

人間以外の動物に対して単数形の THEY を使用するには特別な文法が必要ですか？

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Does using singular THEY with nonhuman animals require special grammar?

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Introduction

The use of the third-person pronoun THEY with a singular pronoun is long-established (Balhorn, 2004; Curzan, 2003), and despite a campaign of proscription that began in earnest in the 1700s and the ensuing stigma (Bodine, 1975), negative appraisals of using THEY as a singular pronoun have dramatically weakened since the 1970s – numerous style guides now recommend it, at least in certain contexts. The most well-established and widespread varieties of singular THEY often go unnoticed. So much so that singular THEY is routinely produced even by those who express negativity toward it (Bate, 1978; LaScotte, 2016). Even in some apparently unusual contexts singular THEY use is readily processed without incident by those who dispute its acceptability (Brown, 2019). There are ways, however, in which modern usage of singular THEY (hereafter, ST) has extended beyond the ways it has been used historically. The older and most well-established varieties of ST involve antecedents and referents that are indefinite

or quantificational, or whose social gender (not to be confused with the concept of grammatical gender) is epicene/unknown/hidden. Examples of such usage are in (1).

- (1) a. Please make sure each guest finds their seat.
- b. Could the person who drew the short straw introduce {themselves/themselves} first?
- c. Someone left their bag behind.
- d. An anonymous user left an email address for you to contact them.
- e. Every driver should have their license with them.

Furthermore, ST appears to be available for gendered antecedents as long as they are quantified, as in the example in (2), taken from an interview with the author Toni Morrison and reported in Meyers (1993).

- (2) a. Everybody's grandmother was a teenager when they got pregnant.

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The newer extensions of ST revolve around definite, specific antecedents whose gender is known or inferable as in (3). Some people do not find these extensions acceptable.

- (3) a. My boss never makes their instructions clear.
b. Your friend told us what they need.
c. Her youngest child showed me where they scraped their knee.

For some who say the sentences in (3) are acceptable, however, the sentences in (4) are not acceptable. Still others deem those in both (3) and (4) acceptable.

- (4) a. His sister brought their own dishes.
b. Robert told me they would be late.

Bjorkman (2017) refers to usage such as that in (1) and (2) as Conservative (meaning essentially that these are the long-standing and well-established usages of ST), usage such as that in (3) as Innovative, and attempts to explain why some people might find the usage in (3) acceptable but the usage in (4) unacceptable. Konnelly and Cowper (2020) suggest there is an on-going shift in the grammatical system of English speakers. They describe usage such as that in (1) and (2) as being Stage 1 of this shift (essentially an as-yet unshifted stage), the kind of usage found in (3) as being Stage 2, and the sentences in (4) as being Stage 3 (the completion of the shift).

But what about sentences such as those in (5) in which the antecedent or referent is a

nonhuman animal (hereafter, NHA) ?

- (5) a. Chirps and trills are how a mother cat tells their kitten to follow them.
b. This grizzly was sedated and tagged [...] Look at how big their paws are!
c. Look at how happy your dog is when you hold their paw!
d. Where every dog has their day
e. Quite comical that some think killing a cow is good for their welfare.
f. Now I'm [on] the bus with a slug, nowhere safe to put them.
g. If the dog is not displaying signs of heatstroke, let them rest while you establish how long they were in the car.

Each of the examples in (5) are attested, 'in-the-wild' sentences taken from social media posts, organizational websites, and press/media outlets. What are we to make of these with regard to how grammatically conservative/innovative they are, or what stage they might belong to in a pronominal system restructuring? Bjorkman as well as Konnelly and Cowper mention the use of ST with NHAs, but fleetingly and it is not wholly clear how they would answer the question above. Indeed, most scholarly work regarding ST is focused on its use with people.

