Examining the use of singular *they* pronouns:

A literature review and discourse analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores age and other factors that affect the use of the third person pronoun *they* for singular and non-binary antecedents in English. Two methods were used for data collection: an online survey and individual interviews. Models laid out by Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly and Cowper (2020) were used to categorize participants into 3 stages of the use of singular *they*. However, these models may not account for all uses of singular *they* that arose in the data. This led to the exploration of the possible effects of discourse features such as hypotheticality on the use of singular *they*. These may help explain instances where speakers use singular *they* when they would otherwise be unexpected to.

The age effects found in this study support previous research findings that younger speakers are more accepting of singular *they* than older speakers (Conrod, 2019; Moulton et al, 2020). Moreover, other factors such as being in the LGBTQIA2S+ community also affect the use of singular *they* (Bradley, 2020; Conrod, 2019; Hekanaho, 2020). The results also showed that some people are unaware of their own use of singular *they*. Furthermore, this thesis explores how some speakers resist singular *they* because they believe *they* is strictly a plural pronoun and supports previous findings that attitudes to language change can affect acceptance of singular *they* (Bradley, 2020).

This study is complemented by an overview of generic *he* and its effect on written English, which helps situate the current use of singular *they*. This informs the transition in English from gender exclusive language (the use of generic *he*), to gender-inclusive language (the use of *he* and *she* as generic pronouns), and finally to a gender-neutral language that is inclusive of not only masculine and feminine gender but other gender identities as well.

Key Terminology

Cisgender: An adjective that denotes a gender identity that corresponds with biological sex at birth (Sostar, n.d.).

Gender-exclusive language: Language that excludes a part of the population by using gender-specific words such as generic *he* and nouns for professions that are markedly masculine such as *policeman* instead of *police officer* (Department of Justice, 2020; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011).

Gender-inclusive language: Language that uses gender neutral words, e.g., *mail carrier* instead of *mailman*, and *they* instead of *he* or *she* as generic pronouns (Department of Justice, 2020; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011).

Generic pronoun: A pronoun without a specific referent. The referent can be specified for gender or not, and generic pronouns are sometimes used to refer to a referent of either gender, such as in the case of generic *he* (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005).

LGBTQIA2S+: This acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, or two-spirit, and the + means 'any other affirming way in which people choose to self-identify' (Sostar, n.d.).

Non-binary: An adjective used by/for people who do not acknowledge or fit conventional notions of male/man and female/woman gender identities. They may instead identify as being of another gender, no gender, or a combination of genders (OED, 2022). Non-binary is sometimes used as an umbrella term that encompasses other terms such as genderqueer, gender non-conforming, agender, genderfluid (Sostar, n.d.). For some, transgender includes non-binary, or vice versa; however, in this thesis these two terms will be treated as separate.

Third person singular pronoun: A pronoun that refers to a single referent who is neither the speaker or listener in the discourse (e.g., *he, she, it,* and *they*) (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005).

SINGULAR *THEY*

Transgender: An adjective that denotes a gender identity that does not correspond to the biological sex assigned at birth (Sostar, n.d.).

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Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

"No singular 3rd person pronoun in English is universally accepted as appropriate for re-ferring to a human when you don't want to specify sex" (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005). The lack of a truly singular and gender-neutral pronoun in English has been the subject of many argu-ments in literature and politics. From the legislation of generic *he* in the 1850's (Bodine, 1975) to the adoption of singular *they* by style guides like the APA (2022) to respect people's preferred pronouns, the shift to a more gender-inclusive language can be seen in many functional varieties of English. *They* has been used to refer to indefinite and gender-neutral singular 3rd person ante-cedents at least since the middle ages, but the debate about the grammaticality of singular *they* has continued since the 1800's (Bodine, 1975; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020).

The new use of *they* as a non-binary pronoun has brought singular *they* under the spot-light in both politics and grammar in recent years (Ackerman, 2018; Conrod, 2019; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). Although it is commonly thought to only be a plural pronoun, historically *they* has been used as both a singular and plural 3rd person pronoun. The use of *they* as a singular 3rd person pronoun will henceforth be referred to as singular *they* in this thesis. The earliest example of singular *they* in the Oxford English Dictionary is from before 1375. The following are some examples of singular *they* with indefinite antecedents from the OED online:

1) a. 1759 LD. CHESTERFIELD *Let.* 27 Apr. (1932) (modernized text) V. 2350:
   If *a person*$_i$ is born of a..gloomy temper..*they*$_i$ cannot help it.

  b. 1968 *Listener* 3 Oct. 440/3:

    When *somebody$_i$* becomes prime minister *they$_i$'re* immediately put on a pedestal.

  Recent studies have shown age effects in the use of *they* as a singular 3rd person pronoun (Conrod, 2019; Moulton et al., 2020). Older speakers tend to accept singular *they* if the antecedent is indefinite and/or non-specific, and not specified for gender, as in (1) above. Younger speakers tend to accept singular *they* when it refers to antecedents whose gender may be known to the speaker regardless of definiteness, e.g., "*my friend$_i$* left *their$_i$* phone here yesterday" (Bjorkman, 2017; Conrod, 2019; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). Studies also show positive correlations between being in the LGBTQIA2S+ community acceptance of singular *they* (Bradley, 2020; Conrod; 2019; Hekanaho, 2020). These findings informed the study I conducted for this thesis. I expected to find an age effect where younger speakers are more comfortable using singular *they* pronouns with definite antecedents, such as non-binary people. I also expected to find a relationship between being in the LGBTQIA2S+ community and acceptance of singular *they*.

  The study I conducted used a survey to observe age and gender effects on the use of singular *they* and an interview was used to gather and analyze participants' natural speech. Both the survey and interview gather information on attitudes toward the use of singular *they*. This allows for an examination of relationships between the use of singular *they* and attitudes toward grammar changes and LGBTQIA2S+ gender identities. A discourse analysis of participants' speech focuses on what *they* takes as antecedents and how this may be affected by factors such as age, being LGBTBQIA2S+, and discourse features such as hypotheticality. The thesis also includes a detailed review of current work on singular *they* by Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly and Cowper

(2020), and a review of other changes in English pronominal systems, such as the shift away

from generic *he*, which contextualizes changes in the use of *they*.

1.1 i) Aims and motivations

When *they* began to be used for singular referents in the 14th century, it was generally

only used for singular antecedents that were quantified, indefinite and/or non-specific (Bjorkman,

2017). Now singular *they* is used for definite and specific antecedents, such as for nonbinary in-

dividuals (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). There are two specific environments where singular *they*

fills a role in the English pronominal system. It is used as a generic and gender-neutral 3rd per-

son pronoun (instead of generic *he*), and as a non-binary pronoun. Singular *they* is important in

the switch to gender-inclusive language and it helps fight sexism, heterosexism and male bias in

English (Lindqvist et al., 2018).

Although the generic use of singular *they* has been studied thoroughly, the non-binary use

of singular *they* has only more recently been examined by linguists (Ackerman, 2018; Conrod,

2019). Though there is no clear date when *they* first began to be used by non-binary people as a

personal pronoun, the first example the OED uses in their definition of non-binary singular *they*

is from 2009. In the search for a gender-neutral singular 3rd person pronoun, a plethora of neo-

pronouns have been created, such as *xe/xem/xyr*, but none have truly become a part of everyday

English (Baron, 1981; McGaughey, 2020).

Ackerman (2018) examined the ethics of studying personal pronouns and the need for in-

clusivity and acknowledgement of gender identities in research. By describing and analyzing the

contexts in which people are using singular *they*, this thesis documents changes in acceptability

and use of singular *they*. This change is examined by comparing different age cohorts' use and

acceptance of singular *they*. Apart from looking for age and gender effects, the following questions will be considered: Is singular *they* used to be polite and does the use of singular *they* differ whether or not the speaker knows a non-binary person?

1.1 ii) Structure

Chapter 2 contains background information about generic *he* and singular *they*, and a review of Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly and Cowper (2020), which are essential to the discourse analysis. These two sections are supported by observational data from social media, television, and text. Chapter 3 reports on the survey, outlining the methods, analyses, the results and discussion of the findings. Chapter 4 reports on the interview, using the same structure as chapter 3. Chapter 5 discusses the limitations of this study and chapter 6 contains the conclusion which draws together points from the survey and interviews to highlight the findings of the study and some implications for future studies.

Chapter 2

2.1 Background

The use of singular *they* as opposed to *he* as a generic pronoun has been influenced by the work of many academics and feminists who argued, and continue to argue, against gender exclusionary language (Bodine, 1975). These arguments have driven changes in, for example, editorial and publishing guidelines, such as the American Psychological Association guidelines (APA, 2020). The change in the use of singular *they* can be seen in government legislation of generic *he*, and subsequent appeals to make language more gender inclusive (UK Parliament, 2022; De-

partment of Justice, 2020a). These changes have also affected grammar instructions and writing style guides (Bodine, 1975; Baron, 1981; Zuber & Reed, 1993).

The United Kingdom's *Interpretation Act* of 1850 (13 & 14 Vict. c. 21, 4) legislated that "words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females" and "the singular to include the plural, and the plural the singular". This legislation was quickly appealed for fear that women would attempt to vote under this legislation (Bailey, 2020). The appeal failed and indeed many suffragettes argued that if *he* includes the feminine gender, then women should be allowed to vote (Baron, 2020). Until 1918, women, and 42% of men, were unable to vote in the United Kingdom (UK Parliament, 2022). Although women won the right to vote in 1918, generic *he* remained in legislation in the UK until 1978 (Bailey, 2020). Seven years after the UK amended their *Interpretation Act* to include both masculine and feminine pronouns, Canada followed suit (Department of Justice, 2020a).

Susan B. Anthony was arrested for trying to vote in 1872, one year after generic *he* was legislated in the United States of America's Dictionary Act (Baron, 2020). She argued that if women cannot vote under this 'inclusive language' act, then they should not have to pay tax or be responsible for violations of the law (Baron, 2020). The 19th amendment to the US Constitution avoided pronouns entirely (U. S. Const. amend. XIX), but other statutes still use generic *he* (Baron, 2020). This shift to no-pronouns for the 19th amendment was clearly not a sign of gender-inclusivity, but it was done just in time for 1920 when women won the right to vote (National Archives, 2022).

The decision to use the masculine pronoun *he* as a generic pronoun was deemed a sign of androcentrism in grammar by feminists in the 20th century (Bodine, 1975), and the effects of it are still seen to this day. When Kamala Harris was elected the first woman attorney general in

California in 2010, all the statutes that referred to the attorney general used the pronoun *he*, so she had them changed to *she* (Hensley-Clancy, 2019). Harris was praised for adding her pronouns to her social media accounts during the election when she became the first female vice president of the United States (Savage, 2020). When Hillary Clinton ran for president in 2016, those who opposed having a woman president argued that because the constitution uses masculine pronouns the president must be male (Baron, 2020).

So why generic *he* instead of singular *they*? Grammarians in the 19th century denounced the supposed widespread use of singular *they* and argued that a number violation is worse than a gender violation in the 3rd person pronoun (Bodine, 1975; Baron, 1981). However, the same Acts that legislated generic *he* also legislated that "the singular refers to the plural, and the plural to the singular" (*Interpretation Act,* 1850). The number violation argument is still used today to oppose the use of *they* for non-binary people, for example:

2) a.

> Replying to @HuffPost
>
> They/them is plural so why would an individual call themself that anyways
>
> 9:11 PM · Dec 16, 2020 · Twitter for Android

   b.

> Any English teacher who uses "they/them" as a singular pronoun should lose their teaching license.

The examples in (2) are from Twitter and Facebook. The writers are arguing against singular *they* while also using it in their own writing. Note that the antecedents for *themself* and *their* are indefinite in these examples and in (2b) the antecedent is also quantified. These are the most widely accepted ways to use singular *they* (Bjorkman, 2017). Based on these examples, it

seems possible that individuals' use of singular *they* reflects tacit knowledge. In (2a) the speaker even recognized that *individual* is singular and decided to number match the anaphor by using *themself* instead of *themselves*. Konnelly and Cowper (2020) found that speakers use *themself* and *themselves* for a singular antecedent; however, with a plural antecedent, *themself* is ungrammatical. Substituting generic *himself* in place of *themself* in (2a) would be strange (in contemporary English) because *an individual* is unmarked for gender. In (2b) if *any English teacher* received generic *he* then it could be interpreted as assuming all English teachers are male.

The use of generic *he* for indefinite and gender-neutral antecedents is considered inappropriate by a large proportion of speakers because of its masculine gender interpretation (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005). Nevertheless, the legislation of generic *he* affected written grammar for more than a century (Zuber & Reed; 1993). It is still found in textbooks and grammars; for example, the 8th edition of Choy and Clark's grammar guide (2010) recommends using generic *he* in formal writing. As previously mentioned, generic *he* is still used in many levels in English-speaking countries.

English does not have a specific language council that has a hand in controlling changes in language like other languages do (such as Swedish and Irish), though governments have periodically attempted to control language through legislation. However, there are other systems that act as unofficial language authorities for English. These language authorities directly affect writing by providing definitions and writing style guidelines. For example, the 1989 edition of the OED contained the use of singular *they* for quantified and/or indefinite antecedents. In the most recent revision in 2013, they added the non-binary use of singular *they*.

In 2015, the American Dialect Society made singular *they* their word of the year, and the Washington Post style guide accepted it as grammatical (Nunberg, 2016). In 2019, the Merriam-

Webster Dictionary chose *they* as their word of the year. Social media platforms such as Facebook default to singular *they* if a user hasn't specified their gender (Nunberg, 2016). By adopting the use of *they* for non-binary people, these authorities acknowledge shifts in language around gender identities. The APA added singular *they* to the 7th edition of their writing guidelines in 2019. The APA allows singular *they* for definite antecedents, recommends it if the preferred pronoun is unknown, and requires it if *they* is the person's preferred pronoun. The APA advises against using generic *he* or *she,* or a combination of the two. Although Canada's Department of Justice (2020b) encourages the use of singular *they* for indefinite antecedents, it does not accept it for definite/specific antecedents, such as for non-binary people.

Countries that do have official language authorities take a different approach to language change. Swedish had also legislated the generic masculine pronoun *han* as a gender-neutral 3rd person pronoun. The Finnish word *hen* was first proposed as a replacement to generic *han* in 1966, and again in 1994, and it was officially added to Swedish in 2012 (Asklöv, 2019). Two years prior to the official addition of *hen*, it was used as a non-binary pronoun by the LGBTQIA2S+ community (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2020). Similar to singular *they*, *hen* received negative backlash, but Gustafsson Sendén and colleagues (2015) found that negative attitudes toward *hen* shifted to positive between the years 2012 and 2015.

Singular *they* and *hen* pattern similarly in their rates of acceptance for different antecedents (e.g., indefinite, definite, non-binary). In 2020, Gustaffson Sendén and colleagues found that *hen* was more often accepted as grammatical when referring to indefinite/non-specific antecedents than definite/specific ones. This is similar to findings about singular *they* in English. It could be that *hen* and *they* will follow a similar trajectory of change. Lindqvist and colleagues

(2019) found that using gender-fair language can help reduce male bias in language. Conversely, it has been argued that generic *he* increases male bias because it fails to be gender neutral (Bodine, 1975; Moulton et al., 1978).

Supporting these early claims, Noll and colleagues (2018) found that generic *he* inhibits feminine interpretation whereas singular *they* facilitates it. Generic *he* was found to evoke a disproportionate number of masculine images (Gastil, 1990) and not to be interpreted as referring to women (Miller & James, 2009). The comprehension of generic *he* is dominated by its gender function which makes it gender exclusive and often inappropriate (Bodine, 1975; Huddleston & Pullum, 2005; Miller & James, 2009). There is no gender feature on the pronoun *they*, so it can refer to antecedents of either gender. It is clear that *they* makes a better candidate for a gender-neutral singular 3rd person pronoun than generic *he*, regardless of its number mismatch.

2.2 Literature review

Bjorkman (2017) observed that there are conservative and innovative uses of singular *they*. 'Conservative users' find singular *they* acceptable when it refers to quantified, indefinite and/or non-specific antecedents. The 'innovative users' on the other hand find singular *they* acceptable for definite and specific antecedents, where the gender may be known to the speaker and listener but is not explicitly established in the discourse. Bjorkman considered this a sign of a disappearing gender contrast on pronouns, where gender is becoming an optional semantic feature for 'innovative' speakers, while it remains a non-optional syntactic feature for 'conservative' speakers.

Definiteness and specificity play important roles in the acceptability and use of singular *they*, and in the models set out by Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly and Cowper (2020). Definite-

ness refers to determiner phrases that either have a definite determiner, such as *the*, *that*, and *this,*

or an indefinite determiner such as *a/an* (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005). Some pronouns are inher-

ently indefinite, e.g., *anyone* and *someone*. Quantificational determinatives such as *some*, *no*, and

any also mark a noun as indefinite (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005). For this thesis, specificity is

used in two ways, contextual specificity and gender specification. Contextual specificity is based

on whether the listener can identify the antecedent from the context. Gender specification may be

established in the discourse or lexically. Lexical gender is when a word has a gender feature

[FEM] or [MASC] in a speakers' lexicon, such as *boy* which is marked by [MASC]. Some words

are given lexical gender by the addition of a suffix, e.g., *actor* becomes *actress* [FEM].

The grammar Bjorkman posits for 'innovative' speakers does not allow singular *they* to

have antecedents that are gender-specific nouns (e.g., *man*) or proper names (unless the name is

androgynous). Therefore, it cannot account for the use of *they* as a non-binary pronoun. Bjork-

man suggests that coreference in discourse resolution prevents innovative singular *they* from re-

ferring to an antecedent that has previously been specified for gender in the discourse. However,

if the gender is known but has not yet been specified in the discourse, singular *they* is acceptable

to innovative speakers. Konnelly and Cowper's (2020) extension of Bjorkman's (2017) model

accounts for non-binary singular *they*. Their model is broken down into 3 stages. Stages 1 and 2

mirror Bjorkman's (2017) conservative and innovative uses of *they*. Stage 3 accounts for the use

of non-binary and gender-neutral singular *they*.

Konnelly and Cowper (2020) state that stage 1 speakers will obligatorily match a pro-

noun to the lexical gender of a word or the known gender of the referent. This means that they do

not use singular *they* for definite, specific antecedents. This contrasts with stage 2 where speak-

ers can use singular *they* for definite, specific and gender-known antecedents, so long as the

gender has not yet been established in the discourse. Konnelly and Cowper (2020) state that in stage 2, definite antecedents that do not have lexical gender may be added to a list of lexical items that have optional gender. For example, *the doctor* does not require gender to be spelled out on the pronoun in stage 2. However, words with lexical gender (e.g., woman) still have an obligatory gender spell-out in stage 2. The list of lexical items that have optional gender is what separates stage 2 from stage 1, but gender is still contrastive for both stages.

