GENDER IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE: HOW ‘HE’, ‘SHE’, AND ‘THEY’ ARE CHANGING

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ANNOTATSIYA

The English language, like all living languages, evolves constantly in response to social, cultural, and political shifts. One of the most visible and debated areas of change in recent years is the use of gendered pronouns—*he*, *she*, and increasingly, *they*. What was once a relatively fixed system is now being reshaped by the need for inclusivity, respect for gender diversity, and the recognition that language plays a key role in identity and equality.

KALIT SO‘ZLAR

Cultural, political shifts, gramatically, singular, plural, gender-specific, comeback, he, she, they, cultural.

Introduction. The traditional role of gendered pronouns: In traditional English usage: ***He*** was used for male individuals. ***She*** was used for female individuals. ***It*** referred to inanimate objects or non-human entities. **They** was reserved for plural subjects. Grammatically, these distinctions served to mark gender clearly—but also rigidly. For centuries, "he" was used as a ***generic*** pronoun to refer to any person when the gender was unknown or supposedly irrelevant (e.g., ***“Each student must bring his own lunch”***), reinforcing male-default thinking. **Historical use of singular ‘They’**, although some argue that singular ***they*** is a modern invention, it has a long history in English. For example: **Writers like Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Chaucer** used singular ***they*** naturally. Example from Shakespeare’s ***Much Ado about nothing***: ***“And every one to rest themselves betake.”***

Literature analysis. This usage declined in formal writing during the 18th and 19th centuries, when grammarians insisted on more gender-specific, binary

forms like ***he/she*** which aligned with the cultural norms of the time. **Why 'They' is making a comeback**, in recent decades, ***they*** has re-emerged as a ***gender-neutral singular pronoun*** to: Refer to a person whose gender is unknown or irrelevant (***"Someone left their phone"***). Respect individuals who identify as **nonbinary, genderqueer**, or outside the traditional male/female binary. This use of ***they/them*** is not only a matter of grammar but also one of identity and inclusivity. Many people now introduce themselves with their pronouns (e.g., "Hi, I'm Alex. I use they/them pronouns") as a way of affirming their gender identity. **Modern shifts and institutional recognition:** The use of singular ***they*** has gained broad recognition: **In 2019**, ***Merriam-Webster*** added the singular ***they*** as an official dictionary entry and named it their ***Word of the Year***. **The American Psychological Association (APA)** and **Modern Language Association (MLA)** both endorse the use of singular ***they*** in academic writing. Many **schools, workplaces, and government forms** now allow individuals to specify their pronouns, including they/them.

Analysis and results. Gender-neutral alternatives beyond 'They': Although ***they*** is the most common gender-neutral pronoun, other alternatives have been introduced, often by LGBTQ+ communities: **Ze/hir** or **xe/xem**: Invented pronouns that avoid gender entirely. **Per**: Short for "person," used similarly to ***he*** or ***she***.

These pronouns haven't reached mainstream use but reflect creative efforts to find language that better matches the full range of human experience.

Resistance and cultural tension: Not everyone supports the shift toward gender-neutral language. Some objections include: **Grammatical resistance**: Critics argue that ***they*** as a singular pronoun causes confusion, especially in formal writing. **Cultural or ideological pushback**: Some view the change as a political or ideological imposition rather than a linguistic evolution. However, linguists widely agree that language change is both natural and necessary when it helps people communicate more clearly and respectfully.

The psychological and social impact: Using correct pronouns is about more than grammar it has real emotional and psychological effects: Research shows that **being referred to by the correct pronouns** can improve mental health outcomes, especially among transgender and nonbinary youth. Conversely, **misgendering** (using the wrong pronoun) can cause distress, alienation, and increased anxiety. Language plays a critical role in affirming identity and fostering inclusivity.

The future of gender in English: It's likely that gendered pronouns will continue to evolve, just as vocabulary and syntax have changed over centuries. What's emerging is a more **fluid, inclusive system** where people are empowered

to choose how they are identified, and language adjusts accordingly. In the future, English may rely less on gendered markers altogether, or we may see the standardization of new pronouns. What's clear is that the discussion around ***he, she, and they*** is reshaping not only grammar but also how society sees and respects gender.

The rise of 'They': The singular ***they*** has been used informally for centuries long before the modern gender conversation took center stage. For example, in everyday English, people commonly say, "Someone left their phone," even when the gender of "someone" is unknown. This usage is grammatically accepted and natural to many English speakers. However, the use of ***they*** as a personal pronoun for individuals who identify outside the gender binary is a more recent and intentional development. For many, using ***they/them*** pronouns is not just about language it's about visibility, respect, and identity. Major dictionaries, style guides, and organizations have recognized singular ***they*** as both grammatically correct and culturally significant.

Cultural and institutional shifts: In 2019, ***they*** was chosen as the Word of the Year by Merriam-Webster, reflecting its growing importance in public discourse. Educational institutions, workplaces, and governments have begun adopting policies that allow people to self-identify their pronouns. Email signatures, conference name tags, and social media bios increasingly include pronouns like ***she/her***, ***he/him***, ***they/them***, or combinations like ***she/they***. These changes promote a more inclusive environment where individuals can express themselves authentically. Yet, they also raise questions and spark debates, especially among those unfamiliar with gender-neutral language.

