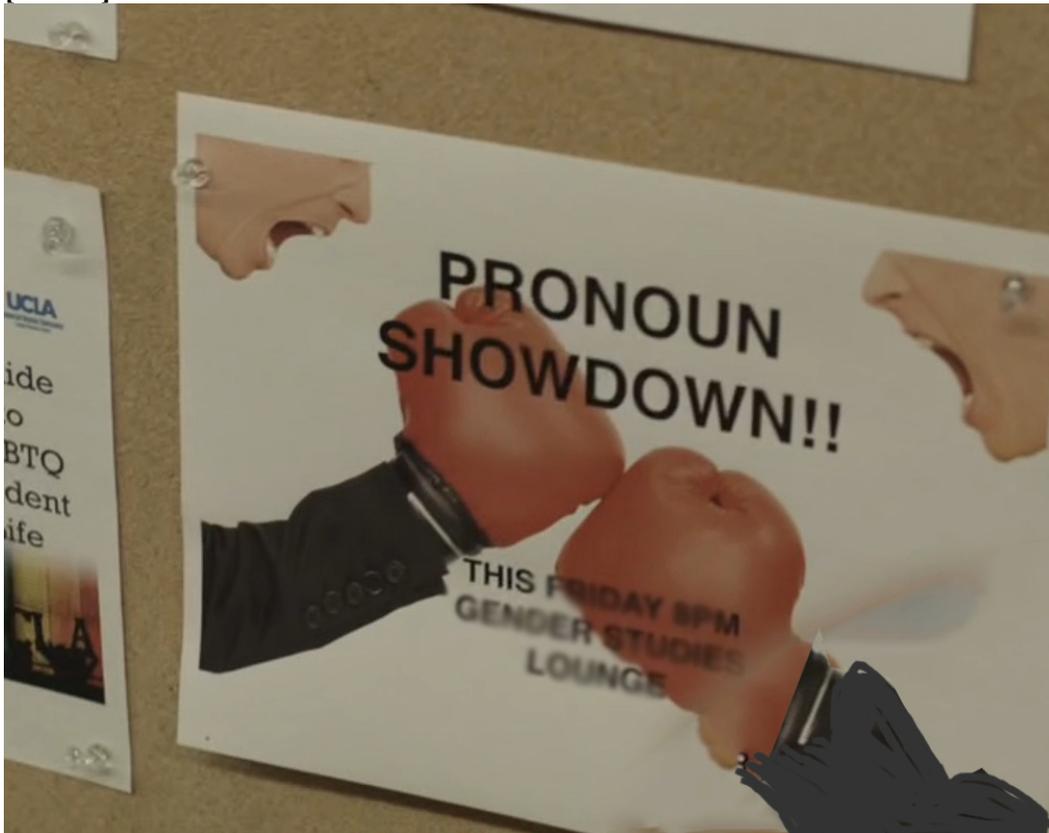


Pronoun showdown 2016:

Are nonbinary pronouns and singular *they* ruining the language or making English great again?

Dennis Baron
Professor of English and linguistics, University of Illinois

[slide 1]



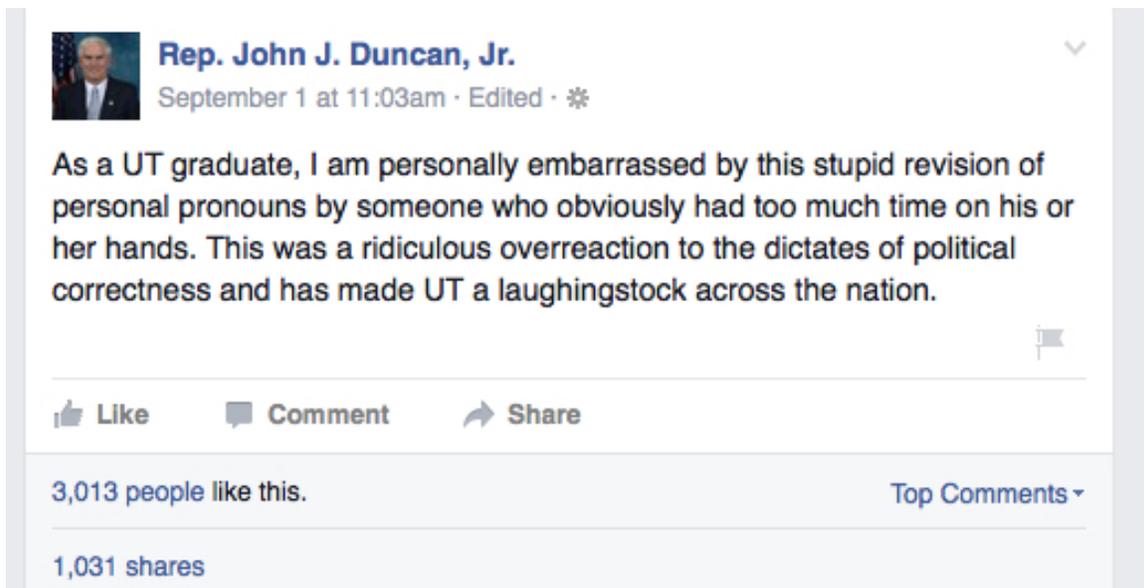
[slide 2]



In September, 2015, the director of the University of Tennessee’s Pride Center suggested asking people what pronouns they use, because people who don’t identify as men or women might prefer something gender-neutral, like *ze*, *hir*, *xe*, *xem* or *xyr*. They advised, these pronouns “may sound a little funny . . . because they are new” — so you could also ask, “Oh, nice to meet you . . . What pronouns should I use?”

