

# The future is *they*: the morphosyntax of an English epicene pronoun<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The search for an English singular epicene pronoun dates from at least the 1700s; more than 80 forms have been invented, none of which have taken hold. However, the singular use of *they* is attested since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, though limited until recently to contexts where it is bound by a quantifier, or refers to an individual whose gender is unknown or deliberately not indicated. Increasingly, however, *they* is used for definite animate singular referents, even overtly gendered ones.

Within a realizational approach to morphology, we explore the featural consequences of this expansion in the range of *they*. While intuitively, this seems not to be a major change, it requires significant reorganization of English pronoun features. Interestingly, both before and after the change, *they* is the least marked, or default, pronoun in English. We show how singular *they*, before its range expands, is restricted to contexts where it spells out a bound variable, or where the default form is used to sidestep the gender system entirely. While *he* spells out only ANIMATE, the contrast with FEMININE leads to the insertion, at the interpretive interface, of the enhancement feature [*masculine*]. The increasing obligatoriness of enhancement makes the “neutral” use of *he* impossible.

The expansion of singular *they* produces a different featural system. INANIMATE is marked rather than ANIMATE, and [*masculine*] and [*feminine*] are noncontrastive modifier features. Singular inanimates are referred to by *it*, which spells out INANIMATE, and singular animates are spelled out by the default pronoun *they*, or optionally by *he* or *she*.

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Expansion of *they* thus involves demotion of [FEMININE] from contrastive to modifier status, and reversal of the markedness of the animacy dimension. Interestingly, *it* is the only pronoun whose spellout conditions change. The subtlety of this restructuring may explain why some speakers find the change difficult to learn.

**Keywords:**

English gender, singular *they*, grammatical features, language change

**1. Introduction**

It has long been acknowledged by linguists, grammarians, and the public at large that the English language would benefit from an epicene pronoun, a singular pronoun that could refer to known human individuals without having to specify a binary gender.<sup>2</sup> Currently, the leading contender for this role is *they* (1).

- (1) a. *The professor told me **they** won't be holding office hours this week.*
- b. *The right candidate knows **they** should bring a copy of their resumé.*
- c. *Every author knows **they** should get an early start in the morning.*

*They* has a long history as a singular pronoun in the English language, and has occurred in constructions similar to (1) since at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Singular *they* has, for many centuries, been able to refer to non-specific and quantified individuals. In recent years, singular *they* has expanded to yet another context: it is now also used to refer to specific individuals of known (but not necessarily binary) gender. *They* is not only a popular alternative to “generic” *he* and other more verbose or opaque but less sexist constructions such as *he or she* and *s/he*, but it is

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<sup>2</sup> A binary gender system contains only two options: *masculine* or *feminine*. In many societies, this is assumed to correspond both to the genders *man* and *woman* and the sexes *male* and *female*, respectively.

also the personal pronoun of reference<sup>3</sup> for many non-binary individuals – those whose gender identity is not, or is not exclusively, masculine or feminine. Yet not all speakers judge this recent innovation to be grammatical, even if they would not object to singular *they* in sentences like (1) and would produce similar examples natively. We argue that this resistance can, at least in part, be attributed to a grammatical change in progress. In this paper, we advocate for singular *they*, showing how this legitimate grammatical change can be accounted for in feature-geometric terms,<sup>4</sup> and what it means for the English pronominal system – and the small set of English nouns that may also carry gender features – as a whole. While this change may take time for some speakers, it is by no means insurmountable, and is either complete or well underway for an increasing number of speakers.

In contrast to proper names or definite descriptions, pronouns are grammatical elements, whose interpretable content is specified entirely in terms of (usually) contrastive features.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the addition of a new member to the class would of necessity have consequences for the structure of the system as a whole. *They*, however, is not a new member of the English pronoun system, but an existing one that has simply expanded into a new context – that of being able to refer to singular, definite, specific referents. This raises a pertinent question: what are the featural consequences of expanding the range of *they* to include specific individuals of known

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<sup>3</sup> We use the term *personal pronoun of reference* instead of *pronoun of preference*, since the term *preference* implies a degree of optionality between forms: for an individual who uses *they* as their personal pronoun, frequently neither *he* nor *she* is acceptable at all. In such instances the term *pronoun of preference*, wrongly suggests that *they* is simply preferred over other alternatives.

<sup>4</sup> The theoretical status of feature geometries has been challenged by Harbour and Elsholtz (2012), Harbour (2016), and Cowper and Hall (2017). Nothing in this paper hinges on whether dependencies among interpretable formal features derive from a feature geometry or from a contrastive hierarchy, as Cowper and Hall (2017) propose; for clarity we use the more widely known of the two approaches.

<sup>5</sup> See section 3 for an important instance of the non-contrastive use of features.

(but not necessarily binary) gender? Intuitively, this should not constitute a major change in the system, but as we intend to show, it does require a significant reorganization of English pronoun features. We hope that in showing what is involved in expanding the range of *they* in this fashion, we will both acknowledge the difficulty some speakers experience in recognizing and adopting the newer usage, and inspire speakers to overcome the surmountable challenge of acquiring the new system.

