

As Language Evolves, Pronouns Leap Forward

They/Them/Theirs

By Suzanne E. Rowe



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Grammar 101

If we are going to fight about pronouns, let's be sure we all know what we're fighting about. Pronouns are little words that replace nouns. (In case I just lost you, nouns are people, places, things, ideas — *lawyer, court, book, freedom.*) By using pronouns, we can avoid repeating a noun ad nauseum.

Suzanne read *Suzanne's* book. It's *Suzanne's*.

She read *her* book. It's *hers*.

Or, since this is obviously about me:

I read *my* book. It's *mine*.

In the second example, the pronouns are *she, her* and *hers*.

In the third example, the pronouns are *I, my* and *mine*.

Pronouns are traditionally considered to be singular (one person) or plural (more than one person). Pronouns exist in first person (the person writing or speaking), second person (the person being written or spoken to) and third person (everyone else). Examples of singular pronouns are *he* and *she*. An example of a plural pronoun is *we*.

Different pronouns replace different forms of nouns. Technically these forms are called “cases,” and understanding noun cases is the one and only benefit I still derive from my high school Latin class.

Nominative pronouns, also called subjective pronouns, are the subjects of sentences.

I am a curmudgeon.

You are reading this article.

She might not agree with my recommendation.

We are each entitled to a different opinion.

Chart 1 (below) shows the nominative/subjective pronouns in the order grammarians often think of them:

Subjective Pronouns	Singular	Plural
First person	I	we
Second person	you	you
Third person	he/she	they

Chart 1

Over time, pronouns move around on that handy chart. A few hundred years ago, *you* was plural. Only plural. A single person being spoken to was *thee*, not *you*. Over time, *you* crept over to the singular column, too, and now we accept *you* as both singular and plural.³

Another set of pronouns — objective pronouns — serve as the object of a verb (receiving the action) or the object of a preposition. (If I lost you again, prepositions are little words like *to* and *in*.) The list of objective pronouns includes *me, you, her, him, us, them*.

Give *us* the briefs.

Give the briefs to *us*.

The last set of pronouns for today (and then I promise to stop) shows possession. Instead of *Suzanne's* book, I say that it's *my* book. *My* replaces *Suzanne's*. And if I then want to state my ownership without naming the book again, I just say, “It's *mine*.” Similarly, your bike is *yours*, her motorcycle is *hers* and our cars are *ours*.

If we put all of those pronouns into one chart, then we see where people get the lists of pronouns that sometimes appear on nametags or email signature lines (e.g., *he/him/his*). We are also more likely to sympathize with people learning

In September 2019, Merriam-Webster updated its online dictionary, adding new words like *fabulosity, pickleball, free solo* and *deep state*. But what caught everyone's attention in the world of legal writing was the expanded definition of *they*.

After the ho-hum definitions — referring to “those ones,” referring to a group of people generally and referring to indefinite singular nouns like *everyone* — the bombshell dropped with a fourth possibility. *They* can be used officially “to refer to a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary.”¹

For many, the response was “Yes!”² For others, the response was “No!” Readers who know me as a grammar curmudgeon might be surprised that I'm in the “Yes!” camp. No one should be surprised that I explain my response with a grammar lesson.

English as a second language. (See Chart 2, below.)

The Nonbinary They

Even if your eyes glazed over a few times during the grammar review, they should pop open as we take a look at what Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary did in updating its usage of *they*.

The starting point was recognizing that some people identify as nonbinary, which Merriam-Webster defines as “relating to or being a person who identifies with or expresses a gender identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely female.”⁴ From there, it was an easy step to recognize that the masculine and feminine pronouns (*he/him/his* and *she/her/hers*) are not appropriate for some.

Given the preference of some for the pronouns *they/them/theirs* and the increasing use of those pronouns in the third person singular, Merriam-Webster acknowledged what many speakers and an increasing number of writers already do: *they* is acceptable as a singular pronoun in some circumstances. That means *them*, *their* and *theirs* are sometimes singular, too.

The backlash was predictable among curmudgeons who are even more curmudgeonly than I. “*They* cannot be singular!” I suggest that we all use *they* as a singular in speech already, at least occasionally. I know I do. But while I use the singular *they* in conversation, it still feels awkward for me to use *they* as a singular in writing. Especially in legal writing.

I remind myself that a prior generation of curmudgeons believed that “Ms.”

was an abomination. The proper honorifics for a female were “Miss” until marriage and “Mrs.” thereafter. Geraldine Ferraro, running for vice president in 1984, was required to choose one of the proper honorifics; being Ms. Ferraro was not an option. I remember being annoyed: Her marital status was no more important than her running mate’s was, yet no one questioned that he was simply Mr. Walter Mondale.

Singular or Plural?

