From *Heo* to *Zir*:

A History of Gender Expression in the English Language

Brodie Robinson

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2018

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the
Honors Program of Liberty University.

_____
Carl Curtis, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

_____
Don Fowler, Th.D.
Committee Member

_____
Nicholas Olson, M.A.
Committee Member

_____
Tess R. Stockslager, Ph.D.
Assistant Honors Director

_____
Date

Abstract

With the growing presence of the LGBTQ+ community on the global stage, the matter of gender has been rushed to the forefront of the public consciousness. News outlets have hotly debated the topic of gender expression, a topic which has motivated mass demonstrations and acts of violence, and this has promoted a linguistic conversation at the international level.

This thesis is intended to provide the historical context for the contemporary debate on gender expression in the English language, and explores both the grammatical background (the Indo-European origins of linguistic gender, the development of the modern pronoun system, etc.) and the conceptual background (the Greek origins of "gender" as they differ from modern usage).

From *Heo* to *Zir*:

A History of Gender Expression in the English Language

Introduction

The LGBTQ+ community is everywhere. Though those who identify as homosexual, transgender, or genderqueer continue to constitute a small portion of the United States population, and an even smaller portion of the world at large, the vocal minority has successfully brought its concerns to the forefront of cross-cultural global dialogue. News outlets championed the cause of those suffering under Russia's anti-LGBTQ+ regime; countries such as Canada have begun to add pro-LGBTQ+f clauses to their human rights protections; and, recently, Coca-Cola employed the use of a gender-neutral pronoun in an ad aired during Super Bowl LII.

This last example is particularly noteworthy, as it indicates not only a *social* shift, but a *linguistic* shift as well. For much of human history, human gender has been understood as binary; there are females, and there are males. But now, whether one agrees with the concept or not, the LGBTQ+ community has posited a radical shift from the historical position: gender is not binary, but rather exists on a spectrum, with extreme masculinity on one end, and extreme femininity on the other. This presents a difficulty for the English language, which has inherited a set of pronouns that, though it is divided between animacy and gender, lacks a pronoun that conveys both human animacy and neutral gender. Modern speakers of English are thus faced with a conundrum: how is one to express the multiplicity or negation of gender in a referent when communicating with pronouns? The analysis of and answer to such a question is beyond the scope of this

work. Yet, in ascertaining an informed conclusion to the question, it is necessary that one should have a full understanding of the circumstances that have given rise to said question.

An investigation into the history of gender expression within the English language yields a rather complex linguistic history, with the collapsing of entire grammatical systems and the recurring prescriptive attempts to refine the collapse's remains. Old English's *grammatical gender* system, wherein words bore inflectional endings to coincide with agreement targets, gave way to Modern English's *natural gender* system, in which the few preserved inflections agree with the gender of a given noun's referent, even if it disagrees with the noun's former grammatical gendering. The remainder of the history of English's gender system merely consists of authors' attempts to rectify grammatically ambiguous situations, such as instances where the gender is unclear (e.g., "a person") or where a singular word communicates a plural idea (e.g., "everyone"). Prior to the prominence of the transgender community, these difficult situations were a purely grammatical dilemma—the debate over these situations played out among academics and editors of style guides; however, with the present spotlight on individuals with nonbinary gender identification, this formerly grammatical question has become a matter of political import.

Yet, before dealing with English proper, it will be necessary to examine two separate historical threads that predate the written English record: the history of grammatical gender as a linguistic concept, and the actual development and history of grammatical gender in language.

Greeks and Grammar: The Origin of Gender as a Concept

One of the earliest written references to the concept of gender is found in

Aristotle's *Rhetoric*:

τέταρτον, ὡς Πρωταγόρας τὰ γένη τῶν ὀνομάτων διῄρει, ἄρρενα καὶ θήλεα καὶ

σκεύη: δεῖ γὰρ ἀποδιδόναι καὶ ταῦτα ὀρθῶς: (Aristotle)

(The fourth rule consists in keeping the genders distinct—masculine, feminine,

and neuter, as laid down by Protagoras; these also must be properly introduced.)

Rhetoric was written in the fourth century B.C., and references an even earlier

philosopher as the source of linguistic gender: Protagoras. Protagoras himself was the

first of a group that would later be called *sophists*, professional teachers for hire who

inculcated the basic tenets of philosophy and rhetoric into the minds of young statesmen.

Despite his having a great influence, being cited by both Aristotle and Plato, none of

Protagoras' works have survived into the modern era; thus, what little that can be

recovered of his thought comes secondhand. This results in the difficult situation of

interpreting Protagoras' observations on language without the greater contextual schema

of his philosophy.

For instance, at first glance, the above passage from *Rhetoric* appears to denote

what one would expect: there are three grammatical genders ("*γένη*"), the masculine

("*ἄρρενα*"), the feminine ("*θήλεα*"), and the neuter ("*σκεύη*"). The terms *ἄρρενα* and

θήλεα are easy enough to understand; they frequently appear in opposition with each

other, and are the same words rendered in the Septuagint's translation of Genesis 1:27:

"*male* and *female* he created them." But what of *σκεύη*? J. H. Freese, whose translation of

the passage is provided above, includes a footnote stating that the word may better be rendered as "'inanimate things,' the classification probably being male, female, and inanimate, [and] not the grammatical one of masculine, feminine, and neuter" (Freese). Since Greek's grammatical gender system makes no distinction between animate and inanimate, this distinction is probably more notional than grammatical. And furthermore, what is meant by *γένη*? Though *γένη* is a cognate with Latin *genus*, the etymological root of English *gender*, modern readers should be careful, and ensure that they do not read modern meanings into an ancient text. *Γένη* only denotes a "type," "kind," or "race," and definitely does not bear the same meaning that modern *gender* bears today.

