University of California, Los Angeles

Singular *they*

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To my parents, Susan and David Lagunoff

Preface

This document contains the doctoral dissertation I filed in 1997 concerning use of singular *they* in English from the Middle Ages through the mid-1990s. In the two decades since that filing, singular *they* has continued to be of great interest, both to linguists and to the general public. In the interest of making an electronic version of my research widely available, I am now publishing this version of my dissertation online. To prepare it for publication, I made revisions only to reorganize and edit the preliminary pages, correct typographical errors, clarify confusing or awkward phrasing in the original content in a few places, and ensure the formatting allows for ease of downloading, printing, and reading. The main content, appendices, and bibliography all appear as originally written and approved by my dissertation committee. I am grateful to Adam Keim for assisting with updating the formatting throughout. I also owe thanks to Geoffrey Pullum, who got a hard copy of the original version early on and has been citing it ever since, for his encouragement to get this work out to the world.

Rachel Lagunoff
San Francisco
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Abstract of the Dissertation

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In English, the third person plural pronouns *they*, *them*, *their*, *theirs*, *themself*, and *themselves* can be anaphoric to a grammatically singular antecedent, that is, a noun phrase which has singular verb agreement. The use of what is called singular *they* has puzzled grammarians since at least the 19th century, since agreement rules appear to be violated (Visser, 1963; Bodine, 1975). Often, singular *they* is assumed to be a pragmatic strategy for avoiding one of the gender-marked singular pronouns, *he* or *she* (e.g., Corbett, 1991). In this study I propose that singular *they*, while useful as an evasive form, exists independently in the grammar of present-day English, as it has from Middle English on. Singular *they* can appear in any form, in any structural relationship to an antecedent which describes or quantifies humans (or sometimes animals). Certain types of antecedents appear more often with singular *they* and are accepted by more native speakers, in the following semantic hierarchy: universal quantifiers, existential quantifiers, indefinite noun phrases, definite noun phrases (cf. Newman, in press; Parker, 1983; Whitley, 1978). Antecedents of singular *they* can be of any kind, including those where gender is overt or implied, except names. In addition, singular *they* cannot be used with pointing (deixis), providing support for a theory of reference where only names and deictics are referential (Russell, 1919; Neale, 1990). Antecedents which indicate gender are restricted to those which do not introduce a discourse referent, a noun phrase which can be referred to by a pronoun later in the discourse (Karttunen, 1976). Agreement rules are not violated if the concept of 'plural' is understood as indicating lack of precise number or identity, rather than 'more than one'. Singular *they* is then often the best choice with animate nonreferential antecedents.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have come into existence were it not for the support and interest of numerous people. So many people were so helpful in so many ways that I cannot possibly list them all here individually; please know that you are all appreciated, even if your name is not included here. First, I express my deep appreciation for my committee chair, Pam Munro. Her enthusiasm for my ideas, her patience with my procrastination, and her demand for clarity and precision were exactly what I needed. She carefully read numerous preliminary (some very rough) drafts of chapters, providing detailed useful comments on all aspects of my work, from linguistic theory to citation style. Pam helped me to hone my ideas and present them in a form that a wide readership could understand. She also collected numerous examples of singular *they*, either meeting or exceeding (I lost count a long time ago) the number of examples I had collected myself. If it hadn't been for Pam's keen eye and ear, many rarely occurring usages of singular *they* wouldn't have been accounted for in this study. Most importantly, Pam trusted me: trusted that I knew what I was doing (even when I didn't), and that I would be able to do it (even when I thought I wouldn't). Another committee member who deserves special thanks is Marianne Celce-Murcia. She served as committee chair for my master's thesis, where I formed my first ideas on singular *they*, staying with my prolonged project to the end. Marianne's reading of drafts has consistently been thorough and incisive; if any linguistic concept is misrepresented, or any comma out of place, it is only because I ignored her advice. My two other committee members, Bob Kirsner and Ed Keenan, also provided indispensable input. Both of them were skeptical, in different ways, requiring me to provide more detailed data and argumentation than I otherwise would have. Ed also made available his database of Old English and Middle English pronouns in context, allowing me to delve deeper into the historical roots of singular *they*.

Many of the ideas in this dissertation were formed in discussions with Gerhard Brugger. He first suggested that referentiality was a relevant factor, providing useful references. He also read some early drafts of chapters, offering welcome criticism and encouragement. Michael Newman gets the award for most gracious fellow singular *they* scholar. While working on his dissertation on the same topic at around the same time I was, he never failed to share his ideas and arguments, his references and data. (He also put me touch with Michael Barlow, who kindly sent me copies of his papers on a related topic.) I greatly benefited from Michael's point of view and generosity.

In addition to Pam Munro, several other people contributed to my collection of examples of singular *they*: Bob Agajeenian, Gerhard Brugger, Marianne Celce-Murcia, Jason Merchant, Jean-François Miller, Elise Morse-Gagne, and Tim Stowell. Special thanks go to Robert Stockwell and Donka Minkova for their invaluable help with the translations for the Middle English examples. Appreciation is also due to the many people who completed questionnaires on singular *they*: students in Chris Golston's Linguistics 1 class in spring 1994; and a group of graduate students in TESL & Applied Linguistics, who took the time to imagine a very odd situation, which was suggested to me by Anna Szabolcsi. For their judgments on sentences I thank Benjamin Munson, J.F. Miller, Tim Stowell, and Patricia Ellen Schneider-Zioga. Finally, thanks to all the linguists and friends not mentioned here who offered comments and suggestions.

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Chapter 1: Definitions and Issues

1.0 Introduction

This dissertation concerns the distribution and use of pronouns in English such as that in (1), which have a grammatically singular antecedent, yet are plural in form, and require plural verb agreement.

(1) **Everyone** thinks **they** have the right answer.

The boldfacing (which will be used throughout) indicates an anaphoric relationship between the noun phrase *everyone* and the pronoun *they*, excluding an interpretation where the pronoun is anaphoric to some other noun (which could be grammatically plural). The sentence in (1) can be interpreted in two ways: (i) each person in the group thinks all the people in the group together have one right answer; (ii) for each person *x* in the group, *x* thinks that *x* has the right answer. It is the singular (in (1), distributed) interpretation that this study is concerned with. The use of the plural pronoun as a singular, which I will call "singular *they*", following the terminology of previous studies on this phenomenon (e.g., Newman, in press; Baron, 1986), is however not restricted to distributive contexts, nor to any particular structural conditions (2).

(2) **Someone** told me **they** left **their** sweater here; I will pick it up for **them**.

However, singular *they* is limited in the type of antecedents it allows, with some antecedent types requiring particular semantic contexts. This study is a description of what the possible antecedents are, and an initial attempt at explaining what some of the restricting semantic factors might be. Most of the description is based on naturally-occurring examples, collected from written and spoken sources, compiled in Appendix I. I have also made use of my own native-speaker intuitions, and of judgments provided to me in person or on questionnaires from other native speakers of English.

1.1 Definitions

For the purposes of this study, singular *they* is defined as any form of the third person plural pronoun when anaphoric to a grammatically singular antecedent (with a few exceptions discussed below). The forms include: *they*, *their*, *theirs*, *them*, *themselves*, and *themself*. (Throughout, nominative forms of pronouns will be used as representatives of all forms, except where a particular form is discussed.) The types of antecedents considered include the following: quantifier phrases (phrases headed by *every*, *no*, *any*, or *some*); indefinite phrases (headed by *a* or *an*); definite phrases (headed by *the*, *this*, or *that*); any of these phrase types coordinated with another by *and* or *or*; and coordinated pronouns (*he or she*, etc.). For simplicity, all of these phrase types will be called noun phrases, unless it is necessary to distinguish the different types from each other, for example, quantifier phrases versus indefinite phrases. In addition, only noun phrases denoting humans will be considered; a large exception to this is noun phrases denoting animals, usually pets, who are personified, in a sense promoted to human status. With inanimate noun phrases, the epicene third person singular pronoun *it* is available, obviating the necessity

for singular *they*; singular *they* appears to be available only when the use of a gender-marked pronoun would otherwise be required.[1]

The term "gender" will be used for linguistically-marked gender, and the term "sex" will be used for the biological sex of referents. A noun phrase (NP) will be considered to be gender-marked if it has either semantic gender (as in *mother*, *boy*), or morphological gender (as in *actress*, *bachelorette*). The term "epicene"[2] will be used to mean noun phrases with no gender marking (see Newman, in press; Baron, 1986; Corbett, 1991). Examples of epicene NPs are *person* or *friend*.

Certain types of antecedents, which otherwise fit the definition above, are not considered in this study. One of these is correlatives: *neither* NP *nor* NP, and *either* NP *or* NP (3).

(3) **Neither Tamara nor Gersky** was registered, at least under **their** own name, in any motel, hotel, or bed and breakfast from San Francisco to San Diego or in any of the other counties near L.A.[3]

Quantity phrases, such as *at least one student* are not considered either. Another type is collectives, such as *group* or *family*. (In British English, some collective NPs are grammatically plural, taking plural verb agreement, and thus are not antecedents of singular *they* by my definition). Collectives as antecedents of *they* have usually not been deemed problematic by prescriptive grammarians; the plural pronoun refers to all the members in the set together, and is thus a real plural.

Two other antecedents types not considered are arbitrary reference *they* with no antecedent, as in *They say smoking is bad for you*, and what has been called "corporate" *they*, where there is no direct antecedent, but one is pragmatically constructed from the introduction of a corporate entity into the discourse. In the case of corporate *they*, the constructed antecedent could be singular or plural. The examples in (4) appear to be plural, where *they* is standing in for a group of people representing the place (park, city, country).[4]

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1 One example collected by Pam Munro appears to contradict the requirement that antecedents denote humans: "**This white car** has **their** lights on" (Allen Munro, personal communication, Sept. 21, 1996). In several years of collecting examples, this is the only one of its kind I've seen (or heard). For this reason, I am inclined to interpret *this white car* as a type of metonymy, where *this white car* represents 'person driving (or owning) this white car'. There is still the issue of whose lights are on, surely the car's. However, it is possible to say, "Oh no! I left my lights on!", meaning the lights of the car I own or am driving.

2 Corbett (1991) defines epicene nouns as "those which denote sexed beings but which do not differentiate them according to sex, in a given language" (p. 68).

3 Maxine O'Callaghan, *Trade-Off*, Worldwide Mystery, 1996, p. 184.

4 References for the sentences in (4): (4a), Nevada Barr, *The Track of the Cat*, Avon, 1995, p. 156; (4b), *Montreal Gazette*, June 14, 1996; (4c), *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1996, p. A2.

(4) a. Did **the park** think they had an open invitation to walk over his land any time **they** wanted, trample down his fences, upset his cows?

b. "**Thirsk** was very protective of Alf Wight's privacy, and it's to **their** credit that **they** didn't trade on his name," the mayor said.

c. "America should know more about **Japan—they** are our biggest trading partner," Campbell says.

The use of a form of *they* in (5) also appears to be a plural corporate use; the pronoun seems to substitute not for the dictionary itself, but for the group of people who wrote and edited the dictionary.

(5) **The dictionary** seemed to me to use **their** labels in a reasonable way.[5]

An (invented) example of a singular corporate use is in (6), where *they* stands for one person, the person who answered the phone, who represents the movie theater.

(6) I called **the theater**, and **they** said the movie starts at 8.

Related to corporate *they* is the use of singular *they* meaning 'someone' or 'that person' in response to a question posed about *anyone*. Again, in this usage, there is no direct antecedent of singular *they*, though the person *they* picks out has been defined by information in the question. Two examples are given in (7).[6] (Here, and throughout—unless otherwise noted—number-letter combinations in brackets correspond to examples in Appendix I, where references are given. Examples from written sources are cited exactly as written in the source, except for my added boldfacing of pronouns and antecedents.)

(7) a. A: Is anyone sitting there? [pointing to a single unoccupied seat]

B: Yes—**they**'ll be right back.

b. Jan Amsterdam of Encino says grandson Jacob, 5, was listening to his mother explain her work as a therapist. Therapists help people change their behavior, she said, but no one can make anyone change unless the person wants to. Jacob added: "Except **their** mommy." [VII.A.ii.18]

In (7a), the *they* in B's response stands in for something like 'the person who was (or will be) sitting there'; in (7b), their stands in for 'the person's'. The instance of *they* in (8) is a little harder to explain as a direct substitution, since no other NP fits in the sentence ("a person hadn't"?), though the meaning is clear: *they*, along with the negation of the verb, answers the question "had anyone told him?" with the response "no one had".

(8) I asked him whether anyone had told him how to make a retroflex "r," and he said **they** hadn't. [XIV.1]

5 Collected by Pam Munro from a Linguistics 88 student paper, UCLA, fall 1996.
6 The dialog in (7a) is from Gregory Ward (personal communication). It is not included in Appendix I since it is an invented example.

1.2 Singular *they*: Bad grammar?

It is not uncommon in natural human languages to represent different grammatical functions with the same lexical or morphological symbol. For example, in English, the present progressive can indicate both ongoing and (planned) future events: *He's leaving now*; *He's leaving tomorrow*. In French, the pronoun *on* can be interpreted as both third person singular (equivalent to the NP *one* in English) and first person plural, always with third person singular verb agreement. Therefore, from a purely linguistic point of view, it is not surprising that a pronoun such as *they* could be both plural and singular. In fact, there is another pronoun just like this in English: *you*. The second person plural is also used as a singular, though the verb agreement is always plural (at least in standard English). Yet, for some reason, grammarians since the 18th Century have felt it their duty to protect the purity of the English language by proscribing the use of singular *they* and prescribing in its place the use of "generic" (i.e., epicene) *he*. Documentation and discussion of historical and modern pronouncements on singular *they* can be found in Visser (1963), Bodine (1975), Stanley (1978), Sklar (1983), and Newman (in press).

The view that singular *they* is an error persists in popular opinion to the present day. In (9a), Norbert Hornstein quotes Noam Chomsky using singular *they*, putting a *sic* after the occurrence of the plural pronoun, as if it were an incomprehensible mistake. In (9b), a use of singular *they* is branded "semiliterate" by a journalist.

(9) a. If **a child** hears English, **they** [*sic*] pick up on the phonetics pretty quickly…[XVII.3]

b. Never mind that the cover shot was a fuzzy composite, …and the advertising copy inside was a pastiche of earnest-sounding slogans…and glib, semiliterate promises ("North Star Expeditions can and will help **your child** to find **their** way home"). [XVII.2]

In (10), a letter to the Los Angeles Times, the writer calls the use of singular *they* "incorrect grammar," "a flaw," and a "dreadful error."

(10) Cindy Crawford's even features certainly don't automatically betoken a paucity of intellect . . . But she undermines her assertion to that effect by using incorrect grammar, a flaw I warn my college English students to avoid. Crawford protests the dumb idea that "if **someone** is beautiful **they** must be stupid"; the correct version, of course, would be "she must be stupid." Let's give her the benefit of the doubt, since this dreadful error is fast becoming the norm—but perhaps she shouldn't have dropped out of Northwestern her freshman year after all. [XVII.1]

Columnists writing on language are equally dismissive of what is clearly a widely accepted usage, using the argument that "good grammar" necessarily rules out the phenomenon of singular *they*. Daniel Seligman, writing in *Fortune* (perhaps significantly in the April 1, 1996 issue), heaps scorn on the use and acceptance of singular *they*, with (11) as one example.

(11) Martin [Scorsese] was depicted introducing his movie *Casino* to a Scottish group…and prefacing his remarks by stating, "I hope **everyone** has done **their** homework." Okay, nobody said he was the Greatest Living Grammarian. [XVII.4]

William Safire[7] rejects a suggestion from Spiro T. Agnew that "the authorities of English . . . make a forthright declaration that *their* is a correct alternative to be used with a singular human subject," a situation which is in fact in the process of happening (see Chapter 5), by asking rhetorically: "Abandon pronoun-antecedent agreement? Cave in to the radic-lib forces of usage permissiveness?"

Apparently, the prescriptive grammarians have done a good job convincing many English speakers that singular *they* is an unacceptable violation of pronoun-antecedent agreement. How descriptive linguists have presented the phenomenon of singular *they* is discussed in the next section.

1.3 Previous studies

Until Newman (1982, in press[8]), only small descriptive studies had been published of singular *they*. Not surprisingly, researchers differ on whether they consider the facts of singular *they* (which were not always complete) attributable to syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic factors. In some cases, accounts were based on very limited data, meaning that certain uses of singular *they* (acceptable to some, though usually not all, native speakers of English) were not considered and cannot be explained by the hypotheses put forth. In addition, there is no consensus as to what area of grammar pronominal anaphora belongs to, or whether it is purely a pragmatic or discourse phenomenon. Also to be accounted for is the fact that even as a singular, *they* always has plural verb agreement, and can have either singular or plural morphological agreement with the reflexive suffix *–self / –selves*. In Chapter 5, I suggest some possible hypotheses for how agreement might work with singular *they*. In this section, I will summarize previous published research on singular *they*.

Both Jochnowitz (1982) and Whitley (1978) provide syntactic analyses, proposing that singular *they* is unmarked for number at some deeper derivational level. Whitley notes that *they* must get the feature [+plural] at some point, which happens either before reflexivization (resulting in *–self*) or after (resulting in *–selves*). McConnell-Ginet (1979), Parker (1983) and Weidmann (1984) focus on the semantics of the antecedent. McConnell-Ginet notes that *they* is either unacceptable or marginal with proper names, pointing, or definite generics, attributing the requirement for a gender-marked pronoun to the personalization of the antecedent. Parker, considering quantifier phrase antecedents, proposes an acceptability hierarchy of antecedents based on the semantic interpretation of the different quantifiers. Weidmann notes a contrast in judgments between "assertive" and "non-assertive" antecedents: assertive antecedents refer to an actual person, whereas non-assertive antecedents do not presuppose the presence or existence of a person.

In a corpus-based study, Newman (in press) concludes that the use of singular *they* (as opposed to epicene *he*) is associated with quantifier antecedents, low individuation (of referents), and plural notional number. The pragmatic concept of individuation is defined as "the perspective

7 In the *New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 29, 1995, p. 24.

8 Newman (in press) first appeared as a 1993 dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University. It is this version that I cite throughout.

taken on the referent as an identified individual protagonist versus and undifferentiated member of a group" (p. 132). McConnell-Ginet's observation is also taken up by the concept of individuation: "Any person referred to by a proper name or anyone physically present was considered to be fully individuated" (p. 163). Newman also concludes that his study "provides strong support for theories that see anaphora and agreement as dynamic processes that operate on a discourse level" (p. 211), in particular Barlow's (1992) Discourse-Linking theory.

As mentioned above, I will not take any particular stand on the agreement issues; it remains to be seen which system is the most accurate for explaining and predicting differential agreement of the type singular *they* exhibits. The above studies do contribute some interesting observations about the types of antecedents which are acceptable with singular *they*; in collecting examples over a number of years, I have found data that supports some of the ideas and refutes others. It is true that no one finds singular *they* acceptable with antecedents which are proper names; reference determined by pointing is also not compatible with singular *they*. Definite generics are possible antecedents, but not when gender-marked. Quantifier phrase antecedents, as well as indefinites and definites, consistently fall into a hierarchy of acceptability with singular *they*. Newman's (in press) concept of low individuation of a referent as a predictor of singular *they* usage is upheld by his own data and judgments; however, he rejects as unacceptable some types of antecedents that appear in spontaneous use (though more rarely than the types Newman accepts), and are judged acceptable by other speakers I have found. I have attempted to account for the semantics of the antecedents of singular *they*, taking into consideration the points made by the previous studies, expanding the description and hypotheses to include additional data collected from a variety of sources.

1.4 Organization of the dissertation

In Chapter 2, I provide a detailed description of singular *they*, focusing on the types of antecedents available. First, I dispel several myths about singular *they*: that it is (always) a performance error; that it is (solely) a pragmatic strategy for avoiding gender specification; that it is a recent phenomenon; that it is part of a particular regional dialect. I then show in what ways singular *they* can be considered singular, noting some instances where, due to presumed performance error, a speaker or writer will switch from singular to plural *they* within a stretch of discourse. The following Chapter 2 sections are concerned with the possible anaphoric relationships and antecedents singular *they* is compatible with. In general, there are very few restrictions on singular *they*: it behaves just like any other singular pronoun in the language, appearing in any form and in a variety of anaphoric relationships. It may be close or far from its antecedent; bound or free; anaphoric or cataphoric; nominative, accusative, possessive, reflexive. In addition, all NP types except proper names are available as antecedents (though individual speaker judgments may differ as to how acceptable certain antecedent types are, as discussed in Chapter 3). Singular *they* is not used with inanimate antecedents, for which *it* is available. However, with children and animals (especially pets), for which *it* is also available, singular *they* can be used.

Chapter 3 is concerned with quantitative studies of singular *they*, including an informal survey I conducted with undergraduates at UCLA. Interestingly, all studies, large or small, corpus counts

or judgment and production tasks, show a very similar hierarchy of antecedents, based either on rate of acceptability or frequency. Phrases headed by the quantifiers *every*, *any* and *no* are typically highest on the scale, followed by *each* and *some*, then by indefinite phrases (with *a*/*an*) and definite phrases (with *the*). This hierarchy is not surprising, given the semantics of the noun phrases. The relevant aspects appear to be the sets defined by universal versus existential quantifiers, and the collectivity and distributivity of universal quantifiers.

In Chapter 4, I consider how the semantics of antecedents and pragmatics of gender and sex assignment interact to determine the availability of singular *they*. As noted above, previous studies have suggested that certain semantic and pragmatic conditions restrict the use of singular *they*; here I make an attempt at identifying the exact conditions, showing how semantics and pragmatics interact. First, the semantics of the antecedent affect singular *they* availability and acceptability. Proper names can never be antecedents of singular *they*, evidence that names are indeed different from all other kinds of noun phrases, as argued for example by Russell (1919). The relevant property of proper names, shared by deictics (which I here restrict to gestural deixis, pointing directly to a person), is what has been called "referentiality." Unfortunately the term "referentiality" has been used with many different definitions in many different contexts, making it problematic.[9] However, as "referential" is the term used by those who define the concept in the way I will be using it, for names and gestural deictics, it seems fruitless to coin a new term. In fact, the singular *they* data provide empirical evidence that the concept of referentiality defined in this way is real.

Second, certain types of antecedents do not allow singular *they* when gender-marked. If a noun phrase introduces a discourse referent (in the sense of Karttunen, 1976) and is semantically or morphologically gender-marked, anaphoric singular *they* is not allowed. Once the gender of a discourse referent is known, it appears pragmatically infelicitous to ignore the information when choosing an anaphoric third-person pronoun. Gender agreement is of course possible (perhaps even preferred) when no discourse referent is introduced; however, the few cases of gender-marked antecedents of singular *they* that have been attested are noun phrase types that never introduce a discourse referent: phrases headed by the quantifiers *every* and *no*; phrases of the type *certain kind of* + NP.

The question of agreement is examined in Chapter 5. Singular *they* has long been thought of as an exception to agreement rules, yet it is widespread and robust in English, making it worthwhile to consider whether the rules are not accurate if they cannot account for the agreement properties of singular *they*. Some possibilities discussed here are the interpretation of the feature [plural] as 'at least one' (rather than 'more than one'); the analysis of the English plural verb as unmarked; the mechanisms of pronoun-antecedent agreement as being different from subject-verb agreement. The final section overviews pragmatic reasons, based on Grice's conversational maxims, for the choice of singular *they* as opposed to a gender-marked singular pronoun.

9 One problem is that "refer" is sometimes used for the relationship between a pronoun and its antecedent. While I try to avoid this usage as much as possible, it may crop up occasionally for convenience of expression. However, I do not hold that anaphoric pronouns "refer" in the way names do.

Chapter 6 provides a general summary, as well as some ideas for future areas of research suggested by the present study. Appendices follow, containing the naturally occurring examples and judgment questionnaires that constitute the primary data for this study.

Chapter 2: Singular *they:* The Data

2.0 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with defining singular *they*. Third person plural pronouns with grammatically singular antecedents have been used by speakers of English since the English language was first recorded, remaining a widespread occurrence in spoken (and to a more limited extent, written) English to this day. However, this phenomenon has not been widely recognized as a part of the grammar of English; when it is recognized, it is most often intuitively considered as a way to avoid specifying gender in the third person singular. While singular *they* is certainly useful for avoiding gender, it cannot be accurately defined solely in terms of this pragmatic strategy. Other intuitive ideas about singular *they*, such as the distance of the pronoun from its antecedent, also turn out to be falsified by real data. In this chapter, common myths about singular *they* are disabused, and a detailed description of actual usage is presented.

2.1 Myths about singular *they*

The agreement mismatch between anaphoric singular *they*, which has plural verb agreement, and its singular antecedents seems to trigger a set of assumptions for many people, including linguists. One is that it must be a performance error, that is, a mistake made by native English speakers whose underlying grammar does not include singular *they*. In section 2.1.1, I will show that this cannot be the case; rather singular *they* appears to be used as a grammatical form. Another is that singular *they* is a pragmatic strategy for avoiding the choice of one of the gender-marked third person singular pronouns. Of course, singular *they* can be used this way, in fact is preferred by some people for this purpose; however, the plural pronoun was not drafted into English solely to serve this purpose. Rather, speakers make use of a form already available in the grammar as one option among many. In section 2.1.2, I show why the existence of singular *they* cannot be explained by appeal to gender avoidance alone.

A third impression, related to the previous one, is that singular *they* is a new form which emerged in English in the past few decades to meet feminist demands that the language be freed of sexism, in particular the use of the masculine pronoun to refer both to males and females.[10] Once again, although singular *they* is certainly a good candidate for fulfilling this mandate, it did not come into English in order to do so; singular *they* has been in existence as long as plural *they* has; in fact, even the Old English third person plural seems to have been used with singular antecedents. Historical details are discussed in section 2.1.3.

Finally, the question of whether singular *they* is a facet of a particular dialect is often raised. As far as I can tell, it is not restricted to any regional, socioeconomic, or ethnic dialect. Evidence for the widespread use of singular *they* (and some differences of opinion on its acceptance in British versus American English) is given in section 2.1.4. It does seem likely that register (oral vs.

10 One current alternative is to use *she* as an epicene, or to alternate in a text between epicene *he* and *she*.

written, informal vs. formal, etc.) has an effect on availability and frequency of singular *they*; however, I have not made a study of usage variations, leaving this for future research.[11]

In the following sections, I do not mean to imply that a given use of singular *they* cannot be a performance error, nor to deny that it may be used as an evasive strategy or that its use may have become more widespread due to social and political gender awareness in our society; what I wish to impress upon my readers is that singular *they* cannot be defined by these usages. Rather, the pronoun can be used in these ways because it exists in the grammar for independent reasons.

2.1.1 Performance error

Since singular *they* violates number agreement, it is often considered an error in English (see Chapter 1). From a descriptive point of view, performance errors can be made while speaking that violate a speaker's underlying knowledge of the grammar of English. An example is *The box of papers have arrived*, where the verb is plural due to its proximity to the noun *papers*, when it should have singular agreement with the head of the noun phrase *box*. However, a native speaker would never say *The box have arrived*, evidence that the plural verb is a performance error due to word order, not a rule of English grammar. If all uses of singular *they* were performance errors, we would expect that in careful speech and in writing, its use would systematically be corrected or edited out. In addition, we might expect that most instances of singular *they* would be found separated from the singular antecedent, causing the speaker to lose track of what features were supposed to be matched, and to switch to plural.

Instead, it appears that singular *they* is used in careful speech and in formal written and edited contexts; it is even used deliberately by educated speakers of English, including linguists. This evidence is outlined in section 2.1.1.1. In addition, singular *they* can appear very close to its antecedent, as close as one word away. The distance of singular *they* to its antecedents is discussed in section 2.1.1.2. It is possible that some instances of singular *they*, especially in speech, are performance errors, especially for speakers who do not normally accept singular *they* or do so only in very limited contexts. However, in general, singular *they* must be evaluated as a part of the knowledge speakers have of English, a part of English grammar, available as a grammatical choice for those who use it.

2.1.1.1 Deliberate use

Since singular *they* is usually not considered standard or correct usage, it may seem to be a performance error, used only in informal spoken contexts. While it may be true that singular *they* is used in informal speech contexts by people who say they do not use it otherwise, I suggest that this differential usage may be due to the converse situation: in formal spoken or written contexts, educated people are careful not to use singular *they*. Of course, some people may not find singular *they* acceptable in most or many linguistic or pragmatic contexts. What I wish to

11 It may be that age is a factor, since younger speakers tend to accept and use singular *they* more readily (among those of all ages I have consulted, mostly at UCLA).

describe here is the possibility of the deliberate use of singular *they* as a grammatical form (as opposed to a performance error) for those who do find it acceptable.

First, singular *they* does exist in the speech and informal writing of educated people who should "know better". Examples of singular *they* usage come from journalists, doctors, teachers, even linguists. Following are two examples of linguists using singular *they*. The first example (1a), from Noam Chomsky, is a transcription of a spoken response to a question. The second (1b), from Tim Stowell, was in the written instructions on a midterm given in a syntax class (about a debate between a man and a woman, each of whom has a different theory).

(1) a. But **a ten-year-old child in Puerto Rico** sees no particular reason to learn English, and if you don't give **that child** any reason for learning English, **they** are not going to do it, no matter how good your methods are. [VIII.A.i.2]

b. Assume that **each one** is interested in convincing a studio audience that **their** theory is correct. And **each one** is going to try to use the facts to either construct an argument that the data prove **them** right or do not prove **them** wrong. [V.A.v.2]

Educated people who study language also use singular *they* in formal writing. The following examples come from edited texts, so presumably an editor has also read the instances of singular *they* without correcting them. The first example (2a) is from an applied linguistics textbook by Herbert Seliger and Elana Shohamy. The second (2b) is from an article in TESOL Quarterly, by Rod Ellis. The third (2c) is from an article in an edited set of papers on phonology, by Elisabeth Selkirk (she also uses singular *they* two other times in the same article).

(2) a. Since we know that **each individual** may have **their** own idiosyncratic pathway to developing language competence . . . [V.A.ii.3]

b. [T]eaching listening skills helps a learner become functional in using the L2 and also enables **a learner** to continue **their** language study independently of the teacher. [VI.A.ii.10]

c. The mere fact of a systematic phonological difference . . . raises the possibility that this distinction might be exploited by **the language learner** in **their** acquisition of the syntactic distinction . . . [VII.A.ii.13]

In addition, there are linguists and lexicographers who acknowledge their purposeful singular *they* usage. Example (3) is from an electronic message posted to the Sign Language Linguistics List by Mark Mandel. In the paragraph previous to the one cited below, he used the coordinate singular pronoun *his*/*her* anaphoric to *this person* (a person whose identity he is concealing). When I contacted Mandel via email, he responded that he felt he was being more formal or careful when using *his*/*her*; he said he is aware of using "epicene 'they'" and uses it on purpose.

(3) I think I'm protected from violating any confidentiality by time, distance, non-specificity of the description, and the fact that if **the person** should happen to see this then either **they** don't know about the sign and won't recognize the description, or **they** do know about it and this posting doesn't reveal anything new to **them**. [VII.C.v.2]

In the fifth edition (1995) of their introductory linguistics textbook, *Introduction to Language*, Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman write the following (4):

(4) If you heard **someone** clearing **their** throat you would be unable to segment the sound into a sequence of discrete units… [IV.A.ii.10]

The word *their* in the above quote is footnoted: "We will use the pronouns *they*, *their*, and *them* as the singular or plural form when referring generally to either male or female" (p. 177).

The Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995), designed for use by learners of English, is based on a large corpus of actual written and spoken English usage, including usage of singular *they*. In a special section entitled "Using language that is not sexist", the following suggestion is given:

You can often avoid unnecessary male pronouns by using the plural pronouns *they*, *them*, etc. instead.

> "*Someone's on the phone*." "*What do **they** want?*" (p. 1305)

The editors of the dictionary follow their own advice, using singular *they* in definitions and examples given of current English usage:

> A student who is **sent down** is asked to leave college or university without finishing the course because they have done something wrong.
>
> If you **send** someone **packing** you ask them to leave immediately. (p. 1291)

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, Ninth Edition, (1995) presents a description of singular *they* as an informal, but not incorrect, usage:

> The use of *they* instead of 'he or she' is common in spoken English and increasingly so in written English, although still deplored by some people. It is particularly useful when the sex of the person is unspecified or unknown and the writer wishes to avoid the accusation of sexism that can arise from the use of *he*. Similarly, *their* can replace 'his' or 'his and her' and *themselves* 'himself' or 'himself or herself', e.g. *Everyone must provide their own lunch*; *Did anyone hurt themselves in the accident*?

Thus, although educated speakers may be aware that singular *they* is supposed to be corrected according to prescriptive rules of English grammar, its use cannot be considered a performance error; singular *they* is in fact completely grammatical for what appears to be a large number of individual English speakers.

2.1.1.2 Nearness to antecedent

It is sometimes assumed that singular *they* only appears when separated from its antecedent. For example, Fries (1940) asserts that certain "indefinites (everyone, everybody, nobody, anyone, anybody, (n)either) that may be singular in form with plural idea take a plural reference pronoun or a plural verb only when other words intervene between the indefinite and the verb or reference

pronoun" (p. 50). If instances of singular *they* did usually appear far away from the antecedent, this might indicate that the use of a plural pronoun was due to a performance error—that the speaker had lost track of the grammatical number of the antecedent, and switched to plural. (For some actual cases of a switch to plural after an instance of singular *they*, see section 2.2.1.4.) Such agreement errors can be seen for example in subject-verb agreement, when the singular head noun is separated from the verb by a plural, resulting in agreement with the intervening plural as in *The box of papers have arrived*. One difference between uses of singular *they* and agreement errors due to intervention has already been discussed above: singular *they* is often not edited out of writing or speech, and can even be deliberately chosen, whereas a sentence such as *The box of papers have arrived* would be corrected to *The box of papers has arrived*. In addition, no one would accept *The box have arrived*. Thus, if we found that singular *they* could consistently appear close to its antecedent, it would be difficult to explain it as a performance error based on distance. As it turns out, singular *they* can be found quite close to its antecedent, under different measurements of distance. In fact, in a quantitative study of my database, it most often appears at the closest structural distance to the antecedent.

I will consider three measurements of distance: linear distance, structural distance, and a specific type of structural distance, c-command. For linear distance, I simply give a number of examples; for structural distance, I give the results of a count from my database of three measurements of distance; for c-command, I summarize the results of a quantitative study by Newman (in press).

The first measurement of distance I will consider is simple linear distance: in a string of words, does singular *they* appear immediately after its antecedent, or is it separated from the antecedent by other words? It is possible for singular *they* to be separated from its antecedent by only one or two words. Some examples are provided in (5a–e). All grammatical forms can appear close to their antecedents: nominative (5a); accusative (5b); genitive (5c–d); and reflexive (5e). Note that the plural pronoun can also appear right after a singular verb, as in (5c).

(5) a. In this election, I received a death threat. **Someone** said **they** were going to vote with a bullet. [IV.A.i.2]

b. Turn to **the brother or sister next to you** and tell **them**, "You've got what it takes." [XII.C.3]

c. **Everybody** pulls **their** weight. [I.A.ii.1]

d. There is one sure way to remind **a child** of **their** connection to life and other human beings and that **they** are important and valuable. . . it's called a hug. [VI.A.v.2]

e. The rules go out the window and it's **every sweetheart** for **themselves**. [I.A.iv.1]

In addition, I found one case of a coordinate singular pronoun appearing immediately after a reflexive form of singular *they* (6).

(6) The way to get through Broadmoor is to be a model patient and **a model patient** does not stand up for **themselves**—**he or she** does not complain. [XV.B.2]

This example clearly shows that the speaker has not erroneously switched to plural number, but is alternating the plural pronoun and the (coordinated) singular pronouns anaphoric to the same grammatically singular antecedent (*a model patient*).

Another aspect of linear distance involves the alternation in an extended sentence or discourse of a pronoun and a full NP, both associated with the same original antecedent. In these cases, singular *they* appears in between two coreferent singular NPs. (See section 2.2.3.3 on cataphora or backwards pronominalization, where the antecedent appears after the pronoun. See section 2.2.1.4 for switches from singular to plural after use of *they*.) In the examples (7a–c), the instance of singular *they* appears closer to the antecedent, with the full singular NP appearing further away.

(7) a. Although (university officials) cannot immediately change the policies of the military, they can protect the students by agreeing to pay tuition for **any cadet** who loses **their** scholarships because of **their** sexual orientation until **the student** can find another source. [III.A.ii.12]

b. We say **someone** is pretty for instance, whereas, if the truth were known, **they** are probably as ugly as Smith going backward, but by our lie we have made **that very party** powerful, such is the power of the charlatan. . . [IV.A.i.5]

c. Of course, if **anybody** chooses to extend **their** bad opinion of the Mossad to those who cooperate with the Mossad, then that's **each person**'s choice. [III.A.ii.1]

Another measure of distance is based on syntactic structure. To analyze the sentences in Appendix I for this measure, I defined three structural distances as follows: close, where the antecedent and pronoun appear in the same smallest phrase or sentence (including pronouns in complement clauses of a verb whose subject is the antecedent, as in *Everyone claimed they were the winner*); separate clause, where the antecedent and pronoun are in separate clauses of the same sentence, as with for example *if-then* clauses; and separate sentence, including sentences separated by a conjunction or punctuation.

For the comparison of distance, I considered 403[12] instances of singular *they* in my database (Appendix I). Within each example collected, I did not count repetitions of the same form at the same distance from the antecedent. As can be seen in Table 2.1, half the instances of singular *they* are structurally close to the antecedent. In fact, the further singular *they* is from the antecedent, the less often it appears.

12 This number is the total number of examples I had collected at the time I made the count.

Table 2.1: Pronoun-Antecedent Distance

Distance	Instance of *they*
Close	203 (50%)
Separate clause	146 (36%)
Separate sentence	54 (14%)

The irrelevance of distance as a factor in the choice of singular *they* is also evident within the discourse of one native speaker. In (8) the author, in separate sentences of the same text, uses first singular *they* and then later *it* with the antecedent *a child*. Both *they* and *it* are in a separate clause from the antecedent, and would thus be rated at the same distance in my system. However, the *a child* antecedent of *it* is embedded inside another NP as a possessive (*the child's innate knowledge*), whereas the *a child* antecedent of *they* is the subject of the first clause (*a child has already learned*); thus, it is the anaphoric *it* that is structurally further from the antecedent, and anaphoric *they* that is closer.

(8) Assuming that **the child** has already learned that there is a prosodically relevant distinction . . ., **they** would be in a position to observe . . . that some words always appear in strong form, ... Given **the child**'s innate knowledge of the universal constraints on prosodic structure, **it** could conceivably draw the inferences . . . . [VII.A.i.13]

In a corpus-based study of spoken English, Newman (in press) analyzed whether distance was relevant to singular *they* choice when compared to choice of a gender-marked singular. Using c-command[13] as the measure of pronoun-antecedent distance, he found that distance was not a relevant factor in choice between *they* or *he* with epicene antecedents.[14] The relative frequency of each pronoun was the same, though *they* was used more often overall. Only 65 instances of epicene *they* and 26 of epicene *he* were found in Newman's database, making this a small study. However, the results for instances of *they*, summarized in Table 2.2, do support my assertion that singular *they* does not have to be distant from its antecedent to be used in speech.

Table 2.2: Pronoun-Antecedent Distance: c-command

Distance	Instance of *they*
C-commanded	22 (34%)
Not c-commanded; Same sentence	33 (51%)
Separate sentence	5 (7.5%)
Separate speaker	5 (7.5%)

Adapted from Newman (in press)

In conclusion, there is no measurement of distance by which singular *they* can be said to appear only, or more often, when far from its antecedent. Singular *they* appears systematically in all

13 C-command in Newman's study roughly compares to what I have defined as "same smallest phrase"; for a more precise definition, see Reinhart (1983); the definition Newman (in press) uses is on p. 23.
14 Newman also compared epicene uses of *she*, but only found one in the corpus he used.

environments where a singular pronoun could appear, and cannot be explained in these contexts as an accidental slip into plural.

2.1.2 Evasive role

A common conception is that singular *they* exists in the language as a device for avoiding the use of one of the gender-marked singular third person pronouns (particularly *he*). In this view, singular *they* is called into use in contexts where use of the gender-marked singular would impart information about the sex of the person(s) associated with the pronoun when such information would be wrong or unavailable. This usage could also account for cases where a speaker wished to conceal the identity of the referent. Corbett (1991) classifies singular *they* in this way: "*they* is primarily for plural reference: when it is drafted in to replace the singular pronouns (because it does not mark gender), thus avoiding the gender choice, this is its 'evasive' role" (p. 221). It is true that singular *they* can be used in order to avoid expressing masculine or feminine gender in the third person singular. However, *they* can also be used when its antecedent NP is overtly gender-marked, or when the gender of the antecedent of the sex of the referent can be determined by the context. Examples of singular *they* with antecedents having overt or implied gender have been cited in Abbott (1984), Meyers (1993) and Newman (in press). In the following section are listed examples I have collected. In all of these examples, a form of the gender-marked singular, *he* or *she*, could perfectly well be used instead of singular *they*, with no change in meaning or intention. Thus, the avoidance explanation does not predict all uses of singular *they*.

2.1.2.1 Gender-marked antecedents

In the examples (9a–e), the antecedent of singular *they* contains a gender-marked common or proper name.

(9) a. Every girl I've spoken to about him said he was the kind of guy that **every mom** was glad to see **their** daughter associated with. [I.B.1]

b. Christian was **an example of a man** totally engaged by **their** passion for bullfighting, for bulls. [VI.B.3]

c. For **a certain kind of woman** it is essential that **they** be fully developed themselves before they can marry. [VI.B.2]

d. **Any prospective Portia** should watch this tape until **they** wear it out. [III.B.1]

e. If you get a man who doesn't mind, and is weak, then you begin to hate him for it. If you get **a Peter Jennings**, you'll annoy the shit out of **them**. [VI.B.1]

2.1.2.2 Gender implied contexts

In (10a–b), the antecedent itself is not gender-marked, but there are other gender-marked NPs in the discourse (*a man*, y*our girlfriend*) which identify the antecedent as describing either male or female individuals. In addition, in (10a) there is a quote clearly describing a woman's anatomy, and *her* is used twice after *they*; (10b) is a quote from a woman, who clearly has in mind marrying a man.

(10) a. Well, I'll tell you what, how about you preach this to **someone you love (your best friend/girlfriend/sister/mother)** the next time (God forbid) **they** are raped by a guy who "liked the feeling he had when he saw her nice tits" and thus felt so good that he had to share his "zest for life" with her. [IV.A.i.25]

b. I picture living there with a man, and the whole house is designed around that man. I've imagined his den, bedroom, bathroom—totally for him. . . . But I'd want a prenuptial agreement, and **anyone I would want to marry** I'm sure would want one for **themselves**. [III.A.iv.1]

In the examples in (11a–g), gender is implied by physiological or cultural circumstances mentioned in the discourse. Only women can get pregnant (11a) and have abortions (11b). Only men can have wives (11c). Normally, only men have beards (11d) and wear a suit and tie (11e). It is usually men who are accused of sexual harassment by women (11f), and women who are considered rape victims (11g). (In addition, (11g) is from a newspaper article about a woman losing her job.)

(11) a. Making friends with **someone** just because **they**'re pregnant is great if it's a coincidence, but why force it? [IV.A.i.9]

b. They will not close us down. If **a patient** wants an abortion, we will figure out a way to get **them** in the clinic. [VI.A.iii.5]

c. **Anyone** would be stunned to learn that **their** wife had been murdered. [III.A.ii.10]

d. I am just amazed this city can create new rights for cross-dressers. If **someone** comes in with a beard and a miniskirt, do I have to hire **them**? [IV.A.iii.5]

e. We think Usenet is like a conversation. It's not something that should be kept forever to haunt you. Say **some student** posts something about Microsoft being the big evil empire and then, two years later in a suit and a tie, **they**'re applying for a job there. [IV.A.i.11]

f. But even Mel Reynolds is not as shameless as my personal favorite, Bob Packwood. I actually admire the Republican senator from Oregon . . . yes, admire him. You have to admire **anyone** who actually has the gall to talk about family values after **they**'ve been charged with sexual harassment by enough women to fill the Yellow Pages. [III.A.i.4]

g. I couldn't believe it. I'd never heard of **a rape victim** losing **their** job because of the rape. [VI.C.ii.2]

Pragmatic contexts outside of the discourse can also imply gender. Example (12a) is from a description of a women's prison; (12b) is a quote from the medical director of a women's health center; (12c) is a description of clothes for women and girls, the original text accompanied by a photograph of a woman and a girl. Example (12d), from an issue of *Mad* magazine, is about contestants in an Alfred E. Newman look-alike contest, where all the contestants are male (in fact, in another part of the same text, the male pronoun is used: *In the event **the winner** is unable to fulfill **his** obligations* . . .).

