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Pronouns and Thoughts on Neutrality: Gender Concerns in Modern Grammar

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With increased social awareness of transgender and non-binary individuals, universities across the United States have implemented policies, made suggestions for inclusive language practices, and provided gender-neutral pronoun guides to avoid marginalizing these groups of people through adjusting personal pronoun usage. However, these measures have been met with mixed reception from students, parents, administrators, legislators, and others. As linguists, the authors looked at the situation with gender-neutral pronouns on campuses and investigated 1) an overview of how exactly language plays a role in identifying someone's gender; and 2) the historical linguistics and social contexts that surround this issue. The paper concludes with recommendations for gender-neutral pronouns in compliance with federal policies and university visions, missions, and goals to be more inclusive of genderqueer and non-binary individuals.

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1. Introduction

With increased social awareness of transgender and non-binary individuals, universities across the United States have implemented policies, made suggestions for inclusive language practices, and provided gender-neutral pronoun guides to avoid marginalizing these groups of people through adjusting personal pronoun usage. These measures have been met with mixed reception. At Harvard University, slightly more than 1 percent of the 4,000 students have indicated preference for gender-neutral pronouns through the university's registrar system¹. There has been little, if any, resistance to more inclusive language options among other top-tier colleges and universities. On the other hand, some institutions, such as at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, have received more public opposition.

Donna Braquet, Director of the Pride Center on the UT system's flagship campus, released a gender-neutral pronoun guide in a newsletter through the Office for Diversity & Inclusion on August 26, 2015. However, news commentators, Tennessee state legislators, and parents of UT students were quick to denounce the Office's gender-inclusive initiative before students and faculty had the opportunity to take into consideration the suggested gender-neutral pronouns². The main backlash was a result of a misunderstanding that the guide was a requirement from the Office and that the gender-neutral pronouns would completely replace 'she/her/hers' and 'he/him/his' pronouns. Instead, it was a suggestion to address others with gender-neutral pronouns without assuming their gender. Regardless of the intention of the memo, the uproar caused UT-system President Joe DiPietro and UT-Knoxville Chancellor Jimmy Cheek to remove the educational pronoun guide from the Office's website, and the Tennessee Senate Education Committee added discussion of the matter to its agenda on Wednesday, October 14, 2015.³ While "Diversity and Inclusion" was listed on the agenda, very little of the discussion was about gender-neutral pronouns.

Despite administrative opposition, the situation with the gender-neutral pronoun guide sparked awareness of gender differences and linguistic nuances on the University of Tennessee's campus, with language usage becoming a more popular topic in the school's newspaper, *The Daily Beacon*^{4,5}. There has been some outrage from faculty and students at the decision to take down the guide^{6,7}. Genderqueer and non-binary students have felt further marginalized on campus without support from administration for their preferred pronouns. They also fear what this could mean for their safety across campus since many transgender individuals receive verbal and physical abuse due to their gender identity.⁸

As linguists, we looked at the situation with gender-neutral pronouns on our campus and decided to 1) conduct an overview of how exactly language plays a role in identifying someone's gender; and 2) investigate the historical linguistics and social contexts that surround this issue. In the first section, we provide a background to the psychology of gender, with particular attention to the difference between sex and gender and how that difference is reflected in language and pronouns. In the second section, we take the relationship between gender and pronouns and look at how it influences society, specifically marginalized individuals who prefer to be referred to with gender-neutral pronouns. In the third section, we delineate the history of gender neutrality throughout personal pronouns, from proto-Indo-European roots to Modern English. In the fourth section, we discuss advantages and disadvantages to using gender-neutral pronouns. In the fifth and final section, we conclude the paper with recommendations for gender-neutral pronouns in compliance with federal policies and university visions, missions, and goals, with particular attention to the University of Tennessee, to be more inclusive of genderqueer and non-binary individuals.

