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Generic *He* and Singular *They*

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When linguists and descriptive grammarians criticize prescriptive school grammar for its deficiencies, they usually cite those rules which proscribe split infinitives and prepositions at the end of sentences as cases where prescriptionists, ignoring the actual usage, have imposed Latin-based or "unscientific" rules on English. As far as I know, however, they seem to have failed to notice a more "unscientific" rule - a rule which prescribes the use of the masculine pronoun *he* in anaphoric reference to a singular antecedent of unspecified sex, in spite of the fact that this rule is socially far more problematic than these 'trivial' rules which prohibit split infinitives and sentence-final prepositions. This may be because generic *he* has been so deep-rooted in the English language that even those who call themselves linguists have taken it for granted until quite recently without noticing its intrinsically "unscientific" and "sexist" nature.

No other social movement has had more extensive consequences for English usage than the recent feminist movement. It has stimulated lay people as well as scholars to reexamine the grammar and vocabulary of English for signs of the alleged masculine biases claimed to be woven into the fabric of the language. The most significant effect the movement has had is on the pronoun system. Earnest efforts have been made to replace the masculine singular third-person pronoun *he* as a generic pronoun with a sexually-neutral designation such as singular *they,* or *he or she.* About twenty years ago, people were generally pessimistic about changing anything as basic as the pronoun system. But changes are coming about. Based on direct and indirect evidence from various sources, we can predict that generic *he* will not lose its potential generic force very soon, but that singular *they,* which had already been in common use long before the feminists began their campaign, will eventually drive generic *he* out of its last stronghold, formal written language.

Historical Background of Generic *he*

Bodine (1975) identifies John Kirby, an eighteenth-century grammarian, as the first person to prescribe generic *he*.

> The masculine Person answers to the general Name, which comprehends both Male and Female; as Any Person, who knows what he says [*A New English Grammar* (1746)][Cited in Bodine].

Here the question arises: why did Kirby prescribe *he* rather than *they* or *he or she* as a sex-nonspecific pronoun? Obviously he rejected *they,* which had already been in wide use by that century, because of the conflict of number. As will be discussed below, for such early grammarians as Kirby, Lowth, and Murray, concord in grammatical number was paramount. A singular antecedent should be referred back to by a singular pronoun even at the risk of making a violation of gender-concord. This is logical enough, but there arises another question: if those prescriptive grammarians truly had given priority to logic in prescribing English grammatical rules, why hadn't they chosen *he or she*, which is apparently the most logical of the three alternatives in respect of both number and gender? Why did they give up the most logical, if not concise, disjoined form, for the problematic pronoun *he* which apparently violates gender concord?

In order to answer this question, we must take into account the process in which social and cultural bias is consciously or unconsciously embedded in the language, because, as we will see, gender in English is political or social rather than purely grammatical.

In the period of OE and ME, English had a gender system, but in the course of time it has lost all inflectional differentiations in the noun system except for the genitive and plural markers. As a result the gender of an animate noun is mostly determined by the natural or biological sex of the referent of the noun while the gender of an inanimate noun tends to be determined by the characteristics socially or conventionally associated with men and women. In order to see how these characteristics are attributed to nouns by the eighteenth-century grammarians, we may refer to lames Harris, who had great influence on his contemporary school grammarians:

> In this view we may conceive such Substantives to have been considered, as Masculine which "were conspicuous for the Attributes of imparting or communicating; or which were by nature, active, strong, and efficacious, and that indiscriminately whether to good or to ill; or which had claim to Eminence, either laudable or otherwise." The Feminine on the contrary were "such, as were conspicuous for the Attributes either of receiving, containing or of producing and bringing forth; or which had more of the passive in their nature, than of the active; or which were peculiarly beautiful and amiable; or which had respect to such Excesses, as were rather Feminine, than Masculine."[I. Harris (1751/1765): *Hermes or A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Universal Grammar* (John Nourse & Paul Vaillant), Second Edition (1765), pp. 44-45]

According to this principle, *the Sun* is Masculine because it "communicates Light," which is "native and original" and imparts "the vigorous warmth and efficacy of his Rays" while *the Moon* is Feminine because it is "the Receptacle only of another's Light" and shines "with Rays more delicate and soft." (p. 45) Not surprisingly, *God* "is in all languages Masculine, in as much as the masculine Sex is the superior and more excellent." (p. 54)

Thus the male-dominant ideas proposed by Harris and some other philosophical grammarians led eighteenth-century grammarians to assume that the masculine is the major gender and the feminine the minor one, and led some of these grammarians to the premise that nouns are all inherently masculine unless the feminine idea is specifically dominant. In other words these grammarians did not feel it problematic to use the masculine pronoun *he* in reference to an indefinite noun or pronoun antecedent because "masculine" is implicitly understood unless the antecedent is clearly feminine. Naturally they did not find anything wrong with such concord sequences as *Everybody . . . he* and *A student . . . he.* In their view, *he* was perfectly correct in respect of number (i.e. singular) as well as gender (i.e. masculine) because *everybody/a student* is singular and is taken as implicitly masculine unless the idea of sex-polarization is dominant.

In this connection, it should be noted that the grammar books in those days were written mostly by male grammarians and mostly for a male audience. In Sklar's (1983) survey, for instance, the literacy rate for English females was only slightly over half that for males in 1750, and among the two hundred grammar books published in England between 1750 and 1800, only fifteen books were written by women.