Then the press got wind of the story, with consequences that I’m pretty sure the Pride Center did not anticipate.

[slide 3]



The polite suggestion that we need to be pronoun-aware brought down the wrath of the state's conservative legislators, who promptly vowed to investigate the university for teaching language evolution.

State Senator Bo Watson, a proponent of creation linguistics, offered to slash the higher education budget by an amount equal to the cost of all these new pronouns:

“Tennessee taxpayers should not expect to be paying for this kind of stuff.”

Congressional representative and UT grad John J. Duncan, of Knoxville, Facebooked,

“This was a ridiculous overreaction to the dictates of political correctness and has made UT a laughingstock across the nation.”

Note the number of likes and shares.

[slide 4]



In the face of legislative pressure, the UT administration first announced that there was no official pronoun policy.

[slide 5]

The screenshot shows the website for the Office for Diversity and Inclusion at The University of Tennessee Knoxville. The header includes the university's logo and name. A navigation menu on the left lists Home, About, Programs, News, and Events. The main content area displays a 'Page Not Found' message: 'We're sorry. It looks like nothing was found at this location. We hope the information below can be of some assistance.' Below the message is a search bar with the text 'Try searching for the page:' and a dropdown menu labeled 'Search the Office for Diversity and Inclusion Site'. A callout box with a speech bubble says 'Let's Hunt Down That Page.' with an image of a dog's head.

Then they excluded the post from the Office for Diversity and Inclusion website.

[slide 6]

Education Administration & Planning 1

Amendment No. 1 to HB2248

Brooks H
Signature of Sponsor

AMEND Senate Bill No. 1912*

House Bill No. 2248

by deleting all language after the enacting clause and substituting instead the following:

SECTION 1. Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 9, Chapter 4, Part 51, is amended by adding the following language as a new section:

- (a) State funds shall not be expended by the University of Tennessee to promote the use of gender neutral pronouns, to promote or inhibit the celebration of religious holidays, or to fund or support sex week.

And now legislators want to divert funds for pronouns and diversity to bumper stickers for police cars reading “In God we trust.”

[slide 7]



However, the web seldom forgets. A pdf of the offending suggestion is readily available online.

[slide8]

	Subject	Object	Pronoun	Pronunciation
Gender Binary	she	her	hers	as it looks
	he	him	his	as it looks
Gender Neutral	they*	them*	their*	as it looks
	ze	hir	hers	zhee, here, heres
	ze	zir	zirs	zhee, zhere, zheres
	xe	xem	xyr	zhee, zhem, zhere
				*used as singular

Here are the UT diversity pronoun options.

Choices include the standard binary pronouns —with the feminine coming first, for a change, plus three invented nonbinary pronouns, and singular they.

[slide 9]



Tennessee's inclusive pronoun initiative was controversial, but it was hardly unique.

Here's another pronoun card from the University of Wisconsin, a button from Berkeley, one from the British National Union of Students.

There's also a button and a t-shirt from a commercial website, and a name tag graphic from Ben Zimmer's article on singular "they" in the Wall St. Journal, because pronouns are good business.

[slide 10]

Today I will set the current flurry of interest in nonbinary English pronouns on campuses, among editors, in the press, and among our posturing elected officials, in its historical context, because the call for such pronouns goes back over 200 years, and not surprisingly, so does opposition to changing the pronoun system.

The need for a common-gender third person singular becomes apparent when we look at sentences like this:

Everyone loves _____'s mother.

Here's how you could fill in the blank:

Everyone loves *his* mother.

That's a problem because generic *he* frequently isn't generic, and since pronouns are supposed to agree in gender and number with their referent, it forces the user to violate the gender agreement rule.

Everyone loves *their* mother.

Singular *they* violates number concord — even though *they* has doubled as singular and plural since the 14th century.

Everyone loves *her* mother.

Because of the grammatical glass ceiling, generic *she* never achieved widespread use.

Everyone loves *his or her* mother.

Always clunky, plus if you're worried about taxpayer dollars, two pronouns costs twice as much as one pronoun.

Everyone loves *one's* mother.

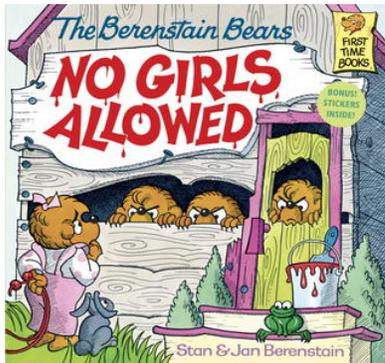
You're kidding, right? One doesn't even say this in England.

Given the unsuitability of these options, some language reformers thought the way to remedy the lack of a common-gender pronoun was to coin one. It would let us refer to either males or females, or to both males and females, and more recently, to refer to transgender or gender nonconforming persons as well.

Unfortunately, the coined nonbinary pronouns haven't fared too well, not just at Tennessee, but pretty much everywhere. But we'll get to them in a minute.

[slide 11]

Where note, That the Masculine Gender is more worthy than the Feminine, and the Feminine more worthy than the Neuter.



First let's start our historical romp through pronoun-land with the generic *he*.

Generic *he* derives from the Latin notion of the worthiness of the genders. Here's how John Lyly described it back in 1567:

“the Masculine Gender is more worthy than the Feminine, and Feminine more worthy than the Neuter.”