2 . Gender, Sex, and Identity

When it comes to the human impulse to categorize the world around us, there are no categories more salient than modern conceptualizations of gender and sex. Gender, the seemingly more abstract of the two, is a category constrained by social criteria which can be used to designate an individual as a man or a woman.⁹ On a seemingly more scientific note, sex is usually defined as being composed of male and female subcategories which are determined by biological criteria. Though these categories seem to be conflicting, gender and sex are both socially constructed and categorize people based on arbitrary criteria that have changed throughout history. At present, clothing, body positioning, and hairstyle can code for gender categories, while chromosomes, genitalia, and hormones can code for sex categories. Each category is composed of a contrasting binary, which can be defined in opposition of its compliment: man and woman; male and female. If human nature and biology were so simple as to naturally occur in such categories, there would be no need for an analysis of gender-neutral pronouns or for senators to allot great amounts of time to the condemning of grammatical innovations. However, these categories do not naturally exist: they are created by people to convey a view of the world that in turn constrains how others view the world, and it is when those constraints break down that one sees the shortcoming of language.

2.1 Psychology of Gender

As defined above, gender is a category consisting of two sub-categories, man and woman, which are determined by social criteria surrounding self-expression.¹⁰ However, due to misconceptions of gender as an idea, many believe that sex and gender are inalienably linked or that gender is predetermined by the sex category assigned to an individual at birth. This is further complicated by the existence of gender roles, or the norms that are associated with a specific gender category (e.g. mothers being caregivers).¹¹ As a result of the gender-binary, gender roles and modes of expression also exist in binaries. However, gender as defined above is not necessarily constrained to two categories. As discussed at length below, there exist genderqueer, non-binary, and transgender individuals who express their gender in a way that is neither truly masculine nor truly feminine, or in a way that is incongruous with the sex they were assigned at birth.

2.2 Psychology of Sex

Sex is a social category consisting of the sub-categories, male and female, which are determined by biological criteria such as genitalia and hormones¹². Although this might seem straightforward and natural, male and female are not actually such clear-cut categories: intersex refers to the sex of an individual who has both feminine and masculine biological characteristics or has ambiguous genitalia at birth. These ambiguities are often surgically altered by doctors shortly after birth in order to facilitate an individual's entrance into society as a fully functional male or female. The criteria for being fully functional is more often than not defined as whether or not an intersex individual will be capable of having pleasurable sex in adulthood, a point centered around a pre-existing notion of a heterosexual framework. The existence of intersex people causes a problem for the societal construction of sex as a meaningful, objective category. So, if the biological criteria for sex categories cannot accurately portray the biology of an intersex individual, sex as a category faces a problem of meaningfulness that is not easily refuted.

2.3 Linguistic Expressions of Identity

The categories of sex and gender are intricately linked as a result of several centuries of cultural evolution and posturing. As a result, words referring to gender are often based on words referring to sex. This has become the center of an identity crisis within English. Beginning from a more general point, lexical items are neither static nor independent of culture and context. Thus, if language codes only that which is relevant to the specific cultural context in which it exists, one should be able to find non-binary and gender-neutral words in English to refer to individuals existing outside of or in spite of such categories. Such words do exist, but until recently, they were

almost exclusively pejorative: hermaphrodite for intersex individuals, ‘pansy’ or ‘sissy’ for feminine men, butch for masculine women, trannie for transgender individuals, etc. What we see occurring with the prescription of new pronouns in English, then, is not simply adding to our language or creating new categories but legitimizing taboo categories of identity and reconceptualizing derogatory terminology in a positive light.

3. Non-Binary Individuals and Pronouns

Many people identify as either a man or a woman, but not everyone. There is a broad range of gender identities, including transgender woman, transgender man, non-binary person, and genderqueer person. The latter two completely avoid confining the individual to a binary gender. With increased awareness of gender itself as a social construct, more individuals are identifying as genders across or outside of the binary of man and woman. Some students fall into social categorizations such as transgender or non-binary. These students may not feel comfortable being addressed with the gendered, third-person singular pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’. Misgendering students in this way may cause them to feel uncomfortable among peers and in society. Individuals prefer some pronouns over others, but there is no specific formula for preferred pronouns being associated with a specific gender. Transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer identities have implications for English pedagogy. As knowledge of gender and its linguistic framing expands, the English language must reflect societal awareness of linguistic representation. Before discussing the instruction and prescription of personal pronouns to non-binary individuals, this section will provide a comprehensive background of various genders, terms, and pronouns, and the implications of misgendering and excluding these students in schools.