Lowth, the putative founder of prescriptive school grammar, attempts to correct "errors" in the examples he collected from the Bible, Shakespeare and others, based on the following rule he himself devised:

> The Distributive Pronominal Adjectives, *each, every, either,* agree with Nouns, Pronouns, and Verbs of the Singular number only. [R. Lowth (1764): *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (Dodsley), p. 152]

But the way Lowth actually corrected "errors" shows that his main interest was not in the pronominal agreement but in verbal agreement as in "*either* of these two qualities *is* wanting " and the 'improper' use of *either* in the sense of *each.*

Murray, acknowledged to be a faithful successor to Lowth, is a little more detailed in his account of pronominal agreement. He proposes Rule V, which prescribes:

> "Pronouns must always agree with their antecedents, and the nouns for which they stand, in gender and number, and person." [L. Murray (1799): *English Grammar Adapted to Different Classes of Learners* (Longman & Rees), 5th Edition, p. 124]

As one illustration of violation of this rule, he gives such an instance as "Can any one, on their entrance into the world, be fully secure that they shall not be deceived? " and corrects the "errors" by replacing *their* and *they* with *his* and *he* respectively, without any further comment or explanation (p. 124). The replacement was automatic because the indefinite pronoun was interpreted as masculine as well as singular. Murray repeats the same rule in his *Abridgment of Murray's English Grammar* (Darton & Harvey, 1808) but omits the example just quoted. On the whole, Lowth, Murray and their contemporary grammarians do not seem to find the generic use of *he* particularly worth mentioning. I examined nine grammar books published in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which are listed below. I find that, though they devote considerable space to the discussion of concord in general, they make little or no mention of this particular type of concord:

J. Priestley (1761): *The Rudiments of English Grammar.* 1st Edition. [UMI Reprint]

J. Buchanan (1762): *The British Grammar.* 1st Edition. (A. Millar)
A. Fisher (1779): *A Practical New Grammar, with Exercises of Bad English.* 11th Edition. (G. Robinson)
J. Ash (1784) : *Grammatical Institutes: or an Easy Introduction to Dr. Lowth's English Grammar.* New Edition. (Charles Dillly).
J. Rothwell (1787): *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language.* 1st Edition. (W. Eyres)
J. Hornsey (1802?): *A Short Grammar of the English Language* 3rd Edition. (EDW. Walker).
E. Devis (1805): *The Accidence, or First Rudiments of English Grammar.* 12th Edition. (C. Law)
J. Grant (1813): *A Grammar of the English Language.* 1st Edition. (Sherwood, Gilbert & Piper)
[ANON.] (1817): *The Grammatical Remembrancer.* 1st Edition. (Thomas Smart)

Evidently indefinite (pro)noun--anaphoric pronoun concord was not especially noteworthy at that time. When early grammarians spoke of concord, they usually had in mind the concord of (1) verb with its nominative, (2) adjective with its substantive (or noun) and (3) relative pronoun with its antecedent.

From what we have so far discussed, we can conclude that, although some of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century grammarians prescribed the generic use of *he*, they did not make any explicit statement to the effect that *he* is sex-inclusive when used for general reference. They did not feel any need to make such a statement for two closely related reasons: Linguistically, as mentioned above, nouns were all thought to be inherently masculine unless the feminine idea was specifically dominant, and socially, males were thought to be the standard representatives of the human species. Thus, as Spender (1985) puts it, women were "encoded as

invisible" and, "the knowledge which is constructed assumes this invisibility - this non-existence - and proceeds accordingly."

Nineteenth-Century Grammars and Generic *he*

In the course of time, however, grammar books began to be written for women as well as men. As suggested by Rothwell (1787), some people began to wonder "why the fair sex should be so shamefully neglected in this very essential part of a polite education, as they hitherto have been, (except perhaps, in a superficial manner, by Mistresses at Boarding-Schools)."

With the rise of comparative linguistics, grammarians became aware of the difference between English, whose (pro)nouns are strongly dominated by natural gender, and other languages which inflect (pro)nouns for grammatical gender, and found it more and more necessary to explicitly state to their audience that *he* is sex-inclusive or neutral, because indefinite pronouns like *everybody* and *somebody* and general nouns like *reader* and *student* refer to both sexes in most real contexts. At the same time, they attempted to find a lexeme which can serve as a third person singular, common-gender pronoun to fill the gap of the English pronominal system. The most popular way to solve the problem was to defend the role of the masculine pronoun *he* by explicitly announcing that *he* can be generic as well as masculine. Thus by the end of the nineteenth century, the

prescriptive grammarians had succeeded in giving *he* a double function and justifying the generic use under the pretext that it was meant neither to devalue nor to exclude women, but was simply a matter of linguistic convention. Furthermore we should note that this usage was sanctioned not only by grammarians but by the law, in particular, the Act of Parliament in 1850, which ordered that "in all acts words importing the 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 and number is expressly provided." [Cited in Evans, B. & Evans, C. (1957): *A Dictionary of Contemporary of American Usage* (Random House). p. 221]. Thus grammatically and legally authorized, generic *he* became the only approved choice and was adopted in a great number of textbooks and popular reference books.

> Don't use a plural pronoun when a singular is called for. "Every passenger must show their ticket," illustrates a prevalent error. "Everybody put on their hats" is another instance. It should be, "Everybody put on his hat." [Anon. (1880): *Don't: A Manual of Mistakes & Improprieties more or less prevalent in Conduct & Speech*, p. 75]

> "Everybody has something to say which *they think* is worthy of being heard." *Everybody* refers to persons singly, and not collectively. *They think* should be *he thinks*, *he* being the proper pronoun to employ when the gender is not indicated. [J. H. Bechtel (1841): *Slips of Speech*, p. 134]

Among these nineteenth-century prescriptive grammarians, Alexander

Bain can be said to be exceptional in defending 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. "*Every person*'s happiness depends in part upon the respect *they* meet in the world". . . [A. Bain (1886/1904): *A Higher English Grammar*, New Edition (1904) p. 310]

J. C. Nesfield, the most influential school grammarian in the first half of the twentieth century, presents, in his *Errors in English Composition* (Macmillan, 1903) (pp. 65-66), four possible ways to avoid the pronominal problem - *he or she*, singular *they*, pluralization and singular *he.* He criticizes Bain's statement quoted above and recommends singular *he*, justifying its use on the grounds that in English masculine nouns (e.g. *colt, dog, horse*) can be used to refer to both sexes and vice versa (e.g. *duck, bee, goose*).