Fortunately, this brief excerpt from *Rhetoric* is not the only instance wherein Aristotle discusses gender. In his *Poetics*, he gives a more thorough treatment of the subject, though the Protagorean roots are not mentioned. "Of the nouns themselves," he says, "some are masculine, some feminine, and some neuter. Masculine are all that end in N and P and Σ […] Feminine are all that end in those of the vowels that are always long, [and] the neuters end in [I and Y, as well as] in N and Σ" (*Poetics* 1458). While his reasoning includes vast generalizations with numerous exceptions, this categorizing of nouns based on their formal qualities (here, their terminal phonemes), rather than their referents, indicates that, even if Protagoras himself did not view the noun classes as being grammatically-rooted, by the time of Aristotle's writing *Poetics*, gender was understood as a grammatical concept.

But the question remains as to why Protagoras labelled these grammatical categories with semantically-gendered terms, or, if Protagoras *did* view these as semantic

categories, why Aristotle persisted in using the erroneous semantic labels. The answer is found in the *semi-semantic* nature of Greek's gender system. In a semi-semantic grammatical gender system, nouns with male referents tend to bear a masculine gender, while nouns with feminine referents tend to bear a feminine gender; however, many words with sexless or inanimate referents also bear a masculine or feminine gender. Thus, the personal referents bearing sex-based gender are exceptions in a larger system where gender is non-semantic (Foundalis 3). For example, the Greek word ἄρσεν, which means "man," is grammatically masculine, but so is λογος, "word." Given the high frequency with which gendered entities are referenced in the discussion of human affairs, it is only natural that Protagoras and Aristotle noticed the correlation between referent and grammatical gender.

The progression of western civilization has created a clear tradition of grammatical thought which, finding its inception in Ancient Greece, was passed down to classical Rome and to modern linguistic scholars. Greek linguistic thought became codified in the first century B.C., when the first grammar books were written. The preeminent example of this was *The Art of Grammar*, written by Dionysius Thrax. While Dionysius' goal was to restore the Greek language to the poetic heights of Homer, he entrenched himself in the linguistic tradition of Protagoras, including a brief passage on the three potential genders of nouns (Rodby and Winterowd 5). Observing the utility of Dionysius' grammar, the Romans adopted and adapted the Greek grammar to Latin, which also bore a three-gender grammatical system. The territorial dominance of Rome led to a cultural dominance as well, and the continued use of Latin as an administrative

and ecclesiastical *lingua franca* resulted in the widespread use of the works of Roman

grammarians well into the Middle Ages, where an "education," to a large extent, simply

meant learning Latin grammar. By the time Englishmen sought to transcribe the grammar

of their own vernacular, they had a well-established tradition to borrow from, a tradition

that had continued to employ a three-part distinction in gender, and had utilized semantic

terms to discuss that distinction.

Conjecture and Comparative Linguistics: The Origins of Grammatical Gender

Both the semi-semantic grammatical gender system of Aristotle's Greek and the

natural gender system of modern English find their origin in the Proto-Indo-European

language, the hypothetical parent of such diverse languages as Hindi-Urdu, Latin, Hittite,

and Punjabi. Because of Proto-Indo-European's predating the inception of writing,

scholars do not know what the language sounded like; however, this has not stopped

historical linguists from attempting to reconstruct the language through comparative

linguistics. By observing the changes that languages gradually undergo over time, and by

comparing and contrasting the oldest representatives of the Indo-European language

group, linguists have been able to make well-educated guesses at the grammar, syntax,

and vocabulary of Proto-Indo-European.

It is believed that the Indo-European language had a gender system, and possibly

one that was semantically based; however, this gender system was not one based in a

masculine-feminine-neuter divide, but was rather based in a division between animate

and inanimate alone. Words in such a system would bear particular inflections depending

on whether the agreement target's referent was human. This animacy distinction was *only*

between humans and non-humans; though many languages, such as Navajo, bear a multiplicity of animacy categories, Proto-Indo-European only had two. If a referent was human, then a noun would take an animate inflection; if not, it would take an inanimate inflection.

But, one may ask, where did this animate-inanimate gender system come from? To attempt to answer that question means reaching the edge of what can feasibly be reconstructed. The most widespread conjecture is that the ancestor to Proto-Indo-European had demonstrative pronouns correlating with animate and inanimate objects, and that the repetitive use of these pronouns led to their becoming grammaticalized as affixes.