19th-century grammarians would occasionally say, snarkily, that the masculine *embraces* the feminine. You can just hear them snickering into their gerunds, like they were in junior high school or something.

But from the start, critics found cases where *he* clearly signaled, “no girls allowed.”

[slide 12]

For want of a personal pronoun in the singular number of a common gender The American is noted for his wasteful propensities We say his, but we mean hers,

Here's an anti-feminist, writing in 1895, who believes women spend too much, and he wishes he had a gender-neutral pronoun so he could stop calling women *men*:

“*The American is noted for his wasteful propensities. We say his but we mean hers.*”

Think that’s bad? It gets worse. He says,

“We may use the masculine pronoun . . . on the ground that ‘the men embrace the women,’” but if women spent less, “the men would embrace the women oftener than they do.”

It’s gonna take more than a nonbinary pronoun to solve this writer’s woman problem.

[slide 13]

If our writer had also been a reader, he might have known that people had been coining nonbinary pronouns for more than 100 years. Here are a few of them:

ou 1792
en, han, un 1868
ne, nis, nim ca. 1850
se, 1874
um, ita 1877
e 1878, 1890
hesh, hiser 1879
thon, hi, ip, le, hiser, hersh, hae 1884
tha, zyhe 1885
he’er, his’er, him’er 1912
ir, ze, de 1888
ons 1889
hi 1890
hizer, ith, zie 1891
hoo, en 1895

Some of these are blends of *he* and *she*. Some are reduced versions of *he* and *she*. Some, like *ou* and *un*, probably come from unaspirated forms of Old English *he* and *hēo*. And some, like *ip*, are just cute little words dying to be adopted.

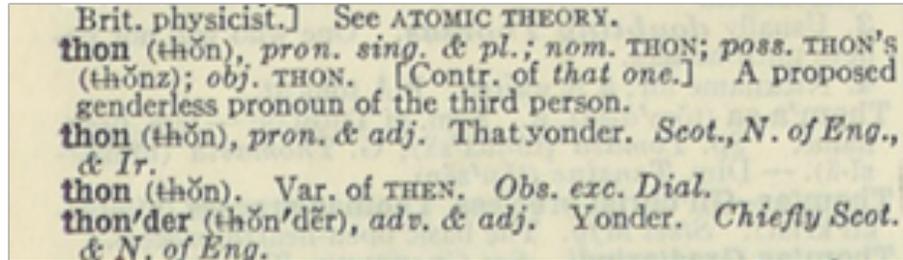
The earliest new pronoun appears in 1792 (surely earlier ones will turn up). Scottish economist James Anderson suggested *ou*, a pronoun already found in dialect use. Anderson actually thought English would benefit from 13 genders instead of two. His suggestions were widely ignored.

Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, may have been behind *ne*, *nis*, and *nim*, thought to have been coined around 1850, as was the first *hiser*, a form invented over and over again.

But even though more than 100 of these invented words have been coined, none succeeded.

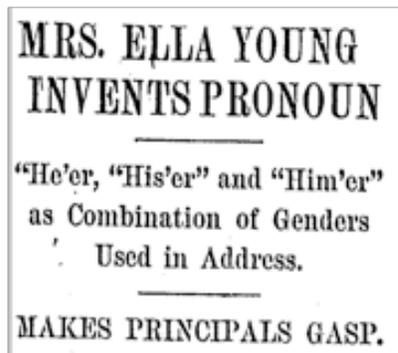
Thon and *he'er*, perhaps the most popular—and they were never *really* popular—appeared in Webster's *New International Dictionary*, and you could look them up in your *Funk and Wagnalls*. But they were eventually dropped because not enough people used them.

[slide 14]



Here's the entry for *thon* from W2; it was dropped in Webster's Third.

[slide 15]



He'er was coined in 1912 by Ella Flagg Young, Chicago's superintendent of schools. You think Tennessee legislators overreact to invented pronouns? Young's pronoun actually made school principals gasp.

[slide 16]

**Dr. Funk Approves Coined Personal
Pronouns of Common Gender.**

To the Editor of The New York Times:

In a Chicago dispatch last Saturday it was announced that Mrs. Ella Flagg Young, the able Superintendent of the Chicago schools, suggested "himer" and "hiser" as personal pronouns of the common gender. These words, like Wagner's music, are better than they sound. It is easy to create a new word, but to get it introduced is the rub. New words as a rule are very grudgingly admitted to good verbal society.

Some people liked Young's pronoun: Isaac Funk, of Funk and Wagnall's fame, wrote to the *New York Times* that

"these words, like Wagner's music, are better than they sound."

Some compliment, right?

Funk likes *thon* better, but he did add both pronouns to his dictionary.

[slide 17]

"Man" Includes Women
 Mrs. ELLA FLAGG YOUNG has invented a new third person singular personal pronoun of common gender, "his'er" and "him'er," to take the place of the awkward "his or her," "him or her."—*New York Tribune*.

It won't work. By current usage "his" is used as a pronoun of common gender to include "her." There is no very lively prospect of bettering our language in that particular. It cannot be done by any arbitrary exercise of authority. "His" includes "her" (though less distinctly), as "man," used for the human race, includes women. When "man" ceases to include women we shall cease to need a language, and won't care any more about pronouns. There is a better chance to bring about a better understanding of the sense of "his," when used to include "her," than there is to win acceptance of new pronouns.

