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Who Uses 'Them'? : Gender-Neutral Pronoun Usage among Queer and Non-Queer College
Students

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Abstract

In this project on language ideology, I designed a sociolinguistic study to investigate the relationship between language perception (what one thinks they know about language usage) and language production (how one actually uses language) via writing and speaking tasks designed to assess general pronoun usage given specific referents in both formal and informal contexts. The qualitative responses are categorized and descriptively analyzed across queer status based off participants' background information.

Participants included 61 college students who were native English speakers and between the ages of 18 and 26. Based off a question collected on the background information sheet, 18 participants were categorized as queer, and the remaining 43 participations were categorized as non-queer. The tasks for the study were presented in a way so that participants had no explicit knowledge that the study was designed to assess general pronoun usage. Predictions were that (1) queer participants will use gender-neutral pronouns (particularly singular 'they') more than non-queer participants, but that (2) both queer and non-queer participants will use gender-neutral pronouns with varying degrees, dependent upon specific referents; moreover, (3) gender-neutral pronouns will be more apparent in the speaking task than the writing task since participants are unable to monitor and revise their language usage as clearly in such an informal context.

In this study, it was found that both queer and non-queer participants used gender-neutral pronouns depending upon the referent. Non-queer participants tended to use gender-neutral pronouns with typically gender-neutral referents as opposed to typically gendered referents. Furthermore, no introduced pronouns such as 'xe' were used; the only gender-neutral pronoun used was singular 'they'. Given the results that both queer and non-queer students use a form of gender-neutral pronouns, I provide recommendations for gender inclusivity on college campuses.

Who Uses 'Them'? : Gender-Neutral Pronoun Usage among Queer and Non-Queer College Students

Every day we construct our own identities and the identities of those around us through a simple part of speech: pronouns. These pronouns may be singular or plural and first, second, or third person. They may also be gendered. In fact, 'he' and 'she' are the only inherently gendered terms left in the English language: 'He' functions as a singular third-person pronoun referring to one person who identifies as male, and 'she' functions a singular third-person pronoun referring to one who person who identifies as female. If the identity of someone is not known, it has been prescribed to use 'he or she' to be gender inclusive. However, there are some individuals who do not identify, physically or not, within the socially constructed gender binary. Issues arise when others are unaware of these perceived gender difference and (hopefully unintentionally) address someone as the incorrect gender. Gender-neutral pronouns serve as a way to solve misgendering individuals.

Gender-neutral pronouns, as opposed to gender-inclusive pronouns such as 'he or she', attempt to avoid gendering someone based off their physical appearance. There have been many reasons from those in opposition to gender-neutral pronouns. One claim that caught my attention has been from prescriptive grammarians—amateurs and experts alike—who posit that singular 'they' is ungrammatical. While standard conventions suggest that 'they' is exclusively a third-person plural pronoun, people still use 'they' for a single referent.

Studies (e.g., Shuy, Wolfram & Riley 1967; Wolfram 1969) have shown that certain linguistic forms are seen across all members of a group, despite stereotypes that only a certain group talks this way. Furthermore, these forms are more noticeable if they are socially prestigious or stigmatized variants (Finegan & Rickford 2004: 69). There are constraints on this

variability such as age, ethnicity, the conversation, region, and sex; however, the constraint of sex has so far only included male and female. It has not explored gender as a separate constraint from sex nor has it explored the constraint of queerness.

Thus, I conducted a study on general pronoun usage and compared third-person personal pronoun usage between colleges students of the queer community and college students of the non-queer community. Predictions were that (1) queer participants will use gender-neutral pronouns (particularly singular 'they') more than non-queer participants, but that (2) both queer and non-queer participants will use gender-neutral pronouns with varying degrees, dependent upon specific referents; moreover, (3) gender-neutral pronouns will be more apparent in the speaking task than the writing task since participants are unable to monitor and revise their language usage as clearly in such an informal context. The study may provide insight into the gender neutrality that already exists subconsciously in written and spoken language.

Method

There are four linguistic domains of oral languages: listening and reading make up input or perception, while speaking and writing make up the output or production. Due to limited resources and equipment, this study focuses on language production through tasks and on language perception through responses to the background information.

Production Tasks

The study consisted of two production tasks that each assess different contexts of language: formal and informal.

Writing task. A cloze test (see Appendix A), also known as a fill-in-the-blank test, was created to assess participants' writing skills and formal English. A cloze test was necessary to see what the participants would put in the blanks where pronouns are appropriate. The participants

were only instructed to fill in the blanks, and they were not explicitly told to use a pronoun. There were a total of 20 items, 5 of which were distractors. The test included three personal pronoun cases: subject, object, and possessive. These personal pronouns had five possible referents: indefinite pronouns (e.g., 'anyone'); gendered names (e.g., 'Sarah'); non-gendered names (e.g., 'Alex'); gendered generic nouns (e.g., 'lawyer'); and non-gendered generic nouns (e.g., 'student'). The writing task has specific morphosyntactic constraints that more directly dictate what the participant can do, unlike the speaking task.

Speaking task. With very little direction, the storytelling was written minimally to provide insight into participants' speaking skills. The speaking prompt (Appendix B) asks for the participant to tell the researcher a story about a student and a professor for no more than three minutes. The participants were also told that the story must be fictional and that the participants could not be the professor or the student. This last restriction was implemented to ensure a participant's usage of third-person pronouns. The prompt was designed specifically to see which pronouns the participant would use given two typically gender-neutral generic nouns. After the research began the recording device, the participant could begin. Afterwards, the audio recording was transcribed and then deleted.

Perception Assessment

Background information was collected for social variability, queer or non-queer categorization, and perception of pronoun usage through a background information sheet (see Appendix C).

