

A Pragmatic Account of Singular They

Introduction

Though the pronoun “they” and its variants are typically considered “plural” pronouns, their actual usage is significantly more complex; “they” is used to denote referents which are in some sense notionally plural, as well as to refer to singular individuals of unknown, unspecified, or non-binary gender. In this thesis, I discuss the present usage of singular they, and present an analysis which accounts for its distribution and interpretation. I argue for an analysis of third person pronoun distribution grounded in pragmatic reasoning based on Gricean maxims, with variable constraint rankings accounting for inter-speaker variation. Additionally, I investigate “they” as a non-binary pronoun, specifically considering the conditions under which the use of “they” implies that a referent uses “they/them” personal pronouns. Finally, I review other accounts of the modern use of “they” and discuss how my account differs from them, and in particular why I believe a pragmatic analysis of English third person pronoun use is significantly more effective than an account based on syntactic feature matching.

This paper concerns the use of the pronouns “they”, “them”, “their”, “theirs” “themselves” and “themself” in English when used to refer to antecedents with singular verb agreement, a usage which I will refer to as “singular they”. To differentiate between the use of singular denoting no gender information and its use denoting non-binary gender, I will use the terms “epicene they” and “non-binary they” respectively. Additionally, I will use “they” to refer to “they” and all its variants; I will similarly use the nominative form of a pronoun to refer to all variants of it, unless quoting a specific use of a pronoun from a given example. Also, while this

paper argues for and analyzes the use of “they” as not specified for number, I will still refer to “they” as a plural pronoun, and refer to “he”, “she”, and “it” as singular pronouns, as this is the standard terminology and reflects the difference in verb agreement between the two groups. This paper also focuses primarily on third person pronoun use, and as such will often disregard pronouns such as “you”, “I”, and “we” when discussing pronouns. Finally, though other languages may be mentioned where they provide useful insight, this paper is specifically concerned with English grammar, and so any generalizations made about the behavior of pronouns or other linguistic features should be assumed to apply only to English¹.

Gender

Before discussing how singular they is used, it is necessary to discuss the use and meaning of pronouns more generally in regards to how they denote gender. While it is common knowledge that “she” and its variants are feminine pronouns while “he” and its variants are masculine, it is not as evident exactly how it is determined which pronoun is used for which referents. For instance, while pronoun gender in English typically denotes the gender of the referent, there are cases where people will refer to objects with gendered pronouns, such as calling ships “she” as a form of personification. Additionally, sometimes pronouns are used to simply denote femininity rather than female gender, as with gay men often calling each other “she” (Conrod 181). However, for the sake of this thesis, I will focus only on the use of pronouns to denote the referent’s gender, and not any uses which denote gender non-conformity or uses where gendered pronouns are used to personify objects.

¹ And only to the variety of English with which I am familiar.

However, even once we have narrowed our focus down to pronouns which denote referent gender, there is still the issue of defining exactly what gender is and how it is denoted. In a 2019 paper, Lauren Ackerman provides a useful framework for looking at gender in a linguistic context. Ackerman describes three types of gender: grammatical gender, conceptual gender, and bio-social gender. She defines grammatical gender as being made up of formal morphosyntactic features, which allow syntactic gender agreement in some languages; conceptual gender as being made up of speakers' knowledge, assumptions, and associations regarding the gender of various referents; and bio-social gender as people's gender as they experience it in their lives (Ackerman 3). Using this framework, I will treat pronouns as referring to the conceptual gender of a referent. When speakers use a gendered pronoun to describe someone, they base their choice of pronoun on the gender which they perceive the referent as being. This perception can be based on the referent being described with a gendered term, such as "actress" or "sister"; physical cues about referents who are present in the context, such as style of dress and apparent sex; gender stereotypes based on contextual cues about the referent, such as their profession or the gender of a partner of theirs; and actual information from the referent themselves, such as the referent having informed the speaker of their gender or preferred pronouns.