The matter of how the animate-inanimate bipartite system gave rise to the tripartite division of masculine, feminine, and neuter is more within the realm of knowledge, but still lacks a singular scholarly consensus. The point of difficulty is discerning when and how the feminine gender developed, as most linguists see continuity between the animate and the masculine and between the inanimate and the neuter. David J. Peterson, a language-expert most notable for his work on the naturalistic, constructed languages of *Game of Thrones*, stated that "[s]ex-based gender systems tend to arise from animal terminology" (116). In a similar vein, linguists in the first half of the twentieth century developed the position that the feminine gender arose during the domestication of livestock. This occurred due to the differences between the specific (singular) and the general (plural). In herding livestock, there tend to be numerous females, with only one or two males. To the herder or breeder, it is important to distinguish between the two

sexes. While one could intentionally coin new sexed words to make the necessary distinction—English does this with "bull" and "cow"—it appears that the Indo-Europeans subconsciously began to correlate the plural with the feminine, due to the numerous females, and the singular with the male, due to the presence of a lone bull or stallion. Thus, through common usage among shepherds and horse-wranglers, singular endings began to be used for masculine livestock, while the generic, plural endings were employed for the feminine. These could have then been applied through analogy to other entities, such as male and female humans.

After the initial adoption of gender inflections, said inflections persisted for multiple reasons. For one, gender agreement provided a means of redundancy; it is much easier to determine an error in speech when there is an error in agreement. On a similar note, grammatical gender inflections allowed for more expedient referent tracking; if both a pronoun and its targeted noun take gender markings, then a listener can more accurately determine the anaphoric reference of multiple pronouns in a single passage of discourse.

Yet these reasons for the persistence of gender should not be confused as motivations for the adoption of gender. Like most linguistic shifts, the adoption of gender inflections most likely occurred subconsciously over the span of multiple generations. Simple demonstratives for animate and inanimate gave way to inflected gender endings, and the continued application and eventual misapplication of those endings allowed them to bear meanings foreign to those originally intended, giving rise to the tripartite model of gender classification so ubiquitous amongst the Indo-European language family.

Concerning "Male" Women: Old English and the Collapse of Grammatical Gender

By the time English appears in the written record, beginning the history of English proper, thousands of years have passed, radically changing the language from its Indo-European roots. When the first words were written in the English tongue, English bore little resemblance to its mother language; yet, despite this, it still managed to preserve its Indo-European grammatical gender system. Old English adjectives, demonstratives, and personal pronouns each took endings (or in some cases, entirely different and distinct forms) based on the grammatical gender inherent in a word. For those familiar with modern Romance languages, the concept is the same. Just as a book in Spanish ("*libro*") is always "masculine," causing any words modifying it to take an *-o* ending, so too did an Old English child ("*cild*") force a neuter agreement.

Yet Old English's grammatical gender system, from its first appearance in the written record, was in a much more precarious position than its Romance counterparts. First and foremost, English was a Low West Germanic language, meaning that, by its very nature, it was prone to the loss of inflection, and thus the loss of grammatical gender. This is because English, in its earliest forms, "show[ed] the adoption of a strong stress accent on the first syllable of the root of most words, a feature of great importance in all the Germanic languages" (Baugh and Cable 47). Since the initial syllable of a word was stressed, emphasis began to taper off by the end of words. This resulted in the gradual decay of inflectional endings, first through the reduction of final vowels to a *schwa* (the final vowel in the word *China*), and then later through the loss of many final inflectional consonants (Curzan 60).

Another factor predisposing English to the loss of grammatical gender was the nature of Old English's gender agreement. Unlike its Latinate counterparts, the "gender of nouns in Old English was not so generally indicated by the declension." That is to say, unlike Spanish *libro*, with its clear gender-marker in the final *-o*, Old English nouns did not have clear formal cues as to what gender nouns took. *Wifmann* ("woman"), *engel*, ("angel"), and *nama* ("name") are all grammatically masculine, but nothing in their forms or referents indicates this. Rather, gender was revealed "by the concord of the strong adjective and the demonstratives. These by their distinctive endings generally showed, at least in the singular, whether a noun was masculine, feminine, or neuter" (Baugh and Cable 161).

Language functions on the premise of distinction. The only reason one knows the difference between *but* and *putt* is because of the distinction of voicing between the initial *b* and *p*; the syntactic functions of nouns are determined in modern English through the distinct ordering of words. It is because of this driving factor of distinction that, if two declensions, through sound shift, eventually become indistinct, they will be dropped. Once the inflections of the gender-distinguishing demonstratives and adjectives were reduced to a single, indistinguishable schwa, it was only a matter of time before English speakers ceased to pronounce that schwa as well.

Yet, the decay of grammatical gender did not necessarily demand a shift to natural gender; after all, the masculine and feminine personal pronouns *he* and *heo* had almost become indistinct by the time the demonstratives' and adjectives' decay to the schwa had been completed. English may have just as easily returned to its Proto-Indo-European

roots and adopted an animate-inanimate gender distinction in the singular pronouns. What instigated the shift to a natural gender system?