Background information sheet. Data on age, year in school, race, educational attainment of parents, first language(s), identity, gender-neutral pronoun usage, self-identifying pronouns, and gender-neutral pronoun self-definition were collected. Sex, gender, and sexual

orientation were not explicitly asked. Instead, broad questions were asked to reflect how the individuals express themselves within a broader scope of general queerness and awareness of queerness.

Queer or non-queer. Participants were asked, “Do you identify as something other than cisgender or heterosexual?” to ascertain queer identity from the participants. I avoided the usage of the word ‘queer’ in my collection since the term still has negative connotations outside of and within the queer community. Furthermore, I defined ‘cisgender’ and ‘homosexual’ in case participants were not familiar with the terms. This is the basis on which I frame my group comparison.

Personal and interpersonal pronoun usage. To assess language perception of pronoun usage, I asked that participants what pronouns they use for themselves and for others. On the background information sheet, participants had to answer “What pronouns do you use to identify yourself?” Additionally, they were asked if they “use gender-neutral pronouns in [their] language?” with options corresponding to using gender-neutral pronouns until someone says their pronouns; using gender-neutral pronouns if someone asks for them to be used; and not using gender-neutral pronouns in any situation. There was also an option for participations to provide an alternative response.

Defining ‘gender-neutral pronoun’. At the end of the background information sheet, participants were asked, “What is a gender-neutral pronoun? Please elaborate in the remaining space.” This question was incorporated to assess participants’ perceptions (and misconceptions) of gender-neutral pronouns.

Deception Debrief

At the end of the study, participants were made aware that the researchers withheld that the tests were designed to get them to use pronouns because studies have shown that people change their language usage to what they think researchers are trying to study (e.g., Lippi-Green 1997 and Fasold 1972). After being debriefed completely about the study, participants had the opportunity to withdraw in which case all of their data would be deleted. Participants had to sign the post-debriefing consent (Appendix D) affirming that they recognized the deception used at the beginning of the study and still consent to their data being used.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics was the main source of analysis for this study. Percentages were taken of the responses to compare across queer status since there were fewer queer participants than non-queer participants. The presence or absence of gender-neutral pronouns were noted in both tasks. Additionally, all responses were counted and compared.

For the cloze test, the responses were collected and categorized as 1) a repeated referent; 2) a gendered pronoun ('he' or 'she'); 3) he/she gender-inclusive pronouns; pre-existing gender-neutral pronouns such as 4) 'they/them/their' and 5) 'it'; and 6) introduced terms such as 'xe/xym/xyr'. Responses that were not third-person pronouns or repeated referents were excluded. Responses for the audio recording included the same categorizations in addition to 7) generic noun and 8) name.

For the speech analysis, Labov's 'principle of accountability' (1969: 737-8, fn. 20) was used as a framework. Labov underscores that multiple utterances of a linguistic variant must be reflected as a proportion of total possible opportunities of using the linguistic form for a group of speakers. Furthermore, Labov believes that 5 to 10 speakers of a group are sufficient for a

representative descriptive analysis. Thus, proportions were taken from the speaking task for each variant in relation to total number of linguistic variation for a specific referent: the student or the professor.

Results

Participant Population

There was a total of 66 original participants in this study who were recruited through word-of-mouth and templates for a flyer (see Appendix E) and an email (see Appendix F). Of these 66 participants, only five were excluded from the analysis due to disinterest (1), repeated participation (1), or not knowing English as a first language (3). Participant information was collected through a background information sheet.

Perception Assessment

School year, age, race, and parental educational attainment. The average year in college among participants was 2.54, and the average age was 20.23. For race identity, the vast majority of participants (81.87%) identified as White. Moreover, 4 (6.56%) participants identified as Mixed Race, the same number identified as Black or African American, and 2 (3.28%) who identified as Asian. 1 (1.64%) wrote in Hispanic/Latino. For parental educational attainment, many participants (36.89%) indicated that their parents at least received a bachelor's degree. About the same amount of participants (33.61%) had parents who received a graduate or professional degree. All of the participants' parents at least received a high school diploma or general education diploma (GED).

Pronoun identity, gender-neutral pronoun usage, and queerness. Gender and sex were not collected; however, self-identify pronouns were collected, which may reflect the gender expression of the participants (Butler 1990: 25). 68.85% of participants indicated 'she' pronouns,

and 21.31% of participants indicated 'he' pronouns. 9.84% participants wrote in 'I' from which gender expression cannot be inferred. No participants indicated self-identification with gender-neutral pronouns.

Queer and non-queer participant comparison. Tables 1-5 show that the background information for the queer and non-queer participants are relatively the same across age, year in school, race, and parental educational attainment. However, the data differ most noticeably for gender-neutral pronoun usage for others. While queer participants indicated that they either use gender-neutral pronouns until someone says their preference (27.78%) or uses gender-neutral pronouns if someone asks for them to be used (72.22%), some non-queer participants responded that they never use gender-neutral pronouns (18.60%) or that they provided alternative options (6.98%), which were primarily additional commentary (e.g., 'They' is used when gender is unknown or unimportant).

Production Tasks

Tables 6-24 provide data on the writing and speaking tasks. Results for the writing task are tabulated as follows: categorical and sub-categorical data (tables 6 and 7); all of the responses (table 8); response comparisons for cases, summarized and broken down (tables 9-12); and response comparisons for referents, summarized and broken down (tables 13-18). Results for the speaking task are tabulated as follows: all utterances for referents, collectively and separately (tables 19-21) and by cases (tables 22-24). The following sections report the results.

Writing task. Table 6 reflects a categorical overview of the responses to the cloze test. Both queer and non-queer participants filled in the blanks with gendered pronouns the majority of the time (66.32%). 31.34% of the time, they answered with a gender-neutral term, and the referent was repeated the remainder of the time. Moreover, queer participants were more likely

to respond with a gender-neutral pronoun than non-queer participants (37.80% to 28.62%), whereas non-queer students were more likely to respond with a gendered pronoun than queer students (68.89% to 60.24%). No participants responded with introduced pronouns such as 'xe' or 'xym'.

