

# The Fault Is in Our Grammars: Language, Gender, and Pronouns

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**Abstract:** Cultural consciousness around gender identity and the use of personal pronouns is changing rapidly. In particular, the use of the singular *they* is increasing among non-binary and gender-nonconforming individuals. Such usages pose difficulty for some speakers, not because of ideological reasons, but because of grammatical categorization and the features assigned to personal pronouns like *they*. Perceptions of *they* either as a definite, plural third-person pronoun or an indefinite, singular third-person pronoun come into conflict with the contemporary usage of *they* as a definite, singular third-person pronoun.

**Keywords:** gender; pronouns; grammar; syntax; categories; gender identity

## 1. Introduction

To say that our cultural consciousness on matters of gender identity is rapidly evolving is an understatement. In a few short years, our awareness as a culture went from practically none to a kind of “how could you not know that?” state. Let me give you a quick illustration.

For many years, I had the privilege of working in a campus ministry context. I served a community of students committed to sharing God’s radical, all-inclusive love with a broken world through acts of worship, devotion, service, hospitality, and especially social justice. Of the religious communities on campus, aside from the Unitarians, they were by far the most progressive.

Once, at a student leadership meeting in 2010, one of the students announced the men’s group breakfast the following weekend. “So, if you like Canadian bacon and don’t have a uterus, you’re welcome to come.” In three years’ time, in that same community — a community that would invite “all female and female-identifying persons” to attend United Methodist Women meetings — this comment would have been viewed as terribly transphobic. But in 2010, no one even batted an eye — in the most progressive and social justice-conscious religious community on a very liberal campus.

The speed of this change means that many people are still catching up to the understandings of gender and how it differs from sex and biology. It also means that even for well-meaning older folks, there are different obstacles that are hard to eradicate in quick order.

## 2. Who Now? The Obstacles to Comprehension

A few years ago, a student came into my office to chat a bit and mentioned that he would see another student in the community, a student who had been identifying as non-binary. Our conversation went like this:

ME: What are you up to this weekend?

STUDENT: I’m going over to Jessie’s<sup>1</sup> for dinner.

ME: That sounds like fun.

STUDENT: They got a new apartment, and we’re going over to see their new place.

ME: Who got a new place?

STUDENT: Jessie.

ME: Oh, right, yeah.

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This was not a case of my not paying attention; I literally *didn't understand* what the student was talking about. My brain simply didn't make the connection between the *they* in the second statement and the person, Jessie, mentioned in the first statement.

But why not? I'd been campus minister to this progressive, gender-conscious community for years — surely, I knew that some people, Jessie being one of them, identified neither as he nor she but as *they*. What did I not get?

### 3. Who Are They? Who Is They?

For me, the problem lay in one of grammar. Not the kind of grammar that says you can't put a preposition at the end of a sentence or that says you shouldn't split an infinitive; the kind of grammar that is deep-seated in your mind and gives you the rules that you're not even aware you know. Like the rule that says you can't say, "What a beautiful day it's!" and have to say, "What a beautiful day it is." (Bet you didn't even know that was a rule you'd been following for years.)

In the actual grammar that is resident deep within our brains, words get tagged with certain semantic markers that define what they mean to us. For a word like *they*, such markers might be something like the following:

[+definite][−singular][−gendered]

This is the most common use of *they* as a third-person plural pronoun standing in for a plural subject.

- (1) **The boys** were picnicking in the park.  
**They** were picnicking in the park.
- (2) **The girls** were making the trebuchets.  
**They** were making trebuchets.
- (3) **The boys and girls** were collecting recyclables.  
**They** were collecting recyclables.
- (4) **Some boys and girls** were playing bagpipes.  
**They** were playing bagpipes.

In each case, the pronoun *they* stands in for any plural subject of whatever gender and could be either definite or indefinite (the versus some).

Now, plural *they* is not the only use of the word *they*; *they* has a long history (back to Shakespeare and the King James Bible, if not further) of being used as an indefinite singular pronoun. Such a pronoun would be marked:

[−definite][+singular][−gendered]

and is seen in sentences like:

- (5) Did someone leave **their** phone on the table?
- (6) Everyone should trust **their** instincts when writing.
- (7) A trebuchet maker really needs to know what **they're** doing.

Many linguists have long argued that this is an entirely acceptable use of *they*: a gender-neutral third-person indefinite pronoun. It avoids the clunkiness of sentences like *Did someone leave his or her phone on the table?* and the outright inaccuracy of the purists' *A trebuchet maker really needs to know what he's doing* (especially since we've seen that it's girls who make trebuchets).

Now, another use of *they* has long been used: the deliberate concealment of someone's identity or gender for reasons personal or politic:

- (8) I don't want to upset you, Janice, but someone told me **they** don't like your trebuchets.

(9) I have a friend who might be interested in lending you money; I'll ask **them**.

In these sentences, a specific, singular person is identified, but the pronoun *they* is used to obscure identity from the listener, lest an explicit gender make it obvious who was being referenced. Here, a person who would normally be marked with a [+definite][+singular] pronoun (e.g., *he* or *she*) is intentionally marked with a [-definite][+singular] pronoun. The definite antecedent is made intentionally indefinite for various personal reasons. So, in general, the word *they* can either be marked

[+definite][-singular][-gendered]

or

[-definite][+singular][-gendered]

— either definite or singular, but not both—at least in most older speakers' minds. Therein lies the challenge.

The language is changing as fast as our changing cultural awareness will allow. However, when the change requires reworking our linguistic understanding, it can take a lot longer to set in than the understanding that some men do, in fact, have uteruses. When folks use *they* in both *definite and singular* senses, it often doesn't fall through the right linguistic slots in people's brains. Take the following sentence:

(10) Jessie invited me to their apartment for dinner.

Younger speakers often have no problem understanding that the *they* in the second half of the sentence refers to the subject *Jessie*. Many older speakers, with decades of perceiving *they* as either a definite plural pronoun or an indefinite singular, have difficulty connecting it to a subject that is definite *and* singular. I am always inclined to hear sentences like the above one and assume that Jessie has invited the speaker to *someone else's* apartment. It takes me a second or two to realize what the sentence means. I suspect a lot of people are like that.

#### 4. Conclusion

Our cultural understanding of gender is changing rapidly, as well it should. People who have long identified as a gender other than the one assigned at birth are freer than ever to express that gender identity. Folks who do identify as *both* or *neither* male or female have language to employ to express themselves. And that is a good thing.

But language changes, while relentless, happen slowly, and even more so in the minds of individual speakers. There may be folks who don't quite get the way a pronoun like *they* is used — even people who are well-meaning and consider themselves allies. So, a little grace may be required, but don't worry; we'll catch up in a second or two. The fault is not in our stars but in our grammars.