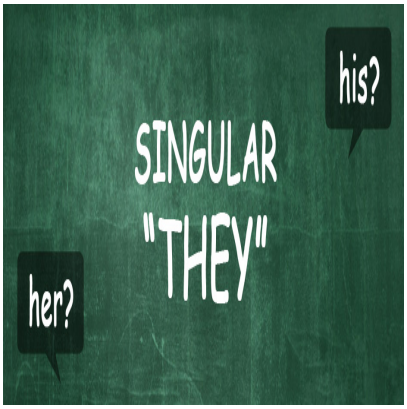

Description

Changes in social perceptions can lead to changes in language and grammar, and perhaps nowhere has this been seen as clearly as with the usage of pronouns. While at one time *he* used to mean *people* (men and women) in general, this has changed, and the task of writing without gender bias has become more complicated. Social awareness has increased towards transgender identity and the terms used for gender identity; therefore, the pronouns that writers must use have seen changes as well.

The Classic “They”

Grammarians point to the historic use of *they* as a singular pronoun, where the term means one person rather than a group of people. This use is found in the King James Bible—“In lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves” (Philippians 2:3)—and in the writing of Shakespeare (“God send everyone their heart’s desire”). Those who wrote and spoke English in the 18th century often used *they* or *them* as singular pronouns.

The Universal “He”

Following this period, writers balked at the usage of a plural pronoun for a single person. The writing communities of Europe and the United States used the “masculine generic”—that is, *he* refers to a person of either gender. The sentence “Every doctor must focus on the field of medicine *he* has chosen” would be considered acceptable. Most readers, especially prior to the 18th century, would assume that the physician referred to was male.

Contemporary Style

Writers who consult the 16th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* will find that the singular *they* is discouraged. At CMS 5.46, it reads the following:

Because *he* is no longer accepted as a generic pronoun referring to a person of either sex, it has become common in speech and in informal writing to substitute the third-person plural pronouns *they, them, their*, and *themselves*, and the nonstandard singular *themselves*. (*The Chicago Manual of Style*,

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2010)

But is *they* allowed? The passage continues, “While this usage is accepted in casual contexts, it is still considered ungrammatical in formal writing.” Similarly, the APA style does not encourage the usage of the singular *they* either and proposes alternatives, i.e., recast the sentence, substitute “he or she,” or delete the pronoun altogether. However, at the same time, informal English is embracing *they*. In casual conversation, we may hear “a parent wants the best care for their child” or “no one applauded for a song they didn’t like.” Thus, writing seems to be following suit.

Bias-Free Options

One controversial aspect of using *he* in formal writing is that it seems to show bias. Writers who insist using a gender-specific pronoun can avoid prejudice by using the pronouns alternatively. *He* and *she* can be used as needed, alternating by chapter or by paragraph. The truncated *s/he* is still sometimes seen, but its use seems to be decreasing.

Innovative Alternatives

Some have tried to resolve the gender bias issue by inventing new pronouns. Dennis Baron, professor of English and linguistics at the University of Illinois and the author of *The Epicene Pronoun: The Word That Failed*, came up with a number of alternatives such as “thon,” “le,” “ip,” “zi” and “hiser,” but none of these has seen widespread popularity.

Is *They* Gaining Acceptance?

While individual writers may still argue over a plural term being used for the singular, writing collectives have moved forward. At a meeting of the American Dialect Society, a number of linguists declared the singular “they” as the Word of the Year. So, what is likely to win? The answer is Simplicity. *They* is shorter (one syllable), faster, and tidier than *he or she* or *s/he.* Also, it is now gaining acceptance in everyday conversation and informal writing. So, the chances are that it is here to stay.

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