1-10-2021

Finding A Middle Ground: A Compromise for Gendered Pronouns

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Recommended Citation

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Finalist

Academic Category

2019-2020 Emerging Writers Contest

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"Who am I?" is a question of identity that can only be answered by oneself through discovery, experimentation, and life experience; this power and autonomy over self is an individual's right to life. There are many different identifiers one could relate to, including gender and what one might choose to define one's gender as. Although the creation and development of one's gender identity can only be captained by the individual alone, it is often misidentified by society, which, over time, has developed its own beliefs of what gender is and isn't. To many Western societies, gender is binary: a black or white decision between male or female. From the moment a child forms in a mother's womb, society identifies one's gender based on one's sex before one is even born – from baby "gender" reveal parties to the baby blue or pink-themed onesies dressed on the child for strangers to easily recognize its gender, society plays a huge role in labelling children before they are capable of thinking for themselves, stealing their freedom of identity and essentially, their voice.

As Edwards defines in *Language and Identity*, gender is a man-made concept "built upon biological categorization" and is a means for people to define who they are (126). The concept of gender is inherently helpful and powerful, allowing people to put into words some of the "social and behavioral" features attached to their identity, further enabling them to communicate and express exactly who they are to those around them (Edwards 126). Although the concept of

gender provides "social anchors" for people to cling to and understand, language does not necessarily satisfy the complexities of identity; language, in fact, often reflects the mind and attitude of the majority, favoring the majority's views over the more uncommon views (Edwards 22). And in a society where gender is restricted to a binary gender construct, meaning that there can only be male and female identification, language, particularly the English language, is created to reflect such societal beliefs.

The concept of gender, being "an indication of the masculine or feminine behavior" outside of sex has only been around since the 1960s, making this non-binary definition of gender fairly new (Edwards 126). It has only been very recently that a non-binary view of gender has been recognized, making it a very untraditional view of gender; while this non-binary view of gender has been acknowledged, still, the English language reflects much of the traditional, binary, *he/she* construct of gender. This explains the most common forms of pronouns, *he* and *she*, to refer to individuals assuming that there are no gender identities beyond the two, subjecting certain individuals to "erasure", or the hurtful "assumption that a particular identity does not exist or should not be socially recognized" (Knutson 4).

The inconsiderate use of binary pronouns pose an issue for those who identify as non-binary: individuals who "do not see themselves as "wholly male" nor "wholly female" but, rather, a combination of the two—or none at all" (Simpliciano 317). The pronouns used in the English language *he* and *she,* are, as Hyde expresses, "inadequate" in representing non-binary individuals who do not fit into the "cookie-cutter mold" and do not wish to be referred to as a *him* or a *her* (185). One individual expressed in an interview that "it was very dispiriting to have to choose between he or she, both of which just didn't encapsulate who (they were) at all" (*Gender Beyond the Binary*).

Additionally, the use of the impersonal pronoun "he" or "man" to reference all individuals regardless of their gender identity subjects non-male individuals to "erasure" (Knutson 4). Assigning masculine pronouns to individuals who may or may not identify as male displaces all other genders by misrepresenting what they may identity as and by leaving no other options of identification, thus regarding their gender identity unworthy of recognition. The impersonal "he" and "man" has been used for an "extended period of time in the history of the English language" and has been used in significant documents such as the Declaration of Independence (Wagner 41). This statement in the Declaration of Independence, "All men are created equal", though it was written to shed light on the equal worth and importance of all, does exactly the opposite by limiting the representation of non-males with its use of the impersonal pronoun "men". Such inadequacy of gender representation in the English language is not just found in the lack of pronouns but also in the preferred use of preexisting pronouns, particularly in which masculine pronouns are often used to represent all.

Due to the disconnect between non-binary gender identification and the use of preexisting binary pronouns, individuals began to identify with gender-neutral *they, them, their, themself* pronouns, refusing to be referred to by gender-specific pronouns. In addition to this choice, more individuals began to reclaim their gender identity and began utilizing their preferred pronouns, a new set of pronouns were created as a result. New pronouns such as *zi, zir, zirs, zirself* were created by individuals who felt as though they were not represented by the preexisting pronouns, *zi* being one of the many new pronouns created (Knutson 3).

The creation of new pronouns brings inclusivity to English, allowing individuals the freedom and choice to be who they are and to be adequately represented by the language they speak. With the rise of gender inclusivity and societal liberty to be represented by preference,

many more pronouns have been created and added since the early twentieth century. However, with little to no monitoring and administration of the pronouns that have been recently discovered and added, there is one concern that rises about this movement. Within an interview of English-speaking American citizens, one individual expressed his concern with the new addition of pronouns: how many pronouns are enough to make the English language inclusive to all? And if so, how could society implement many pronouns for common use (Jubilee)?

Although the increase of pronoun options provides individuals the freedom to be known by their own liking, where is the line drawn when it comes to the creation and addition of new pronouns representing different gender identities? Gender is described to be a "spectrum" of identities, ranging from far masculine to far feminine, rather than definite, assigned genders (Alvites). However, there is an infinite number of possibilities within a "spectrum"—and just as a binary system of pronouns did not represent enough of the population, new pronouns may not be able to satisfy everyone along the never-ending spectrum.

