

SQUIB

Singular *they* and the syntactic representation of gender in English

Bronwyn M. Bjorkman

Queen's University, 99 University Ave, Kingston ON K7K, 1W4, CA
bronwyn.bjorkman@queensu.ca

Singular *they* enjoys a curious notoriety in popular discussions of English grammar. Despite this, and though its use with quantificational, non-specific, and genuinely epicene antecedents dates back at least to the 1400s (Balhorn 2004), it has been little discussed in formal linguistics. This squib suggests an analysis of this longstanding use of *they*, while also describing a more recent change in *they*'s distribution, whereby many speakers now accept it with singular, definite, and specific antecedents of known binary gender. I argue that the distribution of *they*, in both conservative and innovative varieties, has implications for our understanding of the syntactic representation of gender in English, the structure of bound variable pronouns, and the regulation of coreference.

Keywords: features; gender; pronouns; variable binding

1 Introduction

This paper addresses general issues of pronominal binding and coreference, though its empirical focus is comparatively narrow, being mainly concerned with the distribution of so-called singular *they* in Modern English, and the evidence that distribution provides for the syntactic representation of gender features in the language.

For a functional element, singular *they* enjoys a curious notoriety, particularly among non-linguists. Though sometimes discussed as though it were a twentieth century innovation, introduced due to feminist backlash against epicene *he*, in fact it has been used in contexts like those in (1), with quantificational, non-specific, and genuinely epicene antecedents, going back at least to the 1400s (Balhorn 2004). Bodine (1975) notes that prescriptive edicts against singular *they*, by contrast, date back only to the 1700s, and never successfully eradicated singular *they* from standard English usage.

- (1)
- a. Everyone should know their own phone number.
 - b. Could Janet or Thomas introduce {themselves/themself}?
 - c. (*Seeing an unidentified distant figure:*) They're waving at us.
 - d. (*After answering a phone call:*) They had the wrong number.

Theoretical work on the English pronominal system has largely overlooked the use of *they* in (1), though it has been described in sociolinguistic and some psycholinguistic studies. The focus of this paper, however, is not on this longstanding use of *they*, but instead on a more recent change in *they*'s distribution, which appears to have been overlooked even in descriptive work. This change is visible in contexts like those in (2), where some speakers

accept *they* even with an antecedent that is singular, definite, and specific, referring to an individual whose binary gender is known to both speaker and hearer.

- (2) a. %The professor_i said they_i cancelled the exam.
 b. %Our eldest child_i broke their_i leg.
 c. %I'll let my cousin introduce themselves.¹

Not only has this extension of *they* gone unreported, it also presents an additional puzzle, in that even speakers who accept singular definite specific *they* as in (2) generally do not accept sentences like those in (3), where the antecedent remains singular, definite, and specific, but is now a proper given name or gender-specific noun.²

- (3) a. *Janet_i said they_i cancelled the exam.
 b. *Thomas_i broke their_i leg.
 c. *I'll let my sister_i/father_i/aunt_i introduce themselves_i.

The contrast in acceptability between (2) and (3) has been made more striking by increased cultural visibility of nonbinary individuals—individuals who identify with neither masculine nor feminine gender, and so who cannot be referred to with either the singular masculine pronoun *he* or the singular feminine pronoun *she*. Many nonbinary individuals prefer singular *they* as a pronoun of reference, and *they* is sometimes said to have the advantage of being already part of English grammar, in contrast to fully innovative alternatives.³ It is thus surprising that even for innovative *they* users, the current status of *they* in English is apparently insufficient to render sentences like those in (3a–b) automatically acceptable, even for speakers who accept sentences like those in (2), and even if *Janet* and *Thomas* are known to name nonbinary individuals.

Internalized cultural assumptions that all humans can be sorted into binary gender categories likely form part of the obstacle to adopting *they* as a singular pronoun of reference—but the contrast between (2) and (3) reveals that there may also be a grammatical obstacle as well. This paper is not intended to argue against adopting *they* as a singular pronoun of reference for nonbinary individuals, but instead to clarify the grammatical status of *they* among contemporary English speakers, and so to clarify what changes are involved in extending *they* further to examples like (3a–b).

From a theoretical perspective, this paper argues that the distribution of *they* has implications for our understanding of both bound variable pronouns, and the role of gender in regulating pronominal coreference. In the first case, I argue that we need a syntactic account in which bound variables (optionally) instantiate fewer feature distinctions than their full referential counterparts. The distinction among pronoun types proposed by Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002) offers the right kind of distinction in this respect, while the widely adopted mechanism of Feature Transmission (Heim 2008) used in much semantic work to account for features on bound variables cannot account for the attested distribution of singular *they*.

¹ From this point forward in the paper, I consistently use the reflexive form *themselves* even as the non-plural reflexive of *they*, though it should be noted that some speakers prefer *themsel*. There is also independent variation with *theirself/selves*.