Thus the use of common-gender *he* was so firmly established that it became almost a part of the English language. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, even linguists, who are otherwise critical of any rules artificially imposed on the language, have used *he* in their writings until quite recently.

Sex-Neutral Substitutes: Closed-Class & Open-Class

In the course of time people have become more and more aware of the inadequacies of generic *he*, such as inequality/asymetricity involved in the supposed double role of *he*, and possible ambiguity which might result in a

non-generic interpretation of intended generic meaning and vice versa. Influenced by the feminist movement, more and more people have begun to regard generic *he* and *man*-words not just as a linguistic convention but a reflection of social bias. Some people have seized on what is usually referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and contended that language must be changed because it functions as an unnoticed background to speakers' thinking about the world and creates unconscious biases in perception. Numerous attempts have therefore been made to find a singular third person epicene pronoun that is not specifically connected with one sex or the other. One proposal is the creation of a new pronoun. A variety of pro-forms have been suggested as candidates to replace 'the product of the unconscious androcentrism of the eighteenth-century male grammarians'. According to Baron (1981), between 1970 and 1978, the following set of forms were proposed:

> she, heris, herim (1970) / co, cos (1970) / ve, vis, ver (1970) / tey, ter, tem; him, herself (1972) / fm, shis, shim, shims, shimself (1972) / ze, zim, zees zeeself; per, pers (1972) / na, nan (1973) / s/he; him/er; his-or-her (1973) / shem; herm (1973) / ne, nis, ner (1974)/hir, herin (1975) / she, herm, hs (1976) / po, xe, jhe (1977) / e, e's, em (1977) / sheme, shis, shem; heshe, hisher, himmer (1977) / em, ems (1977) / ae (1978) / hir (1978)

Neologism is common in the area of open-class lexemes like nouns and verbs, but in the case of closed-classes like pronouns and prepositions, as well demonstrated in the history of English, neologism is highly improbable. It is no wonder, therefore, that none of these proposed forms above have gained wide currency; moreover there would appear to be little chance of their becoming a part of the language in the future. According to Nilsen (1977), for instance, only 11 of 96 editors to whom she sent questionnaires

concerning sexism regarded *tey* as a good change, 25 as a probable change, and the majority (60 people) as either an impractical or impossible change. From a feminist's point of view, these respondents fail to "see the point of innovations, still less the virtue in them." As feminists resist sexist language, Cameron (1992: 122) argues, so many speakers resist the alternative.

Among open-classes, especially nouns, however, many of the sex-neutral substitutes so far proposed have gained acceptance and have found their place not only in special anti-sexist dictionaries like *The Nonsexist Word Finder* (1988), *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook* (1992), and *The Emancipated English Handbook* (1993) but in many general dictionaries as well. Of course some substitutes, for instance, a set of variants of *woman/women - wofem, womban, womon, woperson / wimmin, wimyn, womyn* - are highly unlikely to be commonly used, probably because they lack neutral connotations, naturalness or lexical availability, though *womyn* is recorded in *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (1991).

We should note, however, that closed-classes can accept functional expansion. It is possible, for instance, to expand the role of a particular pronoun already present in the language and have it bear the function some other pronouns had performed separately, as evidenced by the expanded use of the second person *you,* which was originally plural but now also serves as a singular pronoun, as a result of the revolutionary spirit of the eighteenth century which urged *you* as a polite singular to extend downward to the masses and to supplant the singular *thou,* which tended to mark the socially inferior rank of the addressee. Another instance of expansion is the special use of *we* called Royal *we* or Editorial *we.* We can also point out a

somewhat related instance of expansion - the syntactic and semantic expansion of the objective case in standard informal or nonstandard English: *It's me. / You and me have always been close. / Us linguists love a good fight* (cf. Lakoff 1990).

20th Century Prescriptive Grammars and Singular *they*

It seems that *they* is now following the same route as *you.* As attested by *OED,* Poutsma's *Grammar of Late Modern English* (1916: Part II, IA: 310-12), Jespersen' s *Modern English Grammar* (1922: Vol. II. 138-40), Vissor's *Historical Syntax of the English Language* (1963: Vol. I. 75-8) and many other scholarly traditional grammar books, the singular use of *they* goes back to the mid-seventeenth century, when, according to *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1989), agreement was governed by notional rather than formal concord. As already pointed out, this use was severely stigmatized by some eighteenth and many nineteenth century school grammarians because of its formal discord in number, and attempts were made to replace it with *he* . However this old usage has not died out. One strong reason for the continuing currency of singular *they* is of course its neutrality in respect of sex. The other reason is its intrinsic plurality. As suggested above, indefinite pronouns like *everyone/everybody* and *anyone/anybody* semantically and pragmatically often imply more than one person. This notion of plurality is especially predominant in such utterances as "*Everybody* had a knapsack, but *they* all forgot to bring them" and "*Everybody* had a knapsack, didn't *they*?" where, as will be discussed later, the idea of more than one referent is so dominant that *he* is practically impossible even in informal contexts.

To illustrate how the English pronoun system has made adjustments to the masculine bias built into it, we will compare prescriptive attitudes toward *they* as a singular sex-indefinite pronoun before 1970 with those after 1970. First consider the following quotations.