When looking further at the specific possible responses in Table 7, participants filled in the blanks primarily with he-pronouns (35.91%), followed closely by they-pronouns (30.99%) and not the other gendered responses such as she-pronouns (20.82%) and he/she gender-inclusive pronouns (9.59%). Between the two groups, queer participants were less likely to use he/she gender-inclusive pronouns than non-queer participants (6.30% to 10.99%). The non-queer participants were much more likely to respond with he-pronouns (37.44%) than they-pronouns (28.12%), whereas the reverse was true for queer participants: There was a tendency for them to respond with they-pronouns (37.80%) than he-pronouns (32.28%). A breakdown of all responses is provided in Table 8.

Cases. When looking at the participants' responses across the different cases (subject, object, and possessive), it was found in Table 9 that gendered pronouns were most likely to be used across all cases (62.26%, 50.82%, and 45.57% for subject, object, and possessive cases, respectively). Participants had a higher tendency to use they-pronouns in object and possessive cases (33.77% and 35.08%, respectively) than in the subject case (18.36%). There were instances in which participants filled in the blanks with irrelevant responses, i.e., responses that were not the referent or a pronoun being used in the third-person singular. Irrelevant responses were most apparent in the possessive case (9.84%) with much fewer instances in the object (4.92%) and subject (2.95%) cases.

Subject case. Table 10 shows a comparison of responses for a subject-case referent across queer and non-queer participants. Both groups responded primarily with gendered pronouns. However, when a gendered pronoun was not used, queer participants tended to use they-pronouns more than non-queer participants (23.33% to 16.28%, respectively), and non-queer participants tended to use he/she gender-inclusive pronouns at about 12.09 percent of the time more than queer participants, who used it 8.89 percent of the time. 1.40 percent of non-queer participants responded with it-pronouns.

Object case. Similar results were found with responses in the object case for repeating the referent, gendered pronoun usage, and queer and non-queer likelihood in using he/she gender-inclusive pronouns and they-pronouns with detailed percentages in Table 11. In contrast to the subject case, queer participants had more of a tendency (14.44%) to provide an irrelevant response than non-queer participants (7.91%). No participants used it-pronouns in the object case.

Possessive case. In Table 12, the percentages show that the responses in the possessive case are different from those in the subject and object cases. While queer participants had a tendency to use gendered pronouns the most, 48.37% of the time, queer participants tended to use they-pronouns more than gendered pronouns (40.00% of the time compared to 38.89%). There were similar response rates for repeating the referent. No participants used it-pronouns in the possessive case.

Referents. When looking at the participants' responses across different referents (indefinite pronoun, non-gendered name, gendered name, non-gendered generic noun, and gendered generic noun), the data in Table 13 shows that the response rate for gendered pronouns and they-pronouns is the highest across referents. Participants answered mostly with gendered

pronouns for non-gendered names (79.78%), gendered names (90.16%), and gendered generic nouns (58.47%). The other referents, indefinite pronouns and non-gendered generic nouns, had response rates for they-pronouns of 76.50 percent and 44.81 percent, respectively. Participants only had a slight tendency to provide they-pronouns for a non-gendered generic noun with the response rate for gendered pronouns (36.07%) not far behind. There were response rates of irrelevant answers for indefinite pronouns and gendered generic nouns (12.57% and 9.84%, respectively) than non-gendered names (2.73%), gendered names (2.19%), and non-gendered generic nouns (2.19%).

Indefinite pronoun. Table 14 shows that queer participants responded with they-pronouns more than non-queer participants for indefinite pronouns (88.89% to 71.32%). Moreover, queer students had a higher response rate of they-pronouns than non-queer students, and non-queer students had a slightly higher response rate of 8.53 percent than queer participants' response rate of 5.56 percent. There was a higher response rate for non-queer participants to fill in the blanks with irrelevant responses (16.28%) than queer participants (3.70%). There were no instances in which the participants used it-pronouns or repeated the referent for an indefinite pronoun referent.

Non-gendered name. Participants were extremely more likely to respond with gendered pronouns given a non-gendered name (74.07% for queer participants and 82.17% for non-queer participants, respectively). Moreover, from Table 15, queer participants were more likely to provide responses with he/she gender-inclusive pronouns (11.11% to 6.20%) and they-pronouns (9.26% to 4.65%) than non-queer students. The response rate for repeating the referent and answering with an irrelevant response were close to one another. No participants used an it-pronoun with a non-gendered name.

Gendered name. Table 16 shows that response rates for gendered names were extremely likely to be a gendered pronoun for both queer participants (92.59%) and non-queer participants (89.15%). A few non-queer participants (3.10%) responded with they-pronouns, and it was slightly more likely for a non-queer participant (6.20%) to respond by repeating the referent than a queer participant (1.85%).

Non-gendered generic noun. There was a high response rate for they-pronouns given a non-gendered generic noun from both groups of participants (55.56% for queer participants and 40.31% for non-queer participants) according to Table 17. However, the non-queer participants had close response rates for gendered pronouns (36.43%, which is similar to queer participants' response rate of 35.19%) and he/she gender-inclusive pronouns (20.16%, which was not similar to queer participants' response rate of 3.70%). There was an extremely small response rate for it-pronouns from non-queer participants (0.78%) for which there were no such responses from queer participants. The responses rates for repeated referent and irrelevant responses from queer and non-queer participants were similar.

Gendered generic noun. Table 18 shows that queer and non-queer students had a tendency to use gendered pronouns with response rates of 50.00 percent and 62.02 percent, respectively. There were extremely low response rates from non-queer participants for repeating referent (0.78%) and it-pronouns (0.78%). Similar data represented queer participants with 1.85 percent and no responses, respectively. If participants filled in the blanks with other answers, the response rates varied for both queer and non-queer participants, respectively: for he/she gender inclusive pronouns, 9.26 percent and 16.28 percent; for they-pronouns, 24.07 percent and 12.40 percent; and for irrelevant information, 14.81 percent and 7.75 percent.