² For at least some speakers, *they* is possible with given names if the referent is of unknown gender, or of known nonbinary gender. But because the empirical focus of this paper is on the contrast between (2) and (3), and to avoid a proliferation of marks to indicate different distributions of grammaticality, in the remainder of this paper examples like those in (3) are marked as ungrammatical.

³ A number of gender non-specific pronouns have been formally proposed in various sources, including *e/em/eir* (Spivak 1990), *hu/hum/hus*, *ze/zir/zir*, *ze/hir/hir*, *thon/thon/thons*, and many others.

Accounting for the innovative use of *they* in (2), by contrast, requires an account of the status of gender features in English, and the role of these features in regulating pronominal coreference. I suggest that for innovative *they* users, gender has ceased to be a contrastive feature on pronouns, instead becoming a fully optional semantic feature. But even for these speakers, a subset of English nouns—proper names and gender-specific nouns—remain syntactically specified for gender features, and mechanisms of coreference resolution in discourse prevent *they* from referring back to any antecedent that was previously specified for gender.

The paper begins in sections 2–3 by briefly reviewing previous work on the distribution of singular *they* in English, and by describing in more detail the innovative use of *they* with singular definite specific antecedents. Sections 4–5 then turn to details of the proposed analysis.

2 A brief history of *they*

As noted above, *they* has been possible with quantificational, indefinite, and epicene antecedents throughout the Modern English period.⁴ The examples in (4), from Shakespeare, Swift, and Austen, are typical in this respect. Other historical examples involve definite antecedents that are nonetheless generic or non-specific (e.g. *the ideal candidate*), or involve an antecedent of unknown gender.

- (4)
- a. Shakespeare (*A Comedy of Errors*, 1623)
There's not a man I meet but doth salute me
As if I were **their** well-acquainted friend
 - b. Swift (*Polite Conversation*, 1738)
Every fool can do as **they're** bid.
 - c. Austen (*Pride and Prejudice*, 1813)
Both sisters were uncomfortable enough. Each felt for the other, and of course for **themselves**[.]

Though prescriptive objections to singular *they* may have reduced its use in much formal writing, especially in more linguistically conservative American sources, singular *they* has remained well attested in speech and less formal writing through to the present day (Bodine 1975; Matossian 1997; Baranowski 2002). Studies as far back as Bate (1978) have shown that singular *they* is used even by speakers who self-report that they do not use it at all, and a long record of psychological studies has shown that English speakers do not in fact interpret generic *he* as gender-neutral (Martyna 1978; MacKay & Fulkerson 1979; Gastil 1990; Foertsch & Gernsbacher 1997; Miller & James 2009).

Bodine (1975) provides the following examples of naturally-occurring singular *they* “collected by the author from the ordinary conversation of native speakers of American English holding bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees.” (139):

- (5)
- a. Did everyone say they missed you like mad yesterday?
 - b. Somebody left their sweater.
 - c. Not one single child raised their hand.
 - d. When you call on a student, it's better if you can remember their name.

Haegeman (1981)—the sole generative paper to comment on this use—gives a number of examples similar to those in (5), and directly states:

⁴ I use “quantificational” and “indefinite” in a slightly imprecise sense, including singular *WH*-items and free relatives, as well as nominals with determiners such as *every*, *no*, *each*, *both*, *any*, *no*, *some*, *each*, and indefinite *a*. I use “epicene” to refer to antecedents of unknown, indeterminate, or mixed gender.

“It is important to add that this use of *they/their* is restricted to generic nominals which are unmarked for sex: no instances of such a neutral singular *they* are to be found with (i) referentially specific nominals (*my teacher*); (ii) sex-specific nominals (*sister, mother, etc.*).” (Haegeman 1981: 237)

The examples from Shakespeare and Austen above already show that the second of these restrictions is too strong, as we see bound variable *they* with nominals like *man* or *sister*. We will return to the first restriction below, in discussing the innovative use of singular *they*.

Recent studies of pronoun use have continued to find an association between *they* and quantificational, indefinite, and epicene antecedents, even when not using this semantic terminology. Newman (1992), analyzing a corpus of spontaneous speech from nine television shows, suggests that singular *they* prefers “nonsolid” antecedents, where “solidity” is intended to combine referentiality, specificity, and definiteness. Newman states this as a preference rather than an absolute requirement, but none of the examples of potentially solid antecedents in the paper—all of which appear in (6)—involve truly definite and specific singular antecedents for *they*. In (6a) the antecedent *one* is nonspecific (though contextually referring only to women married to men); in (6b) it is a free relative *whoever is chosen*; in (6c) it is an nonspecific partitive *one of them* (in context, one of a set of male doctors).

- (6)
- a. If **one** is signing and thinking that **their** husband is representing that there isn’t any other relationships, there isn’t any problems there, and **they** do that as part of the consideration for the agreement, then, of course, you can test it and determine and develop the information that shows that that wasn’t so. And that **they** were being misrepresented.
 - b. I’m sure that **whoever is chosen**, probably **their** viewpoints will be at least reasonably known on those issues.
 - c. Just before the program, we looked up **one of them**, and **they**’re not in there.