For many, at first glance the use of ST with NHAs may seem to obviously be grammatically innovative, perhaps even more so than the extension of ST to people whose gender is known or inferable, including named individuals. I will argue, through engagement

with the work of both Cowper and Konnelly as well as Bjorkman, however, that grammatically the use of ST with NHAs is fundamentally similar to the use of ST with humans; that there are ways of using ST with NHAs that fit Konnelly and Cowper’s Stage 1, Stage 2, and Stage 3 systems. Additionally, I will argue that the sense of oddness some people feel toward the idea of using ST with NHAs is not rooted in questions of well-formedness, but is simply a contingent product of habit and convention.

Conservative / Stage 1 System

Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly and Cowper (2020) are in basic agreement about the distribution of ST in this category, with Konnelly and Cowper giving a basic description of the system at this stage as “quantified antecedent, or antecedent of unknown gender” (p. 5). They do have theoretical differences which lead them to describe the system’s realizational rules differently. Bjorkman puts the rules this way (6) :

- (6) a. [FEM] [SG] ↔ *she*
- b. [MASC] [SG] ↔ *he*
- c. [INANIMATE] ↔ *it*
- d. *elsewhere* ↔ *they*

Konnelly and Cowper put the rules this way (7) :

- (7) a. [SG] [FEM] ↔ *she*
- b. [SG] [MASC] ↔ *he*
- c. [SG, INANIM] ↔ *it*

d. Elsewhere ↔ *they*

Despite the theoretical differences, for the purposes of the present paper, we can see that these are similar in which features are part of the system : the features FEMININE, MASCULINE, and INANIMATE. All three are contrastive, making *THEY* the only option if an animate’s gender is epicene or unknown; and ST is an option for pronouns bound by quantified antecedents (e.g., “no mother wants {her/their} child to go hungry”). One notable point is that in this system ST is not available for inanimates although plural *THEY* is of course available for referring to both animates and inanimates.

While describing this Conservative/Stage 1 system, Konnelly and Cowper do not mention NHAs. However, Bjorkman (p. 5), in saying that “*they* is restricted to singular *animate* referents”, clarifies in a footnote that “More accurately, *it* is required for non-persons, both non-human animals and small children and infants can be optionally referred to as *they* or *it* [...], despite being animate.” This raises a question as to whether *IT* is truly a pronoun of inanimacy, but also about the nature of animacy and its role in the pronominal system. I will return to this question. For now, it suffices to say that it appears that many of the examples introduced in (5), including those repeated in (8), fit the Conservative/Stage 1 system of ST usage.

- (8) a. Where every dog has their day
- b. Now I’m [on] the bus with a slug, nowhere safe to put them.

- c. Chirps and trills are how a mother cat tells their kitten to follow them.
- d. This grizzly was sedated and tagged
[...] Look at how big their paws are!

One important point to note is that with NHAs we are not typically concerned with questions of social gender, or notional gender (McConnell-Ginet, 2015), but with sex categories; thus, we might slightly redefine Konnelly and Cowper's basic description of Stage 1 to "quantified antecedent, or antecedent of unknown gender in the case of humans or unknown sex in the case of NHAs". Each of the examples in (8) demonstrate instances of a quantified animate and/or an animate whose sex is epicene/unknown/hidden, and these animates happen to not be human. ST is available for NHAs even in the Conservative/Stage 1 system of ST usage.

Innovative / Stage 2 Variety

There appears to be some kind of a shift away from the three-way-contrastive-features system of the Conservative/Stage 1 system of ST in the grammars of people for whom sentences such as those in (3) are grammatical. Bjorkman argues that in this Innovative system gender has ceased to be a contrastive feature, and is simply optional. But then the sentences in (4) should be acceptable in this system. As to why some people would find the sentences in (3) acceptable but the sentences in (4) unacceptable, Bjorkman argues that the antecedents in (4) maintain a relevant gender

feature from the referent which makes a particular gendered pronoun obligatory. Indeed, we can see that the examples in (4) differ from those in (3) by being gender-specific nouns or proper names relatively strongly associated with a binary gender category.

