

The Case for Gender-Neutral Pronouns

The debate on Gender-Neutral Pronoun usage has been one that has been going on for a while now. The use of the singular “they” has sparked a lot of discussion on whether or not its smooth incorporation can ever be done successfully.

Before we get into the implications of a singular they, it’s important to consider the consequences of its implementation – what a world with actual gender neutral pronouns looks like. Luckily, that is a world that is not too far from our own. Gender-neutral pronouns are a prominent feature of many languages, especially in our corner of the world. The singular they/we is quite prominent in most Indian languages, used as a signifier of respect – a prominent example being Hindi’s “hum”. Swedish has even introduced a gender-neutral pronoun to its vocabulary, “hen” as recently as the 1960s, with the pronoun being used in everything ranging from official texts to popular speech – properly un-founding certain linguistic fears.

The English language in itself has many historical examples of gender-neutral writing. Writers ranging from Shakespeare to Austen to Lord Byron have featured it in their works. Some prominent examples of this include: "She kept her head and kicked her shoes off, as everybody ought to do who falls into deep water in their clothes." (C.S. Lewis), "I know when I like a person directly I see them!" (Virginia Woolf), "'A person can't help their birth,' Rosalind replied with great liberality." (William Makepeace Thackeray).

The usage of singular “they” (and/or completely new gender-neutral pronouns) is an extremely practical one. It often helps get rid of most of the clunkiness of the English language. The introduction of a gender-neutral pronoun could help do away with the awkward “he/she” terminology, and (even worse) the defaulting of “he/him” as the general pronoun for an unknown subject. Gender-neutral pronouns help make language more inclusive. This inclusiveness is an important theme for this discussion.

The disuse of the singular “they” in the common English vocabulary stemmed from grammarians moving to a version of English Grammar that better reflected Latin Grammar. Today, the absence of the singular they in the common vocabulary seems to be something that its critics brandish proudly. “How can you bring back something that has been dead for years?” is a common sentiment. These critics are often also against the introduction of a completely new gender-neutral pronoun - for example, xe/xer/xem, in the vein of Mx. The main reason behind these criticisms and hesitation seems to be the fact that people seem to think that language is restricted.

And that is where they are wrong – language is constantly evolving! From the inception of the English language has been a perfect melting pot of all these different languages. Language and its usage has changed and been remodelled several times over. Today, a native English speaker would probably be as intelligible to a Shakespearean era guy as much as one of his contemporary Frenchmen. As mentioned before, language is so incredibly inclusive in that sense, language is so accommodating that it just “goes with the literal flow” – being an amalgamation of all the changes happening around it.

That spirit of inclusiveness brings us to a deeper layer of the whole problem – the real reason most people are against the usage in the first place. The use of gender-neutral pronouns and the discussion today is almost always supplemented by a discussion of Gender non-conforming individuals. Today, the advocacy for gender neutrality in language is often done by and for non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals. Non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals are people who feel like their gender identity does not belong to the societal understanding on male

or female. As such, these individuals often advocate for language that is inclusive enough to accommodate their identity.

As we've seen so far, the spirit of Language in itself is inclusiveness. When people rally against gender-neutral pronouns for simply "pushing a political agenda" and being against the current use of language as we know it, what we encounter is a misunderstanding of how language works in the first place. Ultimately, language, whichever one you consider is form of communication – of reaching out to the world around you. Language has constantly evolved and adapted to be accommodating, as mentioned previously. There are many reasons for use of gender-neutral pronouns and there are lots of languages that do have that framework built into them. But the main thing we need to focus on today is the spirit of language as a unifier, as a bridge. How does one effectively communicate when they are not represented properly by their own language?

At the end of the day, as individuals dare to explore the limits of society's binaries and boundaries, it is important that we empower them to do so. It is important that we are able to lend them a voice – the voice of language – to efficiently challenge our pre-conceived notions. Language must ultimately serve its form as a communicator, and as such, it would be foolish of us to restrict it on the basis of pure aesthetics and puritan stances.