> Both[*their, theirs*] are plural, and cannot stand as possessives to singular indefinite pronouns like *one, anyone, everybody, nobody*, or distributives like *each.* [H. A. Treble & G. H. Vallins (1936): *An ABC of English Usage*]

> . . . an error commonly found in both speech and writing, and arising from our lack of a relative pronoun *his-or-her.* [E. Partridge (1947): *Usage and Abusage.* 1964 edition]

> . . . the origin of the mistake is clearly reluctance to recognize that the shortening of the cumbersome *he or she, his or her,* etc., is *he* or *him* or *his* though the reference may be to both sexes. [H. Fowler (1926): *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage.* SV THEY, THEM, THEIR 1] / Undoubtedly grammar rebels against *their;* and the reason for using it is clearly reluctance to recognize that, though the reference may be to both sexes, the right shortening of the cumbersome *he or she, his or her,* etc., is *he* or *him* or *his* . . . [H. Fowler & E. Gowers (1965): *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (MEU)*]

Perhaps failing to find any appropriate alternative, these grammarians do not denounce singular *they* as openly as their predecessors. As implied by the phrases "mistake" and "grammar rebels against", however, they are willing to defend generic *he* rather than advocate singular *they. MEU* is now being revised by R. Burchfield, editor in chief of *OEDS.* From his recent article "anyone . . . their," which appeared in *Sunday Times* 29 May 1988,

we can roughly guess how he is going to revise it. After discussing the old origin of singular *they*, he concludes that even good writers find this use of *they* hard to avoid in informal contexts. It is therefore highly probable that the revised edition of *MEU* will be more relaxed in the register constraint on singular *they* than its predecessors.

In contrast to Vallins, Partridge, Fowler and Gowers, many present-day normative grammarians, or what Lakoff (1990) calls "language bosses," who are by nature critical of any "illogical" use in language, are sympathetic with singular *they*, probably influenced by the contemporary debate about sexism in language, especially feminists' strong objections to the "*he/man* approach". Though they do not usually go so far as to accept singular *they* as a norm, they refrain from openly stigmatizing it. They usually just suggest two or three non-sexist alternatives as possible options writers can consider to skirt the pronominal problem. The following quotation represents their typical attitude.

> Perhaps one of the most challenging linguistic problems brought on by the advent of nonsexist English is the question of whether to use *his, his or her, or their* . . . . *His* is the grammatically and historically correct choice, but its implicit notion that everyone is male is offensive. *His or her* is grammatically correct but horrendously cumbersome . . . . And the popularly used *their,* which may in time be considered correct, is not thought so at this writing and offends the ears and eyes of most people who care about proper usage. Another possibility is to rewrite a sentence so a pronoun isn't used . . . [P. Heacock (1989): *Which Word When ?*]

We can see similar stances in the following grammar and usage books:

> N. Lewis (1987); *The New American Dictionary of Good English* / Carter, B. & Skates, C. (1988): *The Rinehart Guide to Grammar and Usage* / E.D. Johnson (1991): *The Handbook of Good English* (2nd

edition) / W. R. Ebbitt and D. R. Ebbitt (1990): *Index to English* (5th edition) / K. S. Nolting (1990): *The Written Word III* (Revised edition) / J. N. Hook (1990): *The Appropriate Word* / M. H. Manser (1990): *Bloosmbury Good Word Guide* (2nd edition).

More conservative than these general usage references are American college handbooks. The following handbooks unanimously agree that writers should avoid pronouns that exclude either sex or reflect the stereotypic male and female roles (e.g. **The astronaut* must begin *his* training long before a flight).

J. W. Kirkland & C. B. Dilworth (1990): *Concise English Handbook* (2nd edition) / J. C. Hodges et al. (1990): *Harbrace College Handbook* (11th edition)/ G. P. Mulderig & L. Elsbree (1990): *The Heath Handbook* (12th edition) / R. Perrin (1990). *The Beacon Handbook* (2nd Edition).

They offer as rewriting devices pluralization of the antecedent (*Astronauts* must begin *their* training . . .), sparing use of *he or she* (*The astronaut* must begin *his or her* training . . .), elimination of possessive pronouns or replacing them with articles (*The astronaut* must begin training . . .), alternate use of *he* and *she* and passivization, but still adhering to the traditional doctrine that a pronoun must agree in number with its antecedent, none of these handbook writers offer singular *they* as a possible option, They thus reject both generic *he* as sexist and singular *they* as ungrammatical. Here it is important to notice that rejecting generic *he* does not necessarily leads to accepting singular *they*.

Pedagogical Grammars and Singular *They*

So far we have been concerned with usage dictionaries and reference manuals designed for adult speakers of English. We will now turn to pedagogical grammar textbooks and usage references primarily intended for learners of English. According to Bodine's (1975) survey, of thirty-three grammar books being used in American junior and senior high schools, published between 1958 and 1967, twenty-eight condemn both *he or she* because of its clumsiness and singular *they* because of its inaccuracy, and only three give an adequate account of singular *they*. Of course, the situation is different now. Recently published pedagogical grammars, especially ESL/EFL grammars, are more willing to accept singular *they*. Although these authors are pedagogically prescriptive, their prescription is mostly derived from objective observation of actual usage or description of large corpus-based grammars such as *GCE*, *CGEL* and *Collins Cobuild English Grammar*. In this respect, they differ from those prescriptive usage critics who tend to depend for their prescription on logic, etymology, and often their own personal taste. G. Leech, a co-author of *GCE* and *CGEL*, for instance, writes in his *An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage* (1989):

> In<informal English>we also often use *they* to refer back to indefinite pronouns . . . e.g. We told *everyone* to bring *their* passports with *them*.

