Shaping the English Language – Gender-Neutral Pronouns in EIL

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Abstract

This paper addresses the potential for replacing English language gender-based pronouns, based on ESL inclusion and the expansion of global English. The appeal of English as a language that welcomes new words from every human endeavor in its earnest adaptability for word usage every day from everywhere is ultimately its strength in relevant and meaningful communication. These tiny he/she/, him/her, his/her words occur with astonishing frequency out of proportion with their useful contribution to meaning. Rarely are reproductive purposes relevant in pronoun usage, although their integral underlying structural function makes them extremely difficult to extract. This paper presents an historical perspective of gendered pronoun usage in English and other languages, current trends in genderless replacements, and strategies already in place for using gender neutral language. This paper also investigates inherent transitional difficulties, the resistance to a replacement rationale and a prediction for ESL advances.

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Introduction

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English, as an unconstrained accumulation of spoken and written words, is a modern mash-up of its Germanic origins, Latin and Greek influences, with large doses of French mixed in, and easily absorbs thousands of words each year to add to its burgeoning vocabulary. As the world's vernacular alternative, it is mutating to merge with those who wish to adapt it for their own identities in the creation of hybrids such as Spanglish, Chinglish, Singlish, Tinglish, and many others. The General Explanations section of the Oxford English Dictionary states: "The vocabulary of a widely diffused and highly cultivated living language is not a fixed quantity circumscribed by definite limits... there is absolutely no defining line in any direction: the circle of the English language has a well-defined center but no discernible circumference" (1989).

As of 2012, English passed the million word mark. The Global Language Monitor has now reached 1,022,000 words and estimates that there is a new English word added every 98 minutes. With the inclusion of a million words, about five hundred thousand just in the last fifty years, how can it be so difficult to add a word – just one little word – a pronoun that doesn't trip itself up with a gender case. The most widely used pluricentric language in the world with its modern grammatical gender-less form, having cast off most of its case system spreading its uniform writing format across the globe with new varieties of English and lexical innovation is still slogging in the mud of gender-based pronouns.

Where can English go to find some gender-neutral support? Most languages (about 75%) do not have personal pronouns marked for gender. For example, the pronouns in Tagalog, an Austronesian language, do not have specified genders. Thai pronoun usage is based on the relationship between the speaker and the referent, not their genders. Some Asian languages have only recently added gender-based pronouns to their languages to provide a transliteration of the English forms since their languages did not have an equivalent "he" or "she". The potential for replacing gender-based pronouns is expanding with the circumference of English usage in the world.

In the 18th century, the critical decision was made in the case of the indefinite pronouns which imply the plurality of all the people but function as grammatically singular - our communal and individual senses colliding in the arenas of advertising and war propaganda. And it was thus declared that the case of number had precedent over the case of gender, and therefore "everyone should do his best in the grammar situation in which he finds himself," encouraged this third person singular pronoun usage.

Subsequently, it was determined that "he" should be the generic third person singular pronoun. The grammatical rule was coded so that for undetermined gender the default use would be "he" and the understanding was that it referred to all of mankind, but when the gender was specialized (stereotypical roles such as nursing, biological roles such as mothering, or known female sex of the subject), then the use of "she" was indicated. The idea that "he" means "he or she", or just "he", while "she" really means female is an illogical approach. Further, when does "he" specifically and only mean males? Is "he", "his" and "him" really gender neutral? "It", of course, is a third person singular neuter pronoun; however "it" already has the very big job of covering the entire inanimate world, most non-human animals, as well as abstractions, and the occasional baby. While "he" refers to humans and other animals for which we have an emotional attachment, the "she" pronoun since the Middle Ages has had the additional duty of referring to inanimate objects, such as the Earth, ships, oceans, machines, and the fury of nature. This usage of "she" is outdated, and since 1979 the National Weather Service has included traditionally male names along with traditionally female names for equal opportunity storms.