Konnelly and Cowper report that a default to singular *they* is common in stage 3, but that *he* and *she* are still available. Table 1 on the following page shows a comparison of these two models. Bjorkman (2017) labelled the 'unaccounted for' examples in Table 1 with *, meaning they are ungrammatical, because the focus of her paper was to look at the difference between the conservative and innovative *they*. Konnelly and Cowper (2020) marked the examples in Stages 2 and 3 in Table 1 with %. The focus of their research was on stage 3 of singular *they*, so they did not mark any of these examples as ungrammatical for all speakers. I do not mark any examples in this thesis as grammatical or ungrammatical. However, speech errors did occur in the ex-amples from natural speech and are described and discussed. In possessive phrases coindexing appears on the determiner head of a DP, as in *their$_i$* daughter. Elsewhere it appears on the nom-inal head of NP, as in *the student$_i$*. This was the clearest way to coindex since the focus is on 3rd person pronouns and their antecedents.

Table 1: Comparison of Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly and Cowper (2020)

Bjorkman (2017)	Konnelly and Cowper (2020)
<u>Conservative</u> *They* used with quantificational, non-specific, and genuinely epicene antecedents: a. *Everyone$_i$* should know *their$_i$* own phone number. b. Could *Janet or Thomas$_i$* introduce {*themselves$_i$/themself$_i$*}?	<u>Stage 1</u> *They* used with quantified antecedent, or antecedent of unknown gender: a. *Anyone$_i$* who thinks *they$_i$* need more time should ask for an extension. b. *The person$_i$* at the door left before I could see who *they$_i$* were.
<u>Innovative</u> *They* used with singular, definite, and specific, referring to an individual whose gender is known to both speaker and hearer: a. %*The professor$_i$* said *they$_i$* cancelled the exam. b. %*Our eldest child$_i$* broke *their$_i$* leg.	<u>Stage 2</u> *They* used with antecedent of known gender, but ungendered description/name: a. %*Kelly$_i$* said *they$_i$* were leaving early. b. %*The strongest student$_i$* will present *their$_i$* paper next.
<u>Unaccounted for:</u> *They* used with singular, definite, and specific, but is now a proper given name or gender-specific noun: a. **Janet$_i$* said *they$_i$* cancelled the exam. b. **Thomas$_i$* broke *their$_i$* leg. c. **I'll let *my sister$_i$/father$_i$/aunt$_i$* introduce *themselves$_i$*.	<u>Stage 3</u> *They* used with antecedent of any gender, no restriction on description/name (aka default *they*), and for pets: a. %*Maria$_i$* wants to send *their$_i$* students on the field trip. b. %We asked *the first girl$_i$* in line to introduce *themself$_i$/themselves$_i$*. c. %*Fluffy$_i$* didn't eat any of *their$_i$ dry food*.

Doherty and Conklin (2017) conducted an eye-tracking study that involved words that are considered either gender-neutral, gender stereotypical, or gender specific such as *the cyclist, the mechanic,* and *the spokeswoman* matched with the pronouns *him*, *her* or *them*. They found that

antecedents with higher gender expectancy had higher processing costs when co-referring with *them*, compared to antecedents with low or no gender expectancy. Doherty and Conklin's preliminary study had participants rate the expected gender of certain nouns. Nouns with lexical gender such as *actress* and *policeman* received very high gender ratings (e.g., masculine or feminine). They were therefore considered gender-known (having a lexical gender specification) instead of having high gender-expectancy such as for the word *nurse* which was highly rated as expected to be feminine.

The words *mechanic* and *nurse* have high gender expectancies (masculine and feminine respectively). Phrases like 'male nurse' and 'lady mechanic' indicate that speakers can add a gender specific word to *nurse* and *mechanic*. One could argue that *nurse* and *mechanic* may have such high gender-expectancy that they may act as though they have lexical gender. Speakers who have only even seen or heard of female nurses and male mechanics may consistently use the corresponding binary pronoun for nurses and mechanics. This is especially likely in stage 1, because in stage 2 the speaker can use singular *they* even if the gender is known (just not established in discourse) (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). Evidence of this may be found in the unexpectedness of collocations such as 'female nurse' and 'male mechanic'. In stage 3, gender becomes non-contrastive. Words with lexical gender, like *husband*, can take *he*, *she* or singular *they,* depending on what is appropriate. The non-contrastive and optional status of gender in stage 3 means that singular *they* is available regardless of the lexical gender of a word, or known gender of a referent. However, stage 3 speakers still have access to *he* and *she* and will use them when appropriate.

As mentioned above, Doherty and Conklin (2017) found that the higher the gender-expectancy, the higher the processing cost of singular *they*, compared to gender-matched pronouns. For example, there were no processing costs when the word *man* had to the pronoun *him*. The

highest processing costs in the study were when a lexically gendered word received the opposite gendered pronoun, for example if *he* were used for the word *lady*. The lower the gender expectancy of a word, the less processing costs there were for the pronoun *them*. In stage 3, the gender spell-out on pronouns is optional, and there is often a default to singular *they*. A future study could establish whether stage 3 speakers have a lower processing cost when *them* is paired with words that have high gender expectancy.

Words can also have different levels of gender specification. In (3a) below, *my child* is definite, unspecified for gender, and specific. Note that the speaker in (3a) would know their child's gender, but the noun itself is not gender specific. In (3b) *every woman* is quantified, indefinite, lexically specified for gender, and contextually non-specific. Sometimes a noun that does not have lexical gender itself is given a gender in the discourse, such as in (3c). *Someone* has no lexical gender but is given gender in the discourse. Lexical gender is based on the representation of gender in a person's lexicon instead of information from the discourse.

3) a. *My child*$_i$ broke *their*$_i$ leg.

   b. *Every woman*$_i$ experiences sexism in *their*$_i$ workplace.

   c. *Someone*$_i$ who is a man.

In 2020, Moulton and colleagues found that age and acceptance of singular *they* was inversely correlated; as age increased, acceptance of singular *they* decreased. Their study found that participants rated singular *they* as acceptable whether or not the gender of the antecedent was known to the discourse participants. Their study showed that *they* was rated as more acceptable with a lexically realized antecedent such as in (4a) below compared to without a lexical antecedent such as in (4b). They interpreted this higher acceptability of *they* for a lexically realized antecedent as the presence of a linguistic antecedent signalling the irrelevance of its gender.

If an antecedent is not lexically realized, then it is assumed to be contextually specific. If it was

hypothetical, it would be hard to infer who the antecedent is.

4) a.   I think *the server$_i$* put *their$_i$* hair in my potatoes.

    b.   I think *they$_i$* put *their$_i$* hair in my potatoes.

  (Moulton et al., 2020).

Bjorkman (2017) posits that *they* occurs 'elsewhere' because *he* and *she* are specifically

used for gender specific antecedents, while *they* typically occurs with antecedents that are not

gender specific. As previously mentioned, innovative *they* cannot refer to an antecedent that has

lexical gender, yet this happens in the text from Shakespeare in (5a) that Bjorkman examines.

She argues that even though *not a man* has lexical gender, the quantifier and indefiniteness allow

conservative (stage 1) speakers to use singular *they* for it.

5)   a.   Shakespeare (*A Comedy of Errors*, 1623)

            There's *not a man$_i$* I meet but doth salute me
            As if I were *their$_i$ well-acquainted friend*.

Bjorkman (2017) suggests that gender syntactically occurs below D, but above number

and animacy, which are never optional. Konnelly and Cowper (2020) argue instead that gender

occurs below number. Under Konnelly and Cowper's proposed syntactic structure, the number

feature copies to the quantifier on D, and this causes gender to be optional where otherwise it

would be spelled out. Both Bjorkman and Konnelly and Cowper suggest that, for conservative

they and stage 1, gender is optional on quantified antecedents, but obligatory anywhere else.

Konnelly and Cowper suggest that stage 1 and 2 have identical position and optionality of

gender. They theorize that the difference comes from the lexical gender on nouns, and whether

nouns that lack lexical gender (e.g., *child*) have obligatory gender assignment. In stage 1, gender

assignment is obligatory for antecedents of known gender (unless quantifier bound). In stage 2 gender is optional on nouns that are not gender-specific, such as *teacher* and *friend*, and gender remains optional for nouns like this even if the gender is known as in (4a), *my child.*

Konnelly and Cowper state that speakers in stages 1 and 2 can use *they* for non-binary individuals while not using *they* elsewhere. They suggest that there are a few ways that these speakers may navigate using non-binary *they*. They may create a new lexical entry for a proper name that is typically gender specific, such as *Amy* [FEM]. This new entry for *Amy* would be unmarked for gender. The speaker can then access both the new lexeme with no gender marking, *Amy* [Ø], and the original lexeme, *Amy* [FEM]. When these speakers encounter a new *Amy*, they would still default to the *Amy* [FEM] and use *she* unless told otherwise.

The other option for stage 1 and 2 speakers is to shift their lexicons so that for all lexemes of proper names, the gender feature becomes optional instead, *<fem>* and *<masc>*. In this case the default is *<Ø>* which then elicits *they* because of its 'elsewhere' status. This enters these speakers into stage 3 where *they* is the default pronoun for singular antecedents, regardless of gender. Konnelly and Cowper (2020) hypothesize that it is not necessary for a speaker to pass through the stages sequentially. Therefore, stage 1 speakers can arrive at stage 3 without ever going through stage 2.

Aside from lexical and discourse gender, I suggest that discourse features, such as hypotheticality, also influence the use of singular *they*. Hypotheticality denotes a context in which the characters are imagined and often the antecedents are also hypothetical. When making up a hypothetical story about a specific person or animal, the antecedent is not hypothetical but the context is. Hypotheticality can arise in different types of phrases, such as examples and conditional clauses. Let's consider examples of natural speech where singular *they* refers to non-quantified,

gender-specific antecedents. The first story is from a girl (approx. 7 years old) on the American television show "Kids Say the Darndest Things" (2019). Examples (6b) and (6c) are from the Instagram account @samgria_ (23 years old), posted in March and April 2022.

6) a. Hailey on Kids Say the Darndest Things:

Ok, *somebody*$_h$ has to be behind you that's *a boy*$_h$, and you have to have *another boy*$_i$ in front of you, and ask *the boy*$_i$ in front of you "do *you*$_i$ wanna be my boyfriend?", and *they*$_i$ say "no", then you turn to the *other person*$_h$, and then you ask *him*$_h$- and then you act disappointed, and then you ask *them*$_h$, and then *they*$_h$'ll say yes, that's how I got *mine*$_h$.

b. @samgria_:

Would you like to hear an embarrassing first date story? Well, I was looking out the window and saw this *person*$_j$ fall and I kind of laughed, sorry I didn't even really mean to but I just kind of saw *him*$_j$ slip and fall and I thought it was a little funny. Obviously I hope *they*$_j$ weren't hurt or anything, but it's snowing outside and *they*$_j$ slipped and fell. As *they*$_j$ were getting up, I noticed *he*$_j$ had a walking stick, so obviously not funny whatsoever, but I had laughed. Anyways the *girl*$_k$ I was on the date with says *she*$_k$ still wants to see me again so it's fine.

c. @samgria_:

Okay I was at lighthouse today and I was dancing with a *man*$_i$ who is gay by the way. I had the best time dancing with *him*$_i$, and *he*$_i$ kept being like "we're the hottest people here".

The speakers in (6a) and (6b) show a default to singular *they* for gender-specific ante-cedents. The fact that the speakers in (6a) and (6b) use *they* for antecedents that are singular but not quantified means that these speakers cannot be in stage 1. The use of *they* in (6a) is not con-sistent with Konnelly and Cowper's (2020) stage 2 because the story is about two boys, and *boy* has lexical gender [MASC]. Although the antecedent *this person* in (6b) does not have lexical gender, it is assigned [MASC] in the story when the speaker switches between *he* and *they*. This use of singular *they* is inconsistent with stage 2 because of the [MASC] feature assigned by the use of the pronoun *he*. Singular *they* in this context shows the speaker's doubt about the gender of the referent. Compare this to her use of *she* for *the girl* she was on a date with in (6b), and (6c) where she uses *he* and *him* to refer to *a man*. Stage 3 speakers have access to the feminine and masculine pronouns even though they may default to *they* (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). In this case it may have been used when the gender of the referent was unclear.

The speaker in (6b) and (6c) is a social acquaintance of mine from the LGBTQIA2S+ community in Nova Scotia. She is aware of non-binary gender identity and uses non-binary *they* and defaults to *they* for cisgender individuals which confirms that she is in stage 3. On the other hand, it is possible that 7-year-old Hailey in (6a) is unaware of non-binary gender identity and that her use of singular *they* is not indicative of her ability to use it for a non-binary person. This may indicate that the hypotheticality of her story let her use *they* for the masculine antecedents when otherwise she might not. There are no more examples of Hailey's speech; however, there is a speaker of a similar age in (7a) below to compare her speech to.

The following excerpt is from an episode from the American television show "Hey Steve" that aired in October 2017. This episode stars two little girls, Dani and Dannah, who help Steve give a guest dating advice. Dani and Dannah are approximately 6-7 years old. The guest

asked a question about how to respond to the men who show interest in her but put no effort into the lines they use to attract her attention. The antecedent is not hypothetical and is plural.

7) a. Dani$_i$: My answer is, you should just, y'know, ignore *him*$_j$, then *he'll*$_j$ come crawlin' back.

b. Steve: Oh, I guess that's it, I thought *she*$_i$ had an add on, but I guess *she*$_i$ went "uh-uh that's it". Yes, ignore *him*$_j$ and *they'll*$_?$ come crawling back. So, my advice to you is, [looks at notecard] yes ignore *them*$_k$, and *they'll*$_k$ come crawling back.

Note: [square brackets = a visible action]

In (7a), Dani uses singular *him* instead of plural *them*. In (7b), Steve Harvey, the 60-year-old show host, aligns with Dani's *him* instead of the guest's plural *them* by using the masculine pronoun, but then he immediately switches to *they*. He then corrects the sentence by repeating it starting with *them* rather than *him*. The index on the first *they* in (7b) has a question mark to signify that it could co-refer with *him*, but based on the correction I argue that it probably is an error. This show is also likely scripted because he looks at his note card before repeating (and correcting) the sentence. This indicates that he noticed the mistake and had to check the script. By correcting himself, Steve seems to be amending the number violation between the singular *him* that Dani used and the plural referent that they are both supposed to be referring to. This does not look like the switching between pronouns in (6a) and (6b).

It is possible that the younger speakers in (6) could actually co-index the first *they* in (7b) with *him*, in which case they would not need to make a correction just as they did not make corrections in their own speech. However, in (7a) Dani uses *he* for one of the non-hypothetical men in the group of men the guest asked about. This contrasts with Hailey's use of singular *they* for each of the hypothetical boys in (6a). Although these speakers are two different people, they are roughly the same age. These two examples suggest that the hypotheticality of referent may li-

cense singular *they*. This will be explored below with more examples from the interviews for this thesis. These examples provide some evidence that younger speakers may be more likely to be in stage 3 than older speakers. If this is the case, we would be witnessing language change.

Chapter 3: The Survey

3.1 Introduction

The present study used two research designs, a survey and an interview, to explore individuals' attitudes toward and use of singular *they*. Both methods gathered information about individuals' use of singular *they*, and other factors such as attitudes, age, gender, and knowledge of non-binary gender identity. The survey specifically gathered quantitative data on individuals' use of *they* in controlled contexts and qualitative data about their attitudes toward singular *they*. The individual interview gathered examples of individuals' use of *they* in their natural speech instead of in controlled environments. The survey had the ability to reach large numbers of people and to gather data in environments that cannot always be elicited naturally during interviews.

3.2 Methods

The online survey was used to gather data on how individuals use *they* in controlled contexts, and their attitudes toward singular *they*. It also gathered demographic information such as age, gender and first language. The full survey can be found in Appendix A.

3.2 i) Materials

The survey contained an informed consent letter, 3 sections of questions, an invitation to the interview and a feedback letter. The question sections were put in an order that separated the language exercise (exploring individuals' use of language) from the questions about attitudes to-

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ward language change (individuals' perception of how they use language). This was done by putting the demographics section in the middle and so not allowing the 'attitudes' section to prime or otherwise directly influence responses to the exercise. The survey was laid out in this format:

1. Informed consent
2. Language exercise: included 21 fill-in-the-blank questions and 2 judgment questions.
3. Demographic information: gathered information on age, first language, highest level of education, gender, preferred personal pronouns, and involvement in the LGBTQIA2S+ community.
4. Language knowledge and preferences: gathered information on explicit use of singular *they* and attitudes toward it.
5. Invitation to do the individual interview
6. Feedback letter

3.2 ii) Procedure

The online survey was available from January 20th, 2022, to February 28th, 2022. The survey was made with Google forms and was accessible via the internet. It was posted on Facebook, Reddit, Linguistlist, and Instagram. On Facebook and Reddit, it was posted in the following groups (not including postings to personal profiles on Facebook):

Facebook: Roving knitters HRM, Knitterinos, Halifax Queer Exchange, Meowderinos, Pupperinos, Nova Scotia Association of Garden Clubs, TESL Nova Scotia, Survey Exchange, My Favourite Avada Kedavra, Memerinos: The Revenge, LGBTQ Community.

Reddit: r/SampleSize, r/BobsBurgers, r/myfavouritemurder, r/NonBinary, r/SurveyExchange, r/languagelearning, r/EnglishLearning.

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The survey was posted in some groups that I was already a member of, and groups that I was not. The groups were randomly selected, for example, I tried to post the survey on the subreddits r/halifax, r/UK, and r/america. I quickly learned that a lot of groups do not allow surveys at all. After having the survey rejected many times, I began posting it in groups that I was more familiar with. These groups were not randomly selected. A lot of these groups were associated with a podcast I listen to called My Favorite Murder. I often had to ask for permission from the moderators of subreddits to post the survey. The subreddit /SampleSize allows people to post their surveys daily, so I also did that.

Posting the survey in groups that I was already a member of was met with enthusiasm, unlike the groups I was not a member of. This might be a common occurrence for outsiders. Groups on Reddit and Facebook have rules which state what types of things are allowed to be posted and this dictates whether surveys are allowed or not. The group rules also state the values of the group such as no bullying, and some do not allow any discussion about politics. Some groups require newcomers to read and agree to these rules. The groups that I was already a member of are supportive of the LGBTQIA2S+ community based on their rules.

There is no way to know how many people from each group filled out the survey because the survey was anonymous. However, in some groups the survey received a lot of interactions, such as upvotes, comments or likes, and in others it received very little interaction. Lower levels of interactions in some groups may signify that this sample is not representative of the general population. Attempts were made to share the post in groups with varied views and values. The survey was public, so members of these websites and groups were able to share the survey with other groups, other individuals, and on their own public profiles. Therefore, it is uncertain the extent to which the survey was shared, or in what groups/on what websites it was shared.

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3.2 iii) Participants

Anyone above age 16 could fill out the online survey.

3.2 iv) Informed consent process

The first page of the survey contained a letter of informed consent, which stated at the bottom that by continuing to the following page, participants give consent to fill out the survey.