It is possible that the answer may be found in the semi-semantic nature of Old English's gender system. Like the aforementioned Greek of Aristotle, Old English pronouns, though intended to agree through grammar, did have an understood notional meaning. Though many might assume, since the Old English shift from grammatical to natural gender caused pronouns to carry semantic information, that the opposite of this shift must *also* be true, that prior to the natural gender system, the pronouns carried no semantic value at all, this is not the case (Curzan 60). This reality can be seen through the minority of personal nouns in Old English wherein the grammatical gender and natural gender do not coincide. As Curzan notes, "for almost all general terms for human beings in Old English, the grammatical gender of the noun and the 'natural gender' (or socially constructed gender) of the referent correspond" (61); however, there were many nouns with widespread usage that did not have this correspondence, and for this "set of well-known exceptions to [the] rule of gender correspondence […] natural gender almost always prevails in the anaphoric pronouns" (62). In her corpus study of Old English texts, Curzan found that the words *wif* ("*woman*;" neuter) and *wifmann* ("*woman*;" masculine), are almost always referred to with feminine pronouns. *Wifmann* was referenced with feminine anaphora 16 out of 18 times, while *wif* was referenced 116 out of 118 times. This phenomenon still occurred even when masculine and neuter modifiers were present in the antecedent noun phrase. Every time that the neuter *mægden* ("*maiden*") was referenced with an anaphoric pronoun (which totals to 25 times), the pronoun was

feminine, despite the fact that nine of the noun phrases included non-feminine forms (63).

Thus, it appears that an understood correspondence between the masculine and feminine

pronouns and their natural referents existed even while the grammatical gender system

was in full force. Such a reality may be one of the primary causes as to why the speakers

of Late Old English and Early Middle English preserved the gender distinction in the

pronouns and applied said distinction to natural gender.

A Successful Pronoun Shift: The Adoption of *She* and *They*

By the dawn of Early Middle English, the three formally distinct Old English

pronouns *he* (masculine), *heo* (feminine), and *hie* (plural), had become nearly

indistinguishable in many English dialects. The language had all but deserted its former

inflections in the nouns, adjectives, and articles, and it seemed briefly that the personal

pronouns would condense into an indistinguishable *he* as well. However, whether

intentionally or subconsciously, speakers of Middle English preserved the inflectional

gender distinction in their language by adopting two new pronouns: *she* and *they*.

Of the two, *they* has the much simpler history; it was a borrowing from Old

Norse. This adoption of a function word—a third-person plural pronoun—is somewhat

anomalous in linguistic history. Though content words are very easily borrowed between

languages (the Italian word for "computer" is simply the English *computer*), function

words, such as auxiliary verbs, demonstratives, articles, and pronouns, tend to express the

greatest resistance to change, and are thus rarely adopted between languages. Yet, the

circumstances between English and Old Norse were rather unique. Having repeatedly

invaded the western shores of England, the Danes eventually conquered and settled in the

Northwest of Great Britain; this settlement led to continued tensions between the English

and the Danes, as the Danes sought to continue their conquest. King Ælfred, successfully

resolving the crisis of the Danish Invasion, had the Danes baptized, and established the

Danelaw, a section of Britain wherein the English and Danes could live in peace. The

close mingling of English and Norse in the Danelaw may have aided the general loss of

inflections. Both English and Norse were West Germanic languages, and thus shared a

similar vocabulary; however, they had different inflectional paradigms. The constant

interaction between the two peoples, each with various means of inflecting words, may

have instigated the general reduction of their respective inflections. One manner in which

Old Norse undoubtedly influenced English, though, is in the adoption of the gender-

neutral plural pronoun *they*. *They* was borrowed in all of its forms, typically beginning

with the nominative, and then being adopted in the oblique cases (accusative *them* and

genitive *their*).

So, *they* was borrowed from Old Norse "in response to a functional need for

clearer communications, since the Old English pronouns were phonetically merging,

creating the great potential for ambiguity in reference" (Curzan 193). Since *hie* had

become indistinct from *he* and *heo*, some clarity in referent tracking was necessary, and,

as there was a solution to this ambiguity readily available in the Danish community living

in England, which spoke a language very akin to English, the speakers of English adopted

the gender-neutral plural *they*.

The development of *she* occurred because of a similar motivation, "the loss of

distinctively gendered nominal inflections transferred all gender-marking functions to the

pronouns, which could have heightened speakers' need to preserve the gender distinction in the pronominal forms" (193); however, rather than being a mere loan-word, many scholars now believe that *she* developed internally from English itself. This occurred through a sound-shift. Through generational repetition, the Old English *heo* most likely contracted to /hjo/. From there, the initial *h* probably transformed into the palatal fricative /ç/ (the initial sound in *hue* and *huge*), indicated by the spellings *ȝo* and *ȝho*. Finally, the palatal fricative probably developed into the modern "sh" sound /ʃ/, giving rise to, more or less, the modern form of *she*. Evidence for this shift can be seen when one tracks the diachronic, geographic spread of the variant spellings of *heo*, *hio*, and *ȝho*. The spread occurs from the Northwest to the Southeast, from the Danelaw to Wessex. Regions begin with /h/ initial pronouns, which are then replaced by initial palatal fricative pronouns, spelled with *ȝ*, and from the palatal fricative forms arise the common, initial "sh" sound.

Yet, as in almost all topics within historical linguistics, the jury is still out. While this thesis supports an internal development of *she*, some believe that Old Norse also had an influence in the shift. It may have been that Old Norse was going through a similar sound shift at the same time. This, though, seems like a much less likely option.

"Everyone Loves *His* Mother": Gender-Neutral *He*

With the adoption of *she* and *they*, the English natural-gender pronoun system had reached its modern form. And, with this modern form arose the same contemporaneous questions of usage that modern speakers face today: mainly, what does one do when faced with referents that either lack gender or demonstrate a multiplicity of gender. A common example can be found in the phrase "Everyone loves _____'s mother." What

should go in the blank? While the word *everyone* demonstrates a plural idea, and thus an ambiguous gender, it is in and of itself a singular pronoun; thus, the only "correct" answers that English gives are *he*, *she*, and *it*. The last of these can be removed from consideration due to its representing the inanimate, but which of the two remaining should be chosen? The prescriptivists would respond that the only true answer is the gender-neutral *he*.