Bjorkman's explanation for this is that "if a pronoun refers back to an individual introduced by a noun like *actress*, which bears a feminine gender feature, the pronoun must similarly bear a feminine feature" (p. 10-11) and that "a pronoun can add to the linguistic features associated with a referent, but it cannot underspecify them" (p. 11). A noun phrase like "my boss" does not carry a gender feature, but a noun phrase like "my sister" does, and this feature cannot be ignored by a subsequent pronoun, according to Bjorkman. Therefore, the examples in (3) are acceptable to those who have the Innovative/Stage 2 system, but the examples in (4) are in general not acceptable to those people.

Konnelly and Cowper do not agree with Bjorkman's analysis. They argue that in the Innovative/Stage 2 system, the three-way-contrastive-features system remains intact, which is to say the system's fundamental structure is unchanged. What has changed, they argue, is the proportion of nouns which carry a contrastive gender feature; there are fewer of them. Essentially, people who have the Innovative/Stage 2 system have the same system as those who have the Conservative/Stage 1 variety, but how nouns are specified in a speaker's lexicon has changed. Nouns like "friend", even when referring to an individual

whose gender is known, are no longer specified for gender (that is, the referent's known social gender does not make use of a gendered pronoun obligatory).

Proper names are also affected. A proper name that is not strongly associated with a binary gender category may not be specified for gender in the speaker's lexicon. Also, acquaintance with a gender non-binary individual could result in a gender-unspecified entry in the lexicon for that person's proper name, perhaps alongside an entry in which the same proper name is specified for gender (i.e. there could be two entries for the proper name in the lexicon, one gender-specific, one not). (9a) is an example of a proper name that may have no gender-specification in a speaker's lexicon, and (9b) is an example of a proper name that could belong to a non-binary individual and so an entry for that name that is not specified for gender has been inserted into a speaker's lexicon.

- (9) a. Taylor said they will be late.
b. Trevor said they will be late.

This amounts to an Innovative/Stage 2 speaker making changes to their lexicon in a case-by-case fashion. Which nouns and proper names are no longer specified for gender will differ from speaker to speaker. Locating the gender feature on an entry in the lexicon, rather than as something assigned by the referent, is a crucial distinction with Bjorkman. Konnelly and Cowper's simple description of this category is "antecedent of known gender, but ungendered description/

name" (p. 5), to which we could add "in the case of NHAs, antecedent of known sex, but unsexed description/name". They offer persuasive reasons for preferring their account, including that if we follow Bjorkman's account past the immediate questions at hand, it is liable to make inaccurate predictions about well-formed strings.

Stage 3

While Bjorkman tries to account for why Innovative/Stage 2 speakers would reject the sentences in (4), Konnelly and Cowper examine sentences such as those in (4) as being a further, and to some an acceptable, extension of ST. For Konnelly and Cowper, the restructuring of the pronominal system occurs with the move to Stage 3. Their basic description of Stage 3 is: "antecedent of any gender, no restriction on description/name" (p. 5), to which we might add the familiar note about sex and NHAs. In other words, in the Stage 3 system ST is available for any singular and animate referent. While they examine this "even more innovative variety" (p. 15), they argue that "Bjorkman's account of what we call Stage 1 and Stage 2 cannot easily be extended to account for the Stage 3 system" (p. 15).

Crucially, they argue that a speaker can move from Stage 1 to Stage 3 directly, and that the Stage 1 to Stage 3 move is the same as the Stage 2 to Stage 3 move (recall, Stage 1 and Stage 2 are structurally identical). There is no necessary process of updating the lexicon noun-by-noun, name-by-name; they suggest that many speakers who have the

Stage 3 system in fact did just that, moved directly from Stage 1 to Stage 3.