3.2 v) Linguistic analysis

The language exercise in the survey had 21 fill-in-the-blank questions. 12 of these were filler questions, some of which could be used for future study. The 9 remaining questions were included in the analysis. These 9 questions have antecedents that can take a 3rd person pronoun. Some of the blanks may have also elicited either no word or a lexical word rather than a pronoun. The following set of survey questions will be examined:

8)
  a. *The cyclist* fell off ____ bike while going down a hill.
  b. *The nurse* said ____ would get the doctor.
  c. *Each student* must hand in ____ own homework in person.
  d. *This child* can go up the stairs by ____.
  e. *The average person* can hold 7 numbers in ___ short term memory at one time.
  f. *Someone* forgot ____ phone at the party last night.
  g. I bought my new shoes at a second-hand store and *Gabriel* bought ____ new shoes at the mall.
  h. *Every child* thinks that ____ could take care of a puppy.
  i. *My friend* has to pick up ____ little brother from school before coming to my house.

These questions have antecedents that differ in gender specificity, definiteness, and contextual specificity. Antecedents that are unspecified for gender in the discourse may still have lexical gender. Antecedents can have low or high gender expectancy, or no gender expectancy.

Gender expectancy can be due to a gender-bias, such as with *the nurse*. The antecedents in the

survey with high gender-expectancy are (9b) *the nurse* and (9g) *Gabriel*.

9) a. *The cyclist*   definite, context specific, not specified for gender

    b. *The nurse*   definite, context specific, not specified for gender

    c. *Each student*   indefinite, context specific, not specified for gender

    d. *This child*   definite, context specific, not specified for gender

    e. *The average person*   definite, context non-specific, not specified for gender

    f. *Someone*   indefinite, context specific (one of the people from the party)

    g. *Gabriel*   definite, specified for gender

    h. *Every child*   indefinite, not context specific not specified for gender

    i. *My friend*   definite, context specific, not specified for gender

Doherty and Conklin's (2017) research showed that the pronoun *them* was rated as ac-

ceptable when it referred to gender-neutral (no expectation of gender) antecedents and for ante-

cedents with low gender expectancy (e.g., *the cyclist*). *Them* was also considered more natural

for antecedents with high gender expectancy than for gender-known antecedents. Based on their

findings, low gender-expectancy antecedents such as *the cyclist* may elicit *they*. Even though Do-

herty and Conklin (2017) found a high acceptability for singular *they*, binary pronouns that

matched the expected gender of an antecedent were rated the most acceptable. Antecedents with

low or high gender expectancy may elicit a binary pronoun more often than singular *they* be-

cause binary pronouns are always acceptable.

The antecedent *Gabriel* likely has high gender expectancy. Although *Gabriel* is typically

masculine and *Gabrielle* is typically feminine, there may be differences in individuals' lexical

representations of *Gabriel*. It can also be a last name in which case it would not have any gender

specification. Konnelly and Cowper (2020) and Bjorkman (2017) both state that androgynous

names may elicit singular *they* by stage 2/innovative speakers. Therefore, if *Gabriel* is con-

sidered androgynous then it may elicit singular *they*. Stage 3 speakers have the option to use any of the pronouns, *he, she* and singular *they* for definite and gender specific antecedents like proper names. It is expected that more younger participants will choose *they* for *Gabriel*.

Based on Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly and Cowper's (2020) work the following hypotheses will be explored. It is expected that all speakers will choose singular *they* for quantified, indefinite and/or non-specific antecedents, but that stage 1 speakers will not choose singular *they* for definite antecedents. Speakers in stage 2 and 3 are expected to be able to choose *they* for definite and context specific antecedents who are not specified for gender, but only stage 3 speakers will find *they* acceptable for definite and gender-specific antecedents. Based on Doherty and Conklin's (2017) research, the gender-expectancy of an antecedent may also affect whether participants choose *they* for it.

3.2 vi) Statistical analysis

Chi-square tests of independence were used to analyze whether there are significant relationships between two factors, age (by age group) and gender, on pronoun choice. The pronouns were sorted into two groups: 'binary' and '*they*'. The 'binary' group included all forms of the masculine pronoun *he (*i.e., *him, his, himself, hisself)*, all forms of the feminine pronoun *she* (i.e., *her, hers, herself*), and any combined forms of the two such as *he/she* (*his/hers, himself/herself*). The singular *they* group included all forms of *they* (*their, them, themself, themselves, theirself, theirselves*) and any tokens of the combined *he/she/they* (*his/her/their, him/her/them, himself/herself/themself/themselves*). The *he/she/they* tokens were included in the '*they*' group because they represent participants' acceptance of singular *they*.

3.3 Results

3.3 i) Participants

A total of 1188 volunteers filled out the survey. The ages ranged from 16 to 84 years old. Table 4 below provides an overview of the survey participant demographics. The majority of participants identified as women (75%), and 82% of participants were in the 16-25, 26-35 and 36-45 age groups (combined). The mean age was 35.5. Most participants reported supporting the LGBTQIA2S+ community (97%), and a handful of people from each age group reported not supporting it. In total, 42% of participants reported being LGBTQIA2S+. Only 4% of LGBTQI-A2S+ participants were in the 46-55, 56-65 and 66+ age groups. The distribution of participants who reported being something other than a binary gender was also unequal in the age groups. There were no participants who identified as non-binary (or other) in the 56-65 or 66+ age groups.

The question that asked about participants' gender in the survey had the options *female*, *male*, *non-binary* and *other*. Some people said that they would have preferred the terms *woman* and *man* as opposed to *male* and *female* as genders. The terms *male* and *female* are understood to be biological sexes and not necessarily genders. In hindsight, it might have been better to use both terms *man* and/or *male*, and *woman* and/or *female* to be as inclusive as possible. Participants reported the following non-binary gender identities: non-binary ($n = 88$), genderfluid ($n = 6$), agender ($n = 2$), genderqueer ($n = 2$), two-spirit ($n = 1$), and transgender ($n = 1$).

One of the questions in the survey asked participants if they think *they* is singular, plural or either. A few participants in each age group chose 'plural', but most chose 'either'. For this analysis the 'singular' responses were left out because there were so few ($n = 25$), they will be examined in the discussion. A chi-square test of independence examined the relationship

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between age and whether people think *they* is plural, or either (plural and singular). A significant relationship between these variables was found, χ^2 (5, $N = 1156$) = 62.65, $p < .05$. A Bonferroni Correction post hoc analysis revealed that the 26-35 age group ($n = 263$) chose 'either' significantly more often than anyone outside of the 26-35 age group, the 56-65 age group ($n = 72$) chose 'either' significantly less often than anyone outside of the 56-65 age group, and the most extreme group was the 66+ group ($n = 30$) who chose 'either' far less than the other group.

Table 3. Is 'they' plural, singular or either?

Age group	Either	Plural	Singular	Total
16-25	92% (217)	7% (17)	1% (2)	236
26-35	94% (435)	3% (16)	3% (12)	463
36-45	93% (259)	6% (17)	1% (3)	279
46-55	87% (88)	10% (10)	3% (3)	101
56-65	80% (58)	15% (11)	4% (3)	72
66+	57% (17)	37% (11)	7% (2)	30

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Table 4. Survey demographics

Characteristic	Age group						Total
	16-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66+	(*N* = 1183)
	20%	39%	24%	9%	6%	3%	
	n = 236	*n* = 463	*n* = 279	*n* = 102	*n* = 73	*n* = 30	
	M = 22	*M* = 30.3	*M* = 40	*M* = 49.9	*M* = 59.7	*M* = 71.1	
Gender % in group (*n*)							
Female	61% (145)	75% (346)	80% (223)	81% (83)	84% (61)	80% (24)	75% (882)
Male	17% (39)	15% (67)	13% (36)	16% (16)	16% (12)	17% (5)	15% (175)
Not a binary gender	19% (46)	9% (42)	4% (10)	1% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	8% (100)
Did not say	1% (2)	1.2% (6)	3.2% (9)	1% (1)	0% (0)	3% (1)	2% (19)
LGBTQIA2S+							
Member	61% (143)	50% (231)	35% (97)	12% (12)	8% (6)	6% (2)	42% (491)
Supporter	94% (223)	98% (455)	98% (273)	95% (97)	93% (68)	90% (27)	97% (1143)
Knowledge	89% (211)	93% (429)	91% (253)	92% (94)	88% (64)	66% (20)	91% (1071)

Note: The category 'Knowledge' is for participants who reported knowing a non-binary or trans person. All percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number. The responses from the 5 people who did not report their ages in the survey were not included in the analysis.

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3.3 ii) Age and pronoun choice

The results for the chi-square tests of independence and descriptive statistics for each antecedent in the fill-in-the-blank exercise are reported below. The tables in this section only refer to the pronouns in their nominative case forms, *he*, *she*, *it,* and *they* for ease of reading. Indefinite and/or non-specific antecedents:

10) a. *Each student* must hand in _____ own homework in person.

     b. *Every child* thinks that _____ could take care of a puppy.

     c. *Someone* forgot _____ phone at the party last night.

     d. *The average person* can hold 7 numbers in _____ short-term memory at one time.

Almost all participants chose *they* for the antecedents in (10). Each of these four received the highest numbers of singular *they* responses in the survey, and less than 5% of participants chose a binary pronoun for each of these four antecedents. Interestingly, there were fewer *she* responses than *he* responses (see Table 5). The 3rd person pronoun *it* was only used for *each student* and *every child*. Huddleston and Pullum (2005) state that *it* is used for inanimate nouns, for animals, and sometimes for human infants. It was excluded from the chi-square tests because of how few tokens it received. Some questions in the survey elicited words other than a pronoun, which can explain any discrepancies in the total number of pronouns chosen for each antecedent. For example, in (10c) the blank could be filled in with another article, and for (10d) some participants wrote that they would not put a word there at all.

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Table 5. Total pronoun tokens for indefinite antecedents

Antecedent	He	She	He/she	Total H+S	They	It	N = 1183
Each student	2% (28)	0% (0)	2% (27)	5% (55)	95% (1124)	0.1% (1)	1180
Every child	1% (15)	0.3% (3)	1% (11)	3% (29)	97% (1127)	0.3% (4)	1156
Someone	1% (13)	0.3% (3)	0.3% (3)	2% (19)	98% (1123)	0% (0)	1142
The average person	0.1% (1)	0.2% (2)	1% (10)	1% (12)	99% (1119)	0% (0)	1132

Note: The 'total H+S' column contains the first three pronoun columns combined. Percentages below 1% were not rounded to the nearest whole number.

Chi-square tests of independence were used to examine the relationship between age (by age group) and pronoun choice (*he*, *she*, or singular *they*) for each of the four antecedents in (10), *each student*, *every child*, *someone*, *the average person*. The relationship between age and pronoun choice was statistically significant for three of the four antecedents: *Each student* χ^2 (5, N = 1180) = 57.42, *p* < .05, *every child*, χ^2 (5, N = 1156) = 31.78, *p* < .05, *the average person*, χ^2 (5, N = 1142) = 39.76, *p* < .05. Bonferroni Correction post hoc analyses (adjusted *a* = .0042) revealed that the 66+ age group was significantly different, *p* < .0042. The 66+ age group had significantly less singular *they* tokens for these three antecedents than any other age group. The only relationship that was not significant was the relationship between age and pronoun choice for the antecedent *someone*, χ^2 (5, N = 1132) = 1.17, *p* > .05.

The following fill in the blank questions have antecedents that are definite, contextually specific, and have either no lexical gender or low gender expectancy.

11) a. *The cyclist* fell off _____ bike while going down a hill.

b. *My friend* has to pick up _____ little brother from school before coming to my house.

c. *This child* can go up the stairs by_____.

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The words in (11) do not have lexical gender. *My friend* and *this child* have no expectation for gender, but Doherty and Conklin (2017) found that *cyclist* does have low expectation for gender, specifically masculine gender. Stage 2 speakers will accept singular *they* here, but stage 1 speakers will be likely to give each antecedent a binary pronoun (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). Because these antecedents are all definite, it could be assumed that the gender is known to the speaker. The lack of gender specification for *my friend* received comments from six participants. The comments were: "depends which friend", "need more context for gender", "not enough information", "my friend's preferred pronoun" and "I would know my friend's gender so would use his/her/their as appropriate".

Chi-square tests examined the relationship between age and use of singular *they* for the antecedents *the cyclist* and *my friend*. These relationships were statistically significant: *the cyclist*, χ^2 (5, $N = 756$) = 29.76, $p < .05$, *my friend*, χ^2 (5, $N = 1155$) = 33.38, $p < 0.05$. Bonferroni Correction post hoc analyses ($a = .0042$) revealed that for *the cyclist* the 56-65 age group ($n = 43$) was significantly different from the other age groups, $p < .0042$. Participants in the 56-65 age group chose singular *they* significantly less often for *the cyclist* than the other age groups. For *my friend*, the Bonferroni Correction revealed that the 66+ age group ($n = 28$) was significantly different from the other age groups, $p < .0042$. The 66+ age group had significantly less singular *they* tokens for *my friend* than the other age groups. See Figures 1 and 2.
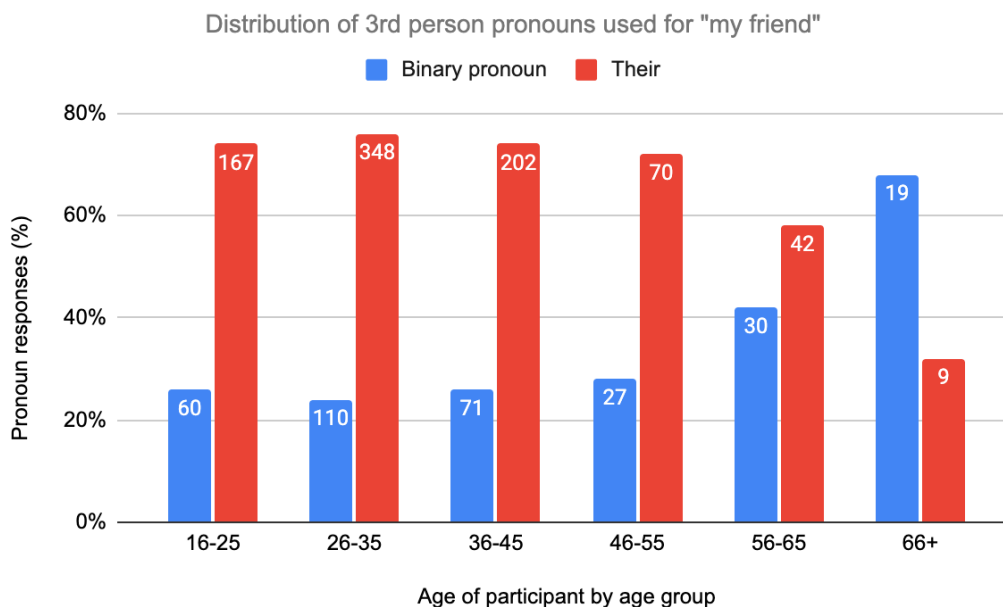
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Figure 1: Results for "the cyclist" by age
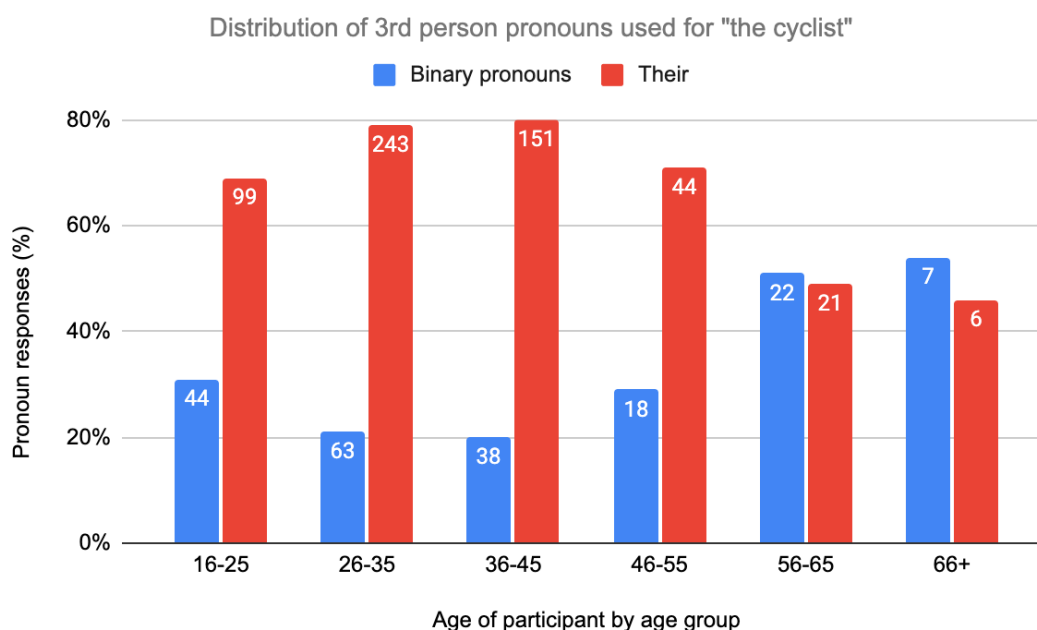
Percent of 3rd person pronoun responses to the question, "*The cyclist* fell off _____ bike while going down a hill"., sorted by participant age 'Binary pronoun' includes *he*, *she*, and combinations of the two. 'Their' contains *their* and any combinations of *his/her/their*. The data labelled in each column is the number of tokens.

Figure 2: Results for "my friend" by age

Percent of 3rd person pronoun responses to the question, "*My friend* has to pick up _____ little brother from school before coming to my house", sorted by participant age. 'Binary pronoun' includes *he*, *she*, and combinations of the two. 'Their' contains *their* and any combinations of *his/her/their*. The data labelled in each column is the number of tokens.
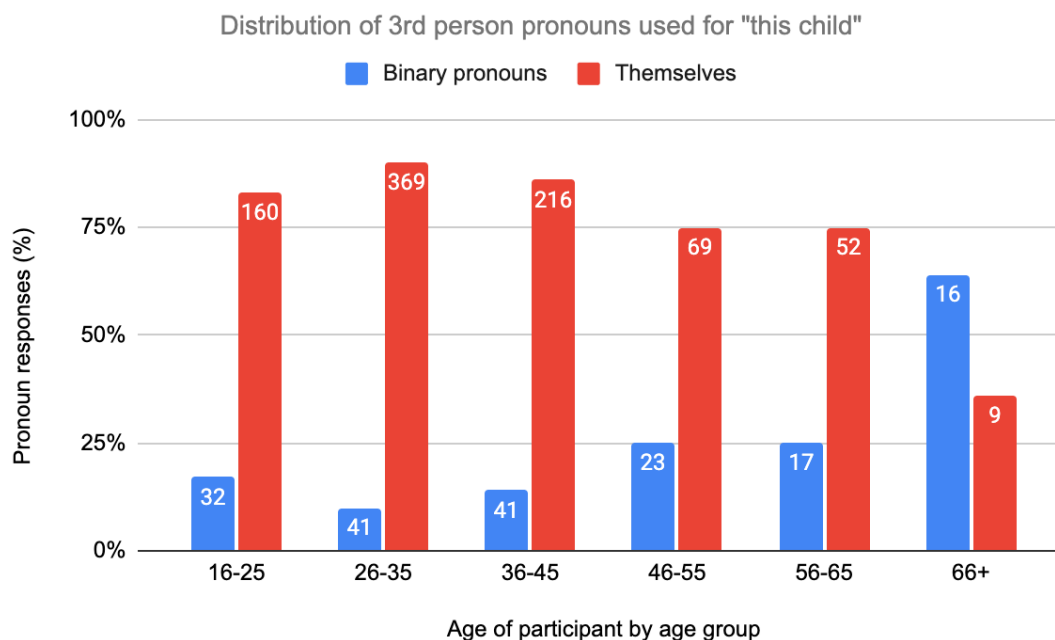
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Figure 3: Results for "this child" by age

Percent of 3rd person reflexive pronoun responses to the question, "*This child* can go up the stairs by____", sorted by participant age. 'Binary pronoun' includes *he*, *she*, and combinations of the two. 'They' contains *themselves* and any combinations of *himself/herself/themselves*. The data labelled in each column is the number of tokens.

