

# GENDER NEUTRALITY: PRONOUNS

## History of gender-neutral pronouns

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Pronouns have been in use for centuries as a way of referring to individuals and groups of people in an abbreviated way. Within the former societal understanding of gender as a binary, singular pronouns he/him and she/her were generally seen as male and female pronouns, whereas plural pronouns were typically denoted a group. The meaning of gender-neutral pronouns, including they, has shifted to both a plural for a group and gender-neutral pronoun for an individual just last year when Merriam-Webster added it to the dictionary, recognizing this as a common use. In addition, other pronouns have been adopted for use as gender-neutral pronouns.

### DISCRIMINATION

Pronouns have often been at the center of cases of gender discrimination and transphobia, when an individual's identity is disrespected and devalued through misgendering with the use of inaccurate pronouns.

Sophomore Bev O'Malley uses they/them pronouns but has bumped into some issues with how others use their pronouns.

"My mom was really supportive about it, and remembers most of the time to use the correct pronouns," O'Malley said. "My dad and stepmom were confused... they still didn't understand why I wanted to use those pronouns and refuse to use them."

A BBC News article analyzed controversy over how the pronoun they should be used, with some maintaining that the pronoun can only be plural while others argue that the use of a singular they is not new. There are many instances of they being used as singular and gender-neutral in literature. The article cites the 1386 novel *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer and Shakespeare's 1599 play

Hamlet as examples of literary works using singular they.

Linguist Emma Moore said that existing pronouns adapted to be gender-neutral have tended to be more widely adopted than new gender-non-binary pronouns, as those pronouns have already been accepted as part of language.

**"IT'S NOT A DEFINING PART OF MY PERSONALITY THAT MAKES ME WHO I AM."**

Morgan Riley

Sophomore Morgan Riley acknowledged that for the older members of their family, adjusting to they/them pronouns is a learning curve.

"It's not ignorance on their part; it's like having the apps on your Home Screen arranged a certain way for fifteen years and then having them moved around," Riley said. "They're still the same apps, but it's different, and muscle memory makes it difficult to get used to."

### CULTURAL NORMS

A Swedish study demonstrated the effect that language can have on cultural norms, in this case, the effect that pronouns can have on an understanding of gender. Swedish employs the gendered pronouns 'hon' and 'han,' equivalent to 'she' and 'he' in English. In 2014, the gender-neutral pronoun 'hen' was officially added to the Swedish language. years later in the study, almost 2,000 native Swedish speakers were asked to identify a gender-neutral cartoon, and the majority of them identified it as 'hen,' as opposed to using a gendered pronoun.

Many adults today grew up without genderless pronouns in their day to day vocabulary. They have become more used and understood with younger generations. So-

cial media and a more interconnected world have allowed young people easy access to information on they/them pronouns.

Commenting on the Swedish study, Efrén Pérez, a political psychologist at UCLA, said "Most people don't have ready-made attitudes on most things we think are important. If your language nudges you in some direction, it should have some nontrivial effect on your opinion," he said. "You could boil it down to, how does the language you speak affect how you see the world?"

### NUANCED IDENTITY

9th grader Bri Rucker began identifying with she/they pronouns earlier this year.

"I struggled with my identity for years now, debating between girl, boy, enby, or anything in between. Now that I've solidified it and even found a flag that matches, I'm a lot happier with myself."

Riley explained their journey to they/them pronouns and how some push back on this.

"I'm neurodivergent, autistic to be exact, and I have trouble picking up on social cues. Since gender is, in this day in age, mostly a social construct, I never fully picked up on it," Riley said. "I can see it now, but it's harder to just shove myself into it after years of not understanding. Some people have said it's just taking the easy way out—if it's hard to understand, why try when you don't have to? For me it feels different. While I truly did not understand what gender was then, I do understand now, I just choose not to associate myself with a social construct I feel like I don't belong in."

Rucker notices that people often refer to them with she/her pronouns.

"Something difficult about also going by they/them is that people usually stick with she/her because they're more comfortable with it, and of course, I am too, but it'd be nice to have some variety," Rucker said.

While for some Riley's pronouns may be hard to understand, they don't want to try and fit themselves into a box just for the sake of others.