Matossian (1997), perhaps the most comprehensive study of the colloquial use of singular *they* to date, adopts Newman’s distinction of the “solidity” of antecedents in her study of epicene pronouns in sociolinguistic interviews conducted in Philadelphia and Minneapolis. Again, though Matossian describes the association of *they* with nonsolid antecedents as a preference, and does not directly comment on whether *they* ever appears in her data with a specific definite antecedent of known binary gender, all of the examples given in the dissertation of potentially solid antecedents appear to be either indefinite or nonspecific. A selection of Matossian’s examples of singular *they* appear in (7), including the single example given of a singular definite antecedent for *they* (7a) (where the antecedent is nonspecific *the other*).

- (7)
- Matossian (1997: 164–166)
- a. Usually, if one [spouse] is Catholic, as long as **the other**’s Catholic, whichever nationality **they** are doesn’t matter, as long as **they**’re Catholic. I mean if **they**’re a good Catholic, you know.
 - b. [Q: What would happen if a girl asked a boy to dance?] **They**—some people would dance with **them**, but, like, others wouldn’t. [Q: How come?] It depends on the girl—who the girl is.
 - c. I consider [childbirth] the most important event of my life. An’ it’s some-thin’ I’ll never forget, an’ I’m glad I had the opportunity to have a child an’ to see everything. I can’t imagine **anyone** just being knocked out an’ wake up an’ have the baby in **their** arms. I think **they** miss so much.

Throughout the modern English period, then, it appears that *they* has been possible as a bound variable (with quantificational or indefinite antecedents), and with genuinely epicene antecedents, those of indeterminate, mixed, or unknown gender (as in the case of non-specific definites like *the ideal student*).⁵

Finally, note that we cannot account for this use of *they*—what we might call the *conservative distribution* of singular *they* in English—simply by proposing that gender or number features are optionally absent in these contexts, because *they* is restricted to singular *animate* antecedents. When the referent of a pronoun is inanimate, the pronoun *it* is obligatory.⁶

- (8) a. Every book lost its/*their cover.
 b. I like my local grocery store. I recommend it/*them to you.⁷
 c. (*Seeing a distant object, which cannot be identified:*) I think it's/*they're a tree.

Interestingly, this restriction to animates remains true even for speakers for whom *they* is possible with specific definite singular antecedents of known binary gender, what we might call the *innovative distribution* of singular *they*, to which we turn in the next section.

3 Innovative *they* with specific definite antecedents

Though previous descriptions have reported that *they* is not possible—or is strongly dispreferred—with singular definite antecedents, or as a referential pronoun when the gender of the antecedent is known to both the speaker and hearer, we already saw in the introduction that for some contemporary speakers *they* is fully grammatical in these contexts.

- (9) a. %I really love their costume. (*e.g. while pointing someone out*)
 b. %My friend left their sweater here.
 c. %Your research assistant said they'll be joining the call later.

The judgements reported in this paper on the innovative use of *they* are those of the author, confirmed in consultation with other native English speakers from the US and Canada, and via observation of the use of *they* in speech and writing over several years. Approximately 20 speakers have been consulted in detail regarding the judgements overall, and though not all of them accept the use of *they* illustrated in (9), all sentences marked with '%' have been systematically accepted by a subset of speakers consulted. While firm generalizations are not possible based on this small sample, it appears that younger speakers more often accept the innovative use of *they*, while older speakers are more likely to find it ungrammatical or pragmatically odd. Confirmation of this age-grading, or further conclusions regarding possible regional or social factors, must await a larger scale study.

If we were to inspect only the examples in (9), we might hypothesize that for innovative speakers gender specification has become optional even on pronouns, the sole context

⁵ Indeed, some English speakers not only allow *they* as a bound variable in quantificational contexts, but actually require it, even with antecedents like *every boy* or *no woman*. Determining whether this covaries with the innovative use of *they* discussed in section 3 is beyond the scope of this paper, but it has pedagogical implications, as students who are native English speakers may reject classic diagnostics involving complex binding judgements if they are presented with bound variable *he* or *she*. Further, it may be more accurate to say that epicene *they* is possible when the gender of the referent is not in the *common ground*: consider (1d), where *they* is used to refer to a caller who had the wrong number. Most speakers I have consulted regard the use of *he* or *she* to be mildly infelicitous in this context, even if the speaker did form some opinion about the gender of the caller on the basis of their voice. What appears to allow the use of *they* in this context is that the *addressee* does not know the gender of the referent.

⁶ More accurately, *it* is required for non-persons: both non-human animals and small children and infants can be optionally referred to as either *they* or *it* in the contexts in (8), despite being animate. I nonetheless refer to *it* as inanimate, following standard terminology.

⁷ *Them* is acceptable here, but only referring to a collective, i.e. “the people who run my local grocery store”.

where it remains morphologically reflected. As a consequence, the distinction between singular *she/he* and plural *they* would also be lost, bringing the third person in line with second person number-neutral *you*.

