

Comparative analysis of advocacy strategies in justifications for gender-neutral English

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Abstract. This comparative analysis of arguments for singular *they* and neopronoun adoption focuses on two justifications: historical presence of gender-neutral language in English (historical references), and individuals' freedom to choose affirming terms for themselves (agency references). We found significant relationships between explicit mentions of support for singular *they* and historical references, as well as explicit mentions of support for neopronouns and agency references, indicating a meaningful distinction in the ways language users justify different preferences. The frequency of specific arguments illuminates how people conceptualize language, which arguments are perceived as effective, and who must be convinced to accept the usage of a specific gender-neutral pronoun. These findings can inform our understanding of folk perspectives on where and how prestige is granted to linguistic features.

Keywords. non-binary gender; gender-neutral language; singular *they*; neopronouns; folk linguistics; advocacy; sociolinguistics; historical linguistics; language change; agency

1. Introduction. English third person singular pronouns are functional category words. As such, compared to the consistent evolution seen in lexical categories, there have been few organic pronoun coinages throughout history (Muysken 2008). The three canonical third person singular pronouns (*he*, *she*, and *it*) have predominated the category for centuries. Additionally, generic singular *they* has existed alongside them at least since the 14th century, and singular *they* in reference to a specific individual has risen in acceptability and popularity in recent years (Baron 2020, Bjorkman 2017, Konnelly and Cowper 2020). Neopronouns (e.g. *xe*, *fae*, and *ey*) are neologistic pronouns that are often coined by their users, and their position as functional category neologisms makes them uniquely worthy of study (Miltersen 2016).

Neither neopronouns nor singular *they* are universally accepted by English speakers, and in both cases young people and gender-marginalized people tend to accept them the most (Hekanaho 2020, Rose et al. 2023, Konnelly and Cowper 2020). The partial acceptance of singular *they* and neopronouns with salient demographic trends means that proponents of these pronouns have the opportunity to advocate for the pronouns that they believe should be adopted fully by the English-speaking community. These instances of folk linguistic advocacy that promote the adoption of new or repurposed language provide valuable insights into folk perceptions of language change and linguistic agency.

* We would like to thank Kirby Conrod, Vic Wen, Kyra Roepke, Jasper Nash, and members of the SEPTA Lab group as well as attendees of the LSA 2024 annual meeting for their insights and feedback. Authors: Max Winig, Swarthmore College; Ell Rose, Swarthmore College.

While singular *they* has become the subject of significant linguistic research in recent years (Bjorkman 2017; Conrod 2019; Konnelly and Cowper 2020, inter alia), there is relatively little comparable research on neopronouns (Hekanaho 2020; Hekanaho 2022; Rose et al. 2023). Similarly, while *acceptability* of various pronouns has received much attention (Bjorkman 2017; Konnelly and Cowper 2020; Hekanaho 2020; Rose et al. 2023), there has been little if any prior research into *advocacy* for the acceptance of said pronouns. The concept of folk linguistic advocacy is, in itself, worthy of research as it provides insight into which traits of language are considered to be prestigious, beneficial, or otherwise valuable. Furthermore, the advocacy efforts surrounding pronouns are uniquely worthy of study as it provides a glimpse into folk perceptions of major changes to the usage of certain functional category words in English.

2. Background. Both singular *they* and neopronouns have existed in some form for centuries, but both are seeing changes to their acceptance and use in the 21st century. Previous research has shown that both pronoun types receive substantial albeit inconsistent support across English speakers, with social factors such as age and gender serving as a meaningful predictor for acceptance (Bjorkman 2017; Conrod 2019; Konnelly and Cowper 2020; Hekanaho 2020; Rose et al. 2023).

2.1. SINGULAR *THEY*. Since at least the 14th century, generic singular *they* has been used as an alternative to generic *he* (Baron 2020). Generic pronouns are used in conjunction with indefinite nouns (e.g. *anyone*) or to refer to people of unknown gender. Specific singular *they*, which is used to describe a known individual, is more novel and is perceived as being related to gender (Conrod 2019). There is almost universal acceptance of generic singular *they* by English speakers, but acceptance of the specific usage varies, and acceptance is associated with social factors such as youth, marginalized gender, and a lack of conservative language and political ideology (Curzan 2003; Bjorkman 2017; Conrod 2019; Konnelly and Cowper 2020; Hekanaho 2020). Rejection of the more novel specific singular *they* has also historically been related to perceptions of the prestige of the English language (Curzan 2003).

