

SINGULAR *THEY*: AGREEMENT AND CONCORD

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This paper explores the morphosyntactic features of the phenomenon singular *they*. It distinguishes between epicene and non-binary *they*. The analysis draws on the pronoun's historical development, Agreement and Concord theory, the distribution of the third-person singular inflection -s, morphological structure analysis, and morphosyntactic analyses. The findings support that both types of singular *they* are felicitous in discourse.

Keywords: pronouns, they, agreement, concord, phi-features

1 Introduction

Personal pronouns are important elements of a language; they are generally used as substitutes of noun phrases: they stand in for the entities in our discourse without repeating the full noun phrase, as in *Mary is a professor – she teaches British history*. Nowadays, pronouns are even more important with the rising visibility of genderqueer people, as they identify themselves with pronouns, especially in English. In particular, the usage of pronouns has become especially important for those whose pronoun of reference does not conform to the prescribed *he/him* or *she/her*.

The present paper concerns the use of singular *they*. There are two types of singular *they* that are distinguished from one another, namely *epicene they* and *non-binary they* (Bjorkman 2017, 1–2; Konnelly and Cowper 2020, 1). Here, I will use *non-binary* as an umbrella term to describe the uses of the pronoun to refer to those people whose pronoun of reference is *they/them*.

Epicene *they* (or generic *they*) is the pronoun that is sex-indeterminate and refers to an unspecified person or entity, as in (1). An epicene pronoun is a pronoun that may denote individuals of either sex.

- (1) Somebody left *their* drink; I hope *they* come back for it.

Epicene *they* has been used in the English language for centuries, first appearing in the 1300s (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2019). This use of the pronoun is certainly

more accepted and more frequently used by people in general as opposed to non-binary *they*. The epicene use of the pronoun is to refer to a person whose gender is unknown to the speaker(s), is not relevant, or is deliberately hidden (Whitley 1978, 28; Konnelly and Cowper 2020, 2).

Non-binary *they*, however, is relatively new. It is a gender-neutral pronoun of reference for specific individuals, as in (2).

- (2) This is Kai, they will present their findings on motivation in L2 learning during the conference.

Non-binary *they* directly refers to a specific person whose gender identity is known to the speaker(s), and this person the speaker is referring to does not identify as a man (*he/him*) or as a woman (*she/her*). As Konnelly and Cowper (2020, 2) state, “Pronouns, along with proper names, are often among the first acts of linguistic self-determination a transgender person makes.”

In this paper, I will first discuss the history of the pronoun *they* to show in what form it came into the English language and how history shaped its form and usage; I will then describe its syntactic properties related to agreement and concord, and I will describe the difference between the pronouns *they* and *you*. Furthermore, I will also examine the morphosyntactic features of the pronoun *they* and discuss an interesting phenomenon in some dialects of Newfoundland English, after which I will draw a conclusion.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 The History of the Pronoun They

This section focuses on the history of *they*, more specifically on its usage as a singular pronoun. *They* came into the English language from Old Norse *þeir*, *þeira*, *þeim* in the 1300s, according to Cole (2018, 165). *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* claims that the pronoun *they* was regularly used as a singular pronoun by the 1300s. However, grammarians of the 16th century attacked singular *they* and encouraged the use of the singular pronoun *he*.

He was advocated for various reasons. The masculine gender was deemed worthier than the feminine (Poole [1646] 1967, 21), and Kirkby ([1746] 1971, 117) claimed that the masculine gender included the feminine gender as well. In 1850, the Interpretation Act of 1850 legally replaced the previous phrase *he and she* with *he*,

officially including the feminine gender in the masculine. White (1880, 416, cited in Bodine 1975, 137) claimed, “*His* is the representative pronoun, as *mankind* includes both men and women.” The inclusion of feminine gender in the masculine is also represented in the verb *to man* and the participle *(un)manned*, which are both used to express the provision of personnel (or *manpower*), regardless of gender.

Grammarians of the 18th century (e.g. Kirkby [1746] 1971) who were opposed to the use of singular *they* argued that the singular use of the pronoun violated the traditional grammar rules, since the pronoun *they* was exclusively plural. If we interpret this as being about concord with the antecedent, then the problem with this argument is that if it is correct, then the same argument should apply to *he* as well. If *they* is only accepted as a plural pronoun referring to a group of individuals and not as a third-person pronoun referring to people of unknown or non-binary gender because it fails to agree in number with a singular, sex-indeterminate antecedent, then *he* should not be accepted either, as it fails to phi-agree in gender with a singular, sex-indeterminate antecedent, since *he* denotes masculine gender, while the gender of the referent may be female or beyond the binary. *He* also fails to agree in number with a plural antecedent, as it is restricted to singular number. However, if these traditional grammar rules are taken to be about agreement with the finite verb, then *they* is the only one that is problematic because its singular reference intuitively clashes with the use of a plural verb form (as in *they are a neurosurgeon*).

