Gender-Identity and the Naturalness of Referential Singular *They*

Trevor Block
Simon Fraser University

Research Question. First, I look at whether referential singular *they* requires that its antecedent is genderless (e.g. *someone, cyclist*), or if it may also refer to antecedents with expected gender (e.g. *mechanic, secretary*). Second, I investigate whether there are differences between non-binary and cisgender people when judging the naturalness of referential singular *they*.

Background. Singular *they* is commonly used to refer to genderless, generic singular antecedents (Bodine, 1975; MacKay, 1980). Gender-neutral *they* has become more prominent in recent years, frequently used by individuals who identify as non-binary. No studies have looked at naturalness ratings across various genders for singular *they*. A study conducted via paper questionnaire by Doherty and Conklin (2017) shows that when *them* refers to low gender-expectancy antecedents, speakers rate them similarly to constructions with *him/her*. However, when *them* refers to high gender-expectancy antecedents, speakers rate them worse than gender-mismatch cases, suggesting that *them* cannot refer to antecedents with expected or known gender.

Current Study. The current study investigates singular *they* instead of singular *them* for two reasons. First, the third person singular pronoun is used more commonly as a subject than as an object in speech and writing. Second, *they* will always be pronounced and heard as /ðeɪ/ in speech, unlike *them*, which can be uttered as /əm/, potentially being interpreted in speech as '*him*'. 30 non-binary and 50 cisgender participants were recruited. Participants then read sentences in a word-by-word self-paced reading paradigm. Following each sentence, participants gave a naturalness rating about the previous sentence on a scale of 1 (unnatural) to 7 (natural). Sentences with proper names were also included, as shown in (1).

(1) **Natalie**$_i$ was birdwatching alone in the park. After seeing an exotic bird, **she**$_i$/**they**$_i$ decided to write a journal entry.

Results. Non-binary participants tended to rate all sentence types higher than cisgender participants. Sentences with *they* were rated as the most unnatural compared to *he/she* matches and mismatches. Gender-mismatch (high-marked) cases were rated as more natural than sentences with *they*. Non-binary participants rated sentences with proper names and *they* higher than cisgender participants.

	Example	Cisgender	Non-binary
Control	mechanic – he	6.09	6.33
High-Marked	mechanic – she	5.90	6.27
High-They	mechanic – they	5.52	5.93
Low-Marked	cyclist – he	6.15	6.32
Low-They	cyclist – they	5.55	5.95
Name-Match	Sarah - she	6.03	6.28
Name-They	Sarah - they	4.65	5.64

Table 1. Naturalness Ratings (1-7)

Implications. *They* may refer to antecedents with or without expected gender, but cisgender participants find it less natural than non-binary participants. Non-binary participants have less restrictions in their usage of referential singular *they* with proper names than cisgender

participants. The results also show that theoretically, singular *they* does not consider gender agreement with its antecedent.

References.

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