(See also Beaumont & C. Granger (1989): *The Heinemann English Grammar*, p. 195/ M. Swan (1992): *Oxford Pocket Basic English Usage*, p. 307). Similarly, S. Greenbaum and J. Whitcut, both of whom are also involved

with *GCE* and *CGEL* in one way or another, take a view that this usage is established in speech but not in formal writing, in their *Longman Guide to English Usage* (1988, p. 45). C. Chalker, who also collaborated on the Survey of English Usage, goes a step further. She removes the formality constraint and accepts *they* both in spoken and written English, but with a brief warning:

> *They* is often used as a singular pronoun, particularly after an indefinite pronoun like *anybody* or *everyone.* This avoids the problem of having to choose *he* or *she*, and is commonly found both in spoken and written English. Unfortunately some people still think this is ungrammatical. [C. Chalker (1990): *English Grammar: Word by Word*]

L. G. Alexander, a co-author of *English Grammatical Structure* (1975), and J. Sinclair, who is in charge of the Cobuild Corpus of 200, 000, 000 words, take a similar stand in *Longman English Grammar* (1988. p. 87) and *Collins Cobuild English Usage* (1992, pp. 291-92) respectively. Even more decisive are A. J. Thomson and A. V. Martinet, authors of the widely-read EFL grammar book, *A Practical English Grammar,* which has gone through four editions since it was first published in 1960. In their new *Oxford Pocket English Grammar* (1990), they simply accept this usage, with no comment on register restriction or possible objection:

> With compounds of *one* and *body* and with *either/neither* and *none* we use *they/them/their* instead of *he/him/his* and *she/her*. Everyone passed the exam, didn't *they*? (p. 65)

(See also R. Hurst (1989): *Grammar and Practice*, p. 202 / E. Woods & N.

McLeod (1990): *Using English Grammar,* p. 237/ E. Eastwood (1992): *Oxford Practice Grammar,* p. 188). It should be noted here, however, that Thomson and Martinet give only the one instance "Everyone passed the exam, didn't *they* ?" where the nominative form *they* appears in the tag. As has often been pointed out (e.g. D. Langendoen (1970): *Essentials of English Grammar*), *he* is practically impossible in this position as in "*Everyone* passed the exam, didn't they/**he* ?" where the notion of more than one referent is so strong that *they* is practically the only choice. The point at issue is whether Thomson and Martinet's unconditional acceptance of singular *they* is intended to automatically apply to other cases in which the referent is strongly felt to be one person as in, for instance, "*Somebody* left *his/their* car in the driveway" or "*Somebody* left *his/their* car in the driveway, didn't *he/they*?" In any case it is interesting to compare *Oxford Pocket English Grammar* just quoted above with the fourth edition of *A Practical English Grammar* (1986), in order to see how the authors have been influenced by the feminist movement against sexism during the past four years:

> These expressions [*someone, somebody, anyone* etc.] have a singular meaning and take a singular verb so personal pronouns and possessive adjectives should logically be *he/she, him/her, his/her.* However in colloquial English plural forms are more common. (p. 69)

Thus four years ago Thomson and Martinet accepted singular *they* only in colloquial English, but four years later, the authors took a further step and removed the register constraint "in colloquial English". Though their observation is somewhat superficial, we can take them as having become

more liberal in accepting singular *they* both in speech and writing.

ESL/EFL Dictionaries and Singular *They*

As shown below, EFI/ESL dictionaries such as *Collins Cobuild* (1987), *LDOCE* (1987, 2nd edition), *OALD* (1989, 4th edition), and *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture (LDELC)* (1992) are also more willing to accept *they* than are general-purpose dictionaries such as *COD* (1990, 8th edition), *POD* (1992, 8th edition) and *The Oxford Modern English Dictionary* (*OMED*) (1992), among which *COD* and *OMED* regard singular *they* as disputable and *POD* does not even record it.

> **they 4** (used in order to avoid saying *he or she* after a singular noun or pronoun when one wants to include people of either sex): If anyone has any information on this subject, will they please let me know afterwards? [*LDOCE /LDELC*] / **3** (used informally instead of *he or she*): If anyone arrives late they'll have to wait outside.[*OALD*]

Collins Cobuild goes a step further. It not only accepts *they* as "used instead of 'he' or 'she' to refer to a person whose sex is not known or stated" but uses *they* in its sentential defining descriptions. *Thin and stubborn,* for instance, are defined as "*a person* or *an animal* that is thin has no extra fat on *their* body," and "*Someone* who is stubborn is determined to do what *they* want and very unwilling to change *their* mind" respectively. This use of *they* is endorsed by the three companion volumes, *Collins Cobuild English Grammar* (1990) and *Collins Cobuild English Usage* (1992), both based on the same Cobuild corpus or its extended version, and *The BBC Dictionary* (1992), based on the analysis of over 70 million words of

radio output from 1988 to the present day.

Thus, in grammars and dictionaries published in the past twenty years, there has been a growing tendency for singular *they* to be accepted in both speech and writing, whether formal or informal.

It should be remembered, however, that, in spite of a growing body of experimental tests which have led many feminists to refer to singular *he* as "false generic," some people, to say nothing of anti-feminists, still resist this tendency and stick with the old normative rule they were taught at school, thinking that *he* is a linguistically sex-neutral as well as the only correct grammatical form in a context where the antecedent is sex-inclusive. It should be also noted that, as will be discussed later, recently published general dictionaries such as *COD* (1992) and *POD* (1992), *OMED* (1992), to which many people turn for authoritative rulings, still accept generic *he* without any comment on its alleged male superiority.