Having given a general definition of gender, it is now also necessary to describe how gender categories are typically used by speakers. Historically, English-speaking cultures have categorized people as "male" or "female", with conceptual gender corresponding exactly with apparent sex. However, in the modern day, we understand gender as independent from sex, as in the case of transgender people, and as such many speakers base their choice of pronouns on cues

about the referent's gender identity rather than their sex. Even more recently, we² have begun to understand gender as not being binary, with some individuals having gender identities outside of "man" or "woman". In using pronouns for these people, it is typical that binary aligned transgender people use binary gendered pronouns according to the gender they identify as, while non-binary people often use "they/them" pronouns or neologistic pronouns like "xe/xem" or "ze/zem". However, gender does not always correlate exactly with pronoun choice, with some non-binary people still using binary pronouns. For the sake of my thesis, I will discuss only pronouns which correspond exactly with gender, with "he" denoting male-identified referents and "she" denoting female-identified referents. As for "they", I will first discuss it as a definite pronoun outside of its use as a non-binary pronoun, and then go on to discuss cases where it conveys clearly non-binary meaning.

Background

Before constructing an account of singular they, it is necessary to acknowledge some of the assumptions upon which the account draws.

The primary linguistic mechanism relevant to the issue of singular they is that of markedness. For this analysis, I am drawing specifically on works such as Sauerland's analysis of the singular as marked, and the plural as being unmarked and deriving its plural meaning through implicature (Sauerland). Such analyses note that the plural can be used in cases where the meaning is in fact "at least one", indicating that the plural need not in fact denote "more than one" entity (Patson 1141). However, if plural forms are not marked for number, then it is

² "We" here being society as a whole, including the culture I am a part of. Some people have been aware of the existence of transgender and non-binary people for a long time, while others deny the existence of these people even today.

necessary to explain how they are often interpreted as meaning “more than one”. This interpretation is achieved through Gricean maxims, another concept which I use as a foundation of my analysis. According to Grice, speakers are expected to abide by the following maxims: quantity (give as much information as necessary but not more than necessary), quality (do not say things which you believe aren’t true or which you do not have evidence for), relation (be relevant), and manner (try to be clear, unambiguous, brief, and orderly) (Grice 1975:45). Grice states that speakers expect each other to follow these rules, and reason about each other’s speech accordingly. In regards to markedness, this means that speakers are expected to use the most informative possible option, provided that it is relevant and provided that they have the necessary knowledge to use it while not disobeying quality. In regards to the plural and the singular as marked or unmarked, this Gricean reasoning is applied to mean that if a speaker uses the weak form (in this case the plural), listeners interpret this as meaning that the more informative alternative (the singular) is untrue, because if it were true the speaker should have used it (Patson 1141).

Pragmatic Pronoun Selection

Although “they” is typically considered a plural pronoun in English, a descriptive analysis of its use shows that speakers commonly use it to refer to antecedents which have singular verb agreement, including those which are conceptually singular (Conrod 81). In fact, among many innovative speakers, including the general speaker community to which I belong, there are relatively few types of referents which singular they cannot be comfortably used with.

In this section I explore the distribution of singular they, and present an analysis accounting for this.

I argue that singular they's distribution can be accounted for by pragmatic factors, making use of the marked/unmarked distinction discussed previously to explain the distribution of singular they. Under my proposed account, "they" is not marked for plurality, and is instead unmarked for number. Though this assumption is largely in keeping with the idea of the plural as unmarked and the singular as marked, it is worth noting that pronouns do not necessarily reflect this division perfectly. Beyond being marked only for singularity or plurality, pronouns also convey gender and animacy information as well as information about person (though as my analysis pertains only to third person pronouns, I will disregard person markedness from this point onward). However, distinctions of gender and animacy are restricted to the singular pronouns "he", "she", and "it", whereas "they" does not directly convey any information about gender or animacy.

Though treating "they" as unmarked for number accounts for the fact that it is able to be used for singular referents, it does not account for why its use with some referents is more common and more comfortable than with others, and why some singular referents don't seem to permit use of "they" at all. Despite the fact that for speakers such as myself, there are more types of referents which "they" can be used to refer to than those which "they" cannot be used with, most referents which allow singular they also allow the use of singular pronouns such as "he", "she", or "it". This presents an issue, as while "they" is unmarked, "he", "she", and "it" are all marked for singularity and some combination of gender and animacy/inanimacy, making the singular pronoun options more informative alternatives than the unmarked "they". As such,

singular pronouns should generally be preferred over “they”, and “they” should only appear instead when the use of a singular pronoun would violate a maxim. However, as I will explain in greater detail when discussing specific uses of singular they, there are several potential ways in which “he”, “she” or “it” might not be pragmatically appropriate, and thus cause speakers to choose “they”.