In the 19th and 20th century, the masculine gender was no longer deemed as the worthier by the majority of the people; however, the use of *he* as an epicene pronoun was – and still is – widespread. However, *he* as an epicene pronoun fails because of number. See example (3) taken from Pullum (2008), cited in Doyle (2009).

- (3a) Everyone knows each other.
- (3b) They know each other
- (3c) *He knows each other.

In the case of (3a), *everyone*, which is grammatically singular, requiring a singular verb, is semantically plural, thus it can combine with *each other*. Pullum (2008) and Doyle (2009) claim that *he* in (3c) is ungrammatical since it is singular, but *each other* must agree with a plural antecedent because it is semantically plural. On this basis, Pullum states that in English morphosyntactic singularity and semantic plurality are compatible. Note, however, that non-binary *they* also fails with *each other* (as in **They know each other*) since the non-binary use of *they*, which is semantically singular, cannot be the antecedent to *each other* despite the syncretism with the plural version of *they*.

Now in the 21st century, the use of the pronoun *they* is encouraged (American Psychological Association 2025) in order to respect the identities of all people, and also

to avoid the clumsiness of the phrase *he or she*, even though it is deemed unacceptable by many people when anaphoric to a morphologically singular antecedent.

2.2 Agreement and Concord, Plural-agreeing Singular Noun Phrases, the –s Inflection

In this section, I will discuss the Agreement and Concord phi-features of singular *they* as well as its similarity to plural-agreeing noun phrases, and I will also examine the distribution of the present-tense third-person singular inflection –s.

2.2.1 Agreement and Concord

The main focus of this paper is the Agreement and Concord phi-features of singular *they*. Phi-features in general are the following: person, number, and gender. Wechsler (2011, 1001) differentiates between *Index phi features*, which are features of referential controllers, responsible for grammatical agreement, and *Concord phi features*, which are those features that are involved in adjective–noun concord, responsible for semantic agreement. One further difference between Index phi features and Concord phi features is that while Index phi features include the person feature, Concord phi features do not.

Wechsler (2011, 1002) claims that those verbs that show Index number agreement also agree in person with the controller, making the following sentence grammatical.

(4) He is a smart boy.

The subject pronoun is third-person singular, and the copula shows third-person singular agreement with the subject.

The agreement of finite verbs is treated as Index agreement. The inflections of finite verb agreement originate from incorporated pronouns. According to Wechsler (2011, 1019), the copula *are* does not carry a referential index, but it rather selects a subject with a plural number index. Finite verbs pattern with bound pronouns whenever the pronoun is in syntactic agreement with the verb, and the pronoun bears a person feature that is exclusive to the Index phi features.

Pronouns are universally specified for Index features. As controllers of agreement, they trigger agreement on all the elements that are targets for Index features; however, according to Wechsler (2011), “nothing in principle requires a pronoun to have Concord phi features” (1001). Consequently, he claims that pronouns only have to be specified for person obligatorily, but not for number and gender.

The relevance of this for this paper is that singular *they* controls plural agreement with the finite verb, but it does not show number concord with predicate nominals.

(5a) All dancers think that they are the best dancers ever.

(5b) Every dancer thinks that they are/*is the best dancer(*s) ever.

In (5b), *Every dancer* and *they* indicate plurality, but *the best dancer* has to be singular in order to be coindexed with *Every*.

According to Wechsler (2011, 1028), pronouns can serve either as targets or controllers of agreement. As targets, they are specified for Index phi-features, namely person, number, and gender. However, he also points out that targets that lack a person feature can vary in their number concord. Since the pronoun *they* is morphologically unmarked for any Index phi-features that could trigger syntactic agreement, it can vary in its number concord, thus making the singular use of the pronoun grammatical.

A similar argument was made by Whitley (1978, 31), who states that “*they* is neutral as to whether the speaker is referring to individuals in a group or to a group of individuals. If so, ‘singular’ *they* might be said to neutralize not only sex, but also number”, as in (6).

(6) The dance ensemble is doing their best to entertain the audience.

2.2.2 Plural-agreeing Singular Noun Phrases

Plural-agreeing singular noun phrases, referred to by den Dikken (2001, 20) as *plurilinguals* or *committee-type noun phrases*, show a difference in plural agreement between British and American English. British English allows a formally singular but collective noun to have plural agreement with the finite verb, but American English typically only accepts a singular verb, as in (7).

(7a) The committee has/have decided. (British English)

(7b) The committee has/*have decided. (American English)

(den Dikken 2001, 28)

The head noun of plurilinguals is uniformly unmarked for number, so it is ungrammatical to use a plural demonstrative with this type of noun phrases.