3.1 Pronoun Usage

Pronouns are a way of avoiding redundancy. It would be repetitive to say, for example, “Janet reviewed the syllabi for Janet’s classes. Then, Janet bought textbooks.” By standard conventions taught in schools, this sentence would be simplified as, “Janet reviewed the syllabi for her classes. Then, she bought textbooks,” using feminine pronouns ‘she’ and ‘her’. However, this usage relies on a number of assumptions, namely that 1) Janet is a woman based off physical appearance and/or name; 2) ‘she’ pronouns are gendered for women; and 3) Janet prefers ‘she’ pronouns. These assumptions are based off mainstream English prescriptions that do not reflect all individual identities. We will discuss English pronouns and their conventions before introducing other non-standard pronouns.

3.2 The Seven Subject Pronouns

In the English language, there are seven personal pronouns that can be used as a subject pronoun: ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘she’, ‘he’, ‘it’, ‘we’, and ‘they’. These are categorized into first person, second person, and third person usage for “I and we”, “you”, and “she, he, it, and they”, respectively. These categories are further separated into singular and plural pronouns. Thus, these are the following conventions: The first-person pronouns are ‘I’ and ‘we’, which are singular and plural, respectively; the second-person pronoun ‘you’ is singular, and, in some cases, is understood as plural; the third-person pronouns are ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘it’, and ‘they’, with the ‘they’ being the only plural third-person pronoun. The first- and second-person pronouns are often uncontested. However, because third-person pronouns describe other nouns and impose an understanding of their referents, their usage—particularly that of the singular, third-person pronouns—receives more attention.

‘It’ is used to refer to an inanimate object or a non-human, animate being such as a ball or a dog. ‘He’ and ‘she’ are used to refer to human beings, specifically for individuals who identify as masculine or feminine, respectively. Problems arise when gender (and therefore a gendered pronoun) does not match physical appearance or the sex assigned to the individual at birth.

For individuals who are transgender, non-binary, or genderqueer, the conventional third-person singular pronouns serve not as a way to avoid redundancy but to misgender and marginalize these groups. Thus, different pronouns should be used to refer to these individuals.

3.3 Terms and Definitions of Non-Binary Individuals

While we recognize that terms for gender identity can vary between individuals, the provided definitions for people outside of the gender binary are ones that we feel are the most commonly accepted definitions of the ones we found¹³. Cisgender is a description for a person whose gender identity, gender expression, and biological sex align. If someone does not identify as a man, but expresses themselves as masculine and is biologically male, then the individual is non-cisgender. Genderqueer is 1) an all-encompassing term used to describe people whose gender falls outside of the gender binary; and 2) a person who identifies as both a man and a woman, or as neither a man nor a woman. Genderqueer is different from non-binary; genderqueer covers identity and expression, whereas non-binary refers specifically to identity and not to expression. Transgender individuals may identify as masculine, feminine, or neither masculine nor feminine. Because transgender and non-binary individuals are not a part of the binary, gendered pronouns based off the binary are inaccurate for describing people in these groups. Thus, gender-neutral pronouns are more appropriate for referring to transgender and non-binary individuals.

3.4 Gender-Neutral Pronouns for Non-Binary Individuals

Multiple pronouns have been introduced to be used to properly describe a transgender or genderqueer individual.¹⁴ 'Zie' and 'hir' were first used by the transgender and genderqueer community, yet these options were considered too feminine since 'sie' means 'she' in German and 'hir' is a feminine pronoun in Middle English. Ne/nem/nir/nirs/nemself was introduced to avoid gender-neutral pronouns that are derived from gendered pronouns. The 'n' at the beginning of each pronoun stands for neutral, and there is a clear grammatical pattern for its derivations. Other gender-neutral pronouns have been criticized for maintaining gender binary such as ve/ver/vis/vis/verself with clear male and female pronoun derivations. Spivak pronouns (ey/em/eir/eirs/eirself), pronouns used by Michael Spivak, are free of gender since they use the pronoun 'they' and its declensions without 'th-' in front of them. While Spivak avoids gendering, these pronouns conflict with English morphological rules, which dictate the formation of words in the language, subject-verb agreement ("Ey wants to be eirself." rather than "Ey want to be eirselves.") and pre-existing pronunciations in informal English ('em' for 'them' and 'im' for 'him'). One of the most common pronominal systems used is ze/zir/zir/zirs/zirself. Ze is derived from earlier 'sie' and 'hir' and uses 'she' declensions. Some people use xe/xem/xyr/xyrs/xemself to avoid the feminine association with ze, but the orthographic change poses difficulty in pronunciation.