(12) a. The prison service used to say that prisoners should maintain contact with outside agencies. . . There used to be about 20 women here going out to college; now there are none. If **anybody** does have to go out **they** are handcuffed. [III.A.i.2]

b. I hope we serve as a model . . . to look at **a patient** in **their** entirety. [VI.A.ii.9]

c. This trendy tunic looks so good that **your youngster** will want one as well. There's also a matching bag to hold **their** bits and pieces. [IX.A.ii.7]

d. **Winner** will receive a free one-year subscription to MAD whether **they** want it or not! [XVI.3]

Another pragmatic context in which gender is implied is when the antecedent describes a particular individual whose sex is known to the speaker. Such usage can be considered evasive if the speaker does not wish to reveal the sex of the person described, but cannot be considered evasive if the speaker seems to have no reason to hide anything. In the quote in (13), Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina is giving her opinion on a doctor who had assigned the task of performing a particular surgical operation to a technician. First, Molina describes the doctor as *this person*, followed by the pronoun *their*. Later, she describes the doctor as *the doctor*, in the next sentence using the pronoun *she*.

(13) I think **this person** should have lost **their** job. [The patient] was in for elective surgery. She got scheduled, she got prepped, and what, **the doctor** took a hike? Did **she** go get a cup of coffee? [VIII.C.ii.1]

2.1.3 Historical use

A common conception of singular *they* is that it is a new usage, brought into the language to respond to feminist concerns about using the masculine third person singular as "generic", that is, including both sexes (what I am calling "epicene"). For example, in a discussion of the use of singular *they* and coordinated gender-marked pronouns as a way to avoid "the unmarked masculine", Quirk et al. (1985) remark that it "is clear that the feminist movement in language has made many language users aware of problems of sexual bias which were overlooked by previous generations" (p. 343). Yet, as early as the eighteenth century, grammarians wrote on the use or avoidance of singular *they* (see discussion in Baron, 1986, chapt. 10). In fact, even in those prefeminist days, efforts were well underway to invent a new third person singular pronoun unmarked for gender, as for example Converse (1889), who suggested the word *thon*. Such efforts did not succeed; a comment by Morgan (1891) suggests why:

> I can only repeat that it is not in the least worse essential grammar to use "their" for "his or her," than to use "your" for "thine"; that it has been so used for at least two centuries; and that it is no further beyond our power to extend the meaning of an old word than to invent an ugly new one, —which no one has questioned our right to do. (p. 262)

In fact, examples of the third person plural pronoun with a grammatically singular antecedent can be found as early as the 14th century. In this section, I will discuss the similarities and differences between historical and current uses of singular *they*.

The third person plural forms *they*, *them* and *their* were adopted into Middle English from Scandinavian (Old Norse) between 1200 and 1500, replacing the previous Old English third person plural pronouns, which could easily be confused with the singular forms. For example, the Old English plurals *hie*, *heom* and *heora* were similar in pronunciation to the singular forms *he*, *him* and *hera* (Jespersen, 1938). The singular reflexive form *themself* appeared in the 14th century, disappearing (according to the OED[15]) around 1570; the plural forms *themselfs* and *themselves* appeared around 1500. The forms *theirself* and *theirselves* were also in use from the 14th century on (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

When looking at historical examples of singular *they*, it is important to note that the types of noun phrases which often serve as antecedents could be either grammatically singular or plural, from Old English to as recently as the 19th century. The negative quantifiers *none* and *neither* can be plural or singular in present-day English; such was also the case for *no* + NP, *every* + NP, *each* and *either* (Visser, 1963). For example, in (14a–b), both the verb and the pronoun are plural, presenting no agreement mismatch. (The example letters and numbers in brackets in this section correspond to those in Appendix II, where full references are given. In all examples, the antecedent and associated pronoun(s) are boldfaced and the relevant verbs are underlined.)

(14) a. **Every one** in the House were in **their** Beds. (1749) [D.17]

b. **Every body else** I meet with are full ready to go of **themselves**. (1759) [D.18]

Thus, I only count historical instances of *they* as singular when the verb agreement with the antecedent is singular. No examples from Old English (i.e., before 1200) can be found in the sources I consulted (*Oxford English Dictionary*; Visser, 1963; Keenan, 1994 database). However, some examples do exist of the Old English plural pronoun forms with singular antecedents. In (15), the plural forms *here* (genitive third person plural) and *hie* (nominative) have as antecedent *non scafte* 'no creature' which takes the third person singular verb form *is*. One concern in this example is that the conjoined plural NPs *angles and menn* intervene between the subject and the pronouns; it is not clear whether or not this intervention is affecting the use of the plural pronouns.

15 Since *themself* exists in current-day English (see section 2.3), it is not clear to me that it ever disappeared. I leave it to further research to determine whether this form indeed dropped out and has recently been picked up again, or never left English.

(15) **Non scafte** ðe is scadwis, al swo bieð angles and menn, ne aged te hauen **here** agen-will, forðan **hie** ne bieð, ne ne muȝen bien, naeure riht-wise ne gode, but **hie** folȝin godes wille on all wisen. (c1200)
'No creature that is rational, as are angels and men, ought to have **their** self-will, because **they** are not, nor ever can be, righteous nor good, save **they** follow God's will in all ways.' [A.1]

By the time the Scandinavian forms are in full use, so is their use as singulars. The forms in (16a–i) can be found with singular antecedents in Middle English: *they*, *them*, *themself*. The following (with NP complement where appropriate) appear as antecedents: *each*, *every*, *no*, *any*, and *one* (nonanaphoric, meaning 'a person').

(16) a. **Eche on** in **þer** craft ys wijs. (a1382)
'**Each one** in **their** craft is wise.' [A.2]

b. Ilke man in lande no[u] leris wyt falsedam to pinchyn and pike; es þer **no man** þat **þem** sterys. (a1400)
'Each man in the land now learns/teaches with falsedom to find fault and complain; there is **no man** that stirs **themselves** [= gets to work properly and honestly].' [A.3]

c. **Noman** was hardy in all þat countrey to sette aȝainst hem, for drede þat **þey** hadde of hem. (c1450)
'**No one** was brave in all that country to set against them, for dread that **they** had of them.' [A.4]

d. þat **ich of myn executors** þat takis charge opon **þaim** have v marc for his travaill. (1415)
'That **each of my executors** that takes the responsibility upon **themselves** have a mark for his work.' [A.5]

e. For at that time, **every man** was out of **ther** aray. (c1422–1509) [A.6]

f. **Euery creature** That ys gylty and knowyth **thaym-self** coulpable Demyth alle other [to] **thair** case semblable. (c1450)
'Every creature that is guilty and knows themself culpable deems all others similarly to their case.' [A.7]

g. Inheritments, of which **any of the seid persones** . . . was seised by **theym self**, or joyntly with other. (1464) [A.8]

h. Whan **one** hath no delyte to fulfyll **theyr** owne wyll or desire. (c1490) [A.9]

i. **No man** asketh what he ought to do in his office, but **the** woll aske a question, what the benefice is wourth. (a1500)
'No one asks what he ought to do in his position, but they will ask a question, what the payment is worth.' [A.10]

Into Early Modern English and up to the present day, singular *they* remains possible with the antecedent types in (14–16), as well as with indefinite phrases (*a* + NP, especially *a person*, which perhaps replaces *one* for the most part), as seen in (17a–c).

17. a. **Everye bodye** was in **theyr** lodgynges. (1530) [B.11]

b. If **a person** is born of a… gloomy temper… **they** cannot help it. (1759) [B.12]

c. Whenever **any one** was ill, she brewed **them** a drink. (1874) [B.13]

The examples in (18a–c) do not have a singular verb, but it seems likely that *one* and singular indefinites have always had singular verb agreement.

18. a. **A man or woman** being lang absent fra **thair** party. (1563) [C.14]

b. Holes, of that bignesse that **one** may thrust in **theire** neafe. (1641) [C.15]

c. Little did I think … to make a Complaint against **a Person so very dear to you**, . . . but dont let **them** be so proud … as to make **them** not care how **they** affront everybody else. (1742) [C.16]

2.1.4 Dialectal distribution

Singular *they* is a phenomenon of English, not confined to any regional, socio-economic, or ethnic dialect. Individual speakers do vary in their acceptance of singular *they*, and age may be relevant to which forms of the pronouns and which antecedents are allowable. However, I have yet to meet a native English speaker who never accepts singular *they* anywhere. Native speakers from the United States, Canada, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand all admit to using it.[16] The Middle English examples cited in the previous section are clearly British Isles English. Abbott (1984) cites 40 examples of both oral and written uses from British English. In my own database (Appendix I), of 311 examples[17], 256 (82%) were from U.S. sources, 36 (12%) from British sources, and 19 (6%) were unknown (to me). The high number of U.S. sources reflects the fact that the data was collected mostly from U.S. media and literature. The British examples come from writing and quotes in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, a newspaper I subscribe to. More quantitative research would need to be done to determine if there are any differences in type and frequency of instances of singular *they* in British and American English; my hypothesis would be that singular *they* use is virtually the same in both varieties.

16 Laurence Kitching has electronically published a summary of responses to a query on singular *their*, which includes these personal admissions: Vol.-7-600 ISSN 1068-4875, April 24, 1996; <kitching@sfu.ca>; Interdisciplinary Studies, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6, Canada.
17 The total of all examples collected at the time this count was taken.

Grammarians' impressions have differed with respect to British versus American acceptance of singular *they*. McKnight (1928, p. 528) notes that "in the use of pronouns following words or word combinations with collective meaning, British use often gives a shock to an American's grammatical nerves", citing (the American) Richard Grant White classifying the use of a plural pronoun anaphoric to *every* a "misuse". McKnight goes on to point out that "the kinds of 'misuse' here condemned in American use, in British use are established not only by long tradition but by current practice. The awkward necessity so often met with in American speech of using the double pronoun, 'his or her', is obviated by the 'misuse' of *their*". He then cites several examples from British literature of singular *they* with antecedents such as *every man*, *nobody*, *each*, *anyone* and *a person*. More recently, Quirk et al. (1985) make the opposite observation: "The pronoun *they* is commonly used as a 3rd person singular pronoun that is neutral between masculine and feminine. . . . At one time restricted to informal usage, it is now increasingly accepted even in formal usage, especially in AmE." (p. 770).

2.2 The truth about singular *they*

In this section, I will define singular *they* in detail, giving examples from my database of present-day examples (Appendix I). In the first section 2.2.1, I will show in what ways this use of the third person plural can be considered singular; in 2.2.2, I will show that singular *they* can appear in all cases, and the reflexive form, just as any other pronoun; in 2.2.3, I show that singular *they* is used in discourse contexts just as any other pronoun; in 2.2.4 I show that all NP types except names can be antecedents of singular *they*.

2.2.1 Singularity

Although singular *they* appears to remain a plural form, always taking plural verb agreement, and usually taking plural morphological agreement (*themselves*), it does have some grammatical attributes of a singular. The antecedents of singular *they* are singular, taking singular verb agreement. Singular *they* can also have singular morphological agreement, as seen in the form *themself*. Singular *they* can alternate with singular coordinate pronouns. Singular *they* can be in constructions with singular NP predicates. Possessed NPs with the possessive form, *their*, can be singular in contexts where a plural possessive would require a plural NP, interpreted distributively.

Singular verb agreement with antecedents of singular *they* has already been seen in numerous examples in this chapter. In the following subsections, I present evidence of *they* having the other types of singular attributes mentioned in the previous paragraph. In the last section, I consider some instances which appear to be counterexamples, where singular *they* seems to be reinterpreted as plural as a discourse progresses.

2.2.1.1 Singular –*self* morphology

Although the reflexive pronoun in its plural form *themselves* is used with singular antecedents, the singular form *themself* also exists in current-day English. (See section 2.2.1.3 for more details on the history and usage of this form.) Abbott (1984) and Whitley (1978) also give examples of *themself*. In (19a–g) are examples I have collected.

(19) a. If **somebody** just wants to kill **themself**, is there anything we can do about it? [IV.A.iv.1]

b. At a given stage **a child** actually had both choices available, but actually never availed **themself** of the other choice. [VI.A.iv.1]

c. Sometimes, however, leaving a bad relationship is the only way for **a co-dependent** to take care of **themself**. [VI.A.iv.2]

d. Question a is asking for an answer, while question b is more of a rhetorical question. Question b sounds more like something **a teacher** might ask and then answer **themself**. [VI.A.iv.3]

e. If **a young person** inflicts an injury on **themself**, no one outside need even be told. [VI.A.iv.5]

f. If **a person** feels good about **themself**, **they**'ll look good. [VI.A.iv.7]

g. The British convention is for **the caller** to introduce **themself** by name before being asked, once they've been connected to the person they want to speak to. If the caller doesn't know who has answered, but seeks a specific individual, they will say 'Can I speak to X?' (and if X is the answerer X will reply 'Speaking'). Otherwise, if the caller wishes to identify the answerer (or if the answerer wishes to identify **a caller** who has not identified **themself**) they say 'Who is speaking?' or 'Who is that speaking?' [VI.A.iv.4]

2.2.1.2 Singular NP predicates

Although it is possible for a plural subject NP to have a distributed singular NP predicate, normally, such a choice sounds quite odd, since it tends to suggest that the people described by the plural subject fulfill the description of the singular NP predicate as a group, as in (20a).[18] However, a grammatically singular subject, even if it has notional plurality, can easily have a singular NP predicate (20b).

(20) a. ?*All professors were once a student.

b. Every professor was once a student.

These judgments suggest that when *they* is the subject of a singular NP predicate, it must be functioning as a singular, not a plural. Abbott (1984) also gives examples of singular *they* followed by a singular NP predicate. In examples (21a–e), I have boldfaced the NP predicate, in addition to the form of *they* and its antecedent.

18 Speakers differ in their acceptability of the distributive reading of (20a), whereas (20b) is always acceptable.

(21) a. **No actor** can be certain **they** will make **a good director**, but at least he or she starts with the advantage of knowing what not to do after hanging around sets for so long. [II.A.i.2]

b. Who gets to make art; **who** even gets to imagine that **they** might become **an artist**? [XI.A.v.1]

c. If **a deaf person** identifies **themselves** as "deaf" and wants to be a member of the DC then **they** will be **a member**. [VI.A.v.5]

d. Usually, when **a person** has been in a hospital setting, **they**'re very comfortable with anyone and everyone coming in and disrobing **them**, leaving **them** uncovered and treating **them** simply as **a body**. We try to give back to **them their** dignity as **an individual** and then enhance **their** awareness as **a sexual being**. [VI.A.v.8]

e. **A person** who doesn't take a careful inventory of **their** skills and capabilities is **a fool**. [VI.A.ii.2]

It is possible for a singular NP predicate to have a plural antecedent, however, particularly in contexts where the predicate can easily be interpreted as distributed. In (22), though the antecedents are plural in both the written and spoken parts of the text, singular predicate NPs are used. It is clear that the choice of dressing as a man or woman is applied to each member of the group (*transvestites* or *cross-dressing customers*), not to the group as a whole.

(22) A Scottish bank now allows **transvestites** to use two of its new high-security check-cashing cards—one with a photo of **them** dressed as **a man** and the other as **a woman**. "If **any cross-dressing customers** are confident enough to go shopping dressed as **a woman**," a spokesperson explained, "it's possible for **them** to have a second card so that they can avoid embarrassment or difficulties when paying by check." [XVIII.C.2]

Since use of singular predicate NPs is possible with plural subjects, the examples with singular *they* preceding singular predicate NPs in (21) might not necessarily provide evidence of the singular status of the pronoun. It would be interesting to know whether the speakers/writers of the singular *they* sentences accepted singular predicates with plural subjects or not.

2.2.1.3 Singular possessed NPs

As with singular predicate NPs, a singular, non-distributive possessed NP usually sounds best when the possessor is singular, though some speakers may allow a singular distributive interpretation with a plural possessor. Thus, (23a) has a distributive interpretation, with each student raising one hand, while (23b) has a distributive interpretation with every student raising both hands. With a plural possessor, however, the interpretation is ambiguous: in (23c), each student could be raising one hand, with the plural *hands* representing the totality of hands raised, or each student could be raising both hands. In (23d) then, the only interpretation available is the distributive one, with each student raising one hand, but due to the plural possessor *the students*, it sounds odd, unless there is one hand (a big cardboard hand, for example) being raised by all the students as a group.

(23) a. Every student raised his/her hand.

b. Every student raised his/her hands.

c. The students raised their hands.

d. ?*The students raised their hand.

Now, with a singular possessor, and a plural possessive determiner, we have the following questions: What is the interpretation of the plural possessive determiner? Is it a singular, just as *his* or *her*, or is it a plural? What are the possessive determiner and the possessed NP agreeing with? These questions will be discussed further in Section 2.4, along with a quantitative analysis of all possessed NPs in my database. For the moment, I will assume the judgments given in (23); an instance of a singular distributed possessed NP will thus be evidence that *their* is singular, agreeing with the singular possessor antecedent. Some examples, with different types of antecedents, are given in (24a–g). For each of these, replacing the singular possessor antecedent with a plural would make the sentence sound odd, similarly to (23d). The singular possessed NPs are underlined.

(24) a. In these tough times **everyone** has to tighten **their** belt. [I.A.ii.2]

b. **No City Councilmember** fights harder for **their** district than Nate Holden. [II.A.ii.13]

c. How can **anyone** possibly claim that **they** are more of a UCLA student than I am, and that **their** single voice deserves to be heard and mine does not? [III.A.v.3]

d. Doesn't it seem strange that **someone** who lives in a big white guarded house in Washington, D.C., and sends **their** child to a private school would come to Los Angeles and try to tell us how to run our city? [IV.A.ii.1]

e. At the University of Florida, **each employee** is to receive a copy of **their** personnel file on request. [V.A.ii.4]

f. Sometimes **a person** is right that **their** partner can't handle knowing something. [VI.A.ii.5]

g. Come to today's concert, featuring Jill Warren and other artists, and show you care more about **the human being sitting next to you** than **their** awful rat-tail haircut. [VII.A.ii.14]

2.2.1.4 Switch to plural

Although the antecedents of singular *they* are grammatically singular, often their notional number is plural or indeterminate. In addition, the notional number of *they* can be one of three possibilities: plural, indeterminate, or singular. Thus, it is not surprising that speakers might lose track in a discourse of which notional interpretation was intended by a use of a particular antecedent and a form of *they* anaphoric to it, resulting in a switch from singular *they* to plural *they*. I analyze such mid-discourse switches as pragmatic performance errors.

A switch may also be due to the syntax and semantics of quantifier-pronoun relationships. One such grammatically determined switch is seen with quantifier-pronoun binding.[19] When a pronoun is bound by a singular universal quantifier, the pronoun can be singular; when the pronoun is not bound, it must be plural.[20] Thus, (25a) can be followed by (25b), but not (25c).

(25) a. Every girl thought she was late to the party.

b. In fact, they arrived on time.

c. In fact, she arrived on time.

Singular *they* can also be bound by a singular universal quantifier, with the same distributive interpretation as a gender-marked singular. It then "switches" to a plural when not bound. One example of such a switch is (26), from an undergraduate student paper. Since the students discussed have different native languages, this instance of *their* is a distributed singular, corresponding to the singular antecedent *each of the students interviewed*. The switch (indicated by underlining) is seen in the next sentence, where *they*, still anaphoric to *each of the students interviewed*, is now plural, as emphasized by the use of *all*. In the following sentence, *they* continues as a plural; the plural *native languages* is distributed across the students (assuming each student has only one native language, the apparent meaning).

(26) **Each of the students interviewed** agreed that **their** native language use on campus is very rare, if at all; English is the language they all use. However, they do use their native languages at other times in other places. [V.A.ii.7]

The next example (27) is a somewhat confusing piece of writing (by journalist Michael Ventura), where the singular existential quantifier phrase *somebody* seems to switch to plural. In the first *their peace of mind*, the pronoun is anaphoric to *somebody*, which posits the existence of a non-specific individual who satisfies the criteria of being a member of the court whose peace of mind is disturbed; here, *their* must be singular. However, the next instance of *their peace of mind* (with *their* presumably still anaphoric to *somebody*) is then followed by two plural possessed NPs (*minds* and *imaginations*), suggesting that *their* now has some understood plural antecedent. Since there is no such antecedent in the text, it may be that the first use of singular *they* triggered a plural interpretation, leading to the switch.

19 Quantifier-pronoun binding will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. The following definitions will suffice for now: A pronoun is bound if it is in the domain of its antecedent; the domain is the smallest noun phrase or sentence containing both the quantifier and the pronoun.

20 This rule is not absolute, as will be discussed in Chapter 4; continuation of a singular pronoun is possible in certain modal contexts. Such contexts are irrelevant for the current discussion, and will be ignored.

(27) So the court's "moral opposition," which is now sufficient cause to abridge our First Amendment, on examination is nothing more than **somebody**'s prissy resentment over any act that disturbs **their** peace of mind — as long as this "somebody" is, or seems to be, in the numerical majority. The real question becomes: Why does it disturb **their** peace of mind? More specifically: What is the process by which their minds are disturbed? Would their minds be disturbed by naked dancing if the act didn't loom so large in their imaginations? [IV.A.ii.13]

A similar situation occurs in (28): the pronoun *they* is anaphoric to the singular NP *a person*, a generic indefinite. However, after this instance of *they* there is a plural predicate NP, *legal U.S. immigrants*. Once again, since the only NP antecedent for this predicate is singular, it appears that the intervening pronoun has been reinterpreted as plural, and has triggered the plural agreement.

(28) If **a person** desires government services, why can't **they** simply apply for a green card and become legal U.S. immigrants? [VI.A.i.6]

Another example (29), from an email message sent to the Sign Language Linguistics List, contains what seems to be an unwitting switch from singular *they* to plural. First, the generic indefinite *an Afro-American* is introduced, followed by a conjoined singular anaphoric pronoun set *his/her*. In a conjoined sentence, the possessive pronoun is *their*. (The switch from coordinate singular pronouns to singular *they* is attested elsewhere as well; see section 2.2.4.5.) Although this use of *their* is singular, it may be contributing to the switch to a plural NP in the next clause, *those individuals*, presumably all the people defined in the first clause, i.e., Afro-Americans who have left the ghetto as a result of getting an education. After this switch, two instances of plural anaphoric *they* follow.

(29) For example, when **an afro-american** makes the decision to get an education and fight **his/her** way out of the ghetto (or wherever the fight initiates) and that move eventually leads to a rise to the middle class and a move away from **their** home base to suburban areas of America, those individuals have a problem because the core group feels they have left because they are too "uppity" for the rest of them. [Capitalization of original.] [XV.A.9]

The examples of singular to plural switches in this section seem to be based on a confusion of which grammatical number to assign to certain types of antecedents with indeterminate number. In all the examples discussed, the antecedent NP describes a group of people, with singular number possible either by distribution of some characteristic across members of the group, or by the positing of a generic indefinite exemplar to represent the group. Whether the antecedent is grammatically singular or plural, *they* is used as the anaphoric pronoun, perhaps contributing to making the choice of number more mutable as the discourse continues.

2.2.2 Grammatical forms

Singular *they* can appear in all the grammatical forms possible for English pronouns: nominative *they* (30a); accusative *them* (30b); genitive determiner *their* (30c); genitive NP *theirs* (30d); and reflexive *themselves* (30e) and *themself* (30f).

(30) a. She chuckled now and again at a joke, but it was the amused grim chuckle of **a person** who looks up to discover that **they** have coincided with the needs of nature in a bird. [VI.A.i.2]

b. If you want to detect **a liar**, you're better off not watching **them**. [VI.A.iii.6]

c. Sometimes **a person** is right that **their** partner can't handle knowing something. [VI.A.ii.5]

d. If **a person with a hearing loss** does not want to be identified as being “Deaf” then the choice of acceptance is **theirs** not the DC. [VI.A.v.5]

e. The way to get through Broadmoor is to be a model patient and **a model patient** does not stand up for **themselves**—he or she does not complain. [VI.A.iv.6]

f. Sometimes, however, leaving a bad relationship is the only way for **a co-dependent** to take care of **themself**. [VI.A.iv.2]

2.2.3 Discourse relationships

Once introduced into a discourse, singular *they* functions in the same ways as any other anaphoric pronoun. In this section, examples are discussed of use across sentences, across speakers, before the conceptual antecedent, and with contrastive stress.

2.2.3.1 Anaphoric use across sentences

Just as with any other pronoun, singular *they* can be used anaphorically in a discourse across sentence boundaries (and across different speakers) to track a particular antecedent without repeating the full NP each time. In most cases, the antecedent introduces a hypothetical or exemplar individual into the discourse, but an antecedent (unmarked for gender) which introduces a specific person is also possible. Following are some examples. I count as separate sentences those separated by punctuation, and those conjoined by *and*, *but*, or *or*.

First, in one person's ongoing discourse, different forms of anaphoric singular *they* may be used in subsequent sentences (31a–e).

(31) a. **Each president** should have the option to sit on the board. If **they** choose to forgo that opportunity, It's **their** choice. But there shouldn't be a policy hindering **them** from doing so. [V.A.v.6]

b. I'm running out of time in life; I don't have time to call directly. So the first time I call **someone**, I listen to see if **they** have The Message Center. I make a red dot by **their** name and next time, I send **them** a message. I tell **them** to reply by pressing 4 after **they** hear my message. **They** don't need to call back directly and I can respond back again at any time. [IV.A.v.8]

c. If any time during the year, **an individual** is being ineffective in carrying out the council's goals on a committee, **they** should be immediately held accountable. And if this means pulling **them** off the committee, then (USAC should). [VI.C.v.1]

d. Have you ever noticed how in a gang, **one member** isn't so tough when **they**'re alone, but as soon as **they** have **their** crew behind **them** they act like **they**'re immortal? [VI.C.v.3]

e. An important lesson for **the co-dependent** to learn is that **they** have a job to do in a professional environment. It is not **their** family. **They** do not need to be loved and accepted. **They** do need to perform adequately and functionally. [VII.A.v.2]

A form of singular *they* may also be anaphoric to an antecedent introduced by an interlocutor (32a) or to a NP in a previous sentence when the NP introduces a specific individual into the discourse (32b).

(32) a. M&R: "Let's talk about the famous Willie Brown style. What's your secret for getting **someone** to do what **they** don't want to do?" / Brown: "Prove to **them** that it's in their best interest." [IV.A.v.12]

b. There is in fact **a GTC** for Applied/TESL, and I forget who it is. I will have **them** contact you. [VI.C.iii.7]

Both these instances have existentials as the antecedent; the pronoun in the following sentences can thus be interpreted as substituting for a definite phrase *that person*, and could be considered as endophoric deixis. Whatever the analysis, singular *they* is functioning here in the same way that other singular pronouns do in discourse, as in for example: *A woman walked into the room*. *She sat down*.

2.2.3.2 Cataphora and stress

While the vast majority of the examples of singular *they* that I and other researchers have collected are truly anaphoric—that is, where the antecedent comes before the pronoun—it is also possible for singular *they* to be cataphoric, where the pronoun appears before the "antecedent", also called backwards anaphora. Whitley (1978) gives the following example:

> The psychologist explained that, along with the attention **they** receive from others, **the overweight person** may choose to remain fat out of fear that **they** won't be able to handle being thin. (p. 30)

I also have two examples in my data (33a–b).

(33) a. The society in which **they** were raised will influence **a person**'s choice of language. [VI.A.i.17]

b. Somewhere deep inside **themselves**, **a dog**'s ancient gene pool is telling **them** what to do. [VI.A.v.11]

Singular *they* can also receive phonological stress. Sentence (34a) is from a written pamphlet, the italicization (from the original) representing phonological contrastive stress. The italicized *they* is stressed here to make clear that it's the person who is unavailable, as opposed to the drug mentioned just before. Sentence (35b) is dialog from a novel, with the italicized *their* representing contrastive stress differentiating the identity of *someone* from that of *the girl*.

(34) a. What all the talk about tolerance and endorphins and withdrawal means in human terms is that **a person** who gets strung out on junk gets sick, very sick, if it is suddenly unavailable—or if ***they*** are suddenly unavailable because **they**'re in jail or some other place where it's impossible or difficult to get a fix. [VI.A.i.9]

b. 'No,' he added slowly, 'I think we have to look elsewhere for our killer. Someone who didn't know about Linda's double life; someone who had no reason to think she had a record; **someone who** thought we'd discover ***their*** identity once we knew the girl's.' [IV.A.ii.6]

2.2.3.3 More than one *they*

It is possible to have two instances of singular *they* with different antecedents in the same sentence (35a–b). (Here I have italicized the second set of antecedent-pronoun pairs.)

(35) a. If **another office employee** picks up the phone and ***the person*** is speaking Spanish, **they** usually put ***them*** on hold and call for the secretary. [VI.A.i.13]

b. Otherwise, if **the caller** wishes to identify the answerer (or if the answerer wishes to identify ***a caller*** who has not identified ***themself***) **they** say 'Who is speaking?' or 'Who is that speaking?' [VI.A.iv.4] [VII.A.v.4]

It is also possible to have an instance of singular *they* and an instance of plural *they* in the same sentence (36a–b).

(36) a. If you look at ***the buttocks*** of **an 80-year-old person**, ***they*** don't look wrinkled like **their** face. [VI.A.ii.16]

b. The reason you rely on **this person** is simple—**they** can answer ***your questions***, and more importantly, **they** can answer ***them*** in language you can understand. [VIII.A.i.5]

2.2.4 Antecedent types

Although individual speakers of English vary in their acceptance of antecedents of singular *they* (see Chapter 3), examples of uses of singular *they* are attested with every type of antecedent except proper names.

2.2.4.1 Quantifier phrases

Certain quantifier phrases, consisting of a quantifier alone (*each*, *none*), or a quantifier (*every*, *each*, *no*, *any*, *some*) plus a singular NP (*–one*, *–body*, free NPs), require singular verb agreement.[21] All of them can serve as antecedents of singular *they*.

Examples are given in (37a–h) of each type of quantifier in different possible internal configurations, followed by separate comments on specific and non-specific uses of *some*.

(37) a. Now, **everyone** has **their** own horse. [IA.ii.3]

b. Not only Buddha, but **every believing Buddhist** also reincarnates and, depending on **their** behavior in the past life, moves up and down a scale of new creatures and plants. [I.A.ii.10]

c. The nudes attempt to demystify and educate as Cameron closely documents his subjects' physical transformations while allowing **each** to express **their** diversity. [V.A.ii.1]

d. **Each person** has to fill **their** own basic needs as a person. [V.A.v.4]

e. **Nobody** loves **their** car like a Honda owner. [II.A.ii.1]

f. **NO TAXPAYER IN CALIFORNIA** WILL SEE ANY CHANGE IN **THEIR** TAXES. [II.A.ii.12]

g. I've never been with **anybody** who just loves what **they** do so much, and puts everything into it. [III.A.i.1]

h. **Any back patient who suffers increased pain during exercise** should stop immediately and see **their** physician. [III.A.ii.8]

The existential quantifier *some* with a singular human NP can be interpreted in two different ways: the existence of at least one non-specific person; or, the existence of one specific person that the speaker has in mind. Singular *they* is available for both: non-specific (38a), (38b); and specific (38c), (38d).

(38) a. Who **someone** sleeps with has absolutely no bearing on how **they** do **their** job. [IV.A.ii.9]

b. Every time **someone** turns on a TV set, **they** are actually choosing not to do 100 other things. [IV.A.i.20]

c. In this election, I received a death threat. **Someone** said **they** were going to vote with a bullet. [IV.A.i.2]

d. Once when **someone** grabbed me and tried to drag me into **their** car, I screamed and it was my friends who came up and saved me. [IV.A.ii.8]

21 The only exception is *none*, which can also take plural verb agreement.

2.2.4.2 Indefinite phrases

Indefinite phrases, *a, an, one, another* + NP, can be antecedents of singular they. I will be assuming two semantic interpretations for indefinites, generic and existential (with existential having two sub-interpretations, specific and non-specific). The generic interpretation posits the existence of a kind or prototype, predication of which holds true for all or most individuals of that kind, at all or most times. The existential interpretation posits the existence of a single individual: this individual may be hypothetical (non-specific), or real (specific). Predication of an existential can be true for only the one individual, and at a given time. Thus, if I say *A child likes ice cream*, the indefinite has the generic interpretation, and could be modified by *usually* or *always*. Liking ice cream is a property of children in general. If I say *A child has just eaten some ice cream*, the specific time reference prevents the generic reading; I must be talking about one particular child who ate some ice cream at a particular moment. (Note also that modifying *ice cream* with *some* in the generic sentence is not possible.) Indefinite phrases with both kinds of interpretations, as long as the indefinite is not gender-marked (see Chapter 4), are available as antecedents of singular *they*.

In (39a–c) are examples of generic indefinite antecedents (no particular time or situation).

(39) a. Do you believe that laws should allow **a terminally ill person** in severe distress the choice of medical assistance in hastening **their** death? [VI.A.ii.13]

b. How far will **a parent** go to protect the child **they** love? [VI.A.i.3]

c. The absence of sleep reduces **a person**'s attention span, delays **their** reaction time, and can cause **them** to fall asleep easily, sometimes within minutes. [VI.A.v.1]

In (40a–c) are examples of non-specific existential indefinite antecedents (a particular time or situation).

(40) a. Wouldn't it be good to get **a young 25-year-old African-American** and just pay **them** to do a column and not have **them** on staff? [VI.C.iii.2]

b. It's important for the media to pick up the stories about gay-bashing incidents, because the next time **an individual** is sitting at home, thinking about committing an act like this, we want **them** to know that the sheriff's department will catch **them**. [VI.C.iii.4]

c. You can still send something special to **a certain someone** and have it get there fast. In fact, for just $2.90 you can have a two-pound package in **their** hands in just two days. . . . you could send a Priority Mail package through the holidays and let **them** know just how important **they** are. [VI.C.v.2]

Only one example in my data set is of a specific existential indefinite antecedent (41).

(41) There is in fact **a GTC** for Applied/TESL, and I forget who it is. I will have **them** contact you. [VI.C.iii.7]

2.2.4.3 Definite phrases

Singular definite phrases (*the* + NP) can also be antecedents of singular *they*, and also have two semantically different readings: generic, and individual-denoting. The generic definites have the same properties as the generic indefinites: they describe a kind or prototype, and are only compatible with generic time reference. The individual-denoting definites, on the other hand, describe a particular individual, and may have specific time reference predicates.

In (42a–g) are examples of generic definites as antecedents of singular *they*.

(42) a. I absolutely agree with him that **the American adult** does not have an ongoing source of information to meet **their** sexual needs. [VIII.A.ii.11]

b. **The average person** spends about 45 minutes at **their** dental cleaning. [VII.A.ii.6]

c. Under the DCP, **the academic student employee** would pay 8.95 percent of **their** salary into a university-administered pension fund. [VII.A.ii.12]

d. By doing science hands-on, you raise it to a level where **the child** can reason and apply what **they** learn. [VII.A.i.4]

e. The smaller **the person**, the more space **they** will occupy. [VII.A.i.6]

f. Early romantic relationships usually reach a transition point where they either deepen or end. As this point approaches, you need to find out enough about **the other person** to make an informed decision about whether **they**'re worth the risk and investment. [VI.A.i.9]

g. We'll let you choose **the banker you want** and you can see **them** every time. [VII.A.iii.4]

Much rarer as antecedents of singular *they* are individual-denoting definites. I have collected five examples (43a–b) and (44a–c). In (43a) and (43b) it is not entirely clear that the pronoun is anaphoric to the definite phrase, or that the definite NP is denoting an individual. In (43a), it is possible that the pronoun stands for something like 'whoever was there' rather than the specific employee introduced before. Example (43b) is a quote from Jonathan Dimbleby, who interviewed Prince Charles for a film. Although he seems to be talking about Prince Charles when he says "the individual", it may also be that he has switched into a generic use, with the Prince as the understood referent of the generic description.

(43) a. Campus police made the arrest after responding to a Saturday morning call from a university employee who noticed the office door pried open, campus police officer Sgt. Phil Baguiao said. "**The employee** heard some noise coming from the office, and since it was a Saturday, **they** called the police," he said. [VII.C.i.1]

b. This is not a political interview where you grill someone; this is a documentary based on an understanding of **the individual** and an attempt to draw **them** out. If you go feet first and bang **them** about the head, **they** retreat. [VII.C.v.1]

The three examples in (44a–c) seem to be clear instances of individual-denoting definites as singular *they* antecedents. In the first, (44a), there is what seems to be an error in the first part of the sentence, which should probably read: "I got a call from *someone at* Psychological Services". However, the antecedent of *they* clearly denotes a particular person, whose identity is unknown. In (44b), the writer used singular *they* on purpose, as part of a strategy to protect the identity of the person described. In (44c), the identity of the person simply seems to be irrelevant.

(44) a. I got a call from Psychological Services who was very concerned about trying to locate **the individual who had placed the ad**, thinking that **they** needed help. [VII.C.i.2]

b. I think I'm protected from violating any confidentiality by time, distance, non-specificity of the description, and the fact that if **the person** should happen to see this then either **they** don't know about the sign and won't recognize the description, or **they** do know about it and this posting doesn't reveal anything new to **them**. [VII.C.v.2]

c. On Monday, July 11, 1994, at approximately 7:30 p.m. at Cole and Haight streets, I asked a passerby for a cigarette. **The person** gave me a cigarette and walked on **their** way. [VII.C.ii.2]

2.2.4.4 Demonstrative phrases

Demonstrative phrases (*this*/*that* + NP, DemP) are used in different ways, with different functions and interpretations. First, a DemP may be a type of definite phrase, anaphoric to a linguistic antecedent previously introduced into the discourse. This use could be considered deixis, with the "pointing" being endophoric—to another linguistic element. Singular *they* can be anaphoric to an instance of an anaphoric DemP, in the same way it can be anaphoric to a definite phrase. Alternatively, singular *they* in such contexts could simply be alternating with the DemP, similarly to the way it alternates with coordinated pronouns (see section 2.2.4.5). Interestingly, in all the examples I have collected, singular *they* always appears after an instance of a DemP anaphoric to an indefinite NP, never before (45a–c). There appears to be a hierarchy of informational content, which decreases as the discourse continues. Thus, the first mention is a fully descriptive NP, such as *an offender* (45a) or *a ten-year-old child in Puerto Rico* (45b), the second mention is a DemP with less descriptive content (*that person*, *that child*), and the third mention is a pronoun (*their*, *they*).

(45) a. Family conferencing employs the non-Western goal of restoring **an offender** to the community and offering **that person** the opportunity to act on **their** sense of contrition. [VIII.A.ii.1]

b. But **a ten-year-old child in Puerto Rico** sees no particular reason to learn English, and if you don't give **that child** any reason for learning English, **they** are not going to do it, no matter how good your methods are. [VIII.A.i.2]

c. If you're like most folks, you probably have **a friend, co-worker, or relative** you call whenever you need help with your Macintosh. The reason you rely on **this person** is simple—**they** can answer your questions, and more importantly, **they** can answer them in language you can understand. [VIII.A.i.5]

The example in (46) seems to be another instance of decreasing information in a NP–DemP–pronoun series, except that the DemP is an idiomatic expression with the additional modification *special*.

(46) Is there **anyone out there who works on gender and ASL**? If you are **that special someone**, or you know **them**, please respond to this email address. [VIII.A.iii.1]

Idiomatic DemPs can also be the original antecedents of singular *they* (47a–b). In these instances, the full descriptive content is understood: *that special someone* or *that certain someone* is understood to be something like 'the person you love' or 'the person you highly value'.

(47) a. Give **that special person** something **they** can always use—cash. [VIII.A.i.1]

b. If you are having trouble figuring out how to approach **that certain someone**, simply ask **them** if **they** would like to have lunch at North Campus. [VIII.A.v.1]

A DemP can also be used in informal contexts to introduce a person into the discourse; here it functions as a type of indefinite existential phrase rather than a definite. Thus, *I saw this guy yesterday* means much the same thing as 'I saw a certain guy yesterday'. Although I have no examples in my database, such uses can also be antecedents of singular *they*. An invented example would be: ***This person*** *came up to me at the party last night and told me* ***they*** *could predict earthquakes*.

A DemP, like a pronoun, can get its reference from outside the discourse, by pointing. Such exophoric uses of a DemP can serve as antecedents of singular *they*. Note that in the examples I have collected, the deictic use of the DemP is not directly to a person, but to some physical object or space representing the person. The first example (48a) is from a note attached to a form. The sex of the student was not evident from the name on the form. The second example (48b) is from an email message: it was written above a copied message, sent by a person whose name and sex was unknown—"this person" refers to the sender of the original message.

(48) a. **This student** filled out the wrong form. I tried calling, but was not able to reach **them**. [VIII.C.iii.1]

b. I have been answering many questions for **this person** regarding setting up **their** secretarial service. I guess **they** are done with the questions and this is my payment. [VIII.C.v.1]

Direct deixis, pointing to a person and using a pronoun, is not possible with singular *they*. See Chapter 3 for a discussion of such contexts, including a test of the unusual circumstance when a person's sex is hidden from a pointing speaker.

2.2.4.5 Coordinated singular noun phrases

Singular NPs coordinated with *or* may serve as antecedents of singular *they*; in addition, coordinate pronouns may appear between a singular antecedent and an instance of singular *they*. In such contexts, it is possible that the coordination is being interpreted as inclusive, with the

antecedent being a type of plural. While this is quite plausible, I consider such antecedents to be singular for the following reasons: 1) the verb agreement is singular; 2) the coordinate NPs can have singular NP predicates (see section 2.2.1.2); 3) coordinate pronouns can appear after an instance of singular *they*.

One possible avoidance use of singular *they* is when a conjoined antecedent has two gender-marked NPs, with different genders (49a–c). Such usage has been available historically as well (see (18a) in Section 2.1.3).

(49) a. No foreign news editor in London, New York or Paris, has to my knowledge told **their man or woman** that **they** must stay. [XII.C.1]

b. Are you saying that **the divorcee or widower** will forever be promiscuous, even if **they** remarry, on the grounds that **they** have had sex before marrying **their** present spouse? [XII.C.2]

c. Turn to **the brother or sister next to you** and tell **them**, 'You've got what it takes.' [XII.C.3]

However, gender avoidance is not the reason that singular *they* is acceptable with coordinated antecedents in general, since the NPs can both be epicene, or both be of the same gender (50a–c). Note the singular verb *is* in (50a), and the singular NP predicate *a participant* in (50b).

(50) a. This is to certify that **the applicant or sponsor listed** is financially capable of meeting the financial commitment indicated, and, if the funds are outside the United States, is permitted to use them under **their** government's present regulations. [XII.A.ii.1]

b. If you see **a friend or relative** as a participant in the terribly destructive 'pain behavior' syndrome try to show **them** how their suffering is affecting **their** entire way of life—how **their** pain is jeopardizing **their** mental as well as physical well-being. [XII.A.v.1]

c. That is as much rape as if you had sexual intercourse with **any other girl or woman** without **their** consent. [XII.B.1]

One way to avoid choosing one or the other gender-marked pronoun is to use both at the same time (in constructions such as *he or she*, *his*/*her*, etc.). This appears to be an instance of avoidance or evasive usage, since it involves a conjoining of two otherwise separate forms for a particular purpose. Such coordinate pronouns are never found with gender-marked antecedents, as is singular *they*. Although *or* can function as an inclusive conjunction, and thus may be notionally plural, singular pronominal subjects coordinated with *or* still take singular verb agreement, as in (53e–f) and (54a–b). I will thus consider them to be grammatically singular, just like their non-coordinated counterparts. Coordinate singular pronouns most often come before singular *they* (10 of the 12 examples I collected), but can also come afterwards (as in (54a–b)). (For more discussion of distance, see section 2.1.1.2). Meyers (1993) also gives examples of mixed use of singular *they* and coordinate pronouns. In (51), (52a–c), (53a–f) and (54a–b) it appears that singular *they* is being used interchangeably with the coordinate singular pronouns.