2.2. NEOPRONOUNS. Alongside generic singular *they*, neopronouns have existed since at least the 19th century as proposed alternatives to generic *he*, although few reached widespread use (Baron 2020). While there were some individuals who used neopronouns to describe themselves at that time, the vast majority of coinages and uses were intended as an alternative to the gendered singular generic pronoun, meaning that the use of neopronouns for a specific known referent is also a relatively novel phenomenon (Baron 2020). Also like singular *they*, the modern use of neopronouns by specific individuals is perceived as being tied to gender. However, neopronouns are also often coined by their users to reflect other parts of their identities not directly related to gender (Miltersen 2016). Neopronouns are also a substantially online phenomenon: while many people use neopronouns in their daily lives, many more only use them with online friends and on social media. This is often because they are difficult to explain to people who are not familiar with neopronouns as a category, much less their specific coined pronoun (Miltersen 2016). The acceptance of neopronouns also somewhat mirrors that of specific singular *they* in that they are

accepted more than plainly ungrammatical sentences but less than canonical pronouns, with younger and gender-marginalized people generally being more accepting (Hekanaho 2020; Rose et al. 2023).

2.3. **ADVOCACY.** Importantly, while ideology may be a major factor in an individual's acceptance of novel pronoun usage, individuals' ideologies, and therefore acceptance, can change (Konnolly and Cowper 2020). As such, the reasons people accept or reject certain pronouns, and whether or not those reasons are considered when individuals construct arguments in favor of certain pronouns, can have a meaningful impact on which pronouns reach widespread acceptance among English speakers. Both neopronouns and singular *they* have substantial historical roots, and use for specific referents is relatively novel in both cases, but their status within the language is often perceived differently by English speakers. Singular *they* tends to be seen as an established English pronoun, likely owing to the near-millennium of generic use, while neopronouns are perceived as innovative and more political (Hekanaho 2022). In one case, the historicity of the pronoun is seen as a reason for acceptance, while in the other it is more frequently forgotten. Generic singular *they* is viewed as precedent for specific singular *they*, but generic neopronouns are not necessarily considered precedent for specific neopronouns, if the historical generic form is remembered at all.

2.4. **2023 STUDY.** This paper uses respondent data from the acceptability survey that we distributed in June 2022 and published in Rose et al. (2023). We provided participants with a number of sentences featuring four neopronouns—*xe*, *ze*, *ey*, and *fae*—which they were asked to rate each one on a 1-7 Likert scale. In Rose et al. (2023), we determined that neopronouns are not perceived as universally grammatical nor ungrammatical by English speakers as a group, as they were consistently rated as more acceptable than case-errored sentences (e.g. *John said that **him** wanted a cookie*) but less acceptable than sentences featuring canonical pronouns (e.g. *John said that **he** wanted a cookie*). We also found demographic patterns in acceptance, primarily with younger speakers and those who did not identify themselves as women nor men finding neopronouns to be most acceptable.

3. Methods. In June 2022, we conducted a large-scale (n=1000) acceptability survey via Qualtrics and distributed it over social media (see Rose et al. 2023). Respondents were provided with a number of sentences containing neopronouns and canonical pronouns (*she*, *he*, *they*) in the nominative case and a masculine, feminine, or neutral name for the referent, as shown in (1)-(3):

- (1) Cecelia is baking a cake so *xe* can bring it to the birthday party.
- (2) Solomon promised *he* would bring some dessert to the party.
- (3) Remind Riley that *fae* borrowed a book from me last week.

Respondents were also asked to rate a number of intentionally ungrammatical filler sentences featuring quantity mismatches and case errors. We also asked for a variety of demographic data, including but not limited to race, gender, pronouns, and cisgender status through a combination of free-response, checkboxes, and multiple choice for each category (see Rose et al. 2023).

Lastly, we asked five free-response questions aimed at soliciting metalinguistic commentary from respondents about singular *they*, neopronouns, and gender-neutral language in general. We provided a text box with no character limit and made definitions available for terms with which respondents may have been unfamiliar (such as *neopronoun*). For our current research, we focused our analysis on responses to two questions:

- (4) Do you think that it's bad grammar to use the pronoun *they* to refer to only one person?
- (5) Do you think English language would benefit from ways to refer to people outside of male and female genders?

