A Gamble on Gender: Perceptions of the Singular "They" Pronoun among College-Age Students

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This paper discusses a study that was carried out with the aim of discovering the perceptions of the singular "they" pronoun (both general and specified) among college students with a focus on the interaction of the gender of the participant with their perceptions. The linguistic variables considered were the level of acceptability of different pronouns, pronouns used by participants, and direct perceptions of the singular "they," while the social variables were gender, age, first language, and academic year. The hypotheses are as follows: men would find the singular "they" (both forms) less acceptable than women and nonbinary genders, and in the overall data, the general singular "they" would be rated lower than the pronouns he and she, and the specified singular "they" would be rated lower than that. The study utilizes an online survey targeting college students containing 30 questions about the acceptability of various pronouns, including questions that asked participants to rate sentences on how grammatically acceptable they were (1 being not acceptable, and 5 being very acceptable) and questions regarding social situations involving pronouns. Some general observations of the data are as follows: 94.9% of respondents have met someone who uses the singular they pronoun. Additionally, younger people are more likely to rate the specified singular they higher. Most relevantly, the general singular "they" was rated the same as the pronouns "he" and "she," and the specified singular "they" was rated highly but significantly lower than any other pronoun asked about. This study helps to fill gaps in LGBT+ linguistics research and provides a wider knowledge base for this topic. Repetitions with larger sample populations would be valuable.

Keywords: pronouns, gender, linguistics, age, LGBT+

Introduction

Numerous sources were consulted for this research, all of which helped to shape the survey that was used for the study and my understanding of the subject matter in general. Here I consider the findings of three of them in particular: Bradley et al., "Singular 'They' and Novel Pronouns: Gender-Neutral, Nonbinary, or Both?" (2019); Nikolova, "Singular Specific 'They' in the English Language" (2020); and Bradley, "The influence of linguistic and social attitudes on grammaticality judgments of singular 'they.'" (2020). Other relevant sources for this study include Konnelly, L., & Cowper, E. (2019), an analysis of the morphosyntax of the specified singular "they"; Zimman, L. (2016), a look at the socio-political impact of pronouns; and Hernandez, E. (2020), a study on attitudes towards the singular "they" in the context of prejudice and prescriptivism.

In one of several studies on the topic, Bradley et al. examined whether the singular specified "they" and

the neopronoun "ze" were perceived as gender-neutral (referring to any gender, binary or not) or perceived as specifically referring to a nonbinary gender by having participants match photos to resumes. T he authors discovered that "they" is generally interpreted as gender-neutral, while "ze" depended on whether the participant was familiar with the pronoun or not. If the participant was, "ze" was interpreted as gender-neutral. If the participant wasn't, many thought it was a misspelling of "he."

An article by Nikolova in 2020 presents the preliminary results of a larger study whose focus is to investigate the frequency and distribution of the singular "they" in comparison to other pronouns in varying conditions depending on the referent's gender identity, gender explicitness, and the relevance of gender in the condition. This was tested through varying tasks whose goal was natural elicitation from the participants to avoid self-policing. The preliminary results confirm previous studies' findings: that the singular "t hey" is g rowing in prevalence, and is actually used more frequently than thought, notably in places where gender is clear but not relevant.

Bradley's 2020 article, "The Influence of Linguistic and Social Attitudes on Grammaticality Judgments of Singular 'They,'" describes a study that is similar to the one that the present author has conducted in that the author presented a series of sentences with pronouns to participants and asked them to rate them on a 1-5 scale of grammaticality. Bradley also asked participants to rate how much they agreed with various prescriptivist statements on a 1-5 scale. The results found that the singular "they" is very acceptable when used in reference to a hypothetical person of unknown gender, while the use of the singular "they" to refer to specific individuals of unknown or nonbinary gender is less acceptable; however, the degree of acceptability varies depending on the participant's level of agreement with prescriptivist and "benevolent sexism" statements. This is in reference to the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick and Fisk, 1996) which describes sexism either through positive-sounding sexist statements – benevolent, or negative-sounding sexist statements – hostile.