The fact that the coordinates tend to occur closer to the NP antecedent may be the result of attention: to use a coordinate pronoun probably takes some extra thought, and is done on purpose to avoid using a gender-marked pronoun. Thus, the first anaphoric pronoun is carefully chosen to be the coordinate singular, whereas later in the discourse, singular *they* can be used, either unwittingly, or as a shortcut. Interestingly, in the two instances where coordinate pronouns appear after singular *they*, they appear at the beginning of a new clause, where the speaker or writer again has a chance to pause and evaluate which type of pronoun to use.

I have one example of a coordinate pronoun itself serving as the antecedent of singular *they* (51). The pronouns are referring to a person who has just hung up after calling a suicide hotline (in the movie *Mixed Nuts*).

(51) If **he or she** had not spoken with you, **he or she** might have become suicidal, mightn't **they**? [XV.A.10]

The slash coordinate can only be used in writing (52a–c), since there is no (natural) phonetic form.[22]

(52) a. If **the manipulee** is acting under **his/her** own motivation and retains control, **he/she** can act in **their** own good time. [XV.A.1]

b. The new rulings permit the trials to take place without the presence of the defendant if **the defendant** places **him/herself** in a condition rendering **them** unfit. . . [XV.A.8]

c. For example, when **an afro-american** makes the decision to get an education and fight **his/her** way out of the ghetto (or wherever the fight initiates) and that move eventually leads to a rise to the middle class and a move away from **their** home base to suburban areas of America, those individuals have a problem because the core group feels they have left because they are too "uppity" for the rest of them. [XV.A.9, capitalization as in the original]

The "or" form can be used in both writing and speech.

(53) a. If the rituals of the courts are allowed to dominate over the search for truth then **any person** who can be presented as an apparent expert will be seized on by the defence or the prosecution in the hope that **he or she** can bluff **their** way through. [XV.A.3]

b. This year's Halloween *do*: dress as **your ex** and scare the daylights outta **him or her** by showing up at **their** house to beg for a Big Hunk. [XV.A.4]

c. If **a person** shoots relatively weak heroin for a short period of time, **he or she** can expect to develop a fairly mild habit, but a habit nonetheless. If **they**'re running up purer heroin, **they** can expect a habit that will be tougher to kick. [XV.A.5]

22 I have heard the expression "he slash she", which is a reading out of the written form *he/she*.

d. Please have **each person who takes the test** write **his or her** name, address, signature, and social security number (if **they** have one). . . [XV.A.7]

e. On several occasions I have seen a look of distress, even tears, on the face of **an abductee** at the moment when **he or she** realizes that an experience **they** had chosen, more comfortably, to consider a dream had occurred in some sort of fully 'awake' . . . or conscious state. [XV.A.2]

f. **The typical American citizen** is under the misconception that because **he or she** is American, the worst thing that can happen to **them** is **they**'ll be thrown out of the country. [XV.A.6]

The coordinate pronouns follow singular *they* in (54a), which was written, and (54b), which was spoken.

(54) a. **No actor** can be certain **they** will make a good director, but at least **he or she** starts with the advantage of knowing what not to do after hanging around sets for so long. [XV.B.1]

b. The way to get through Broadmoor is to be a model patient and **a model patient** does not stand up for **themselves**—**he or she** does not complain. [XV.B.2]

2.2.4.6 Proper names

Proper names do not appear as antecedents of singular *they*. A name that serves as a common NP, as the complement of a determiner, no longer has the syntactic or semantic properties of a name, but of the type of NP defined by the determiner (examples are given in section 2.1.2.1, (9d–e)). There does seem to be one exception, however: the generic epithet *so-and-so*. This epithet can be used to replace a name, as in (55), although it is not a name in itself. In this case, the word seems to stand for a definite or indefinite description with the meaning 'the/a person of a particular name'.

(55) Often figuring out who someone is talking about is done by context . . . asking if you know **so-and-so** by referring to **their** name sign . . . [XIII.1]

2.2.4.7 Children and animals

I have thus far defined singular *they* as a personal pronoun, used almost exclusively with antecedents which describe humans. The reason for this restriction is most likely because the non-human form *it* is available for non-human animals. The pronoun *it* is also used for babies and young children, possibly because they are considered unformed sexually. However, since *it* is also associated with inanimacy, it may sound derogatory when used with children, so gender-marked third person singulars or singular *they* are used in the same way with children as with antecedents describing adult humans. In addition, *it* may also sound inappropriate for those who have an emotional attachment to animals; thus, the gender-marked singulars and singular *they* can also be used for antecedents describing animals.

I have collected 14 examples of singular *they* with *child*, *baby*, or *youngster* as antecedents. A sampling is given in (56a–h).

(56) a. Why use a standard baby monitor when the SmartChoice Wireless BabyCam lets you hear and see **your newborn** without disturbing **their** sleep or play activities. [IX.A.ii.6]

b. **Your baby**—wandering unprotected along a highway—never! Nor would you forget **their** baby shots. [IX.A.ii.8]

c. If **every child** has one teacher like that, who recognizes **their** learning style and doesn't give up, **they** are very lucky. [I.A.v.2]

d. There is one sure way to remind **a child** of **their** connection to life and other human beings and that **they** are important and valuable . . . it's called a hug. [VI.A.v.2]

e. By doing science hands-on, you raise it to a level where **the child** can reason and apply what **they** learn. [VII.A.i.4]

f. Once **the child** gets the teddy bear, it's **theirs**. **They** really hang onto it. [VII.A.v.3]

g. Allow **your child** to express **their** feelings and then act out **their** feelings. [IX.A.ii.1]

h. We should be making the argument in higher education that we are interested in preparing **your youngster** for **their** last job, not their first. [IX.A.ii.4]

One set of quotes is particularly interesting in that the author (Elisabeth Selkirk) does allow *it* with *child* antecedents (57a), yet also uses singular *they* (57a–b).

(57) a. Assuming that **the child** has already learned that there is a prosodically relevant distinction between strong unreduced syllables and weak syllables, **they** would be in a position to observe in the speech of adults that some words always appear in strong form, while others alternate between weak and strong realizations. Given **the child**'s innate knowledge of the universal constraints on prosodic structure, **it** could conceivably draw the inferences sketched in (48). . . [VII.A.i.13]

b. **The child learner of English** could also, in principle, gain access to information about the surface morphosyntactic phrase structure of the sentence in which a Fnc is embedded, given **their** knowledge of the universal prosodic constraints at play. . . [VII.A.ii.17]

Examples of singular *they* with animal antecedents are rare, but do exist. In (58a–b), emotional attachment to animals is apparent, perhaps accounting for the use of *they* as opposed to *it*. In (58a), the antecedent is *your pet*; most people have close attachments to their house pets, and it might sound unfeeling to call a pet dog or cat *it*. In (58b), although the antecedent, *an animal*, describes a nonspecific animal, the speaker has an obvious emotional attachment to animals, and again, singular *they* is used rather than *it*.

(58) a. If **your pet** starts PROGRAM now, before **they** have fleas, **they** may not need other flea control products. [IX.A.i.2]

b. When you kill **an animal** to eat **them**, it goes against the grain. [VI.A.iii.7]

On the other hand, no emotional attachment is evident in (59); perhaps dogs and cats tend to have special human-like status in our society in general.

(59) Somewhere deep inside **themselves**, **a dog**'s ancient gene pool is telling **them** what to do. [VI.A.v.11]

2.3 More on *themself*

As shown in section 2.2.1.1, the singular third person plural form *themself* can be found in present-day English. Until quite recently, dictionaries did not define the form *themself* as part of current English usage. Abbott (1984) treats *themself* as a recently invented form: "I have to report the appearance of a new word. The use of *they* as a sexless singular has given rise to the word *themself*" (p. 47). Whitley (1978) on the other hand simply notes the existence of the form, albeit as colloquial; after giving rules to derive both *themselves* and *themself*, he notes that "both versions exist, though the latter is far more stigmatized" (p. 35).[23] The OED states that "in Standard Eng. *themself* was the normal form to *c* 1540, but disappeared *c* 1570", with "Standard English" presumably meaning the variety found in written documents. Indeed, there are no attested examples of *themself* after the late 1500s until the past few decades. However, it may be that the form survived in informal spoken usage up until today, rather than being reinvented. Two recent dictionaries take into account such informal usage, mentioning *themself* as a current form; the information given is quoted below.

In the Chambers Dictionary (edited by Catherine Schwarz, Chambers Harap Publishers, 1995) under *themselves*:

> —pronoun **themself** (colloq: unrecognized in Standard English) introduced as a *singular pronoun* to avoid **himself** or **herself** when the sex of the person is unspecified.

In the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, Ninth Edition (edited by Della Thompson, Clarendon Press, 1995) as a separate entry:

> **themself** pron. dirp. = THEMSELVES 3 (anyone can hurt themself)
>
> • **usage** The use of themselves or themself in sense 3 is considered erroneous by some people.

2.4 More on *their*

In this section I will first briefly consider the frequency of the genitive determiner form *their* in my database; I will then analyze in more detail the number and distributivity of the genitive form and its possessed NPs. In general, singular *their* favors distributed singular possessed NPs, as would be expected of a singular pronoun agreeing with a singular antecedent.

Of 442 occurrences of forms of singular *they* in my current-day English database (Appendix I), 186 (42%) are the genitive *their*. (The next largest number is of the form *they*, 161 (36%); these numbers include repetitions of the pronoun with the same antecedent, which occurs more frequently with *they* than with *their*.) As a comparison, I counted all instances of third person

23 He also provides a naturally-occurring example: And pretty soon, **the law-abiding citizen**, who won't own handguns, won't be able to defend **themself** (Whitley, 1978, p. 30, boldfacing added).

plural pronouns (including both singular and plural) in my database and in Michael Newman's database of talk show transcripts.[24] The results of the count (with rounded off percentages) are in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: Database counts of forms of *they*

3rd person plural pronoun form	Newman (in press) database, singular and plural, N=1863	Lagunoff database (Appendix I), singular and plural, N=528	Lagunoff database (Appendix I), singular only, N=442
they	1412 (76%)	198 (37%)	161 (36%)
them	211 (11%)	85 (16%)	
their	200 (11%)	209 (40%)	186 (42%)
theirs	1 (<1%)	2 (<1%)	
themselves	30 (2%)	19 (4%)	
themself	0	15 (3%)	

Although the two databases are not completely comparable (Newman's being all speech, and mine being mixed oral and written, with mostly written examples), Table 2.3 does show that *their* is not necessarily the most frequently used third-person plural pronoun form in English in general. However, there is no apparent reason, in terms of syntactic structure or semantic interpretation, why the genitive should appear so frequently in a collection of examples of singular *they*. It would be interesting for future research to see if the frequency of the genitive is maintained in other singular *they* databases, and whether modality, style or content of discourse affects the appearance of different pronoun forms.

I coded the 186 instances of *their* for the number, distributivity, and countability of the possessed NP. When the antecedent is an existential quantifier (*some*+NP), a singular description (definite or indefinite phrase), or the "generic" *one*, a singular possessed NP is necessarily interpreted as a single thing possessed by a single (hypothetical or real) individual, and a plural NP is necessarily interpreted as plural things possessed by a single individual. With the other quantifiers (*every*, *each*, *any*, *no*) and with *wh*– phrases, on the other hand, a singular possessed NP is ambiguous between being distributed across single individuals, or as being possessed by the group (defined by the quantifier) as a whole. A plural NP is interpreted as being distributed as a plural across individuals, or possessed by the group. An example is (60). In (60a), the interpretation is that each student raised one hand; in (60b) each student raised both hands. The genitive *their* is singular; these sentences do not mean that the students as a group raised some collective hand or hands (see section 2.2.1.3).

(60) a. **Every student** raised **their** hand.

b. **Every student** raised **their** hands.

24 I thank Michael Newman for providing me with an electronic form of his database, and for the word-counting software. His database and results can be found in Newman (in press).

If the antecedent is a plural quantifier phrase, on the other hand, the interpretation is at best ambiguous between group-owned and distributive; some speakers do not allow the distributive interpretation for a singular possessed NP, as in (61a). If *their* is plural, as in (61b), then it is possible to interpret the plural possessed NP as distributed as a singular across individuals, in this case, each student raising one hand.

(61) a. **All the students** raised **their** hand.

b. **All the students** raised **their** hands.

In my database, the great majority of possessed NPs are singular: 113 (61%). The rest are mass: 35 (19%); plural: 27 (14%); coordinate singular or plural: 5 (3%). (The plurals here only include those possessed by an individual or distributed as plural.) All of these represent instances of singular *their*. Examples of each possessed NP type are given in (62), (63), (64) and (65), with the possessed NPs italicized.

(62) Singular Possessed NP

a. As our society gets more and more technologically advanced, any form of body manipulation puts **a person** back in control of **their** *own body*, whether you're a tribe member in New Guinea or a college student in California. [VI.A.ii.1]

b. Miss Conners said who was the gum criminal. **No one** raised **their** *hand*. [II.A.ii.7]

(63) Mass Possessed NP

a. Undergraduate president York Chang would not support the bill, saying that a textbook is a way to reward **a professor** for **their** *research*. [VI.C.ii.4]

b. **No one** wants to face the fact that **their** *health* is not what it used to be, especially smokers. [II.A.ii.8]

(64) Plural Possessed NP

a. **A legislator** almost has an obligation to recommend **their** *constituents*. [VI.A.ii.11]

b. **NO TAXPAYER IN CALIFORNIA** WILL SEE ANY CHANGE IN **THEIR** *TAXES*. [II.A.ii.12]

(65) Coordinate Possessed NP

a. **No foreign news editor** in London, New York or Paris, has to my knowledge told **their** *man or woman* that they must stay. [II.A.ii.11]

b. **A person** who doesn't take a careful inventory of **their** *skills and capabilities* is a fool. [VI.A.ii.2]

In one example it is not clear whether the possessed NP is meant to be distributed as one or many; in fact, it may be left ambiguous on purpose. In (66a), as the word play of *no ones* in the sentence following the use of *their* indicates, the group defined by *no one* can be interpreted as

plural, with *children* distributed either as one or as many. It is possible for antecedents such as *no* and *any* to have a singular distributed possessed NP as in (66b), or a plural possessed NP, distributed as plural as in (66c).

(66) a. It's fashionable to say, "**No one** sends **their** *children* to public schools anymore." It's that vast majority of "no ones" that American policy must address. [II.A.ii.9]

b. Few non-academic readers are very keen on Ulysses, but **no one** thinks **their** *kid* could have written it. [II.A.ii.2]

c. **Any truly responsible parent** would buy books and crayons for **their** *children* and lock up the TV until the kids leave for college. [III.A.ii.9]

A small number of instances of *their* appear to be plurals distributed as singular, which is what would be expected if *their* were a plural with a plural antecedent. Of these six examples (3%), two are possibly instances of plurals distributed as plurals. The others are probably instances of a shift from singular to plural, triggered by the use of the plural pronoun (see section 2.2.1.4 for more discussion of this phenomenon).

In (67) the plural NP *scholarships* could be interpreted as single scholarships distributed across any of several cadets. However, since the antecedent *any cadet* is clearly singular, with a singular verb right before the instance of *their*, followed by another singular NP *the student*, the meaning here is probably that each cadet may have more than one scholarship that could be taken away.

(67) Although (university officials) cannot immediately change the policies of the military, they can protect the students by agreeing to pay tuition for **any cadet** who loses **their** *scholarships* because of **their** sexual orientation until **the student** can find another source. [III.A.ii.12]

In (68) it is possible that each celebrity has more than one rightful position in life, though it seems more likely that the idiom is the singular *rightful position*, and the plural is supposed to be distributed across celebrities as a singular.

(68) If you could kidnap **any celebrity** in the world (and then safely return **them** to **their** *rightful positions in life* (without any harm done (including psychological scarring))), who would it be and why? [III.A.v.6]

The remaining four examples are clear shifts from singular to plural. Interestingly, three of them have antecedents headed by the quantifier *each*; perhaps *each* tends to be interpreted as a distributing plural rather than a true singular. Example (69) is discussed in detail in section 2.2.1.4 (as (27)), and I won't remark on it again here.

(69) So the court's "moral opposition," which is now sufficient cause to abridge our First Amendment, on examination is nothing more than **somebody**'s prissy resentment over any act that disturbs **their** peace of mind—as long as this "somebody" is, or seems to be, in the numerical majority. The real question becomes: Why does it disturb **their** peace of mind? More specifically: What is the process by which **their** *minds* are disturbed? Would **their** *minds* be disturbed by naked dancing if the act didn't loom so large in **their** *imaginations*? [IV.A.ii.13]

The examples in (70a–c) have plural possessed NPs which must be interpreted as distributed as singular. The first, (70a), is a comment about the movie "Moonstruck"—since reincarnation is not part of the storyline, the NP *own lives* must mean one life per character. In (70b), I assume each professor has only one salary, so the *faculty salaries* are distributed one to each of the three professors.[25] In (70c) the first possessed NP *languages* is distributed as plural, since each speaker speaks more than one language; the second possessed NP, on the other hand, is most likely describing the one native tongue each interviewee has, since *use of English* is contrasted *with native tongues*.

(70) a. **Each character** believes **they**'re in control of **their** *own lives*. [V.A.v.1]

b. Since mid-May, when the three professors were put on paid leave, Wilkening said **each** has had **their** *faculty salaries* directly deposited into their bank accounts, which she estimated to be in excess of $100,000 annually each. [V.A.ii.2]

c. The interviews revealed that **each multilingual speaker** used **their** languages with different speakers and in different situations. **Each interviewee** had different attitudes towards **their** *native tongues* and **their** use of English. [V.A.ii.5]

It should be noted that other quantifiers which allow plural interpretation in some contexts can have a singular distributed possessed NP, as with *everyone* in (71a) and *anyone* in (71b). Thus, the examples above should be treated as exceptions, either due to a performance error resulting in a switch to plural, or to proximity-triggered agreement of the possessed NP with the pronoun.

(71) a. A mature person is never bored at a party. We know that **everyone** has a fascinating story to tell about **their** *life*. [I.A.ii.5]

b. The ad asked that **anyone** who had been at a similar low point in **their** *life* and could give reasons not to commit suicide, to "please communicate" via a campus P.O. box. [III.A.ii.4]

2.5 Deixis

Most use of deictic phrase antecedents (*this* or *that* + NP) in my database are linguistic deixis, where the demonstrative phrase is anaphoric to another type of NP (see section 2.2.4.4). However, there is one example where the phrase is pragmatically deictic, in that it points to something not in the linguistic context (72). These sentences were written on a note attached to

25 In addition, the three professors under discussion are all male, making the singular *his faculty salary* an option.

an application form; the sex of the person who had filled out the form was not apparent from the name.

(72) **This student** filled out the wrong form. I tried calling, but was not able to reach **them**. [VIII.C.iii.1]

It is possible to point to an object representing a person whose identity is unknown or concealed, and use singular *they*, with or without a linguistic antecedent. For example, I could point to the name written on the form in (72) and say, "Have they called back yet?" However, if the person were in the room, I could not point to that person and say, "They're sitting right over there."[26] More discussion of deixis can be found in Chapter 4.

2.6 Conclusions

In this chapter I have given evidence from naturally-occurring data of the allowable uses of singular *they* in present-day English, along with a smaller number of examples from earlier periods of English. Singular *they* is always grammatically plural in subject-verb agreement, and can be either singular or plural in morphological *–self* agreement. Singular *they* can be distributed across individuals in a set, or have a set of one individual as an antecedent. While singular *they* is available as a way to avoid specifying gender (when anaphoric to the types of antecedents described in this chapter), its use is not confined to contexts where gender avoidance is necessary.

As widespread as singular *they* may be, however, not all speakers agree on whether all uses are acceptable to them. The next chapter considers the issues involved in quantifying the acceptability of singular *they* by individual English speakers.

26 Robert Kirsner has also pointed out to me that it is not possible to use *they* as a singular in deictic situations where there is no pointing, for example, when someone assumed to be a single individual knocks at the door: "Here they are right now!"

Chapter 3: Quantitative Studies

3.0 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with quantitative studies of singular *they*, that is, where the use or acceptability of singular *they* has been quantitatively measured either in analysis of a spoken corpus, or in elicitation or judgment surveys. First, I summarize previous quantitative research on singular *they*, in particular comparing the very similar antecedent hierarchies that have been found. Then I discuss the methods and results of a judgment questionnaire I designed, which was completed by a group of undergraduate students. A number of variables which could be affecting singular *they* acceptability are considered, including universality and distributivity, gender, reference, and structural distance.

3.1 Previous quantitative studies of singular *they*

Previous quantitative studies of singular *they* are varied in their methods and the type of data collected: Newman (1991; in press) analyzed an oral corpus of television talk show transcripts; Langendoen (1970), Whitley (1978) and Parker (1983) elicited pronouns in tag questions; and Parker (1983) and Green (1977) elicited judgments on pronouns. These studies were all quite small, either in the number of tokens of singular *they* found, or in the number of respondents to elicitation or judgment tasks. What is interesting is that, even though different in scope and design, all studies came up with a very similar hierarchy of acceptable antecedents of singular *they*, as measured either by frequency in the corpus study, or by rate of acceptability in the elicitation and judgment tasks (with the exception of Green (1977), which doesn't provide information on the determiner categories of the antecedents). A summary of the hierarchies found is given in Table 3.1. An analysis of the antecedent hierarchy will be given in section 3.2.2.

Table 3.1: Hierarchy of Antecedents of Singular *they* in Previous Studies [27]

Newman (in press)	Langendoen (1970)	Whitley (1978)	Parker (1983)
"Quantifier"	(Not) Every	Every	Every
	No	No	No
	Any		Any
		Some	Some
A		A	A
The		The	The

27 The ranking in this table may slightly misrepresent some of the studies in that I placed some antecedents which ranked the same one rung below or above the other.

In the next sections, I will discuss these studies, plus that of Green, in more detail. Then I will present the findings of my own judgment elicitation questionnaire, comparing my results to those of the previous studies.

3.1.2 Newman (in press)

Newman (1991; in press) collected 68 examples of *they* with a singular antecedent from a corpus of three transcribed television talk shows. He classifies 65 of these as having epicene antecedents (that is, singular and unmarked for gender or sex). Unfortunately for my purposes, Newman did not break down his data by quantifier type. In his classification, phrases are headed by a "quantifier" (including *every*, *no*, *any*, and *some*); an "indefinite" (indefinite article); or a "definite" (definite article). I have summarized his results in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Singular antecedents of anaphoric *they* from Newman (in press)

Antecedent type	Form of *they*	Form of *he* or *she*[28]
Quantifier	42 (86%)	7 (14%)
Indefinite	12 (48%)	13 (52%)
Definite	10 (38%)	16 (62%)
Mixed[29]	1	0

In Newman's corpus, of singular antecedents not marked for gender, quantifiers appear more often with anaphoric *they* than with a singular gender-marked pronoun, indefinites appear the same amount of time with either type of pronoun, and definites appear more often with a singular pronoun. Although the total number of singular *they* occurrences studied is quite small, it is striking that the relative frequency counts of antecedents in the corpus are comparable to the relative acceptability counts in the elicitation and judgment tasks; the same hierarchy that holds across speakers is mirrored in the acceptability judgments of one speaker. If singular *they* is more likely to appear in a corpus with *everyone* as an antecedent, for example, it is more likely to be rated (highly) acceptable by a native speaker. This correlation shows that native speaker judgments and pronoun choice in elicitation tasks provide an accurate prediction of how pronouns will be used in authentic discourse; it also provides further evidence that use of singular *they* in discourse is not (necessarily) a speech error: speakers use pronouns in the same way when they have time to think and reread sentences as when they produce them spontaneously.

3.1.3 Langendoen (1970)

Langendoen (1970) conducted a tag question elicitation study with 46 teachers. For example, the respondents would be given a sentence such as *Everyone likes me*, and have to supply a tag

28 This category includes instances of the third person singular pronouns *he* or *she* used separately as well as what Newman calls "disjunctive" pronoun usage: *he or she*.

29 The mixed antecedent was a definite phrase followed by a quantifier phrase headed by *any*, apparently restating or clarifying the definite: ***The young practitioner**, **any practitioner out there**, is trying to make a statement to the community, to find a way for the community to get to reach **them** and for **them** to reach the community* (footnote 72, p. 160).

question such as *Don't they?* or *Doesn't he?*. Langendoen was considering a variety of constructions, including quantifier phrases as subjects of the sentence requiring a tag question with a pronoun. I have summarized the results in Table 3.3. In the summary I included tallies of one sentence with *not everyone* as subject, three with *everyone*, two with *no one* and one with *anyone*. I eliminated two sentences with *everyone* which contained the reflexive *himself* (since this appeared to bias the tag question pronouns towards *he*). Also, the only sentence with *each* had as full subject *each of the fellows* (which might also bias the tag question pronouns towards *he*). With one exception, all the tag questions contained the pronouns *they* or *he*. The one exception was the sentence *Everyone likes everyone here*, where *Doesn't she?* was one response. This could be explained by the fact that 32 of the 46 respondents were women, who presumably had in mind a group of all women. However, this raises the question of why the sentence *Everyone likes one another here* did not receive any *she* responses in the tag.

Table 3.3: Singular antecedents of anaphoric *they* from Langendoen (1970)

Antecedent type	*they*	*he*	Total
Not everyone	34 (74%)	12 (26%)	46
Everyone	100 (73%)	37 (27%)	137 + 1 (*she*)
No one	49 (53%)	43 (47%)	92
Anyone	24 (52%)	22 (48%)	46

3.1.4 Whitley (1978)

Whitley (1978) also surveyed 46 people, asking them to provide a tag question to a statement with a quantifier phrase subject. I have summarized his results below, excluding the correlative *neither*/*nor*, which I discuss in section 3.1.7.

Table 3.4: Singular antecedents of anaphoric *they* from Whitley (1978)

Antecedent	*they*	*he* or *she*
Everyone	45 (98%)	1 (2%)
Nobody	43 (93%)	3 (7%)
Somebody	35 (76%)	11 (24%)
Some idiot	18 (39%)	28 (61%)
A friend	11 (24%)	35 (76%)
The driver of the car	0	46 (100%)
The waiter	0	46 (100%)

N=46

Although the survey results show no *they* anaphora with definite antecedents, Whitley goes on to give three examples he found, two from speech and one in writing. Interestingly, all the examples he cites are generic prototype uses of the definite article,[30] whereas in the sentences in

30 Two of the three examples he cites are as follows: "The kid, when they grow up, winds up as a second-class citizen"; "And pretty soon, the law-abiding citizen, who won't own handguns, won't be able to defend themself".

his survey, the definite phrases are non-generic (*The driver of the car apologized*; *The waiter dropped the soup*). Thus, not just the form of the antecedent, but its semantic function in context, appears to affect anaphoric *they* acceptability.

3.1.5 Parker (1983)

Parker (1983) had 26 undergraduates both produce pronouns and judge pronoun choice in tag questions, testing different quantifier phrases, including the correlatives *neither*/*nor* and *either*/*or* (which I will discuss in section 3.1.7). In the table below, I have combined the results of both tests, summarizing the data only from the non-correlative quantifier phrase antecedents.[31]

Table 3.5: Singular antecedents of anaphoric *they* from Parker (1983)

Antecedent type	*they*	*he*	Total
Every / No	200 (96%)	8 (4%)	208
Any	85 (82%)	19 (18%)	104
Some	77 (74%)	27 (26%)	104

Based on his results, Parker concluded that choice of anaphoric *they* is conditioned by the type of quantifier in the antecedent. He notes that, as universal quantifiers, *every* and *no* include or exclude all members of a set, making them more semantically plural; *any* can be either universal, or the negative of *some*, which, being existential, posits the existence of at least one member in a set. I have summarized his characterization of the different quantifier types in the table below.

Table 3.6: Quantifier Types (Adapted from Parker, 1983)

Quantifier	Type	Set defined
every	universal	all members included
no	universal	all members excluded
any	universal or negative of *some*	all members or at least one
some	existential	at least one member

In addition, Parker found an implicational hierarchy of singular *they* choice by speaker. Those who accepted *they* with *some* as an antecedent also accepted it with *any*; those who accepted *they* with *any* also accepted it with *every* and *no*. The converse was true for the choice of *he*. Parker's implicational hierarchy (1983, p. 14) is reproduced in (1), '>' representing "implies."

31 The results were fairly consistent between the elicitation and judgments tasks: in judgments, more use of a singular pronoun (i.e., *he*) was allowed with *any* and *some* antecedents.

(1) *some* (plur.) > *any* (plur.) > *every*/*no* (plur.)

every/*no* (sing.) > *any* (sing.) > *some* (sing.)

3.1.5.1 *–body* versus *–one*

Parker (1983) notes that for one respondent, quantifiers with *–body* elicited more plural responses (i.e., more instances of *they*) than those with *–one*. A native English speaker I consulted on singular *they* spontaneously remarked that while ***Everyone*** *loves* ***his*** *mother* is "marginally acceptable" to her, ***Everybody*** *loves* ***his*** *mother* is "awful".[32] In a corpus-based study of *somebody* and *someone*, Roth (1991) found that *somebody* is more often an antecedent of a form of *they* than *someone*.[33] While this difference between *–body* and *–one* seems to be real, at least for some English speakers, it is quite subtle and hard to define. Roth's corpus study supported overall the hypothesis put forward by Bolinger (1977) that the *–body* form is associated with psychological and physical distance, indefinite reference, and collectivity, while the *–one* form is associated with nearness, definiteness, and individuality.

As we have seen, antecedents that are preferred with singular *they* are (in descending order): universal or negative quantifiers; existential quantifiers; indefinite NPs; definite NPs. In addition, generic definites and indefinites are preferred over nongenerics. The antecedent hierarchy is reflected in Bolinger's concepts of definiteness and collectivity or individuality (the hierarchy moves from more indefinite and more collective to more definite and more individual). However it is still not clear what exactly the formal semantic difference between the *–body* and *–one* forms is. I will leave this problem for future research, just noting that the existence of a difference is supported by singular *they* judgments.

3.1.6 Green (1977)

A study by Green (1977) shows that singular *they* is less available the more the antecedent is associated with a particular gender or sex, yet remains acceptable to a small number of respondents regardless of gender or sex information. Green does not give an appendix of the full set of questions he tested, so it is difficult to analyze some of his results; however, it appears to be a judgment test, with respondents choosing one of two pronouns, *his* or *her* versus *their*, in sentences such as "A person has a right to (his, their) own opinion." It is not clear whether all the sentences had an indefinite as antecedent. The test was given to 184 college undergraduates. Green considered the first five of the antecedents in Table 3.7 "singular-common," that is, giving no information on gender, and the next nine as "singular-specific," giving some type of information on gender. For some of the antecedents (*machinegunner*, *burglar*, *prostitute*, *stripteaser*) the information is social or pragmatic, rather than inherent in the form or meaning of the NP (as with *man*, *woman*, *actress*, *housewife*, and *longshoreman*).

32 I thank Patricia Ellen Schneider-Zioga for her judgments, and for noting this particular phenomenon.
33 Specifically, *somebody* was the antecedent of a plural pronoun in 12 instances out of 47, while *someone* was the antecedent of a plural pronoun in only 4 instances out of 39.

Table 3.7: Singular antecedents of anaphoric *they* from Green (1977)

Noun phrase antecedent	Form of *they* (percent)
"Singular-common"	
Person	35, 23, 20, 18, 17
Divorced person	28
Teacher	27, 26
Teenager	22
Musician	13
"Singular-specific"	
Machinegunner	11
Longshoreman	9
Burglar	8
Man	5
Prostitute	5
Woman	5, 2
Actress	4
Stripteaser	3
Housewife	2

N = 184

Another interesting aspect of Green's data is that percents of pronoun choice for each antecedent differed among different sentences with the same antecedent (as shown by the lists of percent choices of *they* in Table 3.7). Unfortunately, without the full set of sentences used in the judgment task, I cannot analyze what the variables causing the differential pronoun choice might be.

3.1.7 Correlative antecedents (*either*/*or*, *neither*/*nor*)

Langendoen (1970), Whitley (1978) and Parker (1983) all also collected responses on the choice of pronoun in a tag question for a sentence with a correlative antecedent: *Either* NP *or* NP; *Neither* NP *nor* NP. Although my own research is not concerned with this type of antecedent, the results of these studies are interesting in that *they* is available with correlative antecedents as a singular or plural tag pronoun.

Langendoen's (1970) tag question survey of 46 teachers included sentences whose subjects were of the form *Either* NP *or* NP and *Neither* NP *nor* NP. I have summarized the results in Table 3.8. In the table, F represents a female name, M a masculine name, Mpl *the boys*, and Fpl *the girls*.[34]

34 No F/F correlatives were tested.

Table 3.8: Correlative antecedents of *they* (Langendoen, 1970)

Antecedent	*they*	*he*	*she*	Other[35]
Either F or Mpl	46 (100%)			
Neither M nor F	25 (54%)	2 (4%)	18 (39%)	1 (2%)
Either M or F	22 (48%)	3 (6%)	19 (41%)	2 (4%)
Either Fpl or M	21 (46%)	24 (52%)		1 (2%)
Either F or M	20 (43%)	23 (50%)	1 (2%)	2 (4%)
Neither M nor M	14 (30%)	32 (70%)		
Either M or M	6 (13%)	40 (87%)		

The results show that *they* can serve as a singular for an antecedent of mixed gender. In several instances, it appears that *they* is a true plural for some of the respondents: when a masculine plural is the closest to the end of the sentence (Either F or Mpl), *they* was chosen by all respondents, who seem to be following a rule of having the tag question pronoun agree with the closest antecedent. However this can't be the sole reason for the choice of *they*, since when the plural was not the closest, *they* was still chosen by slightly less than half the respondents (*Either* Fpl *or* M). With the negative correlative, *they* might be a plural in the sense that the interpretation of *neither* NP *nor* NP is *not* NP *and* NP; however, when the gender of the two NPs matched (Neither M nor M), a majority chose *he*. Thus, in *Neither* M *nor* F, the choice of *they* seems for many of the respondents not to be because of a plural interpretation of the antecedent, but to avoid choosing a gender (or using the more awkward *Doesn't he or she*, which was chosen in two cases).

Whitley (1978) tested only one correlative: *Neither Fred nor Alice likes parties*. Forty-five (98%) of the responses had *they* in the tag question, while only one (2%) had *he*. In all of Langendoen's sentences, a modal or past tense verb was used so that verb number could not influence pronoun number. However, even with a third-person singular verb in Whitley's study, a striking majority of respondents chose *they*. The question once again arises, even with the singular verb, of whether respondents chose *they* as a singular, in order to avoid choosing a gender-marked pronoun, or whether they chose *they* as a plural. Since Whitley did not test any other correlatives, the answer is impossible to determine for his set of respondents.

Parker (1983), in a combined elicitation and judgment study, tested two variables: negative versus positive correlatives; and same sex versus mixed sex NPs. I have summarized his results in Table 3.9.[36]

35 Other responses were: *he or she*; *she or he*; or no response.
36 No F/F correlatives were tested.

Table 3.9: Correlative antecedents of *they* from Parker (1983)

Antecedent	*they*	*he*
Neither M nor F	52 (100%)	
Neither F nor M	26 (100%)	
Either M or F	52 (100%)	
Either F or M	26 (100%)	
Neither M nor M	47 (91%)	5 (9%)
Either M or M	44 (84%)	8 (16%)

In both judgment and elicitation, all of the respondents chose *they* in the tag question when the correlative antecedent had mixed sex NPs (in this case names). However, with same-sex NPs in the correlative, a small number chose *he* (slightly more in the judgment task than in the elicitation task). More respondents chose *he* with a positive correlative than with a negative one. These results suggest that although *neither/nor* tends to be interpreted as plural, both *neither/nor* and *either/or* can be interpreted as singular. In the mixed-sex positive correlatives, at least for the approximately 16% who interpret *either/or* as singular and the 9% who interpret *neither/nor* as singular, *they* is a singular, chosen because it does not mark gender.

Parker also found an implicational hierarchy among his respondents for correlatives: "Those subjects who treated negative correlatives as singular also treated positive correlatives as singular; conversely, those who treated positive correlatives as plural also treated negative correlatives as plural" (p. 14). The hierarchy is represented in (2).

(2) negative (sing.) > positive (sing.)

positive (plur.) > negative (plur.)

One obvious difference between the studies is that some show much more frequent choice of *they* for correlative antecedents than others. One variable that might account for this is time: the older studies (especially Langendoen, 1970) show much less acceptance of *they* than the more recent studies. Another is the profession and age of the respondents. In Langendoen's study, all the respondents were junior high or high school teachers who presumably knew and taught the prescriptive rules, i.e., that such NPs are grammatically singular and require singular anaphoric pronouns. In Whitley's (1978) study, 93.7% of the teachers chose *they*, while 97.8% of the nonteachers did. The percentage for teachers is still much higher than in Langendoen's study; perhaps teachers became much less affected by prescriptive views in the eight intervening years. Parker (1983), on the other hand, questioned undergraduates, who, despite what their teachers appeared to have wanted to teach them, overwhelmingly preferred *they*.

3.2 Questionnaire on Singular *they* acceptability

3.2.1 Methods

The questionnaire (Appendix IV), a judgment elicitation task of 31 sentences, was given to undergraduate students in an introductory linguistics class at UCLA in the spring of 1994.[37] Fifty-two usable questionnaires completed by native English speakers (five bilingual) were collected. All sentences included an example of singular *they*. The students were asked to indicate for each sentence whether they found it acceptable or unacceptable, or whether they weren't sure, based on what they would actually say. The sentences varied according to antecedent type (determiner type and semantic gender) and distance of the pronoun from the antecedent, and were placed in random order. In order to make the questionnaire less boring and obvious, the sentence structures and form of the pronoun were also varied; unfortunately, this appears to have introduced several more variables into the task. However, given the consistency of the overall results with previous research conclusions, these variables seem not to have interfered with the general trends of singular *they* usage.

In the following sections, I will discuss the results of the questionnaire, with respect to the following topics: interference of prescriptivism in the judgment task; semantic hierarchy of antecedents; distance of pronoun from antecedent; and gender marking of the antecedent.

3.2.2 Results

3.2.2.1 Interference of prescriptivism in the judgment task

A long history of singular *they* proscription, continuing up to the present day, may have affected some of the students' judgments in the questionnaire. English grammar books often stress the importance of antecedent-pronoun agreement, presumably since otherwise many (or most) people would not strictly adhere to such rules. Sklar (1988) surveys several grammar handbooks, from the 18th century on, noting that "today the singular agreement rule for indefinite pronouns is a standard, even mandatory entry for grammar handbooks at all levels" (p. 414). However, some modern grammars do mention the possibility of using singular *they*. Interestingly, Fries (1940) and Evans & Evans (1957) both classify singular *they* as "standard English". Quirk, et al. (1985), who describe singular *they* usage as largely informal, note that "the plural is a convenient way of avoiding the traditional use of *he* as the unmarked form when the sex is not determined" (p. 342). Yet, despite some acceptance of singular *they* among grammarians, the proscription seems to have remained in force. Valian (1977) describes a small elicitation study she and a colleague carried out with college students, who had to provide a pronoun for the antecedent *everybody*, finding that "subjects used the appropriate form of the generic pronoun 'they' about 45 percent of the time. Further, many subjects who used the masculine third-person singular reported remembering being taught not to use the third-person plural in grammar school" (p. 164).

In order to give the questionnaire to a fairly large sample of students, it was not possible for me to collect the judgments individually. Therefore, I had to rely on the students' rather limited understanding of linguistics and the nature of acceptability judgments, and their careful reading

37 I thank Chris Golston for handing out and collecting the questionnaires in his Linguistics 1 class.

and understanding of the instructions. The questionnaire requests optional open-ended comments at the end; these comments aided in assessing the way in which the students perceived the task. Apparently, the pedagogical prescription not to use a third-plural pronoun with a singular antecedent affected some of their responses. The students often seemed to be troubled by the difference between what they "knew" was "right" and what they knew they would actually say.

In fact, I had to throw out three responses due to the students' reliance on (or sarcasm towards) prescriptive grammar rules. Two were filled in with all Xs (indicating that none of the sentences were acceptable) with the following written comments:

- "They are all wrong, but I would probably say some of them, like #1, #2, actually, I'd probably say a lot of them."
- "Each sentence contains the same mistake basically. Present English is moving toward a generic 'their' or 'they' to refer to singular possessives 'his' or 'her' and to not neglect 'her' when 'his' is used. Part of a women's movement thing."

One was filled in with all checks (indicating that all the sentences were acceptable) and the following written comment:

- "Grammar ain't matter nothing. It don't make no difference."

In addition, among the questionnaires that had varying judgments, were the following comments noting awareness of prescriptive rules:

- "All of the sentences are wrong, but I know that I do say some of these sentences."
- "According to what I have learned about grammar, virtually all of them looked grammatically incorrect. Although this is true, there are many (11) that sound fine and I could say."
- "The question is a little vague. For example, I put a check by the sentences I could say and sounds [*sic*] fine, even though I know the sentences are grammatically incorrect."
- "It was hard to decide if examples like 23, 24, 25 were correct or not, because it seems as though the singular subject and plural pronoun don't agree, but I find myself saying that kind of sentence because I have no alternative."
- "I know that these examples are mixing up singular and plural subject agreements. However, some of the examples are commonly said and hence, they sound acceptable."
- "Sorry for the mess. I am too aware of grammar."

In general, it appears that the students writing the above comments recognized the contradiction between prescriptive rules and their own usage, marking their judgments accordingly. However, two others added to my marking system order to indicate their apparent discomfort with making judgments that went against prescriptive rules. They both used an asterisk (*), with the following comments:

- "I know it's wrong, but I would say it anyway."
- "I know this is wrong, but might say it anyway."

Based on the modality used in their comments, I translated their asterisks into my own marks: checks for acceptable sentences ("I **would** say it anyway"); question marks for sentences the student was not sure of ("I **might** say it anyway").

Based on the written comments, and based on the prevalence of singular *they* usage in both speech and writing, I decided that a combined count of completely acceptable and possibly acceptable sentences would be the best reflection of acceptable singular *they* usage. In the tables summarizing the results, I have included tallies of the separate counts as well as the combined ones, to make the original judgments available to my readers.

3.2.2.2 Acceptability hierarchy of antecedents of singular *they*

The results for acceptability of sentences with a form of singular *they* anaphoric to an epicene antecedent are given in Table 3.10. The two different percentages indicate the different responses to two different sentences given for each antecedent type (possible explanations for these differences will be discussed in the following sections). The results show the same hierarchy of antecedent types as the previous studies described in section 3.1. The only difference is that *anyone* rates slightly higher than *no one*; however, the difference is probably too small to be significant. In addition, since in the examples with *anyone* the antecedent is a universal quantifier, these results are expected under Parker's (1983) analysis (see Table 3.6). The universal quantifier *everyone* was the most acceptable antecedent, followed by *anyone*, *no one*, *each student*, *someone*, *a parent*, (arbitrary reference) *one*, *the TA*, and *my roommate*. The quantifier hierarchy is thus the same as that found in other research: *every*, *any*/*no*, *some*, indefinite article + NP, definite article + NP. Arbitrary *one* rated slightly below nonspecific *a parent*, both well above definite NPs. It appears that *one* is judged similarly to the indefinite article, which is not surprising if *one* is interpreted as *a person*. The largest break appears between the indefinite and definite antecedents: definite antecedents were judged acceptable by at most 20% of respondents, whereas the lowest acceptability for indefinites was 52% (for *one*).

Table 3.10: Hierarchy of acceptability of singular antecedents of anaphoric *they*

Antecedent	Percent marked √	Percent marked ?	Percent Total √ + ?
Everyone	70/71	15/23	85/94
Anyone	68/73	15/17	85/88
No one	58	25	83
Each student	47/52	25/31	77/78
Someone	37/64	11/19	56/75
A parent	41/56	7/19	60/63
One	40/52	8/12	52/60
The TA	10/13	6	16/19
My roommate	4/10	0/10	4/20

N = 52[38]

3.2.2.3 Factors affecting differential acceptability of antecedents

For most of the antecedents, the differences in acceptability between the same antecedent in different sentence types is not large enough to merit discussion. For the following antecedents, the acceptability rate differed by no more than 2 (3%): *anyone*, *each student*, *a parent*, *the TA*. However, for *someone* and *my roommate*, fairly large discrepancies appeared. Possible reasons for these discrepancies will be discussed in section 3.2.2.3.1.