He or She

As pointed out above, the disjoined form or double pronoun *he or she*, though proposed as early as in the eighteenth century, has not excited much attention from the broad base of users mainly because it is condemned as stylistically cumbersome or clumsy by grammarians, textbook writers and the publishing industry. The clumsiness will culminate in absurdity when *he or she* is repeated within a short stretch of discourse. The following 'invented' instance illustrates the point:

> Another cause of obscurity is that the writer is *herself or himself* not quite sure of *her or his* meaning. *He or she* has a vague

impression . . . [Strunk, W. & White, F. B. (1979). *The Elements of Style.* 3rd edition. p. 60]

Nilsen (1984) presents another possible reason for the unpopularity of this form: It is against the historical tendency for English to prefer short forms to long ones in ordinary contexts, for example, *bus* instead of *omnibus*, and *TV* instead of *television.* Bolinger (1980: 95) gives a further possible reason: It is against phonological law. Since unmarked anaphoric pronouns carry low information, they are inevitably de-accented and h is dropped as in, "She was getting 'erself ready to go visit 'er cousin." But *he or she* demands full accent and full-blown *h*'s. We cannot therefore reduce *him or her* to *imorer* as in **If you see the manager, call imorer.* Thus he attributes the clumsiness of this double pronoun not only to the fact that we are unaccustomed to it but to the fact that it refuses to take the back seat that all languages reserve for pure anaphora.

In any case *he or she* is fairly common in formal or academic writing, but far less common in informal writing and speech. Prescriptive grammarians and usage critics almost always refer to this usage as one of the possible alternatives, but rarely do they strongly support it, probably because of the morphological, stylistic and phonological reasons mentioned above.

Of course not all grammarians disapprove of this form. R. F. Tracz (1991); *Dr. Grammar's Writes from Wrongs* and L. Rozakis (1991): *The Random House Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation,* for instance, recommends 'the double reference to both sexes' as a good alternative, though they also suggest rewriting the whole sentence as another good way of resolving the pronoun problem.

Martyna (1980) is optimistic about the future of this form. Although she admits the possible awkwardness, she argues that, compared with the ambiguity and sex exclusiveness of the *he/man* approach, even that awkwardness is not serious, and predicts that the awkwardness will eventually decline. In fact *he or she* is the only choice for those who want to consciously avoid both grammatical and social problems. This may be one of the reasons why an average of 46 percent of the *AHD 's* (1992) Usage Panel, a group of 173 well-known writers, critics, and scholars, chose *his or her* when asked to complete such sentences as "A patient who doesn't accurately report __ sexual history to the doctor runs the risk of misdiagnosis." We must be careful to note, however, that this is a choice consciously made, not necessarily a reflection of how people actually write or speak. *He or she* will be abbreviated into *he/she*, or further *s/he*. According to *AHD*, the latter form is pronounced as / shē´ər hē´ / or / shē´ hē´ /. These abbreviated forms are also limited to academic papers, legal documents and other formal written registers.

Linguists' devices for avoiding generic *he*

There are several areas in the analysis of language and human behavior where pronoun reference is of particular interest. The three most important areas among these are linguistics, medicine and religion. In the rest of this paper, we will limit our attention to the area of linguistics and see how linguists have tackled or ignored linguistic sexism. As mentioned earlier, linguists, who tend to condemn prescriptive rules artificially imposed on language, seems to have mostly accepted generic *he* until quite recently. They seem to have regarded it as just a linguistic matter, assuming that *he* is

linguistically unmarked in contrast to *she* just as *old* and *tall* are unmarked against their opposites *young* and *short.* They seem to have failed to detect the social bias hidden in this allegedly unmarked form. Leonard Bloomfield, for instance, begins the first chapter of his *Language* (1933) in such a way that women readers today would feel as if they are totally excluded:

> Language plays a great part in our life. Perhaps because of its familiarity, we rarely observe it, taking it rather for granted, as we do breathing or walking. The effects of language are remarkable, and include much of what distinguishes *man* from the animals . . . . There are some circumstances, however, in which the conventionally educated *person* discusses linguistic matters. Occasionally *he* debates questions of "correctness"—whether it is "better," for instance, to say *it's I* or *It's me.* (p. 3)

It is interesting to note that in respect of this *he/man* approach, the generativist Noam Chomsky shares much in common with his structuralist predecessor Bloomfield. The following is from *Language and Mind* (1979):

> When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the "human essence," the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to *man* . . . . It is important to bear in mind that the creation of linguistic expressions that are novel but appropriate is the normal mode of language use. If some *individual* were to restrict *himself* largely to a definite set of linguistic patterns, to a set of habitual responses to stimulus configurations, or to "analogies" in the sense of modern linguistics, we would regard *him* as mentally defective, as being less human than animal. (p. 100)

In 1975, Robin Lakoff's paper "Language and Woman's Place" first appeared in *Language in Society* 1(2) and in the same year an enlarged version was published in book form. It set off a debate in linguistic circles and beyond about the empirical status of her assertions of sex differences

in speaking patterns. Most interesting are her attitude toward pronoun problems and her actual use of pronouns. She proposes a distinction between generic *he* and other sexist nouns such as *mistress* and *professional*, and argues that the area of pronominal neutralization is both less in need of change and less open to change than many of the other disparities. She even goes so far as to say that an attempt to change pronominal usage will be futile. Therefore she makes no attempt to propose new devices for avoiding pronominal sexism, and, not surprisingly, uses singular *he* throughout her text:

> Two words can be synonymous in their denotative sense, but one will be used in case a *speaker* feels favorably toward the object the word denotes, the other if *he* is unfavorably disposed. (p. 3)

> If a *linguist* encounters an example like *The way prices are rising is horrendous, isn't it?* and feels indecisive about its acceptability in various situations, it is *his* duty to tell exactly where *his* doubts lie, and why. (p. 48)

In the following quotation, it is to be noted, Lakoff uses *he or she* instead of the conventionally preferred *she* in reference to *teacher*, whose occupational role is invariably associated with the female gender as are *typist* and *secretary*.