Speaking task. Within the framework for Labov's principle of accountability (1969: 737-8, fn. 20), only 5 to 10 speakers of a group are needed to show systematic usage of linguistic forms. Each variant for a linguistic form was categorized and counted as a repeating noun, a generic noun, a name, she-pronouns, he-pronouns, he/she gender-inclusive pronouns, it-pronouns, or they-pronouns. There was one speaking prompt, which had two non-gendered generic nouns.

Referents. Table 19 reflects an overview of utterances for both referents: 'student' and 'professor'. Overall, there was a tendency for participants to use a repeated referent (34.85%) or use she-pronouns (33.94%). When breaking down the utterances between queer and non-queer participants, two variants had noticeable differences. Queer participants tended to use they-pronouns more than non-queer participants (13.64% to 9.15%), whereas non-queer participants tended to use he-pronouns more than queer participants (15.40% to 12.30%). The utterances for repeated referent, generic noun, name, she-pronouns, he/she gender-inclusive pronouns, and it-pronouns were about the same (within a two-percent range) across the two groups.

Student. Table 20 shows the utterances for 'student' as the referent. There was a tendency for non-queer participants to use a repeated referent more than queer students (24.58% to 21.74%). Also, there was a tendency for queer students to use they-pronouns more than non-queer students (18.97% to 13.32%). The utterances for repeated generic noun, name, she-pronouns, and he-pronouns were within a two-percent range. There were no utterances for he/she gender-inclusive pronouns and it-pronouns.

Professor. There was more variation with the amount of utterances for 'professor' as the referent as shown in Table 21. There was a tendency for queer participants to repeat the referent (66.12%) than for non-queer participants (51.68%). Non-queer participants were more likely

than queer participants to say a name (6.04% to 2.48%), she-pronouns (17.79% to 9.09%), and he-pronouns (20.13% to 16.53%). The amount of utterances for generic nouns, gendered pronouns, they-pronouns, and it-pronouns were all within a one-percent range.

Cases. The amount of utterances for the speaking prompt were compared across cases in which variants were used. Participants repeated the referent almost as much as using she-pronouns in the subject case. In the object case, the participants repeated the referent more than any other variants. Queer and non-queer participants were very likely to use she-pronouns in the possessive case.

Subject case. Table 22 shows that queer and non-queer participants tended to repeat the referent more than other utterances (37.11% and 36.02%, respectively). Participants also had similar utterance rates for a repeated referent, generic noun, she-pronouns, he/she gender-inclusive, and it-pronouns. For the subject case, there was tendency for queer participants to use they-pronouns compared to non-queer pronouns (16.02% to 8.75%). Non-queer participants were more likely than queer participants to utter a name (5.66% to 3.52%) or he-pronouns (15.61% to 9.77%).

Object case. Both groups of participants repeated the referent more than other variants (queer participants, 49.23%; non-queer participants, 51.33%). There was only one variant that dramatically differed in utterances between queer and non-queer participants in the object case, according to Table 23. Queer participants had a tendency to say to say she-pronouns (27.69%) more than non-queer participants (21.24%). Queer participants were as likely as non-queer participants to utter a generic noun, name, he-pronouns, he/she gender-inclusive pronouns, and they-pronouns. There were no instances in which the participants uttered it-pronouns in the object case.

Possessive case. In Table 24, it can be seen that queer and non-queer participants use she-pronouns more than other variants (49.06% and 57.78%, respectively), which were used more by non-queer participants. He-pronouns were used more by queer participants (22.64%) than by non-queer participants (16.30%). Queer and non-queer participants used they-pronouns about the same amount (11.32% and 11.11%, respectively). Both groups said names or he/she gender-inclusive pronouns about the same amount. There were no utterances of generic nouns or it-pronouns from either groups of participants.

Discussion

Perception Outcomes

Queer participants indicated on the background information questionnaire that they either used gender-neutral pronouns until the addressee made their pronouns known, or used gender-neutral pronouns if asked. Unlike the queer participants, the non-queer participants had mixed responses. 18.60 percent of the non-queer participants said that they never use gender-neutral pronouns. According to the data from the production tasks, this is not true. Not only does the data show that non-queer participants use gender-neutral pronouns—specifically singular ‘they’ and in some cases ‘it’—throughout the cloze test and the speaking task, but it also shows the instances in which gender-neutral pronouns are used.

Production Task Similarities

Overall, participants tended to use gendered pronouns, if pronouns were used at all, most often for both writing and speaking tasks, even when looking at a general comparison of responses between queer and non-queer participants. This is expected since usage of ‘he’, ‘she’, or ‘he or she’ for a single referent is what is prescribed through English grammar lessons throughout compulsory education. When gender-neutral pronouns were used, there was a

tendency for queer participants to use them more than non-queer participants, although there was usage of gender-neutral pronouns among non-queer participants as well. Interestingly, participants never used introduced gender-neutral pronouns. This may be for a couple of reasons. First, there is a large variety of introduced pronouns that are only assigned by the individuals who use them. In contrast, singular 'they' is widely known and used, whether consciously or subconsciously, by both queer and non-queer individuals. Second, no participants indicated that they used gender-neutral pronouns. The results may have been different if there had been participants who use any gender-neutral pronouns. Despite these similarities, differences arose when looking further at the specific responses—collectively and individually, across case and referent comparisons.

Cloze Test Differences

While participants collectively used more gendered pronouns, a detailed breakdown shows that queer participants responded with gender-neutral pronouns more often than gendered pronouns, whereas non-queer participants were more likely to respond with gendered pronouns than gender-neutral pronouns. Specifically, queer participants used they-pronouns the most as opposed to non-queer participants who used he-pronouns the most. This shows that singular 'they' is functioning as 'he' for a specific group of people who are more aware of the gender diversity.