      A chi-square test examined the relationship between age (by age group) and the use of singular *they* for *this child*. The relationship between these variables was statistically significant, χ^2 (5, $N = 1039$) =64.7396, $p < 0.05$. The Bonferroni Correction post hoc analysis (adjusted *a* = .0042) revealed that the 26-35 age group ($n = 410$) chose singular *they* significantly more often, $p < .0042$, and the 66+ age group ($n = 25$) chose singular *they* significantly less for *this child* than the other age groups, $p < .0042$. The most common answer was *themselves* with 571 tokens (48% of total responses), followed by *themself* with 267 tokens (22% of total responses). These included tokens of *theirself* ($n = 31$) and *theirselves* ($n = 3$). A chi-square test examined the relationship between age (by age group) and *themself* vs. *themselves*. The relationship between these variables was not statistically significant, χ^2 (5, $N = 875$) = 6.6065, $p > 0.05$. The choice between *themself* versus *themselves* for a singular antecedent was not affected by age.

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The following survey questions have definite antecedents with high gender-expectancy.

12)   a.   *The nurse* said _____ would get the doctor.

b.   I bought my new shoes at a second-hand store and *Gabriel* bought _____ new shoes at the mall.

In total, *Gabriel* received more binary pronouns (69%) than *the nurse* (36%). There were a few tokens of *she* ($n = 72$) for the name *Gabriel*, suggesting that for some speakers it is a feminine name. Table 6 contains the pronoun results for these two antecedents. The following comments were written for *Gabriel*: "The name Gabriel is not gender specific", "need more context for gender", "his. I mean unless I knew Gabriel was a girl, or didn't like the he/she thing", "his (I have a cis male cousin with this name)", "his, unless Gabriel uses different pronouns", "his/her/their, depending on known identified gender", "not enough information".

Table 6. Total pronoun tokens for the nurse *and* Gabriel

Antecedent	She	He	He/she	They	Total
The nurse	30% (324)	4% (42)	2% (26)	64% (691)	1083
Gabriel	6% (72)	62% (665)	1% (9)	31% (329)	1075

Chi-square tests found significant relationships between age (by age group) and pronoun choice (*he/she* or *they*) for *the nurse* χ^2 (5, N =1105) = 60.14, $p < .05$, and *Gabriel*, χ^2 (5, N =1081) = 18.60, $p < 0.05$. The Bonferroni Correction (adjusted $a = .0042$) revealed that for *the nurse* the 26-35 age group ($n = 430$) chose singular *they* significantly more often, $p < .0042$, and the 56-65 ($n = 68$) and 66+ age groups ($n = 27$) chose singular *they* significantly less often for *the nurse* than the other age groups, $p < .0042$. The Bonferroni Correction revealed no significant relationship between age and pronoun choice for *Gabriel*. However, there was a trend of younger participants choosing *they* more often than older participants.

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Figure 3: Results for "the nurse" by age
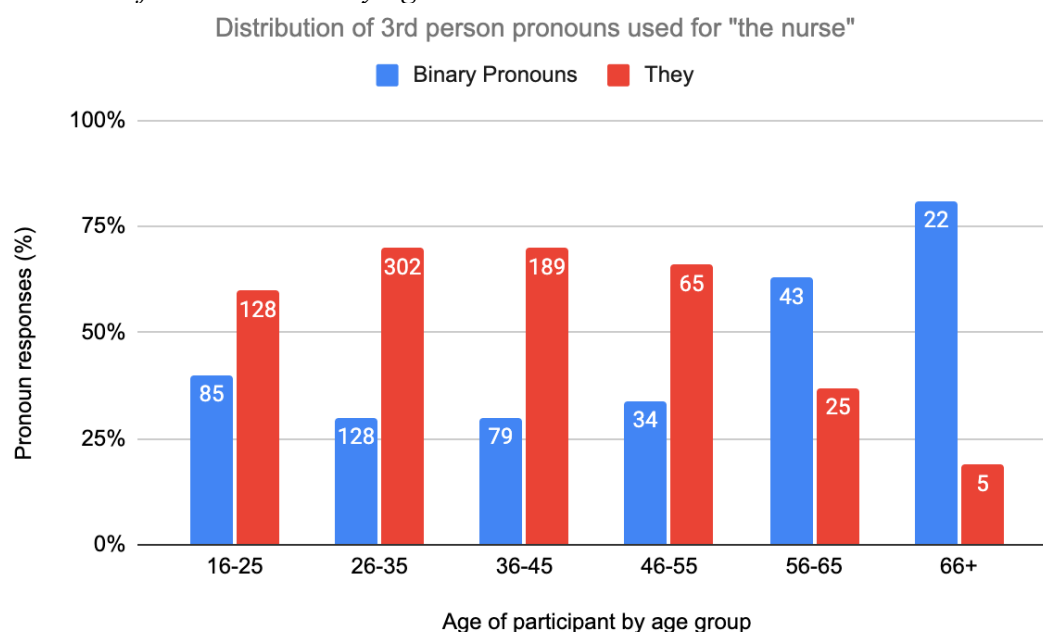
Percent of 3rd person pronoun responses to the question, "*The nurse* said ____ would get the doctor", sorted by participant age. 'Binary pronoun' includes *he, she*, and combinations of the two. 'They' contains *they* and any combinations of *he/she/they*. The data labelled in each column is the number of tokens.

Figure 4: Results for "Gabriel" by age
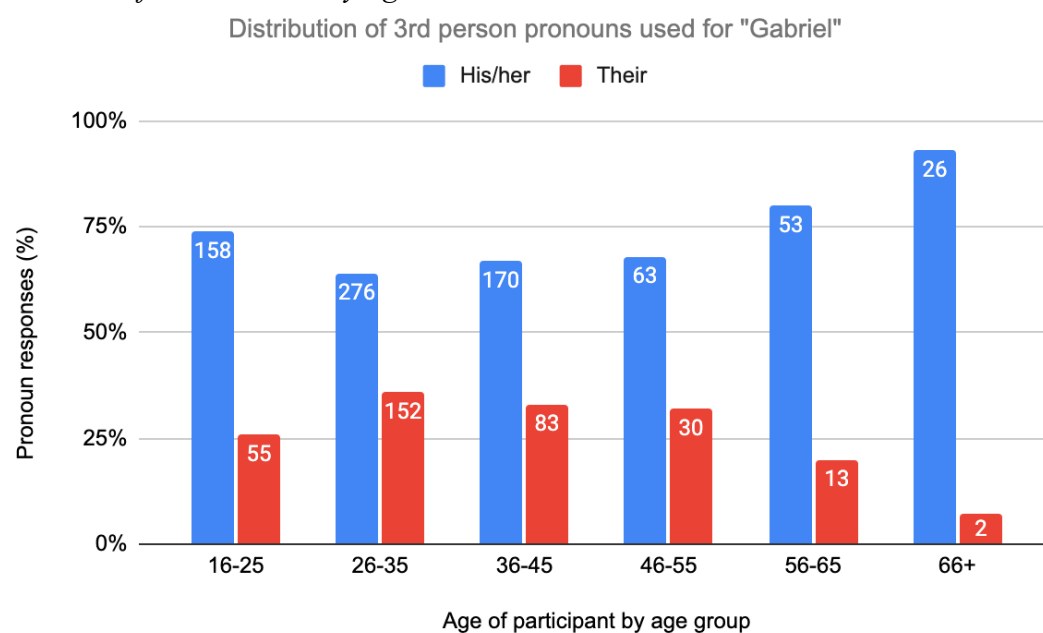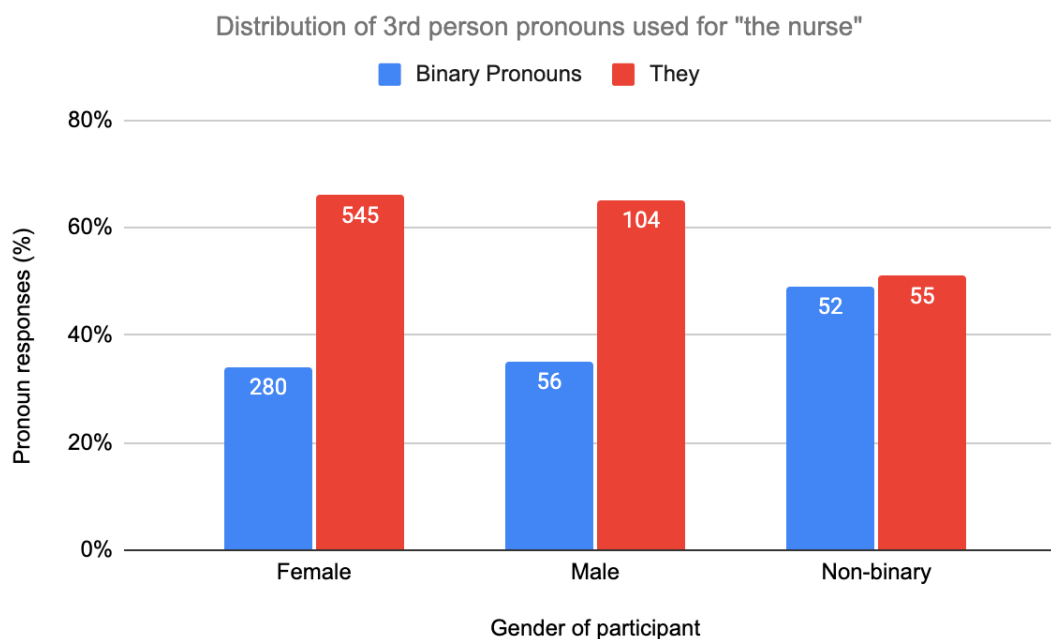

Percent of 3rd person pronoun responses to the question, "I bought my new shoes at a second-hand store and *Gabriel* bought ____ new shoes at the mall", sorted by participant age. 'Binary pronoun' includes *he, she*, and combinations of the two. 'Their' contains *themselves* and any combinations of *his/her/their*. The data labelled in each column is the number of tokens.

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3.3 iii) Gender and pronoun choice

For this analysis there are three gender categories, 'male', 'female' and 'non-binary'. The 'non-binary' category includes those who chose 'other' and wrote another gender identity. A chi-square test of independence analyzed whether there is a significant relationship between gender and pronoun choice (binary or singular *they*). Male and female respondents did not differ in their pronoun choice for any of the antecedents in the survey. The only significant relationship found was between participants who identify as non-binary and pronoun choice for *the nurse*, χ^2 (2, N =1092) = 8.90, $p < .05$. The Bonferroni Correction (adjusted $a = .0083$) revealed a significant relationship between being non-binary and high rates (49%) of choosing a binary pronoun for *the nurse*, $p < .0083$. Table 7 shows which pronouns were chosen by each group for *the nurse*.

Figure 5: Results for "the nurse" by gender

Percent of 3rd person pronoun responses to the question, "*The nurse* said ____ would get the doctor", sorted by participant gender. 'Binary pronoun' includes *he*, *she*, and combinations of the two. 'They' contains *they* and any combinations of *he/she/they*. The data labelled in each column is the number of tokens.

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Table 7: Pronoun choice for the nurse by gender

Gender	She	He	He/she	They	Total = 1092
Female	28% (235)	3% (27)	2% (18)	66% (545)	825
Male	28% (44)	4% (6)	4% (6)	65% (104)	160
Neither	39% (42)	7% (8)	2% (2)	51% (55)	107

3.4 Discussion

The results from this survey support previous findings of an age effect on the acceptability of singular *they* (Conrod, 2019; Moulton et al., 2020). The size of the sample for this survey ($n = 1183$) makes it quite powerful. Conrod (2019) conducted an online survey for their dissertation about singular *they* which received 754 complete responses. Conrod's survey asked participants to rate the acceptability of different pronouns (*he*, *she,* and *they*) with a variety of singular antecedents using a Likert scale (1-7). Conrod found that age, gender and trans identity were significantly correlated with the acceptance of singular *they*. Conrod also found that the 'neither female or male' group of participants were almost at ceiling for acceptance of singular *they*, meaning this group accepted singular *they* with the most antecedents. I could not analyze my data for a relationship between transgender identity in particular and pronoun choice because only one person identified as explicitly as transgender (in this case, trans male).

Unlike Conrod's survey, mine did not ask participants if participants found singular *they* acceptable for each antecedent, it only asked them to fill in a word. The interest of this study is the current use of *they* across different age cohorts and not participants' explicit acceptance of it for different antecedents. It is possible that if asked about their acceptance of singular *they*, participants might have answered differently. Although participants were likely to fill in a word only if they would actually use it, some may find singular *they* acceptable for some antecedents but

not use it themselves. The opposite is also true, people may claim to not find it acceptable, but use it in their own speech.

Even though the 'neither female or male' participants in Conrod's study were at ceiling for their acceptance of singular *they*, overall, the non-binary participants in the current study chose binary pronouns as often as the female and male participants. This was unexpected based on Conrod's (2019) findings, and it highlights the difference between the acceptance of singular *they* and the use of it. Because these participants identify as non-binary, it is likely that the majority of this group are in stage 3 and that they are able to use singular *they* for specific, definite, and gender-specific antecedents. These findings suggest that even though stage 3 speakers often default to singular *they*, as Konnelly and Cowper (2020) stated, they still have access to binary pronouns. These findings have important implications for when categorizing participants into the stages 3 of *they* (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020).

I argue that stage 3 speakers do not necessarily default to *they* in all the environments that they can, and that even though the gender of an antecedent is optional it may be considered important in certain contexts. For example, the speaker in (6b) and (6c), @samgria_, used binary pronouns for *the girl*, and *a man*, because binary pronouns are accessible to her and possibly important for these stories. She also used singular *they* in (6b) when she was unsure of the gender of *this person*. When and why stage 3 speakers default to *they*, or alternatively, when and why they choose to use binary pronouns, needs further examination. This and when and why speakers in stage 1 or 2 use singular *they* (apart from where it is expected), will be explored in the interview section.

The only significant relationship found between the gender of the participant and pronoun choice was for *the nurse*. The non-binary participants chose more binary pronouns for *the nurse* compared to the male and female participants, which was unexpected. This finding indicates that non-binary people are no less likely to have gender stereotypes for certain words like *nurse*. In general, antecedents with high gender expectancy were more likely to receive binary pronouns (Doherty & Conklin, 2017). As expected, the survey data revealed that *the nurse* had a higher gender expectancy than *the cyclist* because overall *the cyclist* received a lower percent of binary pronouns (25%) than *the nurse* (36%). The stereotype of nurses being female is representative of the nursing population in Canada where 92% of nurses are female (Michas, 2022). Based on this and Doherty and Conklin's (2017) findings that nurse has high gender-expectancy, the high number of singular *they* responses for *the nurse* (64%) was unexpected.

This could be explained by some non-binary people using *they* as a non-binary pronoun, while cisgender people use *they* as a gender neutral option. In this case, the non-binary participants may choose binary pronouns because it is unlikely that non-binary people make up the majority of nurses. Speakers vary on how often they use singular *they* and for who. Everyone can use singular *they* as a gender-neutral pronoun for quantified and indefinite antecedents, but some people choose to use it specifically as a non-binary pronoun. Others dislike using singular *they* as a non-binary pronoun, and do not wish to be referred to with singular *they*. Some people who are gender non-conforming wish not to be referred to with any third person pronouns because they believe that singular *they* signifies a gender, even if that gender is non-binary (Krauss, 2022). So, for those who wish to be no gender at all, singular *they* fails.

When participants did choose a binary pronoun for *the nurse*, there was a feminine bias (*she, n* = 324, *he, n* = 42). Using singular *they* for *the nurse* could show an awareness of, and res-

istance to, the gender stereotype this word carries. Some participants commented: "she, gendered of me, I know! I just know so many female nurses", "she, sorry", "damn, nope, at first I typed she", "she, unless I saw a man, odd bias I am now aware of". Overall, there was an age effect on the choice of pronoun for *the nurse*, more younger participants chose *they* for the nurse compared to older participants.

The results also support previous findings that being in the LGBTQIA2S+ community is correlated with a high acceptance of singular *they* (Bradley, 2020; Conrod, 2019; Hekanaho, 2020). The highest percentages of LGBTQIA2S+ participants and people who reported being non-binary (NB) were 16-25 (61% LGBTQIA2S+, 19% NB) and 26-35 (50% LGBTQIA2S+, 9% NB). These proportions indicate that identifying as LGBTQIA2S+ may have influenced the likelihood for participants, at least in the younger age groups, to participate in this survey. It was clear from the poster for the survey that the study was about language change that involves the LGTBQIA2S+ community (see Appendix A).

Even though the youngest group had the highest percent of LGBTQIA2S+ and non-binary participants, in general they used singular *they* less than the 26-35 age group. One possibility is that the 16-25 age group had less experience with singular *they* than the 26-35 age group. This age effect also suggests that 7-year-old Hailey from (6a) may not be in stage 3 and supports the hypothesis that the hypotheticality of the antecedent allowed her to use singular *they* for gender specific antecedents. More than 66% of people in each group reported knowing a transgender or non-binary person. The question asked if participants knew a transgender or non-binary person instead of just a non-binary person which limits the interpretation of these results. The 26-35, 36-45 and 46-55 age groups had the highest rates of reported knowing someone who is not cisgender (>90%), but the 26-35 age group still used *they* more than any other group.

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It is possible that the older age groups knew transgender people but not non-binary people. In this case they may not know people who prefer singular *they* as their personal pronoun. No one in the 56-65 and 66+ age groups reported being non-binary in this survey. Conrod (2019) did have two participants above age 56 who identified as 'neither female or male', but it is unclear whether these participants were transgender or non-binary because Conrod grouped them together. This is consistent with the idea that for some people non-binary is an umbrella term that includes transgender. For others, transgender is the umbrella term that includes non-binary. In both cases, there are transgender people who identify as a binary gender, or non-binary.

There was a higher percentage of people below the age of 35 who are non-binary and/or LGBTQIA2S+ than people above the age of 35 in my survey. This may be an effect of the sampling procedure. It is also possible that there are more young people online who are interested in engaging in this topic, but only 27% of under-20-year-olds have Facebook accounts (Leonhardt, 2021). This made it harder to reach people in the youngest age group. Overall, the survey participants who were below the age of 35 may have had more experience with using singular *they* for definite and specific antecedents than the other groups.