(8) This/*These committee has/have concluded.

Den Dikken (2001, 34–36) argues that pluringulars can only agree with a plural verb if they are headed by a silent pronoun (*pro*). That silent pronoun cannot be an associate of *there*, and in the absence of the silent pronoun, these types of noun phrases are singular which gives rise to singular verb agreement. This explains the ill-formedness of (9) with plural verb inflection.

(9) There is/*are a committee in the room.

(den Dikken 2001, 32)

2.2.3 The Verbal *–s* Inflection

Kayne (1989, 188) claims that the present tense third-person singular inflection *–s* is a number marker and not a person marker. I argue that the distribution of the suffix *–s* is controlled by subjects that are marked with the singular feature (*he, she, it*), whereas those subjects that are unmarked for number (e.g. *they*) cannot control the suffix.

(10) She is a neurosurgeon; she operates on brains.

In other words, the verbal inflection *–s* is only available for those subjects that are marked for number, and that number is singular. The fact that *they* is unmarked for number in my analysis makes the pronoun *they* possible with reference to single individuals; it also explains that *they* consistently fails to combine with the verbal *–s* inflection, even when it has a singular referent.

(11) This is my favourite character, Kai; they do research on neuroscience.

In light of the fact that the verbal *–s* inflection is only available for those subjects that are explicitly marked third-person singular, I assume that in English the plural verb agreement is the unmarked form, since the plural form of verbs is typically identical with the bare stem.

2.3 Similarities and Differences Between the Pronouns *They* and *You*

In this section, I will discuss the similarities and differences between the pronouns *you* and *they*, focusing on the acceptance of these pronouns with certain antecedents and of certain forms of these pronouns. The aim here is to shed light on the stigma surrounding the reflexive pronoun *themselves*, used in reference to a non-binary individual.

There is an interesting difference between the acceptance of *you* and *they* in general. *You* is accepted with both singular and plural reference while still controlling plural

agreement in copular sentences. *They* also controls plural agreement in copular sentences, but it may also be accepted to refer to singular individuals by some speakers. However, these two pronouns are not treated in the same way, as unlike in the case of *you*, the acceptability of reference to a single individual is subject to variation in the case of *they*.

(12a) You/They are smart children.

(12b) You/%They are a smart person.

The difference between the acceptance of these pronouns is even more striking with the reflexive *self* pronouns. The reflexives of *you* are *yourself* (singular) and *yourselves* (plural).

(13a) You have clearly overworked yourself. (referring to a single individual)

(13b) You have clearly overworked yourselves. (referring to a group of individuals)

With the reflexive *self*-forms of *they*, however, the tolerance for the singular form is much lower; the form *themselves* is rather stigmatised. Despite the low tolerance of *themselves*, however, it is not ungrammatical, and it is widely used in various dialects of English, according to *Merriam Webster* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The plural form *themselves* is perfectly fine.

(14a) They have clearly overworked %themselves. (referring to a single individual)

(14b) They have clearly overworked themselves. (referring to a group of individuals)

There are two types of personal reflexive pronouns: one in which the bound morpheme *self* combines with a genitive determiner, as in *myself*, *yourself*, *ourselves*, and *yourselves*; and one in which the bound morpheme *self* combines with an accusative pronoun, as in *himself*, *themselves*, and *themselves*.

Historically, as the distinctions between the original cases (accusative, dative, genitive) began to collapse in Middle English, the noun *self* (which then was later reanalysed as a bound morpheme) began to fuse with the pronouns since those lost their case endings. There was variation between the Northern and the Southern dialects, since the Southern dialects combined the genitive pronouns with the NP, whereas the Northern dialects combined the accusative pronouns with *self* (van Gelderen 2000, 91).

In the case where a genitive form combines with *self*, the genitive form serves as the possessor of *self*. Since *self* was considered a common noun (van Gelderen 2000, 88), it receives number inflection in the case of a plural antecedent, independently

of the number features of the possessor: there is no phi-feature matching between possessors and possessed nouns in English. In the case of an accusative pronoun combining with *self*, there is a concord relationship between the accusative pronoun and *self* both for case (accusative) and for number.

When *self* takes a common noun or proper name as its possessor, it combines with the Saxon genitive *s* that serves as a linking element between the common noun/proper name and *self*, as in *a person's self* and *John's self*. The reflexive pronouns *myself* and *herself* have no linking element between the genitive determiner and *self*. Their structure is the following: [*my/her+self*]. For the third-person masculine reflexive, one would (on the analogy of *John's self* and *a man's self*) expect the form *hisself*, with the structure [*he+s+self*]. Though the form *hisself* occurs in dialects of English, it is not the standard form. Instead, a non-possessive dependency between accusative *him* and *self* is established in the formation of the third-person singular masculine reflexive pronoun, delivering *himself*.