With a closer look at the cases, gendered pronouns were primarily used across all three. The difference was in the possessive case: While gendered pronouns were primarily used, queer participants used they-pronouns the most, whereas non-queer participants used he-pronouns the most. Further variation was seen across referents as well. Both groups of participants responded

the most with they-pronouns for indefinite pronouns and non-gendered generic nouns; and with gendered pronouns for non-gendered names, gendered names, and gendered generic names.

Speaking Prompt Differences

There were fewer differences with the speaking prompt than with the cloze test. In fact, the rate of utterances was similar across all breakdowns except for one. Queer participants had the most utterances for repeating the referent, and non-queer participants' utterances were split between repeating the referent and using she-pronouns as was found in the combined data.

Group-preferential and Group-exclusive Forms

The pronoun usage of the two groups reflect gender-neutral pronouns as having both group-preferential forms and group-exclusive forms. Group-preferential forms are typically associated with pronunciation, and group-exclusive forms are typically associated with grammar (Wolfram 2004: 60-61). Gender-neutral pronouns exhibit grammar forms, and in some cases pronunciation forms, different from standard English conventions; however, specific gender-neutral pronouns fall under different group forms. Introduced gender-neutral pronouns such as 'xyr' would be associated with a group-exclusive form since these words sound different from words currently in English. 'They', which is a word currently used in English, has been prescribed with a specific grammatical association (e.g. 'they' is a third-person plural pronoun), and 'they' would be considered a group-preferential form. Introduced gender-neutral pronouns are exclusively used by the queer community, whereas singular 'they' is used by both communities.

Language Prescription

Standardized institutions drive the language people think they are allowed to use. The very citation manual, which this paper has used as a guide, suggests that writers avoid using

generic 'he'; however, the American Psychological Association does not support using gender-neutral pronouns in formal writing. The perceptions of these gender-neutral pronouns have been learned and prescribed through standardization by teachers and professors "responsible for setting the standard of linguistic behavior, norms which are acknowledged across a full range of social classes on a community-wide basis" (Wolfram 2004: 70). Students look at teachers and professors for how they should act and speak. Thus, it is especially imperative for teachers, professors, and administrators with this linguistic prestige to be accepting and encouraging usage of gender-neutral pronouns. This may already be happening at the classroom level. Pauwels and Winter (2006) found that Australian classroom teachers use gender-neutral alternatives to generic 'he' with support for singular 'they'. If greater acceptance and integration of gender-neutral pronouns is achieved, the usage of gender-neutral pronouns can move from having covert prestige within queer (and its ally) communities to having overt prestige.

Inclusive Language and College Campuses

Since the participants for this study were college students, particular attention should be focused on how college campuses can overtly and covertly promote gender-neutral pronouns. One way of doing this is to incorporate promotion-oriented policies to promote information on gender-neutral pronouns, usage guides, and safe-space courses. I recommended in another study (Darr & Kibbey 2016) that colleges should have explicit protection for queer students in their policies, missions, values, and goals in order to be compliant with the protection granted under Title IX. This representation could seek to ameliorate lives of queer students who constantly face discrimination, which dramatically affects their school performance (GLSEN 2013). Additionally, departments should adopt grammar handbooks that allow the usage of gender-

neutral pronouns and/or that contextualize grammar rules to reflect the history of language change that occurs in response to cultural needs (Zuber & Reed 1993).

Future Directions

I would like to expand this study to include a larger sample size. For the cloze test, I would like to include more distractors so that participants may not be able to figure out that the study is designed to look for pronoun usage. For the speaking prompt, I would like to assess the relationship between more referents, specifically non-gendered and gendered names as well as non-gendered and gendered generic nouns. For the background information questionnaire, I would like to include more detailed questions about identity and ask ample questions about social networks since studies (e.g., Milroy 1987) have shown that social networks affect language usage. I would also like to test the other two domains of language (listening and reading) and not only one (writing and speaking). I would also utilize electroencephalography (EEG) testing to acquire event-related potential (ERP) readings for listening and reading tests. These ERP readings would provide insight into the cognitive recognition of grammatical (P600) violations (Kutas & Hillyard 1980) or semantic (N400) violations (Neville et. al, 1991; Osterhout & Holcomb, 1992). Thus, if the ERP results do not show a P600 ERP when hearing or reading a gender-neutral pronoun, then the participant recognizes the gender-neutral pronoun as correct, whether the participant believes it to be correct or not.

Conclusion

For this study, I investigated general pronoun usage and compared third-person personal pronoun usage between colleges students of the queer community and college students of the non-queer community. Predictions were that (1) queer participants will use gender-neutral pronouns (particularly singular 'they') more than non-queer participants, but that (2) both queer

and non-queer participants will use gender-neutral pronouns with varying degrees, dependent upon specific referents; moreover, (3) gender-neutral pronouns will be more apparent in the speaking task than the writing task since participants are unable to monitor and revise their language usage as clearly in such an informal context. (1) and (2) were true; however, (3) was not. The speaking task showed a tendency for speakers to use gendered pronouns more, specifically she-pronouns. This may be due to participants, of whom a majority indicated using she-pronouns, envisioning themselves as the student and/or professor despite being explicitly told that they could not be the student or the professor. This study may have added insight into the gender neutrality that already exists subconsciously in written and spoken language; while neither group of college students, queer or non-queer, used introduced gender-neutral pronouns, these participants collectively used singular 'they'. This shows that gender-neutral pronouns are not exclusive to the queer community. Faculty, staff, and administration with social prestige should support usage of gender-neutral pronouns with guideline and pronoun-preference indication trends sweeping the United States. This study linguistically reflects the usage of gender-neutral pronouns beyond queer communities to ensure inclusive safe spaces for transgender and non-binary individuals.