3.5 Preferred Pronouns and Mainstream Culture

While there have been many gender-neutral pronouns introduced, none have seemed to work their way into mainstream English.¹⁵ These terms are specific to transgender and genderqueer communities, which makes it difficult for them to be used by people outside of those communities. There have been attempts from divisions of diversity and inclusion on college campuses to introduce these terms to the average person. A common suggestion from these campuses is for professors to integrate pronoun preferences into semester introductions. Then, everyone can introduce their preferred pronouns and avoid misgendering transgender, genderqueer, and non-binary individuals. However, a classroom full of unfamiliar faces is a challenging social context in which to share such information if the transgender or genderqueer individuals whose preferred pronouns may not match their gender presentation and could expose their gender identity.

The ability for one person to tell another person their preferred pronouns is a point of privilege that is not available to most people within the transgender and genderqueer communities. If a transgender woman, for example, who physically looks like a man has to announce preferred

pronouns of “she/her/hers” to the class, then this reveal would put the transgender woman in an uncomfortable, and possibly dangerous, position. She would not only be telling the class her preferred pronouns, but she would also be sharing her identity with the class and making herself vulnerable to the attacks and ridicule faced by many transgender and genderqueer individuals. Asking for preferred pronouns in order to avoid misgendering is well intended, but the outcome could do more harm than good.

An alternative to asking for preferred pronouns would be to use gender-neutral pronouns to address everyone until the individual indicates a preference to use certain pronouns and/or reveal their gender identity. Professors could use terms already in the transgender and genderqueer communities such as ‘ze/xe’, but students in the classroom who are not members of these communities may misinterpret these gender-neutral terms as being exclusive to individuals who identify as transgender or genderqueer. Thus, the challenge for gender-neutral pronouns is not only to be inclusive of marginalized transgender and genderqueer individuals, but also to use terms that are already familiar with cisgender people. This could be achieved by using a term that is already used as a singular pronoun in informal contexts: ‘they’. Now, we will provide a historical sketch of personal pronouns, particularly subject pronouns, from proto-Indo-European origins to Modern English.

4. Historical Aspects of Subject Pronouns

Historically, the English language has been subject to everything from conquering Romans to the subtle influence of its own colonies. The English personal subject pronouns, in regards to the entire historical development of the language, represent a small facet of their grammar. However, the development of these pronouns illuminates sociological and developmental changes that occurred within English and alongside the other Germanic languages. In addition to the pronouns themselves, the aspects of gender and plurality have also changed, affecting the way in which we organize the pronominal system and its derivatives. The following represents an analysis of the subject pronouns as first and foremost a system, with the third person pronouns being discussed in due course but within the context of its paradigm.

4.1 Re-constructed Proto-Indo-European Roots

The earliest ancestor of the English language has no extant written records with which to analyze or interpret. However, through methods in comparative historical linguistics, it is possible to reconstruct words and grammar from ancient languages based on evidence from their still-spoken, daughter languages. For this paper, we need only discuss Proto-Indo-European, a hypothetical language that is closely associated with the foundational work of William Jones in his 1786 Third Anniversary Discourse to the Asiatic society. Below in reference 1, Kirill Babaev¹⁶ lists his reconstruction of the first and second person personal pronouns of Proto-Indo-European which are based on the comparative linguistic work of Robert Beekes’ *Comparative Indo-European Linguistics: An Introduction*.¹⁷ In the same work, Beekes presents his proposed reconstruction of the Proto-Indo-European demonstrative pronouns, which would eventually become the third person pronouns.

	Singular	Plural
1st Person	*egʰo(m)	*me(s), *we(i)-
2nd Person	*tū, *t(ū)e	*īū-
3rd Person	*h ¹ e, *id, *ih ²	*h ¹ e, *ih ² , *ih ² es

Reference 1: Proto-Indo-European personal pronouns (nominative)

At this stage in language development, Proto-Indo-European contrasted the first and second person pronouns and possessed only singular and plural pronouns, having not yet developed the dual form that can be found later in Old English¹⁸. Furthermore, this hypothetical language had not yet developed a true third person pronoun but instead used the demonstrative pronouns as a substitute until being fully enveloped into the pronominal system, a common process among many languages. In this case, Beekes defines the demonstrative pronouns of Proto-Indo-European as anaphoric pronouns with the meaning “that, the (just named)”.¹⁹ The demonstrative pronouns were contrasted for grammatical gender (e.g. masculine, feminine, and neuter) as well as plurality (e.g. singular and plural) and, as in the entire pronominal paradigm, were fully declined for seven cases. Though it should be cautioned that these are reconstructed forms, the hypothetical pronouns listed here are the foundations of the remaining historical examination.