## **2. Singular epicene pronouns in the history of English**

### **2.1 Native and innovative forms**

Historically there have been at least two singular epicene pronouns native to English, in some use from the 13th to 14th centuries: *(h)a*, a reduced form of the Anglo-Saxon masculine and feminine pronouns *he* and *heo*; and *ou*, a later form derived from *(h)a* (Baron 1986: 201).

Vestiges of these forms still exist in some British dialects, including *hoo* for *she*, which occurs in Yorkshire English (Orton, Halliday & Barry 1962), and *er* for either *he* or *she* in some West Country dialects (Hughs, Trudgill & Watt 2012:35). However, these forms remain strictly regional and have not undergone wider diffusion.

The search for a productive English singular epicene pronoun has concerned many linguists and grammarians since at least the early 1700s (Baron 1981:88). The desire for a gender-neutral pronoun was driven, in large part, by feelings of inadequacy; many scholars expressed the sentiment that English was limited by the necessity to specify antecedent gender. Some even expressed surprise that an epicene pronoun had not already emerged from the language on its own, as a natural evolution: “according to the established theories it should have long since grown on our speech, as the tails grew off the monkeys” (Bonaparte Brown 1878: 639–640). As Jespersen (1924: 27, emphasis added) noted:

Most English pronouns make no distinction of sex: *I, you, we, they, who, somebody*, etc. And yet, when we hear that Magyar, and, indeed, **the great majority of languages outside the Arian and Semitic world, have no separate forms for the masculine and feminine pronouns** of the third person, that is, make no distinction between *he* and *she*, our first thought is one of astonishment; we fail to see how it is possible to do without this distinction. But **if we look more closely we shall see it is at times a great inconvenience to be obliged to specify the sex of the person spoken about.**

Advocates of pronominal innovation also recognized another problem with the English third-person pronouns, namely, that they did not lend themselves to generic contexts in a fully representative fashion. Jespersen (*ibid*) acknowledges this sexist bias when he adds:

I remember once reading in some English paper a proposal to use the word *thon* as a person pronoun of common gender; if it was substituted for *he* in such a proposition as this: "It would be interesting if each of the leading poets would tell us what he considers his best work," ladies would be spared the disparaging implication that the leading poets were all men.

The traditional response to this disparity of reference was that the so-called "epicene *he*" was the only recourse, but this position was not a unanimous one. In an attempt to resolve these issues, academics and laypeople alike began proposing additional alternatives. Numerous neologistic forms were put forward, a sample of which are presented in Table 1. Generally, these were constructed based on similarity to existing pronouns in the language (e.g. *hi, ip*) or on a combination of existing lexical items (e.g. *hiser, thon, fm*).

Table 1: Some neologistic epicene pronouns of English

NOM	ACC	GEN	REFL	Formation process	Source
		<i>hiser</i>	<i>hyserself</i> <i>hymerself</i>	Blending ( <i>his</i> + <i>her</i> )	Various, ca. 1850
<i>thon</i>	<i>thon</i>	<i>thons</i>	<i>thonsel</i>	Clipping ( <i>that</i> + <i>one</i> )	Converse (1884)
<i>hi</i>	<i>hem</i>	<i>hes</i>		Neologism, similarity to <i>he</i> , <i>she</i> paradigm	Williams (1884)
<i>ip</i>		<i>ips</i>		Neologism, similarity to <i>it</i>	Carleton (1884)
<i>ir</i>	<i>im</i>	<i>iro</i>		Neologism, similarity to “Germanic roots” of English	Molee (1888)
<i>fm</i>	<i>shim</i>	<i>shis</i>	<i>shimself</i>	Neologism, blending of <i>he</i> , <i>she</i>	Kay (1972)
<i>z(i)e</i>	<i>zim</i>	<i>zir, hir</i>	<i>zirself</i>	Borrowing (German <i>sie</i> )	Various (1972)
<i>yo</i>	<i>yo</i>			Neologism	Stotko & Troyer (2007), ca. 2004

Resistance to aspirants like these was strong, and they drew no small amount of ridicule.

Though more than 80 new epicene pronouns have emerged over the years, few have included complete paradigms, as evidenced by the gaps in the table above. Some, such as *hiser*, seemed to have been created solely for specific cases, such as in generic genitive constructions. Others may not have been created for widespread adoption at all, but as a literary challenge to conventional ways of representing gender in language, as often seen in much feminist fiction. Whatever their advantages or disadvantages, however, except within some smaller speech communities, such proposals have generally failed to take hold.