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Tables

Table 1

Background Information: Year and Age (average)			
<i>Constraint</i>	All Participants (N = 61)	+Queer Participants (N = 18)	-Queer Participants (N = 43)
Year	2.54	2.22	2.67
Age	20.23	19.61	20.49

Table 2

Background Information: Self-Identified Pronouns (percentage)			
<i>Personal Pronoun</i>	All Participants (N = 61)	+Queer Participants (N = 18)	-Queer Participants (N = 43)
She	68.85	61.11	72.09
He	21.31	38.89	13.95
I	9.84	0	13.95

Table 3

Background Information: Race (percentage)			
<i>Race</i>	All Participants (N = 61)	+Queer Participants (N = 18)	-Queer Participants (N = 43)
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0	0
Asian	3.28	5.56	2.33
Black or African American	6.56	5.56	6.98
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0	0
White	81.97	77.78	83.72
Mixed	6.56	5.56	6.98
Prefer Not to Respond	1.64	5.56	0

Table 4

Background Information: Parental Educational Attainment (percentage)			
<i>Level of Educational Attainment</i>	All Participants (N = 61)	+Queer Participants (N = 18)	-Queer Participants (N = 43)
No High School Diploma or Equivalent	0	0	0
High School Diploma or Equivalent	9.84	13.89	8.14
Some College	17.21	19.44	16.28
Associate's Degree	2.46	2.78	2.33
Bachelor's Degree	36.89	36.11	37.21
Master's Degree	17.21	11.11	19.77
Doctorate Degree	9.84	16.67	6.98
Professional Degree	6.56	0	9.30

Table 5

Background Information: Gender-Neutral Pronoun Usage (percentage)			
<i>Uses Gender-Neutral Pronouns...</i>	All Participants (N = 61)	+Queer Participants (N = 18)	-Queer Participants (N = 43)
Until Pronouns Made Explicitly	14.75	27.78	9.30
If Asked	67.21	72.22	65.12
Never	13.11	0	18.60
Other	4.92	0	6.98

Table 6

Cloze Test: Categorization of Responses (percentage)			
<i>Response</i>	All Participants (N = 855)	+Queer Participants (N = 254)	-Queer Participants (N = 601)
+Gendered Pronoun	66.32	60.24	68.89
-Gendered Pronoun	31.34	37.80	28.62
Repeated Referent	2.34	1.97	2.50

Non-referent responses were excluded from this table.

Table 7

Cloze Test: Sub-Categorization of Responses (percentage)			
<i>Response</i>	All Participants (N = 855)	+Queer Participants (N = 254)	-Queer Participants (N = 601)
He-Pronouns	35.91	32.28	37.44
She-Pronouns	20.82	21.65	20.47
He/She-Pronouns	9.59	6.30	10.99
They-Pronouns	30.99	37.80	28.12
It-Pronouns	0.35	0	0.50
Introduced Pronouns	0	0	0
Repeated Referents	2.34	1.97	2.50

Non-referent responses were excluded from this table.

Table 8

Cloze Test: Breakdown of Responses (percentage)			
<i>Response</i>	All Participants (N = 855)	+Queer Participants (N = 254)	-Queer Participants (N = 601)
He	9.47	8.27	9.98
Him	13.80	12.99	14.14
His	12.63	11.02	13.31
She	13.10	14.17	12.65
Her	7.72	7.48	7.82
She or He	0.12	0	0.17
Her or Him	0	0	0
Her or His	0.12	0	0.17
He or She	3.74	2.76	4.16
Him or Her	2.57	1.18	3.16
His or Her	3.04	2.36	3.33
They	6.32	8.27	5.49
Them	12.16	15.35	10.82
Their	12.51	14.17	11.81
It-Pronouns	0.35	0	0.50
Introduced Pronouns	0	0	0
Repeated Referents	2.34	1.97	2.50
Total Responses	855	254	601

Non-referent responses were excluded from this table.

Table 9

Cloze Test: Response Comparison of Participants across Cases (percentage, N = 915)			
<i>Response</i>	Subject	Object	Possessive
Repeated Referent	2.30	3.28	0.98
Gendered Pronoun	62.26	50.82	45.57
He/She-Pronouns	11.15	7.21	8.52
They-Pronouns	18.36	33.77	35.08
It-Pronouns	0.98	0	0
Irrelevant	2.95	4.92	9.84

Table 10

Cloze Test: Response Comparison across Subject Case (percentage)			
<i>Response</i>	All Participants (N = 305)	+Queer Participants (N = 90)	-Queer Participants (N = 215)
Repeated Referent	2.30	3.33	1.86
Gendered Pronoun	64.26	63.33	64.65
He/She-Pronouns	11.15	8.89	12.09
They-Pronouns	18.36	23.33	16.28
It-Pronouns	0.98	0	1.40
Irrelevant	2.95	1.11	3.72

Table 11

Cloze Test: Response Comparison across Object Case (percentage)			
<i>Response</i>	All Participants (N = 305)	+Queer Participants (N = 90)	-Queer Participants (N = 215)
Repeated Referent	3.28	1.11	4.19
Gendered Pronoun	50.82	50.00	51.16
He/She-Pronouns	7.21	3.33	8.84
They-Pronouns	33.77	43.33	29.77
It-Pronouns	0	0	0
Irrelevant	4.92	2.22	6.05

Table 12

Cloze Test: Response Comparison across Possessive Case (percentage)			
<i>Response</i>	All Participants (N = 305)	+Queer Participants (N = 90)	-Queer Participants (N = 215)
Repeated Referent	0.98	1.11	0.93
Gendered Pronoun	45.57	38.89	48.37
He/She-Pronouns	8.52	5.56	9.77
They-Pronouns	35.08	40.00	33.02
It-Pronouns	0	0	0
Irrelevant	9.84	14.44	7.91