4.2 Old English

The Old English period began in 450 AD with the Germanic conquest of England by the Jutes, Saxons, and Angles and ended in 1150 AD, the earliest written evidence of Old English being estimated as around 700 AD²⁰. Within this period, the four major dialects known as Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon, and Kentish developed in their respective geographic regions; however, most of our written evidence from this time period comes from the West Saxon dialect, as it was on its way to becoming the English literary standard before the Norman Conquest of England; and it is from this dialect that Baugh and Cable deduce the pronominal system of Old English, seen in reference 2.

	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st Person	ic	wit	wē
2nd Person	ðū	git	gē
3rd Person	hē, hēo, hit	-	hīe

Reference 2: Old English Personal Pronouns (Nominative)

As can be seen in reference 2, the dual number, indicating two individuals (e.g. “the both of us” or “the two of you”), had been added as another point of contrast and the demonstrative pronouns had become a solid part of the pronominal system, notably lacking an equivalent for the dual. Also, the third person plural pronoun had lost a distinction in gender by this point in its history; yet, it still contrasted for grammatical gender in the singular forms. While this period of English saw many conquests and foreign influences affect the language, it is really during in the Middle English period that the third person pronoun really begins to change. The Old English system simply stands to show that the third person had become a fully integrated point of contrast in the pronominal system and that the pronominal system as a whole had changed drastically over the intermittent millennia.

4.3 Middle English

The Middle English period lasted from 1150 AD to 1500 AD and encapsulated a great amount of change in the pronominal system; in the language as a whole, inflections became more reduced, grammatical gender was abandoned in favor of natural gender, and various influences, including that of the French and Norse, shaped the language in many ways²¹. It is in this period that the English pronominal system sees the most change, requiring a lengthier explanation of reference 3.

	Singular	Plural
1st Person	Ic	we
2nd Person	Thou	yē
3rd Person	he, she(o), (h)it	heo, thei

Reference 3: Middle English Personal Pronouns (Nominative)

By the Middle English period, the dual had already dropped out of usage, evidenced by its failure to appear in texts after the 13th century²². The second person additionally took on a social function: the second person singular denoted someone who occupied a lower social class than the speaker and the second person plural denoted someone of a higher social class. However, the most dramatic change was occurring in the third person pronouns of this time.

Although the third person singular masculine pronoun in Middle English changed very little from Old English, the Middle English third person feminine and neuter singular pronouns underwent large changes. The Old English third person feminine singular ‘hēo’ became ‘she(o)’ during the Middle English period: the most popular theory for this development was that the Old English pronoun was reinforced by the demonstrative ‘sēo’²³. Additionally, in the Middle English third person neuter singular pronoun, ‘(h)it’ was undergoing several orthographic and phonetic changes²⁴. In “On Variation of Old English ‘hit’-‘it’ Pronouns,” Vladimir Bondar argues that the initial ‘h-omission’ taking place during this period was an effect of prosodic structure variation and began taking place in Late Old English. Although both variations are attested in several regions at different times, the it form had become the standard third person neuter singular form by Late Middle English.

The final major change that took place in this period was the suppletion (i.e. the replacement of one word or stem for another, which does not share phonological or morphological similarities) of Old English 'hīe' for the Scandinavian 'thei' that became the standard in Late Middle English²⁵. Some scholars theorize that the new third person plural pronoun developed out of reinforcement from the demonstratives, in a way similar to the process that the third person feminine singular pronoun underwent. However, most linguists agree that 'thei' was adapted from the Old Norse spoken by the Vikings, who conquered and occupied much of former Northumbria (i.e. northern England and Scotland) starting near the end of the first millennium. Due to the northern concentration of the Old Norse influence, 'thei' did not become the standard in English until the Late Middle English period, meaning both 'thei' and 'heo' were contemporary variations in the Middle English period.

