

How to live with singular *they*: A linguist's perspective

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Language changes in dialogue (dialectic) with social change

Language change is social change

Singular *they* is neither new nor
incorrect

“Correctness” is a social construct.

Modern English Pronouns

	Singular	Plural
1 st Person	I	we
2 nd Person	you	you
3 rd Person	he, she, it	they

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'Logical' English Pronouns

	Singular	Plural
1 st Person	I	we
2 nd Person	you	yinz
3 rd Person	it	they

Non-gendered English Pronouns

	Singular	Plural
1 st Person	I	we
2 nd Person	you	you
3 rd Person	they	they

































Gender marking in English began as a purely grammatical distinction.











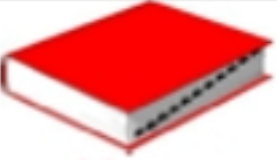





	Feminine		Masculine		Neuter	
	sorg 'sorrow'		engel 'angel'		scip 'ship'	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
Nominative	sorg	sorga	engel	englas	scip	scipu
Accusative	sorge	sorga/sorge	engel	englas	scip	scipu
Genitive	sorge	sorga	engles	engla	scipes	scipa
Dative	sorge	sorgum	engle	englum	scipe	scipum

	'ship'	
	Singular	Plural
Nominative	ship	ship
Accusative	ship	ship
Genitive	ship's	ships'
Dative	ship	ship

Grammatical distinctions such as
gender (often called *noun classes*)
are **arbitrary**
but relate to **cultural ideologies.**

Swahili has 8 singular **noun classes**!

<p>class 1</p> <p>s. m- mw- p. wa-</p>	 <p>mtoto watoto</p>	 <p>mdudu wadudu</p>	 <p>mnyama wanyama</p>	 <p>mpishi wapishi</p>
<p>class 2</p> <p>s. m- mw- p. mi-</p>	 <p>mkate mikate</p>	 <p>mmea mimea</p>	 <p>mwezi miezi</p>	 <p>mti miti</p>
<p>class 3</p> <p>s. ki- ch- p. vi- vy-</p>	 <p>kiti viti</p>	 <p>kitanda vitanda</p>	 <p>kitabu vitabu</p>	 <p>choo vyoo</p>
<p>class 4</p> <p>s. (ji-) p. ma</p>	 <p>jicho macho</p>	 <p>limau malimau</p>	 <p>soko masoko</p>	 <p>(no singular) maji</p>
<p>class 5</p> <p>s. n- ny- p. n- ny-</p>	 <p>ndizi ndizi</p>	 <p>chai chai</p>	 <p>nyama nyama</p>	 <p>simba simba</p>
<p>class 6</p> <p>s. u- p. ---/ny-</p>	 <p>uzi nyuzi</p>	 <p>uma nyuma</p>	 <p>ufunguo funguo</p>	 <p>upendo (no plural)</p>
<p>class 7</p> <p>pa- Mahali/pahali ...ni i.e. hospitalini (No plural!)</p>	 <p>hospitalini</p>	 <p>jikoni</p>	 <p>darasani</p>	 <p>sokoni</p>
<p>class 8</p> <p>ku- Gerunds (No plural!)</p>	 <p>kuoga</p>	 <p>kupika</p>	 <p>kusoma</p>	 <p>kula</p>

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Singular *they* is old.

William Shakespeare 1594
A Comedy of Errors, Act IV, Scene 3

*There's not a man I meet but doth
salute me
As if I were **their** well-acquainted friend.*

Shakespeare 1594: *The Rape of Lucrece*

*Now leaden slumber with life's strength doth fight;
And **every one** to rest **themselves** betake,
Save thieves, and cares, and troubled minds, that wake.*

"Now leaden slumber fights with life's strength; and **takes everyone off to rest themselves**, except for thieves, and worries, and troubled minds, which remain awake."

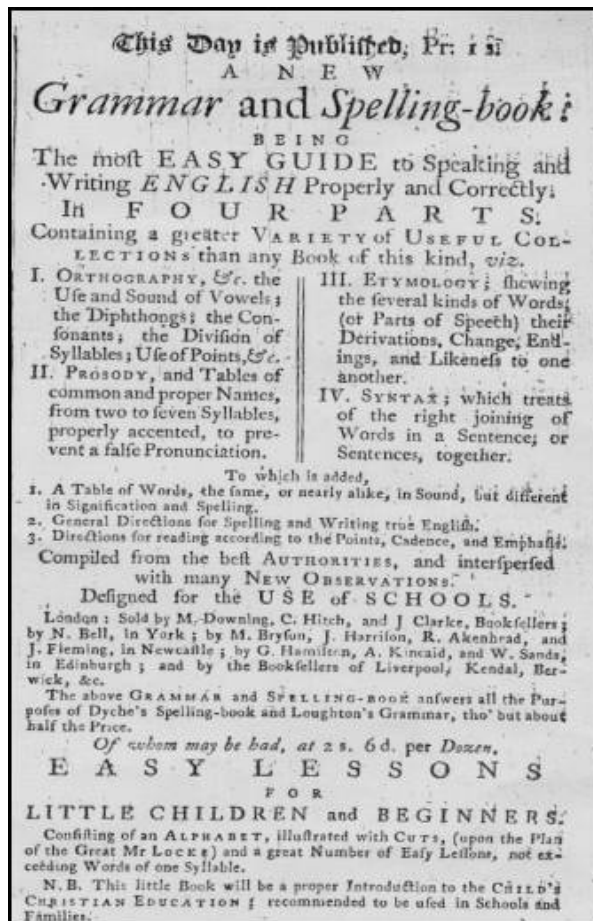
Thomas Wilson (1524–1581)



“Yet in speaking at the leaste, let us kepe a natural order, and set the man before the woman for maners Sake”

- *The Arte of Rhetorique*
1553

Ann Fisher (1745)



The Masculine Person answers to the general Name, which comprehends both Male and Female; as, any Person who knows what he says.

(Fisher [1745]
1750:117n)

Does pronoun use make a difference?

Language change is social change

Gender inequality is foundational to a
categorical gender binary.

Language influences **habitual** thought.

Binary pronouns require a speaker to focus on making a choice about **gender**.

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