

The Perfect Pronoun: Singular ‘They’

I AM YOUR stereotypical, cisgender, middle-aged suburban dad. I dabble in woodworking, I take out the garbage, and I covet my neighbor’s Porsche. My tepid masculinity apparently rings loudly enough that most people call me “he” and “him.” And that’s fine; I will not be offended if you refer to me by those traditional, uselessly gendered pronouns.

But “he” is not what you *should* call me. If we lived in a just, rational, inclusive universe — one in which we were not all so irredeemably obsessed by gender — there would be no requirement for you to have to guess my gender just to refer to me in the common tongue.

There are few linguistic advantages to the requirement. When I refer to myself, when I talk about a group of people, or when I chat with someone directly, I don’t have to bother with gender. “I,” “they” and “you” are gender neutral.

So why does standard English impose gender on the third-person singular? And why do elite cultural institutions — universities, publishers and media outlets — still encourage all this gendering? To get to my particular beef: When I refer to an individual whose gender I don’t know here in *The Times*, why do I usually have to choose either “he” or “she” or, in the clunkiest phrase ever cooked up by small-minded grammarians, “he or she”?

I shouldn’t have to. It’s time for the singular “they.” Indeed, it’s well past time — and I’d like to do my part in pushing “they” along.

So: If you write about me, tweet about me, or if you are a Fox News producer working on a rant about my extreme politics, I would prefer if you left my gender out of it. Call me “they,” as in: “Did you read Farhad’s latest column — they’ve really gone off the deep end!!”

And — unless you feel strongly about your specific pronouns, which I respect — I would hope to call you “they” too, because the world will be slightly better off if we abandoned unnecessary gender signifiers as a matter of routine communication. Be a “him” or “her” or whatever else in the sheets, but consider also being a “they” and “them” in the streets.

I suspect my call will be dismissed as useless virtue-signaling, but there are several clear advantages to the singular “they.” The main one: Everyone already says it. Scholars say “they” and its variants are widely used to refer to an individual, both generically and specifically, whether you know their gender or not — as I just did right in this sentence.

“They” is also perceived as neutral on gender. When people encounter it,

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they’re as likely to guess it’s referring to a man, woman or nonbinary person.

This makes singular “they” a perfect pronoun — it’s flexible, inclusive and obviates the risk of inadvertent misgendering. And in most circumstances, it creates perfectly coherent sentences that people don’t have to strain to understand.

That’s probably why the singular “they” is gaining adherents not just in transgender and nonbinary communities but everywhere else, too. Lyft sent me this notification the other day: “Juan is almost here. Meet them outside.”

Other than intolerant people, there is one group that harbors doubts about “they”: grammarians. The singular “they” has long been common in English, but since the 18th century, grammar stylists have discouraged it on the grounds that “they” has to be plural. Institutions that cater to grammar snoots still disfavor the usage. *The Times* allows the singular “they” when the person being referred to prefers it, but its stylebook warns against widespread usage: “Take particular care to avoid confusion if using they for an individual.”

I think that’s too cautious; we should use “they” more freely, because language should not default to the gender binary. One truth I’ve come to understand too late in life is how thoroughly our lives are shaped by gender norms. These expectations are felt most acutely by those who don’t conform to the gender binary.

But even for people who do fit within it, the very idea that there is a binary is invisibly stifling.

I saw this most clearly after having kids.

From their very earliest days, my son and daughter, fed by marketing and entertainment and (surely) their parents’ modeling, hemmed themselves into silly gender norms. They gravitated to boy toys and girl toys, boy colors and girl colors, boy shows and girl shows. This was all so sad: They were limiting their very liberty to satisfy some collective abstraction. With little prospect for escape: Gender is a ubiquitous prison for the mind, reinforced everywhere, by everyone, and only rarely questioned.

We’re a long way from eradicating these expectations in society. But we could at least make an attempt to eradicate them in language.

Call me “they,” and I’ll call you “them.” I won’t mind, and I hope you won’t, either. □

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