"But whether my gender (or lack thereof, I don't identify as having one) is my lack of understanding of social things or my brain telling me I'm just not a woman or a man, I am the way I am. And while that could change, I would rather live life expecting things to stay the same than try to suppress my feelings to make others happy," they said.

With long held uses of pronouns in the gender binary, for some there are still some unknowns and questions. O'Malley expressed a wish they have for what more people knew about they/them pronouns.

"People can identify with a specific gender and still use they/them," they said.

### NORMALIZATION

Riley wishes that the use of they/them pronouns was more normalized.

"I wish more people knew about it, but I also don't want to make it something big you teach people about. You don't have to make a whole lesson out of she/her and he/him pronouns. I wish it was just as normal to be they/them," they said.

Rucker also expressed that they feel people can wrongly categorize they/them pronouns.

"It's not really a third gender, it's more like transcending gender to a god-like state," Rucker said.

As Moore explained with they/them pronouns, people use the language they are familiar with, as they/them pronouns enter into the mainstream perhaps there will be a realization of Riley's wishes.

"All in all, I just wish that people realized I don't really think about my pronouns all that much and it's not a defining part of my personality that makes me who I am," Riley said.



ILLUSTRATION: Maddy Fisher and Evelyn Lillemo

## What obstacles are posed by gendered language?

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Language is an important way in which gender is shown in society. However, in many languages people who identify with either binary are represented by the language, while those who are in different places along the spectrum are not truly represented.

According to the British Psychological Society, there are three main categories that languages can be assigned to depending on how gender plays into the language: gendered languages, natural gender languages, and genderless languages. In gendered languages, nouns are assigned specific genders (masculine or feminine), and verbs and adjectives can change according to the gender binary of the noun. In natural gender language, nouns, verbs, and adjectives, for the most part, are not gendered, but pronouns do reflect gender. Lastly, genderless languages don't categorize nouns as masculine or feminine, and pronouns are not as differentiable as the languages in the other categories.

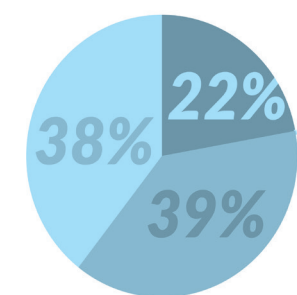
French and Spanish are two examples of gendered languages. In French, there is no official way of referring to a non-binary or gender neutral person. 'They' is always translated as 'ils' (group of males or group of multiple genders) or 'elles' (group of only females). French people have started to use the pronouns 'iel,' 'ielle,' or 'ille,' but these words have not been adopted by the Academie Francaise, the French council that handles matters of the French language. These gender neutral pronouns, however, don't solve the problem of their nouns and adjectives all being gendered; for example, to describe one's self or someone else as happy, one has the choice between 'content' (masculine) or 'contente' (feminine).

Junior Maggie Baxter, who uses she/they pronouns, takes French at school.

"In French, I am fine using the 'she' pronouns and the nouns and adjectives that go with it, so that makes how gendered the language is easier for me. But it doesn't work as well for people who use they/them pronouns all the time because there really isn't a super accepted option. Like in English, we are really lucky to have they/them pronouns that are more used and accepted in the language. In French I have heard of the term 'ielle,' which combines both the male and female pronouns, but I am not really sure that that is super widely accepted or used," Baxter said.

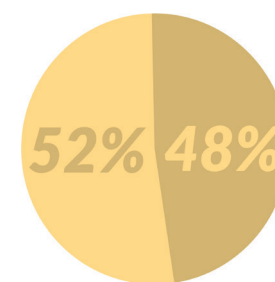
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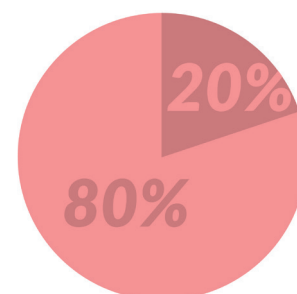


% of U.S. adults who have heard of gender-neutral pronouns 22%: a lot, 38%: a little, 39%: nothing at all

1 in 5 Americans know someone who prefers pronouns other than "he" or "she"



52% of U.S. adults are comfortable using gender-neutral pronouns; 48% are uncomfortable



Information from Pew Research Center

## Rise in usage and feminism

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"Used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary," "used to refer to a non-binary or gender-non-conforming person," and "used to refer to a person whose gender or sexual identity does not correspond to the traditional binary opposition of male and female" are all definitions recently added to Merriam Webster, Dictionary.com and Oxford dictionaries definitions for the word "they."

