

Viability of Shey and Other Neopronouns in English

Introduction: This study seeks to add to the emerging but increasing literature on the formal structures of nonbinary pronouns (see for example Conrod, 2019; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020) by investigating the featural structure of neopronouns as inferred from grammaticality judgments, in particular, testing for the presence of gender and number features in English neopronouns. Though those neopronouns are likely not in the grammars of many English speakers, the acceptability judgements of them can give us some useful insight into how they are incorporated into grammars of those speakers who already accept them, which may be predictive of a change in progress (Rose et al., 2023).

Background: In the context of recent research into feature hierarchies (Harley & Ritter, 2002), Bjorkman (2017) posited a featural content for singular *they* where number, gender, and animacy are underspecified. This overgenerates because it allows singular *they* for singular inanimates, which is not grammatical (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). Konnelly and Cowper (2020) provided another structure for singular *they*, where gender is optional but number and animacy are not, making *they* the default for singular animates. Conrod, Schultz, and Ahn (to appear) found that the reflexive for *they* is undergoing a change to *themselves* for proper names and proximal definites. Rose et al. (2023) found that neopronouns are more accepted when people can make an analogy with he, she, or they. It is in this context that I investigate the following questions.

Research Questions: How acceptable are neopronouns currently? What number agreement(s) are acceptable for which neopronouns?

Methods: Participants were asked to decide whether pairs of sentences (e.g., This is Arbor. Ze are gossiping.) were acceptable (defined here as looking and/or sounding okay) with the options ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘maybe’. The first sentence introduced the person or people that the second sentence talked about. There were 3 variables: the pronoun (she, he, they (sg), they (pl), ze, shey, and co), the gender usually associated with the proper name, and the number agreement. Participants were then asked to fill out a questionnaire that was mainly about their demographics but also included questions about their thoughts on the neopronoun *shey*.

Preliminary results: There were 8 participants, 6 of which identified themselves as trans, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming. *Ze* (sg) was the most accepted, likely because of the rhyme with he and she and/or more familiarity with the neopronoun. *Shey* (pl) was found more acceptable than *shey* (sg), perhaps because of an analogy with *they*. *Co* was the least accepted and may be seen more as a noun. If number agreement on the verb is not salient for pronouns, it could explain why it is the only one that got under 50% ‘yes’ responses for plural agreement.

Significance: This study shows that number agreement that does not align with grammatical number was found acceptable and cannot be explained only through phonological analogy, since *ze* (pl) and *shey* (sg) also had high acceptability. If pronoun number agreement is not salient in verbs, that may explain why *they* can have plural verb agreement and a singular reflexive.

	ze	shey	co
sg	95.83%	72.92%	66.67%
pl	64.58%	85.42%	25%

Percentage of ‘yes’ responses

References

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