In plural reflexives, the pronoun combines with the plural copula *r* (cf. *are*) which is the linking element between the pronoun *self*. Their structure is the following: [*pronoun+r+self*]. In *ourselves*, the genitive combines with *self*, which gets number-inflected due to number concord. In the case of *yourself* and *yourselves*, the pronoun *you* combines with the plural copula *r*, which then combines with *self*.

For the third-person plural pronoun *they*, the logic of the previous paragraph would lead one to expect [*they+r+self*], yielding *theirsself* (cf. *their car*). Though this form occurs in dialects, the standard language uses *themselves*, which differs from *theirsself* in three respects: (a) the form of the pronoun (*them* rather than *they*), (b) the absence of the copula *r*, and (c) concord between the pronoun and *self* (*selves*). These three factors combined indicate that *themselves* does not have a possessive syntax. Instead, accusative *them* and *selves* are in a predication relationship, observing case and number concord.

Their is a genitive, and just like *your* in *yourself*, it is the possessor of *self*. Since most of the reflexive *self*-forms contain a genitive combined with *self*, *theirsself* would naturally fit in, having the structure [*they+r+self*]. However, this pronoun is also only dialectal. One may reasonably conjecture that for those speakers who have *theirselves*, it might be entirely fine to use *theirsself*.

To sum up, the acceptance of singular *you* and of singular *they* is different, despite both having evolved from plural forms. The pronoun *you* is accepted with both a singular and a plural antecedent, and even its singular and plural reflexive forms are accepted and widely used by speakers. The pronoun *they*, however, is not always tolerated with a singular antecedent, especially when it makes a direct reference to a specific person. The tolerance, or rather the lack of it, for singular *themsself* is very different from that for singular *yourself*.

I argue that, in light of the claim that *they* is unmarked for number, *they* should be accepted with both singular and plural antecedents (as in *they are neurosurgeons* and *they are a neurosurgeon*). On this basis, *themselves* may also be accepted as the reflexive form of non-binary *they*.

In the following sections, I will discuss the morphosyntax of singular *they* based on the works of Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002), Bjorkman (2017), and Konnelly and Cowper (2020).

2.4 The Morphological Structure of *They* in Déchaine and Wiltschko's (2002) Analysis

Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002, 410) distinguish between three types of pronoun categories: pro-DPs, pro-ΦPs, and pro-NPs. Pro-DPs can function as arguments, they are definite, bear referential properties, they cannot function as bound variables, and they can function as determiners. Their structure is the following: [DP-ΦP-NP]. First and second person pronouns belong to this category. Pro-ΦPs can act either as arguments or predicates, they can be bound variables, so they can be bound outside their local domains, and they bear referential properties. They have the structure [ΦP-NP]. English third-person personal pronouns are categorized as pro-ΦPs. Pro-NPs are predicates, and they are not bound variables. Their structure is [NP-N'-N]. English impersonal *one* belongs there.

Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002, 415) claim that third-person pronouns, which are pro-ΦPs, cannot function as determiners since pro-ΦPs do not make an overt subconstituent available, unlike pro-DPs. They based this claim on the following data:

- (15a) we linguists – us linguists
- (15b) you linguists – you linguists
- (15c) *they linguists – %them linguists

(Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002, 421)

In English, first and second person pronouns can function as determiners; in other words, they can precede nouns, thus the grammaticality of the examples in (15a) and (15b). By contrast, **they linguists* is uniformly ungrammatical, while in some varieties of American English, *them linguists* is available. Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002, 422) argue that *them* in these varieties is decomposed into a bound D-morpheme *th-* and a clitic Φ-morpheme *'em*. The evidence for this decomposition is that third-person pronouns, both singular and plural, have phonologically reduced clitic forms, which are pro-Φ, as in *I like 'im/'em*. However, *'em* is found in all varieties of English, not just in those where *them linguists* is available; so Déchaine and Wiltschko's

decomposition of *them* does not, as it stands, shed light on the variation regarding the acceptability of *them linguists*. The exclusion of **they linguists* is rooted in the fact that (unlike *them*) it cannot be decomposed into *th-* and a phi-element, since *'ey* as a reduced pronoun is ill-formed, and it does not have a distribution outside *they*.

2.5 Singular *They* in Bjorkman (2017), and Konnelly and Cowper (2020)

In this section, I will discuss the works of Bjorkman (2017) and of Konnelly and Cowper (2020) in connection with the uses of the pronoun *they*.

Bjorkman (2017, 3) refers to the new use of *they* with specific, definite antecedents as *innovative they*, as in (16).

(16a) %I like their hair. (while pointing someone out)

(16b) %Somebody left their wallet on the table.