But this simple explanation could not explain the fact that there are speakers who produce examples like those in (9), and who judge them to be fully grammatical, but who neither produce nor judge grammatical examples like those in (10) (assuming that *Janet* and *Thomas* name individuals of known binary gender).⁸

- (10) a. *I just saw the lead actress_p, and I really love their_i costume.
 b. *Janet_i left their_i sweater here.
 c. *Thomas_i said they_i'll be joining the call later.

The examples in (9) and in (10) differ only in that the examples in (10) involve gender-specific nouns or proper given names. But if the examples in (9) were grammatical due to the loss of gender features in English, then we would expect *they* to be possible with *all* singular definite antecedents, including those in (10).

The contrast between (9) and (10) also cannot be attributed to the increased “solidity” of proper names, i.e. their referential specificity and definiteness when compared with other nouns, because innovative speakers do generally accept *they* with last names introduced by non-gender-specific titles. Some innovative *they* users also report that *they* improves with names that have both masculine and feminine associations, like *Chris* or *Alex*, with internet handles, even those that are gender-specific (but are nonetheless not traditional names).⁹

- (11) a. %I just saw Chris_p, and I really love their_i costume.
 b. %Professor Smith_i left their_i sweater here.
 c. %moongirl17_i said they_i'll be joining the chat later.

These names are as referentially “solid” as the names in (10); they differ in lacking the traditional gender associations of English given names. I suggest below in section 5 that though *they* is a pronoun not specified for gender (or for number), its extension into the space of definite specific pronouns reveals the vestiges of syntactically-represented gender in English, as well as the role of gender features in regulating pronominal coreference.

4 Accounting for bound variable and epicene *they*

I argue in this section that the conservative distribution of singular *they* reflects a contrastive three-way distinction among gender features ([MASC] v. [FEM] v. \emptyset), with its quantificational and indefinite uses arising because bound variable pronouns correspond to a smaller structure than do their referential counterparts (following e.g. Déchaine & Wiltschko 2002, 2015).

I assume a realizational view of the syntax-morphology interface, in which potentially underspecified morphological items compete to realize a fully specified syntactic representation. In this type of system, *they* emerges as the elsewhere realization for English

⁸ The judgements in (10b–c) become more complex if the names refer to individuals of known nonbinary gender—though it is striking that even many innovative *they* speakers have difficulty extending *they* to non-binary individuals, and go through a period of making errors in pronoun use despite efforts to avoid them. This suggests that using *they* in contexts like those in (10b–c) requires genuine grammatical adjustment even for innovative *they* users.

⁹ Though speakers do report a contrast between (10) and (11), these judgements are somewhat more variable than others reported in this paper. It is also possible that when presented as abstract examples, speakers treat the examples in (11) as involving referents of unknown gender. These potential confounds make this a potentially fruitful area for future large-scale studies of singular *they* in naturally-occurring discourse.

pronouns, occurring in the absence of any Φ -features that would trigger insertion of another pronoun. *They* cannot be specified for number, as it occurs in both singular and plural contexts.¹⁰ It cannot be specified for gender, because it is not gender-specific. And it cannot be specified for animacy, as it occurs as both the animate and inanimate plural.¹¹

The realization rules for third-person pronouns in English are as in (12), restricting ourselves to nominative forms for the sake of simplicity:¹²

- (12) a. [FEM] [SG] \leftrightarrow *she*
 b. [MASC] [SG] \leftrightarrow *he*
 c. [INANIMATE] [SG] \leftrightarrow *it*
 d. *elsewhere* \leftrightarrow *they*

Against this backdrop, consider the question of whether gender in English is contrastive. A syntactic feature [F] can be thought of as contrastive if the absence of that feature is semantically interpreted as \neg F. This has been widely used to allow greater underspecification of binary contrasts: a semantic distinction between, for example, singular and plural number thus does not require two features [SG] and [PL] (or [+SG] and $[-$ SG], etc.), but can instead be represented by a single feature (either [SG] or [PL]). That feature is either present or absent in the syntax, but its absence results in a positive semantic interpretation through the mechanism of contrast. A language like French, with a classic two-way contrast in gender, is naturally accounted for in these terms: feminine gender corresponds syntactically to a positively specified feature ([FEM]), while masculine is not $[-$ FEM] but instead corresponds to the absence of a gender feature, and thus masculine is also the default gender used in cases of gender mismatch and in epicene contexts.

We have already seen, however, that neither *he* nor *she* can be used in English in a gender-neutral or epicene context. This can be explained if neither masculine nor feminine is unspecified (featurally “unmarked”) in English, and if the features [MASC] and [FEM] are both contrastive: because conservative varieties require either *he* or *she* for singular definite specific antecedents of known gender, the absence of [MASC] on a pronoun must be interpreted as \neg MASC, and the absence of [FEM] as \neg FEM.