Not everybody liked *he'er*. Ben Blewett, Young's counterpart in St. Louis, thought generic *he* was just fine. Why mess with success? Blewett was gracious enough to admit that when women came into their own, politically, they could use generic *she*.

But for George Harvey, the editor of *Harper's Weekly*, *he'er* meant the end times for language:

"When 'man' ceases to include women we shall cease to need a language, and won't care any more about pronouns."

[slide 18]

judgment and delicacy. How ungenerous it is to pitch upon some one of our acquaintance, tell private stories of them, and then indudriously report them to be the author! This conduct we do censure

With regard to our using the plural pronoun "them" in conjunction with the definitive pronoun "one," as we wished to conceal the gender, we would ask the Don to coin us a substitute.

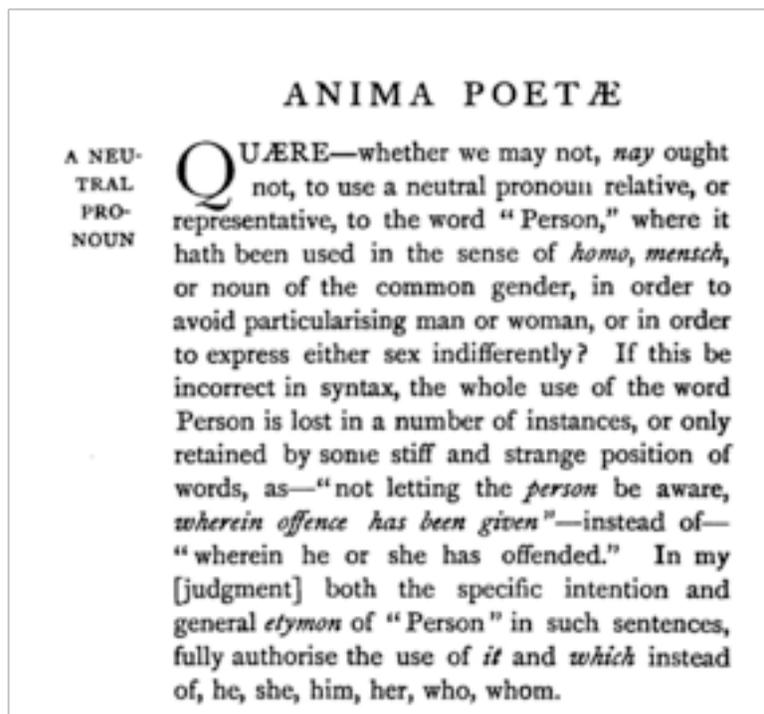
One of the first calls for a nonbinary pronoun was prompted by a dislike of singular *they*. In 1794, a writer styling himself “Don Alonzo” argues that a piece that appeared two weeks earlier in the *Medley*, the Bedford, MA, newspaper, written by three women using the *nom de plume*, “the Belle Assembly,” contains a grammatical error:

the plural *them* used to refer to the singular *one*. [top example on slide]; How ungenerous it is to pitch upon some *one* of our acquaintances, tell private stories of *them*, and then industriously report *them* to be the author!

The “Belle Assembly” responds, in the second example on the slide,

“With regard to our using the plural pronoun “them” . . . — as we wished to conceal the gender, we would ask . . . Don [Alonzo] to coin us a substitute.”

[slide 19]



No new pronoun was forthcoming, but, in 1808, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge proposes *it*,

“in order to avoid particularising man or woman, or in order to express sex indifferently.”

Although Coleridge was an influential writer, his readers looked upon his recommendation of *it* indifferently.

[slide 20]

If anybody will get us well out of the difficulty which results from the want of a really personal pronoun in the third person singular, without gender, he will be entitled to the thanks of all persons who love to talk. We say, "If any lady or gentleman shall buy this article—shall have it for five dollars." The blank may be filled with *he*, *she*, *it*, or *they*; or in any other manner; and yet the form of the expression will be too vulgar to be uttered.

A writer in the New York *Mercury* in 1839 calls for an invented nonbinary pronoun because there's no correct way to fill in the blank:

“We say, ‘If any lady or gentleman shall buy this article _____ shall have it for five dollars.’ The blank may be filled with *he*, *she*, *it*, or *they*; or in any other manner; and yet the form of the expression will be too vulgar to be uttered.

With no sense of irony, the writer employs generic *he* in addressing potential word-coiners:

“If anybody will get us well out of the difficulty . . . *he* will be entitled to the thanks of all persons who love to talk”

[slide 21]

The constitution, whenever it uses the pronoun, in speaking of the president, uniformly uses the masculine gender—from which it may be inferred that male persons only were intended to be made eligible to the office.

By now, the pronoun *he* was becoming controversial.

In 1845, two leading American abolitionists disputed whether *he* meant *she* as well.

Lysander Spooner argued that a woman couldn't be president because the Constitution always refers to the president as “he.”

But Wendell Phillips disagreed:

“in grammars, as well as law, the rule used to be, that the masculine pronoun . . . included the race. . . .

The Constitution itself, in the 5th Amendment, has, ‘no person shall be compelled to be witness against *himself*. . .’

But, alas! according to Mr. Spooner, none of these shields cover the defenceless heads of the women!”