Participants were asked the question, "do you think the pronoun *they* is singular, plural, or either?". Some participants from each age group believed that *they* is only a plural pronoun. This was expected because that is how the English pronominal system is taught. It also is possible that participants could have been focusing on the plural agreement patterns that *they* has. The 56-65 and 66+ age groups chose 'plural' significantly more often. Their 'plural' responses were 15% and 37% respectively as opposed to the other groups whose 'plural' responses made up less than 10% of each groups answers. This aligns with the age effect found in the use of sin-

gular *they*. Some speakers may know they use *they* for singular indefinite antecedents, such as *someone*, but are resistant to using it for singular definite and gender specific antecedents. In this case, they may have chosen 'either', but this does not imply that they are in stage 3.

What was unexpected is that a small number of people in each age group chose 'singular'. It is possible that some participants did not understand the question and that this is an error. Alternatively, choosing 'singular' could indicate a very high acceptance of singular *they*. They could have chosen it to take a hyper positive stance on singular *they*, even though it is technically wrong. 'Plural' is also technically wrong, but it is less wrong because *they* is universally known to refer to plural antecedents. The choice between 'either', 'singular' and 'plural' does not necessarily signify participants' attitudes toward singular *they* used for non-binary reference.

Participants were also asked if they had positive, neutral, or negative views toward singular *they*. The majority of people who chose 'either' had neutral (45%) or positive (53%) views about *they* as a non-binary pronoun, and only 2% had negative views. People who chose 'singular' mostly had neutral views (52%), some positive (36%) and 12% of them had negative views. The high percentage of negative views for people who chose singular further suggests a potential misunderstanding of the question. While the majority of people who chose 'plural' had neutral views (51%) toward *they* as a non-binary singular pronoun, 29% had negative views and 20% had positive views. This indicates that while some people are reserved about the grammaticality of *they*, they are still supportive of it as a singular 3rd person non-binary pronoun.

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Figure 6: Grammar beliefs and attitudes toward 'they'
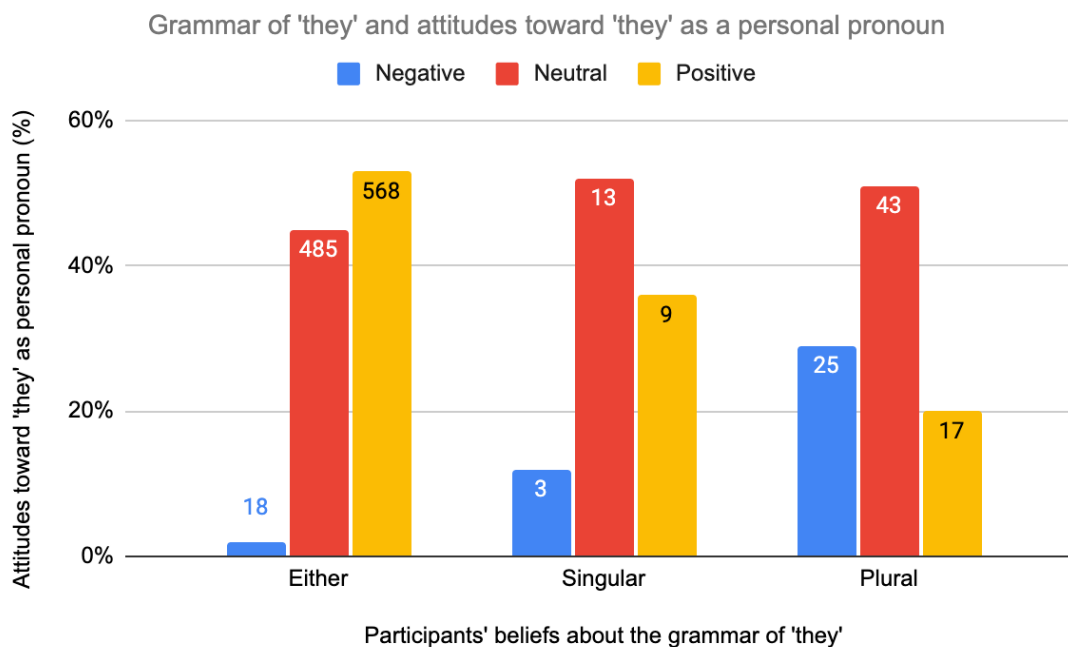
Participants' beliefs about the grammar of *they* and their attitudes toward *they* as a non-binary pronoun. The data labels are the number of responses in each column.

Whether people believe *they* can be used as a singular pronoun or not, participants in stages 1, 2 and 3 do use singular *they* (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). In the survey, the indefinite antecedent *someone* received very few tokens of binary pronouns (n = 19) and showed no significant age effect. This indicates that almost all participants preferred to use the pronoun *they* for *someone*. Now consider the indefinite and quantified antecedents *each student* and *every child*. The results showed an unexpected age effect based on Bjorkman's (2017) theory about optional gender for quantifier-bound indefinite antecedents for conservative (stage 1) speakers. This optionality does not mean that binary pronouns are unavailable, but that even stage 1 speakers will accept singular *they* for these antecedents. However, *each student* and *every child* do not have lexical gender, so they do not require binary pronouns in the first place.

This could signify that these speakers are aware of singular *they* but resistant to using it for a singular antecedent, even if it is quantified and indefinite. This resistance is also reflected in the use of the combined pronouns *he/she*. Combining these pronouns implies that that participant would choose *he* or *she*, but not *they*, unlike those who chose *he/she/they*. This is another example of how use and acceptability differ. These speakers may accept singular *they* for these antecedents if asked to rate if it is natural or not, but they did not choose to use it in the survey.

Even though the older age groups showed resistance to using *they* for *every child* and *each student*, they showed no resistance to using *they* for *someone*. The quantifier on *every child* and *each student* gives these indefinite antecedents the meaning 'every child from a set of children' and 'each student from a set of students'. *Someone* is a compound word formed from the indefinite determiner 'some' and the pronominal epicene 'one' (OED, 2022). *Someone* is an indefinite pronoun and is considered the head of DP in many generative models. If *child* and *student* are indefinite but not quantified, stage 1 speakers will use a binary pronoun or 'he or she' for the referent. According to Konnelly and Cowper (2020), quantifiers like *every* and *each* make the gender spell-out on their anaphoric pronouns optional. Therefore, when there is a quantifier, stage 1 speakers have the option to use singular *they*. However, there was an age effect on pronoun choice and older speakers chose significantly more binary pronouns for *every child* and *each student*.

In (6a) Hailey begins her advice which is hypothetical with "you have to have someone behind you that's a boy". She assigns *someone* a gender in the discourse and the other antecedent has lexical gender, "another boy in front of you". Both antecedents are indefinite. Once her two characters are set up, they become definite DP's, *the boy* and *the other boy*, but she refers to each boy with singular *they* as well as the masculine pronoun *he*. As seen in the survey results,

someone almost always takes singular *they*, and quantifiers make gender optional (Bjorkman, 2017; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020), but definite DPs with lexical gender typically get a matching binary pronoun unless the speaker is in stage 3. The hypotheticality of what Hailey is saying may override the spell-out of any lexical discourse-established gender on pronouns. This could make singular *they* available to a speaker who is in a stage lower than 3.

There could be a stage developing in children that is different from Stage 3 that older speakers of English are using. Because singular *they* is used as the gender-neutral pronoun, children hear it and it is written into their gender systems without necessarily implying they know about or accept non-binary gender identities. Then when they learn about non-binary gender identity, they can either accept or reject the non-binary use of singular *they*. It is also possible, even likely, that children will be unaware of their own use of singular *they*, just as teens and adults in this survey and the tweets in (2) seemed to be unaware of it.

In total, only 30% of participants chose singular *they* for *Gabriel*. Prior to the Bonferroni Correction in the chi-square test there was an age effect, p < .05. The 66+ age group had the lowest percentage of *they* tokens (7%) which is consistent with their high percentage (37%) of 'plural' responses for *they*. If a participant thinks *they* is only a plural pronoun, this would block them from using it for a definite antecedent like *Gabriel*. Choosing *they* suggests that some participants did not want to assume a gender for this name, even if it is typically masculine.

Konnelly and Cowper (2020) state that even stage 2 participants will accept singular *they* for an androgynous name, such as Kelly. Using a more androgynous name for this question could have potentially elicited more tokens of singular *they*. If *Gabriel* was androgynous to some stage 2 speakers, then they could choose *they*. Interestingly, there were 13 participants in the 56-

65 age group and 2 participants in the 66+ age group who chose *they* for *Gabriel*. This suggests that these participants are at least in stage 2, because it is unlikely that participants in stage 1 would choose *they* for *Gabriel* when there was no non-binary gender specified.

There was a discrepancy overall between the number of masculine and feminine pronoun tokens for the four indefinite and/or not context specific antecedents *someone*, *the average person*, *each student* and *every child*, and the definite antecedent *the cyclist*. None of these antecedents were specified for gender, nor do they have lexical gender, but they still received tokens of he. These findings may be indicative of a male bias in language and cognition. If the participants who chose the masculine pronoun for these antecedents were using generic *he* then this may show the lingering effects that the legislation of generic *he* has had on English. This data does not show that people are using generic *he* specifically. This could be explored in a future study.

In 1985, Canada's Department of Justice adjusted its legislation so that the interpretation of the feminine pronoun *she* would include males, to match the masculine pronoun *he* which was meant to include females as a generic pronoun (Department of Justice, 2020a). The Department of Justice did not directly affect written grammar other than legalese and possibly university level writing, but it is a language authority that people and organizations can reference. The change in this guidance reflects the department's awareness of the shift to the more inclusive language that was already underway. However, generic *he* continued to be preferred by some grammar handbooks for many years afterward (Zuber & Reed, 1993).

Younger participants were less likely to have grown up with generic *he* being taught in schools. Conversely, older participants were likely to have been raised using generic *he* in writ-

ten English. These changes happen gradually, and some people continue to use generic *he* in their writing. Finding an age effect in the use of binary pronouns for *every child* and *each student* was not unexpected. However, they were still less likely to elicit binary pronouns due to their quantifiers (Bjorkman, 2017; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). On the other hand, *the average person* was more expected to elicit a binary pronoun because it is definite, but it received the lowest number of binary pronoun tokens in the survey (n = 12). The fact that *every child* and *each student* received more binary pronouns than *the average person* was unexpected. Here *the average person* is acting as a generic term to describe "any person who is in the category 'average'". Like hypotheticality, this generic use may override the stage 1 necessity to give definite antecedents binary pronouns. This will be explored more in the interview section.

The greatest limitation for this survey is that the 56-65 and 66+ age groups were smaller than the other age groups. However, an age effect was consistently found in the data and it was similar to Conrod's (2019) findings. Another limitation is that men and older LGBTQIA2S+ and non-binary people were underrepresented in this sample. Only 15% of respondents identified as male, and there were no non-binary participants in the 56-65 and 66+ age groups. A follow up study with more participants, specifically male participants, non-binary, and LGBTQIA2S+ participants in the older age groups may have different findings. It would be interesting to see if older speakers who are LGBTQIA2S+ struggle to accept or use singular *they*. This would also indicate that age is a big factor in using singular *they*.

Chapter 4: The Interview

4.1 Introduction

The interview further examined the current use of singular *they* by gathering samples of natural speech from participants for discourse analysis. The interview questions were about participants' knowledge and attitudes toward singular *they*. This added important background information for the analysis of participants' speech. Participants were categorized into Konnelly and Cowper's (2020) stages of singular *they* by observing which antecedents they used singular *they* for. Observational data from a variety of sources including in-person and social media-based conversations are included in the discussion section to complement any findings. In order for the survey to remain anonymous, the interview data was not linked to the survey data.

4.2 Methods

4.2 i) Materials

The interviews were held in individual private meetings on Zoom. The interview elicited natural speech using a list of interview questions. The interview questions focused on participants' use of and attitudes toward singular *they*. Other information was gathered about when they had first heard about singular *they* and non-binary gender identity, and whether they know a non-binary person. Participants were also welcome to ask questions. For a full list of the interview questions, see appendix B.

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4.2 ii) Participants

At the end of the online survey, the participants were invited to take part in the individual interviews. The participants had to email in to state their interest in doing the interview. Like the survey, the interview had a lower age limit of 16 years old.

4.2 iii) Informed consent process

Interview participants were sent an informed consent letter and consent form via email that they were required to sign and return. Once the consent form was completed, a date and time was set for the interview. Participants were then sent a link to a private Zoom meeting one day before the interview was set to take place.

4.2 iv) Procedure

After filling out the consent form and receiving a Zoom link in their email, participants opened the link. I conducted the interviews, so upon entering the Zoom meeting I introduced my-self and gave the participants a brief introduction to the topic of the interview. I reminded them that it is private and that examples of speech might be transcribed from the recordings. The participant was then informed that they could have the video on or off for the interview, and then was asked for verbal consent to begin recording. When the recording started, Zoom gave the participant a notification that acted as a secondary form of consent. I then proceeded to ask the participant the interview questions and engaged them in conversation about pronouns.

4.3 v) Linguistic and discourse analysis

The linguistic analysis of the interview data focuses on what antecedents occur with singular *they* in interview participants' natural speech patterns. Like the linguistic analysis done for

the survey, the intent here is to observe what antecedents can take *they* and use this information to categorize speakers as stage 1, 2, or 3 (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020) and how age plays out as a factor in this. Other factors will also be considered, such as individuals' proximity to the LGB-TQIA2S+ community, and how long ago they first heard about singular *they* as a preferred personal pronoun. It is expected that younger speakers will be more likely to use *they* for definite, gender specific antecedents such as non-binary people (stage 3). It is conversely expected that older speakers are more likely to be in stage 1 or 2 and are therefore less likely to use *they* for such antecedents.

Antecedents were coded as hypothetical when the participant made them up. This usually happened in conditional clauses or in examples. Antecedents were coded as non-hypothetical if the characters in the story were real people from a specific context. Non-hypothetical antecedents are sometimes indefinite, but they are always contextually specific. Below is an example of an indefinite but context specific antecedent from one of the interviews:

> It was *a transgender person$_i$* who was giving this webinar and *they$_i$* were talking about…

### 4.3 vi) Statistical analysis

All instances of singular 3rd person pronouns in interview participants' speech were transcribed for the analysis. The antecedent, the pronoun, the situation (hypothetical or non-hypothetical), and the speaker's age were all recorded. The answers to the interview questions were also recorded and used as background information to help inform what stage each speaker is in. Descriptive statistics about pronouns are given in the results. Chi-square independence tests and correlational analyses were used to analyze the relationship between age and variables such as knowing a non-binary person and difficulty with using singular *they*.

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4.4 Results

4.4 i) Participant results

47 volunteers completed the individual interview. The youngest interview participant was 16 and the oldest was 92. Table 8 shows the age demographics of the participants. Although most of the interview participants had also done the survey, it was possible for people to ask to do the interview without doing the survey. This may explain the discrepancy for the age of the oldest participant being higher for the interview compared to the survey, or this participant could have filled out the survey but left their age blank. There were three interviews where the speakers did not use any singular 3rd person pronouns, no examples of speech were taken from those recordings, but their demographic information was included in the analysis below.

Figure 7: *Distribution of participants who know a non-binary person*

Participant age and whether they know a non-binary person
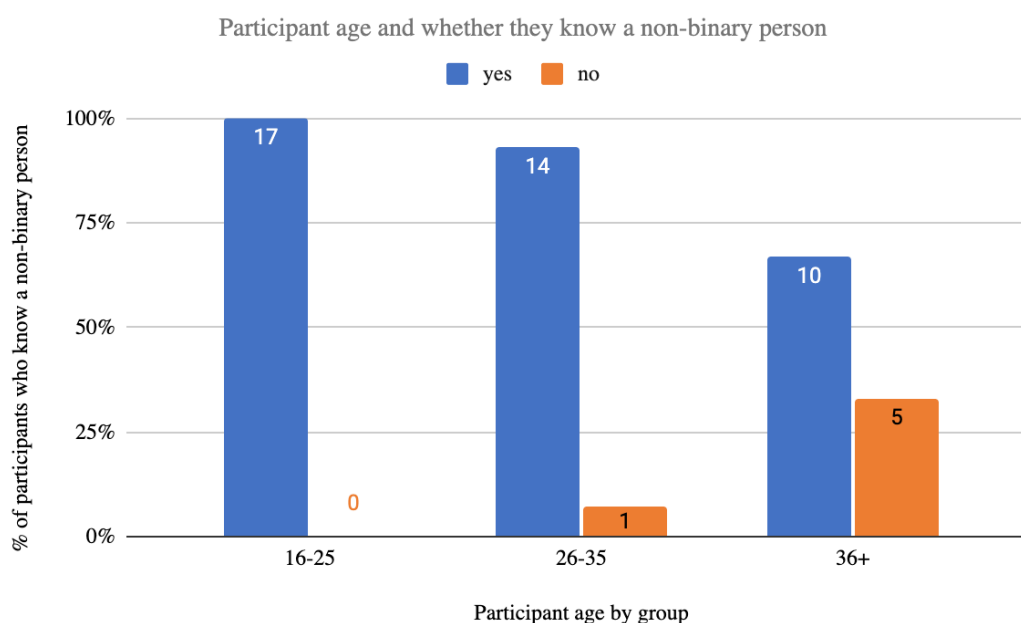
The 36+ group includes everyone in the 36-45, 46-55, 56-65 and 66+ age groups. This was done because these groups were small.
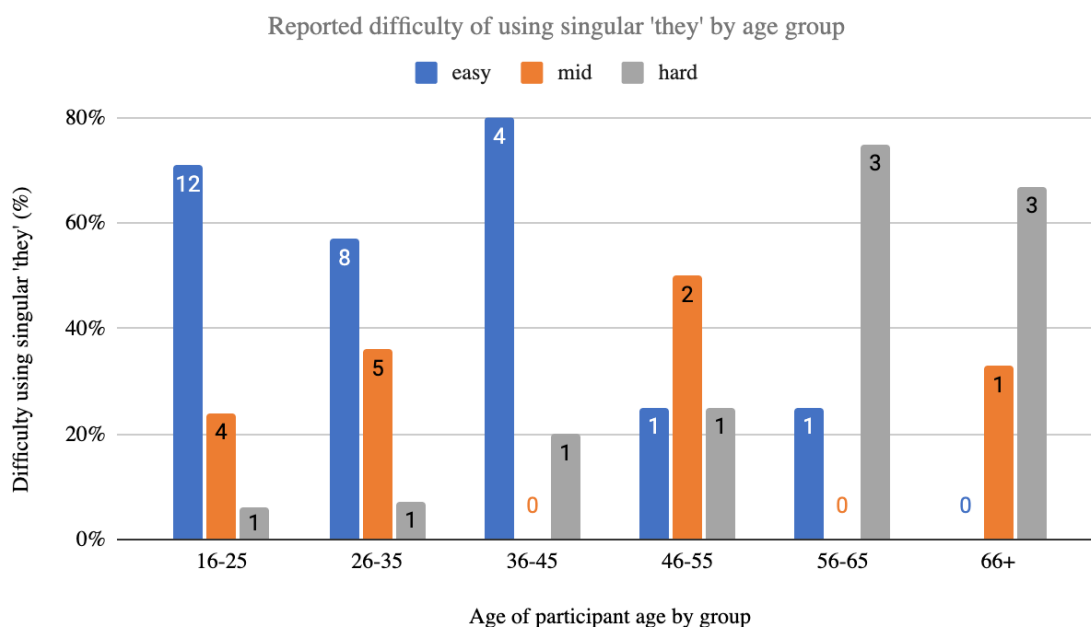
SINGULAR *THEY*

Table 8. Interview demographics: Age

Age group						Total
16-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66+	
17	15	4	4	4	3	*N* = 47

Note: M = 34.8, *Median* = 29, *Mode* = 30.