What if a singular pronoun bore neither of these gender features? Contrast would result in such a pronoun being interpreted as \neg MASC & \neg FEM (i.e. neither masculine nor feminine). This interpretation conflicts with the strong pragmatic assumption that animate individuals (especially humans) can be exhaustively categorized as either masculine or feminine. A singular pronoun with no gender features thus would not be interpreted as referring to an individual who is neither masculine nor feminine, but instead with an inference that the gender of the referent is unknown, nonspecific, or otherwise indeterminate.¹³ Here contrastive ternary gender ([MASC] v. [FEM] v. \emptyset) accounts for epicene uses

¹⁰ Note that even singular uses of *they* fail to trigger third person singular agreement forms on the finite verb (*is, was, has, or -s*), instead triggering the default “plural” forms (*are, were, -\emptyset*).

¹¹ Whether *they* is also underspecified for person depends on the representation of third person. While there is a long tradition arguing that third person corresponds to the absence of any more specific person features (represented in recent work by Anagnostopoulou 2003; Béjar & Rezac 2003; Harley & Ritter 2002, among many others), authors such as Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (2006) and Nevins (2007) have argued that third person does have some positive feature specification.

¹² These realization rules could be simplified if plural pronouns are never specified as [MASC], [FEM], or [INANIMATE], on the grounds that there are no gender or animacy distinctions in the English plural—in other words, that gender and animacy features are representationally dependent on a [SG] feature. This option is pursued, for example, in the discussion of singular *they* in Cowper & Konnolly (2017). If plural pronouns are simply never specified for gender or animacy, then the feature [SG] in the realization rules in (12) would be redundant, and could thus be eliminated.

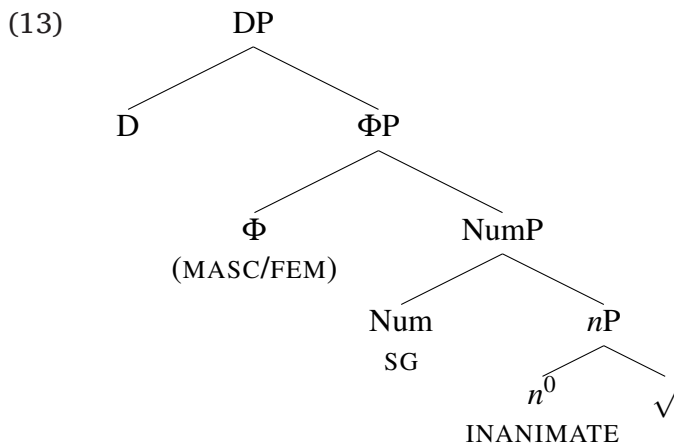
¹³ This system of contrastive ternary gender could be seen as a remnant of the masculine/feminine/neuter grammatical gender system of Old English, still preserved in other Germanic languages. Once nouns lost

of *they* in the same way that contrastive binary gender (most often [FEM] vs. \emptyset) accounts for epicene uses of masculine singular pronouns in languages such as French.

The above account does not yet address the use of *they* with quantificational antecedents: if gender is contrastive, we might expect bound variable pronouns to be obligatorily marked for gender, at least when their domain is restricted to either masculine or feminine entities. And yet, contrary to this expectation, we have already seen that even in its conservative distribution, bound variable *they* occurs with gender-specific antecedents, in the examples from Shakespeare and Austen in (4).

The use of *they* with antecedents like *no man* or *both sisters* suggests that gender features are (perhaps optionally) absent on bound variables. Rather than stipulating this optionality, however, we can explain it in terms of a structural difference between bound variables and referential pronouns. Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002) propose that pronouns fall into at least three classes, distinguished by their semantics and morphosyntax, and further that these three classes correspond to different sizes of syntactic projection: DP pronouns are interpreted as definite referring expressions, Φ P pronouns as variables, and NP pronouns as predicates.

Déchaine & Wiltschko (2015) argue directly that English pronouns can realize either DP structures (in their referential use) or Φ P structures (as bound variables). As the name suggests, Φ P pronouns include a projection associated with Φ -features, but lack a higher DP layer. The distribution of *they* as a variable can be accounted for with a minimally richer structure than Déchaine & Wiltschko propose, with one additional head in the Φ P domain. Following work such as Steriopolo & Wiltschko (2010), I assume here that gender on English pronouns is located high in the nominal spine—that it corresponds to what they call *discourse gender*, i.e. gender that is determined by properties of the discourse referent.¹⁴ While for Steriopolo & Wiltschko discourse gender is located on D, I suggest that in English it occurs lower, within the Φ P domain though nonetheless higher than the heads associated with number (Num) and animacy (n^0), neither of which is ever optional on bound variables.¹⁵



arbitrary grammatical gender features, a cultural or pragmatic assumptions that all persons are either male or female would eliminate the previously available category of animate neuters, leaving genuinely epicene antecedents to instead be realized by an elsewhere form.

¹⁴ This is higher than the position typically assumed for grammatical or semantic gender, most commonly associated with the root itself or with n^0 . See Kramer (2016) for an overview of arguments in favour of a low position for grammatical gender, across a number of languages.

¹⁵ To the extent that some speakers disprefer *he* or *she* as bound variables, it might be possible to locate gender on English pronouns on D. This would eliminate the need for a projection Φ P in (13), which treads quite close to a dedicated Gender Phrase. Such a projection has been proposed by authors such as Picallo (1991), but is argued against by Kramer (2015, 2016), among others.