3.1. CODING OF METALINGUISTIC COMMENTARY QUESTIONS. To find patterns in the metalinguistic commentary provided by respondents, we read each response and coded for common themes, including references to historical precedent, individual agency, comparisons to other languages, extant gender-neutral language, and desire to remove gender-specific language altogether. Ultimately, we determined that the two themes that warranted further investigation were the historical presence of gender-neutral language in English and individuals' freedom to choose affirming terms for themselves. Each theme was explicitly referenced by at least one hundred respondents, showing that both themes frequently come to mind among respondents.

In addition to the aforementioned coding of themes, we also coded for explicit support of singular *they* and neopronouns. It is important to note that because we solicited opinions on singular *they* and not neopronouns, many more people explicitly mentioned singular *they* than neopronouns. As such, the total count of these categories is less important than the relationships with other tags. Furthermore, all of these categories can and do overlap. Some people supported both singular *they* and neopronouns, and some referenced both advocacy strategies. Though we did code for preference of neopronouns over singular *they* and vice versa, a full analysis of respondents' preferences for the adoption of one pronoun over another would require more targeted study and is outside the scope of our current research.

3.2. EXAMPLES OF CODED METALINGUISTIC COMMENTARY RESPONSES. Historical and agency references were present in a variety of forms. Some references to historical usage included specific examples; Shakespeare came up often as a well-known author using singular *they* in canonical Western literature works, as shown in (5). Others instead emphasized how many years singular *they* had been used in English, though these numbers varied across responses. Individual agency similarly appeared in multiple ways. In (6), two types of agency are acknowledged: the agency to choose what language to use, as well as the agency to create new language. Notably, in (7), the respondent puts the agency of the affected group over their own personal feelings about the grammaticality of singular *they*.

- (6) Shakespeare used it [singular *they*] in Hamlet, as did Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales (Cisgender man, 37)
- (7) Someone should be able to decide what terms they like to go by and if some terms don't work for them, they should be free to decide which terms do work for them, whether that be by using terms that already exist or creating new ones (Nonbinary person, 21)

- (8) Part of me doesn't like the subject-verb disagreement [of singular *they*], but if someone wants to be referred to as *they*, I refer to them as *they* [italics added] (Cisgender woman, 33)

4. Results. Out of the 1000 responses received, 912 were coded and 88 were excluded for being blank or containing a simple “yes” or “no.” Of the 912, 234 included a statement that we coded as referencing history or agency and were included in our analysis; 678 did not, and they were excluded as they were not relevant to this part of our research. Demographic questions included the options of “I don’t wish to answer” and “none of these apply”; these responses were omitted when reporting the corresponding demographic information. Of the 234 included responses, the median age was 35. Of those who disclosed race, 80.5% respondents were White, 1.1% were Black, 4.6% were Asian, 3.8% were multiracial, and 6.5% reported other races. Of those who reported gender, 16.3% identified themselves as men, 41.7% identified themselves as women, and 41% identified themselves as nonbinary, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or otherwise beyond the binary of male and female; 56.6% identified themselves as cisgender, 18.7% identified as transgender, and 22.3% responded outside of these categories. Finally, 64.1% reported using a single binary pronoun (e.g. *he* or *she*) to describe themselves and 35.9% reported not using a single binary pronoun, which includes using multiple pronouns of any variety (e.g. *he/she* or *she/they*) or using one or more pronouns that are not *he* or *she* (e.g. *they*, *xe*, or *it*).

Of the 234 relevant responses, 94% (n=221) explicitly expressed support for use of singular *they* and 14% (n=33) explicitly expressed support for the use of neopronouns. Additionally, 44% (n=104) of the 234 responses referenced history, and 67% (n=157) referenced individual agency. Several people referenced support for both pronouns or both forms of advocacy: those people were included in each category they referenced.

For those who made historical references, the median age was 38; 83% were White, 1.8% were Black, 3.6% were Asian, and 6.3% reported other races; 12.7% were men, 38% were women, and 47.5% did not fit these categories. For the respondents who referenced individual agency, the median age was 33; 79.6% were White, 0.6% were Black, 4.4% were Asian, 5% were Hispanic, and 8.4% reported other races; 18.1% were men, 46.2% were women, and 35.6% did not fit these categories.