Table 13

Cloze Test: Response Comparisons of Participants across Referents (percentage, N = 915)					
<i>Response</i>	Indefinite Pronoun	-Gendered Name	+Gendered Name	-Gendered Generic Noun	+Gendered Generic Noun
Repeated Referent	0	3.83	4.92	1.09	1.09
Gendered Pronoun	3.28	79.78	90.16	36.07	58.47
He/She-Pronouns	7.65	7.65	0	15.37	14.21
They-Pronouns	76.50	6.01	2.19	44.81	15.85
It-Pronouns	0	0	0.55	0.55	0.55
Irrelevant	12.57	2.73	2.19	2.19	9.84

Table 14

Cloze Test: Comparison across Indefinite Pronoun (percentage)			
<i>Response</i>	All Participants (N = 183)	+Queer Participants (N = 54)	-Queer Participants (N = 129)
Repeated Referent	0	0	0
Gendered Pronoun	3.28	1.85	3.88
He/She-Pronouns	7.65	5.56	8.53
They-Pronouns	76.50	88.89	71.32
It-Pronouns	0	0	0
Irrelevant	12.57	3.70	16.28

Table 15

Cloze Test: Response Comparison across -Gendered Name (percentage)			
<i>Response</i>	All Participants (N = 183)	+Queer Participants (N = 54)	-Queer Participants (N = 129)
Repeated Referent	3.83	3.70	3.88
Gendered Pronoun	79.78	74.07	82.17
He/She-Pronouns	7.65	11.11	6.20
They-Pronouns	6.01	9.26	4.65
It-Pronouns	0	0	0
Irrelevant	2.73	1.85	3.10

Table 16

Cloze Test: Response Comparison across +Gendered Name (percentage)			
<i>Response</i>	All Participants (N = 183)	+Queer Participants (N = 54)	-Queer Participants (N = 129)
Repeated Referent	4.92	1.85	6.20
Gendered Pronoun	90.16	92.59	89.15
He/She-Pronouns	0	0	0
They-Pronouns	2.19	0	3.10
It-Pronouns	0.55	0	0.78
Irrelevant	2.19	5.56	0.78

Table 17

Cloze Test: Response Comparison across -Gendered Generic Noun (percentage)			
<i>Response</i>	All Participants (N = 183)	+Queer Participants (N = 54)	-Queer Participants (N = 129)
Repeated Referent	1.09	1.85	0.78
Gendered Pronoun	36.07	35.19	36.43
He/She-Pronouns	15.30	3.70	20.16
They-Pronouns	44.81	55.56	40.31
It-Pronouns	0.55	0	0.78
Irrelevant	2.19	3.70	1.55

Table 18

Cloze Test: Response Comparison across +Gendered Generic Noun (percentage)			
<i>Response</i>	All Participants (N = 183)	+Queer Participants (N = 54)	-Queer Participants (N = 129)
Repeated Referent	1.09	1.85	0.78
Gendered Pronoun	58.47	50.00	62.02
He/She-Pronouns	14.21	9.26	16.28
They-Pronouns	15.85	24.07	12.40
It-Pronouns	0.55	0	0.78
Irrelevant	9.84	14.81	7.75

Table 19

Speaking Prompt: All Utterances for Both Referents (percentage)			
<i>Variants</i>	All Participants (N = 1205)	+Queer Participants (N = 374)	-Queer Participants (N = 831)
Repeated Referent	34.85	36.10	34.30
Generic Noun	1.58	1.34	1.68
Name	3.98	2.67	4.57
She-Pronouns	33.94	33.42	34.18
He-Pronouns	14.44	12.30	15.40
He/She-Pronouns	0.58	0.53	0.60
They-Pronouns	10.54	13.64	9.15
It-Pronouns	0.08	0	0.12

Table 20

Speaking Prompt: All Utterances for Student Referent (percentage)			
<i>Variants</i>	All Participants (N = 786)	+Queer Participants (N = 253)	-Queer Participants (N = 533)
Repeated Referent	23.66	21.74	24.58
Generic Noun	1.91	1.19	2.25
Name	3.44	2.77	3.75
She-Pronouns	43.89	45.06	43.34
He-Pronouns	11.96	10.28	12.76
He/She-Pronouns	0	0	0
They-Pronouns	15.14	18.97	13.32
It-Pronouns	0	0	0

Table 21

Speaking Prompt: All Utterances for Professor Referent (percentage)			
<i>Variants</i>	All Participants (N = 419)	+Queer Participants (N = 121)	-Queer Participants (N = 298)
Repeated Referent	55.85	66.12	51.68
Generic Noun	0.95	1.65	0.67
Name	5.01	2.48	6.04
She-Pronouns	15.27	9.09	17.79
He-Pronouns	19.09	16.53	20.13
He/She-Pronouns	1.67	1.65	1.68
They-Pronouns	1.91	2.48	1.68
It-Pronouns	0.24	0	0.34

Table 22

Speaking Prompt: Subject Utterances for Both Referents (percentage)			
<i>Variants</i>	All Participants (N = 839)	+Queer Participants (N = 256)	-Queer Participants (N = 583)
Repeated Referent	36.85	37.11	36.02
Generic Noun	2.03	1.56	2.23
Name	5.01	3.52	5.66
She-Pronouns	31.35	31.64	31.22
He-Pronouns	13.83	9.77	15.61
He/She-Pronouns	0.36	0.39	0.34
They-Pronouns	10.97	16.02	8.75
It-Pronouns	0.12	0	0.17

