

“Facebook, the gender binary, and third-person pronouns”

BY LAL ZIMMAN

“Gender and sexual identity have been powerful catalysts for change in the English lexicon in recent decades. In this post, Lal Zillman explores how new ways of thinking about gender are challenging one of the most fundamental parts of the English vocabulary: pronouns.”

—KATHERINE MARTIN, Head of US Dictionaries,
Oxford University Press

The death rattle of the gender binary has been ringing for decades now, leaving us to wonder when it will take its last gasp. In this third decade of third-wave feminism and the queer critique, dismantling the binary remains a critical task in the gender revolution. Language is among the most socially pervasive tools through which culture is negotiated, but in a language like English, with its minimal linguistic marking of gender, it can be difficult to find concrete signs that linguistic structures are changing to reflect new ways of thinking about the gender binary rather than simply repackaging old ideas.

One direction we might look, though, is toward the gendering of third-person pronouns, which is what led me to write this post about pronouns on Facebook. Yes, Facebook. The social media giant may not be your first thought when it comes to feminist language activism, but this year’s shift in the way Facebook catego-

rizes gender is among the most widely felt signs of a sea change in institutional attitudes about gendered third-person pronouns. Although Facebook does not have the same force as the educational system, governments, or traditional print media, it carries its own linguistic cachet established through its corporate authority, its place in the cultural negotiation of coolness and social connection, and its near-inescapable presence in everyday life.

In response to long-standing calls from transgender and gender-nonconforming users to broaden its approach to gender, Facebook announced earlier this year that it would offer a new set of options. Rather than limiting members of the site to the selection of female or male, an extensive list of gender identities is offered, along with the option of a custom entry, including labels like *agender*, *bigender*, *gender fluid*, *gender-nonconforming*, *trans person*, *two-spirit*, *transgender (wo)man*, and *cisgender (i.e. nontransgender) (wo)man*.

With all of the potential complexity afforded by these categories, Facebook couldn't rely on a simple algorithm of assigning gendered pronouns for those occasions on which the website generates a third person reference to the user (e.g. "Wish ___ a happy birthday!"). Instead, it asks which set of pronouns a user prefers among three options: *he/him/his*, *she/her/hers*, or *they/them/theirs*. As a result, there are two important ways that Facebook's reconsideration of its gender classification system goes beyond the listing of additional gender categories. The first is the more obvious of the two: offering singular *they* as an option for those who prefer gender-neutral reference forms. The other is simply the practice of asking for a pronoun preference rather than deriving it from gender or sex.

Sanctioning the use of singular *they* as a gender-neutral pronoun counters the centuries-old grammarian's complaint that

they can only be used in reference to plural third-person referents. Proponents of singular *they*, however, point out that the pronoun has been used by some of the English-speaking world's finest writers and that it was in widespread use even before blatantly misogynistic language policies determined that *he* should be the gender-neutral pronoun in official texts of the British government. More recently, an additional source of support for singular *they* has arisen: for those who do not wish to be slotted into one side of the gender binary or the other, *they* is perhaps the most intuitive way to avoid gendered third-person pronouns because of its already familiar presence in most dialects of English. (Other options include innovative pronouns like *ze/hir/hirs* or *ey/em/em's*.) In this case, a speaker must choose between upholding grammatical conventions and affirming someone's identity.

But wait, you might ask—don't we need a distinction between singular and plural *they*? How are we supposed to know when someone is talking about a single person and when they're talking about a group? Though my post isn't necessarily meant to defend the use of singular *they* in reference to specific individuals (an argument others have made quite extensively), this point is worth addressing briefly if only to dispel the notion that the standard pronoun system is logical while deviations are somehow logically flawed. As the pronoun charts included here illustrate, there is already a major gap in the standard English pronoun system when compared to many other languages: a distinction between singular and plural *you*. Somehow we get by, however, relying on context and sometimes asking for clarification. Could we do the same with *they*?

The second pronoun-related change Facebook has made—asking for preferred pronouns rather than determining them

based on gender category—is a more fundamental challenge to the normative take on assigning pronouns. According to conventional wisdom, a speaker will select whether to use *she* or *he* based on certain types of information about the person being referred to: how their bodily sex is perceived, how they present their gender, and in some cases other contextual factors like their name. To be uncertain about which gendered pronoun to use can be a source of great anxiety, exemplified by cultural artifacts like *Saturday Night Live*'s androgynous character from the 1990s known only as Pat. No one ever asks Pat about their gender because to do so would presumably be a grave insult, as Pat apparently has no idea that they have an androgynous appearance (were you able to follow me, despite the singular *they*'s?).

But transgender and queer communities are increasingly turning this logic on its head. Rather than risk being “mis-pronounced,” as community members sometimes call it, it is becoming the norm for introductions in many trans and queer contexts to include pronouns preferences along with names. For instance, my name is Lal and I prefer *he/him/his* pronouns. (Even the custom of calling these “male” pronouns has been critiqued on the basis that one needn't identify as male in order to prefer *he/him/his* pronouns.) The goal behind this move is to remove the tension of uncertainty and to avoid potential offense or embarrassment before it takes place. But this is not just a practice for transgender and gender-nonconforming people; the ideal is that no one's pronoun preferences be taken for granted. Instead of determining pronouns according to appearance, *they* become a matter of open negotiation in which one can demonstrate an interest in using language that feels maximally respectful to others.

Facebook's adoption of this new approach to pronouns, despite prescriptive grammarians' objections, suggests that the acceptance and use of singular *they* is expanding. More than that, it furthers the normalization of self-selected pronouns since even those who are totally unfamiliar with the use of singular *they* as a preferred pronoun, or the very idea of pronoun preferences, may be faced with unexpected pronouns in their daily newsfeeds.

For those of us at academic institutions with sizable transgender and gender-nonconforming communities, the practices discussed here may already be under way on campus. During my time teaching at Reed College, for instance, I found students to be enthusiastic about including pronoun preferences in our beginning-of-semester introductions even in classes where everyone's pronoun preferences aligned with normative expectations.

My goal here isn't to argue that the gender binary is dissolving in the face of new pronoun practices. Indeed, linguistic negotiations of gender and sexual binaries are far too complex to draw such a simple conclusion. However, what I do want to suggest is that we are in the midst of some kind of shift in the way pronouns are used and understood among speakers of English. Describing a more fully complete change of this sort, linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein has explained how religious and political ideology among speakers of Early Modern English resulted in a collapse of the second-person pronouns *thou* (singular, informal) and *you* (plural, formal). In the present case, rapidly changing ideologies about the gender binary may be pushing us toward a different organization of third-person pronouns.

The effect of Facebook on linguistic practice more broadly has yet to be fully uncovered, but its capital-driven flexibility

and omnipresence in contemporary social life suggests that it may be a powerful tool in ideologically driven language change.

LAL ZIMMAN is the co-editor of *Queer Excursions: Retheorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality* with Jenny Davis and Joshua Raclaw and a Visiting Assistant Professor at Reed College. His research, which brings together ethnographic, sociophonetic, and discourse analytic frameworks, deals with the relationship between gender, sexuality, and embodiment in the linguistic practices of transgender and LGBTQ communities.

Originally published on 23 September 2014 at: <http://blog.oup.com/2014/09/facebook-gender-binary-third-person-pronouns/>