The creation of new non-binary pronouns opened up a door of possibilities beyond *he, she,* and *they*. However, with never-ending possibilities, implementation of these new pronouns will be confusing to use as the "social anchors" humans need in order to understand one another socially (Edwards 22). And with a new identification every day, implementation of these pronouns will be difficult as pronouns will begin to lose their linguistic convenience for referring to others. Hypothetically, if everyone in this world had separate pronouns for themselves, it would be just like having a second name, which would take time to get to know, memorize, practice, and use—all of which are too much to keep up with, especially when remembering people's names are difficult enough.

Although the addition of many non-binary pronouns succeeded in empowering many individuals, it is an unnecessary inconvenience to English speakers. The addition of pronouns, rather, takes away from the communicative unity of the English language. Edwards defines language as "a communication system" in which its "elements" "possess an agreed-upon significance within a community", "governed" by "rules" that are "necessary for comprehension" (53). And without a community's unified agreement on the linguistic "elements" and "rules", "communication" and "comprehension" cannot exist (Edwards 53). The new pronouns that are being added to the English language disrupt the very unity of the English language spoken in America by adding too many words that the majority of its speakers do not know and will not use on a daily basis. Without standardization to the English language, communication within its very speakers will be difficult, as one speaker may be familiar with a set of pronouns and another won't. Without a set establishment of pronouns and a constantly-changing dictionary of identifiers, lingual unity will decrease, creating further division and confusion amongst English speakers. Therefore, allowing the continual flow and use of new pronouns and acknowledging them as formal pronouns is unnecessary, as it will continue to add problems to communication rather than solving the disconnect between language and gender identity.

Despite the complexity of this situation, there is a much simpler and effective approach to this dilemma. One stellar example that not only gives representation to gender non-conforming individuals but also simplifies the issue is the implementation of gender "X" by the Californian government on government-issued documents (Simpliciano 321). To ensure that all individuals be represented and given the right to be represented properly, gender "X" is assigned to documents belonging to gender non-conforming individuals rather than the standard, binary,

male or *female* (Simpliciano 321). And although this may not exactly be the solution to finding all the right pronouns fit to represent everyone, this is a step to discovering a simpler alternative than adopting many pronouns into the English language, while preventing discrimination towards gender non-conforming individuals.

Another sound solution that could simplify this matter is adopting a more universal, gender-neutral pronoun such as *who, whom, whose,* or *one*. These pronouns satisfy the issues against the use of binary pronouns because *whom/one* is completely void of gender and gender bias. It is also agreed among English speakers to be representative of an individual. Using *whom/one* avoids the grammatical issues that arise from individuals who wish to be identified as *they*, which can be misunderstood as a plural pronoun in many different contexts. Rather, *whom/one* is specifically reserved to refer to a single individual in which misunderstandings and confusion can be cleared. And unlike the impersonal *he/man*, *whom/one* is perfectly gender-neutral, all inclusive and representative of all people regardless of their gender identity, avoiding the issues of misrepresentation and erasure that occur from the use of masculine pronouns to refer to everyone.

In addition, using *whom/one* in place of many other new pronouns will help establish the standardization language is essentially built on. Because these pronouns are already commonly-used and taught in the English language, a lot of the complications that surround communication and understanding gender-neutral pronouns will be avoided and prevented. Simplifying the options down to a few standard gender-neutral pronouns that are already well-implemented and immersed in the English language is a more efficient and effective approach to the issue between language and gender identity. Establishing and agreeing upon the gender-neutral pronouns that are to be used and implemented is a more realistic approach to implementing non-binary, gender

neutral pronouns to common use rather than continuously adding to the list of pronouns. Standardization and implementation of a couple universal pronouns will clear the question of "how many pronouns are enough?" and reduce infinite possibilities down to more manageable, comprehensible options.

Gender binary pronouns, binary gender identification, and the misuse of gendered pronouns for many, many years, have hurt people. It has limited people's means of expression and self-identification, leaving many individuals confused and unable to feel valid in their choice of identity. With the rise of new gender identification, however, individuals have been able to reclaim their gender identity and take a new approach to life and self-expression, particularly through the language that they speak. The implementation of a language that represents all people is important and significant to protecting an individual's voice and rights to self, as the defining words of an individual reflect the person that they want to be.

Many changes and issues have arisen as a shift of cultural perspective and lingual expression have occurred. Unfortunately, gender-neutral pronouns and issues that surround gender identity have become more complex and complicated than it should have been due to society's inability to come to a consensus--to a solution, a language, that would raise and build one's identity up, not tear it down. Gender issues and misrepresentation in language, despite being a very complicated and sensitive dilemma, can definitely be approached and solved in simplicity--all while both meeting the needs of the marginalized and creating a language that can be used freely by everyone without confusion, bringing people together in harmony through a language that suits the needs of all. And as people come together to communicate and express freely through a language that does not discriminate, all--regardless of their gender identity--will be able to reclaim their voice.

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