(16c) %Your teaching assistant said that they will be joining us later.

Generally, younger speakers accept the examples in (16), but older speakers may find *they* with a singular antecedent pragmatically wrong or unacceptable.

According to Bjorkman (2017, 3) gender specification should be optional even on pronouns, meaning that the difference between plural *they* and singular *he* and *she* would be lost, making the use of *they* as a pronoun of reference for non-binary individuals grammatically possible. Speakers using innovative *they* accept proper names as antecedents for *they/them*, as in *Mary/John is a high school teacher, they teach history*. Naturally, the acceptability of *they* with specific, definite antecedents increases with proper names that are associated with more than one binary gender or with last names with non-gender specific titles.

(17a) %Look, there's Kai; their costume is so cool!

(17b) %Professor Shepherd left their coat on the back of the chair.

Bjorkman (2017, 7) assumes that *they* occurs where the absence of the necessary number and gender features would trigger or require another, gender-specific pronoun. She claims that *they* cannot be specified for number, gender, and animacy.

Bjorkman (2017, 4) also speculates that if gender in English is not a contrastive feature, then *they* would be possible with quantificational antecedents. If gender is contrastive, then bound variable pronouns would be obligatorily marked for gender if their domains are restricted to be either feminine or masculine.

For non-innovative speakers, *they* is unacceptable with a gendered antecedent, and gender is obligatory on referential pronouns, meaning that gender must be expressed

whenever the gender of the referent is known to the speaker. For innovative speakers, the expression of gender is optional since for them gender is not a contrastive feature of pronouns, and if gender is absent on a pronoun, it does not mean that the gender of the referent is indeterminate or unknown.

- (18a) I like her/%their hair. (while pointing someone out)
- (18b) My friend left his/%their wallet in the restaurant.
- (18c) Your teaching assistant said she/%they will be joining us later.

Bjorkman (2017, 3) claims that for innovative speakers, the gender is an adjunct feature on referential pronouns, namely $\langle f \rangle$, and the gender features are notated as $\langle masc \rangle$ for masculine and $\langle fem \rangle$ for feminine. This means that these speakers can choose to (or not to) associate a name or traditionally gendered pronoun (*he*, *she*) with a traditional binary gender (masculine or feminine).

However, most proper names are associated with a gender, so the sentences in (19) are generally deemed ungrammatical and even most innovative speakers would not accept them.

- (19a) *Maryi accidentally left their sweater at the restaurant.
- (19b) *Johni said that they will join us later.

The ungrammaticality of the sentences in (19) suggests that there is a linguistic property of *Mary* that is [+F] and of *John* that is [+M]. The notations $[\pm M]$ and $[\pm F]$ are different from Bjorkman's (2017) $\langle masc \rangle$ and $\langle fem \rangle$ in that $[\pm M]$ denoting *male* and $[\pm F]$ denoting *female* refer to biological sex, while $\langle masc \rangle$ denoting *masculine* and $\langle fem \rangle$ denoting *feminine* refer to gender.

Bjorkman (2017, 10) suggests that there is a contrastive gender property of names, and this is why conservative *they* users would find the sentences in (19) incorrect. She advocates that in order to accept *they* as a singular pronoun of reference, people should unlearn the gender features that are syntactically associated with given names.

Konnolly and Cowper's (2020) work is based on Bjorkman's (2017) paper. They claim that there are three stages of *they*, the last one being innovative/non-binary *they*. At stages 1 and 2, gender is contrastive, but at Stage 3, following Bjorkman (2017), gender is optional, allowing for non-binary *they* to be grammatical when referring to a specific person. According to Konnolly and Cowper (2020, 1), this new use of *they* is to refer to "specific individuals of known (but not necessarily binary) gender".

Stage 1: singular *they* (quantified antecedent, or antecedent of unknown gender)
 (20a) Anyonei who thinks theyi need more time should ask for an extension.
 (20b) The personi at the door left before I could see who theyi were.

Stage 2: singular *they* (antecedent of known gender, but ungendered description/
 name)
 (21a) Kellyi said theyi were leaving early.
 (21b) The strongest studenti will present theiri paper next.

Stage 3: singular *they* (antecedent of any gender, no restriction on description/
 name)
 (22a) Mariai wants to send theiri students on the field trip.
 (22b) We heard from Arthuri that theyi need time to think about the idea.
 (22c) We asked [the first girl in line]i to introduce themselfi/themselvesi.
 (22d) Your brotheri called to say theyi would be late.

(Konnelly and Cowper 2020, 5)

Stage 3 speakers are the same as those called innovative speakers by Bjorkman. For Konnelly and Cowper, *he*, *she*, and *they* are all available as singular, third-person pronouns. For them, *they* is not only available when the referent is of a non-binary gender identity but can also be used to refer to those whose gender and pronouns are not known to the speaker. They use *they* in order to avoid accidental misgendering.

