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		we
2 nd Person	you	you
3 rd Person	he,she,it	they



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	Singular	Plural
1 st Person	l	we
2 nd Person	you	you
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Modern English Pronouns

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



'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		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**!



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



class 1 s. m- mw p. wa-	mtoto	mdudu	mnyama wanyama	mpishi wapishi
class 2				- Alle
s. m- mw-	mkate	mmea	mwezi	mti
p. mi-	mikate	mimea	miezi	miti
class 3				
s. ki- ch-	kiti	kitanda	kitabu	choo
p. vi- vy-	viti	vitanda	vitabu	vyoo
class 4				
s. (ji-)	jicho	limau	soko	(no singular)
p. ma	macho	malimau	masoko	maji



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)

This Day is Publisted, Pr. i fi ANEW Grammar and Spelling-book : The most EASY GUIDE to Speaking and Writing ENGLISH Properly and Correctly: In FOUR PARTS. Containing a greater VARIETY of USEFUL COL-LECTIONS than any Book of this kind, viz. I. ORTHOGRAPHY, Sc. the || III. ETYMOLOGY; flowing Ufe and Sound of Vowels ; the feveral kinds of Words; the Diphthongs; the Con-(or Parts of Speech) their fonants; the Division of Derivations, Change; End-Syllables; Ufe of Points, & c. - || ings, and Likenefs to one II. PROSODY, and Tables of another. common and proper Names, IV. SYNTAX; which treats from two to feven Syllables, of the right joining of properly accented, to pre-Words in a Sentence; or vent a falfe Pronunciation. Sentences, together. To which is added. A Table of Words, the fame, or nearly alke, in Sound, but different in Signification and Spelling.
General Directions for Spelling and Writing true English;
Directions for reading according to the Points, Cadence, and Emphaid; Compiled from the beft AUTHORITIES, and interfperfed with many New OBSERVATIONS. ' Defigned for the USE of SCHOOLS. London: Sold by M. Downing, C. Hirch, and J Cherke, Bookfellers; by N. Bell, in York; by M. Bryton, J. Harriton, R. Akenbrad, and J. Fleming, in Newcalle; by G. Hamifern, A. Kincaid, and W. Sanda; in Edinburgh; and by the Bookfellers of Liverpool, Kendal, Rerwick, &cc. The above GRAMMAN and SPELLING-ROOK answers all the Parpofes of Dyche's Spelling-book and Loughton's Grammar, tho' but about half the Price. Of whom may be bad, at 2 s. 6 d. per Dozen. EASYLESSONS FOR LITTLE CHILDREN and BEGINNERS: Confiding of an ALPHANET, illufrated with CUTS, (upon the Plan of the Great Mr LOCK e) and a great Number of Eafy Leilons, not ex-ceeding Words of one Syllable. N. B. This little Book will be a proper Introduction to the Chir. b's

CARDISTIAN EDUCATION f recommended to be used in Schools and Families.

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**.



Sources/Resources

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