The crucial assumption here is that gender features in English ([MASC] and [FEM]) are located on a higher head than either number or animacy. Bound variable pronouns can correspond either to a full Φ P, in which case they will be specified for gender, number, and animacy, or to NumP alone, in which case they will lack any gender specification.

I assume that referential pronouns always correspond to the full DP structure, and so are obligatorily specified for gender (except in the above-noted cases, where contrastive non-specification of gender gives rise to an epicene interpretation). This departs from Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002), who assume that any given pronoun in a language will reliably correspond to DP or Φ P or NP. The structural variability of individual pronouns is predicted on a realizational approach to morphology, however, and so represents a modest extension of their proposal.

This proposal departs significantly from the standard treatment of features on bound variables in the literature, via the mechanism of Feature Transmission proposed by Irene Heim (detailed, for example, in Heim 2008). Heim notes that person and number features appear to be formally uninterpreted on bound pronouns, on the sloppy identity reading in examples such as (14):

(14) Only I love my mother. (Nobody else loves *their* mother.)

Feature Transmission addresses this issue by proposing that the Φ -features of bound variables (e.g. [1SG] features on *my*) are morphosyntactically copied from the binder to the variable, but totally absent on the LF branch, and thus without semantic effect.

Feature Transmission has a number of drawbacks as a morphosyntactic mechanism. In particular, instances of variable binding across finite clause boundaries would require feature copying in violation of syntactic locality conditions—but it also faces a serious empirical challenge in the distribution of bound variable *they*. To account for the fact that *they* alternates with both *he* and *she* as a bound variable in English, we might be tempted to suggest that Feature Transmission is simply optional, and that in its absence we find the elsewhere pronoun *they*. What this would not account for is the fact that *it* does not alternate with *they*—and neither does *my* in examples like (14). For this reason, Feature Transmission cannot account for the distribution of *they* as a bound variable—and also cannot account for its occurrence as a referential pronoun, either with epicene antecedents or in the innovative distribution.

5 Accounting for singular specific definite *they*

While the use of *they* as a bound variable and epicene pronoun is long standing, its extension to specific definite contexts appears to be a recent innovation. Any account of the grammar of innovative *they* users must explain how *they* can refer to specific individuals of known binary gender, while nonetheless also explaining why it remains impossible when its antecedent has been introduced by a gender-specific noun or proper name.

Consider again the examples in (15), repeated from (9) but now showing the variation between *they* and *he* or *she*. In these examples the referent of *they* is animate, singular, both definite and specific, and of known binary gender.

- (15) a. I really love {her/%their} costume. (e.g. *while pointing someone out*)
 b. My friend left {his/%their} sweater here.
 c. Your research assistant said {she'd/%they'll} be joining the call later.

For speakers with the conservative distribution of *they*, for whom *they* is uniformly unacceptable in (15), gender is grammatically obligatory on referential pronouns, in the sense that it must be expressed whenever the gender of the referent is known.

For speakers with the innovative distribution of *they*, by contrast, specifying gender on referential pronouns is possible (and often pragmatically preferred) but evidently grammatically optional. Why then do innovative *they* speakers pattern with conservative speakers in requiring *he* or *she* in examples like those in (10), repeated in (16)?

- (16) a. *I just saw the lead actress_i, and I really love their_i costume.
 b. *Janet_i left their_i sweater here.
 c. *Thomas_i said they_i'll be joining the call later.

The simple fact that innovative speakers can use *they* for referents of known binary gender, interchangeably with *he* or *she*, is sufficient to demonstrate that for these speakers gender is no longer contrastive on pronouns: for such speakers the absence of gender does not convey that gender is unknown or indeterminate (though it is compatible with those interpretations). Following Wiltschko (2008), I refer to this type of semantically interpretable yet optionally specified feature as an *adjunct* feature, notated as $\langle f \rangle$. For speakers with the innovative distribution of *they*, then, the contrastive features [MASC] and [FEM] have been replaced (at least on pronouns) by the optional and non-contrastive features $\langle masc \rangle$ and $\langle fem \rangle$. The realization rules for pronouns remain the same, however, so that *he* and *she* surface whenever these optional features are present.