4.1. ADVOCACY BASED ON PRONOUN TYPE REFERENCED. To determine if relationships existed between certain pronouns and certain forms of advocacy, we ran Chi-Squared Tests of Independence for each pairing of pronouns and advocacy forms (singular *they* and historical references; singular *they* and agency references; neopronouns and historical references; neopronouns and agency references). We found statistically significant relationships between advocacy for singular *they* acceptance and references to history ($p=0.03$) and advocacy for neopronoun acceptance and references to agency ($p=0.01$). We did not find significant relationships between the other two pairings. This indicates that there is a relationship between pronouns and the advocacy styles used to promote them.

4.2. ADVOCACY BASED ON PRONOUN(S) USED BY SPEAKER. Our initial inquiry about identity and advocacy style involved testing relationships between cisgender status and advocacy style (p =not significant for historical references; $p=0.05$ for agency references), which we ultimately determined was likely a proxy for personal pronoun use. We then explored the relationship between the pronouns that respondents reported using for themselves (regardless of which pronouns they supported in their advocacy) and their advocacy style. We sorted the 234 relevant respondents into two categories: those who used single binary pronouns (SBP) ($n=150$) and those who used multiple pronouns and/or pronouns besides *she* or *he* ($n=84$). We ran Chi-Squared Tests of Independence to investigate relationships between SBP use and advocacy form (SBP user and historical references; SBP user and agency references).

We determined that there was a significant relationship between an individual's pronoun category and agency references ($p=0.01$) where those who used SBPs for themselves were referencing agency significantly more frequently than non-SBP users. We also found indication that there may be some relationship between individual identity and historical references, as non-SBP users referenced history more frequently but not significantly ($p=0.06$). We intend to investigate this further in our future research, including if non-SBP use is acting as a proxy for another social factor, such as social network, that has a significant relationship with historical reference.

5. Discussion. Our findings support the notion that not only is there ongoing advocacy for adoption and acceptance of certain gender-neutral pronouns, but that there are specific strategies used to advocate for certain pronouns more frequently than others. Furthermore, it appears that an individual's choice of pronouns for themselves is also related to the ultimate decision of how to advocate.

5.1. SINGULAR *THEY* AS HISTORICAL. The significant relationship between historical justifications and singular *they* suggests that singular *they* is viewed as legitimate in part due to its historicity. There is a strong historical basis for singular *they*, being used in the generic form as early as the 14th century and used in a number of classic works (Baron 2020). Importantly, the presence of accessible examples of singular *they* in historical English permits the argument that its widespread use does not constitute language change, especially if one is willing to disregard the distinction between generic and specific usages. This justification is compatible with linguistic purists' efforts to preserve and idealize old language (Milroy and Milroy 2012). This may explain why people opt to advocate for singular *they* citing history: it is possible that some people use historical references as an advocacy strategy because it is perceived as more effective on linguistic purists, whether or not it is actually compelling to purists. Historical examples appear to legitimize singular *they* while being otherwise in accordance with known patterns of linguistic prestige and purism, which could explain the preference for historical reference advocacy for singular *they* (Busse 2018; Milroy and Milroy 2012).

5.2. NEOPRONOUNS AS LANGUAGE CHANGE. The significant relationship between neopronouns and individual agency is a striking contrast to the historical approach seen with singular *they*

advocacy. Despite neopronouns such as *thon* having existed since the 19th century and being found in multiple dictionaries across the 19th and 20th centuries, it has been shown that neopronoun use is viewed as novel and innovative (Baron 2020; Hekanaho 2022). The historicity of neopronouns is often forgotten, perhaps in part because the prefix “neo” implies temporal newness. The perception of neopronouns as innovative may lead supporters to justify them as a personal agency issue because a historical justification would seem out of place.

An apparent lack of historical foundation forces advocates to confront the matter of language change. Unlike acceptance of singular *they*, where the pronoun could more easily be justified as a gender-neutral solution even by those who resist language change, acceptance of neopronouns requires the presupposition that change is a positive or natural aspect of language. This is reflected in the strategies used in advocacy. Furthermore, neopronouns comprise language change that is inherently coined and promoted by a marginalized group, if not a single individual. Acceptance of such a pronoun, not only one that embodies change but one that embodies bottom-up change to an extreme degree, provides insight into an individual’s beliefs about who controls, or deserves to control, language change. Supporting the agency of a marginalized group to make their own decisions about language shows a prioritization of language as an ever-changing social concept, rather than language as a pre-existing set of rules. Explicit support for new coinage, especially a coinage in a functional category, emphasizes the power of people to decide how language works, especially when they do not feel that existing language does not adequately represent them.

