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# Better Genderless Pronouns in English

## -- Richard Stallman

## We can make English gender-neutral while respecting agreement of number.

Writing or speaking English, we always face a conundrum when we need a pronoun to refer to a person without specifying gender. Previously we needed a way to cover both male and female; nowadays some people state that they don't want to be considered either of those.

There is pressure to refer to a single person as "they", but that is confusing in practice as well as jarring. Therefore I have adopted a method of making English gender-neutral while still distinguishing between singular and plural.

English speakers have traditionally faced a choice between several bad options for referring to someone of unspecified gender:

- Always say "he". This was the rule in the time when sexism was official policy, but using it today would endorse sexism.

- Always say "she". This rejects the traditional sexism by reversing it. The book Ancillary Justice did this, and was acclaimed, but this practice is just as inaccurate as always saying "he".

- Always say "he or she". This is long and sounds bureaucratic. Also, it does not provide for nonbinary genders.

- Always say "he/she". This variant of the previous option is shorter in print but more bureaucratic in tone.

- Alternate between "he" and "she". This method is not bureaucratic, but it takes some effort and care, as I've found in years of using it in my speeches. Also, it does not provide for nonbinary genders.

- Always say "they". This violates the grammar of English so deeply that it feels terribly wrong. It also results frequently in confusing expressions in which the referent of "they" is unclear. For example:

  "When my child was removed and placed with Dad, they internalised it and took it like they did something wrong." (Both the child and Dad internalized it?)

  "Keep building the safe space. Keep eye contact with them and don't acknowledge the attacker's presence: the absence of response from you two will push them to leave the area shortly." (Which of these people does "them" include?)

"My partner places his or her smartphone where they can see it when we are together." (Some chaperons can see it?)

"Spotting the attackers emerging from the car with knives, machetes and axes, the officer raised their rifle and shot four of them dead."
(The officer raised the attackers' rifle?)

You can figure out what these sentences are intended to mean, with a little thought. So can I. That doesn't alter the fact that the pronoun confusion puts a gratuitous obstacle in the path of comprehension.

Sometimes it is very hard to figure out who "they" refers to. For instance, in this passage, "Even if they are totally unsuitable, your child has to work that out. If you intervene, you'll end up possibly pushing them even closer together, or even out of your house.'" "
(Does "they" refer to one person or two?)

Occasionally the ambiguity leads to unintended humor: "Surely a woman shouldn't be forced to wax testicles if that makes them feel uncomfortable?"
It is fun to see this in someone else's writing, but you wouldn't want this to happen in your writing.

- Use an artificial new pronoun such as "ey" or "zhe". This solution works, and avoids the confusion of using "they", but people reject those pronouns because they do not fit naturally into English.

The proponents of "they" argue that it is the correct choice because people have long used it occasionally in the singular. While it is true that people did so, that shows only that they faced a similar choice between bad options. Some chose "they" as the least bad, but that doesn't make it a good solution.

We need not choose among the bad solutions. Thanks to Marge Piercy's book Woman on the Edge of Time (which is well worth reading), we have a clean, clear and natural solution.

- Use the elegant gender-neutral pronouns "person", "per" and "pers". They fit into English smoothly. They are easy to remember, since they come from "person", and the last two resemble "her" and "hers". They are natural to use, since they work just like "she", "her" and "hers". "Pers" ends in a voiced consonant, just like "hers".

This solution is superior, since it does the job while avoiding all the drawbacks of the other solutions. I now use these pronouns some of the time in writing and speech, as illustrated in the rest of this article.

In using them, I've found that I wished that "person" were quicker to say, so I have coined the shorter alternative "perse", made from "person" by omitting the last syllable. It sounds like "purse", and represents the pronoun "person" but not the noun "person". "Perse" and "person" as pronouns are equivalent and interchangeable.

"Perse" and "purse" are not confused in speech because the singular noun "purse" requires a preceding determiner while a pronoun cannot have one. For example, "The purse is here" refers to an object, whereas "Perse is here" refers to a person.

There are those who claim that we have an obligation to refer to someone using whatever pronouns person might choose. I disagree with that position, on grounds of principle and grounds of practice. I think we should respect other people's gender identification, but which pronouns we use for any particular gender identification is a separate matter — a matter of grammar. We do not owe it to anyone to change our grammar according to per wishes.

"Person" etc. are just as gender-neutral as "they" etc., but since they are singular they fit a singular antecedent. Gender neutrality need not imply a sacrifice in English grammatical clarity; it is still possible to have both.

If someone says, "Please use 'ella', 'la', 'le' and 'su' for me," I will follow that request in Spanish (treating per as female). However, I will refuse to use them in English, because those pronouns are not English. If perse says, "Our pronouns are 'we', 'us', 'our' and 'ours'," intended to refer specifically and only to perself, I will not use them — I will not say, "We drank too much and crashed the car," if the meaning is that perse alone did so. Likewise if someone asks me to refer to per with the pronouns "he", "her" and "its", or with "hy", "hap", "happy" and "hyne".

I respect a person's choice of gender identification by using the pronouns and words that go with it. "Person" (or "perse"), "per", and "pers" are gender-neutral; they respect any gender identification, just as completely as singular "they" would do. I would not presume to dictate to other people what pronouns they should use in their speech, but we can all state our preferences and the reasons behind them.

As for "they", if you are plural by nature — for instance, if you are a colonial organism or a group mind, or if you wish to be known for having multiple personalities — I will use that plural pronoun to refer to you.

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Subsequent notes:

In response to this article, someone lectured me for believing that languages don't change. Perse did not trouble first to inquire whether that's what I believed.

Any change can be good or bad. I am advocating a better change instead of a bad one.

The adoption of singular "you" in the 17th century appears to have been a bad change for a similar reason. It eliminated an distinction whose importance is demonstrated by subsequent invention of new ways to make the distinction, such as "y'all."

Which reminds me, I once joined a few acquaintances for a ride on the pleasure boat one of them owned. He pointed at another boat and told us it was a yawl. I waved and said, "Hi, yawl!"

I am not campaigning to reintroduce "thou" into English, because that is more radical than I want to be. Opposing a bad change is less radical than reversing one.

Someone lectured me for believing that grammar books define correct grammar, without troubling first to inquire whether that's what I believed.

Every language has grammar rules. They are in the minds of speakers of the language — including, for English, me. The fact that they weren't decided by an official edict doesn't mean these rules are a trivial matter; demanding people change their grammar rules is an affront. You might succeed in convincing me to change the English grammar rules in my mind, but don't you dare demand it.

That principle applies to me as it does to you. I do not demand others adopt these gender-neutral singular pronouns; I only suggest that this change is better than the usual proposed change.

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I made some edits in July, 2019, but no major changes.

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I've been in favor of gender-neutrality in English for many years. I first used these pronouns in publication in 2012, when I edited the [Information for Maintainers of GNU Software](#) to use them. I published my proposal for [gender-neutrality in Spanish](#) in 2011.