The desperate resistance to the obvious need for gender-neutral pronouns, those who are quite content with the omniscience of "he" is explained by one translator whose objection to gender-inclusive language primarily relates to the Christian bible. Paul Mankowski uses a simple parallel to farm animals. The generic term for pigs (like the generic "he") includes mature pigs and piglets (the subset of baby pigs or the "she" included in "he"). As expected, these diehards are in the minority and dwindling quickly. Beyond the relatively recent radical feminist interest philosophy that was first to raise the flag, almost everyone agrees that the generic "he" is not really generic.

There has been an effort over the last thirty years to eliminate sexism in language. These creative methods for dealing with the grammatical third person pronoun include the exclusive use of "she" in the text, as an attempt to balance the overwhelming past usage of "he", which helps to emphasize the attempt at gender inclusion, but is distracting to read and doesn't actually solve the problem of ambiguity. Other methods employ alternating "he" and "she" by sentence, paragraph or chapter. Although this method also draws undue attention to the pronoun, it further serves to inform the reader of the necessity of a gender-neutral pronoun. In formal writing, the coordinate form has gained the most widespread use and approval of the style guides, but even this form has its variations: he/she, s/he, he or she. Although everyone should do his or her best in the grammatical situation in which he or she finds himself or herself, descriptions most often applied to these coordinate forms are "awkward" and "cumbersome". And these constructions are not smoothly reproduced in spoken form – how do you say s/he, his/her?

Some strategies already in use in the English second language learning setting for avoiding the necessity of a gender-neutral third person pronoun are to use "all" and other plurals as frequently as possible, replace a pronoun with an article, and avoid using possessives. Avoiding his and her constructions is a useful method for learning to write simple, direct sentences instead of complex, run-on sentences. Other options for avoiding gender specificity include the use of the impersonal pronoun "one", if one wishes to sound like an excerpt from a Victorian-era etiquette manual, but, I suppose, one does what one can with what one has, doesn't one? These methods only circumvent the problem and offset English language's best attributes and its popularity as the leader in logical and efficient communication.

The current struggle to find an epicene pronoun is actually a battle to regain what has been lost. Interestingly, going back far enough, as Old English evolved into Middle English, when the language freed its nouns of linguistic gender and adopted a "natural gender" system, there existed the pronoun "he" for males, the pronoun "heo" for females and the common gender pronouns "a" and "ou". The modern English personal pronoun "she" was artificially created around the 12th century. The word seems to have been deliberately invented, like other inventions of the time, to promote gender division. The gender-neutral pronoun "a" is known to still exist in some British dialects

What are the contenders for English or other languages' gender-neutral pronouns? The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language and other dictionaries have regularly received nominations for inclusion of an epicene pronoun in their lexicons. Sweden, considered in 2010 as the most gender-equal country in the world by the World Economic Forum has added a gender-neutral pronoun "hen" to its National Encyclopedia, located between "han" and "hon" (he and she). The list of proposed gender-neutral pronouns, as chronologically compiled by Dennis Baron (1986) is long; a simple sampling is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Conventional, Conventional Coordinate, and Invented Pronouns

Pronoun	Subject	Object	Possessive determiner	Possessive pronoun	Reflexive
He	He	Him	His	His	himself
She	She	Her	Her	Hers	herself
One	One	One	one's	-	oneself
She/he	she/he	him/her	his/her	his/hers	him/herself
s/he	s/he	him/r	his/r	his/rs	him/herself
Singular they	They	them	their	Theirs	themselves
Spivak	Ey	Em	Eir	Eirs	emself
Tho and Thong	Tho	thor	thors	Thor	thongself
Humanist	Hu	hum	Hus	Hus	humself
Per	Per	Per	Per	Pers	perself
Thon	Thon	thon	thons	thons	thonself
Jee, Jeir, Jem	Jee	Jem	Jeir	jeirs	jemself
Ve	Ve	Ver	Vis	vis	verself
Xe	Xe	Xem	Xyr	xyrs	xemself
Ze (or zie or sie) and hir	Ze	Hir	Hir	hirs	hirself
Zhe, Zher, Zhim	Zhe	zhim	zher	zhers	zhimself