> It is also important for a *teacher* to be aware of the kind of language *he or she* is speaking: if a woman teacher unconsciously teaches "women's language" to *her* male students, they may be in difficulties when they try to function in another country. (p. 47)

The reason for using *he or she* instead of *she* is contextually evident. The sex-specific phrase *a woman teacher* demands that the antecedent

teacher should be explicitly sex-inclusive.

Frank Palmer's *Grammar* (1983, 2nd edition) provides us with another interesting example. He sees 'false logic' in the use of *he* as generic and defends singular *they* as "a common and useful device, not illogical or ungrammatical". As will be shown below, however, what he actually does in his writing is to follow the rule of normative grammar he condemns:

> The *student* is not told this; *he* is left to work it out for *himself.* (p. 53) /. . . but given that the *child* already has these basic principles, *he* can develop a strategy for deciding what are the rules of the language to which *he* is exposed. (p. 193)

It is also interesting to note his inconsistent use of the problematic generic noun *man.* On some pages he uses *man* or *men* in a generic sense as in "What sets *man* apart from the rest of the animal kingdom is *his* ability to speak" (p. 9) / "We have very little idea of the steps by which *men* came to speak" (p. 11) / "At some time in the past *man* developed *his* speech organs" (p. 11), but on other pages he switches to *human beings* or *humans* as in "Certainly, *human beings* have an innate, intuitive ability to learn and to speak languages that other creatures do not" (p. 193) / "But *humans* have the ability for other quite remarkable intellectual achievements . . . ." (p. 193). We can see, in these discrepancies, the uneasy adjustment between language and social bias linguists today are involved in. (For the difference in generic potential of *a man, men* and *man,* see Sunderland (1991)).

Usage among feminist linguists is not necessarily unified. Coates (1986), for example, uses *s/he, her/him, they* according to the 'type' of the antecedent.

> The *child,* in Chomsky's view, internalizes a set of rules which

enable *her/him* to produce grammatical sentences. (p. 96)

> It is not sufficient for the *child* to be linguistically competent; in order to function in the real world, *s/he* must also have learned when to speak . . . (p. 97)

> Imagine *someone* who speaks at the same time as others, who doesn't respond to questions . . . . Such a *person* might use well-formed sentences, but we would all recognise that *they* were incompetent in an important sense. (p. 97)

Cameron (1985) goes to the extreme of using generic *she* as in "The *reader* is encouraged to be an active maker of *her* own ideas . . . "so that " any men reading who feel uneasy about being excluded, or not addressed" may "care to consider that women get this feeling within minutes of opening the vast majority of books and to reflect on the effect it has." (p. vii) Is replacing one bias with another a real solution to the problem? Despite the "readers' objections" of this kind, Cameron (1992) sticks with this "visibility strategy" so as to emphasize women's presence in the world and raise people's consciousness by confronting them with their prejudices (p. 125).

In a recent anecdotal description of sexual variation in the social act of using language, Deborah Tannen, an American sociolinguist, intends to be sex-fair rather than sex-neutral, using *he* and *she* alternately in reference to the same (type of) antecedent.

> You know the feeling: You meet *someone* for the first time, and it's as if you've known each other all your lives. Everything goes smoothly. You know just what *she* means; *she* knows just what you mean . . .
>
> But you also know the other feeling: you meet *someone,* you try to be friendly, to make a good impression, but everything goes

> wrong . . . . You start to say something interesting but *he* cuts you off. *He* starts saying something and never seems to finish. [*That's not What I Mean* ! p. 17]

We should note that Tannen does not alternate between using *he* and *she* within the same paragraph. Compare this device with the following straightforward alternation method:

> Following a head injury, have the patient lie down and remain completely quiet no matter how *she* feels. Have *him* do this even though *he* acts all right and insists that you leave *her* alone. Keep the patient flat on *his* back . . . [S. L. Andelman (1976), "Injuries to head need prompt aid" (quoted in Nilsen (1984))]

The sequence is so confusing that many people will take it only to be a sloppy diction. In cases where the sex-indefinite antecedent occurs once, Tannen also intends to be sex-fair by using *he or she* or *she or he* as in "each one feels convinced of the logic of *his or her* position" and "You may also ask the other person what *she or he* expected in response to a comment or question."

A similar but slightly more complicated device for sex-fairness is that used by a British linguist Diane Blakemore. She uses the masculine pronoun *he* to refer to *speaker and* the feminine pronoun *she* to refer to *hearer, learner* or a person other than the speaker as in:

> However, the *speaker* of (14) may be understood to be asking the learner whether *she* is leaving or to be telling *her* to leave.
> (14) You are leaving.
> . . . . Thus, for example, *speaker* of (15) is not describing a state of affairs or conveying *his* belief about the state of affairs . . .
> (15) I promise to end this chapter soon.

All these devices for alternating *he* and *she*, although fairly widespread in certain registers, can be confusing to readers. Confusion will be particularly serious if a reader is skimming paragraphs and does not notice that the alteration is deliberate.

Some linguists still contend that generic *he* is just a linguistic convention with no male chauvinism behind it and, at the same time, want to free their language from unconscious semantic bias. Such linguists often escape from the dilemma by putting a disclaimer between themselves and that usage to the effect that:

> In this book *he* is used to refer to a sex-indefinite antecedent like *somebody* and *speaker* not because of bias or obtuseness but in the interest of economy and style.

It seems that more and more linguists, whether feminist or not, are averse to the male-bias in the third person singular pronoun system, and so are willing to discard generic *he*, but the same linguists hesitate to use *he or she* no doubt because if they initially use an indefinite pronoun or a singular sex-inclusive noun and the paragraphs continue on for several sentences, each one requiring either *he or she, his or her, him or her*, the result will sound clumsy. Some linguists are therefore apt to use *they* more often than the other alternatives because of its succinctness and naturalness.