### DEFINE 'THEY'

In 2019, the same year this definition was added to the Merriam Webster dictionary, "they" was announced as the word of the year.

This announcement signaled the word's substantial rise in usage as a singular pronoun for gender non-conforming or non-binary people.

In their announcement, Merriam Webster noted "lookups for 'they' increased by 313% in 2019 over the previous year."

This increase in people aiming to understand the word beyond its usage as a plural pronoun has risen parallel to the number of people using they/them pronouns.

Although there's limited research on the number of people that use they/them pronouns, a 2014 study in the United Kingdom revealed that 0.4% or 1 in 250 of respondents self identified as nonbinary, a number that has undoubtedly risen since.

As usage of they/them pronouns has surged, people have become more familiar with the terms, especially in younger generations.

Pew Research Center has assembled data indicating that Generation Z is most familiar with gender neutral pronouns, followed by millennials and Generation X.

Because language tends to evolve relatively quickly, Time Magazine predicted that along with other linguistic changes that are now widely accepted, they/them pronouns will be almost

second nature to future generations.

### EXCLUSIONARY FEMINISM

As the acknowledgment of non binary gender identity and usage of gender neutral pronouns have become somewhat mainstream, it has urged feminists to rethink some aspects of their movement for gender equality.

Junior Zoey Burkhardt explains the different ways in which the feminist movement has been exclusionary to transgender and nonbinary individuals: "There are three main ways the feminist movement tries and sometimes fails to include nonbinary people. One is by not including nonbinary people and being transphobic, another is by trying to include nonbinary people and not really getting it, and then there are feminist movements that understand how to include nonbinary people," they said.

Through criticism specifically of the Women's March movement, feminist organizers have come to realize that trademarking pink pussy hats or the phrase "the future is female" may not be inclusive to the transgender and non-binary communities that are habitually excluded from aspects of the feminist movement. The pink pussy hat has been labeled as offensive as it reinforces the idea that vaginas and vulvas are synonymous with womanhood, and the color pink could be exclusionary towards BIWOC whose vaginas don't resemble a pink color. Feminists have begun to reject these previous trademarks, and embrace the notion that their movement stands for equality regardless of gender.

When talking about reproductive rights. The phrase "It's a woman's right to choose" is great, but it excludes all the nonbinary and trans people who can get pregnant and may need access to abortion. Feminist movements need to remember that access to birth control, abortion, and period products affects transmen and some nonbinary people," they said.

### GENDERED TERMS

Language is also an important aspect of how many see the feminist movement as being exclusive to non-binary and transgender people. Beyond pink pussy hats and the phrase "the future is female," the topic of abortion access also tends to be spoken about in gendered language.

"Topics such as reproductive rights and menstruation equity, which are central in the feminist movement, need to be de-gendered as not everyone with a uterus who is affected by these issues is a woman," Baxter added.

Burkhardt echoed this need, and explained why feminists shouldn't speak in gendered terms when discussing issues that impact a range of people beyond women.

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### WHAT'S NEXT?

As the feminist movement has begun to re-focus its message to include non binary and transgender individuals, and as non gender binary pronouns have become recognized in dictionaries and normalized in communities, the understanding of gender has evolved. What was once previously seen as a strict binary by many is now being recognized as a more fluid spectrum that encompasses a range of gender identities.

## GRAMMAR OF PRONOUNS

they / them / their / themself

use "they" as a subjective pronoun  
use "them" as an objective pronoun  
use "their" as a possessive pronoun  
use "themself" as a reflexive pronoun

They are talking. I listen to them. That is their backpack.

ze / hir / hirs / hirself

use "ze" as a subjective pronoun  
use "zir/hir" as an objective pronoun  
use "zirs/hirs" as a possessive pronoun  
use "zirsself/hirself" as a reflexive pronoun

Ze is talking. I listen to hir. That is zirs backpack.

ve / ver / vis / verself

use "ve" as a subjective pronoun  
use "ver" as an objective pronoun  
use "vis" as a possessive pronoun  
use "verself" as a reflexive pronoun

Ve is talking. I listen to ver. That is vis backpack.