For my study, stages 2 and 3 are the most interesting. There is no change in the status of gender features in the pronoun system between Stage 1 and Stage 2; gender is a contrastive feature (in Konnelly and Cowper's (2020) work, [MASC] stands for masculine, [FEM] for feminine, [INANIM] for inanimate). The feature [INANIM] is not a proper gender feature at Stage 1 because it is not realised on the same syntactic head as [MASC] and [FEM], but all three features are in complementary distribution. The features [MASC] and [FEM] are obligatorily realised on the nominal head *n*.

The only differences between stages 1 and 2 are that nouns are specified differently in the speaker's lexicon, and whether the gender-nonspecific nouns that refer to humans are obligatorily assigned a binary gender feature. At Stage 2, there is only a certain set of nouns and proper names that carry contrastive gender features; and the singular pronouns must be either *he* or *she* if the antecedent of the pronoun carries gender, no matter if the gender feature is lexical, assumed, or known.

Konnelly and Cowper (2020, 15) also take into consideration Bjorkman's (2017, 3) argument that for Stage 3 speakers the gender feature becomes optional. This would mean that *they* can be used to refer to any animate singular individual, no

matter if the nominal bears a semantic gender feature, and that *he* and *she* would only be used if the speaker knows the referent's correct pronouns. This would mean that the sentences in (23) are grammatically correct.

- (23a) My mother left her coat here.
- (23b) Your mother left their coat here.
- (23c) Your mother left his coat here.

(Konnolly and Cowper 2020, 16)

(23a) is quite traditional; *my mother* is traditionally referenced by the pronouns *she/her*. In the case of (23b), *your mother* is of unknown gender or of known non-binary gender. In my opinion, the sentence in (23c) is the most controversial one; in that case, *your mother* can either be a transgender individual whose pronoun of reference is *he/him*. What is more, it is even ambiguous because *his* can refer to another individual whose pronoun of reference is *he/him* and has been previously mentioned in the discourse.

The gender feature-adjunction theory of Stage 3 would not only allow singular *they* to be grammatically correct, but it would also make it possible to use it to refer to people who may accept any pronoun (*he*, *she*, or *they*) as their pronoun of reference.

In conclusion, this subsection argued that the gender feature of non-binary *they* is optional. Bjorkman (2017) refers to non-binary *they* as innovative *they*, and her hypothesis concerns the gender specification on pronouns. She speculates that if the gender specification on pronouns was optional, the pronoun *they* would be grammatical when directly referring to a specific person whose pronouns of reference are *they/them* and not the traditional *she/her* or *he/him*. She also claims that for conservative *they*-users, certain proper names like *Mary* or *John* have contrastive gender specifications. She suggests that people should unlearn the gender features syntactically associated with certain given names so that the pronoun *they* can be accepted as a singular pronoun of reference.

3 Singular and Non-binary *They*

3.1 Agreement and Concord, Phi-features of Singular *They*, the Verbal –s Inflection

The main claim of this paper is that singular *they* is indeed grammatical. Wechsler (2011, 1001) argues that pronouns are not required to be specified for Concord phi-features, which are number and gender; but they bear Index phi-features, which

are person, number, and gender. Based on this, I would argue that pronouns only have to be specified for the person feature, but not number and gender, which is in favour of the grammaticality of singular *they*.

Plural-agreeing singular noun-phrases are, as den Dikken (2001, 30) claims, uniformly unmarked for number, which I take to mean that they can combine with either a singular or a plural finite verb, even though this largely depends on the language variety in question. I assume that singular *they* is also unmarked for number, so that it can refer to both plural and singular entities.

Evidence for singular *they* being unmarked for number comes from Kayne's (1989, 188) discussion about the distribution of the verbal *-s* inflection. According to him, the suffix *-s* is a number marker, not a person marker, and it is only available for those subjects that are marked for singular: if one were to specify singular *they* as grammatically specified for singular number, one would expect it to be able to combine with singular verb forms (in *-s*); but in actual fact, singular *they* is incompatible with *-s*. Thus, I argue that the pronoun *they* is morphologically unmarked for number, meaning that its morphological number feature is absent. I also claim, based on the distribution of the verbal *-s* inflection, that in English plural verb agreement is the unmarked form, and singular verb agreement is the marked form for the singular number.

3.1.1 Newfoundland English

During my research, I discovered an interesting phenomenon in Newfoundland English via personal communication with a native Newfoundland English-speaker (Kendra Felicity Wheeler, WhatsApp direct message to author, September 28, 2023). Some speakers may prefer the accusative form of a personal pronoun over nominative forms in subject position, as in (24).

