

# She? Ze? They? What's In a Gender Pronoun

By JESSICA BENNETTJAN. 30, 2016



Credit Mikey Burton

WASHINGTON — What happens when 334 linguists, lexicographers, grammarians and etymologists gather in a stuffy lecture hall on a Friday night to debate the lexical trends of the year?

They become the unlikely heroes of the new gender revolution.

That's what happened here earlier this month anyway, at a downtown Marriott, where members of the 127-year-old American Dialect Society anointed "they," the singular, gender-neutral pronoun, the 2015 Word of the Year. As in: "They and I went to the store," where they is used for a person who does not identify as male or female, or they is a filler pronoun in a situation where a person's gender identity is unknown.

"Function words don't get enough love," a man argued from the floor. (Function words, I would later learn, are words that have little lexical meaning but serve to connect other words — or "the basic building blocks in language," according to Ben Zimmer, the event's M.C.)

"We need to accept 'they,' and we need to do it now," shouted another linguist, hidden behind the crowds.

"As a gender neutral pronoun, 'they' has been useful for a long time," said Anne Curzan, an English professor at the University of Michigan. ("They" can be found in the works of literary greats like Chaucer and Jane Austen.) "But I think we've seen a lot of attention this year to people who are identifying out of the gender binary."

Gender binary: That's the idea that there are two distinct genders, one male and one female, with nothing in between.

But to Ms. Curzan’s point: Indeed. If we’ve learned anything over the last year, from vocal transgender spokespeople like Caitlin Jenner and Laverne Cox; from on-screen depictions like “Transparent,” the Emmy-winning Amazon series about a family patriarch who comes out as transgender; or even from Miley Cyrus — who has said she identifies as “pansexual,” or sexually fluid — it’s that both sexuality (whom you go to bed with) and gender (who you go to bed as) are much more ... flexible.

“I think we, and particularly young people, increasingly view gender not as a given, but as a choice, not as a distinction between male and female, but as a spectrum, regardless of what’s ‘down there,’” said Julie Mencher, a psychotherapist in Northampton, Mass., who conducts school workshops on how to support transgender students. “Many claim that gender doesn’t even exist.”

Photo



“Transparent” has helped illustrate the topic of language in relation to sexuality and gender. Credit Jennifer Clasen/Amazon Studios

It does exist when it comes to language, though. He, she, hers, his, male, female — there’s not much in between. And so has emerged a new vocabulary, of sorts: an attempt to solve the challenge of talking about someone who identifies as neither male nor female (and, inevitably, the linguistic confusion that comes along with it).

These days, on college campuses, stating a gender pronoun has become practically as routine as listing a major. “So it’s like: ‘Hi, I’m Evie. My pronouns are she/her/hers. My major is X,’” said Evie Zavidow, a junior at Barnard.

“Ze” is a pronoun of choice for the student newspaper at Wesleyan, while “E” is one of the categories offered to new students registering at Harvard.

At American University, there is “ey,” one of a number of pronoun options published in a guide for students (along with information about how to ask which one to use).

There’s also “hir,” “xe” and “hen,” which has been adopted by Sweden (a joining of the masculine han and the feminine hon); “ve,” and “ne,” and “per,” for person, “thon,” (a blend of “that” and “one”); and the honorific “Mx.” (pronounced “mix”) — an alternative to Ms. and Mr. that was recently added to the Oxford English Dictionary. (The “x” in Mx. is meant to represent an unknown, similar to the use of x in algebraic equations.)

Those are just the pronouns, of course.

To use them, you need to have at least some knowledge of the identities to which they correspond — beginning with an understanding of the word “identity,” along with its sister verb, “identify” (as in: “I identify as female” or “I identify as mixed-race”).

“Identity” was honored last month in another “word of the year” contest, this one by Dictionary.com — a choice, said Jane Solomon, a senior editor, to reflect the public’s “increasing awareness” of new gender expressions (as well as an increase in lookups for their definitions).

Among the additional words and terms the dictionary was updating for the year ahead: “code-switching,” or modifying of one’s behavior to adapt to different sociocultural norms; “sapiosexual,” for a person who finds intelligence the most sexually attractive feature; and “gender expression,” or an expression of one’s gender identity.