What is the probability that one or more of these words will be incorporated into the English language? The internet community is gender-free technology – communication is not gender-based. The virtual world has changed communication in many ways, and one significant way is the absence of identified gender behind the computer screen of pseudonyms. The social construct of gender can be chosen in the virtual world. And in the real world, there are people who do not want to be defined by their gender, or choose to present as a gender other than the one others perceive them to be. And there is a consequent change in language; people are figuring it out, trading gendered words, for example "brother" and "sister" for "sibling". There is a deliberate decline in the use of those diminutive versions of words that describe women as lesser than the default male by using the suffix "-ess" to designate something smaller or less authentic. Flight attendant has replaced stewardess, server or waitperson has replaced waitress; there are firefighters, letter carriers, and no longer any poetesses. Even in personal lives, spouse and partner are supplanting husband and wife. A small important word that has been successfully added to the lexicon is "Ms", a woman not defined by her title as married or unmarried, but equivalent in sharing the marital anonymity of the male "Mr."

One historically notable pronoun change has been the evolution of the pronoun "you" as the second person singular and plural pronoun replacing thou, thee and thine, now relegated to the 18th century along with the distinction of the formal "you" from the informal "thou". The archaic plural form of "thou" is now only heard in Shakespearean productions and solemn religious rituals. Regional second person plural pronouns still exist in representative dialects such as the northern United States' "you guys", the southern US's "y'all", and the "your" of Boston which may have been embedded by Irish American immigrants in an attempt to form a more plural sounding "you".

The problem of a gender-neutral pronoun is a modern one, with too many options and no obvious way to choose. However, the emerging epicene pronoun of choice appears to be one that is already in common use in spoken language with expanding applications in formal written English. The use of this epicene pronoun is actually a restoration of its 14th century co-existence with the generic masculine: the singular "they", "their", "them" and "themself". Steven Pinker, with a cognitive scientist's approach to linguistics, supports the use of "they" as an epicene pronoun as well as maintaining its current function. Pinker uses these examples (2007):

as a definite, plural, referring pronoun: *Those ladies* over there are wearing their best clothes.

as an indefinite, generic and epicene, non-referring anaphor: On a day like today, *anyone* would want to wear their best clothes.

Singular "they", "them" and "their" may be used to refer to an indeterminate number, where the antecedent is an individual or an unspecified number of people. Singular "they", "them" and "their" may be used to refer to indeterminate gender, where the antecedent is an individual whose gender is unspecified, or irrelevant. And singular "they", "them" and "their" may be used to refer to a subject whose number and gender are known, but serves to generalize their identity. Strict grammarians cringe at the look and discordant sound of the plural pronoun violating the number agreement with third person personal pronoun usage. However, singular "they" has a precedent of usage with singular antecedents. The singular "their" has had to keep up with the complex lives of the indefinite pronouns, sometimes singular, sometimes plural. For example: 'everyone who is interested in gender-neutral pronouns should teach their students the generic "they"' and 'some of the teachers understand their role in promoting gender-neutral pronoun usage.'

These are all options to add to, not necessarily replace, what is currently in use. The current third person personal pronouns won't be forced out of the language; they may still be used, although with a recognition of the gender spectrum which the binary masculine/feminine cannot adequately describe, where ideology and language intersect to promote gender-equality and gender-neutrality. As a global language, English should be an example to the world of language's capability for changing perspectives of gender bias with this unique opportunity to change something so simple and yet so relevant. Of course, everyone should do their best in the grammatical situation in which they find themself.

Conclusion

It is always important to follow the style guide and requirements standard of English for the anticipated audience and editorial discretion for written material, and when taking English language competency exams. However, be mindful of the influence every English speaker, whether first or secondarily acquired, has on the English language. The struggle for gender equality and neutrality in society is evidenced by the generally accepted conclusions on gender-neutral pronouns. The generic "he" is not generic. Using 'all' and other plurals, replacing a pronoun with an article, and avoiding the use of possessives, are current strategies for eliminating the use of a gendered third person pronoun. The exclusive use of 'she', or alternating 'he' and 'she' implores a gender-neutral pronoun. The cumbersome coordinates: he/she, s/he, he or she, approved by many style guides, have no single form and are awkward in the spoken form. Already in common use in spoken language, the use of 'they' as an epicene pronoun, is currently finding new applications in formal written English. ESL can leverage these English language innovations to promote gender equality and neutrality.

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