In total, 41 out of 47 participants reported knowing a non-binary person. A chi-square test of independence examined the relationship between age (by age group) and whether participants reported knowing a non-binary person. There was no statistically significant relationship found, χ^2 (5, N = 47) = 9.78, p > .05. It is possible that the older groups are too small to show any age effect. A second chi-square test examined the 16-25, 26-35 and the rest of the groups combined into one group called 36+. This test did find a significant relationship between knowing a non-binary person and age, χ^2 (2, N = 47) = 8.68, p < .05. Figure 5 above shows the distribution of participants who know a non-binary person.

Age and self-reported difficulty with using singular *they* (easy, medium or hard) were found to be negatively correlated, r (45) = -.50, p < 0.01. As age increased, more participants reported finding it difficult to use singular *they*. Figure 6 shows the distribution of difficulty using singular *they* by age group. Participants reported different issues with using *they* for non-binary individuals including grammar issues and not understanding (or perhaps respecting) non-binary gender identity, or simply having a hard time remembering when to use it.

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Figure 8: Distribution of difficulty using singular they *by age group*

Reported difficulty of using singular 'they' by age group

Unsurprisingly because of the topic of the interview, singular *they* was the most common pronoun in participants' speech. The next most common pronoun was *he,* followed by *she*. In total there were 259 hypothetical antecedents, 7% received *he* or *she* and 93% received singular *they*. Table 8 shows a distribution of the pronouns used for hypothetical antecedents. The hypothetical antecedents that took singular *they* were more often indefinite (n = 179) than definite (n = 45). The non-hypothetical antecedents were slightly more often definite (n = 44) than indefinite (n = 38). Table 9 lists the hypothetical and non-hypothetical antecedents that took singular *they* as a pronoun. The most common hypothetical antecedents were the indefinite pronouns *someone* (n = 54) and *somebody* (n = 40). Together these two words make up 42% of the hypothetical antecedents that took singular *they*. Antecedents that included the word *person*, whether definite or indefinite, made up 17% of the hypothetical antecedents (n = 38).

Table 9: Total number of 3ʳᵈ person pronouns

	They $n = 306$	He $n = 248$	She $n = 138$	Total pronouns $n = 692$
Hypothetical	93% (220)	6% (13)	1% (3)	236
Non-hypothetical	18% (82)	53% (238)	29% (132)	452

Table 9: Antecedents for singular they *from the interviews*

Hypothetical (n)	Non-hypothetical (n)
A child (1)	A friend (2)
A dog (14)	A friend of mine (2)
A fellow human (1)	A lady's name (1)
A girl (4)	A person (5)
A guy (4)	A roommate whose sibling is non-binary (1)
A guy or a girl (1)	A student (3)
A non-binary person (2)	A transgender person (2)
A person (12)	Another friend of mine (5)
A singular person (2)	Everybody (3)
A specific person or a specific example (1)	Friend (5)
A student (1)	Interview participant (1)
A transgender person (3)	My cousin (2)
An individual (5)	My ex (5)
Anybody (2)	My friend (3)
Anyone (3)	My friend ____ or my sister _____ (1)
A quote-on-quote authority figure (1)	My instructor (2)
Every student (1)	My roommate (2)
Everybody else (1)	My roommate's sibling (1)
Everyone (3)	Name (6)
He or she (1)	No referent (3)
My professor (1)	One of her friends (1)
[No referent] (15)	One of my close friend's younger sibling (2)
Nobody (2)	One of my colleagues (1)
One (1)	One of my exes (1)
One person (3)	One of my friends (1)
So and so (2)	One of them (2)
Somebody (38)	One person (1)
Somebody who is queer and transgender (2)	Our buddy ___ (1)
Someone (51)	Ruby Rose (4)
Someone who is older (1)	Said colleague (5)
Someone with schizophrenia (2)	Somebody (1)
That kid (1)	Someone (1)

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That person (15)	*That individual* (1)
The individual or the specific person (1)	*That person* (2)
The person (15)	*The parent* (1)
The professor (3)	*This person* (5)
Them (1)	
This person (1)	
Who (4)	
Your friend (3)	

4.4 ii) Discourse analysis results

The contexts in which speakers use singular *they* can help identify what stage they are in. Other factors, such as their knowledge of non-binary gender identity, also contribute to participants' use of *they*. This section uses examples of speech from the interviews. Proper names of people and some pets were anonymized in the transcripts. Names were turned into *name,* and were marked with [FEM] or [MASC] if the name has lexical gender. All antecedents and their corresponding anaphoric pronouns were italicized and co-indexed.

Table 10: Legend for discourse coding

P = participant	[MASC] = masculine name
R = researcher	[FEM] = feminine name
S = speaker	*Name* = a proper name, anonymized
M = Male (participant)	F = Female (participant)
NB = Non-binary (participant)	… = later in the interview/some text omitted
- = word cut off/false start	

The following examples are of singular *they* used for non-binary antecedents. There were 109 instances of *they* used with non-binary antecedents in the interviews.

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13) a. Interview participant (F, age 26)

P: Recently I realized *my cousin$_i$* identifies as 'he/them', but it's something that's really hard for me to almost break because I've known *them$_i$* my whole life just as 'he' and that's what I've known so that's a little bit hard to kind of break apart from too, but also something if I'm referring to *them$_i$* I try to like make sure I do it.

b. Interview participant (F, age 30)

P: I've spoken to *a person$_i$* before who did identify as non-binary and *they$_i$* expressed to me that it felt more comfortable to *them$_i$*.

c. Interview participant (F, age 32)

P: I think *my- said colleague$_i$* is also studying non-binary language, you'll maybe get the chance to meet *them$_i$* in the future.

d. Interview participant (F, age 29)

P: I was talking to *my friend, name name$_i$* [FEM], last night and *they* have decided *they* would like to be referred to by like the three common pronouns I guess, and um, it- yeah and so I mean, I- I really hate being called like a princess or a queen, um, and I've had my partners in the past and my current partner like occasionally call me like prince or king and it makes me feel really good, like really just genuinely happy, and *name$_i$* was going through the same thing, *she$_i$* said that when *her$_i$* partner called her a king or something it made *her$_i$* feel really nice

Even though these speakers are all able to use *they* as a preferred pronoun for specific non-binary individuals, not all of these speakers are in stage 3. Some non-binary people prefer a combination of *he* and/or *she* and *they*. The speaker in (13a) uses *they* for her cousin who identifies with both *he* and *they*, but she said that she finds it hard to use singular *they* and said it takes

effort for her to remember to use it instead of defaulting to a masculine or feminine pronouns based on the attributes of the person. The speaker in (13b) said she only really began to understand the importance of using people's preferred pronouns last year and now makes an effort to respect people's preferred pronouns. The speaker in (13c) is likely in stage 3 based on their acceptance and self-report that it is not hard to use singular *they*. He also defaults to *they* later in (16d). The speaker in (13d) reports that her friend doesn't mind being referred to by all three pronouns, so she uses both *she* and *they*. It is likely that she is in stage 3.

If an antecedent is unmarked for gender, speakers can choose between *he, she*, and *they*. The examples in (14) show different people choosing pronouns for gender-unknown antecedents.

14)   a.   Interview participant (F, age 46)

R: *My teacher friend$_i$* tries to use it as a blanket pronoun.

P: So, *she$_i$* uses 'they' for everyone?

b.   Interview participant (M, age 73)

R: I had *my oldest interview participant$_i$* today, 92.

P: Oh that's neat! How did you find *them$_i$*?

c.   Interview participant (F, age 33)

P: Was yours the survey where it was like what is the gender for this person and it was like, the nurse blah blah blah. I like totally- I was like- it was like 'nurse' and I was like 'she!' and I was like ah damnit.

Examples (14a) and (14b) include definite antecedents that are contextually specific but unspecified for gender. The speaker in (14a) is a teacher and assumes that *my teacher friend* has feminine gender. This may be due to an internalized stereotype about teachers being women. She could have also assumed that because I am a woman my friends are also women. The antecedent

in (14b), *my oldest interview participant*, has a low gender-expectancy. It would have been odd

for the participant to use a binary pronoun for it. The participant in (14c) is in stage 3 based on

the rest of her interview. However, she automatically thought of the pronoun *she* while filling out

the survey question about *the nurse*. The speakers in (14a) and (14b) could be in stage 1 or 2.

More examples from these two speakers appear in (19a) and (19d).

  The examples of speech in (15) show participants using *they* to be polite.

15) a. Interview participant (F, age 19)

    R: *name$_i$* [MASC] is 33 and I'm 27 so-

    P: I didn't know that you are dating *somebody else$_i$*

    R: Right? I know we haven't talked in so long.

    P: Have you even posted anything with *him$_i$*- with *them$_i$* or?

    R: I post on- like just on Instagram but you don't really use Instagram that

    much.

    P: What does *he$_i$*- what does- what do *they$_i$* do?

    R: *He$_i$* owns and runs a bunch of businesses. It's really fancy.

    P: Fancy! Is *he$_i$* bougie or is *he$_i$* humble?

  b. Interview participant (F, age 37)

    P: Especially as I have transitioned personally to trying to use 'they/them' un-

    til *someone$_i$* confirms *their$_i$* preferred pronouns being something else, uhm, I'm

    trying to set that as like my default.

  c. Interview participant (F, age 52)

    P: If I say 'they' but *they$_i$* actually identify- it's- because I use 'they' now be-

    cause I don't know, *they$_i$'re* offended, because *they$_i$* could be a girl who gets

accused of being a boy, and then *they$_i$'re* really angry, and really upset, be-

cause *they$_i$'re* not 'they', *they$_i$'re'* he' or *they$_i$'re* 'she', it's happened to me with

a 'he' where I've used it to be kind and it's caused upset.

d.   Interview participant (F, age 24)

P: In my day job I have to check people's IDs and write a little bit about them,

and usually the ID will say if they're female or male, um, but whenever I'm

writing about them, I try to still say 'they', which gets confusing because

sometimes people have to review what I've said and if I say like *"they$_i$* did

something to *themself$_i$"* that gives me a little red squiggly, like it's not a real

word you can't say 'themself'. It should be 'themselves', but I feel weird about

that because it's only one person.

e.   Interview participant (M, age 47)

P: I remember shortly after I started putting 'he' in my zoom name, I was in a

meeting with *someone$_i$* who put they in *their$_i$*- in *their$_i$* name. and I thought

well that's who we are doing it for, that way *they$_i$* don't feel weird, we're all

doing it so *they$_i$'re* not weird.

The interview participant in (15a) does three things by self-correcting from *him* to *them*:

she aligns with the topic of the interview, avoids misgendering the referent, and non-explicitly

asks for the correct pronouns. She does not continue to switch between pronouns after the refer-

ent's preferred pronoun has been established. In examples (15b), (c), and (d) participants self-re-

port defaulting to *they* intentionally. Self-reporting can be flawed because people do not always

do what they say they do. For example, the participant in (15c) reports using default *they*, but in

another story she misgenders a transgender person by using the wrong binary pronoun. She could

have intentionally used *they* if she was unsure of which pronoun to use. In (15c) she describes

how some of the elementary students she teaches become upset if she refers to them by *they*. In

(15d) the participant avoids misgendering the referent in writing. In (15e) the participant puts his

pronouns on his zoom out of politeness and solidarity. Of the 47 participants, 21 (45%) said they

put their pronouns in their social media account bios, zoom names, or emails.

Defaulting to *they* is typical of stage 3 (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). The gender of the

antecedents in (16) is given in the discourse or known by the speaker so there is no need to use

they to avoid misgendering these antecedents.

16)   a.   Interview participant (F, age 19)

      R: *One person$_i$* I talked to said that *he$_i$* only just switched to using 'they', and

      he$_i$ always used to use 'he' all the time.

      P: Interesting, I wonder if *they$_i$* were like- if *he$_i$* was told that sometime or if *he$_i$*

      just kind of like assumed that.

   b.   Interview participant (NB, age 39)

      R: I had *another interview participant$_i$* who used singular 'they' with the name

      name$_j$[FEM] and I don't even think it was conscious to *him$_i$* that *he$_i$* said that-

      P: Well, I wonder about that because I think if *that person$_i$* encountered *name$_j$*

      [FEM], *they$_i$* might not know what honorific to use, but *they$_i$* will probably say

      she, when actually talking about *name$_j$* [FEM].

   c.   Interview participant (M, age 28)

      P: *Another friend$_i$ of mine* went to Costa Rica on a research trip or something,

      and *they$_i$* were like- *they$_i$* got really drunk one night and *they$_i$* were like chasing

      this iguana around where *they$_i$* were living, and *they$_i$* didn't realize how sharp

their claws were, because they climb trees with it, and it just like scratched *him$_i$*

right down *his$_i$* chest and it looked like *he$_i$* had been mauled by a bear or some-

thing.

d.　Interview participant (M, age 32)

P: I had *a person$_i$* who like- there is a syllable in Korean 'hee' that's usually

used for female names, but it turns out that *it$_i$* was *a man$_i$*. Like Korean doesn't

have- well it can have gendered pronouns but it's pretty standard to use a non-

gendered pronoun, but, I'm doing like interviews with couples so I had to be

like "I need to know when is good for *you$_i$* and *your spouse$_j$*" but I ended up

saying *husband$_j$* because I assumed *they$_i$* were *a woman$_i$*.

These four speakers are most likely in stage 3 and using a default *they*. The first two de-

fault to *they* but differ because (16a) self-corrected to match the antecedent's gender and align

with the interviewer, and (16b) did not. The antecedents for these two examples are indefinite

but context specific, *one person* and *another interview participant*. The gender is established in

the discourse in both examples. It wasn't necessary for these speakers to use binary pronouns be-

cause gender is optional in stage 3. It is possible that the hypotheticality of the 'if' clause in

(16b) made the speaker less likely to spell out the gender. This speaker also used *that person* in-

stead of a noun with lexical masculine gender such as *that man* to match the given gender of *the*

interview participant. It is also possible that gender was not important in this context so the

speaker defaulted to *they*.

Alternatively, this could be a difference between using singular *they* as a non-binary pro-

noun and using it as a gender-neutral pronoun. The speaker in (16b) is non-binary and it is pos-

sible that they use singular *they* more often than the speaker in (16a). Gender is always optional

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in stage 3 and some stage 3 speakers will choose to use the binary pronoun and some will not.

The speaker in (16c) defaults to *they* for the gender specific antecedent *my friend* and when he

switches to *he*. He does not go back to using *they* once the gender is established.

Speakers in stage 2 are able to use singular *they* for certain nouns even if the gender of

the antecedent is known but not established in the discourse (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). The

following is an example of this and also how it can be difficult to categorize speakers into stages.

17) a. Interview participant (F, age 57)

P: I had a conversation with *a student$_i$* and I didn't know *they$_i$* went by 'they' but

I asked *them$_i$* and *they$_i$* said *they$_i$* go by 'they', and then when I was talking with

the parent$_j$ in email, I referred to *the student$_i$* as 'they' and so did *the parent$_j$*, but

at some point then *the parent$_j$* reverted back to the old pronoun, near the end of

the email, so I think it might have been new for *them$_j$* too.

…

P: I'd always be distracted by the energy of *the person$_i$*, if *they$_i$* exuded a very

feminine persona, I would call *them$_i$* 'she', and if *they$_i$* had a very male persona,

or characteristics or body language, I'd call *them$_i$* 'he'.

The speaker in (17a) is in stage 2 based on her own self-report of using binary pronouns

when someone seems one gender or the other, and my own knowledge of her speech outside of

this interview. This raises a limitation in this study, in that it is not always possible to gather suf-

ficient data to determine which stage a speaker is in. She uses *they* for two people, a non-binary

student and the student's parent. The antecedent *a student* is indefinite, contextually specific and

is specified for non-binary gender identity. The second antecedent, *the parent,* is definite, contex-

tually specific, and the gender is known to the speaker. The gender of *the parent* is not given in

the discourse. This participant uses stage 3 *they* for the non-binary student, however she reports

having a difficult time using singular *they* for individuals in the second example in (17). She also

reports struggling to remember to use *they* for a non-binary person. Although she remembers to

do so in the first example in (17a), in that context she specifies that the student is non-binary and

prefers *they*. Here she is actively thinking about using *they* as opposed to remembering to use

singular *they* while speaking about a non-binary person without talking about the person's

gender identity.

The examples in (18) show how hypotheticality may have an effect in different stages of

singular *they*. Each of these examples have antecedents with lexical gender.

18)   a.   Interview participant (F, age 29)

        P: If *someone$_i$* says *they$_i$'re gay*, like if *a guy$_j$* says *they$_j$'re* gay.

   b.   Interview participant (M, age 73)

        P: If you have *a male$_i$* who's very sensitive to light, colour, form, um, move-

        ment, you know um, and isn't into soccer, you know, we say well, *he$_i$'s* got an

        artistic perspective on things therefore *he$_i$* is ok, you know we accept *him$_i$* in a

        fringe way.

   c.   Interview participant (M, age 61)

        P: If someone said to me, you know you met *a girl$_i$* and you're single and

        you're a guy and you meet *a girl$_i$* and you say 'hey how are you' and *she$_i$* says

        "hi I'm *Josie$_i$*, I wanna be seen- described- you know, seen as a 'they', or ad-

        dressed as a 'they'" or I don't know how- what the proper way of saying it is.

   d.   Interview participant (M, age 52)

> P: For example, I received an inquiry for some business just the other day and
>
> it was *a lady's name$_i$* with no Mrs. or Miss or Ms. and immediately that creates
>
> an issue, not a big one, but when we're trying to email *them$_i$*, I don't like just
>
> calling *somebody$_j$* say, *name name$_j$* [FEM], and you're not sure what's- cause
>
> the default for a woman is Miss.

The first three examples have 'if' clauses which make them hypothetical. The speaker in (18a) is in stage 3 (same speaker from 13e) and therefore the gender spell-out is optional. Stage 2 does not allow singular *they* to refer to an antecedent that has an established gender (Bjorkman, 2017; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). In (18b) and (18c) the speakers chose pronouns based on the lexical gender of the antecedent. If the hypotheticality can license singular *they* for antecedents with gender in stage 1 and 2, then the speakers would have had the option to use *they* for antecedents with gender specification as in (18a) and (18d). However, in (18b) and (18c), the speakers chose the appropriate binary pronouns for *a girl* and *a male*. This indicates that hypotheticality is not binding. Therefore, if gender is important in the context, then the speaker can choose to spell it out on the pronouns. The speaker in (18b) is the same one from (14b) where he uses singular *they* to refer to the non-hypothetical antecedent, *my oldest interview participant*. Both of the speakers in (18b) and (c) are likely in stage 2.