Some of the most common antecedents for singular they, including the earliest known examples, are antecedents which are in some way plural in their meaning. Despite the fact that for such antecedents the use of “they” is almost certainly motivated by notional plurality of the referent, this still qualifies as singular they under the definition being used for the purposes of this paper because the antecedents take singular verb agreement.³ These notionally plural referents tend to be antecedents such as quantified DPs and DPs conjoined with “or”, as in the examples below:

- (1) Every boy_i’s teacher gave them_i cake.
- (2) Sara or Mary_i left their_i pen here.

In both (1) and (2), the DP which “their” corefers with denotes multiple real world referents, making the DPs notionally plural. For these examples, the singular pronouns “his” and “her”, respectively, are available in place of “their”. However, it is worth noting that these singular pronouns sound significantly worse when not in the same sentence as their antecedents.

³ This is not meant to reflect that a DP’s number feature involved in verb agreement properties and its number feature involved in pronoun agreement properties are necessarily the same or even formally linked. Rather, I base the definition of the term “singular they” on verb agreement of referents because this is the standard usage (likely due to the fact that number-verb agreement properties and number-pronoun agreement are typically treated as the same by grammarians and understood as the same by most non-linguists), and the term “singular they” picks out the cases where this conflation fails.

(1') Every boy's teacher gave him cake. #He thanked his teacher for this.

(2') Sara or Mary left her pen here. #Could you return it to her if you see her?

The strangeness of the pronouns in the second sentences of (1') and (2') indicate that for a singular pronoun to refer to a notionally plural DP, the pronoun must be bound by its referent.

For pronouns referring to non-quantified DPs like in (2'), this requires their DP referent to be c-commanding them - the typical condition for binding. However, quantified DPs have special properties whereby they can bind pronouns that follow in the same phrase regardless of c-command. For both kinds of DP (quantified DPs especially), when the pronoun is in a separate sentence making binding impossible, as in (1') and (2'), a coreferring singular pronoun sounds distinctly out of place. This shows that syntactic factors do have an influence on what pronouns are available, though the influence seems to expand the range of possible pronouns rather than restrict it. As such, in the absence of special syntactic influence, "they" is a significantly better match for these DPs than a singular pronoun despite the DPs having singular verb agreement.

Under the account I propose, this is because "he", "she", and "it" are all marked as singular (something which conflicts with their notional plurality), making "they" a better option presumably because speakers believe it more important to be accurate about the number than to be informative about gender (as already conveyed by the use of "boy" in (1) and the feminine names in (2)). However, when pronouns are in a position commanded by the notionally plural DP, the commanding DP can bind them and permit singular pronouns to be interpreted as referring to multiple people individually. In this case, speakers must make a more complex choice, between the more informative singular pronouns and the plural pronouns which better convey the notional plurality. Additionally, if the gender of the antecedent is unspecified or

mixed, as with DPs like “Every student” or “Sara and John”, they have the added options of using “he or she”, which is informative and accurate but more complex than a single pronoun. In terms of Gricean maxims, the maxims which favor singular pronouns are quantity with regards to gender/number, quality with regards to gender, and manner in avoiding singular they in adherence to prescriptive norms. The maxims which favor “they” are quality with regards to notional number, manner in using a more widely applicable/common form, and manner in avoiding complex phrases like “he or she”. Presumably, speakers vary in terms of which maxims they prioritize, and this results in some speakers using “they” where other speakers use “he”, “she”, or “he or she”.

Another kind of notionally plural DP with which singular they is used is DPs which refer to collections of people as a single whole, as in the examples below:

- (3) Google is releasing their/its new version of Google maps today
- (4) The team celebrated their/its victory

In this case, the choice between “it” and “they” is potentially about both notional plurality and animacy. Because “it” marks both singularity and inanimacy, a referent must be both singular and inanimate for “it” to be fully appropriate. However, the kinds of DPs in (3) and (4), which refer to an organization of many people as a singular whole, are neither fully inanimate nor fully singular. DPs like “Google” and “the team” can be conceptualized as referring to singular and non-human institutions, in which case they can be pronominalized with “it”. However, they can also be thought of as either having notional plurality because they are made up of many individual people, or as being too animate and agentive to be pronominalized with “it”, or both, in which case speakers might decide that “it” is not accurate and default to

“they” instead. As such, the relevant maxim here is quality, and whether a speaker finds it more accurate to characterize the referent as inanimate and singular or as animate and plural.