While it may seem counter-intuitive to have a clearly gendered pronoun represent ambiguous gender, to the prescriptivists, it merely seemed natural. The prescriptivists were a group of writers and grammarians functioning within the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that, as their name would imply, demonstrated a grammatical philosophy for *linguistic prescription*. They believed that the purpose of grammar was to describe language as it ought to be, rather than to describe language as it is. As was the case with their forefather, Dionysius Thrax, their written grammar books were intended to preserve the language, and to elevate it to a higher form of logical beauty. They thought that logical speech led to logical thought, so making language more logical would inspire better thinking. It was from this group that modern rules against common usages arose, such as the rule that one should not end a sentence with a preposition.

Prescriptive thought was first applied to the generic pronoun problem in Lindley Murray's *English Grammar*, published in 1794. In the *Grammar*, Murray describes the "violation of number agreement in sentences where *they* is used to refer to an indefinite singular noun" and labels all such situations as erroneous, correcting them to *he* without providing an explanation for his reasoning (Curzan 59). A little more than fifty years

later, in 1850, an act of Parliament determined the "correctness" of generic *he*. In order to shorten legal documents and to cease using the cumbersome *he or she*, The Interpretation Act decreed that "in all acts words importing the masculine gender [would] 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 or number [was] expressly provided" (60). Those who wrote the law did not know it at the time, but this act, as sexist as it might appear today, gave credence to the women's suffrage movement, as the suffragettes argued that the use of *he* in voting acts was that of a generic *he*, and thus included women as well.

While many today would state that the attempts of the prescriptivists were misguided, and were artificially intended to change the language in unnatural ways, corpus research demonstrates that gender-neutral, generic *he* has a well-attested history of usage prior to the prescriptivist movement. In Old English, for instance, generic terms, like *oðer* ("other"), invariably take masculine anaphoric pronouns, "even when both sexes are clearly specified" (65) An example of this can be found in Alfred's translation of Pope Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis*, where, when discussing "sexual distance" in marriage, he writes

> Ne fornime ince **noðer oðer** ofer will butan geðafunge, ðæm timum ðe **he hine** wille gebiddan, ac geæmtigaeð ince to gebedum. (Sweet 199)
>
> (Do not, **neither** of you, deprive the other against his will without consent, at the times when **he** wants to pray, but have time to yourselves for prayers.)

The Old English masculine pronoun appears to have been able to include both genders in instances where both the male and female were intended; neither Gregory nor Alfred intends a homosexual relationship in this passage, but rather group both males and females under *he hine*. This may have been due to convention, as most of those who were writing and reading in the Old English period were men, or it may have been due to formal cues, since the largest noun class in Old English is the masculine noun class. Either way, the prescriptivists' efforts to impose gender-neutral *he* upon English were not wholly foreign to the language—the generic usage of *he* can be traced to Chaucer and the era of *Beowulf*—rather, they appear to be a concerted effort to ensure uniformity through the selection of one internal solution, though they opted for the more widely derided number agreement of *he*.

"Everyone Loves *Thon's* Mother": The Epicene Pronouns

Though many of the prescriptivists opted to support the legally-sanctioned gender-neutral *he*, many were unsatisfied with the resolution. Rather than utilizing gender-neutral, generic *he*, these fringe-prescriptivists sought to introduce a new pronoun into the English language. This *epicene* pronoun, that is, a pronoun that bears no attachment to either sex, was intended to fill the ambiguous void where gender-neutral *he* had been unnaturally placed. Yet, as was the case with the majority of the desired reforms established by the prescriptivists, no epicene pronouns ever enjoyed widespread usage in the English language. Given the innumerable times wherein a prospective grammarian wished to leave an indelible mark on the spoken word, this history will not provide an

exhaustive list of every pronoun ever conceived[1]; however, this history will note

significant contributors to the development of the epicene pronoun, and will also expound

upon the history of the more common pronouns used and discussed today.

One of the earliest would-be grammarians to propose a solution to the epicene

void was one James Anderson; Anderson, writing in 1792, published an article titled

"Grammatical Disquisitions" in *The Bee; or, Literary Weekly Intelligencer*. Anderson,

like Lindley Murray, was a prescriptive, philosophical grammarian, who not only sought

to summarize and explain the various components of language, but also dictated what

made one language superior to another. The concord between English's gendered

pronouns and their natural referents was one of the elements of the language that

Anderson praised, and he was tempted to mark English as superior on that merit alone:

"This language too," he writes, "possesses the singular elegance of following nature

precisely with regard to gender, as far as the number of genders we have adopted will

permit" (194). Yet Anderson also noticed a "defect" in the English language, brought

about by the failing of pronouns to comprehend nouns bearing both sexes; he gives

"friend, servant, [and] neighbour" as examples (195). Though he notes one resolution to

this problem in a colloquialism native to Glocestershire, the pronoun *ou*, which can

apparently be used in place of *he*, *she*, or *it*, Anderson states that the adoption of a

singular epicene pronoun is not enough; rather, while English is adding pronouns, it

should not be satisfied until it has fulfilled a total of *thirteen* gender categories. The