In (18c), the pronoun *them* refers to the person who sent the business inquiry to the speaker. Although *a lady's name* does not directly refer to the referent, I assume that the referent is a woman based on the fact that *lady* gives *name* the feature [FEM]. The rest of the dialogue about titles of address (Mrs., Ms., and Miss) supports this assumption. This speaker's use of *them* to refer to the referent is consistent with stage 3. Other aspects of the interview suggest that he may not be in stage 3. For example, the speaker had only just learned about non-binary gender

identity, and his only other use of singular *they* was for the antecedent *somebody*. His example is about how the lack of a title of address makes it hard to write back to a woman in a business email. His use of this situation as an example makes the referent generic which may allow him to use *them* for a referent with the feature [FEM]. If he is in stage 2, then this use as an example may license singular *they*. Use as examples may parallel hypotheticality insofar as both may make interpretation of the propositions generic.

Some participants reported finding it difficult to use *they* for a singular antecedent but used it naturally in their speech. The following examples suggest that participants were not always aware that they use singular *they*.

19)   a.   Interview participant (F, age 46)

P: If *a student$_i$* wanted to use a restroom, that seemed to be neutral, *they$_i$* would have to get a key from a teacher.

…

R: If you see *someone$_i$* on the street and you don't know *their$_i$* gender, do you use 'they'?

P: I think I would probably use a work around and refer to *them$_i$* with something neutral.

   b.   Interview participant (F, age 20)

R: If you're referring to *someone$_i$* and you can't tell *their$_i$* gender what do you do?

P: If I don't see *the person's$_i$* face or I don't see *their$_i$* physical body or whatever I'll say 'they' but like if I seen that *it$_i$* was a guy or a girl, like the way that I believe *they$_i$* was, I would just say 'her' or 'she'.

  …

  P: (when writing) I use they most of the time, just because I think it's safer,

  and I want like *the professor$_i$* to think *himself$_i$* or *herself$_i$*, whatever- like

  whatever *professor$_i$* has- and I just want *them$_i$* to like make it up like *themself$_i$*

  in *their$_i$* brain when *they$_i$* read it.

c. Interview participant (F, age 41)

  R: If you're referring to *someone$_i$* and you can't tell *their$_i$* gender what do you

  do? Do you use *their$_i$* name, or would you use singular 'they' in that situation?

  P: I think I would use *their$_i$* name, just because it's probably more, I'll say, nat-

  ural to me to do that, because 'they' is new to me.

d. Interview participant (M, age 73)

  P: If I'm driving down the street and *someone$_i$* is blocking my way, car wise or

  otherwise, would I use 'he' or 'they'? I'd use 'he', 'she', I'd use what'd be

  visual.

  R: So if you can't see *them$_i$*, like you can't see who *they$_i$* are?

  P: I might use 'they'... no I think I- I think I would use- I think in that sense

  traditionally, *they$_i$*- *they$_i$* blocked my way, *they$_i$* blocked my car, I think 'they'

  would be a traditionally acceptable way of speaking about it, probably one of

  the few.

 The participant in (19a) is an English teacher. She reported supporting non-binary and

transgender people but that she has a hard time using *they* for non-binary individuals. She said

she struggles with remembering when to use it and with the grammaticality of *they* as a singular

pronoun. Another factor that may affect her use of *they* is that she lives in a very conservative

and religious town. However, she uses singular *they* naturally for indefinite antecedents in the second and third examples in (19a). Recall from (14) that this speaker chose the feminine pronoun for *my teacher friend* (non-hypothetical). In (19a) she uses singular *they* for the indefinite hypothetical antecedents, *a student* and *someone*. In her interview she did not use singular *they* for any antecedents that were non hypothetical. There were no instances that stood out in her interview that would put her in stage 2, and her use of *she* for *my teacher friend* supports this.

The speaker in (19b) reported having a non-binary friend but did not use *they* to refer to that friend during the interview. She is a French-English bilingual with L1 French which may affect her use of singular *they*. She mentioned that her family is very conservative and her parents are not accepting of LGBTQIA2S+ identities. However, this speaker uses singular *they* easily for the hypothetical, non-gender-specific antecedents in (19b). Interestingly she switches between *he*, *she*, and *they* for *the professor* which is definite but non-specific with no lexical gender. This could be an attempt to not be sexist, and in the end she defaults to *they* as a gender neutral singular pronoun.

The participant in (19c) does not know a non-binary person and reported only recently learning about singular *they*. It is very possible that she is unaware of her own use of singular *they* for indefinite antecedents. In (19d), the speaker had also only recently learned about non-binary gender identity. He believed that he doesn't use singular *they* even for an unknown person, but upon thinking about it he realizes that he probably does use it. This is the same speaker from (14b) where he uses singular *they* for a definite antecedent with unknown gender, *my oldest interview participant*, which has no lexical gender, which shows that he does indeed use singular *they*. Example (19d) suggests that he is unaware of his own use of singular *they*. In all the ex-

amples in (19), I had used singular *they* for indefinite antecedents in my questions to the participants. Their subsequent uses of singular *they* could also have been accommodation.

Although uncommon, a few instances of misgendering did happen in the interviews. People of all ages can make the mistake of misgendering someone, and most of the interview participants reported having accidentally misgendered someone in the past. Even the most practiced singular *they* users reported making mistakes. The three participants who misgendered someone in the interviews had specified that the antecedents were non-binary or transgender but then referred to them with the wrong pronouns. These speakers were ages 20, 52 and 92. Interestingly, they all reported feeling supportive of the referents' gender identities, but were not interested in changing their own speech to accommodate them. This shows that it is not enough to simply accept or support gender identities if there is not a willingness to change.

Singular *they* can also be used to misgender people, whether unintentionally or not. As noted by Konnelly and Cowper (2020), trans women are sometimes excluded from the language of womanhood if referred to by *they* instead of *she*. One of the genderqueer interview participants said that using *they* for a transgender person can minimize the work that person has put into their gender identity. There are also some non-binary people who still prefer to be referred to with a binary pronoun. Using people's preferred pronouns is the best way to respect them, and this includes using the proper binary pronoun. A default to singular *they* is not always appropriate even though it may be well-intentioned.

Konnelly and Cowper (2020) stated that singular *they* can also be used for pets in stage 3. In the interviews, *they* was used for hypothetical dogs, but when the dog was non-hypothetical and gender-known, like in (20a) and (20c), binary pronouns were used. On the other hand, hypothetical iguanas received *it* instead of *they*, but Fred the iguana in (20d) received the masculine

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pronoun *he*. The hypothetical and contextually non-specific antecedent *animals* also received *it*. This is in some ways a self-correction that allows the speaker to shift from plural *animals* to 'a specific animal'. The speaker in (20d) is the same one from the iguana story in (16c) and *it* here likely refers back to his previous story. Based on (20d) and (16c), if this speaker was truly referring to all iguanas he would have used plural *they* instead of *it*. Both (20b) and (20d) look like number violations on the surface and they require Gricean-like assumption that there was no error and then figuring out what the speaker is referring to arrive at a coherent interpretation.

20) a. Interview participant M, (are 61)

   R: We're coming to visit you later $name_i$ (dog)

   P: He_i is not identifying with either gender.

   b. Interview participant (F, age 65)

   P: You look at *animals$_i$* and ask yourself if *it$_i$* is a 'he' or a 'she'.

   c. Interview participant (F, age 19)

   R: Look at *name$_i$* (dog) right now

   P: Oh my god, is *he$_i$* just sleeping like that?

   …

   P: If you um, adopt *a dog$_j$* from the shelter *they$_j$'re- they$_j$'re* not used to you, *they$_j$'re* not used to the environment.

   d. Interview participant (age 28)

   R: You've seen *Fred$_i$* (M, iguana) right?

   P: I've seen *him$_i$* on your Instagram... Every time I see *iguanas$_j$* I think of *it$_k$* (iguana from 16c) mauling someone.

4.5 Discussion

The interviews provided more evidence that factors other than age, such as knowing a non-binary person, affect the use of singular *they*. Some interview participants who knew a non-binary person were still in stage 1 or 2, while 7-year-old Hailey from (6a) may be in stage 3 without knowing a non-binary person (or what non-binary is). A combination of factors allows speakers to enter stage 3 and other factors keep speakers in stage 1 or 2. These include perceived grammatical issues with singular *they*, not wanting to change the way one speaks, and not fully understanding or accepting non-binary gender identity. It is also possible that some stage 1 and 2 speakers use singular *they* for non-binary people but never progress fully to stage 3.

One participant who said they struggled with the grammaticality of singular *they* when they first heard about it ten years ago, now identifies as non-binary. Adjusting to using singular *they* for definite antecedents can take time, and this did not seem to depend on age. Consider three different interview participants, ages 32, 33, and 35. Two of them said it only took them an hour to adjust to using *they* for a non-binary person and they had no problem with the grammar of it. The third said it took him a long time to use *they* for specific non-binary people and that he still struggles with accepting *they* as a singular pronoun. If a speaker believes that *they* can only be used for plural antecedents, then it seems to take them longer to accept it for a singular defin-ite antecedent and non-binary individuals. Of these three participants, the third is the only one who still has contrastive gender, putting him in stage 1 or 2, whereas the two speakers who were able to adjust to singular *they* easily are in Konnelly and Cowper's (2020) stage 3 because gender features for them are non-contrastive.

A few interview participants switched between pronouns for a single antecedent. Stage 3 speakers that defaulted to *they* for gender-specific antecedents sometimes switched to the gender

matching binary pronoun, or continued with the default *they*. Finding out exactly when and why

speakers do this is beyond the scope of this study. However, in contexts where the gender of an

antecedent is unavailable then speakers may switch between pronouns until the gender of the

antecedent becomes clear, just as in (6b) where @samgria_ was unsure of the gender of the ante-

cedent and so switched back and forth between *he* and *they*.

Stage 3 speakers' tendency to default to *they* can mean that it is not always possible to

tell if a speaker is referring to someone who prefers *they* as their personal pronoun or not. For ex-

ample, one participant was talking about a roommate of theirs and used singular *they* but did not

specify if that roommate was non-binary. They had stated that all of their roommates, including

themself, are non-binary or transgender, so it is unclear if this was a default *they* or their pre-

ferred pronoun. Defaulting to *they* can make the listener question which pronouns the person

prefers such as in (21a) below. This is a text conversation between a friend (coded as I) and me

(coded as L) from autumn 2021. Interestingly, the name of the referent in this story is androgyn-

ous, but I do not think that this affected the use of *they* here because we both know this person.

21) a) Two stage 3 speakers, both are female and 27 years old

I: So *name$_i$* may have *a perfect human$_j$* for us, *they$_i$*'re going to connect us after *they$_i$*

confirm that *she$_j$* is defs looking to find a place still.

L: Oooooo! Does *name$_i$* use 'they' pronouns?

I: Lol no actually but I can see why you would have thought that.

L: Are you referring to *name$_i$* and *name$_k$*?

I: Oh no I was just talking about *name$_i$* lol.

Some non-binary individuals accept or prefer being referred to with *he*, *she* and *they*, and

some choose *they/he* or *they/she*. One non-binary participant said they put *they* first in the *they/*

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she combination to signify a preference for *they* over *she*. In the interviews, switches in pronouns only happened between a binary pronoun and *they*, and not between a masculine and feminine pronoun. However, some drag queens prefer feminine pronouns when in drag and masculine pronouns when not in drag (Von B, 2013). The famous drag queen RuPaul joked "you can call me *he*, you can call me *she*, you can call me Regis & Cathy Lee; I don't care! Just as long as you call me" (Twitter.com, 2013).

Stage 1 and 2 speakers can use singular *they* out of politeness, policy, and respect to non-binary people. Singular *they* is becoming a part of inclusive language policies; for example it is becoming common in email correspondence with universities. Each of the three teachers in the interviews said that parents are not always aware of their child's changing gender identity. Teachers have to navigate using certain pronouns for a student in the classroom and other pronouns with the student's parents. One of the teachers said that for a few years in the 2010's she used singular *they* for students on report cards. Now she says she uses the student's name instead of any pronoun. This allows her to avoid misgendering altogether and avoid 'outing' a student to their parents unintentionally.

The following are examples of singular *they* used in various forms of politeness. (22a) is a text conversation with an employee from Purple Cow internet provider, (22b) is an email from an employee at the Saint Mary's University records office, (22c) is a student in an in-person class at Saint Mary's University, and (22d) is a 17-year-old employee at a waterpark.

22)   a.   Employee: Did *the person$_i$* give you a referral link to sign up? What is *their$_i$* name and telephone number?

Customer: *name$_i$* [MASC], 902__-____ referred me.

Employee: Sweet, we will get *name$_i$* [MASC] *their$_i$* referral.

    b.   Employee: Attached please find a Declaration Form to *name name$_i$* [MASC] who is

        looking to drop *their$_i$* minor in Spanish.

    c.   A feminine-presenting university student (approx. age 18-25) gesturing to another

        student in a third-year psychology course (September 2021)

        Student: To add on to what *they$_i$* were saying over there...

    d.   A masculine-presenting employee (age 15) asking a lifeguard for first aid help for

        the man standing next to him (Nova Scotia, July 2021)

        Employee: Do you have something just to like flush out *their$_i$* eyes or something?

The gender of the antecedent could be inferred by the speaker either from their name or potentially from visual cues in these four examples. However, none of these speakers use binary pronouns for these referents. The first two speakers might be using *they* as part of an inclusive language policy, or they could be defaulting to *they* for politeness. In (23c) the speaker may be using *they* because the gender of the referent is irrelevant, or the speaker could be actively avoiding misgendering the referent. In (23d) the gender of the antecedent was omitted through the default to *they*. Doing this obscured who exactly had something in their eyes as a form of politeness. If a binary pronoun had been used it may have drawn more attention to the referent than necessary.

There is not enough information from the examples in (22) to know if the speakers are in Konnelly and Cowper's (2020) stage 3. However, although the speakers in (22a) and (b) are using stage 3 *they*, they could be in stage 1 or 2. Speakers (22c) and (d) cannot be in stage 1 because the gender of the antecedents are known but they could be in stage 2 because they do not violate its restrictions. Alternatively, they could be in stage 3 but there are no more examples

from their speech to draw this conclusion from, and there are no lexical antecedents for them to misgender. Examples like these seem to go against the findings from Moulton and colleagues (2020) who found that people are less accepting of *they* when the antecedent is not lexically realized (like in 22c and d) compared to when there is a lexical antecedent. This again highlights the difference between acceptance of singular *they* and use of it. As the current study has shown, participants are not always aware of their own use of singular *they*.

The interview data showed that some possibly stage 2 speakers used singular *they* for referents that have been given a gender feature, such as in (18d) where *them* referred to a referent that had been given the feature [FEM]. This mirrored the 7-year-old's use of *they* for *a boy* in (6a). However, in (6a) the boy was hypothetical and in (18d) the antecedent was used as an example. Using a specific person as an example makes the antecedent generic in the discourse, so it may license uses similar to indefinite antecedents. In the case of *a lady's name*, it refers to a class of people with "ladies' names". This generic antecedent seems to act the same way that hypothetical antecedents do.

Consider again the example from Shakespeare from (5a), repeated here.

23) a.   Shakespeare (*A Comedy of Errors*, 1623)

There's *not a man$_i$* I meet but doth salute me
As if I were *their$_i$ well-acquainted friend*.

The antecedent *not a man* is quantified, whereas *a lady's name* is not. Otherwise, these two antecedents match in indefiniteness and gender-specificity, and generic-ness. The indefinite marker alone is insufficient to warrant singular *them* for *a lady's name* because it is necessary to spell out lexical gender in stage 1 and 2 unless a quantifier is there to block gender from raising to D (Bjorkman, 2017; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). It is unclear whether the speaker in (18d), or the 7-year- old in (6a) are in stage 3, even though they seem to be inconsistent with stage 1 and 2

rules. There was nothing else in (18d) speaker's interview that would suggest that he is in stage 3. Some things he said suggested that he is indeed not in stage 3, such as he feels that it is necessary to have a term of address such as Miss, Mrs., or Ms., in an email to politely address the emailer.

If hypotheticality makes gender optional, then some people will still choose to spell it out. The fact that it can be difficult to determine what stage a speaker is in limited the exploration of the possible effects of hypotheticality in different stages of *they*. A follow-up study could check for this more specifically and could also examine children's use of singular *they* to see what stage children are in, and if any are in stage 1 or 2 and whether there is a space in stage 3 where there is a default to *they* without the use of singular *they* for definite, specific, non-hypothetical antecedents? We also need further study of speakers who may be using default to *they* as a gender-neutral pronoun, versus speakers who are (also) using it as a non-binary pronoun.

Both the interview and survey data suggest that some people are unaware of their own use of singular *they*. Interview participants who reported not using singular *they* ended up using it during their interview. This typically happened when participants were talking about a hypothetical person, such as *someone* or *a person*. The survey found that *someone* typically takes singular *they* by speakers of all ages and in all stages and the interview data supported that because of the high number of instances of singular *they* referring to *someone* and *somebody*. These words seem to almost always take *they*, even if a person is referring to themself. Here are two examples from Tiktok where speakers use singular *they* to refer to the antecedents *somebody* and *a childless millennial*, both of which refer to the Tiktok user and are indefinite. These two speakers can be in stage 2 because this does not violate any of its restrictions. The indefiniteness of these two antecedents sets up categories to which they belong. In (24a) the phrase is set up as an ex-

ample, so the antecedent is *someone* from the category of 'people who have fostered a lot of dogs'. In (24b), the temporal/conditional adjunct 'when X' is a common structure for memes, e.g., "when you ask someone 'what's up' and they say, 'the sky'".

24) a. @insideoutdogtraining on Tiktok, the speaker is a man (spoken):

As *somebody$_i$* who's fostered a lot of dogs and has adopted many many dogs in *their$_i$* lifetime, *I$_i$* think it's important that we start to remove the stigma of returning a dog that doesn't fit with your household.

b. @booplethesnoot is an account run by a woman about her and her dog. This text is from a video of her dog and is meant to be interpreted as the dog speaking about the woman (written):

When you get adopted by *a childless millennial$_i$* & now you're *their$_i$* personal therapist.

The two speakers in (24) also use *they* when referring to a dog with unknown gender in other videos on their accounts. Using singular *they* for an animal is typical of stage 3 (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). It is a form of anthropomorphism and may show that cats and dogs are (becoming) a part of people's families to the extent that people do not want to refer to a pet as *it* so they use singular *they*. This is also a sign of using *they* for politeness and/or uncertainty of gender. This politeness is probably directed toward the owner of the animal and not the animal itself. There is even a Facebook group called "Please tell your cat I love them". The following example is from a text conversation that I had with the participant from (17a) who I categorized as stage 2. I have coded myself as L and the other speaker who is a family member of mine as A. I had sent her a photo of a dog that is available for adoption through a local adoption agency.