Though DPs which are notionally plural are the most comfortable and well established referents for singular they, many speakers also accept singular they in reference to an obviously notionally singular individual.

(4) My friend_i said she/they_i really like that artist. Her/their favorite album is the latest one.

(5) The previous_i professor left their laptop here

(6) It seems that Jordan_i dropped their name tag, but I don’t know someone here called Jordan

(7) genericusername71 seems like they really like cats

In the examples above, the referents of singular they are all individual people, yet it does not seem to be necessary to use singular pronouns to refer to them. In examples (5)-(7), it is the case that the speaker likely does not know the gender of the person. In such cases, the choice of singular they could be attributed to speakers following the maxim of quality, and not giving information that they do not have evidence for (though contextual cues combined with gender biases often cause people to jump to conclusions and use gendered pronouns without having solid evidence of a referent’s gender). However, in cases such as (4), it is typically the case that the speaker knows the gender of “my friend”. In such a case, the speaker might be choosing “they” to conceal gender, or simply to avoid including information they consider irrelevant. This kind of choice would be motivated by the maxim of relevance, while the choice of a singular gendered pronoun might be motivated by the speaker viewing gender as relevant, or by them

valuing quantity over relevance. It is also worth noting that in the case of (4), both gendered pronouns and singular they can be used even when “my friend” is not syntactically controlling them. This indicates that unlike in the case of quantified antecedents, ungendered definite DPs do not syntactically influence the pronouns that can be used to refer to them.

Cases where singular they cannot be used are also worth discussing. The referents which are the least acceptable with singular they are singular inanimate DPs, as in the examples below:

(8) #That chair_i needs their_i leg repaired

(9) # I like the idea [of having breakfast for dinner]_i, but my brother thinks they_i’re kind of silly

In (8) and (9), the use of “they” is notably bad. Rather than use singular they, nearly all speakers would choose “it” instead, as “it” reflects the singularity and the inanimacy that these DPs clearly have. This unusual case of singular they being strictly dispreferred is because referents such as “that chair” are entirely singular and entirely inanimate, with no plurality or agency to justify the use of “they”. Additionally, the inanimacy of objects is a significantly less socially meaningful property than the gender of humans, meaning that speakers do not feel the same need to refrain from marking inanimacy to avoid irrelevance or misunderstanding. Using “it” is then the most informative and least ambiguous choice, making it the most preferred by the maxims of quantity and manner. As such, choosing “they” here would be a matter of choosing a form which is strictly less appropriate based on every maxim, so no matter what degree of importance a speaker assigns to each maxim there will never be a reason to prefer “they”.

Non-Binary They

In addition to the cases discussed above, there is also the case of singular they when used with proper names. In such cases, the use of singular they tends to indicate that the referent is non-binary, and for speakers who are unfamiliar with non-binary pronoun use it is simply infelicitous⁴. The difference between singular they with proper names and with other antecedents is shown in the examples below:

- (10) Blue_i left their_i laptop on the desk
- (11) Sara_i left their_i laptop on the desk
- (12) My friend_i left their_i laptop on the desk
- (13) The previous professor_i left their_i laptop on the desk

In the above sentences, the use of “their” in (10) and (11) where the referent is named appears to indicate that the person referred to is non-binary, and personally uses “they/them” pronouns. This inference is present regardless of the apparent gender of the name, though non-traditional and non-strongly gendered names like “Blue” in (10) give a slightly stronger inference. This is because as with many transgender people, non-binary individuals may change their names when coming out to names with gender associations matching their gender identity, and unusual names like “Blue” are a not uncommon strategy for avoiding names with traditional gender associations. However, there are also non-binary people who use names that do have traditional gender associations, so someone having a feminine name like “Sara” in (11) does not rule out the

⁴ There are also speakers for whom such use is unremarkable, and does not indicate non-binary identity. In their dissertation, Kirby Conrod states that in their experience, many interlocutors do not assume non-binary identity when “they” is used with a proper name. Based on my observations, these kinds of speakers are those who are highly comfortable with singular they, often people very active in LGBTQ+ friendly spaces. For such speakers, the use of “they” would be motivated by the same mechanism as the use in (4), where gender is simply assumed to be irrelevant or unknown.

possibility that they are non-binary. Unlike (10) and (11), the use of “their” in (12) and (13) does not give rise to the inference that the referent is non-binary. Rather, this use is similar to that in (4)-(7), conveying little to no information about the personal pronouns of the referent.