---

[1] For a more exhaustive treatment, including such pronouns as *hiser*, *han*, and *un*, see Baron's "The
Epicene Pronoun: The Word that Failed."

following are what he calls the "obvious distinctions" that should be brought about by

linguistic gender classification:

> 1st, To denote male animals alone, which might constitute the . . .
> *Masculine*.
> 2nd, Female animals alone, . . . *Feminine*.
> 3rd, Inanimate objects alone, . . . *Neuter*.
> 4th, Animate objects which either express general classes, or a whole
> genus, or where it is not necessary to specify sex at all, . . . *Indefinite*.
> 5th, Animals known to be castrated, and meant to be distinguished as such,
> . . . *Imperfect*, or *Soprana*.
> 6th, Males and females, known to be such, though not meant to be
> separated, . . . *Matrimonial*.
> 7th, Males only, part perfect, and part castrated, known and meant to be
> distinguished, but not separated, . . . *Masculine Imperfect*.
> 8th, Females and castrata, . . . *Fem. imperfect*.
> 9th, Males, females, and castrata, . . . *Mixt imperfect*.
> 10th, Males and inanimates conjoined, . . . *Masc. mixt*.
> 11th, Females and inanimates conjoined, . . . *Fem. mixt*.
> 12th, Males, females, and inanimates conjoined, . . . *United*.
> 13th, Males, females, or inanimates, either separated or conjoined, where
> no distinction of gender was meant to be adverted to in any way. This is
> precisely the power of our present pronoun *they*. . . . *Universally
> indefinite*. (Anderson 198)

The most humorous part of this listing may be the brief comment with which Anderson

concludes: "Some lesser distinctions are omitted to avoid the appearance of *unnecessary

refinement*" (199).

Though most proposers of epicene pronouns have faded into obscurity, Anderson,

despite being the first, has faded into the deepest. It is probably fortunate that he did not

propose actual pronouns to fulfill his thirteen-point model, but even his briefly mentioned

ou appears to have fallen out of usage.

The most recognized of the proposed epicene pronouns, though a pronoun that

still failed to receive widespread recognition, was the Converse pronoun, *thon*

(pronounced /ðən/, and not like the last syllable of *marathon*). Coined by Charles Crozat Converse, an attorney and hymnist from Erie, Pennsylvania, most sources state that *thon*'s invention dates to 1858, eight years after the passing of the Interpretation Act; however, Baron, in his extensive research on the early epicene pronouns, fails to find a verifiable source for that date. The earliest published usage of *thon* that he found was traced to 1884 in *The Critic*. Converse briefly explains that he had spent several years grappling with the problem of the gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun, and tried multiple failed coinages, yet he settled on *thon* as the most desirable, a contraction of the phrase "that one."

Converse's proposal caused quite a stir in the journalistic and editorial community, with many people writing in support of or opposition to the new pronoun. Those who supported it noted the ungrammatical nature of all rivaling solutions, such as *they* or *he*, while those in opposition merely stated that it would never catch on. Converse himself appears to have been a lifelong supporter of his little pronoun, as, when an anonymous contributor wrote into *The Writer: A Monthly Magazine for Literary Works* inquiring, "What has become of that impersonal pronoun which was to be evolved before now for the economy of writers' brain-power?" (231), none other than one Charles Crozat Converse emerged from the woodwork to provide a response. "Did *The Writer*'s limits permit," he writes, "I would quote *in extenso* from the hundreds of personal letters and journals of education, etc. commending the public adoption of 'thon' which have been received by me in evidence of the growing common consent which 'thon' is securing for itself" (248). Yet, in spite of the lamented word-count, he still quotes from a

few letters, including that of one Mr. John Kenned, the author of "What Words Say,"

who states that "other attempts [were] made to supply the missing pronoun, but the words

offered [were] more or less arbitrary and gratuitous"; Converse's pronoun, on the other

hand, has more "the appearance of a discovery than an invention" (247). Converse's

shameless promotion, though never elevating *thon* to the ultimate acceptance that he

heartily desired, nevertheless resulted in some degree of success. Unlike any other

proposed epicene pronoun, the Converse pronoun made it into the dictionary, being listed

in *Webster's Second New International Dictionary*, published in 1934. As Converse

passed away, however, and excitement for the proposed pronoun dissipated, the word fell

into obscurity, and was quietly dropped from *Webster's Third*.

But Converse's influence did not just lead to the invention of one gender-neutral

pronoun. His shameless publicizing in *The Writer* inspired James Rogers from Crestview,

Florida, to coin the original version of what has since been termed the "Spivak Pronoun."

His version was inflected as *e* for the nominative, *es* for the genitive, and *em* for the

accusative, and was inspired by the common contraction of *them* in such phrases as

"Let'em come." Rogers, contesting that his pronoun was superior to the Converse

pronoun, argued that everyone must be told how to pronounce *thon*, making it less

suitable for widespread acceptance; further, *thon* was "more than twice as long as *e*" and

was much more difficult to say (13).