## 2.2 Singular *they*

The status of pronouns as a closed class of functional items may suggest that they are more resistant to change, but this is not necessarily the case. In fact, the social significance of

personal reference may make pronouns particularly susceptible to modification, especially in response to societal and ideological changes (Bodine 1975:130). This has certainly been true for singular *they*, the target of great prescriptivist ire but nonetheless a longstanding contender for the role of English epicene pronoun. Despite being treated as a recent innovation, singular *they* is attested in English since at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Balhorn 2004) and has appeared in the published works of nearly every famous writer since, including Shakespeare, Austen, Carroll, and many others.

- (2) a. *There's not **a man** I meet but doth salute me / As if I were **their** well-acquainted friend.* (William Shakespeare, 1623, *A Comedy of Errors*).
- b. *Everybody was punctual, **everybody** in **their** best looks: not a tear, and hardly a long face to be seen.* (Jane Austen, 1815, *Emma*)
- c. *But how can you talk with **a person** if **they** always say the same thing?* (Lewis Carroll, 1871, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*)

The examples in (2) are largely representative of some of the historical constraints on the use of singular *they*. In English spoken up to and including the 20<sup>th</sup> century, singular *they* typically occurred in four contexts: it could be bound by a quantified antecedent (3), refer to an individual of unknown (but assumed) binary gender (4), refer to an individual of known (binary) gender which the speaker does not wish to indicate (5), or, later, to refer to an otherwise generic, non-specific antecedent (6). In short, singular *they* was licit in contexts where the gender of the antecedent was either unknown or omissible for discourse-pragmatic purposes.

- (3) a. *If **anyone** comes to the door, tell **them** to go away.*
- b. ***No mother** should be forced by federal prosecutors to testify against **their** child.* (Billy Martin, L.A. Times, 1998).
- (4) *I heard they hired **a new teacher**. I wonder which grade **they**'ll be assigned to.*
- (5) ***My best friend** called up and said **they** needed to go to Montreal tomorrow.*
- (6) ***The perfect student** always finishes **their** homework.*



The use of singular *they* in these contexts predates the use of epicene *he*, which did not surface in English until the eighteenth century (Bodine 1975:134). At this time, grammarians launched their first attacks on *they*, in condemnatory tones that would be entirely at home in some modern-day English classrooms. But the singular *they* in use up to and including the 20<sup>th</sup> century had its limitations. Though it is by no means recently introduced into the English language, it has only recently extended beyond the contexts in which it has occurred for centuries: singular *they* could not, until the present day, refer to specific, definite antecedents (7a), and especially not ones that are markedly gendered, such as some proper given names (7b).

- (7) a. Ask **Pat** if *they* forgot **their** wallet.  
b. When **Arthur** arrives, please ask **them** to fill out this form.

This final point is a critical one in the contemporary context. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is increasing visibility of non-binary individuals – individuals who identify with neither masculine nor feminine gender, or who identify with both, and who may use singular *they* as their personal pronoun of reference in the same way that binary-gender individuals may use the forms *he* or *she*. Indeed, some such individuals have names that, like *Arthur* in (7b), are felt by many to be markedly gendered. Examples (3)–(6) all show instances of *they* in non-specific contexts, where the presence of *they* (or perhaps more accurately, the absence of *he* or *she*) leads to an interpretation of indeterminate gender. But given the prevalent cultural assumption that all individuals can be identified as falling on one side or the other of a binary gender distinction, sentences like (7) can pose a challenge to even the most well-intentioned listener in referring to a specific, definite individual whose gender is seemingly apparent and unknown at the same time.

Given the understanding that *they* has indeed, and for good reason, expanded beyond the contexts laid out in (3)–(6), why are sentences like (7) so difficult for some speakers to acquire? Our hypothesis is that there is something in the featural representation of English pronouns that makes the extension of singular *they* to (7) challenging, as opposed to – or perhaps in some cases in addition to – something in the entrenched prejudices of speakers of English. Not only are there individuals who use *they* as their pronoun of reference, but there are also speakers who consider (7) to be perfectly acceptable whether or not they also use singular *they* to refer to themselves. Our intention here is to establish what changes in featural representation the pronoun *they* has undergone from pre-21<sup>st</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century English, and to demonstrate precisely what systemic reorganization of the pronominal feature system is required for speakers to consider this new use of *they* to be grammatical. We also attend to the fact that, as argued by Bjorkman (2016, 2017), gender features are not represented only on pronouns: there are a number of given names, kinship terms, and professional titles that are also associated with gender features, making the co-indexing of these nouns with singular *they* marked (or even unacceptable) for some speakers. However, this markedness/unacceptability is not a universal judgement, suggesting that the possible use of singular *they* to refer to definite, specific antecedents dovetails with an attrition of nominal gender features. This may explain why the new context for singular *they* can initially be difficult for some speakers to acquire: the recent broadening of the use of *they* is a change with consequences beyond the pronominal system.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

We take a realizational approach to morphology. In particular, we assume a version of Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993, Marantz 1997), where the syntactic component operates on structures consisting only of formal features, which may be either

interpretable or uninterpretable. In this paper, we are concerned specifically with the interpretable features of English pronouns, and the way they combine to produce the meanings they do.