“It’s like the hyper-individuation of identity,” said Micah Fitzerman-Blue, a writer and producer on “Transparent,” who calls himself cisgender (“cis” for short), meaning he identifies with the sex (male) he was assigned at birth (or A.A.B.). “Is there such a thing as too many pronouns? Possibly. But who am I to pick and choose? Language has a way of sorting this stuff out.”

Does it, though?

In the second-to-last episode of last season’s “Transparent,” there was a blip of a scene that perhaps crystallized this moment in time: Ali, played by Gaby Hoffmann, stood in front of a bulletin board in the gender studies department of a university campus, waiting to speak with a professor. Tacked to the wall was a flier illustrated with a pair of boxing gloves. “Gender Pronoun Showdown!” it declared.

It was prescient.

Facebook now offers 50 different gender identity options for new users, including gender fluid (with a gender identity that is shifting), bigender (a person who identifies as having two distinct genders) and agender (a person without an identifying gender). There are day cares that proudly tout their gender-neutral pronoun policies — so kids don't feel boxed in — and college professors who are skewered on the Internet for messing them up.

In New York City, new clarifications to the city's human rights guidelines make clear that the intentional misidentification of a person's preferred name, pronoun or title is violation of the city's anti-discrimination law.

Misgendering “isn't just a style error,” Caitlin Dewey of The Washington Post wrote to describe a Twitter account she created following Ms. Jenner's coming out, to “politely” correct for pronoun misuse. “It's a stubborn, longtime hurdle to transgender acceptance and equality, a fundamental refusal to afford those people even basic grammatical dignity.” (The Post, Ms. Dewey's employer, recently announced the term “they” would be included in its stylebook.)

And yet the learning curve remains.

I discovered recently that “trans\*,” with an asterisk, is now used as an umbrella term for non-cisgender identities — simpler than listing them all (but still considered respectful). On a recent radio segment, I found out that a newer term for “cisgender” is “chromosomal,” as in “chromosomal female,” which denotes a person who identifies with the sex (female) she was assigned at birth. (Another way of saying that a person was “assigned female at birth” — which does not necessarily make her a “chromosomal female” — is A.F.A.B.).

As for the pronouns: “They” may or may not correspond with these identities — which is why it's in anybody's best interest to simply ask. But when you do, don't make the common mistake of calling it a preferred pronoun — as it is not considered to be “preferred.”

“The language is evolving daily — even gender reassignment, people are now calling it gender confirmation!” Jill Soloway, the creator of “Transparent,” said in a recent profile in The New Yorker, making the case for “they.”

“It's not intuitive at all,” her girlfriend, the lesbian poet Eileen Myles, said in the article.

That doesn't even begin to delve into the debate about the evolving use of “woman” and “vagina” — or, as some prefer to call it, “internal genitalia” — which is perhaps a linguistic (and political) world unto its own. Mills College recently changed its school chant from “Strong women! Proud women! All women! Mills women!” to “Strong, proud, all, Mills!”

Meanwhile, Mount Holyoke prompted a response from the iconic feminist playwright Eve Ensler after canceling a performance of “The Vagina Monologues” last year (because of its narrow view of gender). (At Columbia, that play has been replaced by a production called “Beyond Cis-terhood.”)

Even the venerable NPR host Terry Gross has struggled with the language, repeatedly using the incorrect pronoun when interviewing Ms. Soloway last season about her transgender father, upon whom the show is based.

“I think there are a lot of people who want to do the right thing but are struggling to play catch-up with this new gender revolution,” said Ms. Mencher, a former transgender specialist at Smith College, which is one of a handful of historically women’s colleges to begin accepting transgender students.

“I begin all my trainings with an invitation for participants to stumble over language, to risk being politically incorrect, to bungle their pronouns — in the service of learning,” Ms. Mencher said.

As for they: Lexicological change won’t happen overnight. (Just look at the adoption of Ms.) But it does have a linguistic advantage, in that it’s already part of the language.

“Whether it’s the feminist movement of the 1970s or expressions of non-binary gender identities today,” said Mr. Zimmer of the American Dialect Society, “social changes can help power these changes.”

Jessica Bennett’s book, *“Feminist Fight Club,”* will be published this year. *Command Z* appears monthly.

New York Times, 1/31/16