Rogers' pronoun never gained much notice outside of the editorial section of *The

Writer*, but would eventually be resurrected sixty years later by Christine M. Elverson of

Skokie, Illinois. Elverson, apparently unaware of Rogers' pronoun, won a contest that

had been held by the Chicago Association of Business Communicators to find

replacements for the cumbersome phrases "he and she," "him and her," and "his and

hers." Like Rogers' earlier pronouns, her pronouns, *ey*, *em*, and *eir*, were inspired by

dropping the "th" from *they*, *them*, and *their*. This basic phenomenon of transforming a

simple contraction in *they*'s objective form into a full-fledged pronoun declension is what

defines the Spivak pronoun.

After Donald MacKay published a study in *American Psychologist* investigating

the miscomprehension of gender-neutral *he* as compared to epicene pronouns (he adapted

Elverson's pronouns for use in his study), a mathematician and educator, Michael Spivak,

wrote an AMS-TeX manual, *The Joy of TeX* (1983), using the gender-neutral pronouns *E*,

Em, and *Eir*. It was this usage in *The Joy of TeX* that would eventually give the Spivak

pronoun its name, as a MOO programmer, Roger Crew, in order to test the pronoun code

in his LamdaMOO game, added "spivak" as a choice in gender. Crew's Spivak pronoun

declined as *e*, *em*, *eirs*, and *emself*. Through its inclusion in the LamdaMOO server, the

Spivak pronoun gained widespread usage, and it still maintains a committed group of

online users today.

The final pronoun to be discussed, and the one most prevalent among the

LGBTQ+ community, is the pronoun *Ze*. *Ze*, despite its attested usage at American

universities and in LGBTQ+ publishing, is not present in the *Oxford English Dictionary*,

Meriam-Webster, or the *American Heritage Dictionary*. The only citation in a recognized

dictionary comes from *Dictionary.com*, which is itself derived from the *Random House*

Dictionary. While the dictionary lists the proper definition, every headline or historic

quote that utilizes the supposed word is either a name (as in "Ze Frank"), or a mocking

phonetic spelling of *the* in a German accent. *Dictionary.com* lists the earliest attestation

of the word as being sometime between 1970 and 1975. This is probably referencing a

discussion from the *Newsletter of the American Anthropological Association* in

September of 1972. "Steven Polgar of Chapel Hill, North Carolina propos[ed] the *ze*

paradigm [of *ze*, *zim*, *zees*, and *zeeself*] on the analogy of German *sie*" (Baron 94). While

the nominative *ze* remains unchanged between Polgar's recommendation and the modern

declension, the remaining forms are completely different. By the time that *Ze* resurfaced

as a pronoun in use amidst the transgender community, the declension was *ze*, *hir*, *hirs*,

and *hirself*, where *hir* is pronounced as homophonous to "here." However, confusion

over pronunciation in the possessive, objective, and reflexive forms, as well as the non-

standard initial consonant between said forms and the nominative, resulted in a shift

toward a paradigm of *ze*, *zir*, *zirs*, and *zirself*. *Ze* briefly exhibited another paradigm when

in the fall of 1997, Ithaca College's Richard E. Creel proposed *ze, zer,* and *mer* (he fails

to provide a reflexive form). Given his explanations for the pronouns, it appears that

Creel lacked a knowledge of Polgar's *Ze* paradigm from twenty-five years before. His

reasoning is not rooted in the German *sie*, but rather in borrowing the initial consonant of

she and the vowel of *he*; he mutates the initial consonant of the derived "*se*" as to refrain

from homophony with *see* or *sea*. Thus, he ends with *ze*.

     As can be easily seen in the discussion of *Ze* and the Spivak pronoun, most

gender-neutral third-person pronouns failed to gain notoriety because of their creators'

ignorance of the pronoun dilemma's history. The Spivak pronoun was reinvented

multiple times due to this lack of knowledge, and *Ze*, in its short history, has failed to find a unified paradigm. Had the many movements that have sought a solution to the pronoun problem unified behind one of these options, English speakers could have now been learning a neuter third-person pronoun as part of their linguistic education.

"Everyone Loves *Their* Mother": A Descriptive Solution

Nothing has been said thus far on gender-neutral, singular *they*, and that has been intentional. Throughout this entire history of gender-shifts and epicene inventions, one consistent resolution to the pronoun problem has arisen in the mouths of English speakers: the gender-neutral, singular *they*. Exhibiting a history and usage nearly as extensive as gender-neutral *he*, gender-neutral *they* has been employed by many of the most well-regarded writers in the English language. Shakespeare writes, "There's not a man I meet but doth salute me / As if I were **their** well-acquainted friend," when the "proper" rendering should be *his* (130); Jane Austen writes, "Both sisters were uncomfortable enough. Each felt for the other, and of course for **themselves**," when the "correct" construction should be *herself* (323); and Henry Fielding writes that "every Body fell a laughing, as how could **they** help it," when he should have employed *he or she*, *one*, or simply the gender-neutral *he* (459). The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the earliest entry of gender-neutral *they* as 1375, in a Middle English translation of William of Palerne, and the singular usage has undoubtedly been employed continuously since that date, as Lindley Murray, James Anderson, and Charles Crozat Converse each lamented its improper application in proper writing.

And while it is not the intent of this history to prescribe a solution to the pronoun dilemma, it is noteworthy that this solution to the problem is the only *descriptive* one. While every other attempt to rectify the dilemma has been an effort to explain what language ought to be, the solution of gender-neutral *they* merely explains what language already *does*. It is likely that gender-neutral, singular *they* will gain wider and wider acceptance, while the other epicene pronouns will go the way of the dinosaurs. The unabating political stigma toward *ze* seems to have disqualified it from general use (Duffy), while gender-neutral *they*, on the other hand, has already won "Word of the Year," a feat that no other pronoun can flaunt (Guo).