3.2.2.3.1 Familiarity and individuals

For the two sentences presented in the questionnaire with *someone* as an antecedent of singular *they*, sentence 2 (3a) was marginally or completely acceptable to 75% of respondents, whereas sentence 25 (3b) was acceptable to 56%. In both cases, *someone* is an existential quantifier, which posits the hypothetical or real existence of a person, but does not describe the person in any way. However, in (3a), it is possible that the utterer of the sentence has no idea who this person could be, whereas in (3b), the utterer does know who the person is. The lack of familiarity with the person posited in (3a) may force many speakers into using anaphoric *they* in order to avoid specifying a possibly wrong gender; the presumed familiarity with the person in (3b) may force many speakers into choosing a gender-marked pronoun.[39]

(3) a. **Someone** left **their** book here.

b. **Someone** told me it was going to rain today and I believed **them**.

38 For one of the sentences with *each student* as an antecedent, only 51 tallies could be made. Pairs of percentages reflect different answers for two different sentences with the same antecedent.

39 Another possible explanation could be distance between the antecedent and the pronoun; see section 3.2.2.4.

Familiarity may also be operating in sentences with the definite antecedents *the TA for my section* and *my roommate* (4). In both cases, the roommate can be presumed to be familiar to the person uttering the sentence.[40]

(4) a. **My roommate** thinks **they**'re just so great.

b. **My roommate** was supposed to answer the phone, but **they** didn't.

However, familiarity alone cannot account for differences in *they* acceptability: the familiar *someone* is still much more acceptable (56%) than the definite antecedents (highest about 20%). The semantic category (e.g., existential quantifier phrase versus definite phrase) of the antecedent appears to override any additional interpretations of the use of the antecedent in a particular context.

The concept of familiarity was expressed by some of the respondents in comments focusing on knowing the person referred to by a particular antecedent, and thus, knowing and being able to (or being required to) indicate the sex of that person:

- "If you know the roommate you would specify *he*/*she*."
- "For the TA questions I would know gender & thus use *he*, *she*, *him*, or *her*."
- "I think when it is a person you have in mind, you use *her*, or *him*, but if it's just some girl or parent or something that is unknown you can use *them* or *they*."

Familiarity does not explain the discrepancy in singular *they* acceptability between the two sentences with *my roommate* as an antecedent: (4a) was acceptable to 20%, but (4b) to only 4%. (I will assume distance is ruled out as a possibility, since it doesn't show up for any of the other antecedents; see section 3.2.2.4.). The only possibly relevant difference I can see between the two sentences is the following: in sentence 11 (3a), a particular state (of mind) of the roommate is being given; in sentence 17 (3b), on the other hand, a specific event involving the roommate is described.[41] In the analysis of Carlson (1978), the NP *my roommate* with a stative predicate is an individual; the description is true for the individual at different times and places. The NP *my roommate* with an eventive predicate on the other hand, is a stage; the description is true for the individual only at a certain time and place (i.e., a stage) in the individual's existence. It may be that singular *they* is more easily allowed for individual NP antecedents than for stage NP antecedents.

40 Note that this is not always the case for definite descriptions, as in hypothetical or generic contexts:
(i.) If my roommate next year is a graduate student, I will be happy.
(ii.) I always prefer my roommate to be a woman.

41 Actually, this sentence is ambiguous: it could mean either that there was a specific time when the roommate was supposed to answer the phone (and didn't at that time), or that in general (in some period of time in the past) the roommate was always supposed to answer the phone when it rang, but never did. I find that without context, the first interpretation is the most natural, and base my discussion on it.

3.2.2.4 Distance as a variable of acceptability of antecedents

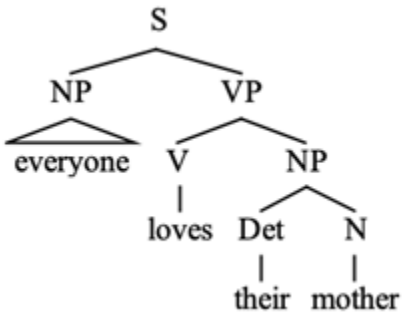
Distance might affect acceptance of singular *they* in two ways: (1) the plural pronoun is grammatically required (or preferred) when outside the c-command domain of its antecedent; (2) the plural pronoun is pragmatically preferred when further away from its antecedent.

For the purposes of this questionnaire, I defined distance by c-command of the pronoun by the antecedent. A simple definition of c-command (suitable for current purposes) is as follows:

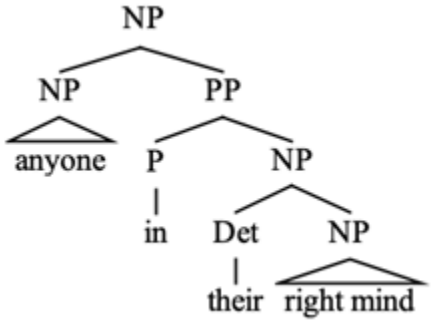
> Node A c-commands node B iff the branching node most immediately dominating A also dominates B. (Neale, 1990, p. 18)

In all the questionnaire sentences, the antecedent is the subject of a sentence containing a form of singular *they*, or the head of a relative cause containing a form of singular *they*; in both these cases, the pronoun is c-commanded by the antecedent. The trees below[42] illustrating the c-command relationships are highly simplified, but the c-command relations do not change with more detailed structure. In (5a), the first branching node dominating the NP subject everyone is S, which dominates all the other nodes of the tree, including the one dominating the pronoun *their*; in (5b) the first branching node dominating the NP head of the relative clause, *anyone*, is the highest NP, which dominates all the other nodes of the tree.

(5) a.



b.



The antecedent does not c-command the pronoun when the antecedent and pronoun are in separate clauses or sentences. In the questionnaire, the structures of example sentences without a c-command relationship between the antecedent and instance of singular *they* are *if-then* constructions or compound sentences with *but* or *and* coordinating two sentences.

For this questionnaire, I define a "close" (C) antecedent as one that c-commands the anaphoric singular *they*, and a "far" (F) antecedent as one that does not. In all but two pairs of sentences (Table 3.11), the difference in acceptability between the C and F antecedents varies from 3% (2) to 9% (5). (The two exceptions are sentences 2 and 25, with *someone*, and sentences 11 and 17 with *my roommate*, which are discussed above in section 3.2.2.3.1.) For two of the pairs, the far antecedent is slightly more acceptable (*everyone* and *the TA for my section*), and for the rest, the

42 Trees drawn using TreeForm software. Derrick, D. and Archambault, D. (2010). TreeForm: Explaining and exploring grammar through syntax trees. *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, 25(1):53–66. doi: 10.1093/llc/fqp031.

close antecedent is slightly more acceptable.[43] Even if the differences were significant, no pattern is discernible. These results confirm Newman's (in press) conclusion that structural distance is not a factor in singular *they* choice (see Chapter 2, section 1.1.2).

Table 3.11: Epicene antecedent acceptability and distance from pronoun

Questionnaire item # and Antecedent	Distance from Pronoun	√	?	√ + ?	*
1. Everyone	Close	36 (70%)	8 (15%)	44 (85%)	8 (15%)
6. Everyone	Far	37 (71%)	12 (23%)	49 (94%)	3 (6%)
20. Anyone	Close	38 (73%)	8 (15%)	46 (88%)	6 (12%)
10. Anyone	Far	35 (68%)	9 (17%)	44 (85%)	8 (15%)
13. No one	Close	30 (58%)	13 (25%)	43 (83%)	9 (17%)
(N/A) No one	Far	—	—	—	—
15. Each student	Close	27 (52%)	13 (25%)	40 (77%)	12 (23%)
21. Each student	Far†	24 (47%)	16 (31%)	40 (78%)	11 (22%)
2. Someone	Close	33 (64 %)	6 (11%)	39 (75%)	13 (25%)
25. Someone	Far	19 (37%)	10 (19%)	29 (56%)	23 (44%)
16. A parent	Close	29 (56%)	4 (7%)	33 (63%)	19 (37%)
31. A student	Far	21 (41%)	10 (19%)	31 (60%)	21 (40%)
5. One	Close	27 (52%)	4 (8%)	31 (60%)	21 (40%)
24. One	Far	21 (40%)	6 (12%)	27 (52%)	25 (48%)
23. The TA C	Close	5 (10%)	3 (6%)	8 (16%)	44 (84%)
28. The TA F	Far	7 (13%)	3 (6%)	10 (19%)	42 (81%)
11. My roommate	Close	5 (10%)	5 (10%)	10 (20%)	42 (80%)
17. My roommate	Far	2 (4%)	0	2 (4%)	50 (96%)

† Only 51 responses were readable for this sentence.

The universal quantifiers (*every* and *each*) would be expected to have a very high discrepancy between C and F antecedents, since a singular pronoun is normally not acceptable outside the c-command domain of the quantifier. Questionnaire items 1 and 6 exhibit this difference. Item 1 was accepted by 85% of the students. Since a singular pronoun is grammatical in this context (6a), presumably the 15% who found *they* unacceptable prefer a singular pronoun. Questionnaire item 6 (6c) was accepted by 94%. What is surprising here is that 3 students did *not* accept the sentence, which is perfectly grammatical; in fact, use of a singular pronoun should be ungrammatical in this context (6b).

43 For *no one*, due to an oversight, only a sentence with a close pronoun was given on the questionnaire.

(6) a. Everyone loves his/her/their mother.

b. *Everyone says it's true, but he/she is lying.

c. Everyone says it's true, but they are lying.

With *each* as the antecedent, almost identical numbers of students accepted both the C and F pronoun relationships. With *each*, as with *every*, a singular pronoun should again be ungrammatical outside the c-command domain of the antecedent; however, a plural pronoun alone does not sound perfectly good either. I find (7a) unacceptable, but (7b) only marginally acceptable; I want to have a distributive reading (one pencil per student), but using *they* makes it sound collective (one pencil for all the students).

(7) a. *Each student arrived on time, but he/she forgot to bring a pencil.

b. ?Each student arrived on time, but they forgot to bring a pencil.

In fact, two of the respondents' comments addressed the issue of a distributive versus a collective reading of the pronoun anaphoric to *each*:

- "For the *each* sentences, I wouldn't use *they* but specify *each* again."
- *Each student arrived on time, but they forgot to bring a pencil*.

  [arrow pointing to *they*] "does that mean all of them?"

This characteristic of *each* may explain the almost identical acceptability rates for the two distances of the *each* antecedents. Further details on the universality and distributivity of *every* and *each* are given in the next section.

3.2.2.5 Universality and distributivity

As noted by Parker (1983), universal quantifiers have plural notional number, since universals include all members of a set (see section 3.1.5). This can account for universal quantifiers such as *every*, *no* and (the universal use of) *any* as being relatively more acceptable as antecedents of *they*. Thus, the high acceptance rates (83–94%) in the questionnaire of sentences with *every*, *any*, and *no* phrases as antecedents is expected. One of the written comments reflected the awareness of the notional plural number inherent in universal quantifiers:

- "In the sentences w/ *everyone* or *each girl/boy*, these words are singular & should correspond to a singular noun on the other side of the sentence; but the second half of the sentence sounds plural because it encompasses all of the each girls, etc.—so to use a plural noun sounds ok."

However, despite the above description of *each* as a universal with collective interpretation, *each* did not pattern with the other universal quantifiers, ranking much lower, only slightly higher than the highest acceptability of the existential (and more notionally singular) quantifier *some*. The reason for this may be that *each* is in fact quite different from *every* in its semantic interpretation. Vendler (1967) notes that *every* and *each* "are both distributive, yet with a marked difference in emphasis: *every* stresses completeness or, rather, exhaustiveness . . . ; *each*, on the other hand,

directs one's attention to the individuals as they appear, in some succession or other, one by one" (p. 78). Beghelli & Stowell (forthcoming), characterize *every* as being intrinsically universal (optionally distributive), and *each* as being intrinsically distributive (obligatorily distributive), though both *every* and *each* can have both universal and distributive interpretations. One way to see the distinction is with predicates that require a semantically plural agent. In (8), with the predicate *sit around the table*, the subject *everyone* can have a collective (universal) interpretation (8a), while *every* + NP, and *each* + NP cannot (8b–c).[44]

(8) a. Everyone was sitting around the table.

b. *Every student was sitting around the table.

c. *Each student was sitting around the table.

While Beghelli & Stowell call both *every* and *each* "strong distributive quantifiers" based on data such as (8b–c), they also note that whereas *each* must always have a distributive interpretation, *every* does not always have to. An example they give of this difference is with the idiom *take* + NP + infinitive (9). Here, *every* + NP can have a collective construal, though *each* cannot.

(9) a. It took every boy to lift the piano.

b. *It took each boy to lift the piano.

The obligatory distributivity of *each* can account for why it is a less acceptable antecedent of *they* than the other universal quantifiers: many speakers may need either another instance of *each* (as noted above) or a singular pronoun in order to express the distributive construal.

3.2.2.6 Semantic gender as a variable of acceptability of antecedents

In the questionnaire, semantically gender-marked antecedents (specifically, *boy*, *girl*, *father* and *mother*) were considerably less acceptable than epicene antecedents for every antecedent type. The results are fairly consistent for *every*, *some*, *no* and *any*: the difference between the highest percent of acceptability for epicene and gender-marked antecedents is between 63 and 67. The results for *each* are inconsistent within the category and will be discussed further below. The results for the indefinite NPs were much closer: a difference of only 49%, probably due to the much lower acceptability of indefinite NPs as antecedents of singular *they* in general.

There seems to be no significant pattern to the acceptability of male versus female antecedents (see Table 3.12). For *every*, *some*, *each* (F), and *a*, the male form was slightly more acceptable than the female form, "winning" by only 4–6% (2–3). For *no*, both genders received the same score. Two sentence sets break this pattern: *any boy* was acceptable to 13% (7) more respondents than *any girl* (in an otherwise identical sentence); *each girl* was preferred by the same amount over *each boy* for the Close sentences in this category. I have no explanation for the higher choice of *any boy*. One possibility for *each girl* having such relatively high acceptability is the

44 Thanks to Anna Szabolcsi for pointing out the sentence in (8a) to me.

order of the sentences in the questionnaire. Sentence 3 is *Each boy thinks they are the smartest*, the first sentence with a gender-marked antecedent. Questionnaire item 30 is *Each girl thinks they are the smartest*, the penultimate sentence, following all the rest of the examples with gender-marked antecedents. It is possible that familiarity with singular *they* examples with different types of antecedents may have had some effect on judgments. However, further research with varying orders of sentences would have to be done in order to test this hypothesis.

Table 3.12: Epicene vs. gender-marked antecedent acceptability

Questionnaire item # and Antecedent	Distance from Pronoun	√	?	√ + ?	*
1. Everyone	Close	36 (70%)	8 (15%)	44 (85%)	8 (15%)
6. Everyone	Far	37 (71%)	12 (23%)	49 (94%)	3 (6%)
12. Every boy	Close	14 (27%)	1 (2%)	15(29%)	37 (71%)
18. Every girl	Close	10 (19%)	2 (4%)	12 (23%)	40 (77%)
2. Someone	Close	33 (64 %)	6 (11%)	39 (75%)	13 (25%)
25. Someone	Far	19 (37%)	10 (19%)	29 (56%)	23 (44%)
29. Some boy	Close	4 (8%)	2 (4%)	6 (12%)	46 (88%)
7. Some girl	Close	2 (4%)	1 (2%)	3 (6%)	49 (94%)
13. No one	Close	30 (58%)	13 (25%)	43 (83%)	9 (17%)
(N/A) No one	Far	—	—	—	—
19. No boy	Close	5 (10%)	4 (7%)	9 (17%)	43 (83%)
26. No girl	Close	6 (11%)	3 (6%)	9 (17%)	43 (83%)
20. Anyone	Close	38 (73%)	8 (15%)	46 (88%)	6 (12%)
10. Anyone	Far	35 (68%)	9 (17%)	44 (85%)	8 (15%)
8. Any boy	Close	5 (10%)	6 (11%)	11 (21%)	41 (79%)
14. Any girl	Close	4 (8%)	0	4 (8%)	48 (92%)
15. Each student	Close	27 (52%)	13 (25%)	40 (77%)	12 (23%)
21. Each student	Far[†]	24 (47%)	16 (31%)	40 (78%)	11 (22%)
3. Each boy	Close	5 (10%)	4 (7%)	9 (17%)	43 (83%)
30. Each girl	Close	11 (21%)	5 (10%)	16 (31%)	36 (69%)
27. Each boy	Far	25 (48%)	12 (23%)	37 (71%)	15 (29%)
9. Each girl	Far	23 (44%)	11 (21%)	34 (65%)	18 (35%)
16. A parent	Close	29 (56%)	4 (7%)	33 (63%)	19 (37%)
31. A student	Far	21 (41%)	10 (19%)	31 (60%)	21 (40%)
22. A father	Close	5 (10%)	0	5 (10%)	47 (90%)
4. A mother	Close	5 (10%)	2 (4%)	7 (14%)	45 (86%)

[†]Only 51 responses were readable for this sentence.

Written comments indicate that gender may be a salient factor in the acceptance of singular *they* anaphora. The comments below mention three different aspects of gender: (1) the preference for a singular (gender-marked) pronoun with a gender-marked antecedent; (2) the acceptability of singular *they* with a non gender-marked antecedent; and (3) the use of singular *they* as a pragmatic device to conceal the sex of the referent.

- "Using *their* seems to sound o.k. when the gender of the subject is not specified. Using *he* is usually grammatically correct but then it excludes females. The sentences that specify gender in the subject should have agreement like *her* or *she* etc. instead of *their*."
- "If it is singular non-gender I always, or at least usually, use *they* & *them*."
- "I know the sentence 'Someone called me, and I need to call him back' is correct, but say a guy called me and I didn't want my boyfriend to know it was a guy, I would say 'someone called me, and I need to call them back.' Just so he wouldn't know it was a guy."

Interestingly, a much bigger difference between Close and Far anaphors with *each* antecedents shows up with the gender-marked antecedents (see Table 3.12). When the pronoun is Far (outside the c-command domain of the gender-marked antecedent), the acceptability is only slightly lower than for the epicene antecedents: a maximum difference of 13% (6). However, when the pronoun is Close (bound), the difference jumps to 61% (31), almost the same as the maximum difference between the other antecedent types, where the gender-marked forms are all Close. The reason the Far gender-marked pronouns are more acceptable than the Close ones may be due to distributivity. The Close sentence (10a) is best interpreted distributively (each *x* thinks *x* is the smartest), but the Far sentence (10b) can easily have a collective interpretation (each *x* asked a question, but all the *x*'s didn't wait to hear the answer), making it more acceptable with *they*.

(10) a. Each boy/girl thinks they are the smartest.

b. Each boy/girl asked a question, but they didn't wait to hear the answer.

With the epicene antecedents, both the Close and Far sentences can be interpreted distributively (11); their high acceptance rate is probably due to the lack of gender-marking.

(11) a. Each student thinks they are the best in the class.

b. Each student arrived on time, but they forgot to bring a pencil.

3.2.2.7 Implicational hierarchy of antecedent types

Parker's (1983) implicational hierarchy of antecedent types (12) is not upheld by the responses to the questionnaire. In a spot check of 10 questionnaires (5 female and 5 male respondents) I found a number of exceptions. I checked for *everyone*, *no one*, *anyone* and *someone*, with questions 1, 13, 20, and 2, respectively. All have "close" singular *they* anaphors. In order to match Parker's number categories, I considered sentences marked acceptable with *they* as "plural" and those marked unacceptable with *they* as "singular." (I didn't count any of the unsure judgments.) The implicational hierarchy was violated in some of the ways noted in (13).

(12) *every*/*no* (sing.) > *any* (sing.) > *some* (sing.)

some (plur.) > *any* (plur.) > *every*/*no* (plur.)

(13) a. every (sing.) / no (plur.) / any (plur.) / some (sing.)

b. every (sing.) / no (plur.) / any (plur.) / some (plur.)

c. some (plur.) / any (plur.) / every (sing.) / no (plur.)

In (13a), *no* and *any* were acceptable with singular *they*, whereas *every* and *some* were not; in Parker's implicational hierarchy, if *every* is singular, *any* must also be singular. The same holds for (13b); in addition, Parker would predict that if *some*, *any*, and *no* were all plural, *every* would also have to be plural. In (13c), the hierarchy holds except for *every*, which should be the same as *no*.

It is particularly striking in the data in (13) is that *every* and *no* do not pattern the same in every case. One confounding factor may be that the verb for *everyone* is in the present tense (*Everyone loves their mother*), and thus marked singular, whereas the verb for *no one* (as well as for *someone* and *anyone*) had no indication of number (*No one left their book here*). None of Parker's sentences had verbs marked for number. However, if the implicational hierarchy is based purely on the semantics of the antecedent, verb inflection should not affect the judgments. It seems more likely that a combination of factors, including all those considered above, is affecting acceptability judgments, with the inherent semantics of the antecedent being just one among many.

3.3 Conclusions

Not surprisingly, it appears that a number of variables interact to affect the acceptability of singular *they*. The strongest predictors of singular *they* acceptability are quantifier type and gender-marking of the antecedents. Structural distance between the antecedent and form of singular *they* (as measured by sentence type or c-command) is not a relevant factor. In addition, although previous research showed an implicational hierarchy by speaker of singular *they* acceptance (Parker 1983), I easily found exceptions to the predicted hierarchy among respondents to my questionnaire.

As noted by Parker (1983), the semantic interpretation of certain quantifiers seems directly related to their acceptance as antecedents of singular *they*: the more a quantifier can have a universal interpretation, the more notionally plural it is, and the more acceptable it is with *they*. The results of my questionnaire support recent research by Beghelli & Stowell (forthcoming), which characterizes *every* as essentially universal, and *each* as essentially distributive. However, it should also be noted that my questionnaire had *everyone* as the instance of a quantifier phrase with *every*; *everyone* has more plural properties than *every* + NP. (Parker also had *everyone* and *everybody*.)

Antecedents containing nouns which are semantically gender-marked, such as *boy* or *girl*, are the least acceptable with anaphoric singular *they*. It is not surprising that since gender agreement with the third person singular pronouns *he* or *she* is available, speakers tend to use or even

require gender agreement. What is striking is that a minority accept singular *they* even when the antecedent makes information on gender available. Thus, gender is a strong predictor of singular *they* acceptability, but not an absolute one.

Since structural distance between pronoun and antecedent has proved to be fruitful in explaining many syntactic phenomena of pronoun usage (e.g., Chomsky 1981), distance is naturally a factor to consider in singular *they* acceptability. However, both in spoken corpus studies (Newman, in press) and in my judgment questionnaire, structural distance is not predictive of singular *they* usage or acceptability. As noted in this chapter, the semantics of the antecedent is the most relevant factor in singular *they* choice.

However, the semantics of the antecedent alone does not appear to be entirely predictive of singular *they* judgments for individual speakers. While a hierarchy of antecedents has shown to be consistent between several studies, an implicational hierarchy by speaker, though found by Parker (1983), was not upheld by the results of my questionnaire. However, Parker had fewer test sentences, and the pronoun was in a tag question; in my questionnaire, I had more and varied sentences, with the instance of singular *they* in different syntactic positions. It appears that a variety of factors can subtly affect singular *they* acceptability. More studies will have to be done to determine exactly what these factors are, and how important they are to singular *they* usage.

Chapter 4: Antecedents

4.0 Introduction

Speakers of English vary in the types of antecedents they will accept for singular *they* anaphora, and in which linguistic and pragmatic contexts (see Chapters 2 and 3). In this chapter, I will not consider the various possibilities for this variability, but rather present an analysis of the overall availability of antecedents of singular *they*. This analysis is based on attested occurrences of singular *they* (both oral and written), combined with consideration of judgments on unattested antecedent types, which reveal a distinct pattern of overall singular *they* availability. It is important to distinguish between acceptability and availability in order to understand the data and analysis of this chapter. At any given moment, for any given sentence with singular *they*, an English speaker may or may not find a particular anaphoric relationship acceptable. While of possible interest in themselves, such judgments are not reliable in predicting all attested uses of singular *they*. In other words, singular *they* is available in English (as a language[45]) in a wider distribution than it may be for a given individual speaker of the language. In this chapter, I will be concerned with characterizing the availability of singular *they*.

There are only two contexts where anaphoric singular *they* is never available: with antecedents which are proper names and with direct gestural deixis (physically pointing to a person). All other NP types and all other types of deixis (for example, pointing to an empty seat) are allowable as antecedents. This general classification corresponds to Russell's (1919) classification of referential and nonreferential expressions: names and deictics are referential, and all other expressions, called descriptions, are nonreferential (see Neale, 1990). Certain semantic or pragmatic interpretations of descriptions in certain linguistic contexts complicate the picture, however. When a specific individual is introduced into the discourse (what I will call "discourse reference", in the sense of Karttunen, 1976), and the linguistic description of that individual is gender-marked, singular *they* is pragmatically infelicitous.

4.1 Possible and impossible antecedents

As noted in Chapter 2, singular *they* can appear in a wide range of constructions, with a wide range of antecedent types. In this section, I will document the types of antecedents available with specific attention to the types of noun phrases, classified by the head of the phrase.

I follow current syntactic analysis of "noun phrases" as having their determiner as head of the phrase (see, e.g. Abney, 1987); thus, they are more accurately termed determiner phrases, or DPs. By the same token, phrases headed by a quantifier are called QPs. In this analysis, an NP is a head noun with any modifiers, and is the complement of the D or Q. (When not specifically discussing different types of antecedents, I will continue to use the term "noun phrase" in a general way.) In the following subsections, I will give examples of both epicene and gender-marked grammatically singular antecedents of the following types: QPs (*every*, *each*, *no*, *any*, *some* + NP), indefinite phrases (*a* + NP), definite phrases (*the* + NP, possessive phrases),

45 As opposed to a dialect or idiolect of English.

this/*that* + NP, the indefinite pronoun *one*, and *who*(*ever*). (For examples of all possible combinations listed for each type, see Appendix I.)

4.1.1 Epicene antecedents

Antecedents which have no gender-marking (i.e., which are epicene) are all available for singular *they* anaphora. This is true even when the sex of the referents is known by the speaker or understood by context (see Chapter 2, section 2.1.2.2). Phrases headed by the quantifiers *every*, *each*, *no*, and *any* tend to be the most acceptable antecedents of singular *they* (see Chapter 3). Examples of quantifier antecedents are given in (1).

(1) a. In these tough times **everyone** has to tighten **their** belt. [I.A.ii.2]

b. **Each person** has to fill **their** own basic needs as a person. [V.A.v.4]

c. **No one** sends **their** children to public schools anymore. [II.A.ii.9]

d. If **anyone** sells smokes to kids, call **them** on it. [III.A.iii.3]

It is clear with the QP antecedents in (1) that no particular individual is being referred to; rather, a set is being quantified over, which one or more individuals may satisfy. The form of *they* here seems to be underspecified for number and gender features (see section 4.4 and Chapter 5), since there are no actual people for which number or gender can be specified. The same is true for arbitrary-reference *one* and *who* (2).

(2) a. Recently my Mom gave me a plate set where **one** can design **their** own plate. [X.A.ii.1]

b. **Who** gets to have **their** story told through art? [XI.A.v.1]

With phrases headed by the quantifier *some*, *a*/*an* and *the*, two types of interpretation are possible: either no particular person is referred to (as in hypothetical or generic contexts), or a particular person is being referred to. With epicene antecedents, both types of interpretation are available with singular *they*. In (3–5), the (a) examples are generic or hypothetical contexts, while the (b) examples are "specific" contexts. (Though used quite freely in linguistics, *specific* is a rather vague term; later in the chapter the intuition captured by this word will be operationalized by applying linguistic tests to antecedent types.)

(3) a. If **someone** is choking, raise **their** hands over **their** head. [IV.A.v.10]

b. **Someone** said **they** were going to vote with a bullet. [IV.A.i.2]

(4) a. Sometimes **a person** is right that **their** partner can't handle knowing something. [VI.A.ii.5]

b. There is in fact **a GTC** for Applied/TESL, and I forget who it is. I will have **them** contact you. [VI.C.iii.7]

(5) a. **The average person** spends about 45 minutes at **their** dental cleaning. [VII.A.ii.6]

b. I got a call from Psychological Services who was very concerned about trying to locate **the individual who had placed the ad**, thinking that **they** needed help. [VII.C.i.2][46]

Hypothetical contexts are represented by *if*-clauses and conditional sentences (3a); generic sentences can only have simple tenses, and may be marked by adverbs such as *always* or *sometimes* or adjectives such as *typical* or *average* (4a, 5a). Specific contexts can be in any tense (past (3b, 5b), future (4b)); in continuing discourse, a pronoun anaphoric to the antecedent can be used (4b).

Demonstrative phrases (*this* or *that*) are definite and can be of three types.[47] One is an idiomatic usage, typically with *special*, as in *that special person* (6a), which means something like 'the person who has some particular importance', usually emotional. This person can be real or hypothetical. The second use is as a linguistic deictic, where the demonstrative is referring back to a previously occurring noun phrase. The interpretation of the demonstrative will thus depend on that of the noun phrase it is anaphoric to; in (6b), the noun phrase is a generic indefinite. The third use is as a locative deictic, with deixis to some object or place providing details on the person described by the demonstrative phrase. In (6c), from a note attached to an application form, *this student* means 'the student who filled out this form' and thus denotes a particular person (who is in this case unknown to the speaker).

(6) a. Give **that special person** something **they** can always use—cash. [VII.A.i.1]]

b. But **a ten-year-old child in Puerto Rico** sees no particular reason to learn English, and if you don't give **that child** any reason for learning English, **they** are not going to do it, no matter how good your methods are. [VII.A.i.2]

c. **This student** filled out the wrong form. I tried calling, but was not able to reach **them**. [VII.C.iii.1]

Gestural deixis to a place of object representing a person is also possible with no linguistic antecedent, as in the context of for example a movie theater (7).[48]

(7) A: Is anyone sitting here?
B: Yes—they'll be right back./They're at the snack bar.

Gestural deixis to a person who is present is not possible (see section 4.3). In addition, names are not possible antecedents of singular *they*, even when the name is not associated with a particular sex (8).

(8) *__Robin__ loves **their** mother.

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46 This quote is written here as it was published; it should probably read: "I got a call from *someone at* Psychological Services. . ."

47 There is a fourth type, an indefinite with the same meaning as 'a certain', as in 'There was this student at the party who made everyone laugh'. There are no examples of this type with anaphoric singular *they* in my database.

48 Thanks to Gregory Ward for providing this example to me.

4.1.2 Referentiality hypothesis

As we saw in the previous section, any type of epicene determiner phrase is available as an antecedent of singular *they*. The only type of noun phrase antecedent not available for singular *they* anaphora is a proper name. In addition, gestural deixis (physically pointing to a person) is not allowable, although pointing accompanied by a linguistic expression (such as *this person*) is allowed, as is pointing to some object or place representing the person.

Conveniently, and probably not accidentally, a long tradition of linguistic philosophy makes a semantic distinction between the types of NPs that I have differentiated here as allowing or not allowing singular *they* anaphora. According to Russell (1919), names and deictics are referential noun phrases, and every other type of NP is a description which in and of itself cannot refer. (I have added the distinction between gestural deictics and other kinds of deixis, which is implicit but not specified in Russell's analysis.) A name or deictic is referential in that it directly denotes an individual; all other NP types quantify over sets. In cases of singular descriptions, the context determines the unique object identified by the description, if there is one. As Russell (1919) puts it: "We have, then, two things to compare: (1) a *name*, which is a simple symbol, directly designating an individual which is its meaning, and having this meaning in its own right, independently of the meanings of other words; (2) a *description*, which consists of several words, whose meanings are already fixed, and from which results whatever is to be taken as the 'meaning' of the description" (p. 174). How the English pronoun system corresponds to this definition of referentiality will be discussed in section 5. For now, I will simply state a preliminary hypothesis concerning antecedents of singular *they* (H1).

> (H1) Antecedents of singular *they* must be nonreferential (i.e., quantifier phrases or descriptions).

While (H1) accurately predicts the availability of epicene antecedents, gender-marked antecedents are more restricted, requiring the hypothesis to be amended. The availability of gender-marked antecedents of singular they will be discussed in the next section.

4.1.3 Gender-marked antecedents

Though attested examples do exist, gender-marked antecedents of singular *they* are quite rare, only allowed in quantified, generic, or hypothetical sentences. Before presenting the specifics of this semantic restriction, I will first analyze naturally occurring examples I and other researchers have collected.

First, there are antecedents which include a gender-marked noun, but which may not have that noun as the head of the phrase. In fact, it is not clear what exactly the antecedent is semantically. In (9a), *a man* cannot be understood to be the antecedent, since (according to my own judgments) *a man* alone would not be acceptable as an antecedent of singular *they* in this sentence (9b).

(9) a. Christian was **an example of a man** totally engaged by **their** passion for bullfighting, for bulls. [VI.B.3]

b. *Christian was **a man** totally engaged by **their** passion for bullfighting.

However, if *example* is the head of the NP, it is not clear how a personal pronoun (*their* or *his*) could then be anaphoric to the NP. It seems that the whole phrase *an example of a man*, which has the human attributes of *man*, but the generic attributes of *example*, is the antecedent of *their*.

Similarly, in (10), the antecedent seems to be the whole phrase *a certain kind of woman*. Again, *a certain kind of* makes the phrase generic, while *woman* makes the phrase acceptable with an anaphoric personal pronoun.

(10) For **a certain kind of woman** it is essential that **they** be fully developed **themselves** before **they** can marry. [VI.B.2]

Though names themselves cannot serve as antecedents of singular *they*, embedded names are like common noun complements of the head of the QP or DP, the quantifier or the in/definite article. In these uses, the embedded name has the same interpretation as the "kind of" phrases just discussed above: the name is representative of a type of woman or man filling the characteristics implied by the name. Again, although names are associated with a particular sex, making the gender-marked pronoun clearly available, singular *they* is also available, due to the quantificational or generic characteristics of the antecedent in the sentence.

(11) a. **Any prospective Portia** should watch this tape until **they** wear it out. [II.B.1]

b. If you get a man who doesn't mind, and is weak, then you begin to hate him for it. If you get **a Peter Jennings**, you'll annoy the shit out of **them**. [VI.B.1]

Quantifier phrases and hypothetical indefinite phrases appear to be the most acceptable of gender-marked antecedents: quantifier phrases (with *every*, *any* or *no*) make up four of the ten gender-marked examples found by me, Meyers (1993) and Abbott (1984); two are "kind of" phrases; two are indefinites; one is a generic definite. In (12) are examples of quantifier antecedents: *every mom* (12a), *no mother* (12b), *any other girl or woman* (12c)[49]; two more indefinites, *a single woman* (12d) and (the hypothetical) *a man* (12e); and a generic definite *the conventional nanny-figure and gracious hostess combined* (12f).

49 This quantifier phrase has a conjoined NP complement, *girl or woman*, and may be interpreted as plural, so that the instance of anaphoric *they*, *their*, is a plural, not a singular. However, since the sentence is also possible (though perhaps not acceptable to many people, similarly to the other examples in this section) without a conjoined NP (i), it is just as likely that the conjoined NP is interpreted as singular.

(i.) That is as much rape as if you had sex with **any other woman** without **their** consent.

(12) a. Every girl I've spoken to about him said he was the kind of guy that **every mom** was glad to see **their** daughter associated with. [I.B.1]

b. There would be **no mother** who would want **their** child to be in a strange place. [II.B.1]

c. That is as much rape as if you had sexual intercourse with **any other girl or woman** without **their** consent. [XII.B.1]

d. He would wait outside a business establishment for **a single woman** to exit, follow **them** home, then sexually assault **them**. (Meyers 1993, p. 189)

e. If a woman approaches **a man**, **they** immediately assume she fancies **them**. (Abbott, 1984, p. 48)

f. **The conventional nanny-figure and gracious hostess combined** hovering behind **their** man (Abbott, 1984, p. 48)

Unlike epicene antecedents, however, gender-marked antecedents are not acceptable with all types of semantic interpretation: existential indefinites which are not in hypothetical contexts, and object-denoting definites, are not possible antecedents of singular *they* when gender-marked. For example, although (12d) is possible, (13a) is not. In addition, an object-denoting definite (13b) is equally unacceptable.

(13) a. *__A single woman__ said someone followed **them** home last night.

b. *__The woman next door__ said someone followed **them** home.

The exact semantic characterization of which types of gender-marked antecedents are available with singular *they* is somewhat complex; this question will be taken up in the following section.

4.2 Gender-marked NPs as antecedents of singular *they*

In general, from what we have seen in the examples in section 4.1.3, the types of gender-marked antecedents which allow singular *they* do not represent or describe a single individual, but rather posit the possible existence of any number of individuals fitting the characteristics described. In the context of sentence (12a), the quantifier phrase *every mom* defines the set of all women who are mothers (and have daughters). In the context of sentence (12d), the indefinite phrase *a single woman* is an existential under the modal *would*, indicating that the event of a woman leaving a building and being assaulted occurred more than once over time; again, no particular woman and no precise number of women have been described. In order to more precisely define the phenomenon that restricts the use of singular *they* with gender-marked antecedents, I will use (and perhaps abuse) Karttunen's (1976) notion of discourse reference. Though Karttunen (1976) only applies the analysis and linguistic tests of discourse reference to indefinite descriptions, I will extend the concept to all types of antecedents.

The test Karttunen uses to determine whether or not a NP establishes a discourse referent or not is whether another instance of the NP, or a pronoun anaphoric to the NP, can be used in continuing discourse. In (14a), for example, the NP *a daughter* introduced in the first sentence

justifies an anaphoric pronoun or NP in the second sentence; thus, in this context, the indefinite phrase established a discourse referent. In (14b) on the other hand, the NP *a son* does not justify an anaphoric pronoun or NP in the following sentence; in this context, the indefinite phrase does not establish a discourse referent.

(14) a. Mary has **a daughter**. **She/her daughter** is two years old.

b. Mary doesn't have **a son**. ***He/her son** is two years old.

We now also have a way to distinguish "specific" from "nonspecific" interpretations of indefinite phrases: specific NPs always establish a discourse referent, whereas nonspecific NPs establish a discourse referent only in certain linguistic contexts. The sentence in (15) is ambiguous: it could mean there was a particular student the professor didn't see, or that the professor saw no students. (Normally, such sentences are disambiguated by modifying the noun with such adjectives as *particular* or *certain* for the specific reading, and *single* for the nonspecific reading.) With the specific reading, the sentence could be followed by (15b); in the nonspecific reading, (15b) would be impossible.

(15) a. The professor didn't see **a student** in the hallway.

b. **The student** was wearing camouflage clothing.

Karttunen (1976) presents the following criteria for determining which contexts are relevant in determining discourse reference for nonspecific NPs: "A nonspecific indefinite NP in an affirmative sentence (single sentence or a complement) establishes a discourse referent just in case the proposition represented by the sentence is asserted, implied, or presupposed by the speaker to be true." (p. 371). The full set of linguistic contexts in which this happens is given in Table 4.1. One set of contexts which is particularly relevant when looking at singular *they* examples concerns short-term discourse referents. In certain contexts an anaphoric pronoun or noun phrase may appear in continuing discourse even when the antecedent does not establish a discourse referent. Karttunen calls such instances the establishment of a short-term discourse referent. A short-term discourse referent must appear in a particular context to be acceptable, in essence a context which extends the hypothetical, quantified or negated nature of the original proposition. The contexts are the following: a conjoined complement in a sentence which does not introduce a discourse referent; a following sentence continuing the modal or quantified mood of the original sentence; suppositions of counterfactual contexts. Two examples follow. In sentence (12d) above, repeated here as (16a), the verb phrases *follow them home* and *then sexually assault them* are conjoined to *wait outside a business establishment for a single woman to exit*. All these VPs are under the scope of the modal *would*, which sets up a habitual context in which a discourse referent is not established. Since no discourse referent is established, singular *they* can be anaphoric to the gender-marked antecedent *a single woman*; however, this NP does set up a short-term discourse referent, available as long as the modality continues. Outside the scope of the modal, no anaphoric pronoun is possible (16b).

(16) a. He would wait outside a business establishment for **a single woman** to exit, follow **them** home, then sexually assault **them**. (Meyers 1993, p.189)

b. He would wait outside for **a single woman** to exit. ***She** got in her car.

In sentence (12e), repeated here as (17a), a suppositional context is set up. As long as this context is continued, either by implication, or by the use of a modal or quantifier-type phrases such as *always*, short-term discourse reference is possible, even though *a man* does not introduce a discourse referent (17b). Once again, if the hypothetical context is lost, no pronoun is possible (17c).

(17) a. If a woman approaches **a man**, **they** immediately assume she fancies **them**. (Abbott, 1984, p. 48)

b. **They** also (always) assume she will dance with **them**.[50]

c. ***They**/**he** wore a hat.

50 This sentence might be interpreted as an E-type pronoun, i.e., a plural outside the c-command domain of a quantified antecedent. However, the same results hold for a singular pronoun (i), suggesting that *they* can be singular in this context.

(i.) If a woman approaches **a man**, **he** immediately assumes she fancies **him**. **He** also (always) assumes she will dance with **him**.

Table 4.1: Discourse reference contexts (after Karttunen 1969)

Establishes Discourse Referent	**Does Not Establish Discourse Referent**
Nonspecific indefinite NP in:	***Nonspecific indefinite NP in:***
Affirmative sentence	Negated sentence
	Complement of modal verb (*want, hope, try,* etc.)
Complement of implicative verb (*manage, remember*, etc.)	Complement of negated implicative verb
Complement of negated negative implicative verb	Complement of negative implicative verb (*forget, fail*, etc.)
Complement of factive verb (*know, realize, regret*, etc.)	
Complement of nonfactive verb implying positive belief [subject's world] (*claim, think, believe, say*, etc.)	Complement of negated nonfactive
Complement of nonfactive verb implying negative belief [speaker's world] (*doubt*)	
	Commands and *yes*/*no* questions
	Sentence with quantifier-like phrase (*every, always*, etc.)
	Establishes Short-term Discourse Referent
	Indefinite NP in:
	Conjoined complement to one of the above
	Following sentences with continuation of modal
	Following sentences with continuation of quantifier-like phrase
	Suppositions of counterfactual contexts (*if-then* interpretation)

4.2.1 Discourse reference and gender-marked antecedents

Antecedents which never allow discourse reference, regardless of the context, are predicted to allow anaphoric singular *they* when gender-marked. In some cases, however, gender-marked antecedents which do not establish a discourse referent nevertheless seem quite infelicitous with anaphoric singular *they*, suggesting that discourse reference is either not the relevant distinguishing characteristic, or that certain contexts introduce another variable restricting the availability of singular *they*. For now, I will proceed with the second option, though I expect that further research may reveal a more unified account.

4.2.1.1 Quantifiers *every, any, each* and *no*

Phrases headed by the quantifiers *every*, *any*, *each* and *no* never establish a discourse referent. A pronoun is sometimes possible in continuing discourse, but the pronoun must be plural, indicating that some group has been established and can be talked about, but not an individual. Short-term discourse reference can explain why singular pronouns are sometimes available outside the c-command domain of a quantifier antecedent, as in for example (18a), where the modal *will* continues the mood necessary to sustain short-term discourse reference. Once that mood is removed, a singular pronoun is no longer available (18b).

(18) a. **Every soldier** is armed, but will **he** shoot?

b. **Every solider** is armed. ***He** went to target practice this afternoon.

As predicted, antecedents with *every*, *any* and *no* + gender-marked NP are attested:

(19) a. Every girl I've spoken to about him said he was the kind of guy that **every mom** was glad to see **their** daughter associated with. [I.B.1]

b. There would be **no mother** who would want **their** child to be in a strange place. [II.B.1]

c. That is as much rape as if you had sexual intercourse with **any other girl or woman** without **their** consent. [XII.B.1]

4.2.1.2 Generic definites

Generic definite phrases never establish a discourse referent, since generic definites represent a prototype of a group, not an individual (20a). Of course, if the generic mood is maintained, short-term discourse reference is possible (20b).

(20) a. **The eldest child** always needs praise. ***He**/**she** is twelve years old.

b. **The eldest child** always needs praise. **He**/**she** also always needs time alone.