So why would some speakers enter Stage 2 rather than go directly to Stage 3? Konnelly and Cowper suggest that the restructuring that takes place in Stage 3 is that the contrastive FEMININE and MASCULINE features become completely optional modifier features (a move from [FEM] and [MASC] to <*fem*> and <*masc*>). Konnelly and Cowper write that “This move is essentially the grammatical manifestation of an understanding that so-called “natural gender” is not a binary property” and that “it would seem that shifting into Stage 3 involves making a separate conceptual leap away from the cultural assumption that all persons can be categorized according to a gender binary, a leap that requires engaging with wider socio-cultural changes regarding gender and gender identity” (p. 10). If this “leap” is difficult, for whatever reason, then an individual may respond to this in-progress grammatical change by moving into the Stage 2 system rather than the Stage 3 system. Of course, such individuals could move to the Stage 3 system eventually, at which point their grammars would be the same as those who moved directly from Stage 1 to Stage 3.

But what about NHAs? Cowper and Konnelly write that for at least some Stage 3 speakers, ST is available for pets. They give the following examples (10).

- (10) a. Fluffy didn't eat any of their dry food this morning.
b. Barkley loves to chase squirrels, but

they never catch any.

However, are both of these examples only available to people who have the Stage 3 system? Let's think about (10a) in particular. The referent, “Fluffy”, is an NHA, whose human companion presumably knows Fluffy's sex. It seems to me that the proper name “Fluffy” could be used for a female or male NHA (in other words, I don't find it strongly associated with a sex category). This fits the basic description of Stage 2 : *antecedent of known gender, but ungendered description/name ; or in the case of NHAs, antecedent of known sex, but unsexed description/name*. (10a) should be acceptable to people who have the Stage 2 system.

But even if someone considers the proper name “Fluffy” to be strongly associated with one sex category, sentences such as those in (11) demonstrate that using ST with NHAs should be available, generally speaking, to people who have the Stage 2 system.

- (11) a. My puppy didn't eat any of their dry food this morning.
b. My pig loves to chase squirrels, but they never catch any.

Examples of using ST with NHAs that would only be available to those who have the Stage 3 system, where the sex is known and the description/name are sexed, are in (12). (12c) is repeated from (10b) ; although I don't find the proper name Fluffy to be strongly associated with a particular sex, in my mental associations the proper name Barkley is a

name for males, making (12c) a usage only available in the Stage 3 system.

- (12) a. Jack the Rooster is atop their perch.
b. Does that sow know where their piglets are?
c. Barkley loves to chase squirrels, but they never catch any.

Thus, we can see that using ST with NHAs is available in the Conservative/Stage 1, Innovative/Stage 2, and Stage 3 systems in parallel to the use of ST with human antecedents. In other words, use of ST with NHAs is not always innovative in terms of grammatical structure, and when it is, it is innovative in the same ways that ST usage with human antecedents can be.

NHAs, pronouns, and animacy

Nonetheless, to many the idea of using ST with NHAs may still seem odd or off in some way, might be deemed unacceptable, even though such feelings and judgements cannot in general be due to special grammatical structure. At this point, I will return to an issue briefly raised earlier : the nature of animacy and its role in the pronominal system. The issue of animacy is crucial for understanding the sense of oddness some may feel toward the idea of using ST with NHAs.

As Bjorkman noted, even in the Conservative/Stage 1 system, ST is available for NHAs. This is also evident from the examples in (8). But there still remains a crucial difference between the pronominal

treatment of NHA and human antecedents : IT is available to use with NHAs, but not with humans without being extremely pejorative and demeaning (aside from small children and infants for whom using IT may be acceptable). That is, human antecedents may be referred to with HE, SHE, or THEY; but NHA antecedents may be referred to with HE, SHE, THEY or IT. The crucial feature here is not social or notional gender, but animacy.

