

2017

Speak Out for Gender Neutrality in the English Language

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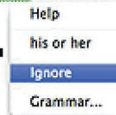
Recommended Citation

Gewertz, Richelle (2017) "Speak Out for Gender Neutrality in the English Language," *Intertext*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol25/iss1/8>

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Carol ate their burger medium rare.



The notion that *they* or *their* can only be plural is based not upon some scientific principle, but to an eighteenth century grammarian who decided one day to make it a rule. Despite long-standing historical use in literature, such as in the well-regarded works of Chaucer and Shakespeare, the use of the plural pronoun with singular antecedents became widely objected on the basis that it violated the rules of number concord.

We believe there is a “correct” standard and that we should avoid using the singular *they* in our formal

academic writing, and yet we frequently employ it in our everyday speech. For example, you might say, “*Each student was talking about how hard their homework was.*” We know it’s grammatically wrong. We know that *they* and *their* are plural, so they can’t possibly refer back to each student, which is singular. But saying “he or she” is just too cumbersome.

Even so, the real difficulty occurs when the antecedent is a specific, named person rather than an unnamed member of a class of persons. You probably felt

uncomfortable with Carol’s chosen pronoun choice. Strange, right? Well, get used to it. The singular *they* is becoming increasingly more common as a personal pronoun for those who refuse to be referred to as either a *he* or *she*. Accept gender neutrality. It’s here and queer. It’s not going anywhere.

SPEAK OUT FOR
**GENDER
NEUTRALITY**
IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE



"Being transgendered is constantly struggling to use the word 'man' rather than 'person' to define yourself." —Zach Ellis, *Being*

In his memoir, Ellis suggests the pressure he feels to identify with a certain gender. He struggles to accept the unfortunate reality that he can't be neutral. He chooses the male gender solely because he does not want to associate with the female gender. But why must he be either one or the other? Can't he just call himself a *person*?

The gender specificity of our language is most easily explained

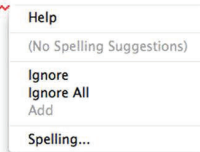
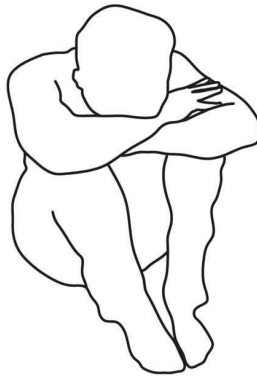
by the lack of a gender-neutral pronoun. In terms of what is considered correct grammar, there is no option but to refer to someone in terms of his or her gender, since we are limited to the use of either the male or the female pronoun.

The current promotion of singular they as a gender-neutral pronoun is an effort by transgender individuals to modify, or perhaps update, the English language so that it can be more inclusive of those who do not conform to the conventional notions of male or female gender. In terms of linguistic identity, they

have created a variation on the standard that more accurately reflects the realities and values true to themselves.

Should we not be free to construct our own identities without the influence of gender expectations? Forget whether someone's a "he" or a "she." Let them be who they want to be.

**SPEAK OUT FOR
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“Being transgendered is typing transgendered into your computer and seeing a red line underneath it which means it’s an unrecognized word and you look beneath you to see if there is a red line too...”

—Zach Ellis, *Being*

In his statement of “being,” Ellis effectively explains a feeling of incorrectness. If transgendered isn’t a word, then is his understanding of himself as a transgender illegitimate, not real? Is there no such thing as being transgendered? Is he incorrect?

Whether it means to or not, our language discriminates against those who do not conform to either the male or female gender. Our bias toward a gender binary has unfortunately led to the misidentification of transgender or nonconforming individuals. By enforcing classification as either male or female, our discourse dictates that this is the only way of being. For the transgendered person who does not conform to this notion, the discrimination against their so-called “norm-breaking” leads them to question their validity as a person, a human being.

The red line Ellis describes is symbolic of the prescriptive nature of the Microsoft Word processing program, dictating what is “right.” But should we debase variations, norm-breaking individuals, as substandard, or in other words, wrong? The consequence of conforming to the standard is a lack of recognition for their being.

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