4.4 Modern English

In *A History of the English Language* Baugh and Cable define Modern English as the English language spoken between 1500 AD and the present²⁶. During this time, the pronominal system has changed very little: losing a few more declensions (i.e. grammatical cases reflected by changes in word endings, such as *who* vs *whom* in modern English) and, to an extent, the second person plural personal pronoun. Furthermore, Modern English exclusively uses natural gender, which has caused several ethical linguistic problems in recent years; these problems are in part created by the use of singular 'they', which first appears during the beginning of this period and became standard in everyday discourse, despite being deemed ungrammatical in the early years of English language standardization. Its usage in large part created a point that could be expanded upon by gender non-conforming or transgender individuals that desire a pronoun to reflect their own gender: a problem in a pronominal system based on grammatical gender which no longer exists.

	Singular	Plural
1st Person	I	we
2nd Person	You	you, you all, y'all, etc.
3rd Person	he, she, it; they	they

Reference 4: Modern English Pronouns (Nominative)

5. Advantages and Disadvantages of Gender-Neutral Pronouns

Within contemporary English, one can currently find two third-person singular pronouns that are purported to be gender-neutral and are widely used in various genres of writing: generic 'he' and singular 'they'. However, these pronouns are not recent additions to the English language. One of the earliest examples of singular 'they' comes from Geoffrey Chaucer's 1395 work, "The Pardoner's Prologue" from *The Canterbury Tales*: "And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame, / They wol come up . . ." ²⁷ As this example from the late 14th century demonstrates, singular 'they' is a naturally occurring pronoun which has existed in the English language since the very beginning of

the Modern English period. As for generic 'he', it can be difficult to determine when its usage was first prescribed. Many place its first appearance in the late 18th century and then enduring through the following 200 years of criticism.²⁸ John Gastil, in his analysis of sexist language published in the journal *Sex Roles*, quotes Strunk and White as stating, "The use of he as pronoun for nouns embracing both genders is a simple, practical convention rooted in the beginnings of the English language. He has lost all suggestion of maleness in these circumstances...It has no pejorative connotations; it is never incorrect" in their 1979 grammar manual *The Elements of Style*.²⁹ Even though this prescription endured into the 1970's, many of Strunk and White's contemporaries were unconvinced of the gender-neutral qualities of generic 'he'. Thus, it is no surprise that within the course of this debate, statistics of usage and lists of advantages contrasting with disadvantages are numerous in publication and illuminating in discussion. Here we will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of singular 'they' in comparison to generic 'he' and look at data regarding the use of epicene pronouns in contemporary sources.

5.1 Advantages of Gender-Neutral Pronouns

The two major advantages of singular 'they' are neutrality and naturalness. In his 1980 publication "On the goals, principles, and procedures for prescriptive grammar: Singular They," Donald MacKay elaborates on these characteristics. He asserts that from his corpus of 108 sources, with an average publication date of 1971, all examples of singular 'they' were gender-neutral for their antecedents. In contrast, he found generic 'he' to be used in reference predominantly masculine antecedents but not feminine ones. However, Merrit and Kok argue that, although it evokes more feminine imagery than generic 'he,' singular 'they' still tends to be male biased³⁰. Despite this still existing gender bias, they do support singular 'they' over the use of generic 'he', if only for being the lesser of two evils. On the point of naturalness, MacKay lists corporate nouns and indefinite pronouns as being natural antecedents for singular 'they' and states that speakers at the time preferred singular 'they' to generic 'he' in these instances³¹. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, singular 'they' has been a part of the English language for over 600 years, while generic 'he' has only been prescribed for 200 years. As a result, part of singular 'they's naturalness can be attributed to simply developing alongside the needs of English and meeting the need for a gender-neutral singular personal pronoun.