Vocabulary items, i.e., the phonological realizations of nodes in the syntactic structure, are inserted post-syntactically. A vocabulary item may be inserted only if it bears a (possibly proper) subset of the features borne by the node it spells out. Since vocabulary items can therefore be underspecified relative to the node they spell out, it is possible that more than one vocabulary item may be eligible for insertion in a particular case. When that happens, the competition between them is resolved by the Subset Principle (Anderson 1992: 133, cited in Halle and Marantz 1993: 131). This is essentially a version of the Elsewhere principle (Kiparsky 1973, cf. Anderson 1992: 162), in that the vocabulary item bearing the largest subset of what is being spelled out (in other words, the most specific, or the best fit) will block the insertion of a less specific item.

In the case of open-class lexical elements like *house* or *swim*, the purely lexical meaning is carried by a *root*, which combines with a category-determining head like *n* or *v*. We assume, following Arad (2005), Borer (2005a,b) and Harley (2005) that roots themselves have no inherent categorial specification, and that the content of a root is invisible to the syntax. Since the focus of this paper is on a closed-class category lacking lexical roots, we will have nothing further to say about roots: we assume that the meaning of grammatical elements like pronouns and determiners is entirely determined by the interpretable formal features that make them up. Following Wiltschko (2008), we assume that these formal features may be either contrastive or. The difference between a contrastive feature and a modificational one arises when the feature is absent from a given representation. The absence of a contrastive feature *F*, in a context where *F*

could have appeared, gives the interpretation ‘not F’, while the absence of a modifier feature has no interpretive consequences. Since pronoun vocabulary items spell out representations consisting only of formal features, the choice of which pronoun to use is determined by the formal features borne by the node being spelled out, the available vocabulary items and the features they bear, and the subset principle.

A change in pronoun usage thus implies a change in the grammatical system of the language. There are four ways the system could change, one or more of which could be at work when such a change takes place. These are listed in (8).

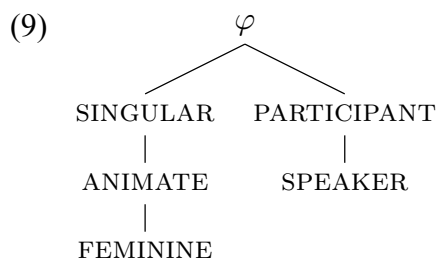
- (8) Possible causes of change in pronoun usage
- a. A change in the set of formal features the language makes use of
  - b. A change in the status of one or more of the formal features the language uses
  - c. A change in the set of vocabulary items the language has
  - d. A change in the feature specification of one or more of the vocabulary items

The changes we describe in this paper instantiate the first, second, and fourth of these possibilities.

## 4. English pronouns

### 4.1 Before

As a starting point, we assume the feature geometry in (9) as the representation of a fairly conservative 20th-century English pronoun system.  $\varphi$  represents the syntactic head that will be spelled out by a pronoun form.



In (8), all of the features are contrastive. In other words, the absence of FEMININE gives an interpretation of “not FEMININE”, and the absence of ANIMATE<sup>6</sup> gives an interpretation of “not ANIMATE”, etc. We take the person features on the right branch from Harley and Ritter (2002) for convenience<sup>7</sup>; nothing in this paper hinges on the specific features of person (for another approach, see Harbour 2016).

Dominance in the tree structure expresses a dependency relation. A dominated feature can only appear if the feature dominating it is also present. In other words, the presence of ANIMATE in the system in (9) implies the presence of SINGULAR. Essentially, the structure in (9) claims that the gender properties ANIMATE and FEMININE are contrastive only for singular non-participant pronouns in English; plural third-person pronouns (and all participant pronouns) lack gender/animacy specification completely.

The structure in (9) is spelled out by the vocabulary items listed in (10).

- (10) a. *she* <=> [FEMININE]  
 b. *he* <=> [ANIMATE]  
 c. *it* <=> [SINGULAR]  
 d. *I* <=> [SINGULAR, SPEAKER]  
 e. *we* <=> [SPEAKER]

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<sup>6</sup> We use the term *animate* here for convenience; in fact, it should be interpreted as a less inclusive property, including human beings (except for small babies who are sometimes referred to with *it*), and some animals – usually pets – that are typically referred to with pronouns like *he* and *she*. The boundary between those entities characterized as ANIMATE and those not so characterized is somewhat vague, and can vary from speaker to speaker. Nothing in this paper hinges on an exact definition of this property.

<sup>7</sup> We assume that the semantic interpretation of PARTICIPANT includes something like sentience, which would thus semantically imply something like humanness or animacy, but participants are not separately specified for the formal feature ANIMATE.

f. *you*  $\Leftrightarrow$  [PARTICIPANT]

g. *they*  $\Leftrightarrow$  [ $\varphi$ ]

In this system, *they* is the so-called default vocabulary item, in that it is specified for no features other than  $\varphi$ . In principle, *they* is thus eligible to spell out any version of  $\varphi$  that the syntax generates. It is only the existence of more highly specified items like the ones in (10a–f) that prevents *they* from being used to spell out pronouns of all persons and numbers.

