

Five- & Eight-Year-Olds' Interpretation of Ambiguous *They*

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The current rise in acknowledgement of nonbinary and gender nonconforming individuals has led to an upswing in both use and acceptance of *they/them* as a singular pronoun [1-2]. As a result, the pronoun *they* has become potentially ambiguous between singular and plural interpretations in some cases: e.g., the example in (1), where Alex uses *they/them* pronouns.

(1) Alex went running with Liz. They fell down.

Recent work [3] explored how adults interpret *they* in these ambiguous contexts. Participants answered questions about a series of two-sentence stories like (1), and their answers demonstrated that (i) the pronoun *they* can be successfully interpreted as singular in contexts with only one person (One-person) but is less often interpreted as singular in those with two people (Two-person) and (ii) explicitly stating one's pronouns as *they/them* promotes interpretation of singular *they* in ambiguous (Two-person) contexts. The present study expanded upon these findings with a novel examination of how children identify whether *they* has a singular or plural interpretation in ambiguous cases: Can children successfully map this pronoun onto a singular individual at all, and is how they resolve ambiguous *they* different than how it is resolved by adults?

We conducted a partial replication of [3]'s first experiment using only the Explicit condition (i.e., participants were informed which pronouns each character utilized) with 3 groups of English-speaking participants: 5-year-olds (N=24, mean: 5;0, range: 4;6-5;6), 8-year-olds (N=24, mean: 8;0, range: 7;6-8;6), and an adult control group (N=24, mean: 37;8, range: 19;3-59;10). The same 3 characters [Liz (*she/her*), Will (*he/him*), Alex (*they/them*)] and two-sentence stories as in [3] were used, see (1). Trials (n=35) were organized into 6 semi-randomized blocks. The first two blocks contained One-person training trials (n=12; 4 per character) to cement character / pronoun understanding. The remaining 4 blocks contained a combination of filler trials (stories never involving Alex, n=15) and critical trials (n=8). For critical trials, each story had a One-person and Two-person context, which were distributed in a Latin square. Crucially, every story was followed by a critical question asking who did the action in the second sentence (e.g., *Who fell down?*); participants then clicked on their answer from 4 pictures given on the screen (Alex; other story character; Alex + other story character; other story character + distractor character).

Singular interpretation of the pronoun *they* is prominent in One-person contexts but less-so in ambiguous Two-person contexts for all age groups (Fig1, $\beta=-3.59$, $SE=0.40$, $Z=-8.92$, $p<0.01$). Comparing all children to adults, no significant differences in interpretation were found ($\beta=-0.26$, $SE=0.48$, $Z=-0.54$, $p\geq 0.1$); children of both age groups can successfully map the pronoun *they* onto a singular individual and also interpret ambiguous *they* similarly to adults. However, significant differences between the child age groups were found: 5-year-olds had significantly more singular interpretations than 8-year-olds in the Two-person context ($\beta=1.09$, $SE=0.44$, $Z=2.47$, $p<0.05$). These findings indicate that older children potentially undergo a form of overregularization of *they* due to grammatical rules enforced at school. Avenues for future study into how children acquire and use this pronoun, as well as exploration of potential significant social factors, will be discussed.

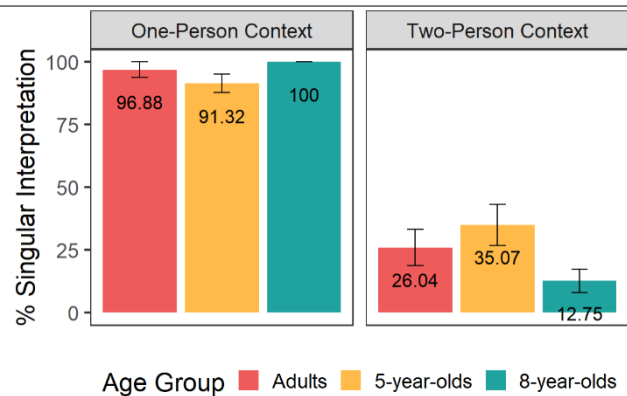


Fig1. Average % singular *they* interpretation split by story context (One- vs. Two-person) & age.

References

- [1] Konnelly, L., & Cowper, E. (2020). Gender diversity and morphosyntax: An account of singular they. *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics*, 5(1), Article 1.
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- [3] Arnold, J. E., Mayo, H. C., & Dong, L. (2021). My pronouns are they/them: Talking about pronouns changes how pronouns are understood. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 28(5), 1688–1697.

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