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2003.

Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Translated by William Hamilton Fyfe, Harvard University Press,

    1932.

---. *Rhetoric*. Translated by J. H. Freese, Harvard University Press, 1926.

Baron, Dennis E. "The Epicene Pronoun: The Word That Failed." *American Speech*, vol.

    56, no. 2, 1 July 1981, pp. 83–97. *JSTOR*, Accessed 19 Feb. 2017.

---. "The Words That Failed: A Chronology of Early Nonbinary Pronouns." *The*

    University of Illinois - English Department, University of Illinois Board of

    Trustees. Accessed 22 Feb. 2017.

Baugh, Albert C. and Thomas Cable. *A History of the English Language*. Routledge,

    2013.

Classen, E. "On the Origin of Natural Gender in Middle English." *The Modern Language*

    Review, vol. 14, no. 1, Jan. 1919, pp. 97–102. *JSTOR*, Accessed 19 Feb. 2017.

Converse, Charles Crozat. *The Writer: A Monthly Magazine for Literary Works*, vol. III-

    IV, Jan.-Dec. 1889.

Creel, Richard E. "Ze, Zer, Mer," *APA Newsletters,* vol. 97, no. 1, Fall 1997.

Curzan, Anne. *Gender Shifts in the History of English*. Cambridge University Press,

    2003. *EBSCOhost*, Accessed 19 Feb. 2017.

Duffy, Nick. "Journalists Told to Ignore Gender-Neutral Pronoun 'Ze'." *PinkNews*, 27

    Mar. 2017, Accessed 27 Mar. 2017.

"The Epicene Pronoun, Yet Again." *American Speech*, vol. 54, no. 2, 1 July 1979, pp.

    157–158. *JSTOR*, Accessed 19 Feb. 2017.

Fielding, Henry. *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*. Wesleyan University Press,

    1975.

Foertsch, Julie, and Morton Ann Gernsbacher. "In Search of Gender Neutrality: Is

    Singular 'They' a Cognitively Efficient Substitute for Generic

    'He'?" *Psychological Science*, vol. 8, no. 2, Mar. 1997, pp. 106–111. *JSTOR*,

    Accessed 19 Feb. 2017.

Foundalis, Harry E. "Evolution of Gender in Indo-European Languages." *Proceedings of

    the Twenty-fourth Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*, 2002.

"Gender, N." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, Mar. 2017, Accessed

    27 Mar. 2017.

Guo, Jeff. "Sorry, Grammar Nerds. The Singular 'They' Has Been Declared Word of the

    Year." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 8 Jan. 2016.

Haig, David. "The Inexorable Rise of Gender and the Decline of Sex: Social Change in

    Academic Titles, 1945-2001." *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol. 33, no. 2, Apr.

    2004, pp. 87–96. *Springer Link*, Accessed 27 Mar. 2017.

Kilarski, Marcin. *Nominal Classification: a History of Its Study from the Classical Period

    to the Present*. John Benjamins, 2013.

Levin, Saul. "The Origin of Grammar in Sophistry." *General Linguistics*, vol. 23, no. 1,

    1983, pp. 41–47. *ProQuest*, Accessed 23 Feb. 2017.

Lougovaya, Julia, and Rodney Ast. "Menis and Pelex. Protagoras on Solecism." *The*
    Classical Quarterly, vol. 54, no. 1, May 2004, pp. 274–277. *JSTOR*, Accessed 23
    Feb. 2017.

Luu, Chi. "They're Here, They're Genderqueer, Get Used to Gender Neutral
    Pronouns." *JSTOR Daily*, ITHAKA, 12 May 2015. Accessed 19 Feb. 2017.

Moore, Samuel. "Grammatical and Natural Gender in Middle English." *PMLA*, vol. 36,
    no. 1, Mar. 1921, pp. 79–103. *JSTOR*. Accessed 23 Feb. 2017.

Peterson, David. "The Function of Gender." *The Art of Language Invention*, 11 May
    2016. Accessed 27 Mar. 2017.

Rodby, Judith, and W. Ross Winterowd. *The Uses of Grammar*. Parlor Press, 2012.

Sandys, John Edwin. *A History of Classical Scholarship: from the End of the Sixth*
    Century B.C. to the End of the Middle Ages. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Shakespeare, William. *The Comedy of Errors*. Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Stenroos, Merja. "Order out of Chaos? The English Gender Change in the Southwest
    Midlands as a Process of Semantically Based Reorganization." *English Language*
    and Linguistics, vol. 12, no. 3, 25 Feb. 2008, pp. 445–473. *ProQuest*, Accessed
    23 Feb. 2017.

Sweet, Henry. *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*. Oxford
    University Press, 1871.

Udry, J. Richard. "The Nature of Gender." *Demography*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1 Nov. 1994, pp.
    561–573. *JSTOR*, Accessed 27 Mar. 2017.

Zuber, Sharon, and Ann M. Reed. "The Politics of Grammar Handbooks: Generic He and

Singular They." *College English*, vol. 55, no. 5, Sept. 1993, pp. 515–530. *JSTOR*,

Accessed 19 Feb. 2017.