We thus expect that singular *they* would be possible with a gender-marked generic antecedent, and in fact such usage is attested:

(21) **The conventional nanny-figure and gracious hostess combined** hovering behind **their** man (Abbott, 1984, p. 48)

However, using my own judgments, gender-marked generic antecedents are not always acceptable as antecedents of singular *they*. The one documented spontaneous use I have found (21) is with a conjoined NP antecedent (*the conventional nanny figure and gracious hostess combined*), which may possibly trigger a (more) plural reading. It is not clear that a simple gender-marked generic would be as acceptable.

(22) a. **The conventional nanny figure** hovering behind **her**/**??their** man

b. **The gracious hostess** hovering behind **her**/**??their** man

One reason generics may not be acceptable with singular *they* is that they are in fact a type of name, a name for a kind, as suggested by Carlson (1978), and further developed in Krifka, et al. (1995).[51] Thus, *the gracious hostess* in a generic context is a name for the kind "gracious hostess". However, if generics behaved exactly like proper names, we would then expect that expect generics in general to be incompatible with singular *they*, whereas this is only true for gender-marked generics.

A relevant difference between proper names and generics is the type of reference they allow. True proper names, as discussed above, are object-dependent; it is possible to point to the individual the name refers to. However, generics are kind-referring, and not object-dependent; although an individual may represent the kind, and may be pointed to,[52] no single individual is referred to by the generic. It appears that having some type of reference (discourse reference or kind reference) limits the ability of gender-marked NPs to allow anaphoric singular *they*. Object-dependent proper names, referential in the sense of Russell (1919), do not allow singular *they* at all, and must be maintained as a semantically separate class.

4.2.1.3 Generic vs. existential indefinites

I have divided indefinite NPs into two types: existential and generic, their interpretation depending on the linguistic context in which they appear. Generics will never establish a discourse referent, whereas existentials may or may not. As we would predict, a gender-marked indefinite generic antecedent is not compatible with singular they (23).

(23) a. How far will **a parent** go to protect the child **they** love?

b. *How far will **a mother** go to protect the child **they** love?

A gender-marked existential indefinite is compatible with singular *they* only when it does not establish a discourse referent (24). As discussed above, the indefinite *a single woman* does not establish a discourse referent; short-term reference is possible in the conjoined verb phrases.

(24) He would wait outside a business establishment for **a single woman** to exit, follow **them** home, then sexually assault **them**. (Meyers 1993, p. 189)

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51 Krifka et al. (1995) propose that "maybe even the more common *man* (as an NP, not as a noun) must be analyzed as a proper name" (p. 65). As I show in Chapter 5, section 5.2.2, generic *man* does behave like a name in not allowing singular *they* anaphora.

52 This distinction is discussed (in different terms) in section 1.3.5 of Krifka et al. (1995).

Although names are not gender-marked (see section 4.3), they usually imply a particular sex of referent. An embedded name can be considered a type of gender-marked noun; NPs with embedded names behave the same way as NPs with common noun complements. In the sentences in (25), the NP (really DP) structures are indefinite article heads with name complements. The interpretation is something like: 'a person of the type Name' (25a), or 'a person who has the name Name' (25b).

(25) a. If you get a man who doesn't mind, and is weak, then you begin to hate him for it. If you get **a Peter Jennings**, you'll annoy the shit out of **them**. [VI.B.1]

b. If there is **a Barbara Wassman** on board, could **they** make **themselves** known to the cabin? (Weidmann, 1984, p. 65)

No discourse referent is established in these hypothetical contexts. Note that the gender-marked third person singular pronoun is also available in such contexts (the first sentence of (25a)), but not required.

The sentence in (26) is interesting in that two gender-marked indefinites are introduced in the *if*-clause, but only one of them is an antecedent for singular *they*.

(26) If a woman approaches **a man**, **they** immediately assume she fancies **them**. (Abbott, 1984, p. 48)

Neither indefinite establishes a discourse referent, but in some analyses (e.g., Krazter 1995) the first NP, *a woman*, is a generic in this context, and the second, *a man*, is an existential (the sentence is true always for a woman, who approaches some man). Interestingly, this analysis predicts the pattern of anaphora in the *when*-clause: the generic gender-marked antecedent does not allow singular *they*, whereas the existential gender-marked antecedent does.

Although indefinite generics are not all kind-referring according to the analysis in Krifka et al. (1995), they do behave the same way as definite generics in not allowing singular *they* when gender-marked. Thus kind reference may not be the critical determining factor in singular *they* availability, but rather some other property related to generic uses of both definites and indefinites. However, at the moment I have no alternative proposal for what this property might be, and simply note the similarity.

4.2.1.3.1 Exceptions and variations

Gender-marked noun phrases which establish a discourse referent can never be antecedents of singular *they*; however, it is not true that gender-marked antecedents which do not establish a discourse referent can always be antecedents of singular *they*. Thus, either the concept of discourse reference is not the relevant one for predicting the availability of gender-marked NPs as antecedents of singular *they*, or the concept needs to be refined. In this section, I will refine the concept.

Indefinites usually establish a discourse referent in an affirmative sentence (27a). If the sentence is negated, the indefinite no longer establishes a discourse referent (27b).

(27) a. Mary has **a son. He** is tall.

b. Mary doesn't have **a son**. ***He** is tall.

However, in this type of negated sentence, a gender-marked NP cannot serve as an antecedent of singular *they* (28b).

(28) a. Mary doesn't have **a son**, but if she did, **he**'d be tall.

b. *Mary doesn't have **a son**, but if she did, **they**'d be tall.

In a sentence like (27b), it is not required by the semantics that exactly one son (hypothetically) exist, but it appears to be implied. Although the semantics of the sentence do not specify number, pragmatically the interpretation seems to be that only one son would exist, and that that particular son would be tall. It may be this assumption of uniqueness that prevents anaphoric singular *they* despite the lack of discourse reference.

The coordinated NPs in (29) are definites which do not establish a discourse referent. Only the coordinates in (29a) are generic, but in none of the sentences do the NPs denote a single object.

(29) a. Are you saying that **the divorcee or widower** will forever be promiscuous, even if **they** remarry, on the grounds that **they** have had sex before marrying **their** present spouse? [XII.C.2]

b. Turn to **the brother or sister next to you** and tell **them**, "You've got what it takes." [XII.C.3]

c. Just broke up with **your girlfriend or boyfriend** and you're breakin' down left only with two Ben Harper tickets, and you don't want to go because he reminds you of **them**, well . . . I don't want you to suffer. [XII.C.4]

d. No foreign news editor in London, New York or Paris, has to my knowledge told **their man or woman** that **they** must stay. [XII.C.1]

If the antecedent is not a coordinate structure, however, gender-marked NPs are not possible in these sentences (30), as is usually true for gender-marked definites.

(30) a. *Are you saying that **the divorcee** will forever be promiscuous, even if **they** remarry?

b. *Turn to **the brother** next to you and tell **them** . . .

c. *Just broke up with **your girlfriend** . . . and he reminds you of **them**?

d. *No foreign news editor has told **their man** that **they** must stay.

Thus, it appears that the availability of singular *they* for the gender-marked coordinate definites is a pragmatic strategy for avoiding the problem of choosing a gender-marked pronoun or coordinated pronoun.

It is unclear what the exact structure and semantic interpretation is for the antecedents of singular *they* in (31). Certainly the full NPs contain a gender-marked noun, but it is not clear what the

head of the phrase is: the personal noun *man* or *woman*, or the impersonal *example* or *kind*. In any case, these indefinite NPs do not establish a discourse referent and are available for anaphoric singular *they* when gender-marked, suggesting that they may be existential rather than generic (cf. Wilkinson 1995 on *kind*).

(31) a. Christian was **an example of a man** totally engaged by **their** passion for bullfighting, for bulls. [VI.B.3]

b. For **a certain kind of woman** it is essential that **they** be fully developed **themselves** before **they** can marry. [VI.B.2]

4.3 Names and Deixis

Proper names can never be antecedents of singular *they*. Even names which can be used for people of either sex are not available. Names must be distinguished from all other types of NPs for this reason. In fact, Russell's (1919) classification of names and deictics[53] as referential and all other NPs as descriptions which do not in and of themselves refer makes exactly such a distinction. The semantics and pragmatics of the referentiality of names can explain why names referring to a single person force the choice of a gender-marked third person singular pronoun.

Agreement with non-name antecedents and anaphoric pronouns is based on abstract categories matched in the grammar (see Chapter 5). However, since names are referential, the pronouns anaphoric to them are also referential (Neale, 1990). Thus, pronoun number must match the actual countable number of referents. When one person is referred to by name or by pointing, an associated pronoun must pragmatically indicate that one person is referred to. While *they* can indicate 'at least one' in grammatical agreement, only *he* or *she* can indicate 'exactly one', and 'exactly one' is called for in a context where one person is referred to directly. This analysis is based only on number; however, a gender must also be chosen since the referentially singular third person pronouns are obligatorily gender-marked.

Proper names do not have grammatical gender in the same way common nouns do, but are associated to males or females by social convention. Since names directly refer, any name can be assigned to any referent, with the appropriate pronoun chosen based on the sex of the referent, not the form of the name. If the sex of the referent is not known, the choice of one of the gender-marked singular pronouns is forced, or perhaps avoided.

The following section reports on a survey which tested whether singular *they* is available in deictic contexts where the sex of the referent is unknown: is it true that choice of one of the gender-marked pronouns is always forced, or can singular *they* extend to deictic contexts?

53 I have narrowed "deixis" to actual pointing to the person referred to, since other types of deixis (see Chapter 2) are allowed with singular *they*. Gender-marked linguistic deictics behave in the same way as other types of NPs which establish a discourse referent, and are not compatible with singular *they*.

4.3.1 Pronoun survey: Names and deixis

As noted above, singular *they* is never found with name antecedents, or with gestural deixis, where the pointing is to the person referred to (as opposed to some object or place representing the person). There are two possibilities why this might be the case. One is that in these contexts, the sex of the person referred to is always known or evident, so for pragmatic reasons the gender-marked singular pronoun must be chosen. The other is that names and gestural deictics are object-dependent, and refer directly to the referent, so that number agreement is corresponding to the actual number of referents and is not based on grammatical agreement, which is often arbitrary, and may not be based on countable objects.

The first suggestion is already partially falsified by the fact that with some gender-marked antecedents, singular *they* is still possible (see section 2.1.2 in Chapter 2). However, we could still say pronouns associated with object-dependent phrases or gestures correspond to the sex of the referent, whereas pronouns anaphoric to gender-marked descriptions are corresponding to the abstract (though semantically-based) gender of the antecedent, not to the actual sex of referents. A way to test this hypothesis is to see what happens when the sex of the referent is not evident from the name or the person designated by pointing. In general, even when the sex of the person is not known, singular *they* is still unavailable with names and gestural deixis. Details of acceptability judgments in these contexts will be discussed below.

If singular *they* were available with names and gestural deixis, it would suggest that this use of the plural pronoun is a pragmatic strategy available in general when the sex of the referent is unknown. It appears instead that the semantics of the antecedent, or the referring properties of the pronoun, are the relevant predictors, and that number (not sex or gender) is the aspect of agreement involved in pronoun choice in object-dependent contexts.

In order to ascertain what English speakers do when faced with the odd situation of not knowing the sex of a person whose name they know, or to whom they are pointing, I created a survey answered by nine native speakers of English. (See Appendix III for copy of the survey.) I provided four contexts: A, the control context, where the sex of the person referred to is known; B, where the sex of the person referred to is not known, since the people are hidden under sheets; C and D, the same as B, with the addition that the people are wearing name tags. In C, reference is by pointing, and in D, reference is by the use of the name. In both cases, the name on the name tag of the person pointed to, Robin, can be used for both males and females.

In context A, the survey respondents imagine they are pointing to a woman, and say the following sentence (with one pronoun chosen): He/She/They is/are waving his/her/their arms. None of the nine respondents could use the pronoun *he* or *they* in this context, and all chose *she* as the best option (i.e., *She is waving her arms*). With an epicene linguistic antecedent, however, a form of *they* became available for all but two respondents. The sentence *This person is waving her arms* was judged good or fairly good, while *This person is waving their arms* was judged a little worse, but still acceptable. Thus we see a sharp contrast between pronoun choice with gestural deictic reference and pronoun choice with a linguistic antecedent, in this case a demonstrative phrase.

In context B, the respondents point to a person, but since the person is completely covered, have no way of determining the person's sex.[54] In this context, the gender-marked pronouns (e.g., *He is waving his arms*) were unavailable for almost everyone. With pointing, three people allowed *he* or *she*, but ranked them very low, suggesting that this choice was forced by the circumstances, and not fully acceptable. The use of *he* and *she* with the antecedent *this person* was a little better than with pointing, but still unacceptable for most respondents. Interestingly, *they* becomes more acceptable with the antecedent *this person* when the sex of the person is unknown, with more respondents choosing it as the most acceptable of all choices.

Context C is the same as context B, except that now the disguised people are also wearing name tags, with names that can be used for either men or women (I used the name Robin, though one person I consulted interpreted it as a female name, and substituted the name Pat). Interestingly, the acceptability patterns in this context, while approximately the same for the previous context, did change somewhat, even though the only difference in the two contexts was the addition of a name tag. The use of *he* or *she* for those who accepted it became slightly better, and fewer people accepted *They are waving their* arms. (Judgments on *This person is waving their arms* stayed the same.) The semantic strength of names seems to have an effect even when the name itself is not used in an utterance.

Context D is the same as context C, except that this time the respondents had to use the name Robin itself as the antecedent (e.g., *Robin is waving her arms*). With a name as antecedent, *they* is virtually impossible as an anaphoric pronoun. The use of the gender-marked singular pronouns is slightly better, probably as a forced assignment of sex to the referent, as in the previous contexts. When embedded inside an epicene NP, *The person named Robin*, judgments were mixed: About half the respondents rejected the sentence outright, and the other half accepted it as perfectly good, or possibly good. Apparently, some respondents react to the head NP, and others to the embedded name. The contrast between *this person* and *the person named Robin* as antecedents is quite pronounced: no one rejected *they* anaphoric to *this person* in any of the contexts where the sex of the referent was unknown, whereas, even though the sex of the referent is still not known, *the person named Robin* was rejected as an antecedent of singular *they* by several speakers.

54 I thank Anna Szabolcsi for suggesting this context, which I had not previously considered.

Table 4.2 below summarizes the judgments described above. The pronouns are in nominative case, representing the gender and number in any form (only nominative and genitive were given in the survey).

Table 4.2: Native-speaker Judgments: Pronouns, Names and Deixis

Context	Best	Possible	Worst
A: Sex of referent known (female)/pointing	She is waving her arms.	??This person is waving their arms.	*He is waving his arms. *They are waving their arms.
B: Sex of referent hidden/pointing	?This person is waving their arms.	?*They are waving their arms.	*He is waving his arms. *She is waving her arms.
C: Sex of referent hidden/name tag/pointing	?This person is waving their arms.	?*He is waving his arms. ?*She is waving her arms.	*They are waving their arms.
D: Sex of referent hidden/name tag/use name	??The person named Robin is waving their arms. ?*The person named Robin is waving his arms. ?*The person named Robin is waving her arms.	?*Robin is waving his arms. ?*Robin is waving her arms.	*Robin is waving their arms.

When the sex of a referent is known (as female), using singular *they* with a linguistic antecedent is allowable; however using the masculine singular, or singular *they* without a linguistic antecedent is not. When the sex of the referent is unknown, singular *they* with a linguistic antecedent is the preferred choice; for some speakers singular *they* is marginally acceptable even without a linguistic antecedent, while the gender-marked singulars are the least acceptable. With the addition of a name associated with a referent, *they* becomes worse and the gender-marked singulars become better, more closely matching the pattern seen with use of a name as a linguistic antecedent. With a name antecedent, use of a gender-marked singular is more acceptable, even when the name is embedded inside an epicene NP.

4.4 Semantic classification of pronouns

The fact that names are incompatible with singular *they*, while all other types of noun phrases are (potentially) compatible with singular *they* (with the restrictions described above)[55], suggests that pronoun number agreement is determined differently for different types of NPs. Since the use of gestural deixis in ascertaining the referent of a pronoun (with no grammatical antecedent) parallels the use of a name antecedent with respect to singular *they* acceptability, it appears that names are in fact quite different from other NPs, and are semantically related to the act of pointing. While we can say that antecedent-pronoun agreement is based on abstract grammatical features for grammatical antecedents, it seems strange to attribute grammatical features to the act of pointing. Instead, we assume that the gender and number features of a pronoun used in this context are based on some connection of these features to real world characteristics, i.e., biological sex and real number, in the sense of counting. This same connection appears to be made with names.

In my analysis, the reason that names and (gestural) deixis are incompatible with singular *they* is that they are referential in the sense of being rigid designators (Kripke 1979); rigid designators denote a unique individual (or "object", which includes animates and humans). For example, when I utter (32), there must be some unique individual Robin who loves her (Robin's) mother, or the sentence is not true.

(32) **Robin** loves **her** mother.

In Neale's (1990) analysis, pronouns anaphoric on referring expressions are themselves referring expressions. Thus, the pronoun *her* in (32) is also dependent on the referent of *Robin* for its interpretation. Pronouns which are referential (in this object-dependent or rigid designator sense, after Russell, Kripke, and Neale) thus must correspond to real number, as opposed to grammatical number. Since these pronouns have unique referents, the pronouns must reflect the real number (and, in the singular, sex) of the referent. The plural form of a referential pronoun, such as *they*, can only be used with a plural number of referents. Note that this concept of referential number is very different from grammatical number; nonreferential pronouns (which may be either quantifiers or bound variables in Neale's analysis) have no inherent number, and are not dependent on any objects for determining their number. Their agreement patterns in the grammar are based on the matching of grammatical features, which may be underspecified.

The use of the same type of agreement marking for both referential and grammatical functions appears in other areas besides pronoun usage. Languages with grammatical gender exhibit the same overlap. Semantically referential number and gender depend on real number of objects or individuals and sex of humans or animals; grammatical number and gender depend on the assignment of abstract categories, which may or may not intersect with real number or biological sex.

55 Another way of putting this is that no English speaker allows singular *they* with a name antecedent, whereas for every other antecedent type, there is some speaker who allows singular *they* anaphoric to it.

The following Tables (4.3 and 4.4) give an example of grammatical forms and their corresponding types of agreement.

Table 4.3: Pronoun Number Agreement

Agreement	Referential: Real Number	Referential and Grammatical	Grammatical: Abstract Number
Antecedent	Mary, that woman	the girls, the boys	everyone, no one
Pronoun	*they	they	they

In Table 4.3, three possibilities are shown. The first is where agreement of the pronoun is with a semantically referential antecedent (a name, or a demonstrative phrase, accompanied by pointing), in which case *they* is impossible with a singular NP, since the agreement must represent the real number of referents. (The same is true with pointing to referents and using a pronoun.) The second (on the far right) is where agreement is purely grammatical: there are no referents described by the antecedent, and *they* is possible even when the antecedent has singular number agreement with the verb. The third (in the middle) is where grammatical agreement applies (since the NPs are not referential, in the Russellian sense described above); however, the NPs can describe a set of people the speaker wishes to refer to, and this set of people is semantically plural, can be counted, and therefore the pronoun also corresponds to the real, or referential number.

For comparison, one can see the same three types of agreement with gender in languages with grammatical gender agreement. Gender must correspond to the sex of the referent with a referential NP; grammatical gender is arbitrarily assigned to certain NPs describing people, which may or may not correspond to the sex of the person a speaker wishes to refer to (as with French *une personne* 'a person (fem.)', whose intended referent may be male or female). In addition, grammatical gender is assigned to objects which have no biological sex. Table 4.4 shows examples of each of these three types of gender assignment.

Table 4.4: Gender Agreement

Agreement	Referential: Real Gender (Sex)	Referential and Grammatical	Grammatical: Abstract Gender
NP	Marie	la femme 'the woman'	la table 'the table'
Pronoun	elle 'she'	elle 'she'	elle 'it (fem.)'

4.5 Conclusions

In this chapter I have accounted for the fact that names can never be the antecedents of singular *they* by classifying them (along with deictics) as semantically referential, or object-dependent, after Russell (1919), Kripke (1979), and Neale (1990). Nonreferential NPs which are epicene (not gender-marked) are available as antecedents of singular *they*; gender-marked nonreferential NPs are also available as antecedents of singular *they*, but to a more limited extent. The limitation is due to an interaction of semantic properties of the NP in a particular grammatical

context, and to the pragmatics of intended reference. A gender-marked NP which is nonreferential is available as an antecedent of singular *they* as long as it does not establish a discourse referent (in the sense of Karttunen 1976), and does not carry an implication of uniqueness. If an antecedent does establish a discourse referent, or if uniqueness is implied, the use of a pronoun which matches the number and gender of the intended or hypothetical referent is preferred for pragmatic reasons.

Pronouns anaphoric to semantically different kinds of NPs are themselves different: pronouns anaphoric to referential NPs are themselves referential, and thus correspond to the real number (and biological sex) of the referent; pronouns anaphoric to nonreferential NPs are not themselves referential, and correspond only to abstract grammatical features inherited from their antecedent. The question that remains unanswered is how a NP with singular verb agreement can have plural pronoun agreement, assuming that the same set of agreement features match both verbs and pronouns. This question will be taken up in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Agreement

5.0 The agreement "problem"

The interest in singular *they* has historically and up until now been based on a perceived agreement violation; a pronoun and its antecedent are supposed to agree in gender and number, with number usually being detected by the agreement between the antecedent subject and verb. A sentence such as (1) is an example of such an apparent violation.

(1) **Everyone** thinks **they** know the right answer.

The subject of the main clause, *everyone*, has singular verb agreement, yet the pronoun anaphoric to it in the embedded clause, *they*, is plural, and has plural verb agreement. It could be argued that universal quantifiers such as *every* are notionally plural, and that pronoun-antecedent agreement is based on notional (semantic or pragmatic) interpretations, and not on strict grammatical agreement. In fact, there is evidence that certain quantifiers tend to be more "plural" than others and tend to allow *they* anaphora by more speakers (see Chapter 3). However, a problem still remains: many possible antecedents of *they* are unambiguously singular, both notionally and grammatically. In (2), a single individual, "a university employee", has been introduced into the discourse (an interview), with *they* anaphoric to the singular definite description of that person, "the employee". No notional plurality is involved.

(2) Campus police made the arrest after responding to a Saturday morning call from a university employee who noticed the office door pried open, campus police officer Sgt. Phil Baguiao said. "**The employee** heard some noise coming from the office, and since it was a Saturday, **they** called the police," he said. [VII.C.i.11]

Thus it appears that even notional number agreement is not a complete solution to the agreement dilemma. However, I will not completely discard the idea of some type of notional number agreement, arguing in Section 5.3.2 that the feature [plural] universally means 'at least one' rather than 'more than 1' (or 'more than *x* number').

In this chapter, I will first give a brief historical overview of the perceived agreement problem, then discuss more recent theories or descriptions of agreement which attempt to account for variations between grammatical and anaphoric agreement rules, looking closely at different types of pronoun-antecedent relationships. The next section concerns the interpretation of number, and what the feature [plural] means, especially in terms of pronoun number; following is a section on gender, and how gender and number agreement interact in the choice of an epicene pronoun, especially with regard to pragmatic conversational principles.

5.1 Grammatical vs. anaphoric agreement

Traditionally, grammarians assumed that number agreement between a NP and any coreferent pronouns was determined in the same way as other types of grammatical agreement, such as that between a subject and predicate. However, singular *they* data, as well as certain other agreement phenomena, suggest that the manner in which associations between agreeing elements are determined is much more varied and complex.

Because both prescriptive and descriptive grammarians often expected all agreement to be of the same type, they have had difficulty either accepting or accounting for the existence of singular *they*. In 1788, Coote (cited by Visser, 1963) insisted that if "*none* requires a verb singular rather than plural, the pronoun referring to it ought also to be singular" (p. 76). Citations of nineteenth and twentieth century prescriptive grammarians who were no less strict in requiring a consistent agreement pattern in English can be found in Bodine (1975), Green (1983), Sklar (1988), and Stanley (1978). Descriptivists, such as Stockwell, Schachter & Partee (1973), while accepting the data, admit they have trouble accounting for sentences such as (1) (repeated here as (3)), since their feature set systems (including number and gender) are "supposed to work for verb number agreement and anaphora alike" (p. 227).

(3) **Everyone** thinks **they** know the right answer.

Another reaction to the agreement mismatch is to consider singular *they* an isolated exception, with the genderless third plural pronoun chosen by the speaker to substitute for the gender-marked singular (the "avoidance" hypothesis). For example, Neale (1990) states that "number agreement between bound pronouns and their antecedents is generally a *syntactical* matter" (p. 230, emphasis in original), followed by a footnote conceding "counterexamples such as 'Someone left their copy of the *Phaedo* behind', when uttered in a deliberate attempt to avoid using the masculine pronoun" (p. 254). Gil (1989), in a non-syntactic account of anaphor number marking, finds that instances of singular *they* are exceptions to his rule system. His description of the counterexamples suggests an explanation based on the semantics of the antecedent, but also pragmatic avoidance: "NPs with vague or indeterminate reference . . . may license plural anaphors even if of cardinality equal to 1. Some speakers of English feel that this 'vague plural' pronoun constitutes a strategy for avoiding commitment to a specific gender" (p. 17).

One way to account for singular *they* within a unified agreement system is to consider the third person plural form of both the verb and the pronoun as unmarked; that is neither singular nor plural. When no more specific form is called for, the plural form is used. Kayne (1989) proposes an analysis of verb number in English where the third-person singular *–s* morpheme marks not person, but rather (singular) number.[56] In this system, "plural" is the unmarked (or "elsewhere") form. This characterization works well for *they*, which can be thought of as neither singular nor plural, but simply unmarked for number (and gender). Other clues in the grammar or discourse, such as adverbs (*they all*), morphology (*themself*) or distribution (*everyone raised their hand*), can signal singular or plural number in contexts where a specific number is intended.

An alternative to accounting for agreement as a unitary phenomenon is to consider NP-predicate and NP-pronoun agreement as fundamentally different. Some of the research proposing this outlook is summarized in section 5.1.1 below.

56 This account includes an argument for why the first and second person singular pronouns (*I*, *you*) do not require singular *–s* agreement.

5.1.1 Subject-verb vs. pronoun-antecedent agreement

Moravcsik (1978), in a typological descriptive study of agreement, notes a cross linguistic tendency which is relevant to understanding the singular *they* agreement pattern: "agreement properties of personal pronouns are mostly but not always the same regardless of whether they are used in their proper sense or in some extended sense such as used as polite pronouns or generic pronouns" (p. 360). For example, in French, the polite or formal second person singular is identical to the second person plural form; even when used as a singular, the pronoun triggers plural agreement with verbs and other agreeing constituents. If singular *they* usage followed this generalization, we would expect the plural pronoun to retain plural verb agreement, even if it had a singular (for example singular generic) antecedent, which is indeed the case. Moravcsik's observation suggests that grammatical agreement (between subject and verb) is independent of the semantic or pragmatic factors involved in pronoun choice. More detailed research on individual languages supports this hypothesis. For example, Bresnan and Mchombo (1987) give evidence from the Bantu language Chichewa that two types of agreement can be distinguished: grammatical, between a NP argument and verb; and anaphoric, between a non-argument NP and a pronoun. Among other facts, they point out a characteristic of anaphoric agreement which is difficult to account for if such agreement is purely grammatical, that is, derived by syntactic relationships between agreeing constituents: anaphoric relations can be maintained across sentence boundaries. Bresnan and Mchombo conclude that "the choice of agreement features of person, number, and gender in the anaphoric use of pronominals is independently motivated: and it need not—indeed, should not—be accounted for by a sentence-internal mechanism of syntactic agreement" (p. 748).

More evidence that pronoun-antecedent agreement cannot be syntactic (as opposed to semantic) is discussed by Cooper (1983): certain adjectives lend gender to otherwise unmarked nouns, as in (4).

(4) **A handsome neighbor** said that **he**/***she** loved John.

Cooper presents a semantic solution, which leaves certain grammaticality judgments of pronoun agreement in the realm of discourse pragmatics (though singular *they* is not specifically discussed).

Corbett (1979) presents data from numerous languages which show differential agreement between different types of constituents. An example of the problem he sets out to solve is shown in the paradigm in (5).

(5) a. The committee has decided.

b. The committee have decided.

c. This committee sat late.

d. *These committee sat late.

Corbett calls the singular agreement in (5a) and (5c) syntactic, and the plural agreement in (5b) semantic. However, it is not immediately clear why (5d) is not possible, when (5b) is. A similar

puzzle arises in singular *they* sentences: although singular quantifier phrases allow a plural pronoun, they never allow a plural verb or a plural noun complement (6).

(6) a. **Everybody** loves **their** mother.

b. ***Everybody** love **their** mother.

c. ***Everybodies** love **their** mother.

d. ***Every children** love **their** mother.

Only singular agreement is possible when there is solely a syntactic relationship between the antecedent and the agreeing constituents; plural agreement is possible when there is a semantic relationship.

From his research of cross linguistic data (though not including singular *they*), Corbett (1991) proposes the agreement hierarchy in (7).

(7) attributive < predicate < relative pronoun < personal pronoun

In this hierarchy "as we move rightwards . . . , the likelihood of semantic agreement will increase monotonically (that is, with no intervening decrease)" (p. 226).[57] Thus, syntactic agreement is more likely further to the left, and semantic agreement is more likely further to the right. The hierarchy predicts (and is supported by) the agreement pattern found with singular *they*. Antecedents of singular *they* have syntactic (singular) agreement with predicates (i.e., verbs), and semantic (singular or plural agreement) with anaphoric pronouns.

Corbett (1991, chapt. 8) details how the agreement hierarchy applies to gender as well as number. In languages with grammatical gender, there is sometimes a clash between choice of the grammatically agreeing pronoun and the semantically agreeing pronoun. One example is the German noun *Mädchen* 'girl', which is neuter gender, but semantically female. Either the neuter pronoun *es* 'it' or the feminine pronoun *sie* 'she' may be used anaphorically with *Mädchen*. Based on cases like this, and other data, Corbett concludes that pronoun agreement is not purely grammatical, nor purely semantic, but that either may come into play, depending upon linguistic and pragmatic variables. Such a conclusion seems warranted for English, where the two possibilities in (8) suggest grammatical number agreement in (8a) and semantic agreement in (8b).

(8) a. **Everyone** loves **his** mother.

b. **Everyone** loves **their** mother.

There is a complication in the use of the singular pronoun in (8a) however; in English, third person singular agreement necessarily forces a choice in gender. In fact, the third person singular forms do not mark number as much as they mark gender. For this reason I will refer to them as

57 See also Corbett (1979).

the "gender-marked singular" forms to distinguish them from singular *they*. Further discussion of the issue of gender and sex will be taken up in section 5.3.1.

Another complication in looking at pronoun agreement is that different pronoun types have different properties, even though the surface forms may look the same. In the next section, some of the pronoun types relevant to the problem of determining number are discussed.

5.1.2 Pronoun types

The syntactic behavior of anaphoric pronouns and their semantic interpretation has been the topic of an enormous amount of research and debate (e.g., Bosch, 1983; Cornish, 1986/87; Lasnik, 1989; Reinhart, 1983; Tasmowski-De Ryk & Verluyten, 1982). As we have seen (Chapter 2) singular *they* is allowable in any syntactic context where the gender-marked third person singular pronouns are allowed (with the only restriction being on the semantic category of antecedents); thus, whatever theory accounts for how third person singular pronouns behave syntactically and are (generally) interpreted semantically will also apply to singular *they*. There is, however, one area of pronoun study which addresses the issue of singular versus plural forms of pronouns, that of "pronouns of laziness", a subtype of which are "E-type pronouns". I will explain what these are, and how singular *they* differs from these plural pronouns in sections 5.1.2.1 and 5.1.2.2. Pronouns of laziness in general, and E-type pronouns in particular, appear to have a singular antecedent in a previous clause; however, they in fact stand in for true plural NPs, and do not present any agreement discord.[58]

5.1.2.1 Pronouns of laziness

Geach (1962, 1976) defines "pronouns of laziness" (his term) as those which substitute for a repetition of a full NP appearing elsewhere in the sentence or discourse. To test for true substitution, the sentence must have the same truth conditions with the full NP as with the pronoun replacement. The type of antecedent (e.g., whether it is a name or not) and the sentence structure can affect whether any given pronoun is a pronoun of laziness or not. An example Geach gives is (9), where *his* can be replaced by *Smith's* with no resulting change in meaning, although it does sound repetitive, presumably why a pronoun of laziness would be preferred.

(9) a. His sudden elevation to peerage was no surprise to Smith.

b. Smith's sudden elevation to peerage was no surprise to Smith.

On the other hand, in (10), the NP *just one man*, if substituted for the pronoun, results in an entirely different proposition.

(10) a. Just one man broke the bank at Monte Carlo, and he has died a pauper.

b. Just one man broke the bank at Monte Carlo, and just one man has died a pauper.

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58 See Bosch (1983) for a critique of Evans (1980) and Geach (Bosch is responding to the 1968 edition), and an alternative method of pronoun classification. As far as I can tell, the various alternative classifications have no bearing on the accurate characterization of singular *they*; thus I will assume the analyses and nomenclature of the earlier studies.

Therefore, the pronoun *he* in (10a) is not a pronoun of laziness.

In some cases, the pronoun does not substitute for an exact repetition, but "a repetitious phrase somehow reconstructable out of the antecedent" (Geach, 1976, p. 26). An example is (11), where the pronoun is replacing the NP 'her boyfriend' or 'the boyfriend she brought to the party'.

(11) The smartest woman who brought a boyfriend to the party kissed him.

Although Geach himself gives no examples of plural pronouns of laziness, other researchers have applied this concept to plurals. Neale (1990, p. 254) for example, suggests that the plural pronoun in (12a) is a pronoun of laziness substituting for *Veg-o-matics*, which seems to be the correct interpretation. I have added an example with a human antecedent (12b), where *they* seems to be a pronoun of laziness substituting for 'Danes'.

(12) a. Pat bought a *Veg-o-matic* after seeing them advertized on TV.

b. Mary married a Dane after discovering they don't hit their kids.

In the context of singular generic prototypes, however, it is not always clear whether a usage of *they* is a pronoun of laziness (substituting for a plural NP), or an instance of singular *they*. The following examples are from Moravcsik (1978):

(13) a. An Englishman never does that; he has different habits.

b. An Englishman never does that; they have different habits.

c. Englishmen never do that; they have different habits.

Here, since the singular is possible (13a), it might seem that singular *they* could be used in place of the singular pronoun. On the other hand, the sentence with a singular antecedent and plural pronoun (13b) seems to be synonymous (as Moravcsik notes) with the sentence where the antecedent is plural (13c). The question now is: are we looking at singular *they* or a true plural *they*?

Clearly the plural interpretation is possible; *they* in (13b) can be a pronoun of laziness replacing *Englishmen*, a plural NP reconstructable from the singular generic antecedent *an Englishman*, representing the class of all Englishmen. Thus (13b) and (13c) are synonymous: it is possible to represent a generic class either by a singular indefinite phrase, or by a bare plural phrase; in both sentences the plural pronoun replaces a plural NP *Englishmen*. It should also be the case that *they* could be singular, especially if *an Englishman* were substituted with *an English person*. A sentence such as (13b) would have a singular *they* instead of the gender-marked singular *he* in (13a). These two sentences would be equivalent. However, it is not clear that the singular interpretation is available, at least with the present tense verbs used here. At least for me, the instance of *they* in (13b) is substituting for a plural: *Englishmen*. Perhaps this is because the true plural is available and somehow that interpretation overrides the singular interpretation. When modals are added, making it more plausible for an individual prototype representing the class to fulfill the situation, the singular reading becomes more accessible to me, as in (14).

(14) An American would never wait that long; they would use their cell phone to call for help.

5.1.2.2 E-type pronouns vs. bound pronouns

In this section, I will be concerned with the difference between two types of pronouns which have quantifier phrases as antecedents. One type is analogous to bound variables in logic,[59] and must appear in a particular syntactic relationship to the antecedent. The QP antecedent is the operator which controls the bound variable (the pronoun). An example is sentence (15a), which has the semantic interpretation (15b).

(15) a. **Everyone** loves **their** mother.

b. For all *x*, *x* a person, *x* loves *x*'s mother.

The syntactic relationship is called c-command; a very simple definition of what constitutes binding under c-command is in (16), from Neale (1990), p. 171.

(16) If P is a pronoun P that is anaphoric on a quantifier Q, then P is bound by Q only if P is located inside the smallest clause containing Q.

A QP operator headed by *every* can control a singular bound variable pronoun, as in (17); however, when the pronoun is not c-commanded by the QP, it is no longer a bound variable and can only be plural (18). In (17), the QP is the subject of the sentence, and thus the smallest clause containing both the QP and the pronoun is the whole sentence; in (18a), the QP is embedded inside a PP inside a VP inside a relative clause modifying the head noun of the subject NP; the pronoun is outside of the smallest clause containing the QP, and cannot be a bound variable, i.e., cannot be singular.

(17) **Every guy at the party** thought that **he** was fascinating.

(18) a. *The woman who talked to **every guy at the party** said that **he** was absolutely boring.[60]

b. The woman who talked to **every guy at the party** said that **they** were absolutely boring.

Evans (1980) proposes that a pronoun which has a QP antecedent, and yet is not c-commanded by the antecedent (and thus cannot have a bound variable interpretation) is standing in for a definite description. He calls such pronouns "E-type".[61] In (18b), the plural pronoun stands in for

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59 As Bosch (1983) notes, this analogy alone may not suffice to define the concept: "if the reader shares the experience of the present author, who was first told in his introductory logic course that bound variables are like pronouns in natural language and was later informed by logically minded linguists that pronouns are just like bound variables in quantified predicate calculus, then he might also share the feeling that there is still something to be explained" (p. ix).

60 Neale (1990) claims that this sentence would be acceptable under the pragmatic condition that there was only one guy at the party; however, this interpretation is not available for all native speakers of English. The natural interpretation, and the one intended here, is that there is more than one guy at the party.

61 Evans (1980) says that E-type pronouns "refer" to "the object(s), if any, which verify the antecedent quantifier-containing clause" (p. 340). I am instead taking the view (following Neale, 1990, chapt. 5) that E-type pronouns are a special type of pronouns of laziness, and that definite descriptions, or pronouns going proxy for them, do not refer directly. (Neale argues that such pronouns should be called D-type rather than E-type in order to distinguish the different analyses. Although I am convinced by his arguments, I will continue to use the better known term, E-type.)

the plural definite phrase ‘the guys at the party’. An E-type pronoun can be singular, if its antecedent quantifies over a group of exactly one; thus, an instance of a third person plural E-type pronoun can be an instance of singular *they*. In the sentences in (19), the pronouns are both singular E-type, replacing ‘the man who walked in late’ in (19a) and ‘the person who walked in late’ in (19b).

(19) a. **A man** walked in late. **He** sat at the back of the room.

b. **A student** walked in late. **They** sat at the back of the room.

There is another kind of plural E-type pronoun, which denotes the members of a set over which a negative QP quantifies. Evans (1980) does not discuss this kind, and explicitly rules out negative QPs as being antecedents of E-type pronouns; however, he did not consider the set-denoting possibility. An example of a context where a negative QP is impossible as an antecedent of an E-type pronoun is given in (20), from Evans.

(20) *No congressmen admire Kennedy, and they are very junior.[62]

There is no definite phrase which describes the members of the set introduced by the antecedent, since the set is null. However, some set is always at least implicitly defined by the use of the quantifier; in (20), it is the set of United States congressmen at the time of utterance. As Bosch (1983) points out, a plural pronoun can “refer” to the members of an implicit set, as in example (21a). By way of comparison to (20), I have also added (21b).

(21) a. Nobody danced last night; probably they were (all) too shy.

b. No congressmen admire Kennedy, because they are (all) jealous of him.

In the sentences in (21), the plural pronoun in each case stands in for the definite phrase that defines the set being quantified over by the negative QP subject of the first clause. In (21a) *they* replaces ‘the people at the party last night’, and in (21b) *they* replaces ‘the congressmen’. Whether or not one accepts the analysis of these pronouns as E-type, they still seem to be pronouns of laziness going proxy for definite phrases reconstructed from the quantificational antecedent, and are clearly true plurals. Thus, even though *nobody* is grammatically singular, the instance of *they* in (21b) must be plural, not singular, as is confirmed by the possibility of modifying *they* with *all*.

5.1.3 Conclusion

For quantifier phrases in English, number agreement between subject and verb appears to be almost entirely grammatically determined; the number agreement which shows up on the verb is invariantly singular or plural (with the exception of *none*, which can vary between singular and plural [63]), independent of the possible number of persons or things the sets defined can include. By definition, all antecedents of singular *they* have singular verb agreement; that such NPs can

62 This sentence contrasts with (i), where the bound plural pronoun is acceptable.

(i.) No congressmen admire only the people they know.

63 Certain forms of negative quantifier phrases tend to have plural agreement in English; for examples of these judgments, see Tsai (1980) and Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983, chapt. 4).

"agree" with a plural pronoun, yet never with a plural verb suggests two things: (1) subject-verb agreement is invariant and is determined based on syntactic relationships; (2) pronoun-antecedent agreement is different from subject-verb agreement, since both a third person plural and a gender-marked singular pronoun can have a grammatically singular antecedent. I have shown in Chapter 4 that a combination of semantic and pragmatic factors is involved in determining pronoun-antecedent agreement in English. (In fact, some researchers, such as Barlow (1992), and Reid (1991) analyze all agreement as based on semantics and/or discourse functions.) The question remains why a plural pronoun would be chosen at all to agree with what can be a semantically as well as syntactically singular antecedent. In the next section, I suggest an interpretation of the feature [plural] which accounts for such usage.

5.2 The interpretation of plural number

It is commonly assumed that the feature [plural] must be defined as 'greater than' some number, this number depending on the pronominal number system of a given language (e.g., Ingram, 1978; Barlow, 1990). Thus, for a language like English, [plural] is defined as 'greater than 1'; for a language with dual pronoun marking, [plural] (i.e., non-singular and non-dual) is defined as 'greater than 2', etc. This list of definitions is not descriptively accurate, and prevents a universal definition of the feature [plural].

First, it is not the case that all uses of plurals are linked to some set of more than one: the third person plural can have singular interpretation in English, as well as numerous other languages. An example in English is (22a), where the sentence is true even if only one student meets the condition. Wierzbicka (1980) discusses examples like (22b), where the meaning is that Mary doesn't have any children at all. The sentence doesn't mean 'Mary doesn't have more than one child', which implies that she could have only one. The interpretation of the plural pronoun in (22a) and the plural NP in (22b) has to be 'at least one'.

(22) a. If **students** do well on the final exam, **they** pass the class.

b. Mary doesn't have children.

In pro-drop languages[64] such as Italian and Spanish, third person plural agreement on a verb with no overt subject can have singular interpretation.[65] In (23), an example in Italian, from Cinque (1988), only one person telephoned and that person has been tentatively identified.

(23) Prima, hann**o** telefonato: mi pareva **tua sorella**.
earlier, has-3pl telephoned: to-me seemed your sister
'Earlier, they telephoned: it seemed to me it was your sister.'

Since in sentences such as (23), the null subject could also describe a set of more than one person, again an accurate interpretation of the feature [plural] is 'at least one'.

64 In very general terms, a pro-drop language is one where pronominal subjects are optional.
65 From preliminary research, I hypothesize that this is true for all pro-drop languages, though this remains an open question.

Another interesting problem with defining [plural] as 'more than *x* number' is that the underlying common meaning of [plural] is not evident: [plural] would be defined differently for each language that had a different grammatical number system. In languages with dual or trial marking for example, the 'more than *x*' category is called 'plural' no matter what number *x* is (cf. Wiesemann, 1986 for examples); but what is the common interpretation of 'plural' in all these cases? Moravcsik (1978) argues that distinctions such as dual, trial, plural of paucity and plural of abundance are subdistinctions within the category 'plural', and that with this classification "we can maintain a universal concept of what plurality means; if we chose some other alternative, plurality would have to be defined as 'more than one' or 'more than two', depending on the alternative categories of a particular language" (p. 347). In fact, duals, trials and quadrals are often used as uncounted plurals in addition to distinguishing a more specific number (see examples in Moravcsik, 1978 and Hutchisson, 1986). We are left with how to interpret the universal feature [plural]. The meaning 'at least one' can apply to all languages, regardless of the subdistinctions made within the plural category.[66]

In the next section, I compare lexical number systems with pronoun number, suggesting how the interpretation of [plural] is related to countability.