The feature geometry in (9) instantiates a contrastive, ternary gender/animacy system, based on the contrastive features ANIMATE and FEMININE. A pronoun referring to a non-feminine animate entity should thus be spelled out as *he*, the vocabulary item carrying the feature ANIMATE. This is the traditional “epicene *he*” alluded to by Jespersen above. However, *he* is not generally interpreted as inclusive. It has been shown experimentally that the use of *he* in generic contexts leads to the interpretation of a male antecedent more often than not (MacKay & Fulkerson 1979, Martyna 1970, Gastil 1990, Miller & James 1999, *inter alia*). Why should this be? Why, for example, doesn’t *he* refer to the entire spectrum of non-feminine genders? We propose that the contrast between [ANIMATE, FEMININE] and [ANIMATE] is subject to *interpretive enhancement*, originating in a (false, but prevalent) presupposition that animate entities belong to one of only two genders, masculine and feminine. While MASCULINE is not a contrastive feature active in the conservative 20th-century system outlined in (9), it is added to [ANIMATE] at semantic interpretation if FEMININE is not specified. This process of interpretive enhancement is adapted from work in phonetics and phonology, where it has been argued that there is a process of phonetic enhancement (Stevens & Keyser 1989, Hall 2011). Phonetic enhancement

applies to the output of the phonology, adding features at phonetic implementation so as to maximize the phonetic distance between phonologically contrasting segments.<sup>8</sup>

While the results of phonetic enhancement are overtly observable in the phonetic output, and cannot be assigned by the hearer if the speaker has not produced them, interpretive enhancement is less obvious. In particular, it can be applied by the hearer even if the speaker had no intention that it should be applied, and it can be omitted by the hearer even if the speaker had intended it. Given the experimental results referred to above, however, it seems that the application of interpretive enhancement with [MASCULINE] is increasingly obligatory, though some speakers insist that it is not. It is clearly not intended in (11), for example – a pair of definitions from the otherwise heteronormative appendix on sex education in the early 1970s *International Webster New Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language & Library of Useful Knowledge* (indices added).<sup>9</sup>

- (11) a. Jealousy: “A jealous person<sub>i</sub> fears that his<sub>i</sub> sexual partner<sub>j</sub> might lose interest in him<sub>i</sub> and turn his<sub>j</sub> attention to other people or other matters.”
- b. Crush: “An adolescent<sub>i</sub> who falls in love for the first time tends to project his<sub>i</sub> own image of an ideal partner on the beloved person<sub>j</sub> who<sub>j</sub> therefore appears surprisingly familiar and trustworthy. He<sub>j</sub> seems to fulfill the lover's<sub>i</sub> every desire to be understood and cared for.”

Based on the target audience and the content of the remainder of the volume, it is highly unlikely that the authors of these definitions were describing same-sex relationships. Therefore, the interpretive enhancement of generic *he* with [MASCULINE], though providing such a reading, is clearly not intended by the authors, though many readers apply it. In other words, with

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in a language with a two-way vowel height distinction based on [±HIGH], [−HIGH] vowels are frequently enhanced with [+LOW]. This has been proposed as the reason vowel inventories like {i, a, u} are much more common than inventories like {i, e, o}. See Hall (2011) for a discussion of the role of enhancement in the phonetic realization of phonemic inventories.

<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Daniel Currie Hall for bringing these examples to our attention.

respect to enhancement, what the speaker says is not necessarily what the hearer hears.

Consequently, *he* is not reliably epicene.

We now return to the matter of singular *they* in (12)–(15), repeated from (3)–(6) above. First, let us consider from a formal perspective how the uses of singular *they* in (12)–(13) differ from the one in (15), and why (12)–(13) seem to present fewer difficulties for some speakers than do (14) and (15).

- (12) a. *If **anyone** comes to the door, tell **them** to go away.*  
b. ***No mother** should be forced by federal prosecutors to testify against **their** child.*  
(Billy Martin, L.A. Times, 1998).
- (13) *I heard they hired **a new teacher**. I wonder which grade **they**'ll be assigned to.*
- (14) ***My best friend** called up and said **they** needed to go to Montreal tomorrow.*
- (15) ***The perfect student** always finishes **their** homework.*

The pronouns *them* and *their* in (12) are bound by the quantified DPs *anyone* and *no mother* respectively. We assume, standardly, that pronouns bound in this way are interpreted only through the quantified expressions that bind them, and thus function semantically as bound variables. One possible account is that bound-variable pronouns have no interpretable  $\phi$ -features of their own. What this means is that when they are spelled out with vocabulary items specified for number and gender, as in (16), they have acquired these features by virtue of their structural relation with the antecedent. However, as can be seen from (12b), agreement is not obligatory, and the default pronoun *they* can be used even with a lexically gendered antecedent.