> In talking in a certain way *a speaker* is saying something about the kind of person *they* are, as well as about *their* perceptions of the listener and the task in hand. [J. Swann (1992), *Girls, Boys & Language*]

> *Everyone* has words for *their* miseries and *their* pleasures and for the stages of *their* lives from birth to death. [R. Burling (1992),

Patterns of Language, p. 14]

Conclusion

Obviously none of the solutions we have discussed satisfies all the objections so far registered by feminists and prescriptive grammarians, and no universally agreed alternative has been discovered. Many writers are therefore still forced to adopt an individual policy.

We have surveyed a considerable number of grammar books, usage references and dictionaries published between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. Since recently published dictionaries and grammars are mostly based on authentic texts or linguistic corpora, they can be regarded as reflecting, however obliquely, the current state of linguistic usage rather than the authors' or editors' personal views. The evidence from these and other sources clearly shows that, having survived for more than two hundred years since Chaucer, singular *they* seems to be gaining wider and wider acceptance as a singular sex-indefinite pronoun, although still regarded as troublesome in respect of number by some writers, particularly writers of usage handbooks for American college students.

So far we have been mainly concerned with *they* as anaphor for what Halliday and Hassan call general (human) nouns as well as indefinite pronouns like *anybody*. In the reminder of this section, we will touch on cases where singular *they* is used in reference to a less general antecedent. Consider the following examples, both of which were invented by theoretical linguists:

> I love a good movie, but *they /*it* never comes to Birmingham. [Magen] / *A tiger* is dangerous . . . . *They* have big, sharp teeth! [Johnson]

This use of *they* seems to be less acceptable than *they* in the time-honored sequence *everybody – they* or *a person – they*. In the examples above, therefore, many people would prefer the plural antecedent as in "I love *good movies*, but *they* never come to Birmingham." / "*Tigers* are dangerous . . . . *They* have big, sharp teeth!" This does not mean, however, that sequences like *a tiger – they* are confined to contrived examples. In the following example, the singular generic antecedent *a guinea pig* is referred back to by *it*, then *they* at the second reference.

> Further south on the pampas of Argentina, the role of the prairie dog is taken by *a guinea pig* the size of a spaniel called the viscacha. *It*, too, lives in dense communities but it grazes only at dusk and at dawn. Like many creatures that are active in the twilight, *they* have prominent recognition marks, broad horizontal black and white stripes across the face. *They* build cairns over their burrows. [D. Attenborough (1979): *Life on Earth*, p. 255]

Now consider the following examples from Bolinger (1980:94).

> If a *person* wants *their* phone number changed . . .
> ?If a *man* or *woman* wants *their* phone number changed . . .
> *If a *subscriber* wants *their* phone number changed . . .

We can see, following Bolinger's intuitive judgment, that the less 'general' the antecedent noun becomes (i.e. *subscriber* < *man or woman* < *person*), the less acceptable singular *they* becomes.

At this point, it is well to remember that English has similar uses of *they* in reference to a collective noun. We use a singular pronoun if we are considering the group as a unit and a plural pronoun if we are considering

the individual members of the group separately as in "The *crew are* going about *their* duties preparing the spacecraft for landing."/ "The *crew is* ready for *its* briefing." As is the case of indefinite pronouns like *everybody*, the collective noun *crew* in the second example requires *they* because it is semantically and psychologically felt to be plural.

Finally consider the examples (1)-(3) cited below. In (1), singular *they* occurs just side by side with plural *they*. In (2), an invented example, the singular verb *doesn't know* co-occurs with *themselves*. Example (3), also invented, is apparently similar to the example from Magen (1980) cited above but different from it in that *they* is used where the antecedent is neither generic nor indefinite/nonspecific, but rather is indefinite/ specific. We can say that singular *they* is really established when nobody feels anything 'wrong' with all these uses of *they*.

(1) It is *a rare foreign student* who does not have some doubts that *their* level of English will be high enough to meet *their* chosen course requirements in all areas. *Many* are conscious of *their* weakness, owing to lack of practice or consistent language feedback, in the skills of writing essays, reports, and papers, and of *their* ability to deliver oral presentations and take part in seminar discussions. [*Educational Courses in Britain* (Dominion Press), 1992. p. 7]

(2) When *a person doesn't* know what to do with *themselves* . . .
[Bolinger]

(3) Every day we rented *a canoe,* and *they* did not sink. / Every day they bought *a flower,* because *they* were inexpensive and, as you know, *they* cheer people up. [Johnson] / I was going to stay with *a friend,* but *they* were ill. [*Collins Cobuild English Usage*]

We must bear in mind that at the institutional level (e.g. grammar texts, publishers' guidelines), it seems as if generic *he* is almost extinct, but that below that level, there may still be a fair amount of resistance to proposed non-sexist reforms. For most people trained to write in a certain way, breaking with the tradition can be painful and awkward. It is reported, for instance, that the average percentage of *AHD* (1992) Usage Panel members who consistently completed with *his* such sentences as "A patient who doesn't accurately report __ sexual history to the doctor runs the risk of misdiagnosis" was 37. Native language is like a second skin. It is so much a part of us that we resist the idea that it should be changed. We tend to be tolerant of changes that happened before we were born. But if a change happens in one's lifetime, the recognition and acceptance of that change will be harder. *He* will not therefore entirely lose its generic potential very soon.

Some linguists (e.g. Robin Lakoff (1975)) are pessimistic about the future of singular *they* on the ground that the pronoun system is too entrenched in English to be changed, but the evidence we have so far examined seems to show that, just as the accusative plural *you* has supplanted the other forms of the second person pronouns for social reasons, *they* has begun to enter the cannons of sanctioned locutions and is driving singular *he* out of its last stronghold, formal written language.

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