(24a) Her is a doctor. (instead of *she is a doctor*)

(24b) Him is a teacher. (instead of *he is a teacher*)

With reference to a non-binary person, *they* as a subject pronoun may default to the accusative form with singular verb agreement, as in (25).

(25a) Them is a student.

(25b) Do them study linguistics?

However, some dialects of Newfoundland English are not only peculiar in that they use an accusative pronoun as subject, but they also sometimes use *them* in

combination with the nominal plural marker *-s* and a singular *-s* form of the finite verb, as in *thems is smart*. In the phrase *thems is smart*, *them* functions as a common noun; the evidence for this is that the plural inflection *-s* can be added to it, since pronouns do not occur with nominal plural *-s*. The fact that it can combine with an *-s*-inflected finite verb is the result of the Northern Subject Rule that allows for plural subject noun phrases to occur with finite verbs that are inflected with the present-tense third-person inflection *-s* (de Haas and van Kemenade 2015, 25). The Northern Subject Rule allows for the following combinations to happen:

(26a) The boys is smart. (meaning ‘the boy is smart’)

(26b) The pizzas is cold. (meaning ‘the pizza is cold’)

I have also found *thems* used as a subject pronoun in the following sentences from the book called *The World of Ice* by R. M. Ballantyne.

(27) “Thems is go to bed.”

(28) “Thems must get up then come abroad.”

(Ballantyne 1859)

Ballantyne was a Scottish author from the 19th-century. What is interesting about Scots English that it explicitly follows the Northern Subject Rule, along with Hiberno-English. Newfoundland English shows several clear linguistic parallels with Hiberno-English.

3.2 Gender Marking of Pronouns

Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) assume that gender is a grammatical feature in the English pronoun system. I suggest, however, that gender in the English pronoun system is natural, as it is in the noun system, and not grammatical. Since there is no gender inflection on pronouns, they function as generalized pronouns. Generalized pronouns refer to animate entities. For [+human] entities, natural gender is obviously more active, since people in general will automatically select the pronoun *he* for males, and the pronoun *she* for females. The selection of gendered pronouns also increases with the appearance of given names that are associated with only one gender; for instance, John will most likely be [+M], and Mary will most likely be [+F] for most people.

3.3 Three Uses of They

I propose that the English language distinguishes between three types of *they* as a personal pronoun, namely *plural they*, *epicene they*, and *non-binary they*. This proposal is based on the works by Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002), Wechsler (2011), and Konnelly and Cowper (2020). It is important to keep in mind that the previous sections presented arguments for why the pronoun *they* is unmarked for number and gender, and why gender in the English language is natural and not grammatical.

Plural *they* is the ‘traditional’ use of the pronoun. Plural *they* makes a direct reference to multiple specified entities, and it controls plural agreement with the finite verb, as in (29).

(29) Those kids were my students; they all have brilliant minds.

Epicene *they* refers to a singular, unspecified, indeterminate entity that bears a [+human] feature. The speaker refers to a person whose identity and gender are unknown to them. It is used to avoid discrimination (used instead of the pronoun *he*), dehumanization (used instead of the pronoun *it*), and misgendering (used instead of *he or she*). Epicene *they*, just like plural *they*, controls plural agreement with the finite verb, as in (30).

(30) Someone left their drink; I hope they come back for it.

The third and the most recent type is non-binary *they*. It refers to a specific individual whose person, identity and gender are known to the speaker. It is used to directly refer to a person whose pronoun of reference is *they*, respecting this particular person’s identity and pronouns, as in (31).

(31) Kai is a talented musician, and they play several instruments with incredible skill.

I propose that all three types of *they* have the same morphological structures, belonging to the pro- Φ P category, as in Déchaine and Wiltschko’s (2002) analysis. All three types can function as bound variables, and they bear referential properties, as in (32). They must be pro- Φ P pronouns so that they can be bound outside their local domains and support coreference.

- (32a) The boys think they are smart, and the girls do, too. (*plural they*)
 (32b) Look at that person over there; they have a cool baseball hat. (*epicene they*)
 (32c) Kai always brings great energy to the team, and they help keep everyone motivated. (*non-binary they*)

There is, however, a small difference between their phi-features. They all have a third-person feature, but epicene *they* and non-binary *they* are restricted to a [+human] feature. It is important to distinguish between the [+animate] and the [+human] features since epicene *they* and non-binary *they* typically cannot refer to an animal whose biological sex is not visible to the eye (in such cases, usually, the English language defaults to *he*).

In summary, I propose that there are three types of the pronoun *they*: plural *they*, epicene *they*, and non-binary *they*. Plural *they* refers to plural entities, while both epicene and non-binary *they* make reference to a single person. They differ in their morphological features; all three types are pro-ΦPs, as Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) argued, but while plural *they* is unmarked for both animacy and humanness, epicene *they* and non-binary *they* have a [+human] feature.