5.2.1 Pronoun number and lexical number

Typological data on number systems add another dimension to the notion of [plural]. Pronoun number marking and lexical number systems share some universal properties. I suggest that pronoun number marking is in fact a lexical representation of counting, in the same way number systems are, and that in human languages, 'plural' is whatever cannot be counted by the lexical elements. In English, this means that even though we are talking about a group of for example three people, that number cannot be specified by the pronoun system, where only a plural pronoun is available for numbers greater than one. Thus, in pronoun number marking, the feature [plural] means 'uncountable'; we usually think of 'uncountable' as being so high a number that it cannot be counted, but it can also mean that we have no means or reason to count, leaving the exact number unspecified, so the best interpretation of 'uncountable' is 'at least one'. Given this definition of [plural], none of the facts of "singular" usage of plural pronouns are surprising.

Number marking higher than four on pronouns is not attested, and even four is very rare (Ingram, 1978; Hutchisson, 1986).[67] Interestingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, the same limit appears in lexical number systems. Greenberg (1978) notes the generalization that number systems in natural languages are finite, allowing him to classify number systems by what he calls L, "the limit number," defined as "the next largest natural number after the largest expressible number"

66 Tasmowski-De Ryck & Verluyten (1982, p. 328) point out that some nouns in English, like *pants*, are not notionally plural, but only syntactically plural, where the plural means not 'more than one object' but 'antecedent is a plural word', as in (i). The definition of [plural] as 'at least one' holds for this type of plural, too, though I agree that such semantic interpretation is probably not available here. Purely syntactic third person plurals appear to be restricted to inanimates in English.

(i.) (John wants his pants that are on a chair and he says to Mary:) Could you hand them/*it to me, please?

67 In fact, in systems which differentiate four, it is also used to mark 'plural' as well as exactly four (Hutchisson, 1986).

(p. 253). Greenberg states as generalization 6: “The largest value of L in systems with only simple lexical representation is 5 and the smallest is 2” (p. 256). An example of L=5 is Guana, with the system 1, 2, 3, 4, ‘many’. If pronoun number marking is also a type of lexical number system, we would predict that the same limit would hold for pronoun number; in fact, the largest pronoun number system, quadral, matches the largest lexical number system, having the following differentiations of number: 1, 2, 3, 4, ‘plural’.[68] Greenberg himself points out the correlation between simple number systems and noun number: “Corresponding to L=2 is a singular/plural distinction, and to L=3, singular/dual/plural” (p. 256).

Thus, if the number feature [plural] is analogous to the meaning underlying the lexical number element ‘many’, [plural] may mean ‘uncountable’, i.e., having indeterminate number. As we have seen with the Italian example in (23) above, the indeterminate number, once determined, could turn out to be ‘one’.

5.2.2 Generics and names

Another area where singular number appears to be indeterminate is with generic NPs and pronouns anaphoric to them. In (24–25) are some examples including sentences discussed in previous sections.

(24) a. If a girl does well on the final exam, she passes the class.

b. If a student does well on the final exam, they pass the class.

c. If students do well on the final exam, they pass the class.

(25) a. A businessman would never wait that long; he would use his cell phone to call for help.

b. An American would never wait that long; they would use their cell phone to call for help.

c. Americans would never wait that long; they would use their cell phone to call for help.

In the (a) sentences, the singular antecedent and singular pronouns at first glance do not seem to mean ‘exactly one’, since the propositions could be true for any number of girls, boys, or businessmen who found themselves in the given circumstances. In fact, the plurals in (24–25) can be substituted for the singulars with little or no difference in meaning. Consistent with the interpretation of [plural] as ‘at least one’, the plural expressions cannot have any specific number associated with them either. As Carlson argues in detail, such expressions are difficult to quantify at all. For example, *students* in (24c) does not maintain its meaning if replaced by *all students*, *many students*, or even *most students*; rather, as Carlson claims, it means ‘the kind student’, or ‘the kind of thing that is a student’.

Carlson (1978) classifies bare plural and definite generics as “kinds” (which take kind predicates such as *be extinct*), and indefinite generics as “objects” (which cannot take kind predicates). He considers both kinds and objects to be semantically equivalent to names of individuals, again on the basis of the types of predicates they allow. Though I do not consider anything but actual

68 Although 4 can also be used for ‘plural’, I still consider such a system quadral since 4 can indeed mark exactly four.

names to be names, Carlson's classification is important for differentiating the different types of generic expressions, and for differentiating generics from existentials. (From here on I will only be concerned with singular expressions.[69])

Individual-level predicates, such as *shy*, *boring*, and *intelligent*, describe characteristics of individuals at all points in their existence; such predicates are thus compatible with generic expressions, as in (26). Stage-level predicates, on the other hand, describe only temporary stages in the existence of an individual; examples are *sick*, *tired*, and *naked*. With such predicates, the generic reading of the NP is no longer available, as in (27).

(26) a. The cat owner is intelligent.

b. A cat owner is intelligent.

(27) a. The cat owner is sick.

b. A cat owner is sick.

The generic sentences in (26) describe a trait of the kind 'cat owner'; the non-generic sentences in (27), describe the state of a particular cat owner.

In addition, the generic or habitual simple present tense is compatible with subjects which are individuals, whereas other tenses, such as the progressive, are only compatible with stages. Thus, the subjects in (28) are interpreted as generics, whereas in (29), they are interpreted as existential or object-denoting definite.

(28) a. The cat owner enjoys staying at home.

b. A cat owner eats fish.

(29) a. The cat owner is enjoying staying at home.[70]

b. A cat owner is eating fish.

Finally, certain predicates, such as *extinct*, *common*, and *widespread*, are only compatible with kinds, and not objects (30). (Also note that the kind predicate *become extinct* is possible in the progressive, since here the progressive does not describe an ongoing state or activity as in (29), but a process.)

(30) a. The cat owner is becoming extinct.

b. *A cat owner is becoming extinct.

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69 Carlson (1978) is mostly concerned with bare plurals, analyzing (indefinite) *a* generics and definite generics only tentatively. The facts about singular generics are quite complicated; the examples here are used to define the concepts generally, and do not present a full description of the grammar and semantics of singular generic expressions.

70 With no context, (29a) may be difficult to interpret; it may help to imagine a situation in which a particular person has been identified as "the cat owner": I have two neighbors; the cat owner is enjoying staying at home today, but the dog owner went to the beach.

Both singular kind and object expressions can be considered singular, in the sense that they describe exactly one kind and exactly one object (a prototype, or representative of the whole species or group). However, they are not completely analogous to names in that they do not denote a single, identifiable individual; they are not object-dependent, but are nonreferential descriptions just like all other definite and indefinite NPs.

There is one class of NPs which can be classified as names, and therefore its members are not compatible with singular *they*. Bare singular generic NPs, such as *man* and *woman*, are a type of name, and cannot be antecedents of singular *they* (31).[71] Definite and indefinite generic NPs on the other hand can be antecedents of singular *they* (32), and thus are not names.

(31) a. *__Man__ found **themself** possessed of a special faculty.[72]

b. *__Woman__ has to fight for **their** right to free speech.

(32) a. **The linguistics student** believes **themself** special.

b. **A student** has to fight for **their** right to free speech.

McConnell-Ginet (1978), in a discussion of prototypes, proposes that it is the singular definite generic that behaves like a name, in that singular *they* anaphora is much less acceptable with definite generic antecedents than with indefinite generics. (She also recognizes that "where reference is 'vividly' specified (by proper name or by pointing), gender-marking is virtually obligatory" (p. 80). "Vividly specified" reference corresponds to "referential" in my analysis.) While the choice of a singular or plural pronoun, when a choice between the two is available, may be explained in part by the notion of prototypes as representing individuals, or name-like entities, it is important to distinguish choice from availability. The third person plural pronoun is unavailable with singular name antecedents or with gestural deixis. Definite antecedents, however, are possible antecedents of singular *they*. Quantitative studies show that definite NPs are not as frequently chosen as antecedents (see Chapter 3), but the existence of speakers who do allow singular *they* anaphoric to definites, both in production and in judgment tasks, shows that such usage is not completely ruled out. Thus, McConnell-Ginet's suggestions about prototypes as individuals are likely to be useful in explaining why speakers may choose the singular over the plural with generic antecedents, but do not serve to identify the class of NPs which are allowed to be singular *they* antecedents.[73]

McConnell-Ginet's analysis brings up another issue in the area of agreement: can number agreement be separated from gender agreement in English third person pronoun choice? The answer, no, will be discussed in the next section.

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71 The similar generic NPs *mankind*, *womankind* and *humankind* are not possible with personal pronouns at all.
72 This sentence is from MacKay (1980).
73 In fact, McConnell-Ginet specifically states that her analysis does not consider pronoun gender choice to be based on "inherent syntactic or semantic features of the antecedent noun phrase" (p. 69); I am proposing that the semantic category of the antecedent is relevant, at least for the availability of singular *they*. Once a choice is allowable, I agree that numerous factors, including pragmatics, come into play in choosing which pronoun form is used in a given situation.

5.3 The interaction of gender and number

Although the use of anaphoric *they* with grammatically singular antecedents is widespread, and acceptable in many contexts to a large number and array of English speakers, the use of gender-marked singular third-person pronouns is also widespread and accepted in present-day English. What pragmatic factors might cause a speaker to choose a plural anaphoric pronoun over a singular one in a given context?

This section starts with a description of gender and sex marking and agreement in English. Following is a discussion of how the relevance of gender or sex in a discourse context interacts with the choice of singular versus plural anaphoric pronoun.

5.3.1 Gender and sex in English

In Corbett's (1991) classification of types of gender, English is cited as having "semantic gender", where gender-marking is determined by "the meaning of a noun" and thus, "given the gender of a noun we can infer something about its meaning" (p. 8). For pronouns, the result is that masculine or feminine gender matches male or female sex of a human (or animal) referent or discourse referent. Any deviance from this matching is a special conventional usage.[74]

The masculine form *he*[75] has often been claimed to be "generic", that is epicene, covering both masculine and feminine genders. Thus a sentence like ***Everyone*** *loves* ***his*** *mother* is supposed to be interpretable as applying equally to males and females. However, various linguistic and psychological studies provide evidence that *he* is often interpreted as male (see McConnell-Ginet, 1978; and references in Corbett, 1991 (p. 221), and Miller & Swift, 1988). For example, in a study conducted on UCLA undergraduates (MacKay & Fulkerson, 1979), the subjects responded at a rate of 87% that a sentence with an epicene antecedent and a masculine pronoun could not refer to a female.[76] Another part of the study tested responses to sentences with similar epicene antecedents, but without pronouns. With these sentences, the response rate (that the sentence could not refer to a female) dropped to 43%, showing that the masculine pronoun had an effect on the interpretation of the epicene antecedent.

More evidence that the masculine singular is male comes from mixed-gender coordinate antecedents. Consider (33) with the following intended interpretation: for all *x*, *x* must bring *x*'s lunch to school.

(33) #**Every girl or boy** must bring **his** lunch to school.

If *he* were truly epicene, (33) should be perfectly fine, since the possessive bound pronoun would agree with both genders in the antecedent. Instead the meaning seems to be that only the boy's lunch is brought to school, which is not the intended meaning (thus the # marking).

74 Such usages are discussed in McConnell-Ginet (1978) and in Corbett (1991), as well as elsewhere. An example is using feminine pronouns for boats.
75 As with *they*, nominative *he* and *she* are used to represent all forms.
76 An example is: *A bicyclist can bet that he is not safe from dogs* (MacKay & Fulkerson, 1979, p. 663).

As McConnell-Ginet (1978) points out, the third person feminine pronoun *she* can also be used as a "generic" prototype, as in the sentences in (34).

(34) a. When **the nurse** comes, **she**'ll take your blood pressure.

b. Students have to check with **the teacher** regularly so **she** knows how they're progressing.

A nurse or teacher can be male, of course, and many people would find such sentences acceptable if in a context where someone said (34a) or (34b) a male nurse arrived or a male teacher taught in the school (in fact, (34b) was attributed to a male teacher). If there were a truly epicene gender-marked third person pronoun, and *he* were it, we would not expect *she* to be able to be used in this way, since *she* should only be allowed in contexts not including any males. Instead, it appears that pragmatic (in this case, cultural) notions determine which sex is appropriate or expected of a prototype described by a NP; these expectations may then show up in the pronoun choice. Similar notions apply to QPs such as *everyone* and *someone*; the typical representative of the set may be male or female (for example, in the setting of an all girls' or all boys' school). It is these representations or expectations that determine whether a pronoun is understood as epicene, not any feature or interpretation of the pronoun itself.

For those who do use *he* with epicene antecedents, it may be that a male represents the prototype person (not that *he* represents both males and females), as is evident in the following example: "As all the world and his wife knows, on Tuesday last a grand Victory Ball was held" (Agatha Christie, *The Affair at the Victory Ball,* first published in 1923).

5.3.1.1 Gender and sex of animals

Although animals can be pronominalized by *it*, often they are personified by the use of the gender-marked personal pronouns. I always choose a feminine pronoun when talking about a cat I know is female. If I saw a cat whose sex I didn't know, however, I would have to use the inanimate pronoun, for example: *I saw a cat on the roof yesterday; it sure looked hungry*. I would also use *it* anaphorically for generic or quantified antecedents, such as *the typical cat, every cat*, etc. Other speakers may choose either *he* or *she* based on the type of animal, for example *he* for dogs and *she* for cats, analogous to the use of either *he* or *she* for human prototypes, based on profession. Some speakers, however, use *he* for all animals. An example of "generic" *he* for cats is given in (35).

(35) Whether it's leaping into **his** favorite sunny window or dashing up and down the stairs, **your cat**'s normal daily activities add to **his** quality of life. —ad for Cosequin in *Cat Fancy*, December 1995.

Again, the use of *he* in such contexts may not be due to its ability to apply to both sexes of the animal in question, but rather because the prototypical animal is male, just like the prototypical person.

We can conclude that in English, pronominal gender is associated with real or attributed sex of real or prototypical people or animals. The gender-marked third person singular pronoun therefore provides information on a biological attribute, suggesting specific knowledge of a specific individual or typical traits of a particular prototype. How this aspect of gender-marking

may affect the choice of the plural as opposed to the singular third person pronoun will be discussed in the next section.

5.3.2 Grice's maxims

As detailed in Chapter 4, the semantic category of the antecedent determines the availability of anaphoric singular *they*; yet, since the antecedents are grammatically singular, a gender-marked singular pronoun should also be available in all cases where gender is marked or sex of a referent is known, and in other cases for those who allow *he* or *she* as an epicene. In fact, the same English speaker may use both singular *they* and *he* or *she* in the same discourse, even in the same sentence (see examples in Chapter 2, Appendix I, and in Newman, in press). It appears that, within the bounds of what is semantically allowed, a speaker makes a pragmatic choice of which singular pronoun to use in a given written or conversational context. In this section I will consider Grice's (1989) theory that speakers follow certain conversational conventions to make their utterances maximally communicative, and that third person pronoun choice is sensitive to these conventions. In doing this, I will broaden the concept of conversation, extending the application of the conventions to written texts as well as spoken interaction.

In Grice's (1989) analysis, conversational conventions fall under the Cooperative Principle, which can be divided into four categories: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner (p. 26). I will first consider Quality, then Quantity and Relation, followed by Manner.

The category of Quality includes the following two maxims:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

These two maxims are applicable in the choice of pronoun for epicene antecedents. For people for whom *he* is not epicene, saying (36) when there was reason to believe the owner of the pen was female would provide the false information that the owner of the pen was male. Saying the same sentence when there was no reason to believe the owner of the pen was male would be providing information for which the speaker had inadequate evidence.

(36) **Someone** forgot **his** pen.

The maxims of Quality correspond to the gender avoidance aspect of singular *they*: when specifying gender (sex) would be wrong or potentially misleading, a pronoun which does not specify gender is the best choice. As we have seen, however, singular *they* can be used when there is no need to avoid specifying gender or sex, in contexts where there is evidence to accurately choose *he* or *she*. In these cases, either the sex of an intended referent is irrelevant, or the notional number associated with the antecedent is indeterminate: a gender-marked pronoun provides more specific information than is necessary. The category of Quantity is concerned with the amount of information provided, and includes the following two maxims:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

In contexts with epicene antecedents, an anaphoric pronoun need only match person and number in order to provide adequate information. If a gender-marked pronoun is used, information on gender is provided which may be unnecessary, thereby violating the second maxim of Quantity. Note that in certain purposeful uses of the gender-marked pronoun, a speaker can intentionally flout the second maxim, thereby focusing attention on the sex (and perhaps identity) of the referent the speaker has in mind, for example: *I saw someone in the hallway yesterday, and* ***she*** *told me where you were last night*.

If it is true, as suggested in section 5.2, that the default number in English is plural (and that plural has the meaning 'at least one' rather than 'more than one'), then the plural pronoun is also the minimally informative third-person pronoun. With quantifier phrase antecedents headed by *every*, *any*, and *no*, precise notional number is not part of the information imparted by the antecedent in the first place. The same is true for hypothetical contexts (such as *If a person wants to go, they should be able to*): there is no particular individual picked out by the antecedent (one person or numerous people could satisfy the conditions on *a person*), so precise information on number is not necessary.

As explained in Chapter 4, gender-marked antecedents of singular *they* are of the type that never establish a discourse referent; no individual is introduced into the discourse, rather a type, prototype or set is introduced. For this type of antecedent, choosing a gender-marked pronoun is unproblematic, since a gender match does not provide too much information. On the other hand, the gender-marked singular pronoun might suggest that number is important, since these pronouns must be chosen when there is a particular individual introduced into the discourse. In order to de-emphasize number, singular *they* can be chosen, even when the antecedent is gender-marked.

A third pronoun choice is to use both gender-marked pronouns. In writing this can be done by combining the pronouns in an unpronounceable compound such as *s/he* or *he/she*. In writing and speech, the pronouns are conjoined with *or*, as in *he or she, his or her*. This strategy meets the conditions of the maxims of Quality and Quantity, in providing accurate information, and (arguably) the right amount of information. This consciously chosen usage violates another maxim, however: the third maxim of the category of Manner:

1. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

Speakers who use both the compound or conjoined forms and singular *they* are switching between providing maximal information and providing the minimal information needed with the minimum number of syllables necessary.

5.4 Conclusions

Singular *they* does not have to be considered a problem for agreement, if the English third-person plural is treated as unmarked for number. I have also proposed that the grammatical notion of plural in general must be interpreted as meaning 'at least one' rather than 'more than one' (or 'more than *x* number'). Given these assumptions, singular *they* has "plural" verb agreement because plural is unmarked: *they* is not grammatically singular, so it has unmarked (zero

morpheme) verb agreement. Another possible way to analyze the differential agreement characteristics of singular *they* is to consider that pronoun-antecedent agreement is different from subject-predicate agreement: singular *they* thus does not match the grammatical singular features of the antecedent, but rather is chosen based on the semantic category of the antecedent, or pragmatic characteristics of the discourse context.

Chapter 6: Final Remarks

6.0 Summary

Singular *they*, any form of the third-person plural pronoun anaphoric to a grammatically singular antecedent, is a widespread phenomenon in English, both diachronically and synchronically. Historically, singular *they* appears to have been restricted to certain types of antecedents, a constraint which continues to the present for some speakers. Instances of singular *they* can be found in all grammatical forms that the other third-person pronouns are found in: nominative (*they*), accusative (*them*), possessive adjective (*their*), possessive NP (*theirs*), reflexive (*themselves*, *themself*). Singular *they* can also appear in all relationships to its antecedent that the other pronouns appear in, with the same structural constraints: before or after the antecedent; inside or outside the same clause as the antecedent (bound or unbound); across sentences or speakers. It is possible for singular *they* to have a (semantically or morphologically) gender-marked antecedent, but only when the antecedent does not introduce a discourse referent (in the sense of Karttunen, 1976). Singular *they* is unacceptable to all native speakers of English when the antecedent is a proper name, whether or not the sex of the referent can be determined by the name. Since singular *they* is also impossible when referring to a person by pointing, the relevant semantic concept is referentiality (as defined by Russell 1919, and Neale 1990): singular *they* cannot be anaphoric to a referential antecedent.

Because singular *they* is available as an acceptable choice in the grammar of English, it can be used when a speaker either cannot or does not want to choose one of the gender-marked pronouns, *he* or *she*. (Obviously, this use is not necessary for those who do not associate the masculine form with the male sex.) Pragmatic reasons for choosing singular *they* include the following: the speaker does not know the sex of possible referents of the antecedent; the antecedent may distribute over referents of mixed sex; there is no possible referent (e.g., *nobody*); the speaker does not wish to reveal the identity of the intended referent; the gender of the antecedent or the sex of the possible referents are simply not relevant to the context. These pragmatic strategies allow speakers to conform to the conversational rules detailed by Grice (1989).

6.1 Directions for further research

A number of questions remain about the grammar and usage of singular *they*. The semantic hierarchy of antecedents could be further studied, as well as the pragmatic factors affecting the choice and use of singular *they* as opposed to the gender-marked singular pronouns. In addition, theories of agreement may have to be re-evaluated in order to be able to account for the complex interaction between number and gender evidenced by singular *they*.

6.1.1 Quantitative studies

As noted in Chapter 3, a number of variables appear to interact in determining acceptance of singular *they* in a judgment task. In order to determine which of these variables are important, and which are due to the task itself, it would be worthwhile to conduct more, and larger, elicitation studies. Task interference includes familiarity with the sentence types, and fatigue

leading to possible strengthening or weakening of judgments as the task proceeds. Some of the variables which would be needed to be controlled are: sentence type; pronoun form; and pronoun-antecedent distance, with different definitions of distance. It would also be interesting to compare an elicitation task with a judgment task. One difficulty that would have to be overcome with both judgment and elicitation tasks is that of what I call prescriptive interference: the tendency of educated speakers to base their intuitions on what they have learned is "correct" rather than on what they actually produce. This tendency leads to the need for further studies of singular *they* choice in actual usage, detailed in the next section.

6.1.2 Corpus studies

Appendix I of this dissertation is the largest collection of naturally occurring examples of singular *they* that I know of, representing the full range of possible antecedents and forms of singular *they*. However, the examples were collected at random, rather than by systematically scanning particular types of text; therefore, the collection cannot be used to compare frequency of forms or contexts of use within a given database. Newman's (in press) study does make such comparisons; however, the total number of examples of singular *they* found in his spoken corpus was fairly small (around 65). One of the problems with doing a corpus study is that depending on the type of written text or spoken context, and the topics discussed or written about, singular *they* may occur quite rarely, or not at all. For this reason, corpus studies may be less revealing than long-term random collections. However, given the fact that such studies may reveal interesting facts about actual usage (as opposed to judgments based on intuitions), they are worth trying. The texts in which I found the most uses of singular *they* were those which were not edited to academic standards, and which discussed hypothetical or prototypical individuals: a journal for a local hospital; forms or newsletters giving instructions or information.

Another area for further study is suggested by the search for quantitative data from corpus studies. In the appendix of randomly collected examples it is clear that some sentence types are more common than others. If this is not due to chance, the question of the sentential context of singular *they* could be further researched, as detailed in the next section.

6.1.3 Semantics

A number of questions arise about the semantics of the contexts in which singular *they* may occur. One is how to specify the feature or features of the different types of antecedents in order to explain the semantic hierarchy. Although it is clear that more "plural" and less "definite" antecedents are more likely to be acceptable with singular *they*, it would be interesting to find a set of features that might correlate with other phenomena, placing the singular *they* tendencies in the context of more general aspects of English grammar and the interpretation of different types of determiner and quantifier phrases.

Another question is whether sentence type also plays a role in singular *they* availability and acceptability. Whether or not an antecedent introduces a discourse referent depends on the sentential context; the notion of discourse reference may need to be refined in order to account for all of the singular *they* data. It may also be that some other kind of sentence-level semantic characteristic would better account for the facts. One possibility is the context of intensional

versus extensional quantification, which has been shown to be relevant for plural pronouns with grammatically singular antecedents in Hungarian (Farkas, 1996, p. 20). Although the English facts are not exactly parallel, this type of exploration may be fruitful for sorting out some of the singular *they* facts in English. In addition, it may be a place to start in considering cross-linguistic comparisons of plural pronouns with singular antecedents, an agreement phenomenon which is apparently quite rare, but may prove only to be quite hidden.

In looking at frequencies of sentence types of the randomly collected examples in Appendix I, it is clear that the predominant structure is *if*-clauses. It is not clear exactly why this should be so, if it is not an accident of the collection method. One possibility is that the hypothetical contexts introduced by conditionals are conducive to singular *they* usage and acceptability. Another possibility is that the syntactic or semantic relationship between an antecedent in the *if*-clause and the pronoun in the *then*-clause somehow favors singular *they* (this might a relevant measure of structural "distance").

6.1.4 Agreement

Even if it is accepted that singular *they* agrees semantically with a singular antecedent, there still remains the question of what kind of agreement theory can best account for the apparent number mismatch. One possibility is that there is no mismatch, [plural] being an underspecified feature that is interpreted not as 'more than one' (or more than some number), but as 'at least one', with singular (or dual, etc.) agreement only required in certain contexts (such as when identification of a referent is possible, or with a singular object of the verb *have*). Another possibility is that there are different agreement rules for subject-verb agreement and pronoun-antecedent agreement, with subject-verb agreement being syntactic (based on matching person, number, and gender between two elements in a particular structural relationship) and pronoun-antecedent agreement being semantic (based on semantic features (such as referentiality) between two elements in an anaphoric relationship).

6.1.5 Non-anaphoric *they*

This study was confined to anaphoric singular *they*, not taking into consideration non-anaphoric uses of the third person plural pronoun where singular interpretation is possible (as in, for example *I went to the bank, and they told me I couldn't get the loan*). However, it may be that these uses are related. One could propose that *they* is the default third person pronoun in English in general, unspecified (or underspecified) for number, making it available in any situation when number, gender, or identity of (human) referents is not important or is unknown or conflicting.

6.1.6 Singular *they* in other languages

One of my initial projects was to research the possibility of singular uses of the third person plural in languages besides English. However, it soon became obvious that understanding the full nature of singular *they* in English was a large task in itself. Although I have yet to find a contemporary language that allows a third-person plural to be anaphoric to a singular antecedent, some other instances of singular interpretation of third-person plural show up in many unrelated languages.

Nonanaphoric “arbitrary reference” third-person plural with possible singular interpretation appears to be common in the world's languages. For example, In Ewe, *wó* ‘they’ (also the plural marker on nouns) is used in sentences where English *one* (and French *on*) is used, as in “one may smoke here” (Westermann, 1930); in Abe, the equivalent of English indefinite pronouns such as *someone* is the third person plural (Koopman & Sportiche, 1989); in Wolof, the impersonal third person plural is used as a number-neutral form (Pamela Munro, p.c.). Cinque (1988) divides the use of arbitrary reference third person plural in Italian into types: quasi-universal interpretation (1a); and quasi-existential interpretation (1b).

(1) a. Lì, odiano gli stranieri.
there hate-3pl the-3pl strangers
‘There they hate foreigners.’

b. Prima, hanno telefonato: mi pareva tua sorella.
earlier, has-3pl telephoned: to-me seemed your sister
‘Earlier, they telephoned: it seemed to me it was your sister.’

Related research has also been published on Spanish (cf. Jaeggli, 1986; Otero, 1986; Suñer, 1983). English allows nonanaphoric *they* in quasi-existential contexts, but not in quasi-universal contexts. From some very preliminary data-gathering[77], I hypothesize that pro-drop languages in general allow the quasi-existential, while non-pro-drop languages do not. It remains to be seen whether this generalization holds, and if so, why.

Another area where third person plural is used as singular in many languages is with passives. Passives (and passive-type structures) may be a way of backgrounding the agent (Kirsner, 1976; Keenan, 1985), or, in some cases, a way of expressing the action of an unknown agent (Langacker & Munro, 1975). Jochnowitz (1982) goes as far as to say that English singular *they* (which he calls “indefinite they”, unmarked for number) is exactly the same as “the unspecified argument which is the underlying subject of passive sentences” (p. 201). Third person plural agreement appears overtly in passive structures of various other languages, either where the agent is impersonal (nonreferential), or where the agent is a specific individual, backgrounded for some reason. I have found examples in Hebrew (Dorit Ben-Shalom, p.c.), Crow (Karen Wallace, p.c.), and Kimbundu (Givón, 1976).

6.3. Closing remarks

My initial interest in singular *they* was to understand a usage that appeared to be natural and useful, yet was widely considered grammatically incorrect, and is to this day vilified as “bad” English by prescriptivists and those who believe in their rules. In my search, I found that descriptive linguists, while passing no moral judgment, nevertheless had trouble accounting for the exception to number agreement between antecedent and pronoun, and often considered singular *they* a pragmatic strategy for avoiding gender. Both groups usually assumed that singular *they* was a recent development, due to modern-day sensitivity to gender in language and

77 Specifically, English, French and German do not allow the quasi-existential use, while Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian and Spanish do.

life. The data and analysis presented here are evidence that singular *they* is a robust, widespread phenomenon that has to some extent existed since the dawn of English, and cannot be dismissed as an exception or solely a pragmatic strategy for avoiding gender specification. It is my hope that this study will be of help to grammarians who wish to reconsider traditional pronoun agreement rules, as well as provide further grist for theoretical linguists' continually productive mills.

Appendix I: Present-day Examples of Singular *they*

I. Every + NP

A. Epicene

i. They

1. We will build, but without declaring it in public. . . . The Labour Party always knew how to do things quietly . . . but today, **everybody** announces everything **they** do in public. —quote from Shimon Peres in *The Nation*, Oct. 16, 1995, p. 416.

2. Uganda, or for that matter all of Africa, is where **everybody** thinks **they** can be president. —quote from Ugandan army Brig. Gen. Chefe Ali, *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1995, p.A10.

3. That's when **everyone** decides who **they**'ll pair off with for the season. —dialog in *There Was a Little Girl* by Ed McBain, Warner, 1994.

4. **Almost everyone** treats me as if **they** had some personal relationship or personal knowledge of me. —quote from Willie Brown, *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 15, 1996, p. A15.

5. **Every student** should be concerned with the University's housing policy whether **they** live on or off campus. —*GSA Voice* (UCLA), p. 4, Winter 1991, No. 1.

6. **Every Smithsonian scientist** wants some of that money right now to fly to the conference **they** want to attend. —quote from Victor Golla, SSILA meeting, Jan. 5, 1996.

7. "But **everyone** has a TV, don't **they**?" —Ruth Rendell, *Simisola*, Dell, 1995, p. 61.

8. **Everyone** knows a few slang words that **they** believe have specific origins. —Student paper, Linguistics 88A, UCLA, fall 1996.

ii. Their

1. **Everybody** pulls **their** weight. —Television commercial for American Airlines, Nov. 15, 1995.

2. In these tough times **everyone** has to tighten **their** belt. —*Currents*, City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power newsletter, Issue 2, 1994.

3. Now, **everyone** has **their** own horse. —advertisement for "The Talking Stick Horse" in Cheyenne Outfitters Catalog, 1995, p. 43.

4. **Everyone** knows the derogatory terms for **their** own race. —Jared Black, Daily Bruin, Feb. 2, 1995, p. 17.

5. A mature person is never bored at a party. We know that **everyone** has a fascinating story to tell about **their** life. —Sylvia (cartoon) by Nicole Hollander, Feb. 3, 1996.

6. . . . practically **every one** and **their** dog has a zine . . . —*Los Angeles View*, April 5–11, 1996, p. 11.

7. **Every great skater** has **their** own personal style. —Dick Button, World Championship Figure Skating Exhibitions, ABC TV, April 13, 1996.

8. **Not every farmer** calls all **their** cows by name anymore. —Woody Sackson, Holy Cow Catalog, 1994.

9. **Everyone** keeps a few secrets, even from **their** spouse. —Sally Forth (cartoon) by Greg Howard and Craig Macintosh, *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 11, 1995.

10. Not only Buddha, but **every believing Buddhist** also reincarnates and, depending on **their** behavior in the past life, moves up and down a scale of new creatures and plants. —Leonie G. Avery, letter in *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Aug. 7, 1994, p. 14.

11. Just about **everyone** discovers a lump or two somewhere on **their** body, usually on the torso or limbs, at some point in **their** lifetime. —quote from David McFadden, M.D., chief of general surgery at UCLA, *Vital Signs*, Vol. 10, Aug. 1995, p. 2.

12. **Everybody** in town's got **their** story to tell. —Bart, "The Simpsons", July 7, 1996.

13. **Everyone** needs a little gypsy in **their** sole. —quote from Kenneth Cole, Kenneth Cole catalog, Sept. 1996.

14. **Every parent** wants what's best for **their** children. —quote from Maria Marquez, *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 14, 1996, p. E1.

15. If **every kid** in Los Angeles gets **their** parents, grandparents and neighbors to vote yes on A then we should win in November. —Proposition A flyer, Los Angeles County.

iii. Them

[see I.A.v.1]

iv. Themself/Themselves

1. The rules go out the window and it's **every sweetheart** for **themselves**. —commercial for Sees candy, KNX radio, Los Angeles, Feb. 5, 1996.

2. **Everyone** had the right to reflect, to come to terms with **themselves**. —Susan Moody, *Grand Slam*, Berkeley, 1996, p. 89.

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. **Almost everyone** had some experience in a library that **they** recognized as pivotal, **almost everyone** can touch a place in **them** where a library meant something to **them**. —quote from Sherry Thomas, *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1996, p. E13.

2. If **every child** has one teacher like that, who recognizes **their** learning style and doesn't give up, **they** are very lucky. —quote from Nan Temple, *Bush Alumni Magazine* (Seattle, WA), Spring 1994, p. 18.

3. **Everyone** has **their** own agenda when **they** write about sex: but Tisdale's is generous and (it seems) honest. —Nicholas Lezard, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Feb. 12, 1995, p. 29.

4. It's as if **everyone** has a perfect age to which **they** aspire, and **they**'re only truly at ease with **themselves** when **they** get there. —dialog in *Metroland*, Julian Barnes, Vintage, 1992 (c. 1980), p. 114.

B. Gender-marked

1. Every girl I've spoken to about him said he was the kind of guy that **every mom** was glad to see **their** daughter associated with. —quote from Josh Alongi, *Daily Bruin*, May 17, 1994, p. 1.

II. No

A. Epicene

i. They

1. **No one** writes long impressive lists of the books **they** have read that month without at least half an eye on an impressed reader. —Philip Hensher, Manchester Guardian Weekly, July 23. 1995, p. 29.

2. **No actor** can be certain **they** will make a good director, but at least **he or she** starts with the advantage of knowing what not to do after hanging around sets for so long. —Derek Malcolm, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, March 6, 1994, p. 27.

3. The recipients of certificates and prizes were lined up on the right-hand side of the hall by officials who fussed around doublechecking that **no one** was in position No. 27 when **they** should have been No. 28. —Hamish McIlwraith, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Sept. 17, 1995, p. 14.

4. **No one** is going to hell just because **they**'re gay. —Jenny Vaughn, Viewpoint Column, *Daily Bruin*, Oct. 7, 1994, p. 17.

5. **No one** drives this road unless **they** must. —Wyn Cooper, "All or Nothing", *The Country of Here Below*, 1987.

   "**No one** knows what **they** are doing," said Benetsee, "not even the gods. Just remember your fathers." —Peter Bowen, *Specimen Song*, St. Martin's, 1996, p. 269.

ii. Their

1. **Nobody** loves **their** car like a Honda owner. —TV advertisement, March 24, 1996.

2. Few non-academic readers are very keen on Ulysses, but **no one** thinks **their** kid could have written it. —Mark Lawson, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Sept. 17, 1995, p. 12.

3. **No one** can put **their** hand on **their** heart and swear that there will be such things as newspapers in 25 years. —Alan Rusbridger, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Nov. 26, 1995, p. 23.

4. Some people believe the sites are so easy to break into they present little challenge for computer hackers seeking a thrill. Others say **no one** wants to admit that **their** site was invaded. —Elizabeth Corcoran, Washington Post section of the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Dec. 31, 1995, p. 12.

5. Quinn said that **no one** would lose **their** job "until the last possible moment." —Ann Devroy, Washington Post section of *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Feb. 18, 1996, p. 16.

6. It is important to remember that, regardless of the ways an individual has chosen to respond to harassing behavior, **no one** asks for or deserves to have **their** personal freedom violated. —Sexual Harassment, A Guide for Faculty, Staff and Students at UCLA, (brochure), Regents of the University of California, 1994.

7. Miss Conners said who was the gum criminal. **No one** raised **their** hand. —Lynda Barry, Ernie Pook's Comeek, "Excellent Revenge", 1995.

8. **No one** wants to face the fact that **their** health is not what it used to be, especially smokers. —*Vim & Vigor,* Vol. 2, Issue 1, Spring 1995.

9. It's fashionable to say, "**No one** sends **their** children to public schools anymore." It's that vast majority of "no ones" that American policy must address. —letter from Deborah Meier, *The Nation*, p. 542, April 26, 1991.

10. One might imagine, as the embarrassing exercise in laceration proceeds, that **no political leader** had ever before been removed from office against **their** will. —in a discussion of Margaret Thatcher, by Hugo Young, p. 4, *Manchester Guardian Weekly,* May 26, 1991.

11. **No foreign news editor** in London, New York or Paris, has to my knowledge told **their** man or woman that they must stay. —Maggie O'Kane, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Jan. 19, 1994, p. 7.

12. **NO TAXPAYER IN CALIFORNIA** WILL SEE ANY CHANGE IN **THEIR** TAXES. —California Ballot Pamphlet for Primary Election, June 7, 1994.

13. **No City Councilmember** fights harder for **their** district than Nate Holden. —flyer from Re-elect Nate Holden for City Council, 1995.

14. It was a nightmare that **no parent** should have to endure—the tragic loss of **their** child. —CBS Evening News, May 26, 1996.

15. **No one** on this street earned **their** money by being virtuous. —Andrew M. Greeley, *Happy Are the Oppressed*, Jove, 1996, p. 33.

16. "I can think of **no one** else to whom I could turn with the assurance both of **their** ability to help, and **their** willingness to do so with the courage it would require, and the supreme tact." —Anne Perry, *Traitors Gate,* Fawcett, 1995, p. 381.

iii. Them

1. Our age group is the fastest growing (group) infected with AIDS, partly because it's an age where **no one** wants to think it's going to happen to **them**. —quote from Esther Agepogu, *Daily Bruin*, Dec. 1, 1995, p. 11.

2. **No-one** can deny the things that make **them** happy. **No-one** can mistake the things that make **them** happy. —notes from compact disc Ali Farka Toure with Ry Cooder, *Talking Timbuktu*, 1994.

iv. Themself/Themselves

[no examples]

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. **No one**, especially no linguist, should be surprised to see **their** words processed into the opposite of what **they** really mean by a journalist. —Dennis Baron, Linguist List posting, Vol. 5.605, May 20, 1994.

B. Gender-marked

1. By her vision and her decision, she connected herself to every woman on the face of the earth, because there would be **no mother** who would want **their** child to be in a strange place, isolated and stranded, and not somebody come to his rescue. —Dr. J. Herman Blake, *The Possibility of Hope* (A Special *Comic News* Insert), October, 1996, p. 7.

III. Any

A. Epicene

i. They

1. I've never been with **anybody** who just loves what **they** do so much, and puts everything into it. —quote from Lisa Marie (about Tim Burton), *Vanity Fair*, Nov. 1994, p. 132.

2. The prison service used to say that prisoners should maintain contact with outside agencies... There used to be about 20 women here going out to college; now there are none. If **anybody** does have to go out **they** are handcuffed. —Staff member of a women's prison, as told to Melanie McFadyean, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Jan. 7, 1996, p. 25.

3. Had **anyone** cared to look into the matter **they** would have discovered these canvases to be reproductions of two intrepid and ancient actors. —Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, p. 7.

4. But even Mel Reynolds is not as shameless as my personal favorite, Bob Packwood. I actually admire the Republican senator from Oregon . . . yes, admire him. You have to admire **anyone** who actually has the gall to talk about family values after **they**'ve been charged with sexual harassment by enough women to fill the Yellow Pages. —J.C. Curelop, *Daily Bruin*, Oct. 21, 1994, p. 11.

5. Today, the old men have died or retired. And what of their dream of recovering the mainland? “Forget it,” says William Lee of the mainland affairs committee. “That is old-fashioned. I don't think **anyone**, no matter when **they** came to Taiwan, wants to move back there.” —*Buenos Aires Herald*, Sept. 21, 1995, p. 11.

6. The MoD's bar, described by the pressure group Stonewall as the most rigorous in the world, covers **anyone of a homosexual orientation**, regardless of whether **they** engage in sexual activity. —*Manchester Guardian Weekly*, March 19, 1995, p. 8.

7. She had forgotten to come by earlier to get the key—if **anyone** happened to be leaving our office soon, could **they** bring it by? —dialog from *Three Bedrooms, One Corpse*, Charlaine Harris, Worldwide, 1994, p. 44–45.

8. I don't know **any producer** who would either do an episode or not do an episode because **they**’re lobbied. —quote from Howard Gewirtz, *Daily Bruin*, Jan. 18, 1996, p. 26.

9. I never turned **anyone** away because **they** couldn't pay me. —Sarah & A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth, *Having Our Say*, Kodansha International, 1993, p. 125.

10. Starting June 1, your name will be given out to **anyone** you call if **they** have a service known as Caller ID. —GTE public service announcement, KNX, May 3, 1996.

11. “I don't know how **anybody** can be expected to maintain true faith and allegiance to the United States if **they** are still considered nationals of another country.” —quote from Bill King, *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 9, 1996.

12. **Anyone** wearing a long cloak and riding a bike in the darkness or in the fog with no lights visible would look as if **they** were moving above the ground. —Veronica Black, *A Vow of Devotion*, St. Martin's, 1997, p. 166.

ii. Their

1. Of course, if **anybody** chooses to extend **their** bad opinion of the Mossad to those who cooperate with the Mossad, then that's **each person**'s choice. —Oscar A. Cabrera, *Daily Bruin*, April 17, 1996, p. 13.

2. Although the UCLA study contests this notion, the researchers said the findings should not prompt **anyone** to alter **their** diet or exercise until further research is completed. —*Summer Bruin*, Aug. 2, 1993, p. 11.

3. A Somali health worker says she is besieged—“harassed” is the word she uses—by social workers asking her: “Do you know **anyone** who has taken **their** child to Somalia for the operation?” —quote in article by Julie Flint, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, May 22, 1994, p. 25.

4. The ad asked that **anyone** who had been at a similar low point in **their** life and could give reasons not to commit suicide, to “please communicate” via a campus P.O. box. —Lucia Sanchez, *Daily Bruin*, Feb. 6, 1995, p. 3.

5. It is very easy to shove Bastian into the Nazi-Stazi slot that seems to await **anyone** these days who could not explain **their** political viewpoint to a television interviewer in ten seconds. —W. Hall in letter to *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Oct. 30, 1994.

6. It's always a topic of discussion, whether or not counseling is best at a department level or at a central level. I don't think **anyone**'s made up **their** mind about what is the best way to do it. —quote from Ned Pinger, *Daily Bruin*, Dec. 7, 1995, p. 1.

7. **Anyone** receiving a package numbered between 1 and 100 will be assigned an Official Address Verification Card which will also designate **their** total potential cash amount. —United States Purchasing Exchange notice, 1994.

8. **Any back patient who suffers increased pain during exercise** should stop immediately and see **their** physician. —quote from Dr. Jeffrey Colbert in Daniel Freeman Marina Hospital newsletter, p. 1, Summer 1991.

9. **Any truly responsible parent** would buy books and crayons for **their** children and lock up the TV until the kids leave for college. —George Willis, *Daily Bruin*, Feb. 16, 1995, p. 16.

10. **Anyone** would be stunned to learn that **their** wife had been murdered. —dialog from *Grand Slam* by Susan Moody, Berkeley, 1996, p. 148.

11. The U.S.S has made a contribution and **anyone** who wishes to contribute should send **their** donation to: Dunblane Primary School. —flyer for the 64th Annual Scottish Festival, 1996.