Between the examples with a non-binary implication and those without such an implication, the only factor which overtly varies is whether or not the DP to which “their” refers is a proper name. In accounting for this difference in the apparent meaning of “they” when used with proper names as opposed to other antecedents, I argue as previously that “they” is always underlyingly unmarked, and that listeners assume different speaker intentions based on the antecedent the speaker uses, causing them to make different assumptions about the information the use of the pronoun “their” is meant to convey. As such, to understand the reasoning leading to these differing assumptions, we must first consider what speaker intentions cause the choice of a name DP as opposed to a definite DP.

A speaker’s choice of which DP to use to denote a particular entity is influenced in part by the prior contextual knowledge they know the addressee to have. For instance, DPs with the D “the”, such as “the dog” cannot be used in the absence of context establishing which dog is being referred to, context that can come either in the form of prior conversational subject matter or a relative clause giving more information about the DP. In regards to the antecedents in (10)-(13), the relevant difference is between situations in which people may be referred to by their proper name and situations in which they are referred to by a DP which indicates their relation or relevance to the speaker. Generally speaking, proper names are not used unless addressees are already familiar with the person they refer to, a rule which I will refer to as the familiarity requirement. Given this requirement, when a proper name is used, all participants in the

conversation can typically assume that the general facts of the referents identity that make up familiarity with them (including their gender) are known by all other interlocutors. DPs such as “my friend”, on the other hand, will tend to be used when an addressee is unfamiliar with the person being referenced. I argue that this difference in familiarity assumptions between proper names and other DPs is what gives rise to the differing implications “they” can have.

While the choice of a definite DP over a proper name generally indicates that the addressee is unfamiliar with the referent, it is sometimes the case that speakers will use definite DPs to refer to a person the addressee is familiar with for other practical reasons. While proper names are typically more informative than definite DPs when referring to an individual who all conversational participants know the name of, there are cases where a definite DP might serve the speaker’s purposes more than the use of a name. For instance, there are cases where speakers might not want listeners to know who in particular they are referring to, as they believe this might lead listeners to make inaccurate or uncharitable assumptions, or simply distract listeners from the actual point. This reasoning is similar to that which leads speakers to use singular they rather than gendered pronouns when the speaker has the knowledge necessary to accurately use “he” or “she”, as in (13). So, while a speaker using a proper name indicates that all conversational participants are familiar with the person who the name refers to, the absence of a proper name does not necessarily indicate lack of familiarity, but could also be attributed to a lack of speaker transparency.

Given these factors that commonly go into the speaker’s choice of DP, we can start to consider what the listener’s pragmatic reasoning about a statement might look like. In terms of the difference in meaning between “their” in (10) and (11) and “their” in (12) and (13), if

pragmatic inference is what causes the difference in meaning, then something about the conditions under which speakers commonly choose a particular variety of DP must cause listeners to make differing assumptions about why the speaker is using a “they/them” pronoun.

As discussed previously, though gendered pronouns can add information, speakers often intentionally choose “they” despite gendered pronouns being available. These cases require pragmatic justification for why a speaker would choose to omit information. In many cases, omission of information is because such information would add unnecessary length, and violate the maxim of quantity. However, there are also cases where speakers have the option of using more specific terminology without adding length, like the choice between “husky” and “dog”, or “she”/“he” and “they”. Here, the issue becomes about relevancy, and the fact that adding information to the common ground without a clear motivation can distract the listener. For instance, if a speaker says “my cat got chased by a husky the other day”, there is a slight indication that the dog being a husky is relevant, something which might lead listeners to assume that the speaker is making a statement about the nature of huskies, or that the dog being a husky in particular is otherwise an important piece of information. The choice of “he”/“she” over “they” functions somewhat similarly, though likely more weakly given that singular they is less prevalent and more prescribed against as an alternative to singular gendered pronouns than is the case for “dog” as an alternative to “husky”. Nevertheless, given sexist and heteronormative stereotypes, there are plenty of cases where speakers might want to avoid specifying gender lest listeners make unwarranted assumptions, like a female speaker avoiding “he” to refer to a friend they got drinks with (which listeners might interpret as a date) or a speaker talking about someone making a stupid mistake and not wanting to gender the person as “she” in case the

listener makes a sexist assumption about the capabilities of women. So, it is clear that there are cases where speakers might want to avoid gendered pronouns despite having the necessary information to make them viable options, as they want to avoid adding unnecessary information which listeners might incorrectly interpret as relevant, or use as the basis for assumptions the speaker does not want them to make. As such, we can see why “they” can be used like it is in (12) to leave the gender of the referent unspecified without some extra implicature arising from the absence of a gender-specific pronoun.