- (16) ***No mother** should be forced to testify against **her** child.*

The situation in (13) is slightly different. First, the pronoun *they* is in a sentence subsequent to the antecedent *a new teacher*. Since the pronoun is therefore not c-commanded by its antecedent, it cannot be treated as a bound variable (Moulton and Han, to appear). As illustrated



in (17), a pronoun not c-commanded by a quantified DP cannot be understood as bound by it, and thus must have interpretable features of its own.

- (17) a. \**I don't know if **anyone**<sub>i</sub> will apply for the job. If **they**<sub>i</sub> do, we should interview **them**<sub>i</sub>.*
- b. *I don't know if **anyone** will apply for the job. If **anyone** does, we should interview **them**.*

The challenge with (13) is that the identity, and thus the gender, of the antecedent *a new teacher* is unknown, even if one were to assume a binary view of animate gender. In (13), then, *they* is being used as an alternative to the supposedly epicene use of *he*. Since the gender of the antecedent is unknown, speakers for whom interpretive enhancement of *he* is obligatory have no option but to use a less-specified pronoun. *A priori*, there seem to be two possibilities: *it* and *they*. As described in (10) above, *it* is specified as SINGULAR, while *they* has no marked features at all. By the Subset Principle, we might therefore expect to find *it* rather than *they* in (13).

Again, we ask why this is not the case. The problem with using *it* to refer to singular animate individuals arises from the contrastive property of the feature ANIMATE among singular non-participant pronouns. A pronoun structure specified as SINGULAR contrasts with one specified for both SINGULAR and ANIMATE. Assuming a binary view of semantic animacy, a singular entity is either animate or inanimate. This leads to the interpretation of *it* as inanimate in the absence of a marked ANIMATE feature.<sup>10</sup> Just as *he* is interpreted (via interpretive enhancement) as masculine because of the contrastive absence of FEMININE, *it* is interpreted as inanimate because of the contrastive absence of ANIMATE. This line of argument raises another question, however. Why is *they* not also ill-formed in this situation? The fully unspecified *they*

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<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, if semantic animacy is not seen as binary, then the obligatory interpretation of *it* as referring to inanimate beings could result from interpretative enhancement.

contrasts with *it*, which is specified as SINGULAR. Indeed, for many speakers a sentence like (18), uttered out of the blue, strongly receives a plural interpretation.

(18) *They will be arriving at 7 p.m.*

While interpretive enhancement and contrastive interpretation is essentially obligatory for all pronouns except *they*, the system requires a truly default pronoun that can be used when no other pronoun can express the intended meaning. Since the least-specified vocabulary item is *they*, it is plausible to assume that these interpretive processes are not obligatory with *they*.

Turning now to (14), we have a case where the gender of the antecedent *my best friend* is presumably known to the speaker, but possibly not to the hearer. A sentence like (14) suggests a number of possible interpretations: the referent does have binary gender, but the speaker does not wish to disclose it for whatever reason; the referent does not have binary gender, and the speaker is using *they* (rather than *he*, for example) so as not to trigger interpretive enhancement and suggest that the referent is male; or the referent wishes to be referred to by *they*, whatever their gender may be. Sentences like (14) clearly show that speakers can use *they* to refer to individuals of whose gender is known to the speaker and may indeed be binary. Why, then, do speakers find (15) so much less natural?

Bjorkman (2016, 2017) proposes that a proper name like *Arthur* has its own gender features, and that pronouns with these kinds of nouns as antecedents must agree with them in gender just as pronouns agree with their antecedents in animacy and number. This, according to Bjorkman, explains why sentences like (19a) are considered ungrammatical for the speakers she consulted,<sup>11</sup> while sentences like (19b) receive variable judgements.

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<sup>11</sup> Bjorkman states that these kinds of sentences are categorically ungrammatical, but neither author of this paper shares that judgement.

(19) a. % *When **Arthur** arrives, please ask **them** to fill out this form.*

b. *Ask **Pat** if **they** forgot **their** wallet*

While *Arthur* in (19a) has masculine gender features that make co-indexing with *they* marked, *Pat* in (19b) is ambiguous for gender, and *they* is therefore less conspicuous. This explanation is extended to the remainder of the small set of English nouns that still seem to bear gender features: gendered kinship terms (*brother, sister, mother, father, etc.*) and feminine profession terms (*actress, waitress, stewardess, etc.*). We will only discuss proper names at length here, as there are pragmatic reasons why *they* occurs infrequently with either gendered kinship terms or feminine profession terms. First, many non-binary individuals elect to use either existing non-gendered kinship terms such as *sibling* or *parent*, or one of many other innovative epicene terms like *nibling* or *mapa*. Many users of *they* also avoid using gendered professional terms, nouns which are in fact already on the decline: lexical replacement of forms like *stewardess* and *waitress* with gender-neutral terms like *flight attendant* and *server* has long been underway as part of a broader attempt to reduce sexist language. In short, for many non-binary individuals, the need for non-gendered language extends beyond their pronoun of reference, making the question of coreference between singular *they* and a gendered common noun somewhat otiose.<sup>12</sup> However, while professional titles often come with other epicene alternatives, the same is not true of all kinship terms. While some non-binary speakers use creative means to avoid gendered nouns, many are perfectly content with what is already available in English. Regardless, based on the speakers that Bjorkman interviewed, it seems that there do remain certain nouns that pose a problem for many speakers, and there exists a general impression that *they* cannot corefer with