Referring to a human with IT is highly inappropriate because it denies animacy to a person. Why would denying a person animacy matter? Animacy is a multifaceted concept. The perception of an entity's animacy can be linked to, among other things, the perception of the aliveness, movement, agency, personhood, individuality, rationality, and sentience of the entity. The perception of animacy can differ from person to person, and may come in degrees rather than binary categories, but the notion that an entity is inanimate, or less than fully animate, associates that entity, at least to some degree, with 'thinghood'. This is why it is highly inappropriate to refer to human antecedents with IT; the human is construed as a mere 'thing'. This *deanimizing* is *dehumanizing*.

To elaborate, I offer the following rudimentary discussion of animacy, pronouns, and NHAs. I discuss this topic in much more detail in Brown (2022), and I encourage interested readers to examine many of the arguments put forth there.

Certainly, NHAs may be referred to with the animate pronouns HE and SHE if the sex

is known or can be inferred, and as we have seen, with *THEY* in a range of situations, but the common default singular pronoun of reference for NHAs in English is *IT*. Does this mean that *IT* does not actually imply inanimacy? If that were the case, what makes it almost always inappropriate for humans? There is clearly an association of *IT* with inanimacy and ‘thinghood’, and this is viewed as demeaning. Mere ‘things’ have lesser inherent worth and it is less morally troubling to treat ‘things’ in a manner that shows little to no care.

Conceivably, the perception and construal of animacy via pronoun choices may not be a matter of straightforwardly binary categories (Sealey, 2018). That is, we might perceive a vast range of potential degrees of animacy in entities, but we are restricted to a limited number of pronominal options. Thus, we might think that *HE* and *SHE*, as well as *THEY*, might be appropriate for referring to ‘more animate to fully animate’ antecedents while *IT* might be appropriate for referring to ‘less animate to completely inanimate’ antecedents.

This makes some sense and accords with how the role and marking of animacy is discussed in the relevant literature. Typically, an animacy hierarchy is posited. Humans sit at the top, or at least in a ‘fully animate’ level, of this hierarchy. NHAs are lower in the hierarchy and considered, in a sense, less animate (Yamamoto, 1999). Thus, we have a traditional state of linguistic affairs in which NHAs, as less-animate animates, may be referred to with animacy-linked pronouns, but

generally are referred to with inanimacy-linked *IT*. We should note that this depiction of a hierarchy is an attempt to describe observed tendencies; it is not a rule that NHAs must ever be referred to in English with an inanimacy-linked pronoun, be construed as less than fully animate, or that *IT* should be the default option.

Comrie (1989) argues that animacy is not actually a scale onto which all entities can be neatly placed and categorized, but in fact derives from how humans interact with and think about the world. If our perceptions of animacy, and linguistic choices about how we construe an entity as animate or not, come from how we interact with and think about the world, then what is it that does lead to sometimes referring to NHAs with animacy-linked pronouns? Mere knowledge of the NHA’s sex is not always sufficient to trigger using *HE* or *SHE* (Gardelle, 2012). Frequently, the selection of an animacy-linked pronoun is accompanied by some social, emotional, or psychological connection the speaker/author has with the NHA in question. Halliday and Hasan (1976) describe the variation between animacy-linked and inanimacy-linked pronouns used to refer to NHAs as depending on “primarily the speaker’s relationship to the species in question” (p. 47). This suggests there is yet another element that affects how we perceive and construe the animacy of various entities: the presence or lack of empathy, which is a reduced or even blurred gap between subject and object, between the self and the other (Decety, 2011).

Is the animacy hierarchy really an empathy

hierarchy (Langacker, 1991), or at least a hierarchy which accounts for degrees of empathy (Matthews, 2007) ?

The potential importance of empathy to the animacy system suggests a different architectural layout may better capture the system's nature, one not with an anthropocentric organizing principle but with an egocentric organizing principle (Gardelle & Sorlin, 2018). In an egocentric system, it would not be humans *per se* at the top of a hierarchy, but the language-using-subject and those in whom the subject perceives the strongest connections. Langacker (1991) describes this as ranking entities "according to their potential to attract our empathy, i.e., on the basis of such matters as likeness and common concerns" (p. 307). Furthermore, rather than the vertical arrangement of a hierarchy, the egocentric system might be pictured as a series of concentric rings reflecting degrees of animacy, with the language-using-subject and those who most attract their empathy, potentially including at least some NHAs, nearest the center.