Resistance and controversy: Not everyone has embraced the shift. Critics argue that using ***they*** for individuals creates grammatical confusion or undermines traditional language norms. Others see the push for pronoun recognition as part of a broader cultural clash over gender, identity, and societal change. However, linguists generally agree that language evolves to meet the needs of its speakers. Just as we've accepted words like ***email*** and ***selfie***, the use of singular ***they*** is becoming normalized, especially among younger generations.

Looking ahead: The transformation of gendered language is ongoing. New pronouns such as ***ze***, ***hir***, and ***xe*** have emerged in some communities, though they remain less widespread than ***they***. As awareness grows and language adapts, English is becoming more capable of reflecting the complexities of gender in the modern world. This shift is not about political correctness; it's about clarity, empathy, and respect. Language shapes how we see others and how we let others

see us. By embracing more inclusive pronouns, we make space for everyone to belong.

A brief history of gendered pronouns: English has long used ***he*** and ***she*** as third-person singular pronouns to denote male and female individuals, respectively. Historically, ***he*** was often used as a generic pronoun to refer to any person when gender was unknown or irrelevant a practice now recognized as exclusive and outdated. As society began to more openly discuss gender identity and expression, the limitations of binary pronouns became apparent. Not everyone identifies strictly as male or female, and forcing individuals to choose between ***he*** or ***she*** erases the experiences of nonbinary, genderqueer, and gender-nonconforming people.

T**he role of pronouns in identity and mental health:** Using correct pronouns is more than grammar, it's directly tied to mental health and well-being. Research shows that when transgender and nonbinary individuals are addressed with their chosen name and pronouns, they experience significantly lower rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. This underscores the importance of respectful and inclusive language in schools, workplaces, healthcare settings, and everyday interactions.

Ch**allenges in translation and global usage:** While English is becoming more inclusive, translating these changes into other languages can be complex. Languages with gendered grammar systems (like Spanish, French, or Arabic) face structural challenges in adopting gender-neutral pronouns. However, movements are emerging globally: In Spanish, terms like ***Latinx*** or ***Latine*** are used to avoid gendered endings. In Swedish, the gender-neutral pronoun ***hen*** was added to the dictionary in 2015.

Etiquette around pronouns: Asking someone's pronouns is increasingly seen as a polite and respectful gesture. Here are some common practices: Introduce your own pronouns when meeting someone (e.g., "Hi, I'm Jordan, and I use they/them pronouns"). If you don't know someone's pronouns, use their name or default to ***they/them*** until you know.If you make a mistake, apologize briefly, correct yourself, and move on. Over-apologizing can put the burden on the person being misgendered.

Education and awareness strategies: ***Pronoun awareness campaigns***: Schools and companies are now offering training on inclusive language. ***Gender-inclusive writing guides***: Many academic and publishing institutions have guides on writing without assuming binary gender (e.g., avoiding "he/she" and using ***they*** or rewording to avoid pronouns altogether). **Pronoun days**: Events like International Pronouns Day (third Wednesday of October) help raise awareness.

Common myths: “Using they for one person is ungrammatical” — false, as proven above. “It’s too confusing to remember new pronouns” — this concern often reflects resistance to social change more than actual confusion. **Political pushback**: Some political or religious groups view gender-inclusive language as threatening to traditional values. Laws in some regions attempt to ban or restrict the use of nonbinary pronouns in schools or workplaces.

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Conclusion: The evolution of gendered pronouns in the English language especially the rise of singular ***they*** reflects a profound shift in how society understands gender and identity. What began as a practical linguistic solution has grown into a powerful expression of inclusivity and respect. While traditional pronouns like ***he*** and ***she*** still serve many, the increasing visibility of nonbinary and gender-diverse individuals has made it clear that the language we use must expand to reflect lived realities. This transformation is not without resistance, but it is grounded in linguistic history, supported by institutions, and increasingly embraced by younger generations. Using someone’s correct pronouns is not just polite it’s a fundamental form of acknowledgment and dignity. As English continues to evolve, it becomes a more accurate and compassionate reflection of the diverse world we live in. The evolution of gendered pronouns is not just a trend it's a linguistic and cultural reckoning that reflects a broader movement toward equity, self-determination, and visibility. As our social understanding of gender becomes more nuanced, so too must our language. This shift does more than serve those who identify as nonbinary or gender nonconforming it encourages everyone to think more critically about identity, inclusivity, and empathy. Pronouns are small words with powerful meaning; they are often the first sign of whether someone is seen, respected, or erased. While challenges remain from social resistance to policy gaps this evolution is part of a larger, global wave of human rights progress. Language does not stand still. Just as English adapted to scientific discoveries, global contact, and digital transformation, it is now adapting to the lived truths of gender diversity. The use of ***they*** as a singular pronoun, and the acknowledgment of personal pronouns more broadly, marks a turning point: a move from assuming identity to **honoring it**. As education, media, institutions, and communities continue to embrace these changes, English becomes not just more modern but more just.

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