The non-contrastive status of gender features does not explain why *they* cannot refer back to a singular gender-specific noun or proper name in (16), however. To account for this, I suggest that though English lacks arbitrary grammatical gender, nouns like *actress* and given names like *Janet* and *Thomas* are nonetheless syntactically associated with gender features. The restriction of nouns like *actress* to feminine reference is thus not a purely semantic fact, but instead reflects the presence of a syntactic gender feature.¹⁶ Nouns associated with gender features include gender-specific nouns, including kinship terms (*boy, girl, man, woman, nephew, niece, father, mother, etc.*), some names of professions (*actress, waitress, stewardess, etc.*), and proper given names.¹⁷

Associating these nouns with gender features is not in itself enough to account for their incompatibility with *they*, however: we might expect that because *they* is underspecified, it could freely occur as a default pronoun regardless of the features of its antecedent. To rule out examples like those in (16), we need to ensure that pronouns are never specified for *fewer* features than their antecedents: if a pronoun refers back to an individual introduced by a noun like *actress*, which bears a feminine gender feature, the pronoun

¹⁶ For conservative speakers, these would remain the contrastive features [FEM] and [MASC], but for innovative speakers we can ask whether gender on nouns and names, like gender on pronouns, has become an adjunct feature. In favour of this possibility, we have already seen that nouns like *friend* can be referred back to by singular *they* without any implication that the gender of the friend is unknown. This suggests that for innovative speakers gender cannot be contrastive on gender-non-specific nouns like *friend*, and so given the logic of contrast it is not expected to be contrastive on any other nouns.

Simply because a feature is not contrastive, however, does not mean that it is not obligatory on some nouns. Kramer (2015) implements arbitrary lexical gender in terms of selectional requirements: in the case of a noun like *actress* the suffix *-ess* itself would realize a $\langle fem \rangle$ n^0 head; other gender-specific nominals, like *mother* or *nephew*, may be selected by a similar (but unpronounced) n^0 head, or may realize a root that is directly specified for a gender feature (though this requires that formal features can occur on roots). This is a different structural position for gender than was assumed above for pronouns; similarly, Steriopolo & Wiltschko (2010) locate the gender of nouns such as *actress* or *mother*, which they refer to as *semantic gender* (determined by properties of the nominal itself), on the root itself, while the *discourse gender* features of pronouns (determined by properties of the discourse referent) occur higher.

¹⁷ I list feminine profession terms because it is not clear whether the non-feminine variants of these nouns—e.g. *actor*—imply a masculine referent. In some cases the previously-masculine term has been extended to cover all members of a profession, but in other cases terms like *steward* do seem to be restricted to men. It is interesting that in some domains a novel gender-neutral term has been adopted (e.g. *server* in place of *waiter/waitress*) perhaps suggesting that the previous “neutral” (i.e. non-feminine) term had a masculine association for many speakers.

must similarly bear a feminine feature, and be realized as *she*. This feature matching requirement cannot be attributed to a syntactic mechanism such as Agree, moreover, because the inability of *they* to refer back to gender-specific antecedents also holds across clauses, as in (16a).

Hence the second part of the explanation, which is that coreference (as opposed to binding) is subject to a dynamic condition on feature matching: referential pronouns can only be interpreted as referring to a previously-introduced referent if they bear a superset of the features that have already been associated with that referent in a discourse. In other words, a pronoun can add to the linguistic features associated with a referent, but it cannot underspecify them.

Consider the case where a referent is introduced with a noun phrase like *my friend*, as in (15b). For innovative *they* users, gender features are syntactically optional, and so the new discourse referent established by *my friend* has no gender information associated with it. It can therefore be referred back to by a pronoun that similarly lacks any gender feature (*they*)—or by *he* or *she*, either of which would then introduce gender information (and so prevent subsequent reversion to gender-non-specific *they*).

By contrast, if a referent is introduced by a gender specific noun like *actress*, or by a proper name such as *Janet*, then it is immediately associated with the gender feature borne by those nominals, here $\langle fem \rangle$. Here subsequent reference to the same entity would require the pronoun *she*, even for innovative *they* users: *they* is excluded because it does not maximally match the formal features previously associated with the referent in the discourse.

For conservative *they* users, by contrast, all referential nouns must be associated with gender features (when the gender of the referent is known), because for these speakers gender features remain contrastive, even when they are not morphologically expressed. For these speakers *they* will always fail to maximally match the features of any specific referent of known gender, and so will never be felicitously used in examples like (15).

6 Coda: *they* as a nonbinary pronoun of reference

The goal of this paper has been to draw attention to the complexities of singular *they* in modern English, both in its long-standing use as a bound variable and epicene pronoun, and in its apparent recent extension to use with definite and specific antecedents.

Returning to the difficulty that many speakers have in accommodating *they* as a pronoun of reference for nonbinary individuals, I am proposing that this arises not only from pragmatic or cultural assumptions about the binarity of gender, but also from a grammatical property of given names in English. What is necessary in order to adopt *they* as a singular pronoun of reference, on this account, is to unlearn the generalization that given names are uniformly syntactically associated with gender features.

