CHANGES IN SINGULAR
THEY
OVERVIEW

Singular *they* is undergoing a change in progress

- This is my friend Hayden. *They* are a computer programmer.

Production of singular *they* for non-generic referents varies by age and gender

More gender categories

Change from above
Attitudes towards singular they

Language commentators say:

◉ It’s Good!
  ◦ You should try to use it to avoid sexist language, or to avoid misgendering someone

◉ It’s Bad!
  ◦ The number mismatch is incorrect, he is a perfectly fine generic alternative (nonbinary people are not a consideration)

◉ It’s Hard!
  ◦ It’s good in theory but it just sounds ungrammatical to me, I can’t remember to use it, I don’t understand how to use verbs with it
Syntacticians working on singular *they* say there is a change

(\text{Bjorkman 2017, Konnelly and Cowper submitted})

Conservative grammar:
- *they* + quantifiers (*everyone, someone, no one*)
- \textbf{Someone} forgot \textbf{their} backpack.

Intermediate grammar:
- *they* + indefinites (*a student, some professor*) or some definites (*the ideal student*)
- \textbf{A student} forgot \textbf{their} backpack.

Innovative grammar:
- *they* + definite, specific referents (*my best friend, Devon, that professor*)
- \textbf{Kirby} forgot \textbf{their} backpack.
METHODOLOGY

Bigger study: how misgendering correlates to attitudes about transgender people (Conrod 2016)

Why is there so much singular they in this study?

- Designed to elicit pronouns intentionally
- Conditions where gender of (real-life or fictional) referent was unclear, people didn’t know each other, or lots of nonbinary referents

Tasks (for the pronouns part)

- Dyadic interviews (acquaintances and strangers)
- Solo interviews
- Film clip responses (Boy Meets Girl, 2013)
METHODOLOGY

Subjects:
- Recruited transgender people first, then paired with either an acquaintance (of their choice) or a stranger (I recruited)
- n=22, 20 speakers analyzed so far
- Collected fall 2016-winter 2017 with field recorder by 1 interviewer (me)

Gender of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feminine-aligned</th>
<th>Masculine-aligned</th>
<th>Neither</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Age of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teens</th>
<th>Twenties</th>
<th>Thirties</th>
<th>Forties</th>
<th>(Fifties)</th>
<th>Sixties</th>
<th>Seventies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>(none)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESULTS: summary

Age differences: people in their twenties are leading

Gender differences: nonbinary people are leading, followed by women
RESULTS: age differences

Use of Singular They by Age group

Proportion of 3rd person pronouns

Age group

teen

twenties

thirties

forties

sixties

seventies
RESULTS: gender differences

Use of Singular They by Gender group

![Bar chart showing the use of singular they by gender group.](chart.png)
DISCUSSION

Apparent time change

- Unclear if there’s also individual change (teens → twenties?)

Gender categories: are nonbinary people generally more innovative than other genders?

- Nonbinary genders have more reason to explicitly align themselves with sg. they – and probably have more nonbinary friends (Ackerman 2018)
- More studies need to explicitly recruit and analyze nonbinary people when you think a change is happening
DISCUSSION

Change from above

◦ **The usual**: people are aware of this change, talk about it, and can identify their own use of it without linguistic training.

◦ **The unusual**: this is not necessarily a prestigious variable
  ◦ language commentary is both for and against this change (though the tides may be turning lately)
  ◦ the gender politics are also mixed. There is possible stigma in some social contexts attached to this variable
  ◦ Change coming from groups with high salience but not necessarily high status
CONCLUSION

*Singular they is undergoing a change*—apparent time data shows that younger speakers use non-generic singular *they* more frequently.

Changes from above are not always necessarily prestigious—more investigation into changes coming from low-status, high-salience groups.

We need to be analyzing more than two genders when looking at language change.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Selected Citations

Ackerman, L. (2017). *Reevaluating how gender is represented and used during sentence processing*. Retrieved from https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B5bI1tcy5_hV1ZLWlpkRiptVWM/view


Konnelly, Lex & Cowper, Elizabeth (under review). The future is *they*: The morphosyntax of an English epicene pronoun.


