

Our words matter: acceptability, grammaticality, and ethics of research on singular ‘they’-type pronouns

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Abstract

Until now, there has been little experimental work investigating the processing and formal properties of the singular *they* suite of pronouns. As scientific and popular attention to singular *they* increases, it will be critical for research to acknowledge theoretical and ethical issues regarding discussion of this phenomenon. This commentary uses the recent paper by Doherty & Conklin (2017) as a starting point to discuss issues surrounding work on the various forms of singular *they*. It concludes that there is sufficient theoretical and empirical evidence to claim *they* has a grammatically singular form (at least in colloquial English). It also recommends care be taken in academic discussions of the grammaticality and acceptability of terms which are associated with marginalised communities.

Keywords: gender, pronouns, coreference, singular they, sentence processing, syntax

1. Introduction

The formation of a coreference dependency during real-time sentence processing requires access to information from the grammar, semantics, and discourse context (e.g., Sanford et al., 1983; Garnham & Oakhill, 1990; Van Gompel & Liversedge, 2003). An increasing number of studies are approaching questions about the influence of social factors on sentence processing through the lens of the learning, cognition, and use of singular *they*-type pronouns. In particular, recent work has begun to examine how such pronouns are being used for specific individuals of either unknown or nonbinary gender. Until recently, however,

10 work on singular *they* typically only acknowledged the generic sense, that is, as
11 used for a generic or indefinite antecedent. However, as the specific and definite
12 sense gains visibility, studies on the generic sense should acknowledge the so-
13 cially complex status of singular *they*-type pronouns and the changing language
14 landscape surrounding them.

15 As the psycholinguistics literature on singular *they* is still quite small, I will
16 use one of the most recent additions as a starting point for my argument. Do-
17 herty & Conklin (2017), henceforth D&C, investigate how the processing of
18 *them* is influenced by the gender expectancy of candidate antecedents which
19 are syntactically and semantically singular. Their paper contributes impor-
20 tant results to the quickly growing body of literature touching on processing
21 of singular *they*-type pronouns. D&C agree that *they*-type pronouns do core-
22 fer with singular antecedents, at least in some conditions. This is supported
23 by psycholinguistic literature (Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 1997), corpus and soci-
24 olinguistic literature (Baranowski, 2002; Bodine, 1975; Newman, 1992; Whitley,
25 1978). However, a concern D&C raise is that linking a pronoun like *them* to
26 a singular antecedent is “grammatically unacceptable due to the mismatch in
27 number between the antecedent and pronoun,” (p 718). D&C’s argument could
28 be interpreted as meaning *them* is necessarily grammatically and semantically
29 plural but speakers produce it in coreference dependencies with a grammati-
30 cally and semantically singular antecedent regularly enough that comprehenders
31 recognize it as a possible, although maybe not well-formed, string in English.
32 Concerning this approach to discussing grammaticality and how future work
33 should engage with the topic of singular *they*-type pronouns, this commentary
34 addresses two issues: (1) the formal counter-evidence against *them* being gram-
35 matically plural, thus “grammatically unacceptable” when coreferring with a
36 singular antecedent, independent of the frequency of usage of this construction;
37 (2) the ethics surrounding academic discussion of constructions related to those
38 used by marginalised and protected groups.

39 2. Acceptability and grammaticality of singular *them*

40 A brief formal assessment of the plurality of *them* suggests that *they* can
 41 be semantically singular. In what follows, binominal *each* is used as a probe of
 42 the grammar (e.g., Boeckx & Hornstein, 2005; Safir & Stowell, 1988). It may
 43 only occur with a semantically plural antecedent, yet certain instances of *they*
 44 cannot be used with it. Sentence (1-a) has a plural antecedent for *each*, thus
 45 serves as a grammatical baseline for comparison. Sentence (1-b) has a singular
 46 pronominal antecedent and (1-c) has a singular generic antecedent. In both
 47 cases (1-b) and (1-c), the coreference between *each* and the singular antecedent
 48 is ungrammatical because of the number mismatch.

- 49 (1) a. The girls_{*i*} read two books each_{*i*}.
 50 b. * She_{*i*} read two books each_{*i*}.
 51 c. * Someone_{*i*} read two books each_{*i*}.

52 There is also a contrast in acceptability between the sentences in (2). In (2-a)
 53 *they* grammatically corefers with a plural antecedent. In (2-b), *they* corefers with
 54 a singular antecedent, although I will avoid attributing grammaticality to it in
 55 this case (marked with a ?). In (2-c), acceptability is degraded as compared to
 56 both (2-a) and (2-b) for coreference between *each* and the singular antecedent.
 57 I use the ?* notation to indicate a decrease in acceptability in order to avoid
 58 claiming ungrammaticality without specifying the formal framework.

- 59 (2) a. Those girls_{*i*} over there: they_{*i*} read two books each_{*i*}.
 60 b. ? That person_{*i*} over there: they_{*i*} read two books.
 61 c. ?* That person_{*i*} over there: they_{*i*} read two books each_{*i*}.

62 The grammatical stipulations on the distribution of binominal *each* and the
 63 degradation of acceptability in (2-c) are consistent with the claim that corefer-
 64 ence between a singular antecedent and *they*-type pronouns may have a gram-
 65 matical basis, at least for people whose acceptability judgements pattern with
 66 those expressed here.