Abbreviations

FEM = feminine, MASC = masculine, PL = plural, SG = singular

Acknowledgements

The ideas presented here have benefitted from conversations with many people over several years, both linguists and people outside the field. Special thanks are due to Elizabeth Cowper, Daniel Currie Hall, and Lex Konnelly, as well as to participants in the Linguistics Research Group at Queen's University. Thanks also to three anonymous reviewers, whose comments were helpful in improving the final version of the paper.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Alexiadou, Artemis & Elena Anagnostopoulou. 2006. From hierarchies to features. In Cedric Boeckx (ed.), *Agreement systems* (Linguistik Aktuell/Linguistics Today 92), 41–62. Amsterdam: Benjamins. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/la.92.05ale>
- Anagnostopoulou, Elena. 2003. *The syntax of ditransitives: Evidence from clitics* (Studies in Generative Grammar 54). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Balhorn, Mark. 2004. The rise of epicene *they*. *Journal of English Linguistics* 32(2). 79–104. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0075424204265824>
- Baranowski, Maciej. 2002. Current usage of the epicene pronoun in written English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 6(3). 378–397. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9481.00193>
- Bate, Barbara. 1978. Nonsexist language use in transition. *Journal of Communication* 28(1). 139–149. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1978.tb01577.x>
- Béjar, Susana & Milan Rezac. 2003. Person licensing and the derivation of PCC effects. In Ana-Teresa Pérez-Leroux & Yves Roberge (eds.), *Romance linguistics: Theory and acquisition* (Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 244), 49–62. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.244.07bej>
- Bodine, Ann. 1975. Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: Singular ‘they’, sexindefinite ‘he’, and ‘he or she’. *Language in Society* 4(02). 129–146. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500004607>
- Cowper, Elizabeth & Lex Konnelly. 2017. The future is *they*: The morphosyntax of an English epicene pronoun. Ms. University of Toronto.
- Déchine, Rose-Marie & Martina Wiltschko. 2002. Decomposing pronouns. *Linguistic Inquiry* 33(3). 409–442. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1162/002438902760168554>
- Déchine, Rose-Marie & Martina Wiltschko. 2015. When and why can 1st and 2nd person pronouns be bound variables? In Patrick Grosz, Pritty Patel-Grosz & Igor Yanovich (eds.), *NELS 40: Proceedings of the semantics workshop on pronouns*. Amherst, MA: GLSA.
- Foertsch, Julie & Morton Ann Gernsbacher. 1997. In search of gender neutrality: Is singular *they* a cognitively efficient substitute for generic *he*? *Psychological Science* 8(2). 106–111. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1997.tb00691.x>
- Gastil, John. 1990. Generic pronouns and sexist language: The oxymoronic character of masculine generics. *Sex roles* 23(11–12). 629–643. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00289252>
- Haegeman, Liliane. 1981. Singular *they*: A recent development? *Moderna Sprak* 75(3). 235–38.
- Harley, Heidi & Elizabeth Ritter. 2002. Person and number in pronouns: A feature-geometric analysis. *Language* 78(3). 482–526. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2002.0158>
- Heim, Irene. 2008. Features on bound pronouns. In David Adger, Daniel Harbour & Susana Béjar (eds.), *Phi theory: Phi features across modules* (Oxford Studies in Theoretical Linguistics), 35–56. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Kramer, Ruth. 2015. *The morphosyntax of gender* (Oxford Studies in Theoretical Linguistics). Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199679935.001.0001>
- Kramer, Ruth. 2016. The location of gender features in the syntax. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 10(11). 661–677. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12226>
- MacKay, Donald G. & David C. Fulkerson. 1979. On the comprehension and production of pronouns. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 18(6). 661–673. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371\(79\)90369-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371(79)90369-4)
- Martyna, Wendy. 1978. What does ‘he’ mean? *Journal of Communication* 28(1). 131–138. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1978.tb01576.x>

- Matossian, Lou Ann. 1997. *Buglars, babysitters, and persons: A sociolinguistic study of generic pronoun usage in Philadelphia and Minneapolis*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania dissertation.
- Miller, Megan M. & Lori E. James. 2009. Is the generic pronoun *he* still comprehended as excluding women? *The American Journal of Psychology* 122(4). 483–496.
- Nevins, Andrew. 2007. The representation of third person and its consequences for person-case effects. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 25(2). 273–313. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11049-006-9017-2>
- Newman, Michael. 1992. Pronominal disagreements: The stubborn problem of singular epicene antecedents. *Language in Society* 21(03). 447–475. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500015529>
- Picallo, M. Carme. 1991. Nominals and nominalizations in Catalan. *Probus* 3(3). 279–316. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/prbs.1991.3.3.279>
- Spivak, Michael. 1990. *The joy of TEX: A gourmet guide to typesetting with the AMS-TEX macro package*. American Mathematical Society.
- Steriopolo, Olga & Martina Wiltschko. 2010. Distributed gender hypothesis. In Gerhild Zybatow, Philip Dudchuk, Serge Minor & Ekaterina Pshehotskaya (eds.), *Formal studies in Slavic linguistics: Proceedings of the formal description of slavic languages* 7(5). 155–172. Peter Lang.
- Wiltschko, Martina. 2008. The syntax of non-inflectional plural marking. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 26(3). 639–694. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11049-008-9046-0>

How to cite this article: Bjorkman, Bronwyn M. 2017. Singular *they* and the syntactic representation of gender in English. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 2(1): 80.1–13, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.374>

Submitted: 05 March 2017 **Accepted:** 12 July 2017 **Published:** 06 September 2017

Copyright: © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Glossa: a journal of general linguistics is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