[slide 22]

4. Be it enacted, That in all acts words importing the Interpretation of certain words
masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females, and the singular to include the plural, and the plural the singular, unless the contrary as to gender or for future number is expressly provided; acts.

eral persons or things; words importing the plural number may include the singular; words importing the masculine gender may be applied to females; the words “insane person” and “lunatic” shall include every

And speaking of law, in 1850, England passed the “interpretation act,” which shortens English laws by making *he* also stand for *she*:

“in all acts words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females . . . unless the contrary . . . is expressly provided.”

Gender inclusion is NOT reciprocal — it’s that old gender double standard — in law, as in grammar, the female never embraces the male.

Despite this establishment of *he* as legal generic, English courts held that *he* also meant *she* for obligations like paying taxes, but *not* for privileges like voting.

A similar act, passed in the US in 1871, provoked questions about the politics of *he*.

[slide 23]



In the 1860s, American women’s rights advocates were agitating for the vote.

By 1869, a Chicago writer reminds us that the Illinois constitution restricts voting to “male citizens.” So women could get elected, they just couldn’t vote for themselves.

That same year another writer cites the need for a common-gender pronoun, and who better to invent one than the “women’s-rights women”?

“As the laws of the grammars stand, the use of ‘he,’ when ‘she’ is meant, is an outrage upon the dignity and an encroachment upon the rights of women. It is quite as important that they should stand equal with men in the grammars as before the law—so we hand this duty of amending the language over to Mrs. Stanton and Miss Anthony.”

And in 1879, a writer complains that a new Texas law has abolished gender. The law says,

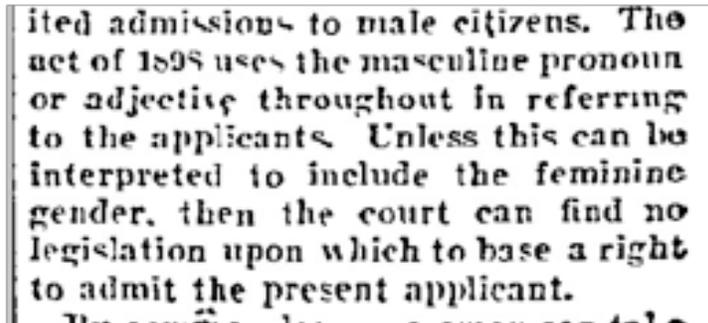
“the masculine gender shall include the feminine and neuter.”

And that means,

“suffrage becomes promiscuous in Texas [don’t get excited, that just means everyone can vote] -- and all the avenues of political preferment are open to all the sexes, masculine, feminine, and neuter.”

[It was a common rhetorical tactic at the time to make fun of your political enemies by labeling them ‘neuter.’ If you’ve been following the primaries, you see that sexual innuendo remains part of our political discourse.]

[slide 24]



ited admissions to male citizens. The act of 1898 uses the masculine pronoun or adjective throughout in referring to the applicants. Unless this can be interpreted to include the feminine gender, then the court can find no legislation upon which to base a right to admit the present applicant.

The battle of the generic *he* continued with an 1881 report on the denial of a petition by Mrs. Belva Lockwood—the papers call her “the Washington lawyeress”—to be admitted to the Maryland bar.

To support her case, Lockwood cited a Maryland law providing that

“the masculine shall be held to include all genders except where such constructions would be absurd and unreasonable.”

In response, the Maryland court ruled

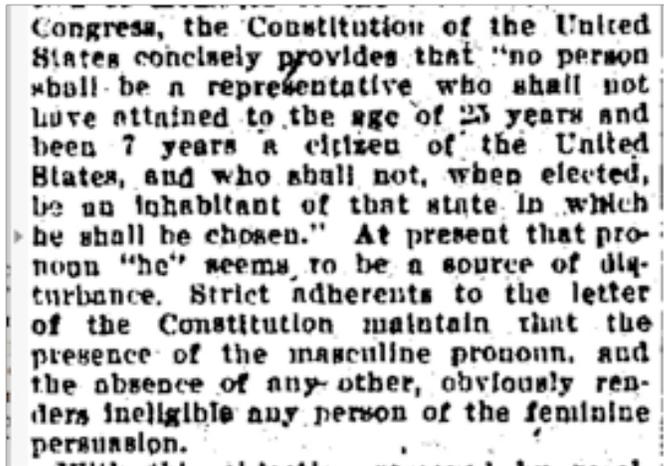
“that it would be ‘absurd and unreasonable’ in the exact words of the code, to apply the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘him’ to a woman.”

Maryland didn’t allow women lawyers until 1902. However changing the language of the law didn’t necessarily change attitudes: women were not admitted to the Maryland Bar *Association* until the 1950s.

That suggests that changing pronouns won’t change social attitudes today, either.

Of course, as attitudes toward gender nonconformism become more positive, pronouns become less binary.

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Congress, the Constitution of the United States concisely provides that "no person shall be a representative who shall not have attained to the age of 25 years and been 7 years a citizen of the United States, and who shall not, when elected, be an inhabitant of that state in which he shall be chosen." At present that pronoun "he" seems to be a source of disturbance. Strict adherents to the letter of the Constitution maintain that the presence of the masculine pronoun, and the absence of any other, obviously renders ineligible any person of the feminine persuasion.

As they say in the late-night TV commercials, but wait, there's more.

In 1909, a Denver civic leader, Sarah Platt Decker, considered running for Congress in Colorado.

One skeptic wonders whether the use of the masculine pronoun in the Constitution might derail her candidacy:

“Strict adherents to the letter of the Constitution maintain that the presence of the masculine pronoun, and the absence of any other, obviously renders ineligible any person of the feminine persuasion.”