5.3. PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP TO GENDER-NONCONFORMING PRONOUNS. Single binary pronoun (SBP) users appear to more frequently approach gender-neutral pronoun justification from their external perspective. As the non-affected group, the acknowledgment of their own lack of knowledge by putting language decisions in the hands of the affected group is a notable recognition of individual agency. An example of this sentiment is shown in (8), where a cisgender respondent prioritizes the needs of the affected group:

- (9) If trans or gender non conforming people feel the need for neopronouns I would use them
(Cisgender woman, 50)

Importantly, this is a case of the non-marginalized group supporting the desires of a marginalized group over their own opinions about language.

There also appears to be an interesting interaction between non-SBP users and historical references, albeit no significant relationship. For those who do not use SBPs, and are therefore deviating from traditional pronoun norms, it is reasonable to assume that niche historical knowledge will be more relevant and interesting. There is also a chance that people who have to defend their own pronouns will choose advocacy strategies based on what has been effective in changing people’s minds, especially if satisfying linguistic purists is a factor in people’s advocacy considerations. In further research, we are interested to see if social network also plays a role in the choice of justification strategies: that is, if proximity to those with certain knowledge or approaches affects one’s own approach. SBP users with close relationships to

Non-SBP users may also find themselves defending non-normalized pronoun use on a semi-regular basis, which could impact their strategy (Miltersen 2016). For people in a social circle with one or more Non-SBP users, niche knowledge like historical references may be relevant in the same ways they are relevant to Non-SBP users themselves.

6. Conclusions. The advocacy strategies people choose when engaging with language demonstrate larger patterns about how language is conceptualized in social spaces. The very presence of diverse advocacy strategies for new language terms shows that English speakers have different opinions on language change: how it should occur, if it ought to happen at all, and if others can be convinced to support it. The existence of advocacy using historical references demonstrates that at least some view linguistic history as lending legitimacy (or perceived legitimacy) to an argument. If historical references are perceived as effective, it may be because some advocates assume that a pro-language change approach will not work on their audience. This has further implications as to who must be convinced: if arguments compatible with linguistic purism are often utilized, it may indicate that linguistic purists are viewed as a core group that must be convinced.

Individual agency as an advocacy strategy, on the other hand, supports a perception of language as something that can and should change to reflect the lives of language users. As such, it may find less success among people resistant to language evolution. However, the consistent use of individual agency as an advocacy strategy may signal a shift in who is respected as a change-maker in English. Gender non-conforming people, and neopronoun users in particular, are a marginalized minority group. Recognition of the agency of these people to design the English language in a way that works for them, especially by the significant portion of SBP users who referenced agency in their advocacy, is a powerful shift toward recognizing bottom-up language change as a valid process.

6.1. HISTORICAL INCLUSION VERSUS INCLUSION VIA COINAGE. Historical references to gender-neutral language permit and support the argument that English is a gender-inclusive language and has been for centuries. If the language is already perceived as sufficiently inclusive, then there is no conflict between a resistance to language change and a desire to be inclusive. On the other hand, justification via individual agency demands language change *towards* inclusion, often implying or outright stating that the universally agreed-upon features of the language are not sufficiently inclusive as they currently stand. Agency-based advocacy asserts that the English language is not appropriately inclusive, but that it can become so by listening to the choices of the people who are not linguistically represented.

6.2. NEXT STEPS. Moving forward, we intend to continue our research with data collection that specifically targets information about pronoun advocacy, including explicitly asking for opinions on both singular *they* and neopronouns when prompting instances of advocacy. We also intend to expand our future research through two means: interviews to collect more extensive metalinguistic commentary and surveys with adjusted recruitment methods to collect a sample with more men and non-White respondents. Additionally, as the metalinguistic commentary

responses provided on the survey do not necessarily represent actual behavior, interviews will enable us to see how people actually use gender-neutral language in natural conversation, and whether or not this usage reflects their opinions on language. This upcoming research may provide information as to who spends the most time advocating for certain pronouns and the strategies they use, as well as the change over time and effectiveness of these strategies.

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