Now that it has been established why “they” is available as a non-gender specifying option for sentences like (12), we have to consider why its use in sentences like (10) and (11) does create an implicature of gender-specification. We cannot simply say that the difference arises because the antecedents in (12) and (13) are ungendered while those in (10) and (11) are gender specific, as though “Sara” is a typically feminine name, “Chris” can commonly be used for people who use “she/hers” pronouns and people who use “he/him” pronouns, and thus doesn’t denote one particular gender. But, given what we already know about when proper names are chosen, I believe we can explain how the inference of non-binary gender actually arises. According to the reasonings already detailed, when a DP like “Sara” is used, conversational participants can generally assume that all interlocutors are familiar with the referent, and that the speaker is being transparent about the referent’s identity, including their gender. This holds equally true regardless of how ambiguous or unspecified the gender associations of the name are, as the degree of masculinity or femininity of someone’s name only provides useful information about that person’s gender for people who are not already familiar with the person to the point of knowing their gender. In such cases, the familiarity condition

would not be fully satisfied in any case, so the non-binary inference would not hold as strongly. When the familiarity condition is satisfied, however, the use of the name informs the listener of exactly who the referent is, and what their gender is, so there is no reason for the speaker to avoid providing information about gender in their choice of pronoun. Similarly, if a listener already knows a fair amount of information about the person the speaker is talking about, it is unlikely that they will draw unjust conclusions about them based on their gender, as the more information someone already has the fewer unknowns there are for them to jump to conclusions on. This all being the case, listeners are aware that if a speaker refers to someone by name, they will probably also refer to them by their personal pronouns. This means that when a speaker uses “they/them” pronouns for a named antecedent, listeners can assume that those are the referent’s pronouns, and that the referent is non-binary.

Though my account so far has considered only the interpretation of sentences like (10)-(13) under typical conditions, there are exceptional cases where the same facts do not hold. For instance, if (11) were uttered in the context of finding a laptop on the desk with the name “Chris” on it, it could be assumed that neither the speaker nor the listener are in fact familiar with “Chris”, and that as such neither interlocutor has enough information about “Chris” to determine their gender. Given the absence of the familiarity condition (and the transparency condition, as there is not really any information that the speaker can be transparent about by using a proper name) the reasoning established for why a speaker might choose “they” in an utterance like (11) does not apply. In fact, the reasoning in (11) becomes like that described in (13), where “they” is used because the speaker does not have enough information to choose “he” or “she” or non-binary “they”. And indeed, this is the meaning that tends to arise in these

contexts (rare though they are).

Similarly, there are cases where the use of a definite DP can in fact be maximally transparent, where the speaker and the listener both know exactly the person being referred to and have information about their gender, but the speaker uses a definite DP anyways. This would be cases like referring to someone as “the host” at a party, or “the speaker” when the speaker is present, or even “my friend” when the friend is with the speaker. In such cases, the presence of the referent in the immediate context makes information about them and their gender (based on visual cues, which though not a perfect basis for assuming gender are what most individuals tend to use in the absence of explicit specification by the referent) readily available to all individuals in the conversation. However, speakers may refer to them via definite DPs nonetheless because they may have forgotten their name (or may believe that their interlocutor has), or may want to indicate the relation of the person to themselves when introducing them. In these cases, the familiarity requirement does seem to be met, as does the transparency requirement in terms of the person’s gender, so the conditions for non-binary specific “they” are present. And as with our previous example, these cases really are where listeners will tend to infer non-binity.

Another Modern Pragmatic Analysis

Another recent analysis of singular they is from a dissertation by Kirby Conrod on the syntactic and semantic properties of pronouns (Conrod). While Conrod’s analysis of singular they has many similarities to the one I propose, their analysis also takes into consideration many factors which my analysis does not touch on. Like my proposal above, Conrod accounts for the choice of “they” rather than “he”, “she”, or “it” by invoking Gricean reasoning, and stating that

the choice of “they” over a more informative singular pronoun can be motivated by factors such as the speaker considering gender irrelevant, not having enough information, and thus forgoing quantity for the sake of relevance or quality (Conrod 159). Conrod explicitly lays this reasoning out in terms of various constraint rankings of maxims which result in the choice of one pronoun or another, something which my analysis touches on to a lesser degree. However, Conrod goes beyond Gricean maxims, including discussion about how positive and negative face and stance affect the choice of pronouns, as well as discussing the syntactic structures and properties of pronouns in relation to singular they (Conrod).