Racial and Financial Minorities vs. Abortion Access

This study used a survey to collect participants' information starting with demographic questions on age, gender, first language, and academic year. Then came a 30-question section (with question order randomized) on how grammatically acceptable various pronouns are. Six sentences were included with each pronoun (he, she, they [general], and they [specified]), and two control (syntactically ungrammatical) sentences for each pronoun. These sentences were either pulled from American TV show scripts by using a random number generator to choose samples from a transcripts website or were created by the researcher.

The instructions preceding this section asked participants to rate each sentence on a 1-5 scale of grammatical acceptability, with 1 being not acceptable at all – in other words, no one fluent in English would say this with the goal of sounding "correct" – and 5 being totally acceptable, or anyone fluent in English would say this with the goal of sounding "correct." I worded it this way in order to elicit a more natural response, with the goal of getting the participant's perceptions rather than administering a quiz. If the study were to be repeated, an alternative question that may elicit more natural responses could be, "If this sentence were being spoken aloud by a friend, how much would it make them sound like a native speaker of English?"

Next in the survey were 11 questions concerning various social situations involving the singular "they" pronoun, including a free response question at the end for any other thoughts on the survey. Figure 1 below contains a few examples of those questions. The complete list of survey questions can be found in the appendix.

What pronouns do you use to refer to yourself?	she/her, he/him, they/them, ze/zim, any pronouns, other
Do you know or have you met someone who uses "they/them" pronouns to refer to themselves?	Yes, No
Do you think it is acceptable to use the pronoun "they/them" (and its variations) to refer to a single person?	Definitely yes, Probably yes, Maybe, Probably not, Definitely not
Do you use "they/them" pronouns to refer to someone whose pronouns or gender you are not sure of?	Always yes, Usually yes, Might or might not, Usually no, Always no

I distributed this survey to friends, acquaintances, former class group chats, various mid-size (1k-5k people) to small (<1k people) discord servers, and the discussion board for survey links for the Language and Gender class I was in at the time. I made sure to specify that I was looking for college/university students fluent in English.

Findings

The sample population (N=78) was distributed as follows: by gender, 51.28% women, 19.23% men, and 29.49% nonbinary gender (in this sense including any genders that are not binary, and not just people who use the label nonbinary). The mean age of the sample was 24.12, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest being 57. By first language, 87.18% said their first language was English, with a further 2.56% listing English and another language. Pronouns had a few more options, so I have included a pie chart below in Figure 2. An interesting additional note: every man chose he/him as his pronouns, but women and nonbinary choices were in every pronoun category. Additionally, it was a little surprising that there were no neopronoun responses.