The foundation of the strangeness some may feel about the idea of using ST with NHAs should be a little clearer now. Most English-speakers' linguistic practices have routinely construed NHAs as 'things' despite the fact that they are animate; for example, by defaulting to IT with only occasional use of HE or SHE when referring to NHAs. This linguistic state-of-affairs has been naturalized in the sense that it feels 'natural' to construe NHAs as just 'things'. But it may also feel inevitable if one is under the impression that

the only options are HE, SHE, and IT because in that case if one does not know the NHA's sex, then isn't IT the only option? But as we've seen, THEY is an option for NHAs, and this means there is no requirement at any time to refer to NHAs with IT.

One might make a non-grammatical argument that defaulting to IT simply reflects that it is natural to feel less empathy, in general, toward NHAs than other people. I am not arguing against the notion that organisms of all sorts (humans included), in general, are most likely to care about conspecifics more than other species. But simultaneously, doesn't defaulting to IT also reinforce that non-extension of empathy? In other words, the 'fact' of non-extension of empathy to NHAs is at least partly due to the ways that we reproduce it, including through our pronominal conventions. Moreover, even if it's natural for humans, generally speaking, to have more empathy for other humans than for NHAs, that 'fact' would not explain why our pronoun conventions routinely deny animacy to NHAs. There is nothing about the notion that humans might naturally hold less empathy for NHAs which requires referring to NHAs with IT. There is no requirement to *deanimate* NHAs and construe them as "things".

If there is no requirement, and certainly there is no grammatical requirement, to default to IT with NHAs, then what is the issue? The issue is in large part one of habit and convention. Most English-speakers are unaccustomed to construing, via pronoun selection, NHAs as, in general, anything but

mere 'things'. Now, there is more than just habit at play here, there is also the issue of 'human exceptionalism'. Whether one cares, or should care whether NHAs are construed as animate or inanimate is a separate topic that involves greater discussion of 'human exceptionalism'. The present paper does not contain this discussion, but I have argued elsewhere that we could care about this issue because the production and reproduction of 'human exceptionalism' ideology is detrimental to not only NHAs, but to humans, too (Brown, 2022), and I would like to direct interested readers to the discussion there. But as to why the idea of using ST with NHAs may seem odd to some, it is not an issue of grammar *per se*. Rather, it is largely a result of the long-standing and naturalized convention of defaulting to an inanimate construal so often – and this is part of a cycle in which pronominally treating NHAs as 'things' reproduces a general sense that NHAs are just 'things' and so in turn pronominally treating NHAs as 'things' is accepted – that the suggestion that one could select THEY and the result would be well-formed, that there could be a (non-grammatical) critique or problem with using inanimacy-linked IT, feels strange to many people in cases where, for instance, the NHA antecedent's sex is unknown. Nonetheless, as the examples in (5) illustrate, ST is available. Presumably, if people continue to use and encounter the use of ST with NHAs, the sense of oddness may dissipate (Bybee, 2007) – and this would not require any kind of new restructuring of the system or special grammar (or, at least no

more than is needed for human antecedents in various contexts), it would simply be a change in mindsets and habits with regard to how NHAs are considered.

Conclusion

The long-established ways of using ST with quantified antecedents and referents of epicene/unknown/hidden gender or sex are available with NHAs. There are grammatically innovative ways of using ST with NHAs, but these are no different from the innovative ways ST may be used with human antecedents. However, while the use of ST with human antecedents revolves around notional gender, the use of ST with NHA antecedents revolves around animacy. The sense that the general idea of using ST with NHAs is odd is based on convention and habit, not issues of grammar *per se* or well-formedness.

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