The Syntactic Alternative

While approaches like Conrod’s and my own account for the data on singular they through pragmatic means, it has also been proposed that the distribution of singular they can be accounted for via syntactic mechanisms. In order to make a thorough case for the pragmatic approach, it is necessary to discuss such syntactic methods and see how they differ. One such relatively current approach is that proposed by Bronwyn Bjorkman (Bjorkman). In her analysis, Bjorkman observes three categories of DP with different acceptability as referents of singular they. Bjorkman notes that while most people accept singular they with quantificational, non-specific, or epicene antecedents as in examples like (14), fewer people accept singular they with definite and specific antecedents as in (15), and most people reject singular they with gender specific DPs and proper names as in (16).

(14) Every woman should know their/her own phone number (Bjorkman 1)

(15) My friend left her/%their sweater here (Bjorkman 5)

(16) a. Janet left her/*their sweater here

b. My aunt left her/*their sweater here

(17) Chris left his/her/%their sweater here (Bjorkman 6).

Based on these distinctions, Bjorkman proposes that for DPs denoting singular human referents, the available gender features are “masuline” and “feminine”, with the corresponding pronouns “he” and “she” (Bjorkman 7). This account sets aside issues of non-binary “they” use, as such use is relatively new and does not yet have a major impact on English grammar as a whole. In this account, as in the pragmatic accounts, “they” is unspecified for gender or number, meaning that in Bjorkman’s syntactic system it occurs when the DP does not have features which require a different singular pronoun. Bjorkman then accounts for the difference in the use of “they” between different DPs by proposing that different DPs have different requirements for the gender features of the pronouns that refer to them. Quantificational and indefinite DPs have gender features which are optionally absent, but require matching with an appropriate pronoun when present. This allows them to match with “he” or “she” when they are marked as masculine or feminine respectively, or with “they” if they are not marked (Bjorkman 6). She accounts for the distribution of pronouns with definite DPs as in (15) by stating that for speakers who find “they” unacceptable, gender features on definite DPs are obligatory and thus gendered pronouns are obligatory, while for speakers who accept both “they” and gendered pronouns, gender features are optional, and thus “they” can be used if gender features are missing. Finally, for gendered

names and gender specific DPs, Bjorkman claims that gender features are always present, meaning that the appropriate gendered pronoun must be used (Bjorkman 10).

While this analysis generally captures the distribution of singular they, it seems to have less explanatory power than the pragmatic approach, while also requiring cumbersome syntactic mechanisms. Additionally, based on my observations and the results of an acceptability study in Kirby Conrod's dissertation, the apparent gender of names does not impact how acceptable it is to use "they" in reference to them (Conrod 81). Regardless of differences in the data, though, the main issue with the syntactic matching analysis is that it does not have a clean account for the fact that in particular contexts, the pronoun matching features of DPs seem to change. This is demonstrated below:

(18) a. # At the farmhouse, the cowgirl left his lasso in the kitchen.

b. At the Halloween party, the cowgirl left his lasso in the kitchen

(19) a. # Chris gave me their purse to hold on to

b. [After picking up a nametag with "Chris" on it] I'd like to get this back to
Chris, but I don't know them.

In (18a), a masculine pronoun referring to a feminine gender denoting DP is infelicitous when the context indicates that "the cowgirl" refers to an actual cowgirl, whereas in (18b) the same DP/pronoun pair is entirely felicitous when the context indicates that "the cowgirl" is referring to a non-cowgirl in a cowgirl costume. In (19a), pairing a proper name with "they" is slightly strange for speakers like myself and many others I have asked, potentially giving rise to an inference that Chris is non-binary. (19b) on the other hand is entirely felicitous, as it is clear that "they" is being used because Chris's gender is truly unknown. While the syntactic account could

account for this variation by making gender features on proper names and gendered DPs optional (as on epicene definite DPs), this still leaves some issues unaccounted for. For instance, if proper names could optionally lack gender features in the same way as definite DPs, the use of “they” for proper names in contexts like (19a) would be equally acceptable as the use of “they” in (15) and (16). This would then make a non-gendered reading accessible, and thereby fail to account for the inference of non-binary identity that exists for many speakers in cases like (19a). To address this, the syntactic account would have to find some way to stipulate that certain DP/pronoun pairings are only available in specific contexts. To do this, it seems unavoidable that pragmatic reasoning would need to be introduced, as the only way to satisfactorily explain why otherwise unavailable DP/pronoun pairs are acceptable only in particular contexts is through the special pragmatic features of those contexts.

