

Gender and pronouns: Why do pronouns change?

The role of gender and changing attitudes towards gender in society can be seen in many different areas of language use. For example, in English, people are abandoning the use of words such as 'chairman' in favour of 'chairperson' and 'Miss' is being more often replaced with 'Ms.' Whereas changes at the lexical level may be the most immediately obvious, there are interesting developments taking place also in other areas of language use. In this worksheet, we will look at the role of pronouns in changing attitudes to signaling gender in language. Pronouns are often considered to be a boring word class. They are a closed set - this means that, unlike, for example, nouns and adjectives, the members of the pronoun group do not change and the group does not usually acquire new members.



Key terms

gender

bias

inclusivity

sexist language

Task 1

In English, for a long time, the pronoun used to refer to people of unknown gender was 'he'. This was considered a 'generic' pronoun (also called 'generic he'), as it was believed to be sex-indefinite and to refer equally to men and women. Look at the following two excerpts from the period of 1985 to 1993 taken from the British National Corpus (BNC) and one recent excerpt from an article in the Guardian.

- A) "The statistics might be easily presented, instead of small numbers being presented **for the reader should he care**, which is roughly what we would do." (from an Environmental Health Officers' conference, BNC).
- B) "Your GP is an expert in health care – but only you will know exactly what and how you feel. The more openly you and your doctor talk together, the better the service **he or she** will be able to give you." (from Health promotion and education leaflets, BNC)
- C) "Back in Inverness one parent reportedly said that **their** son had been bullied as a result of being beaten by a girl." ("Why should a primary school separate girls and boys for sports day?" written by Anna Kessel, published on 5 June 2018 in The Guardian)

Discuss the following questions:

- What is the difference in the use of personal pronouns in these three examples?
- What motivation is there for the difference in use?
- Do the pronouns in these examples reflect any underlying attitudes towards gender in society?

Task 2

Read the following concordance lines taken from the conversations between British English speakers today. Decide in each example whether 'they'/their' refers to the third person singular or third person plural.

1.	how are the sprouts ? S: huh ? S: how are the sprouts are	they	acceptable ? S: oh I 'm loving them	PL
2.	strong impression based on what you see as to what kind of person	they	are (.) you get huge amount of clues don't you when you	
3.	I like wanted to buy a Minecraft realm with my friends then	they	could go on with me S: well Minecraft costs money	
4.	like for a lot of people people don't like cooking and	they	don't like the effort S: yeah S: or they just don't do	
5.	hanges it (.) mm I mean like a professional winer person or whatever	they	're called (.) would like (.) professional winer probably not the same	
6.	always tell which hand he was writing with the person I sit next to in English broke	their	left hand which was their main hand so they had to write with their right	

7.	hint with that (.) I think if you took sent a photo to someone and they	they	stopped replying you would take the hint wouldn't you
8.	but S: there's just no point it's like asking someone if	they	're pregnant if you're not sure like just don't like
9.	contacts his lecturer and says oh I've been talking to this person and	they	're interested in about academic integrity I explained to them how you

Think about the different functions of 'they' that you identified.

- Why do people use 'they' or 'their' to refer to one person?

- Can you identify a pattern when 'they' or 'their' is used to refer to third person singular?

Task 3

In this task, we are going to investigate trends related to the use of third person singular *they* in current English. Using BNClab, find examples for third person *they*. Tip: use the following search phrase: someone (VERB) their OR anybody (VERB) their – this will search for two common grammatical structures in which third person singular *they* appears. Looking at the results, and answer the following questions:

- Use the Gender button to see whether the use of 'singular *they*' changed over time?
- Use the Age button to see whether it is used more by younger or older speakers.
- Use the Social class button to see whether some groups of speakers use it more often.
- Discuss the patterns that you discovered in the use of 'singular *they*' with respect to different social factors.

Research bite

Although the use of 'singular *they*' may appear like quite a recent addition to the English language, it has been documented in English for much longer. For example, in the 1970s, Ann Bodine, a linguist who did extensive research on 'singular *they*', writes that "there is a tradition among some grammarians to lament the fact that English has no sex-indefinite pronoun for third person singular and to state categorically that the only course open is to use 'he' in sex-indefinite contexts. Other grammarians omit the lamentations but state just as categorically that 'he' is the English sex-indefinite pronoun. (...) English has always had other linguistic devices for referring to sex-indefinite referents, notably, the use of singular 'they' (their, them)" (Bodine, 1975: 130-1).



Over the past decade, the use of singular *they* has gathered much attention from the media. Do you think this is a useful development in English? Do you think that awareness of gender issues in society plays a role in the increases use of 'singular *they*' in today's spoken English?

Bodine, A. (1975). Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: singular 'they', sex-indefinite 'he', and 'he or she'1. *Language in society*, 4(2), 129-146.