Table 23

Speaking Prompt: Object Utterances for Both Referents (percentage)			
<i>Variants</i>	All Participants (N = 178)	+Queer Participants (N = 65)	-Queer Participants (N = 113)
Repeated Referent	50.56	49.23	51.33
Generic Noun	1.12	1.54	0.88
Name	2.81	1.54	3.54
She-Pronouns	23.60	27.69	21.24
He-Pronouns	13.48	13.85	13.27
He/She-Pronouns	0.56	0	0.88
They-Pronouns	7.87	6.15	8.85
It-Pronouns	0	0	0

Table 24

Speaking Prompt: Possessive Utterances for Both Referents (percentage)			
<i>Variants</i>	All Participants (N = 188)	+Queer Participants (N = 53)	-Queer Participants (N = 135)
Repeated Referent	13.30	15.09	12.59
Generic Noun	0	0	0
Name	0.53	0	0.74
She-Pronouns	55.32	49.06	57.78
He-Pronouns	18.09	22.64	16.30
He/She-Pronouns	1.60	1.89	1.48
They-Pronouns	11.17	11.32	11.11
It-Pronouns	0	0	0

Appendix A

ID#: _____

Please fill in the blanks for the following sentences. Each blank must be filled.

- D1. Jack came over to my house. I helped _____ with French homework.
- D2. The firefighter was very helpful. I thanked _____ for putting out the fire!
- D3. Someone called the office to pick up a package. I didn't answer the phone, so _____ left a voicemail.
- D4. The _____ ran outside to play in the snow.
- D5. Today my stomach hurts, but my parent says that I still need to go to _____.
- D6. I almost hit the pedestrian who ran across the road, but luckily I didn't hit _____!
- D7. Riley asked to borrow something from me. I need to get it back from _____.
- D8. My professor is great! _____ is very helpful.
- D9. Until I come back from the store, do not touch the _____.
- D10. Alex went to the grocery store. _____ bought a bag of apples.
- D11. When a student wants to change _____ major, I suggest contacting an advisor.
- D12. Sam ate a big bowl of soup. The recipe came from _____ grandparents.
- D13. _____ is essential for every camping trip.
- D14. I don't listen to my doctor when _____ tells me to take care of my body.
- D15. David picks up _____ sister from school everyday.
- D16. Everyone rides _____ bike to school.
- D17. Emily and I have been friends for four years, but _____ gets on my nerves.
- D18. I _____ coffee every day.
- D19. Anyone can come to the party as long as you ask me if you can bring _____ first.
- D20. The kindergarten teacher told me that _____ students misbehave often.

Key D1

Indefinite pronouns (3 - subject, 19 - object, 16 - possessive)

Gender-neutral names (10 - subject, 7 - object, 12 - possessive)

Gendered names (17 - subject, 1 - object, 15 - possessive)

Ungendered generic nouns (8 - subject, 6 - object, 11 - possessive)

Typically gendered generic nouns (14 - subject, 2 - object, 20 - possessive)

Appendix B

Speaking Prompt

Language Usage: Perception versus Production

Tell the researcher a story about a professor and a student. You may start anytime after the researcher begins audio recording. You will be asked to stop after 3 minutes if you choose to talk for that long.

Background Information

Appendix C

ID#: _____

C1. What pronouns do you use to identify yourself?

C2. What year are you? Please circle one.

1st year 2nd year 3rd year 4th year Other _____

C3. How old are you?

C4. What is your race? Please check all that apply.

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- I prefer not to respond

C5. What is the highest level of education attained of parent ONE? Please check one.

- Did not graduate high school
- High school diploma or GED
- Some college (1-4 years, no degree)
- Associate's degree (including occupational or academic degrees)
- Bachelor's degree (BA, BS, AB, etc.)
- Master's degree (MA, MS, MENG, MSW, etc.)
- Professional school degree (MD, DDC, JD, etc.)
- Doctorate degree (PhD, EdD, etc.)

C6. What is the highest level of education attained of parent TWO? Please check one.

- Did not graduate high school
- High school diploma or GED
- Some college (1-4 years, no degree)
- Associate's degree (including occupational or academic degrees)
- Bachelor's degree (BA, BS, AB, etc.)
- Master's degree (MA, MS, MENG, MSW, etc.)
- Professional school degree (MD, DDC, JD, etc.)
- Doctorate degree (PhD, EdD, etc.)

Appendix D

Debriefing Statement

Language Usage: Perception versus Production

The purpose of the study was to look at how people think they use language relates to how people actually use language. Studies have shown that certain features of language are shown across all groups of people, despite stereotypes that only a certain group talks that way. Previous studies have looked at how this is related to age, ethnicity, region, and sex. The researchers have not looked into this type of comparison between queer and non-queer individuals. The researcher was looking at three things:

1. General pronoun usage of queer and non-queer individuals;
2. Different types of pronoun usage within each group; and
3. The pronoun and the noun that represents.

In this study, the researcher is specifically looking at pronoun usage through writing and speaking tests. These tests were designed in ways that would get you to use a pronoun without explicitly telling you to use a pronoun. The researcher withheld that the tests were designed to get to use pronouns because studies have shown that people change their language usage to what they think researchers are trying to study (e.g., Lippi-Green 1997 and Fasold 1972).

Now that you have been completely informed about the study, you may choose to withdraw from the study, in which case all of your data will be deleted. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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POST-DEBRIEF CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I recognize the deception used initially in the study, and I still agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix E

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED ARE FOR A STUDY!

If you are willing to participate in a 30-minute session for a study on language usage, please contact Brandon Darr at bdarr@vols.utk.edu to set up a time to participate. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study, and you must bring your UT ID AND a valid ID with your date of birth.

Appendix F

Hello, all!

My name is Brandon Darr, and I am looking for participants in my study for my undergraduate thesis on language usage. If you would be willing to participate, please contact me at bdarr@vols.utk.edu to set up a time to participate. The entire session will not take more than 30 minutes. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and must bring a UT ID AND valid ID with your date of birth. Your participation would be greatly appreciated.

Best,
Brandon Darr
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