Platt Decker didn't run, but the issue came up again in 1916, when Jeanette Rankin, of Montana, became the first woman elected to Congress.

[slide 26]

Argue That "He" in Constitution Might Bar Miss Rankin From House

Special to The Washington Post.

Chicago, Nov. 11.—Is the Constitution of the United States so eternally masculine that the personal pronoun "he" may not be interpreted as "she"?

If it is—and may be it is—Miss Jeanette Rankin, Congressman-elect from Montana, may be prevented from accepting the prize of her victory.

This ungallant question was brought up today by students of the Federal Constitution, who quoted the following passage:

"No person shall be a Representa-

tive * * * who shall not, when elected, be an inhabitant of that State in which he shall be chosen."

Judge Barton Payne, an authority on the Constitution, said:

"The opponent of Miss Rankin might, of course, contest the election. In that event Congress would ultimately decide the matter. The laws of Montana would be taken into consideration. As for the 'he' in the Federal Constitution, I don't believe it would be construed so as to prevent Miss Rankin from accepting the seat in Congress."

The *Washington Post* reported, "students of the Federal Constitution" are warning that the masculine pronoun might prevent Rankin from being seated if she won.

The relevant part of the Constitution reads, "No Person shall be a Representative . . . who shall not, when elected, be an Inhabitant of that State in which *he* shall be chosen."

Rankin did win, and she had no problem being seated.

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But, alas! language cannot be artificially fabricated. It is a growth, not an invention. "Thon" is better than a thousand words of recognized orthographical standing; but no newspaper and no college can give it good repute. It must come up from the people, like slang, not down from the highbrows.

But Rankin's win didn't deter the snarks from weighing in on what to call the new congressperson:

the "lady from Montana," the "person from Montana," or "the member from Montana"?

So far, the scope of Constitutional pronouns hasn't been raised in relation to the present presidential race. But don't be surprised if some pronoun-birther brings it up in the Fall.

Interestingly, when Hillary Clinton began campaigning for president, some commentators saw fit to wonder whether, if she won, she would be a *woman president* or a *female president*. As the linguist [Deborah Cameron](#) asks, why not just president?

[slide 28]

But when both Genders are implied, it is allowable to use the Plural: 'let each esteem other better than themselves'.

Grammarians frequently call this construction an error: not reflecting that it is equally an error to apply 'his' to feminine subjects. The best writers furnish examples of the use of the plural as a mode of getting out of the difficulty. 'Every person's happiness depends in part upon the respect they meet in the world' (Paley). 'Every one must judge of their own feelings' (Byron). 'If the part deserve any comment, every considering Christian will make it to themselves as they go' (Defoe). 'Everybody began to have their vexation.' 'Everybody around her was gay, was busy, prosperous, and important: each had their objects of interest, their part, their dress, their favourite scene, their friends and confederates.' 'Had the doctor been contented to take my dining tables, as anybody in their senses would have done' (Miss Austen).

Sometimes strict grammar is preserved thus: 'Everybody called for his or her favourite remedy, which nobody brought'. But this construction is felt to be too cumbrous to be kept up,

And now some early comments in support of singular they:

In 1879, Alexander Bain wrote one of the few nineteenth-century grammars to approve of singular *they*:

"Grammarians frequently call this construction an error: not reflecting that it is equally an error to apply 'his' to feminine subjects. The best writers furnish examples of the use of the plural as a mode of getting out of the difficulty."

Bain observes that the conjoined *his or her* preserves strict grammar, but he warns, cumbrously, "this construction is felt to be too cumbrous to be kept up."

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Then to our declensions of personal pronouns would be added:—
 Third person, common gender, singular number.
Nom. They,
Poss. Their or theirs,
Obj. Them.
 It would be easy to adopt this idiom, for we are continually struggling against its use, and how delightful it would be for once to make wrong right!

Also in 1879, the *Atlantic* argued that if the pronoun *you* could serve as both singular and plural, “then why not they?”

“It would be easy to adopt this idiom, for we are continually struggling against its use, and how delightful it would be for once to make wrong right!”

And another concerned citizen, in 1884:

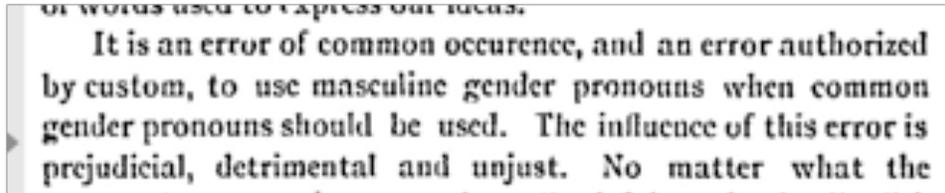
“Many persons who are by no means ignorant accept, in conversation at least, the plan of using the plural common gender pronouns, ‘they, their, theirs,’ etc., indifferently as singular or plural. And in this they are not without authority of good usage,”

[slide 30]

I should use
 “themselves,” and “they,” and “their” for the sexless forms; I have so used them for years, of set purpose, after careful thought, and purpose still to use them, despite full knowledge that they are (wrongly) considered vulgar blunders, on the authority of antiquity, analogy, necessity, and preferability; and I think all good writers should join in giving so large a body of unimpeachable current authorization to them that the mass, who are eager to know and follow good usage, may do so with easy minds, and not reach after such atrocious inventions as “thon” or “hizer,” or stick in the old slough.