67 To draw a direct parallel to D&C’s study, (3) uses *them* as the relevant
 68 anaphor. Seven unanimous informal judgements from non-linguists support the
 69 coreference between *That person* and *them*, such as in (3-b) but then subse-
 70 quently find *each* to degrade acceptability in (2-c), (3-c) (see Mahowald et al.
 71 (2016)’s Small N Acceptability Paradigm for methodological validity). The
 72 degraded acceptability of (2-c) is evidence that *they*-type pronouns are not nec-
 73 essarily plural, thus need not mismatch in number with singular antecedents
 74 (see Sauerland et al. (2005) for an argument that plurals may include singu-
 75 lars through scalar implicature). This can be further substantiated for *them*,
 76 specifically, by making the pronoun in question the object of an exceptional
 77 case-marking (ECM) construction (Chomsky, 1986), as in (3):

- 78 (3) a. (Those kids_i over there:) I want them_i to read two books each_i.
 79 b. (That person_i over there:) I want them_i to read two books.
 80 c. ?* (That person_i over there:) I want them_i to read two books each_i.

81 In (3-a), a plural antecedent (*those kids over there*) gives *them* a referent that
 82 is semantically plural. Thus, coreference between *them* and *each* is grammati-
 83 cal. In (3-b), *them* is used in its specific sense as it refers to a single identified
 84 individual of unknown gender. However, this usage is widely and historically
 85 attested (e.g., Bodine, 1975; Meyers, 1993). Whether or not it is grammatical
 86 depends on the theoretical stipulations one makes, but crucially, the absence of
 87 *each* forms a baseline against which (3-c) can be compared. Finally, as stated
 88 before, the acceptability of (3-c) is degraded as compared to (3-b). This can
 89 be attributed to the presence of *each*, which grammatically requires a plural
 90 antecedent. Thus, it may be concluded that *them* in (3-c) is not plural. Fur-
 91 thermore, the syntactic similarities between (3-b) and (3-c) provide evidence
 92 that *them* in (3-b) might also not be plural.

93 This formal evidence against *them* being semantically plural suggests that
 94 usage of singular *them* does not come solely from frequency of exposure to an
 95 otherwise unacceptable construction. It seems that singular *they*-type pronouns

can indeed be semantically singular in colloquial English, thus also grammatically acceptable (see Conrod (2017) for evidence of extension to known/named antecedents).

This would not be historically unprecedented, as *you* went through a similar change as the grammatically singular (informal) second person pronoun was lost (Bodine, 1975). I am unaware of any arguments for why singular *you* is ungrammatical or unacceptable, despite triggering plural verbal agreement in many (but not all) dialects of English, as in (4). This is further evident in the contrast in (5), in which singular *you* parallels singular *them*.

- (4) a. Are you_{<sg>} going out after work tonight?
 b. * Is you_{<sg>} going out after work tonight?
- (5) a. Are you_{<pl>i} reading two books each_i?
 b. * Are you_{<sg>i} reading two books each_{*i}?

It is important to note that there is experimental evidence indicating singular antecedents for *they* are processed slower than plural antecedents (Sanford & Filik, 2007). However, this does not necessarily mean that such a coreference dependency is ungrammatical or even unacceptable, rather it is only evidence of a higher associated processing cost, which must be interpreted within a specific theory of coreference processing and lexical access.

3. Ethical investigation of singular *they*-type pronouns

With the recent attention the singular-*they* suite of pronouns has garnered, it is crucial that its treatment is dealt with in its contextual use as both a generic and a specific nonbinary pronoun (Conrod, 2018; McLemore, 2015). Since singular *they* is frequently used as a personal pronoun within a protected population, the study and discussion of its use must take into account the effects research can have on members of this group both within and outside the field.

Discussion of the so-called acceptability of singular *they*, whether generic or specific, in an academic context is not independent of surrounding social issues.

124 First, there is prescriptive stigma of *they* as being necessarily plural even among
 125 scholars (although this appears to be changing). But secondly, this bias feeds
 126 the stigma of singular *they* as a personal pronoun for people who identify as
 127 neither male nor female, but instead as nonbinary. I advocate extreme care
 128 in using “unacceptable,” even in its technical sense, to describe singular *they*
 129 in the face of evidence suggesting it is, at worst, acceptability in flux. This
 130 terminology puts authors in the position of telling nonbinary colleagues and
 131 readers (of whom there are plenty) that the terminology which the nonbinary
 132 community has converged on is unacceptable, potentially even in the colloquial
 133 sense. While there is certainly individual variation in ease of use for singular
 134 personal *they*, it is the duty of the researcher to bring no harm to the populations
 135 they study. To this end, the wording of studies on singular *they* must be carefully
 136 crafted, even when discussing its common generic sense.

137 Based on formal analysis, I demonstrate that *they*-type pronouns have a
 138 singular variety. Furthermore, researchers investigating singular *they* must ac-
 139 knowledge this in order to promote respectful discussion of related issues, includ-
 140 ing nonbinary gender and gender nonconformity. Scientists studying language
 141 must not neglect the human and social component of our research, at risk of
 142 alienating and even potentially hurting the populations most affected by our
 143 work.

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