

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Singular They

Risa · Friday, August 27th, 2021

I was talking to my brother the other day. He has the unhappy habit of defying cultural changes—along with their social expressions—when accommodating change would prove more harmonious within our family. We are both in our early 70's and both competent at following current political events and managing the ever-changing technologies of communication. This is to say, he must know what he is doing when he, for example, refuses to accept [the renaming of his beloved Washington Football Team](#), and continues to call them by the longstanding, but racially offensive name, "The Redskins."

I learned that something he said recently upset his daughter so much, she left the dinner table. He has always been somewhat of an agitator, seemingly for the perverse purpose of offending the very people who truly love him. He generally espouses the same political views that are the norm for most of my liberal Jewish family, yet there are times when he makes statements that cause us distress. That make us question what he really believes. Unsurprisingly, these episodes are more likely to happen when he has had a few drinks.

If you lean liberal or further left, you may recognize my brother in someone in your family, friends, or colleagues. Someone you care about and therefore continue to argue with hoping to change his behavior—to hold him accountable to what he says he stands for. Good luck with that.

The conversation started out with the knotty problem of nonbinary pronouns. I am among those who are not yet comfortable handling the singular *they* while also wanting to escape the tyranny of gender stereotypes. And by "not comfortable" I simply mean I get stymied when I come across the singular *they* in print, and look back over the last few paragraphs, thinking I must have missed something (or, more to the point, someone). I had recently participated in a very long Facebook thread, begun by a man who throughout persisted in arguing against the use of the singular *they* on grammatical grounds. Deeper into the conversation, I understood that his true complaint was, as a journalist, he had been instructed to ask interviewees their gender preferences, which he found awkward, off-putting, and unnecessary. My sense was that he feels unwilling to be a change agent and is burdened by having to force the person he is interviewing to face a change in our use of language that they may not have previously encountered or given any thought to. He asked, "why do they need to care about this?"

Did you just catch my use of *they*? Good on you if you did. And back in the third paragraph, when I used *he*, *him*, and *his*, my own gender bias is evident. I know that changes in language usage can be both difficult and confusing. But the singular *they* is far from a new usage. The Oxford English

Dictionary dates its use in writing back to the 14th century, and its use in speech earlier than that. People who object to the nonbinary use of *they* undoubtedly use it in their own everyday speech. Simply stated regarding current usage, the OED says:

Singular *they* has become the pronoun of choice to replace *he* and *she* in cases where the gender of the antecedent – the word the pronoun refers to – is unknown, irrelevant, or nonbinary, or where gender needs to be concealed.*

According to Oxford, the singular *you*—now well-established in everyday speech—has also had its detractors, including George Fox, the Quaker founder, who preferred the biblical singular *thee/thou*, and “wrote a whole book labeling anyone who used singular *you* an idiot or a fool.” And the editorial *we* is a first-person plural that is used regularly as a singular in writing, as in “here we can see that ...” Oxford predicts that the singular *they* “is well on its way to being normal and unremarkable.” Of course, it’s still controversial. Where California has recognized nonbinary gender since 2018, Tennessee banned use of state funds to promote gender-neutral pronouns at its State University. Read the whole OED article* if you want a taste of how hopeless and hopelessly outdated it is to put language into a locked box and expect it to stay there.

It is equally imprudent to resist changes in language usage on principle, as no principle other than speech itself—and its consequence, behavior—underlie its usage. If the principle is that a plural pronoun cannot support a singular antecedent, consider if that is a more important principle *at this moment* than avoiding gender stereotyping. Or the true underlying issue of equity for transgendered persons, including our trans-youth. How can we learn to support transgendered communities if we resist the simple act of using a nonbinary pronoun—the singular *they*?

When I was in my teens and was told to stop using “bad words” I used to reply, “How can a word be bad?” Later, in what passed for group therapy in the nineties, we were told we could say anything—no holds barred—as a step for learning that we could speak our feelings without having to act on them. I now see both approaches as misguided at best, and wrong at core. I think we all understand viscerally that words have the power to act in the most insidious and hateful ways.

I want to acknowledge how much of a mess adults are leaving for future generations and to really listen to what the current generation is telling us about that future—what it might take to salvage it for their grandchildren. I told my brother this: “It’s not our world anymore.” In saying that, I realized this is what so many older white folks are reckoning with, cringing furiously at having to pass the torch on to others who don’t look, think, dress, pray, work, or speak like they do.

I also offered my brother my best strategy, one that usually works for me. Where so much of the time, we act and speak based on how we feel about things, I’m learning to decide what I want to support (such as using nonbinary pronouns) and then try to adjust my feelings accordingly. I told my niece, if her dad can’t get with the program, instead of expecting him to change, she might want to just smile and say, “OK, boomer.”

*A brief history of singular ‘they’ | Oxford English Dictionary ([oed.com](https://www.oed.com))

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