In 1891, Forrest Morgan argues that singular *they* is grammatically correct because good writers use it, and he notes that *your* for *thine* has become perfectly acceptable as well. To Morgan, singular *they* is better than “such atrocious inventions as ‘thon’ or ‘hizer.’”

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In 1900, another writer admits that grammarians have not been able to halt singular *they*, and he concedes that, even though the form is incorrect,

“usage may ultimately force a recognition of the plural pronouns as singular pronouns also when the common gender is used.”

And in 1902, the social radical Bertha Moore rejects generic *he* as “prejudicial, detrimental and unjust.” Instead, since *you* can be both singular and plural, it’s

“equally as proper to use the pronouns they, their and them, both in the singular and plural number.”

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Word coiners continued to invent common-gender pronouns in the 20th century, particularly in the 1970s and 80s, a period that saw a lot of interest in nonsexist language. Even so, there's no general agreement over which invented pronoun is best. Implicit in today's question, "What's your pronoun?" is the acknowledgment that there are many pronouns . . . and they have no plan.

And the issue of common-gender invented pronouns goes beyond English. The Swedish nonbinary *hen* (joining the masculine *han* and the feminine *hon*) was coined around 1996 and received official approval last year, when it was added to the dictionary of the Swedish Academy.

Even so, *hen* remains controversial. The slide shows a montage of screen caps from the Swedish/Danish television series *The Bridge*. The Swedish police detective, Saga Norén, on the right, uses *hen*, and her Danish colleague, Hanne Thomsen, on the left, sardonically questions this "politically correct" usage.

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Most recently, pronoun interest has moved away from invented words and turned to the quiet and growing success of singular *they*.

Singular *they* is approved by many style guides and dictionaries, and the APA may soon revise its style book to allow singular *they*. (Rumor has it, however, that the forthcoming AP Style Book does not address the issue.)

The fourteenth edition of the prestigious *Chicago Manual of Style* actually advised writers to choose singular *they*, citing

“its venerable use by such writers as Addison, Austen, Chesterfield, Fielding, Ruskin, Scott, and Shakespeare.” [Chicago 1993:76-77n.]

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But, facing resistance from readers and editors, the current *Manual* walked back that advice:

Many people substitute the plural *they* and *their* for the singular *he* or *she*. Although *they* and *their* have become common in informal usage, neither is considered acceptable in formal writing. [16e., (2010) 5.227]

The *Manual* tersely rejects common-gender blends like *s/he* and invented pronouns:

they won't succeed. And those who use them invite credibility problems.

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Bryan Garner's *Modern American Usage* disapproves of singular *they* but calls it “commonplace” and

“the most likely solution to the single biggest problem in sexist language . . . the generic masculine pronoun.”

But the *American Heritage Book of English Usage* (1996) calls singular *they* “the alternative to the masculine generic with the longest and most distinguished history” (p. 178).

British reference works are much more accepting of singular *they*:

The *Oxford English Grammar* (1996) notes that singular *they* is readily accepted in Britain, “even in formal style” (19ff.).

[slide 36]

And *the* British authority on usage, *The New Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Burchfield 1996), dismisses objections to singular *they* as unsupported by the historical record and observes that the construction is “passing unnoticed” by speakers of standard English as well as by copy editors. Burchfield finds this trend “irreversible” (776).

[slide 37]

The *New Oxford Dictionary* (1998) not only accepts singular *they*, it uses the form in its definitions.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2000, s.v.) accepts singular *they* as “well-established in speech and writing, even in literary and formal contexts.”

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* (2010) calls singular *they* “generally accepted” with indefinites, and “now common but less widely accepted” with definite nouns, especially in formal contexts.

The *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (Peters 2004) says that singular *they* with indefinites has become “unremarkable—an element of common usage.”

Even though some people still dislike the form, the *Guide* tells us, “that kind of response . . . is no longer shared by the English-speaking population at large,” and it counsels, “Writers who use singular *they/them/their* are not at fault” (538).

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Even so, this recent comment by a Writing Center director at the University of Toronto suggests a bifurcated approach to dealing with singular *they*:

“Using a plural pronoun to mean a singular is grammatically incorrect. However, it’s become a statement of personal identity to use a gender neutral pronoun for some writers in context. . . .

“When it’s used strategically in that context, it’s not an error; it’s a choice.”

The problem is, how to tell when *they* is intentional and when mistaken.

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Singular *they* is reasonably uncontroversial when used for people in general, as in

Everyone loves *their* mother.

But when the referent is a specific individual, and more narrowly, a named person, some may hesitate:

If a student wants to change major, *they* should contact an advisor.

If a student wants to change *their* major . . .

Meet Dylan. *They* prefer the pronouns *they*, *them*, and *their*.

Dylan prefers *their* burger medium rare.

Dylan prefers mustard; they want ketchup, but no onions.

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The pronoun paradigm changes, although slowly. And a plural pronoun can become singular, no problem.

Here are some pronoun changes in English since the middle ages:

- Singular *they* appears ca. 1370 in writing, surely earlier in speech.
- singular *you* pops up in the 17th-century (accompanies loss of *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, and *ye*)

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- In 1660, George Fox, founder of the Society of Friends (Quakers), writes an entire book devoted to the “error” of singular *you*. In *A battle-door [i.e., a textbook] for teachers and professors to learn singular & plural*, Fox vehemently argues, “Do not they speak false English . . . that doth not speak thou to one, and what ever he be, Father, Mother, King, or Judge, is he not a Novice, and Unmannerly, and an

Idiot, and a Fool, that speaks You to one, which is not to be spoken to a singular, but to many?"