4 Conclusion

In my paper, I have discussed the difference between two types of singular *they*, namely epicene *they* and non-binary *they*. Epicene *they* is a sex-indeterminate pronoun that refers to a non-specific person, and non-binary *they* is a gender-neutral pronoun that directly refers to a specific person whose pronoun of reference is *they/them*.

I have explored how singular *they* has evolved throughout the centuries, from the 1300s until today. In the 16th century, singular *they* was attacked because the pronoun *they* was claimed to be plural, and grammarians encouraged the use of the singular third-person masculine pronoun *he* as an epicene pronoun. The pronoun *he* was used as an epicene pronoun for centuries, thus including the feminine gender into the masculine. However, the use of *they* as an epicene pronoun has been encouraged since the second half of the 20th century, thanks to the feminist movement and the rising visibility of genderqueer and transgender people.

In connection with the morphosyntax of the pronoun *they*, I argue that the pronoun only has to be marked for third person, and not for number and gender. Evidence for the pronoun *they* being unmarked for number and gender is that the present tense third-person singular inflection *-s* is only available to those subjects that are marked as singular. Since the verbal inflectional suffix *-s* is only available

for the pronouns *he*, *she*, and *it*, I argue that *they*, along with the other personal pronouns, are unmarked for number. Based on the distribution of the verbal *-s* inflection, I claim that singular verb agreement is explicitly marked for singular number, and plural verb agreement is the unmarked form in the English language, as the plural agreement on verbs is usually identical with the bare stem and the infinitival form of the verb.

There is a certain stigma that surrounds the pronoun *they* when it is used in a singular way, and that stigma is very apparent when the similarities and the differences of the pronouns *you* and *they* are looked at. *You* is accepted both in its singular and plural use, despite having plural verb-agreement, which I argue to be the unmarked form. Furthermore, both its singular and plural reflexives are accepted. The pronoun *they* does not receive the same judgement. It is universally accepted with a plural antecedent along with its plural reflexive form. However, singular *they* might be judged as ungrammatical, but the objection against *themselves* is even more striking.

Déchainé and Wiltschko (2002) distinguish between three types of pronouns: pro-DP pronouns, pro- Φ P pronouns, and pro-NP pronouns. They claim that English third-person personal pronouns belong to the pro- Φ P pronoun category. However, I argue that, while all three uses of the pronoun *they* have the structure of a pro- Φ P pronoun, they differ in their phi-features, as plural *they* is unmarked for animacy, and epicene *they* and non-binary *they* are restricted to the [+human] feature.

The appearance of third-person singular accusative pronouns in subject position in some dialects of Newfoundland English is certainly an interesting phenomenon. I argue that it might be because in such cases, the pronouns, namely *him*, *her*, and *them*, function as common nouns and thus they can control singular verb agreement. What is even more interesting is that *them* can combine with the nominal plural marker *-s* and the singular verb inflection *-s*, as in *thems is smart*. The explanation for this is that *them* functions as a common noun, so it can combine with the plural marker *-s*. The Northern Subject Rule allows plural subject noun phrases to occur with finite verbs with the *-s* inflection. The relevance of this discovery lies in the arguments shown for the grammaticality of singular and non-binary *they*.

I propose that there are three types of *they* that should be distinguished: plural *they*, epicene *they*, and non-binary *they*. Plural *they* directly refers to multiple specified entities; epicene *they* refers to a singular, unspecified entity; and non-binary *they* makes a direct reference to a singular, specific person whose pronouns are *they*/*them*, having a Φ P-NP structure. However, while plural *they* is unmarked for humanness and animacy, epicene *they* and non-binary *they* have a [+human] feature.

Bjorkman (2017) as well as Konnelly and Cowper (2020) argued that gender specifications that are traditionally associated with certain given names should be unlearned in order to achieve complete gender neutrality. They also argue that

gender specifications on pronouns should be optional so that singular *they* would be grammatical.

In summary, I have argued that both types of singular *they*, i.e. epicene *they* and non-binary *they*, are grammatically correct. The pronoun *they* itself is unspecified for number and gender. Gender in the English language is natural and not grammatical, since there is no gender inflection on verbs or nouns. Plural verb agreement is the unmarked form as it is typically identical with the infinitive form of the verb and the bare stem. Singular verb agreement is specifically marked by the present tense third-person singular inflection *-s*. I have also argued that gender specification is optional on pronouns. Furthermore, gender specifications on names may be optional, as Bjorkman (2017) suggested, so that genderqueer, non-binary, and transgender people can be addressed accordingly despite having a name that is traditionally associated with the gender binary.

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