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<sup>12</sup> Unless, of course, the goal is for *they* to become the only singular pronoun of reference for animates, in which case it would undoubtedly need to be able to corefer with all noun subjects. However, we do not advocate for this here: for many individuals, especially those who have had to work hard to have their gender recognized, *he* or *she* are just as important as *they*.

these forms. In proposing that these nouns bear (contrastive) gender features that must be agreed with, Bjorkman addresses the question of what makes using *they* in these contexts so difficult to acquire.

We would like to turn the question around, and ask what the feature geometry of English pronouns would look like if (16), as well as the sentences in (20) below, were perfectly acceptable, while *he* and *she* could also still be used in referring to singular animate individuals of known binary gender. This roughly describes the intuitions of the two authors of this paper, as well as many people of our acquaintance. Let us assume that as before, *it*, but not *they*, is used to refer to singular non-animate individuals; (21a) is thus ungrammatical, and the well-formedness of (21b) and (21c) depend on the status the speaker accords to birds and their cat.

- (20) a. My sister<sub>i</sub> said that they<sub>i</sub> were taking their driving test today.  
b. If Kelly's mother<sub>i</sub> shows up, please offer them<sub>i</sub> a drink.  
c. Uncle Pat<sub>i</sub> likes to talk about when they<sub>i</sub> were a student.
- (21) a. \* I put my notebook<sub>i</sub> somewhere, and now I can't find them<sub>i</sub>.  
b. % A bird<sub>i</sub> landed on the feeder, but they<sub>i</sub> flew away when the cat arrived.  
c. % My cat, Billy<sub>i</sub>, howled at the door all morning, but they<sub>i</sub> wouldn't go outside.<sup>13</sup>

In such a system, *they* can refer to any animate singular entity regardless of gender. We can also interpret from this that speakers who can use this form have lost the contrastive gender features on previously gendered English nouns. The use of *he* and *she* is optional, while *it* remains contrastively distinct from *he*, *she*, and *they*. We are acquainted with a number of people who use pronouns in exactly this way. Whether or not the attrition of gender features on nouns

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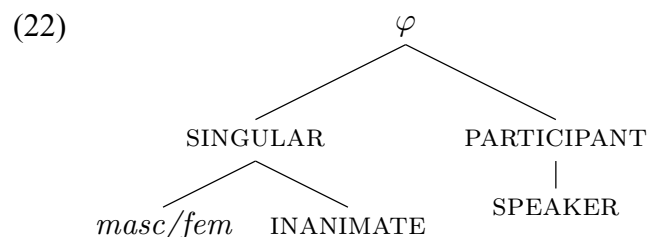
<sup>13</sup> As mentioned in an earlier footnote, the exact semantic interpretation of the animacy distinction in pronouns is not entirely clear. While some speakers accept (21c), others report a clear judgement that *they* cannot be used to refer to a single animal.

preceded or followed the introduction of non-binary singular, definite, specific *they* is an empirical question. We speculate that this may be a relatively straightforward consequence of acquiring non-binary *they*: since the exclusive use of the singular pronouns *he* and *she* rests upon the cultural assumption that all persons can be categorized according to a gender binary, the acquisition of singular *they* (for example, in the context of meeting a person who uses this pronoun) may act to erode this assumption. This may be especially true if a speaker meets a non-binary person whose name is canonically gendered, such as *Arthur*. Put simply, it is not a great conceptual leap from “pronouns need not have gender” to “nouns need not have gender.”

Let us now consider how the features of number, gender, and animacy are structured in such a grammar. For convenience, we refer to this variety as *I21C*, for the *Innovative 21st Century* system.

#### 4.2 After

We propose the feature structure in (22) for I21C English pronouns.



The vocabulary items spelling out (22) are presented in (23), with the changes represented in bold.

- (23)
- a. *she* <=> [**feminine**]
  - b. *he* <=> [**masculine**]
  - c. *it* <=> [**INANIMATE**]
  - d. *I* <=> [**SINGULAR, SPEAKER**]

- e. *we* <=> [SPEAKER]
- f. *you* <=> [PARTICIPANT]
- g. *they* <=> [ $\emptyset$ ]

There are several differences between this system and the one presented in the previous section. First, the marked feature ANIMATE has been lost, and INANIMATE is now the marked pole of the animacy opposition. It is a contrastive feature in the system, and its absence can thus trigger contrastive interpretation as animate. Second, the status of *masculine* and *feminine* has changed: they are no longer contrastive features in the system. Rather, they are optional modifier features (Wiltschko 2008). As modifiers, they can be used when appropriate to add information about the referent, but they are never necessary. Since they are modifiers, rather than contrastive features, their absence cannot trigger interpretive enhancement. Simply put, there is no systematic gender contrast to be enhanced.