25)   a.   L: *Perfect dog$_i$* for you

A: Oh *they$_i$*'re a cutie!

This conversation occurred 3 months after the interview so it is also possible that this speaker's use of *they* could have shifted to stage 3 or expanded to animals in that time. I had not heard her use *they* for an animal before this, and when I asked if she was aware of her use of singular *they* for the dog she said that it was a conscious choice. She said she wasn't sure if the dog was female or male, so she chose to use *they* and not *he, she* or *it*. Originally I had theorized that people use singular *they* for a pet to be polite to the owner (and not the pet), but her explanation contradicts that. She did not want to assume the gender of the dog, or use *it*, so she only had one option for a pronoun left, *they*. In this situation, there was no politeness happening, instead choosing *they* represented the speaker's feelings that pets do not deserve to be called *it*.

I did not come across any examples of people using singular *they* to refer to their own pet as Konnelly and Cowper (2020) suggested happens in stage 3. On the other hand, I came across many instances of people using *they* for dogs and cats of unknown gender. This does not violate stage 2 because the gender of the pet is unknown. From what I have seen, both stage 2 and 3 speakers do this. However, I do not have any examples of stage 1 speakers referring to an animal with *they*. Based on the stage 1 restrictions set out by both Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly and Cowper (2020), it is unlikely that speakers in stage 1 will do this. This expansion of *they,* to be used for a pet of unknown gender, may be occurring parallel to singular *they* for human individuals. It is possible that some stage 1 speakers do this if they do not want to default to *it* like the speaker in (25) stuck either assuming the animal's gender or using singular *they*. A follow up study could question whether stage 1 speakers use singular *they* for individual pets.

Chapter 5: Limitations

The survey had a very large number of participants (*n* =1188), but the younger age groups were far bigger than the older age groups. Originally the plan for this study was to focus on teenagers' use of singular *they* by recruiting teenagers from high schools in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to fill out the survey and do the interview. This was approved by the ethics board at Saint Mary's University but was rejected by the Halifax Regional Centre for Education's research committee for reasons of taking time from students during their exam period (i.e., January/February). This made it much harder to recruit teenagers for the study along with a variety of other reasons such as that teenagers are less likely to use Facebook. Consequently, there were only 46 survey participants below age 20.

The lower age limit for the online survey was 16, so no survey or interview data could be gathered from people close to the age of Hailey in (6a). The older age groups were also difficult to reach through an online survey, and it is likely that a lot of them were friends of friends that found the survey through Facebook. As previously mentioned, there were far more participants who identified as female compared to male (15%) or non-binary (8%). This survey also likely attracted more LGBTQIA2S+ participants than not because it was labelled as exploring language change involving the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

A limitation of the discourse analysis from the interviews is that it is inherently difficult to establish what stage someone is in because anything a stage 1 speaker can say, a stage 2 speaker can say, and anything a stage 2 speaker can say, a stage 3 speaker can say. This was especially difficult when deciding if a speaker is in stage 1 or 2 because they are essentially identical other than certain nouns in stage 2 have optional gender spell-outs. Determining if someone is in stage 3 is easier, but it is not possible in stage 3 based on short spontaneous ex-

amples of speech alone. Discussing each participants' explicit attitudes toward singular *they*

provided information about their use of it. Without having this information, one cannot determ-

ine what stage they are in based on brief examples alone. Only one of the interview participants

said "him or her" and it was while he was giving an example of his speech patterns before he be-

came accustomed to using singular *they*. Repeatedly using "him or her" rather than "them"

would suggest that a speaker is not in stage 3.

There was over 14 hours of interview data collected with an average of 18 minutes per in-

terview. Some participants did not use any 3rd person pronouns and some answered questions

with "yes/no". People can be somewhere between two stages, and speakers can go from stage 1

to 3 without passing through stage 2 (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). It might have been easier to

determine what stage participants were in if the interview data could be connected to the survey

data from the interviews, but this was not the original plan and I did not have ethics approval to

do so. A follow up study with different interview questions, and linkable controlled data collec-

tion, could explore further individuals' use of *they* in more registers, genres and contexts to ad-

dress the data gaps.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The robust quantitative data in this study showed age effects on the use of singular *they*

and supported previous findings of age effects on the acceptance of singular *they* (Conrod, 2019;

Moulton et al., 2020). The results also indicate that age alone does not determine whether

someone accepts *they* as a singular pronoun, and other factors must be considered when trying to

categorize a speaker into stage 1, 2 or 3 (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). This was especially notice-

able in the interviews where there were some younger participants who were not in stage 3. This

study showed that knowledge of different gender identities and choosing to actively use

someone's preferred pronouns is a big factor in how or whether teens and adults enter stage 3. This supports previous findings that being in the LGBTQIA2S+ community is correlated with high acceptability of *they* (Bradley, 2020; Conrod, 2019; Hekanaho, 2020).

All speakers use singular *they* whether they are aware of it or not. With the shift to singular *they* for inclusive language policies, and pronouns becoming common in Zoom names and email sign offs, more people are being exposed to singular *they* in everyday language. This exposure may encourage some speakers to move from one stage to the next, especially those who are using it under inclusive language policies. However, people may resist this language change for a variety of reasons, such as continuing to believe that *they* can only be used for plural referents. A longitudinal study could examine how speakers use of *they* changes over time and if speakers can progress directly from stage 1 to 3 as Konnelly and Cowper (2020) suggest.

Lastly, the default to *they* for any singular antecedent may unintentionally erase the non-binary label that *they* has. This may make non-binary people feel that they no longer have a way to identify, which in part is likely why so many neopronouns have been made. Currently, the default to *they* can make it difficult to know a person's preferred pronouns, but in general using singular *they* until someone's preferred pronouns are known is considered polite and used in inclusive language. As previously mentioned, some people do not wish to be referred to by any pronouns. For them, *he*, *she* and *they* all signify gender, with non-binary not simply being 'not masculine or feminine', but another gender. In a world where all speakers are in stage 3, the effort to use preferred pronouns must be sustained out of respect for people's gender identities.

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SINGULAR *THEY*

Appendices

Appendix A: The Survey

Online recruitment poster and the text accompanied with each post:

Please click the link to complete the survey: (------google forms LINK----)

Welcome! This is a survey about language change. It takes roughly 10 minutes to complete. This survey is for anyone ages 16 and up. Data from all ages is very important for language change research. This survey includes questions about language that pertains to the LGBTQI-A2S+ community.

The survey will gather data about how people use language, and how people think they use language. This research is being conducted as part of an honours thesis by Saint Mary's University student, Lily Jackson, in order to complete her Bachelor of Arts, Honours in Linguistics. This study is under the supervision of faculty supervisor, Dr. Elissa Asp. If you would like more information, please send an email to: lily.jackson@smu.ca or elissa.asp@smu.ca

SMU REB File Number: 22-028

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Feel free to share this survey with your friends and family members. When studying language change, the most fascinating data comes from people of all ages!
(------google forms LINK----)

Language Change Survey
The survey was made with google forms, this is the content of the survey.

Page 1
Consent

<div align="center">Welcome!</div>

You are invited to participate in a research study about language change. The goal of this research study is to gather data from different age groups to observe how language might be changing over time. This study is being conducted by Lily Jackson with support from faculty supervisor Dr. Elissa Asp.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will answer questions in this online survey about your language use. Page 1 contains this information about consent, page 2 is a fill in the blanks and multiple-choice exercise which will show how you use language, page 3 is a questionnaire about your demographics and page 4 is a questionnaire about your language knowledge and preferences. Page 4 has questions that involve talking about language that pertains to the LGBTQI-A2S+ community. Participating in this study will help us learn about language change. You may skip any questions you do not want to answer, and you may end the survey by exiting the page at any time.

Regarding privacy and confidentiality: This survey is anonymous. We do not ask for your name, where you live, your contact information, or any other personally identifying information. Your answers will not be able to be linked to you. The only identifiable information collected from you is computer/device data (e.g., IP address).

In addition to this survey, you are invited to take part in a recorded interview about language change that pertains to LGBTQIA2S+ community. Unlike the survey, this interview will not be anonymous because it requires your name and email. Names and emails will be kept in a separate database. Survey answers and interview recordings will not be linked to one another. The interview will be held over Zoom and it will take 5-10 minutes. Completing the interview will enter you into a draw for one of six 20$ gift certificates to Bookmark, a Halifax bookstore that has an online store as well (https://halifax.bookmarkreads.ca/?q=h).

Please note: You must be 16 or older to participate in the online survey or in the interview.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the Research Ethics Board at Saint Mary's University. If you have any other questions or concerns about ethical matters, you may contact the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board at ethics@smu.ca or (902) 420-5728.

If you have any questions about this study you may contact the researchers through the following emails: lily.jackson@smu.ca or elissa.asp@smu.ca. SMU REB File Number: 22-028

By completing this survey, you are consenting to participate in this study.

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Page 2
Language exercise
This is a fill-in-the-blank exercise with some multiple-choice questions at the end. Fill-in whatever word comes to you first. There are no right or wrong answers, just put what feels natural to you.

1. The college student bought the book ____ the store.
2. The cyclist fell off ____ bike while going down a hill.
3. You are telling your friend that you and John are going to the store, you say "____ and ____ are going to the store." (fill in the two missing words)
4. Everyone said that ___ can come to the party.
5. The nurse said ____ would get the doctor.
6. Henry went to ____ store downtown.
7. Each student must hand in ____ own homework in person.
8. Where did Emily find ____ lost watch.
9. This child can go up the stairs by ____.
10. Spam phone calls ____ annoying.
11. The average person can hold 7 numbers in ____ short term memory at one time.
12. There was a car broken down ____ the highway.
13. Sam is taller ____ Matteo.
14. Someone forgot ____ phone at the party last night.
15. You run into a female teacher who taught you in grade school and you want to greet her, you say: "Hello ____ Sanchez."
16. You run into a male teacher who taught you in grade school and you want to greet him, you say: "Hello ____ Morris"
17. I bought my new shoes at a second-hand store and Gabriel bought ____ new shoes at the mall.
18. The city salts the ____ in the winter.
19. Every child thinks that ____ could take care of a puppy.
20. Apples ____ on trees.
21. My friend has to pick up ____ little brother from school before coming to my house.

Read the tweet below and answer the following questions:

22. In your first impression of this tweet, is the pronoun *you* referring to one person or multiple people?

A) One person
B) Multiple people
C) Other (please explain)

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23. In your first impression of this tweet, are the pronouns *them* and *they* referring to one person or multiple people?

A) One person
B) Multiple people
C) Other (please explain)

Page 3
Demographics
This part of the survey is to collect demographic information about the participants.

24. How old are you in years? (Please type a number)
25. What is/are the first language(s) you learned to speak?
26. What languages are spoken in your home?
27. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

A) High school
B) Undergraduate studies
C) Community college
C) Graduate studies
D) Still in high school
E) Other (specify)

28. If you are still in high school, what grade are you in?
29. What gender do you identify as?

A) Female
B) Male
C) Non-binary
D) Prefer not to say
E) Other (please specify)

30. What pronouns do you use? Check all that apply

A) He/his
B) She/her
C) They/them
D) Other (Please specify)

31. Are you part of the LGBTQIA2S+ community? The acronym LGBTQIA2S+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, two-spirit and any other affirming way in which people choose to self-identify.

A) Yes
B) No
C) Unsure

32. Do you identify as/with the gender you were assigned at birth? For example, someone who was born with female body parts may identify as female.

A) Yes
B) No

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C) Other (please specify)

33. Do you know anyone who does not identify as/with the gender they were assigned at birth? This includes people who are transgender, non-binary, two-spirit, gender-fluid, gender-queer and any other affirming way in which people choose to self-identify.
A) Yes
B) No

34. Do you support the LGBTQIA2S+ community?
A) Yes
B) No

Page 4
Language knowledge and preferences
35. Had you heard of the LGBTQIA2S+ use of the term non-binary before completing this survey?
A) Yes
B) No

36. Do you think the pronoun *they* is singular, plural, or either?
A) Singular
B) Plural
C) Either

37. Fill in the blank: Max uses they/them pronouns. They ____ non-binary.
A) is
B) are
C) I'm unsure

38. Have you heard of other third person singular pronouns like *xe/xem* or *ve/ver*? Third person singular pronouns are used to refer to a single person or thing. *He/she/it.* are examples.
A) Yes
B) No

39. If yes, do you know anyone personally who uses pronouns other than *he, she,* or *they*?
A) Yes
B) No

40. Do you agree or disagree that people should be allowed to choose their own personal pronouns?
A) Agree
B) Disagree

41. Can you comment on why you either agree or disagree that people should be allowed to choose their own personal pronouns?

42. Do you have positive, neutral, or negative feelings about people choosing *they/them* pro-
     nouns for themselves?

A) Positive

B) Neutral

C) Negative

43. Can you comment on why you have positive, neutral, or negative feelings about people
     choosing they/them pronouns for themselves?

Invitation to do an interview about pronouns:

In addition to this survey, you are invited to participate in a recorded 5–10-minute inter-
view over Zoom that will have more questions about singular "they". The purpose of this inter-
view is to collect data from natural speech. Samples of speech may be transcribed from inter-
views to be included in the thesis. These transcriptions will not include any personally identify-
ing information like names or places. Emails and names of interview participants will be kept in
a separate database that is not linked to the recordings. If you would like to do the interview,
please contact the lead researcher, Lily Jackson, at the following email address to receive the
consent form and set up a time: lily.jackson@smu.ca

Participants who complete the interview will be entered into a draw. There are six prizes to win.
The prizes are 20$ gift cards for Bookmark, a locally owned Halifax bookstore that sells books,
stationary, and more. (They also have an online store for non-local shoppers.). We estimate that
participants will have a 1 in 20 chance of winning the draw, but this will vary depending on the
actual number of interviews.

Page 5

Survey Feedback Letter
"Examining the use of singular *they* pronouns:
A literature review and corpus-based discourse analysis"
SMU REB File # 22-028
Principal Investigator: Lily Jackson
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Elissa Asp
Saint Mary's University, Linguistics Program

Dear participant,

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study.

As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to collect examples of language change between dif-
ferent generations. Specifically, this study gathered data on language change and changes in atti-
tudes around the use of singular *they*, in both generic and non-binary (LGBTQIA2S+) contexts.
This study allows us to make observations about patterns in youths' speech compared to people
of other ages that show how language might be changing from one generation to the next.

The data collected will contribute to the knowledge that linguists have about language change
and therefore it will benefit the academic community. This study may benefit English teachers,
linguists and anyone who researches language use and change by adding to the academic know-

ledge base about language changes in English and attitudes around these changes. In the longer term, such knowledge may be used, for instance, to inform English language teachers about contemporary spoken and written English.

Once all the data are collected and analyzed for this study, I plan on sharing the results with the research community as a completed thesis, and a video/audio recorded presentation in April 2022. The results will be available in the public domain through the online Patrick Power's Library at Saint Mary University. A summary of the results will be available on April 30th next summer on this website: https://smu.ca/academics/summaries-of-completed-research.html.

In April, a link to the thesis presentation will be posted on the SMU Linguistics Program News and Events: https://www.smu.ca/academics/departments/linguistics-news-and-events.html

You can contact either me or my faculty supervisor Dr. Elissa Asp if you have questions or concerns about the study or the results. If you would like more resources or information about LGBTQIA2S+ here is a list of resources available to everyone.

1. www.pflagcanada.ca
2. https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/
3. https://www.youthline.ca/
4. https://www.crisistextline.org/

As with all Saint Mary's University projects involving human participants, this project was reviewed by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns about ethical matters or would like to discuss your rights as a research participant, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at 902-420-5728 or ethics@smu.ca.

Thank you again for being involved in this research,

Lily Jackson (lily.jackson@smu.ca)

Dr. Elissa Asp (elissa.asp@smu.ca)

Appendix B: The Interview

Interview Questions

Script for introduction:

"Hello, my name is Lily Jackson, and I am the lead researcher for this study. I want to assure you that this interview is private. That being said, are you alone and somewhere private that you can talk? After the interview is over, the recording will be labeled only with the date and time and will be treated as confidential. The purpose of recording this interview is to gather data about your language use. This means that there may be one or more transcribed examples of your speech that will be included in the final thesis. Examples of speech will be anonymous and will not contain any personal names or other identifying information. You may put your video on or leave it off. If you choose to have your video on, both audio and video will be recorded. The recordings will only be accessible to me and my supervisor Elissa Asp. You can skip any interview questions or stop the interview at any time. Are you ready to answer the interview questions? (yes or no) "I am going to begin the recording now. You must press yes on the Zoom consent button to continue with the recorded interview." (press record – Zoom has a consent button when someone presses record. The participant will press yes to continue with the recorded interview).

SINGULAR *THEY*

Interview questions:

How old are you?
What is the highest level of education you have completed?
If you are in high school, what grade are you in?
What is the first language you learned?
What languages do you speak at home?
The purpose of this interview is to ask you about your knowledge and use of the third person singular they/them pronouns. Singular thid person pronouns refer to a single person or thing that is not the speaker or listener in a conversation. For example, he, she and it are singular third person pronouns.

Do you believe we need a singular 3rd person pronoun for anyone who doesn't identify as female or male? (Discontinued)
Are you familiar with the LGBTQIA2S+ use of the term non-binary?
What does the term non-binary mean to you?
(If they don't know give definition: The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term non-binary as "designating a person who does not acknowledge or fit the conventional notions of male and female gender, and instead identifies as being of another or no gender, or a combination of genders; of or relating to such a person.")
If yes (to preceding question): Do you remember how old you were and where you first heard about it?
Do you know of a friend, family member, celebrity or acquaintance who is referred to by the pronoun *they*?
If yes: Do you feel that you have an easy or hard time using the pronoun *they* for a non-binary person?
Was it easy or difficult to get used to using *they* when you were learning to refer to a non-binary person?
What was the hardest part about learning to use *they* to refer to non-binary individuals?
Have you ever used the pronoun *they* to refer to someone who you don't know the gender of?
Have you ever had someone, like a new friend or a teacher, introduce themselves to you and tell you their pronouns?
Have you ever introduced yourself to someone and told them your preferred pronouns?
Have you ever had the option to choose your pronouns for a social media platform?
If yes: Do you state your pronouns on social media page(s) that have that option?
Why do you think people state their pronouns on social media platforms?
Do you think that people should be allowed to choose their own pronouns? (Discontinued)

End of interview script:
"Thank you so much for participating in this interview. I will now post a list of LGBTQIA2S+ resources in chat in case you would like more information about LGBTQIA2S+ and gender identities. Do you have any other questions about the study before we end the interview?"
1. www.pflagcanada.ca
2. www.thetrevorproject.org/resources
3. www.youthline.ca
4. www.crisistextline.org

Note: one of the questions was discontinued after a handful of interviews because it was uninformative. All participants made their stance clear on whether people should be allowed to choose their own pronouns, so asking this question was not necessary.