they/them
15.4%

any
3.8%

he/him
20.5%

she/they
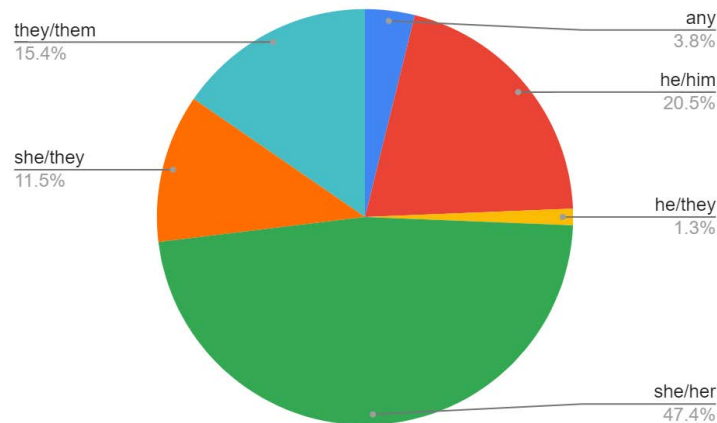11.5%

he/they
1.3%

she/her
47.4%

Figure 2

Examining the general results reveals that the original hypothesis was partially incorrect: the specified "they" was rated the lowest; however, the general "they" was nearly identical to both he and she. Additionally, the specified "they" was much higher than I anticipated. Figure 3 below presents the average scores of each pronoun
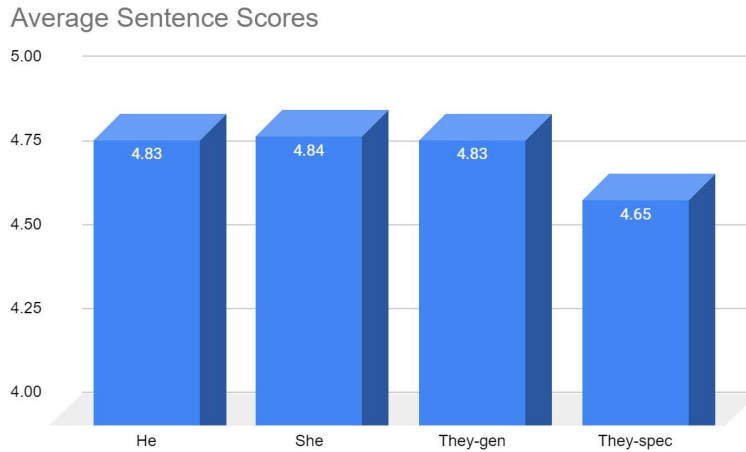
Average Sentence Scores

Figure 3

Now, in the interests of time, I will be analyzing the average scores of one sentence, specifically the lowest scoring specific "they" sentence, with gender. The sentence analyzed is "That's Alex, they're great at math." I created this particular sentence and chose the name Alex specifically because it's vaguely gender-neutral. Below is a table of responses generated for this sentence.

"That's Alex, they're great at math."			
Rated it 4 or higher		Rated it 3 or lower	
Overall	84.51%	Overall	15.49%
F	40.85%	F	9.86%
M	18.31%	M	2.82%
N	25.35%	N	2.82%

Figure 4

It is also interesting to look at proportional percentages of each gender. 80.56% of the women rated the sentence 4 or higher, while 86.67% of the men and 90% of the nonbinary participants responded the same. There were far more women in the study than men or nonbinary participants, but the number of men and nonbinary was more similar, which makes me feel fairly confident in saying that the data suggests that nonbinary people are more likely to rate the singular specified "they" as acceptable than men and women as well.

Additionally, I looked at age and academic year in relation to this sentence's scores but found rather typical data: 93.33% of 18 to 24-year-olds rated the sentence 4 or higher, while 68.67% of 25 to 31-year-olds and 66.67% of 32-year-olds and up did the same. More could probably be found in this area with a larger diversity of age groups, but the target population was college students, so it is unsurprising that I did not get as many older people. As for the academic year, it followed a similar trend of older years rating the sentence lower.

In regards to questions of social acceptability, 94.9% of respondents have met someone who uses they/them pronouns to refer to themselves. This was not surprising, considering that the target population were college students, and studies have found before that younger people are more likely to have met someone who uses they/them pronouns (Parker et al., 2019). 100% said yes or probably yes to the question of whether the general singular "they" is acceptable, while 98.7% said the same to the specified singular. Interestingly these numbers are much higher than the sentence scores. 41% said they might or might not ask someone their pronouns after meeting, and 84.7% said they usually or always refer to someone whose pronouns they do not know as "they." 46.2% said their answers change based on the environment. After that question, I offered a free response for participants to explain their answer further and received some fascinating answers. One in particular seemed to capture most of the sentiments expressed:

> If I feel I'm in an environment where using they/them pronouns could create a potentially unsafe or negatively charged environment, then I will avoid using them, or try not to use any pronouns at all. This usually occurs with people who I don't know especially well, or who I know would not be understanding of gender-neutral pronouns and/or would not be receptive to an explanation of these pronouns from me.