Notice that there is no VI spelling out SINGULAR alone. A non-participant singular pronoun not marked as INANIMATE, and not modified by *masculine* or *feminine*, will therefore be spelled out by the default VI *they*. The interpretation of *they* depends on whether SINGULAR is also present: if it is, then the absence of INANIMATE will trigger contrastive interpretation as animate, ruling out sentences like (21a). If SINGULAR is absent, then animacy is completely irrelevant: *they* is used for non-participant plurals regardless of animacy.

The system just outlined sets the stage for *they* to take over as the pronoun to use for singular human individuals regardless of gender. Indeed, this seems to be exactly analogous to what happened in the late 20th century with the title *Ms*. In the 1970s, *Ms* was used for women of unknown marital status (and was insisted upon by women who did not wish to disclose their marital status). It was not generally considered correct to use *Ms* to address or refer to a woman of known marital status, a fact that many women found intensely irritating at the time. A

generation later, marital status is no longer contrastive, and *Ms* has taken over from *Miss* and *Mrs* as the ordinary title to use for female individuals, though both of the older terms remain available for those who wish to use them.<sup>14</sup>

It seems, then, that the shift towards singular, definite, specific *they* is a change in progress – one that is currently at tipping point and which we believe can be categorized into three distinct stages corresponding to the pronoun systems just outlined. The first stage represents *they* as it has been used for centuries: speakers who are Stage I *they* users can only use singular *they* when it is bound by a quantified antecedent, refers to an individual of unknown (but assumed) binary gender, refers to an individual of known (binary) gender which the speaker does not wish to indicate, or when it refers to an otherwise generic, non-specific antecedent. Speakers in the intermediate stage, Stage II, can use *they* in all the same contexts as the Stage I speakers, with the addition of singular, definite, specific individuals of either binary or non-binary gender. This differs from the the third stage in one crucial respect: only speakers who are in Stage III, the innovative 21st century *they* users can use *they* with the nouns in (19) and with proper names perceived as gendered. For Stage II speakers, those nominals still carry contrastive gender features, and apparently the pronouns *he* and *she* do as well. While Stage I and II speakers still struggle with *they* co-indexed with gendered kinship terms such as *brother*, *sister*, *mother*, *father*, etc. (cf. the ungrammaticality described by Bjorkman 2016, 2017), speakers in Stage III have completely eliminated the contrastive status of these gender features, making the use of *they* fully productive and able to corefer with any noun in the antecedent.

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<sup>14</sup> A new title of address has recently emerged, *Mx* (pronounced *mix*), used by many non-binary individuals, which we may also expect to increase concomitantly with *they*. This further suggests that with respect to these titles, marital status is not contrastive, but gender is.

Table 2: Stages of the grammatical change towards fully productive singular, definite, specific *they*

Singular <i>they</i> can:	Stage I	Stage II	Stage III
Be bound by a quantified antecedent	✓	✓	✓
Refer to an individual of unknown (but assumed) binary gender	✓	✓	✓
Refer to an individual of known (binary) gender which the speaker does not wish to disclose	✓	✓	✓
Refer to generic, non-specific antecedents	✓	✓	✓
Refer to singular, definite, specific individuals of either binary or non-binary gender	-	✓	✓
Co-refer with all but contrastively gendered nominal antecedents (e.g., kinship terms and feminine professional titles)	-	✓	✓
Co-refer with all nominal antecedents, whether or not they carry information about binary gender	-	-	✓

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have proposed an account of recent changes to the English pronominal system that have emerged with the extension of *they* to refer to non-binary individuals. The expansion of *they* to include sentences like those in (20) thus involves:

- a) the demotion of [feminine] from contrastive to modifier status,
- b) the shifting of [masculine] from an interpretive enhancement feature to a non-contrastive modifier, and
- c) the reversal of the markedness of the animacy dimension.

Interestingly, *he* and *it* are the only Vocabulary Items whose spellout conditions change. The relative subtlety of this restructuring may explain why some speakers find the change in usage



difficult. While some speakers find the use of singular *they* in the innovative contexts we have described here to be unworthy for social reasons; i.e., their resistance is rooted in their belief in a binary gender system, this is often packaged as an effort to defend the grammar itself. However, the grammars of all living languages change – even that of English pronouns.<sup>15</sup> The shift towards singular, definite, specific *they* is well underway, and like other observed changes in the History of English, can be given a systematic account – in this case involving three stages of change.

Certainly, the use of singular *they* requires some featural reorganization for some speakers, but it is not impossible – nor should it be met with resistance. The future is *they*.

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth mentioning that the change discussed here is not the only case of pronominal change in the history of English. Second-person pronouns used to include a number contrast, with *thou/thee/thy* used for a singular addressee and *ye/you/your* for plural.

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