5.2 Disadvantages of Gender-Neutral Pronouns

In terms of disadvantages, MacKay lists several flaws that he believes to be inherent within the use of singular 'they': ambiguity (covert, overt, and partial), conceptual availability, problem referents, and vagueness.³² First of all, covert, overt, and partial ambiguity was of prime concern for MacKay; his primary concerns were that singular 'they' could confuse some readers or writers of English as it could be seen to refer to an as of yet unmentioned plural noun or that within a sentence one could have unconjoined singulars (i.e. two or more singular nouns that could potentially serve as the antecedent for singular 'they' but do not occur together as a collective entity) which could be interpreted as a plural antecedent for a singular 'they' [e.g. "A psychologist protects the welfare of a client and when conflicts of interest arise they resolve them in the direction of the client"³³]. In terms of conceptual availability, he questions the neutrality of singular 'they' and posits that the proposed epicene pronoun does not actually carry a veritably neutral meaning. As already mentioned above, Merrit and Kok provide evidence that this is the case, and so MacKay's doubts are supported. His next point, although brief, is that certain referents exist that would not sound natural when used with singular 'they', namely 'God' and 'Man' (i.e. in reference to mankind). As these are two very common words in English, Mackay points out that using singular 'they' could result in a large portion of discourse being awkwardly burdened by the absence of generic 'he' but

offers no solutions³⁴. His final point, the vagueness of singular ‘they’, rests on the argument that plurality weakens the precision of a sentence and that by extending the use of a plural pronoun to singular antecedents, sentences become less precise and more open to ambiguities. Depending on whether the authors are writing from a feminist approach like Merrit and Kok, a corpus linguistics approach like Paterson, or a pedagogical approach like MacKay, at least some of these points are mentioned during the course of the gender-neutral pronoun debate, and for these authors, they seem to be in agreement on the benefits and shortcomings of singular ‘they’.

6. Applications for University Campuses

Until this point, we have discussed the psychology of gender and its connection to language. We then provided social and historical context for gender-neutral pronouns, followed by a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of using extant gender-neutral pronouns. Given the background information, we will now propose how gender-neutral pronouns can—and should—be supported by university administration. These recommendations will be in compliance with federal policies and university visions, missions, and goals, with particular attention to the University of Tennessee, to be more inclusive of genderqueer and non-binary individuals.

6.1 Gender Identity and Title IX

Title IX is a federal law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex—which extends to sex-based harassment and bullying—in any federally funded education program or activity, including elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities. While the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, the agency that enforces Title IX, has explained that Title IX does not explicitly act on the basis of sexual orientation, it has not yet clarified whether Title IX covers discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived gender identity. Furthermore, it is clear that bullying and harassment, physical or verbal, of LGBT or gender nonconforming students, because they do not conform to stereotyped notions of masculinity or femininity, is covered by Title IX. Although misgendering could violate Title IX, transgender and genderqueer students may not know that they are protected with a law since there is not visible support from administration. Posting a gender-neutral pronoun guide along with ways in which non-cisgender people are protected under Title IX would allow universities to be ahead of foreseen protection of these students.

6.2 Gender-Neutral Pronouns and Campus Climate

Universities could be more inclusive of transgender people by incorporating gender-neutral pronouns into their missions, values, and goals. A university-wide system to use gender-neutral pronouns would be the first step for transgender people to feeling more comfortable on campus. This could lead to increased happiness, retention, grade performance, and graduation rates among a population that is plagued by isolation and high dropout rates. These outcomes align with university missions, values, and goals. For example, the University of Tennessee’s mission seeks to “enrich and elevate the citizens of the state of Tennessee, the nation, and the world,” and instating (or in UT’s case, reinstating) a gender-neutral pronoun guide would meet the mission, along with a vision of “social...development targeted to an increasingly global and multicultural world”³⁵. In some areas of the world, such as Thailand and India, transgender women are nationally recognized³⁶. Transgender people are recognized across the world because they are simply individuals who want to be recognized for who they are. Universities, as educational institutions, incorporate ways to treat them that way.

7. Conclusion

An official announcement to encourage students and professors to use singular ‘they’ would not only be inclusive of marginalized transgender and genderqueer individuals, but also be familiar to cisgender people who think of gender-neutral pronouns such as ‘xe/ze’ as exclusive to transgender and genderqueer communities. In this way, students would be relieved of misgendering and avoid having to out themselves as transgender or genderqueer. Professors and students can integrate this approach into their introductions; however, using gender-neutral pronouns may not last very long without acceptance into formal Standard English. The inclusion of ‘they’ as a prescribed option for a third-person singular pronoun in English pedagogy would further instill a safer environment for non-cisgender people. Social acceptance can only maintain a recommendation of using gender-neutral pronouns for so long.

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