12. Although (university officials) cannot immediately change the policies of the military, they can protect the students by agreeing to pay tuition for **any cadet** who loses **their** scholarships because of **their** sexual orientation until **the student** can find another source. —quote from Huong Nguyen, *Daily Bruin*, Feb. 1, 1996, p. 3.

iii. Them

1. **Anyone else who got paid like that** wouldn't resent the boss for hiring **them**. —Sue Cummings (on Michael Jackson), *Los Angeles Weekly*, July 14–20, 1995, p. 43.

2. If **anybody** tells you to stop being upset, tell **them** to knock it off. —quote from Mark Peterson, *Vim & Vigor*, Fall 1995, p. 35.

3. If **anyone** sells smokes to kids, call **them** on it. —Billboard, Los Angeles, Jan. 1996.

iv. Themself/Themselves

1. I picture living there with a man, and the whole house is designed around that man. I've imagined his den, bedroom, bathroom—totally for him. . . . But I'd want a prenuptial agreement, and **anyone I would want to marry** I'm sure would want one for **themselves**. —quote from Corzine, *Los Angeles*, Feb. 1995, p. 63.

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. If **anybody** in this country doesn't minimise **their** tax **they** want **their** head read because, as a government, I can tell you you're not spending it that well that we should be donating extra. —quote from Kerry Packer in *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, p. 8, Dec. 29, 1991.

2. Why would **anyone** want to put **themselves** into work mode when **they** were still legitimately incommunicado? —Donna Christiano, *Glamour*, May 1995, p. 146.

3. How can **anyone** make such broad judgments based on events **they** haven't even witnessed firsthand? How can **anyone** possibly claim that **they** are more of a UCLA student than I am, and that **their** single voice deserves to be heard and mine does not? —Brent Hayward, *Daily Bruin*, May 22, 1995, p. 12.

4. **Anyone claiming to be an asylum seeker**, and who has received a first decision against **their** claim, cannot receive any benefit support while **they** make an appeal. —letter from Rt. Rev. Peter Hall, et al., *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Feb. 18, 1996, p. 2.

5. You have to be really thick-skinned to be a politician. **Anyone** who would really put **themselves** through this must be so twisted by ambition that **they** probably shouldn't be running our lives. **They** have a need for approval. —quote from Michael Kinsley, *Vanity Fair*, Nov. 1994, p. 80.

6. If you could kidnap **any celebrity** in the world (and then safely return **them** to **their** rightful positions in life (without any harm done (including psychological scarring))), who would it be and why? —Franz Keller, *Daily Bruin*, April 17, 1996, p. 15.

B. Gender-marked

1. **Any prospective Portia** should watch this tape until **they** wear it out. —Nancy Banks-Smith, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, July 16, 1995, p. 26.

IV. Some

A. Epicene

i. They

1. And I'm just gon' keep yelpin' like a hyena till the cows come home, set on the couch, put their hooves up, and relax because **somebody in the White House** knows what **they**'re doing. —David Corn (parodying Ross Perot), p. 56, *The Nation*, July 12, 1993.

2. In this election, I received a death threat. **Someone** said **they** were going to vote with a bullet. —quote from Glen Maxey in the *Daily Bruin*, Nov. 15, 1994, p. 12.

3. Now that Linda Kelsey, the editor of She magazine, has resigned due to stress, the cracks are being brought into focus once more. . . . Poor Kelsey now has to cope with the added stress of being representative of a whole generation of women, rather than just being **someone** who has recognised that **they** need a break. —Suzanne Moore, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Dec. 17, 1995, p. 23.

4. If **someone** attacks, undermines, offends or abuses those personal limits, **they** are crossing boundaries. . . . If **someone** is consumed with the need to have someone else to feel OK, safe, loved, etc., **they** are not yet in a place of having clear limits. —*Vim & Vigor*, Winter 1993, p. 58.

5. We say **someone** is pretty for instance, whereas, if the truth were known, **they** are probably as ugly as Smith going backward, but by our lie we have made **that very party** powerful, such is the power of the charlatan . . . —Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, p. 31.

6. How dare you question the loyalty of **someone** just because **they** may have had sex with someone in the past? —Jonathan Lopez, *Daily Bruin*, Oct. 5, 1994, p. 21.

7. The club's name, in itself, seems to say to the UCLA student body that people should define themselves and view others along the same old, tired racial and ethnic lines, rather than forgetting the color of one's skin and simply seeing **someone** for who **they** are: a human being. —letter from Michael Anthony Gatto, *Daily Bruin*, Dec. 2, 1994, p. 8.

8. Our focus is family, family life. Polls show that when **someone** marries and **they** have children **they** take a much deeper interest in the community, **they** become more culturally conservative. —quote from Tom Hess, *The Nation*, Jan. 2, 1995, p. 11.

9. Making friends with **someone** just because **they**'re pregnant is great if it's a coincidence, but why force it? —quote from Tunny Szpiros, *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 6, 1995, p. E5.

10. Don't give **someone** a part of your forever when **they** really only want you for now. —notice from Christian Alumni and Friends of University of California, Los Angeles, printed in the *Daily Bruin*, Feb. 14, 1995, p. 5.

11. We think Usenet is like a conversation. It's not something that should be kept forever to haunt you. Say **some student** posts something about Microsoft being the big evil empire and then, two years later in a suit and a tie, **they**'re applying for a job there. —quote from Louis Monier, *Daily Bruin*, March 5, 1996, p. 11.

12. That is the mark of **somebody** who's really talented. **They** can take one genre and explode, and then go to a completely different kind of film. —quote from Patricia Arquette, about David Russell, *Daily Bruin*, April 4, 1996.

13. "We were wondering," said Calvin, . . . "whether or not there'd been **someone** in that chair when all this happened. Maybe **they** were frightened and ran out of the store, leaving the magazine there on the floor." / "I don't think so," said Mr. Cox. "Wouldn't **they** have called the police?" —K.K. Beck, *Amateur Night*, Mysterious Press, 1994, p. 32.

14. [Removed inadvertent repetition of (13) above.]

15. **Someone** tells me **they**'re feeling afraid. It may not mean **they**'re worried about going outside. 'Afraid' might turn out to mean **they**'re bordering on psychotic paranoia, but the language just isn't there to describe it. —quote from Michael Propper, *Los Angeles Weekly*, July 8–14, 1994, p. 20.

16. There was no better way to learn what one meant than by trying to explain it to **someone** else who was not afraid to say **they** did not understand. —Anne Perry, *Pentecost Alley*, Fawcett Columbia, 1996, p. 264.

17. "When we speak of affections for **a person**," Charlotte continued . . . , "we might be speaking only of the way **they** make us feel, but if it is really a love, or even liking, we should also be speaking of some concern for what **they** feel." —Anne Perry, *Pentecost Alley*, Fawcett Columbia, 1996, p. 308.

18. If **someone**'s leaving, **they** might say **they** are Audi 5000. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

19. I know **someone** who climbed Mt. Everest. **They** were hard core. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

20. Every time **someone** turns on a TV set, **they** are actually choosing not to do 100 other things. —Quote from Tannis MacBeth, *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 26, 1996, p. A20.

21. **Somebody** kills this beautiful girl. Oh yes, she was killed all right. Beautiful, pregnant girl. **They** don't do it quietly, make it look natural or accidental; **they** go to some lengths to make it look violent. And **they** leave her in a place where she's going, sooner or later, to be found. Maybe **they** hoped that by the time she was found she'd be unrecognisable, maybe that's why **they** mutilated her face, but for various reasons I don't think so. —Maureen O'Brien, *Close-Up on Death*, Worldwide Mystery, 1995, p. 84.

22. 'It must have been **someone** from outside.' / 'How did **they** get in?' Sister Perpetua asked. —Veronica Black, *A Vow of Devotion*, St. Martin's, 1997, p. 118.

23. If it's **someone** I love, I'll cry because **they**'re gone. If it's **someone** I hate, I'll cry because **they** got off easy. —Lynn Bradley, *Stand-In for Murder*, Worldwide Mystery, 1996, p. 57.

24. C'mon, **somebody** knows something, and **they**'re not talking. —Greg Howard and Craig Macintosh, Sally Forth (cartoon), November 14, 1996.

25. Well, I'll tell you what, how about you preach this to **someone you love (your best friend/girlfriend/sister/mother)** the next time (God forbid) **they** are raped by a guy who "liked the feeling he had when he saw her nice tits" and thus felt so good that he had to share his "zest for life" with her. —Abel Tomatis, *Daily Bruin*, May 4, 1994, p. 15.

ii. Their

1. Riordan said at the time: "Doesn't it seem strange that **someone** who lives in a big white guarded house in Washington, D.C., and sends **their** child to a private school would come to Los Angeles and try to tell us how to run our city?" —*Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1993, p. A20.

2. Whether it is the allegation that Simpson was carrying cash and a passport, or the claim that Fuhrman may have planted evidence, "the press ought to say we are not going to publish this

unless **someone** is willing to put **their** name to it," Chaleff said. —quote from Gerald L. Chaleff, *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 1994, p. A13.

3. Keep in mind that whether or not **someone** intends **their** behavior to be hurtful or intimidating, the determining factor is the impact this behavior has on another person. —*Sexual Harassment, A Guide for Faculty, Staff and Students at UCLA*, (brochure), Regents of the University of California, 1994.

4. The precision and power of her *mise-en-scène*, which are surprising on the part of **someone** making **their** first feature, derive partly from the self-confident understatement with which every scene is shot. —Pascal Mérigeau, Le Monde section of the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Jan. 29, 1995, p. 16.

5. Being of help to **someone** in **their** health and wellness aspects really gives me a sense of accomplishment. —quote from Miki Wong, announcement for Student Health Advocates, *Daily Bruin*, Jan. 17, 1995, p. 27.

6. 'No,' he added slowly, 'I think we have to look elsewhere for our killer. Someone who didn't know about Linda's double life; someone who had no reason to think she had a record; **someone who** thought we'd discover ***their*** identity once we knew the girl's.' —dialog in *Dead Before Morning* by Geraldine Evans, Worldwide Library, 1995, p. 188.

7. If **someone** changes **their** habits, and that keeps someone from getting HIV, that will make the trip totally worth it for me. —quote from Johnson, *Daily Bruin*, Feb. 22, 1995, p. 10.

8. Once when **someone** grabbed me and tried to drag me into **their** car, I screamed and it was my friends who came up and saved me. —quote from Jane, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Feb. 26, 1995, p. 12.

9. The MoD is wrong. Who **someone** sleeps with has absolutely no bearing on how **they** do **their** job. —quote from Jeanette Smithe, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, March 19, 1995, p. 8.

10. If you heard **someone** clearing **their** throat you would be unable to segment the sound into a sequence of discrete units . . . —Victoria Fromkin & Robert Rodman, *An Introduction to Language*, 5th ed., Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1993, p. 177.

11. You're quoting some USA Today or EFF poll or something. It's just total nonsense. **Somebody** is interpreting numbers for **their** own political purposes. —quote from Jim Kallstrom, *Wired*, Feb. 1996, p. 185.

12. Holy Moses! It's gone! / What's gone? Shared American values? / Yes. But also my new time machine. / T-t-time machine?! / **Someone** used it. All that's left is **their** pile of clothes. —Berkeley Breathed, Outland (cartoon), *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 30, 1994.

13. So the court's "moral opposition," which is now sufficient cause to abridge our First Amendment, on examination is nothing more than **somebody**'s prissy resentment over any act that disturbs **their** peace of mind—as long as this "somebody" is, or seems to be, in the

numerical majority. The real question becomes: Why does it disturb **their** peace of mind? More specifically: What is the process by which **their** minds are disturbed? Would **their** minds be disturbed by naked dancing if the act didn't loom so large in **their** imaginations? —Michael Ventura, *Los Angeles Weekly*, July 26–Aug. 1, 1991.

14. Talk shit: to talk badly about **someone** (usually behind **their** back). —Student paper for Linguistics 88A, UCLA, fall 1996.

15. There's always the possibility that there's **someone** who stocks up with a lot of menudo and has the can in **their** cupboard and doesn't know it. —Quote from Kathleen Rogers, *Los Angeles Times*, "Only in LA", Sept. 14, 1996, p. B2.

16. Paula had been dressed in a spare fire shirt and woolen trousers **someone** had had the foresight to stuff into **their** yellow pack—Black Elk, by the size of the clothes. —Nevada Barr, *Firestorm*, G. Putnam's Sons, 1996, p. 138.

17. "Is it part of **someone**'s hand?" she said. / "**Their** foot, Vinny, **their** foot!" crowed Dr. Hamiska. —Peter Dickinson, *A Bone From a Dry Sea*, Laurel-Leaf Books, 1992, p. 66.

18. **Someone** is on **their** way from Bow Street right now. —Anne Perry, *Traitors Gate*, Fawcett, 1995, p. 406.

iii. Them

1. "Why," he said to himself, "would somebody go to all that trouble, kill **someone**, cut off the head and hands, hump **them** up into the Wolf Mountains, stick them in an old plane wreck." —dialog from *Coyote Wind*, by Peter Bowen, St. Martin's, 1994, p. 29.

2. Skippy said it meant to get **someone**, screw **them** over and then dump **them** (usually in a dating situation). —Linguistics 2 student, UCLA, winter 1996.

3. It is a very small organisation and if you have **someone** who is not up to the job, there has been a tendency to leave **them** in place. . . —quote from Arthur Hay in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Sept. 19, 1993, p. 8.

4. With another line, you're no longer fenced off from the outside world every time someone's on your line. You can always call out and other people can always call in. It's also great for those times you need to send **someone** a fax or reach **them** by modem. —Pacific Bell flyer, 1994.

5. I am just amazed this city can create new rights for cross-dressers. If **someone** comes in with a beard and a miniskirt, do I have to hire **them**? —quote from Adam Sparks in *Edge*, Jan. 11, 1995, p. 86.

6. A school teacher, following a school bus in her truck, went off the road into the ditch and was stranded. . . Fortunately, she had a mobile phone, so people knew where she was. But it still took two farmers five hours to get to her. . . One of the farmers got his ears and face frostbitten but denied he was a hero. "There was **someone** out there, so we had to find **them**," he said. —*Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Dec. 24, 1995, p. 18.

7. Of course, now she thought about it, she had been falling in love with Titus for weeks only she hadn't realised it. Would it have helped if she had known that before he had asked her to marry him? she wondered. She would have refused; being married to **someone** who didn't love you when you loved **them** would be an unbearable state in which to live. —*Dearest Love*, by Betty Neels, Harlequin Books, 1995, p. 126.

8. Sonny nodded seriously and waved his hands. "You hear about all kind of crazy things. Do you think this guy came to Holton to make contact with some sort of Satanists?" / "He came here to see **somebody**," Sam answered. "He told us as much. But I don't expect he came here with the idea of being a sacrifice—certainly not to Satan." / "Oh, no," I said. "Remember? He kept saying 'Praise the Lord' and such. I had the impression he was some sort of religious fanatic—and I don't mean the Satanic religion. But he mentioned that there was **somebody** in Holton he'd known way back." / "Fifteen years," Sam said firmly. "I guess the first thing to do is try to find out if he found **them**. I suspect that he did." —Eve K. Sandstrom, *The Devil Down Home*, Worldwide Library, 1994, p. 68.

9. *Pull one's coat*, on the other hand, is a metaphor for teaching **someone** something or showing **them** the light. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

10. **Someone** needs your help, Dad. You hear **them**? You hear **them** knocking? —Ronald Tierney, *The Iron Glove*, Worldwide Mystery, 1996, p. 213.

11. There were a lot of people milling about and just because **someone** didn't happen to have noticed you at the same time as you noticed **them**, it didn't mean you weren't there. —Dorothy Simpson, *A Day for Dying*, Scribner, 1995, p. 241.

iv. Themself/Themselves

1. If **somebody** just wants to kill **themself**, is there anything we can do about it? —Mark Mewan, CBS This Morning, April 11, 1994.

2. Bagel accidents are a recognizable syndrome. . . . There should be a name for it. It's a good opportunity for an eponym: **Somebody** should write a paper and get it named after **themselves**. —quote from Thomas Stair, Washington Post section of *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, March 5, 1995, p. 20.

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. Because of the ripple effect created by sexual harassment, sometimes complaints are made by a "third party." This is **someone** who is not the direct recipient of unwanted sexual attention but who feels that this behavior has created an offensive or intimidating environment for **them**. . . . Believe you have a right to put your own safety first rather than worrying about offending **someone** or hurting **their** feelings. —"Sexual Harassment, A Guide for Faculty, Staff and Students at UCLA", (brochure), Regents of the University of California, 1994.

2. For the I.N.S., it's not enough for you to like **someone** enough to go through the inconvenience of marrying **them** so **they** can get a green card. The I.N.S. has to be made to believe that you love, live with and, by inference, have sexual relations with your spouse. —Jim Merrett, *The Nation*, Nov. 21, 1994, p. 612.

3. But when **someone** refers to another person in what **they** believe is a non-demeaning way, it creates a verbal war. Let's say someone of one ethnicity offends **someone of another ethnicity** by calling **them** a politically incorrect name in public. —Jared Black, *Daily Bruin*, Feb. 2, 1995, p. 17.

4. Roger put the telephone down with a feeling of immeasurable relief. The *ankh* wasn't exactly unique, but there couldn't be all that many on mainland UK and few folk who went to Morocco were likely to blue £400 on something that looked like a piece of junk jewelry. But **someone** at Cort Place had—and it was the second worst mistake **they** were ever likely to make. **Their** ultimate one had been to leave it around Vera Jackman's neck after **they** had killed her. —Roy Hart, *A Pretty Place for a Murder*, A Worldwide Mystery, Oct. 1994, (first published by St. Martin's Press, copyright by the author, 1987).

5. If **somebody** wants to maintain **their** family culture at home, that's fine, but it should not be imposed on **them** by the schools. —quote from Ron Unz, *Daily Bruin*, May 27, 1994, p. 1.

6. "You know what I want? I want to do stuff on television. I want to be able to tap on the screen of the television set and talk to **someone** sitting in **their** couch and have **them** get that I'm talking to **them**. I want to do that with CD-ROM. I want to do interactive CD-ROM so that **someone** takes me home in a little silver disk, pops me into **their** computer and fucks my brains out. I want to get **them** on **their** knees and give **them** a blow job. I want to do all that, and I think I can, given the technology." —Kate Bornstein, interviewed in 18th Street Arts Complex publication *Traffic Report* 1.2, fall 1994, p. 26.

7. That gift was called a *sedaka*—an ancient Hebrew word meaning something given to **someone** so that **they** can help **themselves**. —commercial for the Jewish Educational Foundation, KNX radio, Los Angeles, Feb. 12, 1996.

8. I'm running out of time in life; I don't have time to call directly. So the first time I call **someone**, I listen to see if **they** have The Message Center. I make a red dot by **their** name and next time, I send **them** a message. I tell **them** to reply by pressing 4 after **they** hear my message. **They** don't need to call back directly and I can respond back again at any time. —quote from Francine, *Messages*, Winter 1996, Volume 6, Number 1 (Pacific Bell flyer).

9. The telepathic hotline: when you'd like **someone** to change **their** behavior, but you don't want to confront **them**. —Sylvia (cartoon) by Nicole Hollander, *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 20, 1995, p. E7.

10. If **someone** is choking, raise **their** hands over **their** head and slap **them** on the back. —*Vim & Vigor*, p. 41, Fall 1992.

11. **Someone who is a lama**, a spiritually advanced person, is able to choose **their** own rebirth, and **they** choose a rebirth that will be of greatest benefit to other people. —quote from Peter Moran, *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 25, 1996, p. A11.

12. M&R: "Let's talk about the famous Willie Brown style. What's your secret for getting **someone** to do what **they** don't want to do?" Brown: "Prove to **them** that it's in their best interest." —Phillip Matier and Andrew Ross interviewing Willie Brown, *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 15, 1996, p. A15.

13. It may not look it to begin with, but when you realize **someone** is essentially interested only in **themselves**, and if **they** even have to choose between what **they** like and what you need, you will lose. —Anne Perry, *Pentecost Alley*, Fawcett Columbia, 1996, p. 307.

14. Don't forget that telephone call must have been made by **someone** who know her . . . . She also said the voice sounded muffled, which indicates that **they** were trying to disguise it, indicating, in turn, someone far closer, **someone** who knew **their** voice would be recognized. —Geraldine Evans, *Down Among the Dead Men*, Worldwide Mystery, 1996, p. 122.

15. Why can't **someone** keep **their** past from haunting **them**? —Promotional announcement on KNBC (Channel 4), Los Angeles, April 28, 1996.

B. Gender-marked

[see parenthetic antecedent in [IV.A.i.25.]

V. Each

A. Epicene

i. They

1. You give **each patient** the time **they** need. —print advertisement for North Hollywood Medical Center, Los Angeles Weekly, May 3–9, 1996.

2. **Each cyclist** could put in $2 (more if **they** wished) before **they** start off. —*Montreal Gazette*, June 11, 1996.

3. In the following list of breeders **each** has at least one champion in the breed **they** are advertising. —Champion Dog Directory and Champion Cat Directory, Los Angeles Times Magazine, September 8, 1996, p. 34.

ii. Their

1. Cameron's black-and-white prints exhibit a female to male perspective on the transsexual experience. The nudes attempt to demystify and educate as Cameron closely documents his subjects' physical transformations while allowing **each** to express **their** diversity. —18th Street Arts Complex publication *Traffic Report* 1.2, fall 1994, p. 30.

2. Since mid-May, when the three professors were put on paid leave, Wilkening said **each** has had **their** faculty salaries directly deposited into **their** bank accounts, which she estimated to

be in excess of $100,000 annually each. [The three professors are all male. –RL] —*Daily Bruin*, Nov. 17, 1995, p. 10.

3. Since we know that **each individual** may have **their** own idiosyncratic pathway to developing language competence. . . —Herbert W. Seliger & Elana Shohamy, *Second Language Research Methods*, p. 125.

4. At the University of Florida, **each employee** is to receive a copy of **their** personnel file on request. —SAGE handout, UCLA, Jan. 1996.

5. The interviews revealed that **each multilingual speaker** used **their** languages with different speakers and in different situations. **Each interviewee** had different attitudes towards **their** native tongues and **their** use of English. —Linguistics 2 student, UCLA, winter 1996.

6. **Each deaf individual** kinda mucks **their** way through this life. —Aaron Weir, Sign Language Linguistics List, March 1, 1995.

7. **Each of the students interviewed** agreed that **their** native language use on campus is very rare, if at all; English is the language they all use. However, they do use their native languages at other times in other places. —Linguistics 2 student, UCLA, winter 1996.

8. I have found that **each person** had essentially **their** own definition for most words. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

9. Chatal Cardin had been attacked from three sides, each attacker with a different goal, **each one** with **their** own responsibility. —Andrew M. Greeley, *Happy are the Oppressed,* Jove, 1996, p. 277.

iii. Them

[see examples under V.A.v.]

iv. Themself/Themselves

[no examples]

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. "**Each character** believes **they**'re in control of **their** own lives," says Academy Award-winning writer John Patrick Shanly. . . —back of videocassette cover for "Moonstruck", 1987.

2. Assume that **each one** is interested in convincing a studio audience that **their** theory is correct. And **each one** is going to try to use the facts to either construct an argument that the data prove **them** right or do not prove **them** wrong. [Concerning a debate between a man and a woman, each of whom has a separate theory. –RL] —Tim Stowell, UCLA Ling. 200B midterm, fall 1990.

3. The German title DIE FRAU, NACH DER MAN SICH SEHNT does not easily translate into English. It does NOT mean "the woman all men desire." "Man" in German is the impersonal

pronoun equivalent to the English "one" — so the title literally means "the woman one longs for," implying that once in **each person**'s life **they** experience a "true love" longing for some woman that overwhelms **them** with its emotional power. —program notes by William Moritz for a German film series at the Los Angeles County museum, Jan. 1991.

4. **Each person** has to fill **their** own basic needs as a person. Another person cannot do that for **them**. —*Vim & Vigor*, Winter 1993, p. 58.

5. Rarely is the focus on how to lead each person successfully through Oz so that **each person** can put implement the skills **they** were born with whether that is by the use of **their** brain, **their** courage, or **their** passion (heart). —Aaron Weir, Sign Language Linguistics List, March 1, 1995.

6. **Each president** should have the option to sit on the board. If **they** choose to forgo that opportunity, it's **their** choice. But there shouldn't be a policy hindering **them** from doing so. —quote from Greenlaugh, *Daily Bruin*, May 16, 1995, p.8.

B. Gender-marked

[no examples]

VI. *A, an, one, another* + NP

A. Epicene, Generic

i. They

1. I said, "**A person** can think anything that **they** want, because there is no way to make yourself not think things. But you don't do everything you think." —Jane Smiley, p. 150, *The Age of Grief*, Ivy Books, 1987.

2. She chuckled now and again at a joke, but it was the amused grim chuckle of **a person** who looks up to discover that **they** have coincided with the needs of nature in a bird. —Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, New Directions, (first published 1937; no date on this edition), p. 53.

3. How far will **a parent** go to protect the child **they** love? —TV ad for "Before and After" (movie), Feb. 13, 1996.

4. . . . the exercise of an individual's right to control his or her medical treatment. . . . there was ample legal precedent for **a competent person** to decide on the form of medical treatment **they** received. —two excerpts from one article by Simon Tisdall in *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Sept. 17, 1989.

5. I would suggest that when **a person** has a thought of doing anything serious against the law, that before **they** did that **they** should go to a quiet place and think about it seriously. —quote from William G. Bonin, *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 24, 1996.

6. If **a person** desires government services, why can't **they** simply apply for a green card and become legal U.S. immigrants? —Jim Lehmann, letter in *Daily Bruin*, Oct. 7, 1994, p. 13.

7. When **a person** doesn't have control over these situations, **they** cling to whatever they can control. For some, that's smoking. —quote from Binnie Phan, *Daily Bruin*, Dec. 7, 1995, p. 3.

8. If **a person** does develop active tuberculosis, **they** must be isolated and treated with a special combination of antibiotics. . . —*Daily Bruin*, Dec. 7, 1995, p. 19.

9. What all the talk about tolerance and endorphins and withdrawal means in human terms is that **a person** who gets strung out on junk gets sick, very sick, if it is suddenly unavailable—or if ***they*** are suddenly unavailable because **they**'re in jail or some other place where it's impossible or difficult to get a fix. —Jim Parker, D.I.N. Publication 105, 7/94, "Heroin".

10. However, if **a patient** has an existing heart condition **they** should check with **their** doctor. —Millie A. Keane, p. 33, Vim & Vigor, Fall 1993.

11. If **a user** is dialing up to the Campus Backbone Network, **they** will find that the modems on Bruin OnLine are faster. . . —Reprinted supplement to *Perspective*, Volume 19, Number 2, Spring 1995, Office of Academic Computing, UCLA.

12. **An individual** is asked what kind of psychological problems **they** have, and **they** say none. —quote from Michael Propper, *Los Angeles Weekly*, July 8–14, 1994, p. 20.

13. If **another office employee** picks up the phone and the person is speaking Spanish, **they** usually put them on hold and call for the secretary. —Linguistics 2 student, UCLA, winter 1996.

14. Researchers employing a Graduate Student Researcher (GSR) may be required to pay employee benefits, and should call the appropriate Center for details and possible changes in benefits. Currently, **a GSR** is entitled to Health Insurance paid at $192.00 per quarter and a Fee Remission of $400.00 as long as **they** have a GPA of 3.00, are enrolled in 8 units, work in an apprentice appointment for no more than 18 quarters and work as **a GSR** no less than 25% time. If the GSR is enrolled in 12 units, the Fee Remission is increased by $224.00 (Academic Personnel Manual, Appendix 1). —Institute for American Cultures, UCLA, Application for 1996–97 Research Grant in Ethnic Studies.

15. Back in East L.A., we would get a field trip once a year to the county jail. I don't think you're going to tell **a lily-white kid in Beverly Hills** to go county jail so **they** don't end up there. —quote from Vladimir Cerna, Los Angeles Weekly, Oct. 21–27, 1994, p. 18.

16. With ordinary letters, the envelope has a physical presence and can be somebody's property. If **another person** opens it **they** are interfering with private property. —J. Peterson, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Feb. 26, 1996, p. 33.

17. The society in which **they** were raised will influence **a person**'s choice of language. —Linguistics 2 student, UCLA, winter 1996.

18. As I mentioned this morning, there are a few usual patterns. Repeated phone calls, in some cases hundreds a day. Or mailings. Two or three letters a day. Following **a person**, showing

up at every public appearance **they** make, even if it's just at the grocery store. —Jeanne McCafferty, Star Gazer, Worldwide Library, 1996, p. 79.

19. Bum rap: When **a person** doesn't get something **they** deserve. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

20. To see the joy of **a child** when **they** see stars for the first time is amazing. —quote from Kristin Braun, *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1996, p. B3.

ii. Their

1. As our society gets more and more technologically advanced, any form of body manipulation puts **a person** back in control of **their** own body, whether you're a tribe member in New Guinea or a college student in California. —quote from Melisa Kaye, U. Magazine, Oct. 1994, p. 11.

2. **A person** who doesn't take a careful inventory of **their** skills and capabilities is a fool. —quote from Jasper S. Hunt, in *Prevention*, Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA, 1996, p. 38.

3. If **a person** has an unhealthy concept of **their** body, there are ways to change it. —*Daily Bruin*, May 16, 1995, p. 11.

4. Charles Chun, who fasted for 12 days, said he did so because he thinks it's important for **a person** to know about **their** own culture. —*Daily Bruin*, April 27, 1995, p. 3.

5. It's not easy to tell what secrets are better to hold onto and what are not. Sometimes **a person** is right that **their** partner can't handle knowing something. —quote from Carolynn Maltas, *Self* magazine supplement, [no date], p. 18.

6. If there's anything we've learned in this epidemic, it's that knowledge [of AIDS] does not mean **a person** is going to change **their** behavior. —quote from Cesar Portillo, *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 1995, p. B6.

7. While saying it is "wrong for liberal extremists in our society to somehow equate **a parent** spanking **their** child to child abuse," Cunneen argued that Conroy's bill would prove just as bad. —quote from Jim Cunneen, *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 31, 1996, p. A12.

8. **A candidate** who does poorly here runs the risk of losing **their** financing. —quote from Dale Willmond [correct spelling of name unknown], KNX radio, Los Angeles, Feb. 20, 1996.

9. I hope we serve as a model . . . to look at **a patient** in **their** entirety. —quote from Mitzi Krockover, medical director of Iris-Cantor-UCLA Women's Health Center.

10. [T]eaching listening skills helps a learner become functional in using the L2 and also enables **a learner** to continue **their** language study independently of the teacher. —Rod Ellis, "Interpretation tasks for grammar teaching", *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, spring 1995, p. 92.

11. **A legislator** almost has an obligation to recommend **their** constituents. —quote from Ward Connerly, *Daily Bruin*, April 1, 1996.

12. We recognize that **a private patient** seeking care in **their** own household is free to make an open choice as to who is appropriate for their needs. —statement from the British Nursing Association, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Feb. 18, 1996, p. 24.

13. Do you believe that laws should allow **a terminally ill person** in severe distress the choice of medical assistance in hastening **their** death? —ad for The Hemlock Society, *The Nation*, Sept. 18, 1995, p. 294.

14. Toward the end of their daylong meeting, Connerly told the board that he believes the university system puts too much weight on **a person**'s race and gender when considering **their** application for hiring or admission. —The *Daily Bruin*, Jan. 23, 1995, p. 19.

15. I believe that when **a person** dies, **their** spirit has a choice to either move on or stay where it is. —quote from Lauren Pope, U. Magazine, Oct. 1994, p. 4.

16. If you look at the buttocks of **an 80-year-old person**, they don't look wrinkled like **their** face. —quote from Dr. Arthur Sosis, p.26, *Vim & Vigor,* Fall, 1993.

17. To take a child away from **a parent** is just a little easier than ripping **their** arm off. —quote from Marc Parent, Turning Stones, attributed to him by interviewer on CBS This Morning, Nov. 22, 1996.

18. **A child** may carry around a notion that it's **their** mission to provide good feelings for the family, to be the golden boy, the achiever. —quote from Rona Novick, *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 25, 1996, p. E6.

19. "Under the terms of the will, what happens when **a beneficiary** is disinherited—or dies?" / "**Their** portion of the estate is divided between the remaining heirs." —Selma Eichler, *Murder Can Stunt Your Growth,* Signet, 1996, p. 82.

iii. Them

1. **A lama** isn't going to reincarnate to somebody who isn't going to let **them** go get educated. —quote from Caroline Lama, *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 24, 1996, p. A11.

2. Even the Enquirer, though, knows when enough becomes too much. Mr. Schwartz, the editor, said: "If the public knows a little bit too much about **a person**, they can tire of **them**, which is what happened to Rosanne and Tom." —*International Herald Tribune*, Frankfurt edition, July 31–Aug. 1, 1993.

3. In British English, if you can not see **a person** but you can hear **them** you ask "who is there?" or "who is that?" because if the person is invisible he or she is considered non-proximate. —Ronan Collis, Linguist List Vol-5-509, May 3, 1994.

4. The first time I see **a patient**, I ask **them** a few things. —quote from Bennett Frank, M.D., *Vim & Vigor,* Spring 1994, p. 54.

5. “They will not close us down. If **a patient** wants an abortion, we will figure out a way to get **them** in the clinic.” said Jeanie Hollis, spokeswoman for the Mississippi Women’s Medical Clinic in Jackson. —*Herald-Times*, Bloomington, Indianan, July 6, 1993, p. A3.

6. If you want to detect **a liar**, you’re better off not watching **them**. —quote from Richard Wiseman, *Daily Bruin*, Feb. 3, 1995, p. 8.

7. When you kill **an animal** to eat **them**, it goes against the grain. —quote from June Silva, *Daily Bruin*, April 1, 1996.

8. For loved ones, it means being able to keep **a family member** at home or in a hospice instead of placing **them** in a hospital at a much higher cost. —AIDS Healthcare Foundation Grassroots Lobby ad in *Los Angeles Weekly*, April 19–25, 1996, p. 9.

9. After logging 120 hours in the shack, **an inmate** receives and adult education certificate—with no reference to its having been earned in jail—which can help **them** get a job in the pet-care or veterinary field. —John M. Gonzales, *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1996, p. B6.

10. Forbidding **a child** something makes **them** want it more. —quote from Bill Pedden, *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 26, 1996, p. A20.

iv. Themself/Themselves

1. At a given stage **a child** actually had both choices available, but actually never availed **themself** of the other choice. —quote from Carson Schütze, UCLA linguistics colloquium, “Child case errors and optional infinitives”, Feb. 9, 1996.

2. Sometimes, however, leaving a bad relationship is the only way for **a co-dependent** to take care of **themself**. —*Vim & Vigor*, Winter 1993, p. 58.

3. Question a is asking for an answer, while question b is more of a rhetorical question. Question b sounds more like something **a teacher** might ask and then answer **themselves**. —TESL/AL 122/216 student, UCLA, winter 1996.

4. The British convention is for the caller to introduce themself by name before being asked, once they’ve been connected to the person they want to speak to. If the caller doesn’t know who has answered, but seeks a specific individual, they will say ‘Can I speak to X?’ (and if X is the answerer X will reply ‘Speaking’). Otherwise, if the caller wishes to identify the answerer (or if the answerer wishes to identify **a caller** who has not identified **themself**) they say ‘Who is speaking?’ or “Who is that speaking?’—Max Wheeler, Linguist List Vol-5-536.

5. If **a young person** inflicts an injury on **themself**, no one outside need even be told. —letter from Frances Cook, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Sept. 23, 1990.

6. The way to get through Broadmoor is to be a model patient and **a model patient** does not stand up for **themselves**—he or she does not complain. —quote from Bynoe in *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, p.23, April 28, 1991.

v. Mixed pronoun forms (includes *theirs*)

1. Sleep is a basic physical drive, which cannot be deprived. The absence of sleep reduces **a person**'s attention span, delays **their** reaction time, and can cause **them** to fall asleep easily, sometimes within minutes. —quote from Dr. Adrian Williams, *Avenues* (Auto Club of Southern California), July/August, 1994, p. 8.

2. There is one sure way to remind **a child** of **their** connection to life and other human beings and that **they** are important and valuable. . . it's called a hug. —Lauren Munger, box of Celestial Seasonings Sleepytime Herbal Tea.

3. She also cited a case of a child in Ohio who was paddled by a teacher for blowing his nose in class. "If a teacher can paddle **a kid** because **they** blew **their** nose the wrong way," Speier concluded, "we've got a sorry state of affairs." —quote from Jackie Speier, *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 31, 1996, p. A12.

4. If you go after **a professor** without witnesses, **they**'ll sue you. But if you don't go after **them**, and future harassment occurs, the victim will sue you. —quote from Melvin W. Beal, *Los Angeles Daily Journal*, Nov. 13, 1989, p. 1.

5. If **a deaf person** identifies **themselves** as "deaf" and wants to be a member of the DC then **they** will be a member. If **a person with a hearing loss** does not want to be identified as being "Deaf" then the choice of acceptance is **theirs** not the DC. —Bob Hoffmeister, Sign Language Linguistics List, March 1, 1995.

6. **A person** has the right to control the conditions of **their** death as much as **they** have the right to control the conditions of **their** living. —quote from "Man whose wife had a heart condition and suffocated herself", *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1996, p. A1.

7. If **a person** feels good about **themself**, **they**'ll look good. —quote from Dottie Reese, *Vim & Vigor*, Summer 1994, p. 58.

8. Usually, when **a person** has been in a hospital setting, **they**'re very comfortable with anyone and everyone coming in and disrobing **them**, leaving **them** uncovered and treating **them** simply as a body. We try to give back to **them their** dignity as an individual and then enhance **their** awareness as a sexual being. —quote from Melanee Fishwick, *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1995, p. E2.

9. "What I've been telling the media is it can be a good drug for anxieties, an excellent drug for obsessive-compulsive self-mutilating behaviors," says Overall. "It will save lives. If **a client** thinks it might be appropriate for **their** animal, **they** might want to encourage **their** veterinarian to check into it through continuing education, or the teaching and research hospitals." —quote from Dr. Overall, *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 16, 1994, Section 15, p. 3.

10. These profiles list the number of original posts **an author** has made. . ., **their** percentage of follow-up posts and a complete listing of every newsgroup **they**'ve taken part in. Simply clicking on a listing brings **their** original post to your screen. —Elizabeth Weise (AP), *Daily Bruin*, March 5, 1996, p. 10.

11. Somewhere deep inside **themselves**, **a dog**'s ancient gene pool is telling **them** what to do. —Harry Smith, CBS This Morning, May 14, 1996.

B. Gender-marked, Generic

1. If you get a man who doesn't mind, and is weak, then you begin to hate him for it. If you get **a Peter Jennings**, you'll annoy the shit out of **them**. —quote from "one friend" of Barbra Streisand, *Vanity Fair*, Nov. 1994, p. 194.

2. For **a certain kind of woman** it is essential that **they** be fully developed **themselves** before **they** can marry. But it is a special kind of man who can take it. —quote from Joan Ganz Cooney, *Vanity Fair*, June 1994, p. 80.

3. Christian was **an example of a man** totally engaged by **their** passion for bullfighting, for bulls. —quote from Simon Casas, p. 28, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Dec. 8, 1991.

C. Epicene, Existential

i. They

1. The information seemed obvious—"Learn **a person**'s habits and the types of people **they** associate with. Find those people and you'll find your missing person." —Earlene Fowler, *Fool's Puzzle*, Berkeley Prime Crime, 1994.

2. Refer **a friend**! **They** get 50% off their first office visit! —Sign posted at Bay Animal Hospital, Manhattan Beach, CA.

3. "There's someone lives opposite," Burden said. It was a bit awkward, he found he couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman. "**A very old person**," he said carefully, and with equal tact. "**They** look as if **they**'d see everything." —Ruth Rendell, Simisola, Dell, 1995, p. 61.

4. We've watched as a rescue teams try to pull **a person** out of water **they** thought would be fun to body surf in. —Rev. Marcia Hoffman, sermon, Manhattan Beach Community Church, July 14, 1996.

ii. Their

1. At the University of Florida, there is a workload committee that may be appealed to when **an ASE** feels **their** workload exceeds the formal announcement. —SAGE flyer, UCLA, Jan. 1996.

2. I couldn't believe it. I'd never heard of **a rape victim** losing **their** job because of the rape. —quote from Salt Lake Country sheriff's Detective Glen Perot, *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 29, 1994, p. A18.

3. It was not wise to accept investment from **one of the company** even if **their** father was a wealthy man. —Gwendoline Butler, *A Coffin for Charlie*, Worldwide Mystery, 1996, p. 210.

4. Undergraduate president York Chang would not support the bill, saying that a textbook is a way to reward **a professor** for **their** research. —*Daily Bruin*, Jan. 18, 1996, p.3. [134]

iii. Them

1. It involves nurses removing **a patient** from the ward and locking **them** in a bare room where there is just a bed screwed to the floor. . . —Rupert Haselden, p. 22, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, April 28, 1991.

2. Wouldn't it be good to get **a young 25-year-old African-American** and just pay **them** to do a column and not have **them** on staff? —quote attributed to Mike Sigman by John Powers in a quote in an article by Jon Wiener in *The Nation*, Aug. 25/30, 1993.

3. . . . whether it was possible to despise **a person** as much when you meet **them** as before. —Mark Huband, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Oct. 14, 1990.

4. It's important for the media to pick up the stories about gay-bashing incidents, because the next time **an individual** is sitting at home, thinking about committing an act like this, we want **them** to know that the sheriff's department will catch **them**. —quote from Dave Winkler, *Los Angeles Times* Westside addition, Feb. 16, 1996, p. 7.

5. Well, my American perspective is, we ask "Who is this?" because "Who is that?" implies the answerer detects the presence of **a third party, e.g., an eavesdropper, or somebody in the room with the caller**, and wants the caller to identify **them**. —John Koontz, Linguist List, Vol-5-509, May 3, 1994.

6. Most of all, when you see **an officer**, smile and wave at **them**. —quote from Richard Riordan on KNX, Nov. 15, 1996.

7. There is in fact **a GTC** for Applied/TESL, and I forget who it is. I will have **them** contact you. —Email message to me from Katherine Crosswhite, Jan. 24, 1996.

iv. Themself/Themselves

[no examples]

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. If any time during the year, **an individual** is being ineffective in carrying out the council's goals on a committee, **they** should be immediately held accountable. And if this means pulling **them** off the committee, then (USAC should). —quote from York Chang, *Daily Bruin*, May 16, 1995, p. 9.

2. You can still send something special to **a certain someone** and have it get there fast. In fact, for just $2.90 you can have a two-pound package in **their** hands in just two days. . . . you could send a Priority Mail package through the holidays and let **them** know just how important **they** are. —US Postal Service brochure, 1992.

3. Have you ever noticed how in a gang, **one member** isn't so tough when **they**'re alone, but as soon as **they** have **their** crew behind **them** they act like **they**'re immortal? —Jared Black, *Daily Bruin*, Feb. 2, 1995, p. 17.

4. I would like to find **a consultant** who will benefit from **their** participation in the institute and who will be able to gain skills, ideas or connections, which **they** can put to use in language maintenance, preservation or revival work in **their** own community. —Email message from a linguist to Pam Munro, June 7, 1996.

D. Gender-marked, Existential

[no examples]

VII. *The* + NP

A. Epicene, Generic or hypothetical sentence

i. They

1. Dr. Ganaway has a ready explanation: "source amnesia," in which "**the person** doesn't remember **they**'ve read a particular book, . . ." —*Vanity Fair*, June 1993, p. 60.

2. **The viewer** feels like **they**'ve been dropped into the middle of a meeting of some two-person club where everything's an inside joke. —*Daily Bruin*, Jan. 12, 1996, p. 13.

3. Pleading no contest means that **the accused** does not admit guilt but accepts punishment as if **they** had been found guilty. —Lucia Sanchez, *Summer Bruin*, June 27, 1993, p. 3.

4. By doing science hands-on, you raise it to a level where **the child** can reason and apply what **they** learn. —quote from Judi Backman, *Daily Bruin*, Dec. 7, 1995, p. 16.

5. What's going to be affected is **the person who falls down in front of the grocery store** and figures **they**'re going to strike it rich and get something **they**'re not entitled to. —quote from Tupper Hull, *Los Angeles Reader*, March 15, 1996, p. 6.