This response echoes experiences similar to those of the present researcher and may indicate, along with other supporting data, that the sentiment expressed by the respondent is a commonly held view. Other responses said it depended on whether they were likely to see the person often after that. Some also said they were socially awkward, so they didn't ask and instead picked up others' pronouns from conversational clues.

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The final question on my survey was a free response for participants to share any other thoughts on the study, and people had a lot to say. A couple of respondents commented on the lack of a gender-neutral pronoun in another language they speak or are learning. Some commented on how gender-neutral pronouns and using the correct pronouns for someone is basic respect and should not be debated. One person, in particular, said "gender isn't real"! One of my favorite responses, however, provided the title for this paper. I've put it below.

> I also sometimes with strangers will make a gamble on their gender. For example, a person that appears cis and presents not queer? If that makes sense, I will sometimes assume they use pronouns aligning with their presentation or perceived cisgender. I am more careful about using they/them pronouns for visibly queer or gender-nonconforming strangers until I know their pronouns.

A gamble on gender! It implies that there is something to be won or lost with the use of different pronouns. Also fascinating are the intercommunity perceptions and assumptions that fuel linguistic choices. It makes me wonder about and want to conduct studies on linguistic choice based on appearance in various communities. Would someone talk differently to (or about) someone dressed like a cowboy? Like a skater? Like an heiress? Would that change based on gender? All fascinating questions.

Conclusion

Part of the original hypothesis was supported, and part of it was rejected, while a lot more data was gathered than expected. In general, my results support the idea that nonbinary people are more likely to rate the specified singular "they" as acceptable. A very large portion of the sample population knows of and supports the singular "they" pronoun, and the use of the singular "they" pronoun can at times be restricted to certain environments out of fear of retaliation. Additionally, though unsurprisingly, younger people are more likely to rate the singular "they" as grammatical.

These conclusions are largely confirmed by shared knowledge within the LGBT+ community, as well as in previous studies, such as the study done by the Pew Research Center which found that 35% of Generation Z (born after 1996) knows someone who uses the singular "they" pronoun to refer to themselves. The implications of their study and mine are generally that the younger generations are more accepting, which I find promising for the future.

Something that possibly influenced this data significantly was the fact that it seemed a large portion of participants were LGBT+ or participated in LGBT+ communities. This makes sense in reflection because I sent the survey in communities I participate in, and, as I am LGBT+, I don't tend to seek out spaces that are unfriendly or hostile to people like me. Repeat studies with different populations could target those less familiar or more opposed to the singular "they" pronoun, or even a study specifically targeting an LGBT+ population. Such a study might include added questions regarding language and why those choices are made.

Ultimately, as is or as could be, my study helps to fill a gap in research on the singular "they" pronoun and on nonbinary pronouns in general. This study and studies like it, particularly in comparison with studies on neopronouns, have the potential to begin to describe the wide variety of language innovations made to describe the human experience of gender as experienced internally and socially.

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Appendix

Demographic Questions
- Comes before acceptability questions, free text response
- Instructions: **LOOKING FOR COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY STUDENTS (UNDERGRAD OR GRAD) FLUENT IN ENGLISH** This is a survey for a research project for a college Language and Gender course. You'll be answering various questions related to how acceptable it is to use different gendered pronouns in different sentences and different social situations. Please answer each question to the best of your ability; your responses will only be used for the purposes of this project and will not be connected to any identifying information from you. There are no right or wrong answers for any question.