While cases like (18) and (19) demonstrate most clearly that context, and thus pragmatics, must affect pronoun choice, this is in fact an issue which any DP with multiple potential gender features creates in the syntactic account. For instance, if a speaker’s grammar allows gender features to be omitted on DPs like “my friend”, then there must be a way for the speaker to determine whether to use “my friend” with feminine features, with masculine features, or with no gender features. For a male or female identified referent, ruling out either masculine or feminine gender is relatively simple, as it just requires ruling out whichever gender the referent is not. However, choosing whether to include gender features in the DP or not requires more complicated pragmatic reasoning. This reasoning would be essentially the same as that employed by speakers choosing between a gendered pronoun and “they” for a referent whose gender is known to them but not to other interlocutors - a matter of weighing the benefit of

gendered pronouns being more informative against the cost of this extra information being potentially irrelevant. In other words, for all types of DPs which can match with both singular pronouns and “they”, a syntactic matching mechanism would still require speakers to use pragmatic reasoning to make a choice between DPs. The only cases in which syntactic matching would be a more efficient approach are for DP types which match with only one type of pronoun. As far as I have identified, the only type for which this is the case is singular inanimates, which the pragmatic approach also deals with fairly cleanly. This issue is not specific to Bjorkman’s approach, but rather is the case for any syntactic mechanism governing third person pronoun matching in English.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented an analysis for the distribution of singular they, and third person pronouns as a whole, based on the pragmatic reasoning of speakers. The primary problem that this paper set out to solve was that of accounting for why, for many American English speakers, singular they is able to refer more comfortably to some referents than others, as well as accounting for how and why the use of singular they implies non-binary identity in only certain circumstances.

In my account, I concluded that “they” is unmarked for gender, number, and animacy, and that speakers use it in conditions where other pronouns fail to satisfy the Gricean maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner to a greater degree than “they” does. Under this framework, variation between singular pronouns and “they” in almost identical conditions can be accounted for by speakers prioritizing different maxims and evaluating maxims differently, while

cases where “they” is not an acceptable pronoun for any speakers are due to cases where all speakers evaluate the use of a singular pronoun as satisfying maxims to a significantly greater degree than “they” would.

In addressing the conditions under which “they” implies that the referent is non-binary, I concluded that “they” implies non-binary identity when speakers have no clear motivation for not using gendered pronouns. Namely, when the referent’s identity is known to both the speaker and the listener. In such a case, the speaker generally has no reason to conceal the referent’s gender to avoid including distracting information or information which listeners might interpret uncharitably, and does have enough information about the referent that using a binary pronoun wouldn’t violate quality if the referent were male or female.

Finally, I briefly reviewed other current accounts for singular they. I first discussed Kirby Conrod’s dissertation, another work which takes a Gricean approach to accounting for singular they, but which also discusses many other factors such as face and stance in pronoun choice. I then reviewed a syntactic account by Bronwyn Bjorkman to provide an example of what a syntactic account for singular they might look like. In doing so, I concluded that a syntactic approach to accounting for the distribution of “they” would necessarily fall short. The only variety of DP/pronoun matching for which a syntactic matching mechanism would be more efficient method is for singular inanimate DPs, as these are the only variety I have identified where no other pronoun is acceptable.

As a whole, I conclude that using Gricean maxims in a constraint ranking model models the distribution of third person pronouns in English relatively neatly and efficiently. However, due to the complex sociological issues of gender with which pronoun use is tied up in, this model

is not perfect. While this paper largely treats gender in terms of distinct categories which are neatly reflected through pronouns, and pronouns as terms which describe exclusively gender, this is not a wholly accurate representation of either gender or pronoun use; a far more complex theory of both subjects is thus necessary to build a more complete model of how speakers match pronouns to referents.

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