.014	0.106	0.141	0.065	*-0.192
Speaker Knows	-0.148	-0.009	0.104	* 0.185	***-0.284
Gendered Family Member	-0.04	0.013	*0.174	*0.172	*-0.177
Non-gendered Name	-0.083	0.009	*0.208	*0.187	** -0.230
Gendered Name	-0.038	-0.016	**0.247	*0.201	*-0.208
Inanimate Noun Phrase	**0.214	0.107	-0.099	-0.138	-0.061

* for p<.05, ** for p<.01, or *** for p<.001

Figure 1. Mean naturalness ratings for all participants.

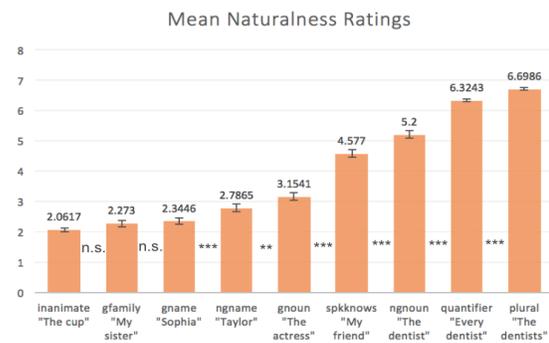


Figure 2. Gap statistic for number of clusters

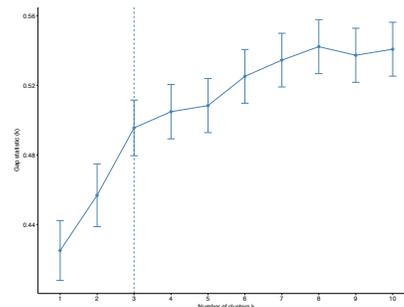


Figure 3. Mean naturalness for three clusters.