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your first (native) language?
4. What is your academic year in college?
   • Comes after acceptability questions with multiple choice options
5. What pronouns do you use to refer to yourself?
   a. she/her
   b. he/him
   c. they/them
   d. ze/zir
   e. any pronouns
   f. Other (please specify)
6. Do you know or have you met someone who uses "they/them" pronouns to refer to themselves?
   a. Yes
   b. No
7. Do you think it's acceptable to use the pronoun "they/them" (and its variations) to refer to a single person?
   a. Definitely yes
   b. Probably yes
   c. Maybe
   d. Probably not
   e. Definitely not
8. (Referring to the previous question) What about if you're talking about someone whose gender you don't know?
   For example, in a generalized statement about a single person, or the unknown owner of a misplaced belonging?

   a. Definitely yes
   b. Probably yes
   c. Maybe
   d. Probably not
   e. Definitely not
9. (Referring to the previous question) What about if the person you're talking about has asked you to use "they/them" pronouns when talking about them?
   a. Definitely yes
   b. Probably yes

10. In general, do you try to refer to people by the name and pronouns they ask you to refer to them by?
    a. Always yes
    b. Usually yes
    c. Might or might not
    d. Usually no
    e. Always no
11. When you meet someone, do you ask their pronouns?
    a. Always yes
    b. Usually yes
    c. Might or might not
    d. Usually no
    e. Always no
12. Do you use "they/them" pronouns to refer to someone whose pronouns or gender you aren't sure of?
    a. Always yes
    b. Usually yes
    c. Might or might not
    d. Usually no
    e. Always no
13. (Referring to questions 11 and 12) Does this answer change depending on your environment (location, what people are around, etc.)?
    a. Yes
    b. No
14. If you responded yes to question 13, please elaborate. If you responded no, please type N/A. [Free text response]

Acceptability Questions
- Sentences are randomized in survey. Answer options are a scale from 1-5, with 1 being "Not Acceptable" and 5 being "Acceptable". Sources are not included in actual survey. If not sourced, sentences were generated by me.
- Instructions: Please rate each sentence on a 1-5 scale of how grammatically acceptable you find it; 1 being not acceptable at all, you wouldn't say this and you don't think anyone fluent in English would say this (with the goal of it sounding "correct"), and 5 being completely acceptable, you or anyone fluent in

Pronoun	Sentence
She/Her	**Acceptable** • "She actually read a short story I wrote." Source: Veronica Mars, S3E18, "I Know What You'll Do Next Summer." • "Maybe someone can actually give Jane the competition she needs. Source: All American, S2E3, "Never No More" • "Is she a professional singer?" Source: The Good Doctor, S1E16, "Pain" • "Okay, we can just stay with her." Source: Atlanta, S2E9, "North of the Border" • "I could take her out to lunch somewhere this week." Source: Mom, S4E14, "Roast Chicken and a Funny Story" • "I'll impress her at the party." Source: Lucifer, S3E2, "The One With the Baby Carrot" **Unacceptable** • "I didn't she know was here." • "Her wants to be my friend again."
He/Him	**Acceptable** • "My roommate said he was going out to the park for a couple hours." Source: iZombie, S1E6, "Virtual Reality Bites" • "You must have been wondering where he was." Source: True Blood, S2E8, "Timebomb" • "Luke feels like the world owes him something." Source: One Tree Hill, S8E15, "Valentine's Day Is Over" • "You can dance with him." Source: Glee, S1E2, "Showmance" • "We'd appreciate if no one told him." Source: FRIENDS, S7E21, "The One With The Vows" • "Should I bring him his phone?" Source: This Is Us, S4E12, "A Hell of A Week, Part Two" **Unacceptable** • "He against leaned the wall." • "You can't him give it."

They/Them (Unspecified)	**Acceptable** • "Somebody left their hat in the classroom yesterday." • "A doctor gets to decide which patients they will see." • "The average person doesn't like it when they have to get up in the middle of the night." • "Anyone who goes down that path should know what they're getting into." • "When a customer comes in, ask them if they have a reservation." • "If you see anyone doing something wrong, let them know." **Unacceptable** • "That person over there is running, what's up with they?"