6. The smaller **the person**, the more space **they** will occupy. —print advertisement for a car.

7. If **the beloved** can't actually be dead, **they** can at least be crippled, sick, or horrifically scarred. —Ian Samson, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, March 3, 1996, p. 28.

8. I think it should be up to **the TA** whether or not **they** want such a screening to take place, but it should not be an individual personnel staff member. —quote from Joseph Evans, *Daily Bruin*, Nov. 17, 1995, p. 11.

9. Early romantic relationships usually reach a transition point where they either deepen or end. As this point approaches, you need to find out enough about **the other person** to make an informed decision about whether **they**'re worth the risk and investment. —Earl Williams, the *Daily Bruin*, Oct. 13, 1994, p. 25.

10. ITALIAN TEE compliments **the wearer** with the ultimate tribute . . . not only are **they** perfect, **they**'re Italian, too. —Gift catalog copy for T-shirt reading: "Not ONLY AM I <u>PERFECT</u> I'm Italian, Too!"

11. It is not the place of **the interpreter** to create signs, if **they** do not know the sign **they** must fingerspell it or explain the term using other signs. —Keely Carroll, Sign Language Linguistics List, April 21, 1996.

12. Can your friendship survive a year of *The Nation*? Chances are **the person on the receiving end** will be challenged, aggravated, provoked, dismayed—and very likely, **they**'ll also be hooked. —*The Nation*, Dec. 1994.

13. Assuming that **the child** has already learned that there is a prosodically relevant distinction . . ., **they** would be in a position to observe . . . that some words always appear in strong form, ... Given the child's innate knowledge of the universal constraints on prosodic structure, it could conceivably draw the inferences . . . . —Elisabeth Selkirk, "The prosodic structure of function words", in *Papers in Optimality Theory*, J. Beckman, L. Walsh Dickey & Suzanne Urbanczyk (eds), GLSA, U. Mass, Amherst, 1995, p. 464–465.

14. This change in meaning can be seen in that shaving someone's head or even cutting their hair can be a very personal experience where **the person** can be very specific about how **they** want **their** hair to look. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

15. I try to give **the customer** exactly what **they** need from me. —quote from Paco Cao, *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 1996, p. E3.

16. But Proposition 213 says that if a reckless driver who can afford insurance hits an innocent person who cannot . . . **the reckless driver** gets off without paying for all the injuries and damage **they**'ve done. —California ballot pamphlet, general election, November 1996.

17. While **the baby** is drinking, you just squirt squirt squirt, and **they** take the medicine. —Dr. Howard Torma, CBS This Morning, Sept. 26, 1996.

ii. Their

1. "The only one who was hurt, **the only one** who had **their** treatment disrupted, was me," said McGann shortly before he died. —*The Nation*, p. 583, Nov. 11, 1991.

2. It's important to ensure the pain is coming from the hip. If **the patient** points toward **their** buttocks, **their** pain may be caused by a pinched nerve in the back, not **their** hip. —quote from James Schaberg, *Vim & Vigor*, Summer 1995, p. 16.

3. Times are flexible but **the individual** must arrange for **their** own transportation. —part-time job position flyer at UCLA, 1993.

4. I was trying to follow the structure of a made-for-TV disease movie, where **the character** has some realization about **their** life. —quote from Todd Haynes, Los Angeles Weekly, June 30–July 6, 1995, p. 29.

5. **The Author** shall contribute to the Work and shall write **their** contribution to the satisfaction of the Editor. . . . The Author undertakes to deliver a copy of the typescript of his or her contribution to the Work. . . —Book contract from Basil Blackwell, July 14, 1994.

6. **The average person** spends about 45 minutes at **their** dental cleaning. —TV commercial for Crest toothpaste, winter 1995.

7. Current research indicates that 20 minutes of walking at your target heart rate three times a week allows **the average healthy person** to maintain **their** cardiovascular health. —quote from Sheila Koch, *Vim & Vigor*, Summer 1995, p. 24.

8. Acknowledge the content of the problem. Let **the other person** know you heard the emotional content of **their** statements. "That must be difficult" or "How sad you must feel" tells **the person** you are empathizing with **their** situation. —*Vim & Vigor*, Summer 1995, p. 63.

9. It seems to mean that the same principles apply here: confidence in **the person doing the translating** based on knowledge of **their** background and fluency in the language. —Ronnie Wilbur, Sign Language Linguistics List, July 1, 1994.

10. The FAA is implementing so-called 'free flight', which will allow **the person in the cockpit** to set **their** own path. —Pam Coulter (reporter), KNX radio, Los Angeles, March 15, 1996.

11. I absolutely agree with him that **the American adult** does not have an ongoing source of information to meet **their** sexual needs. —Debra Haffner, in the *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 24, 1993, p. E8.

12. Under the DCP, **the academic student employee** would pay 8.95 percent of **their** salary into a university-administered pension fund. —SAGE News, Winter 1995, Vol. 1, No. 3, UCLA.

13. The mere fact of a systematic phonological difference . . . raises the possibility that this distinction might be exploited by **the language learner** in **their** acquisition of the syntactic distinction. . . —Elisabeth Selkirk, "The prosodic structure of function words", in *Papers in Optimality Theory*, J. Beckman, L. Walsh Dickey & Suzanne Urbanczyk (eds), GLSA, U. Mass, Amherst, 1995, p. 440.

14. Come to today's concert, featuring Jill Warren and other artists, and show you care more about **the human being sitting next to you** than **their** awful rat-tail haircut. —*Los Angeles Reader*, March 15, 1996, p. 24.

15. If **the patient** is prone to heart attacks and has high blood pressure, beta blockers may help to prolong **their** lifespan. —quote from Dr. Teresa Boydston in the *Daily Bruin*, Oct. 7, 1993, p. 17.

16. Material may be cited by email or back to the list without permission of **the author** only if **their** name, email address and the date of the original quote are included. —SLLING-L subscription guidelines, Feb. 4, 1993.

17. **The child learner of English** could also . . . gain access to information . . ., given **their** knowledge of the universal prosodic constraints at play. —Elisabeth Selkirk, "The prosodic structure of function words", in *Papers in Optimality Theory*, J. Beckman, L. Walsh Dickey & Suzanne Urbanczyk (eds), GLSA, U. Mass, Amherst, 1995, p. 465.

18. Jan Amsterdam of Encino says grandson Jacob, 5, was listening to his mother explain her work as a therapist. Therapists help people change their behavior, she said, but no one can make anyone change unless **the person** wants to. Jacob added: "Except **their** mommy." —*Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1996, p. E2.

iii. Them

1. This feature enables you to receive or place a call to other members. . . . Can you believe it, actually getting to know **the person** before meeting **them**. —ad for Telecompanions, Los Angeles Weekly, June 23–29, 1995, p. 8.

2. If another office employee picks up the phone and **the person** is speaking Spanish, they usually put **them** on hold and call for the secretary. —Linguistics 2 student, UCLA, winter 1996.

3. Well, it was the same thing with couples. If **the other person** didn't change, or didn't conform to our expectations, we got rid of **them**. —quote from Barry Dym, *Los Angeles Times*, p. E3, [date not recorded]

4. We'll let you choose **the banker you want** and you can see **them** every time. —commercial for Glendale Federal Bank, KNX radio, Los Angeles, Jan. 22, 1996.

5. **The child** feels responsible, whether the parents have given **them** the job or not, for assuming a certain role. —quote from Rona Novick, *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 25, 1996, p. E6.

6. The lover is enraptured by **the loved one**, finding **them** to be a source of 'ceaselessly unforeseen originality' (Barthes, 1983: 34). —John Shotter, *Conversational Realities*, Sage Publications, 1993, p. 3.

iv. Themself/Themselves

1. Being **the type of person** who doesn't like repeating **themselves**, I thought it would be a good idea to go after a new sound. . . —notes from compact disc, Seal, 1994.

2. Crucial in such events are those points in a conversation when a 'gap' must be bridged: when . . . what one person says or does must be accounted for, made sense of, or responded to in some way, by an other (or by **the person themselves**). —John Shotter, *Conversational Realities*, Sage Publications, 1993, p. 33.

3. Smark: fan who thinks they have knowledge of the inner workings of the wrestling business based on a certain amount of inside knowledge but is perceived by someone else, usually an industry insider, to be less informed than **the fan themselves** believes. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996. [Also under XVI.6]

v. Mixed pronoun forms (including *theirs*)

1. "At a certain point, public opinion changes, because the average taxpayer doesn't have connections, the university is downsizing," he added. "So **the taxpayer** gets unusually irate

that somebody else has an inside track, because **they**'ll do anything to get **their** kid into UCLA." [Perhaps the antecedent is *somebody else*. –RL] —quote from Tom Hayden, *Daily Bruin*, April 22,1 1996, p. 15.

2. An important lesson for **the co-dependent** to learn is that **they** have a job to do in a professional environment. It is not **their** family. **They** do not need to be loved and accepted. **They** do need to perform adequately and functionally. —*Vim & Vigor*, Winter 1993, p. 58.

3. Once **the child** gets the teddy bear, it's **theirs**. **They** really hang onto it. —quote from Sue Yamada, the *Daily Bruin*, Dec. 2, 1994, p. 3.

4. The British convention is for **the caller** to introduce **themself** by name before being asked, once **they**'ve been connected to the person **they** want to speak to. If the caller doesn't know who has answered, but seeks a specific individual, **they** will say 'Can I speak to X?' (and if X is the answerer X will reply 'Speaking'). Otherwise, if **the caller** wishes to identify the answerer (or if the answerer wishes to identify **a caller** who has not identified **themself**) **they** say 'Who is speaking?' or 'Who is that speaking?'—Max Wheeler, Linguist List Vol-5-536.

5. **The sufferer** may use pain as a means of manipulating those around **them**. . . . Day to day problems become unresolved or even intensified because **the sufferer** is so preoccupied with **their** pain. . . . Pain is one of the symptoms of a state of 'disease' and can affect an entire lifestyle not only for **the sufferer** but for **their** loved ones as well. —*Better Health Through Chiropractic* newsletter, Vol. VIII, No. 10, p. 1–2.

6. While the speaker was solely responsible for trying to initiate the 'creation' by the couple of a new form of their relationship . . . **the speaker** will not have acted out of the blue at all. **They** will have acted at a crucial moment in the changing context of their developing relationship. Usually he or she will have noticed certain incipient tendencies in **their** relationship with and to the other: the other might have spent more than a usual time gazing at **them**, or is disconcerted by **their** presence, and so on. And **they** have decided that when in the right situation . . . to risk making **their** declaration. —John Shotter, *Conversational Realities*, Sage Publications, 1993, p. 3. [Also under XV.A.12]

7. It's like someone sitting next to you on an airplane during a long flight. **The person** knows **they** will never see you again, and that creates a kind of confidential space. **They** just pour **their** heart out to you. —quote from William Morton, *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 24, 1996, p. E1.

B. Gender-marked, generic or hypothetical sentence

[no examples]

C. Epicene, object-denoting definite

i. They

1. Campus police made the arrest after responding to a Saturday morning call from a university employee who noticed the office door pried open, campus police officer Sgt. Phil Baguiao

said. "**The employee** heard some noise coming from the office, and since it was a Saturday, **they** called the police," he said. —The *Daily Bruin*, Oct. 20, 1993, p. 3.

2. I got a call from Psychological Services who was very concerned about trying to locate **the individual who had placed the ad**, thinking that **they** needed help. —quote from Susan Gesell in the *Daily Bruin*, Feb. 6, 1995, p. 3.

3. "Without knowing a little background on **the person that wrote this**, the best I can give you is a good guess." / "I'll settle for that. Do you think it's male or female?" / "Could be either. If **they** had really wanted to fool you **they** would have kept it generic. Then again, it could be a ploy writing about a little girl just to throw you off track. Could be a man." —Sandra West Prowell, The Killing of Monday Brown, Bantam, 1996, p. 254.

4. Her first thoughts were about **the person who was after Rossellini**. What were **they** thinking right now? Were **they** in the city? —Jeanne McCafferty, *Star Gazer,* Worldwide Library, 1996, p. 130.

ii. Their

1. In a few cases I have also used this field to indicate the reference number for a text taken from another author. In these instances, **the author**'s name is given with the first letter in full caps, followed by the example number from **their** article. —Cheryl Black, *Quiegolani Zapotec Syntax*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, UCSC, June 1994, footnote 1, p. 33.

2. On Monday, July 11, 1994, at approximately 7:30 p.m. at Cole and Haight streets, I asked a passerby for a cigarette. **The person** gave me a cigarette and walked on **their** way. —Declaration of Robert Warren, *Street Sheet*, Dec. 1994, p. 5.

iii. Them

[See examples in VII.C.v.]

iv. Themself/Themselves

[No examples]

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. This is not a political interview where you grill someone; this is a documentary based on an understanding of **the individual** and an attempt to draw **them** out. If you go feet first and bang **them** about the head, **they** retreat. —quote from Jonathan Dimbleby, on a film in which he interviewed Prince Charles. *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Jan. 10, 1994, p. 10.

2. I think I'm protected from violating any confidentiality by time, distance, non-specificity of the description, and the fact that if **the person** should happen to see this then either **they** don't know about the sign and won't recognize the description, or **they** do know about it and this posting doesn't reveal anything new to **them**. —Mark Mandel, Sign Language Linguistics List, Feb. 15, 1994.

D. Gender-marked, Object denoting definite

[No examples]

VIII. *This*/*that* + NP

A. Epicene, Generic or hypothetical

i. They

1. Give **that special person** something **they** can always use—cash. —76 Mastercard statement, Dec. 16, 1995.

2. But **a ten-year-old child in Puerto Rico** sees no particular reason to learn English, and if you don't give **that child** any reason for learning English, **they** are not going to do it, no matter how good your methods are. —Noam Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge,* MIT Press, 1988, p. 182.

3. **Someone** had been hanging around the convent. Later after the community had retired for the night **that same person** (for surely there hadn't been two trespassers?) had entered the chapel and, finding the inner door locked, had mounted to the storey above in hope of finding an entrance there. And when **they** had left, alerted no doubt by the consciousness that someone else had arrived, **they** had left behind that exquisite rose. —Veronica Black, *A Vow of Devotion*, St. Martin's, 1997, p. 44.

4. **This new breed of "wellness doctor"** doesn't just treat disease—**they** work to reverse and prevent it. —*Wellness Today*, 1993, p. 14.

5. If you're like most folks, you probably have **a friend, co-worker, or relative** you call whenever you need help with your Macintosh. The reason you rely on **this person** is simple—**they** can answer your questions, and more importantly, **they** can answer them in language you can understand. —IDG Newsletters advertising flyer.

ii. Their

1. Family conferencing employs the non-Western goal of restoring **an offender** to the community and offering **that person** the opportunity to act on **their** sense of contrition. —*Third Force*, Jan./Feb. 1995, Vol. 2, No. 6, p. 37.

2. Finger means that you tell the computer a command and **a person**'s login name and the computer will tell you if **that person** has opened **their** email or logged onto the web and when. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

iii. Them

1. Is there **anyone out there who works on gender and ASL**? If you are **that special someone**, or you know **them**, please respond to this email address. —Laurel Sutton, Sign Language Linguistics List, May 17, 1993.

iv. Themself/Themselves

[No examples]

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. If you are having trouble figuring out how to approach **that certain someone**, simply ask **them** if **they** would like to have lunch at North Campus. —Peter Hamilton, *Daily Bruin*, Feb. 21, 1995, p. 17.

2. "You"—she decided to make this personal to him—"the celebrity become a factor in **this person**'s life. You become the answer to all **their** problems. If **they** can just get to you, everything will be perfect. It's like a piece of **their** personality is missing, and you become what will fill the void. You become the object of **their** obsession." / She took a sip of her spritzer. "You, of course, don't know what role you're playing in **their** life. To **them**, the celebrity has become the perfect lover, or wife, husband, partner, child—although it's usually lover, and you don't act the role that **they** have created for you in their delusion. So **they** get angry." —Jeanne McCafferty, *Star Gazer*, Worldwide Library, 1996, p. 79–80.

B. Gender-marked, generic or hypothetical

[No examples]

C. Epicene, object-denoting definite

i. They

[see VIII.C.v.]

ii. Their

1. I think **this person** should have lost **their** job. [The patient] was in for elective surgery. She got scheduled, she got prepped, and what, the doctor took a hike? Did she go get a cup of coffee? [Note: "this person" is "the doctor" mentioned in the third sentence. –RL] —quote from Gloria Molina, *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1996, p. B10.

iii. Them

1. **This student** filled out the wrong form. I tried calling, but was not able to reach **them**. [Sex of student referred to was not evident from written name. –RL] —note attached to an application form from a UCLA undergraduate, spring 1993.

iv. Themself/Themselves

[No examples]

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. I have been answering many questions for **this person** regarding setting up **their** secretarial service. I guess **they** are done with the questions and this is my payment. [The person

referred to is represented by an email message copied onto the one cited. –RL] —Email message sent to me by Kevin Fox, Aug. 26, 1995.

2. She tapped the papers with her finger—"**this person** is fixated on a memory. Probably the only connective memory **they** have to **their** past." —Sandra West Prowell, *The Killing of Monday Brown,* Bantam 1996, p. 255.

IX. Possessed Noun Phrase

A. Epicene

i. They

1. Feel free to tip **your paramedic** if **they** do a good job. —Introductory announcement to the Late Show with David Letterman, June 29, 1994.

2. If **your pet** starts PROGRAM now, before **they** have fleas, **they** may not need other flea control products. —ad for VCA Animal Hospitals, *Los Angeles Times,* July 25, 1995, p. B10.

ii. Their

1. Allow **your child** to express **their** feelings and then act out **their** feelings. —quote from Stanley Greenspan, *Los Angeles Times,* July 20, 1994, p. E3.

2. Thou shalt not talk bad about **thy advisee/adviser** behind **their** back. —Commandment 2, from The Ten Advisee/Advisor Commandments which mysteriously appeared on the screen of an anonymous linguistics graduate student writing a dissertation on Portuguese, fall, 1994.

3. Never mind that the cover shot was a fuzzy composite, . . .and the advertising copy inside was a pastiche of earnest-sounding slogans . . . and glib, semiliterate promises ("North Star Expeditions can and will help **your child** to find **their** way home"). —Joe Morgenstern, *Los Angeles Times* Magazine, Jan. 15, 1995, p. 14.

4. We should be making the argument in higher education that we are interested in preparing **your youngster** for **their** last job, not their first. —quote from James Harvey, *Daily Bruin,* Feb. 14, 1995, p. 14.

5. ". . . **Mildred's husband's cousin's neighbor** who just had **their** goiter treated." —Motel 6 commercial, KNX radio, Los Angeles, Aug. 21, 1995.

6. Why use a standard baby monitor when the SmartChoice Wireless BabyCam lets you hear and see **your newborn** without disturbing **their** sleep or play activities. —ad in United Airlines *High Street Emporium,* 1995.

7. This trendy tunic looks so good that **your youngster** will want one as well. There's also a matching bag to hold **their** bits and pieces. [This text accompanies a photograph of a mother and her daughter modeling the tunics.] —*My Weekly Knitting Special,* No. 13, 1995, p. 57 (U.K.).

8. **Your baby**—wandering unprotected along a highway—never! Nor would you forget **their** baby shots. —Public service announcement, KNX radio, Los Angeles, Aug. 15, 1995.

9. A MOTHER HOLDS **HER CHILD**'S HAND A LITTLE WHILE, **THEIR** HEART FOREVER. —tapestry pillow in The Paragon Catalog, Spring–Summer, 1996.

10. Our delightful "soft sculpture" sea turtle pillow will capture the imagination of **your child or grandchild** and make a colorful addition to **their** room. —Myakka River Trading Co. catalog.

iii. Them

8. If surfing the Net is one of **your Sweetie**'s favorite pastimes, why not surprise **them** by posting a Valentine Card or Personals message on Internet Sweetheart's home page. —Advertisement for Internet Valentines, *Daily Bruin*, Feb. 3, 1995, p. 9.

iv. Themself/Themselves

[No examples]

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. If you haven't met **your GTC** yet, give **them** a ring or stop by **their** office soon. —Email message from Humanities Computing Facility, Jan. 30, 1996.

2. Make sure to kiss **your date** on the cheek at the end of your first date. Trust me, this old-fashioned technique will drive **them** crazy if **they** like you or will let **them** off the hook if **they** don't. —Peter Hamilton, *Daily Bruin*, Feb. 21, 1995, p. 17.

3. If you are planning to be sexually active, first ask **your partner** about **their** former sex life and request **they** be tested. —advertisement by Judy Elliot in the *Los Angeles Reader*, Jan. 14, 1994, p. 19.

4. Thankfully there are exceptions creeping in, but generally **your average community worker** will still be in denim in **their** thirties, have a canvas knapsack with political badges stuck to it, will spend a working afternoon in the pub with "community leaders", or spend a working day visiting peace camps outside the submarine base. **They**'re also very good at getting arrested; it's a particular skill **they** have. —Peter Turnbull, *The Killing Floor*, Worldwide Mystery, 1996, p. 45.

B. Gender-marked

[see IV.B.1]

X. *One*

A. Epicene

i. They

1. Alcohol is a drug that can make **one** feel **they** have been destroyed and leave one feeling like a crumpled piece of trash in the morning, thus the words "wasted" and "trashed." —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

2. The usage labels are relatively concretely defined so that **one** may differentiate where it would be appropriate to use a word even if **they** were not familiar with it. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

3. When **one** is talking, **they** want others to care about what is being said, to really pay attention. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

ii. Their

1. Recently my Mom gave me a plate set where **one** can design **their** own plate. . . —letter from Mike Geer in *Mad* Magazine, #322, Oct. 1993.

2. **One** has to have **their** head in the sand not to recognize that the presence of television has been the single biggest factor in elongating the trial. —quote from Zev Yaroslavsky, *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1995, p. A16.

3. . . . the relationship between **one**'s allegiance to a prevailing orthodoxy and **their** engagement in debate and likelihood of job placement. —Andy Rogers on the Linguist List, Vol. 4.489, fall 1993.

4. Socially, **one with 'pain behavior'** starts to rely on friends and relatives to perform **their** lifting and bending around the house (or on the job). —*Better Health Through Chiropractic* newsletter, Vol. VIII, No. 10, p. 1.

5. Spindoctor: **One** who finds a slant to a story and uses it to further **their** own political aims. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

6. This alludes to my earlier statements about socialization and how **one** develops **their** own belief system for what is acceptable communication behavior. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

iii. Them

[No examples]

iv. Themself/Themselves

[No examples]

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. If **one** advances confidently in the direction of **their** dreams, and endeavors to lead a life which **they** have imagined, **they** will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. —Henry David Thoreau, quoted on a poster.

B. Gender-marked

[No examples]

XI. *Wh*– phrase antecedent

A. Epicene

i. They

[See XI.A.v.]

ii. Their

1. This one guy started his ad out with the headline 'Herpes Simplex.' Now, **who in the world** would start **their** ad with what has to be **their** least attractive feature? —quote from Sharon Huff, *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 7, 1994, p. E3.

iii. Them

[No examples]

iv. Themself/Themselves

1. Now, **who** doesn't have enough faith in **themselves**? —dialog on Star Trek Deep Space Nine, Oct. 31, 1994.

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. Who gets to make art; **who** even gets to imagine that **they** might become an artist? And **who** gets to have **their** story told through art? —Margaret Spillane, p. 738, *The Nation*, Dec. 10. 1990.

2. Perhaps it might have been different if her husband had loved her, for **who** would give all **their** love to a building—however magnificent—if **they** had a human being worthy of their cherishing? —Geraldine Evans, *Dead Before Morning*, Worldwide Library, 1995, p. 240.

B. Gender-marked

[No examples]

XII. Conjoined NP antecedent

A. Epicene

i. They

[No examples]

ii. Their

1. This is to certify that **the applicant or sponsor listed** is financially capable of meeting the financial commitment indicated, and, if the funds are outside the United States, is permitted to use them under **their** government's present regulations. —UCLA Extension Confidential Financial Statement, 1992.

iii. Them

[See XII.A.v.]

iv. Themself/Themselves

[No examples]

v. Mixed pronoun forms

1. If you see **a friend or relative** as a participant in the terribly destructive 'pain behavior' syndrome try to show **them** how their suffering is affecting **their** entire way of life—how **their** pain is jeopardizing **their** mental as well as physical well-being. —*Better Health Through Chiropractic* newsletter, Vol. VIII, No. 10, p. 2.

B. Gender-marked, one gender

1. That is as much rape as if you had sexual intercourse with **any other girl or woman** without **their** consent. —quote from Mr. Justice Latham, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, March 31, 1996, p. 9.

C. Gender-marked, two genders

1. No foreign news editor in London, New York or Paris, has to my knowledge told **their man or woman** that **they** must stay. —Maggie O'Kane, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Jan. 19, 1994, p. 7.

2. Are you saying that **the divorcee or widower** will forever be promiscuous, even if **they** remarry, on the grounds that **they** have had sex before marrying **their** present spouse? —Jonathan Lopez, *Daily Bruin*, Oct. 5, 1994, p. 21.

3. Turn to **the brother or sister next to you** and tell **them**, "You've got what it takes." —quote in the *Los Angeles Weekly*, July 26–Aug. 1, 1001, p. 27.

4. Just broke up with **your girlfriend or boyfriend** and you're breakin' down left only with two Ben Harper tickets, and you don't want to go because he reminds you of **them**, well I don't want you to suffer. I'll take those two tickets so you're not haunted by the drama of lost love. —notice posted in a café in Santa Cruz, August 17, 1996.

5. For **the man or woman** who values the importance of the written word. Have **their** name monogrammed on our handsome natural wood pen and box. —Bloomingdale's Christmas catalog, 1996.

XIII. "Generic name" antecedent

1. Often figuring out who someone is talking about is done by context . . . asking if you know **so-and-so** by referring to **their** name sign. . . —Tom Lyczcko, Sign Language Linguistics List, Feb. 17, 1994.

XIV. No textual antecedent

1. I asked him whether anyone had told him how to make a retroflex "r," and he said **they** hadn't. —Geoffrey Russon, Linguist List 3.601, 1993.

2. The traditional American right to choose **their** own doctor will be maintained. —Martin Walker, the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, August 22, 1993, p. 6.

XV. Coordinate singular pronouns

A. Before *they*

1. If **the manipulee** is acting under **his/her** own motivation and retains control, **he/she** can act in **their** own good time. —T. Givón, *Syntax*, Vol. II, John Benjamins, 1990, p. 523.

2. On several occasions I have seen a look of distress, even tears, on the face of **an abductee** at the moment when **he or she** realizes that an experience **they** had chosen, more comfortably, to consider a dream had occurred in some sort of fully 'awake' . . . or conscious state. —quote from *Abduction* by John E. Mack in *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, July 3, 1994, p. 20.

3. If the rituals of the courts are allowed to dominate over the search for truth then **any person** who can be presented as an apparent expert will be seized on by the defence or the prosecution in the hope that **he or she** can bluff **their** way through. —David Canter, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Sept. 25, 1994, p. 10.

4. This year's Halloween *do*: dress as **your ex** and scare the daylights outta **him or her** by showing up at **their** house to beg for a Big Hunk. —*Los Angeles Weekly,* Oct. 28–Nov. 3, 1994, p. 63. [269]

5. If **a person** shoots relatively weak heroin for a short period of time, **he or she** can expect to develop a fairly mild habit, but a habit nonetheless. If **they**'re running up purer heroin, **they** can expect a habit that will be tougher to kick. —Jim Parker, D.I.N. Publication 105, 7/94, Heroin.

6. "**The typical American citizen** is under the misconception that because **he or she** is American, the worst thing that can happen to **them** is **they**'ll be thrown out of the country," says Gary Sheaffer, spokesman for the U.S. Department of State and Bureau of Consular Affairs. "The reality of the situation is, however, if you are arrested, you will probably go to jail." —quote cited in the *Daily Bruin*, April 5, 1994, p. 3.

7. Please have **each person who takes the test** write **his or her** name, address, signature, and social security number (if **they** have one). . . —letter to me from Barbara Suomi, Examiner, School and Higher Education Programs, ETS, May 12, 1993.

8. The new rulings permit the trials to take place without the presence of the defendant if **the defendant** places **him/herself** in a condition rendering **them** unfit. . . —notes accompanying Gerhard Richter exhibition at the Lannan Foundation, 1991.

9. For example, when **an afro-american** makes the decision to get an education and fight **his/her** way out of the ghetto (or wherever the fight initiates) and that move eventually leads to a rise to the middle class and a move away from **their** home base to suburban areas of America, those individuals have an problem because the core group feels they have left because they are too "uppity" for the rest of them. —Aaron Weir, Sign Language Linguistics List, March 1, 1995. [Capitalization as written in the the original posting]

10. If **he or she** had not spoken with you, **he or she** might have become suicidal, mightn't **they**? —dialog from movie "Mixed Nuts".

11. It's **the patient** who has the right to make the decision about what **he or she** wants to do with **their** life. —City of Hope commercial, KNX radio, May 28, 1996.

12. For not only will **the speaker** now take on new duties . . . but what **he or she** will notice and care about in the other will also change: **she or he** will be changed in **their** moral sensibility, in **their** very being, in the kind of person **they** are. —John Shotter, *Conversational Realities*, Sage Publications, 1993, p. 2.

13. While the speaker was solely responsible for trying to initiate the 'creation' by the couple of a new form of their relationship . . . **the speaker** will not have acted out of the blue at all. **They** will have acted at a crucial moment in the changing context of their developing relationship. Usually **he or she** will have noticed certain incipient tendencies in **their** relationship with and to the other: the other might have spent more than a usual time gazing at **them**, or is disconcerted by **their** presence, and so on. And **they** have decided that when in the right situation . . . to risk making **their** declaration. —John Shotter, *Conversational Realities*, Sage Publications, 1993, p. 2–3.

B. After *they*

1. **No actor** can be certain **they** will make a good director, but at least **he or she** starts with the advantage of knowing what not to do after hanging around sets for so long. —Derek Malcolm, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, March 6, 1994, p. 27.

2. The way to get through Broadmoor is to be a model patient and **a model patient** does not stand up for **themselves**—**he or she** does not complain. —quote from Bynoe in *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, p.23, April 28, 1991.

XVI. Bare NP antecedent (in/definite determiner omitted)

1. You may authorize an agent or ASUCLA to obtain your diploma. **Agent** must bring this card with your printed name and signature and **their** photo I.D. to 1113 Murphy Hall. —Agent Authorization form, UCLA, 1993.

2. **Member** must notify **their** BLOCKBUSTER Video Store(s) immediately by telephone or in writing if **their** membership card(s) is lost or stolen. —Terms and Conditions card from Blockbuster video store.

3. **Winner** will receive a free one-year subscription to MAD whether **they** want it or not! [Contestants of Alfred E. Newman look-alike contest are all male. In another part of the same contest notice: "In the event **the winner** is unable to fulfill **his** obligations. . ." –RL] —*Mad Magazine*, #322, Oct. 1993.

4. Alerts **thief** that this car is protected BEFORE **they** break a window or lock. —printed information for "The Club" automobile anti-theft device, 1996.

5. Mark: **person** who believes **they** are an expert on the wrestling business based on limited knowledge of the inner workings of the sport. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996.

6. Smark: **fan** who thinks **they** have knowledge of the inner workings of the wrestling business based on a certain amount of inside knowledge but is perceived by someone else, usually an industry insider, to be less informed than the fan themselves believes. —Linguistics 88A student, UCLA, fall 1996. [Also under VII.A.iv.3.]

XVII. Comments on correctness of singular they

1. Cindy Crawford's even features certainly don't automatically betoken a paucity of intellect ("Lights, Camera! Cheekbones!" by Mimi Avins, Sept. 3). But she undermines her assertion to that effect by using incorrect grammar, a flaw I warn my college English students to avoid. / Crawford protests the dumb idea that "if **someone** is beautiful **they** must be stupid"; the correct version, of course, would be "she must be stupid." Let's give her the benefit of the doubt, since this dreadful error is fast becoming the norm—but perhaps she shouldn't have dropped out of Northwestern her freshman year after all. —letter from Diana York Blaine, *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 10, 1995.

2. Never mind that the cover shot was a fuzzy composite, . . . and the advertising copy inside was a pastiche of earnest-sounding slogans . . . and glib, semiliterate promises ("North Star Expeditions can and will help **your child** to find **their** way home"). —Joe Morgenstern, *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, Jan. 15, 1995, p. 14.

3. If **a child** hears English, **they** [*sic*] pick up on the phonetics pretty quickly (in fact, it now turns out that many subtle distinctions are being made, in language specific ways, as early as six months). [The "[*sic*]" is Hornstein's. He is quoting Noam Chomsky, personal communication. –RL] —Norbert Hornstein, *Logical Form*, Blackwell, Cambridge, MA, 1995, p. 8.

4. Martin [Scorsese] was depicted introducing his movie Casino to a Scottish group . . . and prefacing his remarks by stating, "I hope **everyone** has done **their** homework." / Okay, nobody said he was the Greatest Living Grammarian. —Daniel Seligman, *Fortune*, April 1, 1996, p. 164. [Other examples scornfully given in this article: Newt Gingrich: "The idea that you get your . . . savings and investment income and pay no taxes on it, while **the person**

next to you is paying taxes on **their** income, that's nonsense." George Allen: "There should be no discrimination, but I think it is just a statement of fact that if **someone** is not able to read, write, or speak the English language, **their** options are limited."]

XVIII. For comparison: Other pronoun-antecedent types

A. Pluralized singular NP

1. I wasn't the one . . . who got six-page letters from **Hungarian socialists named Kornai**, **another name** I had just added to my list. —*Mating,* by Norman Rush, Vintage, 1991, p. 254.

B. Gender-marked singular pronoun(s) with plural antecedent

1. With pledge funding, only **students** who fill out a pledge card requesting to pay the $5 fee each quarter for the duration of **his/her** academic career will be billed. —GSA Election flyer, April 7, 1994.

2. **Faculty members** will make up their minds and will vote either way **he or she** feels the vote should go. —quote from Friedmann, *Daily Bruin,* April 24, 1995, p. 10.

3. Also, menstruation encourages the ascension of microorganisms into the upper reproductive area which is why **many women who have PID** experience symptoms usually one week within **her** cycle. —*Vim & Vigor,* Summer 1995, p.8.

C. Distributive plural antecedent

1. **Men involved in paternity disputes** will be offered free DNA tests by the Child Support Agency. But **they** will have to pay back the cost—about £400—if a court finds that **they** did father the child. In 94 per cent of paternity cases this year, the men were judged to have fathered the child. —*Manchester Guardian Weekly,* Oct. 29, 1995, p. 9.

2. A Scottish bank now allows **transvestites** to use two of its new high-security check-cashing cards—one with a photo of **them** dressed as a man and the other as a woman. "If **any cross-dressing customers** are confident enough to go shopping dressed as a woman," a spokesperson explained, "it's possible for **them** to have a second card so that **they** can avoid embarrassment or difficulties when paying by check." —*The Realist,* No. 127, Spring 1994.

Appendix II: Examples of Singular *they* from Middle English

Abbreviations: ELK = Keenan (1994) database; MED = Middle English Dictionary; OED = Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition; Visser = Visser (1963). All citations are taken from these sources, in the same format as given in the source (except where I added boldfacing for antecedent-pronoun relationships and underlining for relevant number-marked verbs). Except for [A.1], all translations are mine; I thank Robert Stockwell and Donka Minkova for helping me with them.

A. Third person plural pronoun with singular antecedent from Middle English (1200–1500)

1. **Non scafte** ðe is scadwis, al swo bieð angles and menn, ne aged te hauen **here** agen-will, forðan **hie** ne bieð, ne ne muȝen bien, naeure riht-wise ne gode, but **hie** folȝin godes wille on all wisen.
   ‘**No creature** that is rational, as are angels and men, ought to have **their** self-will, because **they** are not, nor ever can be, righteous nor good, save **they** follow God's will in all ways.’
   [c1200, *Vices & Virtues*, Edited by F. Holthausen, published for the EETS by Oxford University Press, reprinted 1967, orig. 1888; 5.15] [ELK]

2. **Eche on** in **þer** craft ys wijs.
   ‘**Each one** in **their** craft is wise.’
   [(a1382) *WBible* (*1*) (Bod 959) Ecclus.38.35] [MED]

3. Ilke man in lande no[u] leris wyt falsedam to pinchyn and pike; es þer **no man** þat **þem** sterys.
   ‘Each man in the land now learns/teaches with falsedom to find fault and complain; there is **no man** that stirs **themselves** [= gets to work properly and honestly].’
   [a1400 *Falseness and couetys* 7] [MED]

4. **Noman** was hardy in all þat countrey to sette aȝainst hem, for drede þat **þey** hadde of hem.
   ‘**No one** was brave in all that country to set against them, for dread that **they** had of them.’
   [c1450(?c1400) *3 KCol.(1)* 6/15] [MED]

5. þat **ich of myn executors** þat takis charge opon **þaim** have v marc for his travaill.
   ‘That **each of my executors** that takes the responsibility upon **themselves** have a mark for his work.’
   [(1415) *Reg. Chichele* in *Cant.Yk. S.42* 49] [MED]

6. For at that time, **every man** was out of **ther** aray.
   [c1422–1509 Paston Lett. (Gairdner) I, 322] [Visser]

7. **Euery creature** That ys gylty and knowyth **thaym-self** coulpable Demyth alle other [to] **thair** case semblable.
   '**Every creature** that is guilty and knows **themself** culpable deems all others similarly to **their** case.'
   [c1450 ?Suffolk *Myn hert ys set* 55] [MED]

8. Inheritments, of which **any of the seid persones** . . was seised by **theym self**, or joyntly with other.
   [1464 *Rolls of Parlt.* V. 513/2] [OED]

9. Whan **one** hath no delyte to fulfyll **theyr** owne wyll or desire.
   [c1490 Rule St. Benet, The Caxton Abstract (in: Kock, Rule St. B., EETS) 124, 31] [Visser]

10. **No man** asketh what he ought to do in his office, but **the** woll aske a question, what the benefice is wourth.
    '**No one** asks what he ought to do in his position, but **they** will ask a question, what the payment is worth.'
    [a1500 *Chartier Treat.Hope* 131/3] [MED]

B. Third person plural pronoun with singular antecedent from the 16th to the 19th century: singular verb

11. **Everye bodye** was in **theyr** lodgynges.
    [1530 Ld. Berners, Arth. Lyt. Bryt. 283] [Visser]

12. If **a person** is born of a . . gloomy temper . . **they** cannot help it.
    [1759 Chesterf. *Lett.* IV. ccclv. 170] [OED]

13. Whenever **any one** was ill, she brewed **them** a drink.
    [1874 Dasent Half a Life II. 198] [OED]

C. Third person plural pronoun with presumably singular antecedent from the 16th to the 19th century: no verb indicating number

14. **A man or woman** being lang absent fra **thair** party.
    [1563 Win3et *Four Scoir Thre Quest.* liv] [OED]

15. Holes, of that bignesse that **one** may thrust in **theire** neafe.
    [1641 Best *Farm. Bks.* (Surtees) 126] [OED]

16. Little did I think . . to make a Complaint against **a Person so very dear to you**, . . but dont let **them** be so proud . . as to make **them** not care how **they** affront everybody else.
    [1742 Richardson *Pamela* III. 127] [OED]

D. For contrast: quantifier antecedent with plural verb and plural pronoun

17. **Every one** in the House were in **their** Beds.
    [1749 Fielding Tom Jones VII. xiv] [OED]

18. **Every body else** I meet with <u>are</u> full ready to go of **themselves**.
[1759 Bp. Warburton, Lett. (1809) 280] [Visser]

Appendix III: Pronoun Survey—Names and Deixis

Context

You walk into one of three rooms where people are moving around. In one of the rooms, the people are dressed conventionally. In the other two rooms the people are covered by sheets, so you have no idea if they are male or female (and there are no other distinguishing characteristics).

Task

You need to say what each person is doing. In order to indicate which person you mean, you point to the person and utter a sentence from the list given below. Which of the sentences on the list could you say? If a sentence is impossible, mark it with an x. For possible sentences, please rank them according to how good they sound, using as many numbers as there are relative levels of acceptability, with 1 for best. (For the same rank, give the same number). If there is another sentence you would say in this situation, please write it in. Also, feel free to add other comments.

Room A

Conventionally dressed people are walking around. You say, while pointing to a woman:

___ (a) He is waving his arms.
___ (b) She is waving her arms.
___ (c) They are waving their arms.
___ (d) This person is waving his arms.
___ (e) This person is waving her arms.
___ (f) This person is waving their arms.
___ (g) _____.

Room B

The people are covered by sheets, so you have no idea which are men and which are women. You say, while pointing to one of them:

___ (a) He is waving his arms.
___ (b) She is waving her arms.
___ (c) They are waving their arms.
___ (d) This person is waving his arms.
___ (e) This person is waving her arms.
___ (f) This person is waving their arms.
___ (g) _____.

Room C, Situation A

The people are again covered by sheets, but they also have name tags on. However, the names can all refer to either a man or a woman. You say, while pointing to a person wearing a name tag with “Robin” on it:

___ (a) He is waving his arms.
___ (b) She is waving her arms.
___ (c) They are waving their arms.
___ (d) This person is waving his arms.
___ (e) This person is waving her arms.
___ (f) This person is waving their arms.
___ (g) _____.

Room C, Situation B

Since the people each have a unique name, you don't have to point in this room. You instead say:

___ (a) Robin is waving his arms.
___ (b) Robin is waving her arms.
___ (c) Robin is waving their arms.
___ (d) The person named Robin is waving his arms.
___ (e) The person named Robin is waving her arms.
___ (f) The person named Robin is waving their arms.
___ (g) _____.

Appendix IV: Questionnaire on Singular *they* Judgments

To: Students in Linguistics 1, Spring 1994

From: Rachel Lagunoff, PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics

Re: Acceptability judgments

I. Please fill in the following information about yourself:

Age _____ Sex ___M ___F Native language _____

II. Please mark each of the following sentences according to one of three judgments of the **grammar** (not social or contextual acceptability):

√ It sounds fine; I could say a sentence like this.

X It sounds bad; I could never say a sentence like this, except as a mistake.

? It doesn't sound completely good, but not completely bad, either; I'm not sure if I could say a sentence like this or not.

Please add any additional comments you have, to individual sentences, or to the survey as a whole. Also, feel free to correct the "bad" sentences.

Thank you very much for your participation in this research! If you are interested in seeing the results of this questionnaire, leave your name and address with your TA or instructor and I will send you a summary.

III. Sentences. In every case, the boldfaced words are intended to refer to the same entity. (For example, in ***This student*** *loves* ***their*** *linguistics class, their* means *this student's*.)

___1. **Everyone** loves **their** mother.
___2. **Someone** left **their** book here.
___3. **Each boy** thinks **they** are the smartest.
___4. **A mother** always thinks **their** baby is cute.
___5. **One** should admit **their** mistakes.
___6. **Everyone** says it's true, but **they**'re lying.
___7. **Some girl** forgot to bring **their** ID.
___8. **Any boy** in **their** right mind would avoid that class.
___9. **Each girl** asked a question, but **they** didn't wait to hear the answer.
___10. If **anyone** cheats on the exam, **they** will be reported to the dean.
___11. **My roommate** thinks **they**'re just so great.
___12. **Every boy** I know loves **their** mother.
___13. **No one** left **their** book here.
___14. **Any girl** in **their** right mind would avoid that class.
___15. **Each student** thinks **they** are the best in the class.

___16. **A parent** always thinks **their** baby is cute.
___17. **My roommate** was supposed to answer the phone, but **they** didn't.
___18. **Every girl** I know loves **their** father.
___19. **No boy** left **their** backpack at the party.
___20. **Anyone** in **their** right mind would avoid that class.
___21. **Each student** arrived on time, but **they** forgot to bring a pencil.
___22. **A father** always thinks **their** baby is cute.
___23. **The TA for my section** said **they** would be here at noon.
___24. If **one** doesn't want to do something, **they** shouldn't have to.
___25. **Someone** told me it was going to rain today and I believed **them**.
___26. **No girl** left **their** backpack at the party.
___27. **Each boy** asked a question, but **they** didn't wait to hear the answer.
___28. **The TA for my section** has office hours now, but **they** aren't here.
___29. **Some boy** forgot to bring **their** ID.
___30. **Each girl** thinks **they** are the smartest.
___31. If **a student** is honest, **they** won't cheat on an exam.

Comments:

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