D O U B T.
Is not your own *Original*, *Thou* to *one* singular, and *You* to *many* plural; and proper speech, not non-sence? Do not they speak false English, false Latine, false Greek, false Hebrew, false Chaldee, false Syriack, and Arabick, false Dutch, false French; and false to the other *Tongues*, that followes here in this Book, that doth not speak *thou* to *one*, what ever he be, Father, Mother, King, or Judge, is he not a Novice, and Unmannerly, and an Idiot, and a Fool, that speaks *You* to *one*, which is not to be spoken to a *singular*, but to *many* ?

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- Fox lost that battle to the “unmannerly” English of the “idiots” and “fools,” though many 19th-century English grammars continued to show *thou* as the correct second-person singular, and *you* as the plural. Although by 1762, *you* was the second-person pronoun of choice for both singular and plural, here’s how the grammarian Robert Lowth described the second person pronouns:

These are called, respectively, the First, Second, and Third, Persons: and are expressed by the Pronouns *I, Thou, He.*

As the Speakers, the Persons spoken to, and the Persons spoken of, may be many, so each of these Persons hath the Plural Number; *We, Ye, They.*

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And Lindley Murray, in 1794, offers this confirmation of the *thou* / *you* distinction in his popular grammar textbook, even though it had long been abandoned in the usage of everyone except the Quakers:

The personal pronouns are thus declined,

	SINGULAR.	PLURAL.
<i>Nom.</i>	I.	We.
<i>Possess.</i>	Mine.	Ours.
<i>Object.</i>	Me.	Us.
	SINGULAR.	PLURAL.
<i>Nom.</i>	Thou.	Ye or you.
<i>Possess.</i>	Thine.	Yours.
<i>Obj.</i>	Thee.	You.
	SINGULAR.	PLURAL.
<i>Nom.</i>	He.	They.
<i>Possess.</i>	His.	Theirs.
<i>Obj.</i>	Him.	Them.
	SINGULAR.	PLURAL.
<i>Nom.</i>	She.	They.
<i>Possess.</i>	Hers.	Theirs.
<i>Obj.</i>	Her.	Them.
	SINGULAR.	PLURAL.
<i>Nom.</i>	It.	They.
<i>Possess.</i>	Its.	Theirs.
<i>Obj.</i>	It.	Them.

- more recently, singular *you* leads to rise of new disambiguating plural forms of *you*:
 - *y'all*; *youse*; *yins*; and most recently, *you guys*, particularly in speech; and then there's *all y'all*, doubly plural just in case *y'all* has started acting like a singular.

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The advantages of invented pronouns:

- They fill a gap in the pronoun paradigm

- They are high profile, calling attention to the emerging politics of the nonbinary
- They recognize a person's right to control how they're spoken or written about

Disadvantages:

- They are high profile, calling attention to the emerging politics of the nonbinary.
 - In a more positive light, they're useful for now, but when gender nonconformity becomes more ordinary, politicized pronouns may just get in the way.
- They are unfamiliar, hard to pronounce.
- They can be perceived as strident, or a waste of taxpayer dollars.
- There are a lot of them, rather than just one, and there's no clear mechanism for selecting a finalist, or even a short list.

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The advantages and disadvantages of singular *they*:

Advantages;

- It's a natural pronoun with a long history.
- Those who object to singular *they* use it when they're not paying attention.
- Objections to the form's ungrammaticality are easy to ignore, since singular *they* is pretty universal, even among those who object to it.
- Singular *they* is easier to use when referring to an unidentified specific person or a person in general.
- But increasingly, singular *they* appears as a referent for named persons as well.

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Disadvantages:

- It drives the sticklers nuts. (that may actually be a plus)
- People aren't so comfortable using singular *they* for specific, named, individuals, especially when the referent is in the same syntactic unit as the pronoun.

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Pronoun systems change slowly, but they do change.

The pronoun changes of the past didn't ruin the language: it's not dead. Nor did they make English great. That was done by writers like Shakespeare, though not without the help of armies, navies, fast food, and rock 'n roll.

The generic *he* pops up, zombie-like, from time to time, but for all intents and purposes, *he* is pretty much stake-through-the-heart dead.

Invented pronouns have yet to catch on, but still, people keep on trying, which suggests there's a need for them. The problem is, not enough people are paying attention to these new words. The coiners of nonbinary pronouns might do well to consider making a YouTube video.

I've called these invented pronouns "the words that failed." But unlike the generic *he*, they're not dead yet. Are invented pronouns any more likely to succeed now that they're being used by some members of the gender-nonconforming community?

Probably not, given that there's still a relatively small number of speakers adopting them;

there isn't a single invented pronoun, but several;

and non-users may be either puzzled by or resentful of these new words.

Plus, as we've seen lately, several high-profile transgender persons (Caitlyn Jenner, Chelsea Manning, several transgender prisoners petitioning the courts to assert their rights), are adopting traditional binary pronouns.

In contrast, singular *they* continues to spread and gain the approval of dictionaries, editors, and usage guides.

As a natural pronoun, not an invented one, singular *they* appeals to speakers and writers looking for a nonbinary, inclusive pronoun, and it appeals to those who don't give these matters much thought at all.

So now it's your turn to answer the question: Are nonbinary pronouns and singular *they* killing the language or are they making English great again?