Once grammarians wrap their heads around the idea of *they* referring to one person, the world explodes with collateral damage. Does the singular *they* require a singular verb? If so, *they is coming* would be correct. I have been told that singular verbs are proper in this instance, but I doubt the change will be common in legal writing for years to come. In fact, if I were placing bets, I’d say that the plural verb will be used with *they* whether it’s singular or plural. That’s what we do with *you*:

You are my best friend.

You are my best friends.

In the first, *you* is singular. In the second, *you* is plural. Ho hum. Similarly, in the following set, *they* in the first sentence refers to someone who uses the pronoun *they*, while in the second, *they* refers to two or more people.

They are my best friend.

They are my best friends.

The reflexive pronoun might also feel challenging when *they* is singular. (Quick refresher: Reflexive pronouns are needed when the subject and object of a sentence

are the same. Each reflexive pronoun ends in *-self* or *-selves*.) They did it *themselves*? They did it *themselves*? Merriam-Webster suggests the former is gaining ground.⁶ I have my doubts and will again lay my bets on *themselves*.

The Non-Universal They

Now that we know what did happen in September, let’s look at what did not happen.

First, *they* was not expanded all that much. It already referred to a singular person of unspecified gender, though curmudgeons like me still resist and avoid writing, “Each juror should vote *their* conscience.”⁷ Additionally, *they* was already appropriate for indefinite pronouns like *anyone*, *no one* and *someone*. Back in 2010, my favorite dictionary provided the example “ask someone if they could help” and noted this usage dated back to at least the 1500s.⁸ And that dictionary noted the singular *they* was becoming common, at least in less-formal contexts, for singular nouns, as in “ask a friend if they could help.”

Second, *they* was not anointed as an all-purpose pronoun for any and every person. Some people prefer gender-specific pronouns: *she/her/hers* for those who identify as female and *he/him/his* for those who identify as male. Those preferences should be respected, too. *They* is not universally applicable, as *you* has become.

Third, *they* was not announced as a substitute for every other pronoun, interchangeable at will. If a person uses the pronouns *she/her/hers* or *he/him/his*, then those pronouns should be used consistently. Similarly, if a person uses *they/them/theirs*, then those pronouns should be used consistently. A person might be fine with two sets of pronouns, listing *she/her/hers* or *they/them/theirs*. When in doubt, ask for a person’s preferences.

Failing to respect gender identification and to use pronouns consistently can result in confusion, as happened recently as I discussed a case with a student. The plaintiff in the case was Gloria, and the case consistently used feminine pronouns for that person. In a span of 15 seconds, the student referred to the plaintiff as *they*, then *he*, and again *they*. Were we discussing the same case?

If you follow the pronoun clues in reading and in conversation, you’ll likely

	Subjective Pronouns	Objective Pronouns	Possessive Pronouns
1st person singular	I	me	my/mine
2nd person singular	you	you	your/yours
3rd person singular	he she they it	him her them it	his/his her/hers their/theirs its
1st person plural	we	us	our/ours
2nd person plural	you	you	your/yours
3rd person plural	they	them	their/theirs

Chart 2

be just fine. Again, when in doubt, it's best to ask.

Conclusion

Let's celebrate this grammatical leap forward. One small pronoun is a giant leap for humankind — validating the identity of colleagues rather than treating them as a grammatical inconvenience. Let's also remember that pronouns still have specific roles and use our pronouns consistently. ■

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ENDNOTES

1. In addition to updating the definition, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/they>, Merriam-Webster also provided commentary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/singular-nonbinary-they>.
2. The American Psychological Association quickly confirmed the change in its style guide, <https://apastyle.apa.org/blog/singular-they>.
3. This point was covered recently in "What Quakers Can Teach Us About the Politics of Pronouns" by Teresa M. Bejan, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/16/opinion/sunday/pronouns-quakers.html>.
4. Merriam-Webster's definition is at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nonbinary>. The LGBT Foundation defines "non-binary" more broadly as identifying as having a gender between or beyond "man" and "woman"; fluctuating between those two categories; or having no gender, whether permanently or sometimes. <https://lgbt.foundation/who-we-help/trans-people/non-binary>.
5. I realize that I lied earlier when I promised that I'd present just three sets of pronouns. Pronouns in this set (truly the last for today) include *myself, yourself, himself, herself, ourselves, yourselves* and *themselves*.
6. The Chicago Manual of Style agreed with *themself* as the singular, way back in 2017. <https://cmosshtalk.com/2017/04/03/chicago-style-for-the-singular-they>.
7. Often the easiest revision is to make the subject plural. *Jurors* should vote *their* conscience. (Whew! That was tough!) For more ideas, see "Finessing Gender Pronouns," Oregon State Bar *Bulletin* (June 2007).
8. *The New Oxford American Dictionary* (3d ed. 2010).

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