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### That's What They Say: Cognitive Dissonance and Grammaticality with Singular They

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# That's What They Say: Cognitive Dissonance and Grammaticality with Singular They



CLARK UNIVERSITY

Luke Pound '22– Simon and Eve Colin Award (Sponsor: Dr. Alena Esposito)

*"I don't think an individual using they/them while referring to themselves makes sense."*

## Introduction

**Focus of study:** implicit and explicit attitudes surrounding singular they in English, and whether an educational intervention will impact these attitudes

History of singular they

- Singular they is a grammatical phenomenon in English in which the pronoun "they" refers to a person in the singular; see examples in Table 1
- Records of usage dating back to Chaucer and Shakespeare
- Grammarians in the 19th century suggested change to "he" as gender neutral pronoun; many educational materials reflect this
- Now accepted in OED and many style guides, **used by nonbinary individuals**

Implicit and explicit association

- Studies show active thought and opinion does not reflect implicit connections made by the mind
- Explicit can be measured by asking directly; implicit can be measured through **Implicit Association Task (IAT)**
- Explicit more easily changed with intervention; implicit harder if not virtually impossible to change
- Demographics like pronouns and age could impact these attitudes and associations

## Method

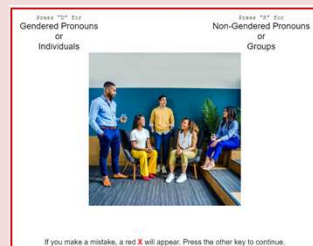
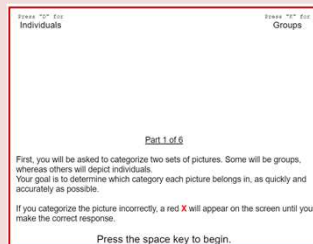
- Participants included 279 adults (mean age=37.19, SD=14.128, 18-84; 51.4% women, 28.8% men, 21.2% nonbinary; she/her 55.9% he/him 25.3%, they/them 21.3%, other 2.2%) recruited via Prolific
- Order of the survey: questionnaire, Implicit Association Task (IAT), informational videos, repeat questionnaire and IAT
- Grammar questionnaire: participants assessed 10 statements as grammatically correct or incorrect; 3 of these sentences used they in the singular (see Table 1)
- Opinion: participants also asked about their opinion on grammaticality of singular they, and if an individual could ask others to use it for themselves
- IAT: participants sorted pronouns and images according to gender and number, respectively

Statement	Grammatically correct?	Uses "they" as singular
Where is our friend, are they here yet?	Almost always	*
The student turned in their assignment.	Almost always	*
Look at them, are they by themselves?	Sometimes	*

**Table 1:** Statements that used singular they. Participants' acceptance of singular they was assessed based upon how many of these statements they rated as correct (0-3)

## Hypothesis

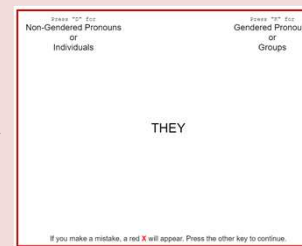
It is hypothesized that **an educational intervention will elicit a positive change in explicit attitudes towards singular they, while there will be no change in implicit attitudes**



Block	Left category	Right category
1	Individual	Group
2	Gendered	Non-gendered
3	Gendered OR individual	Non-gendered OR group
4	Individual	Group
5	Non-gendered	Gendered
6	Non-gendered OR individual	Gendered OR group

**Table 2:** Description of IAT by block.

**Figures 1-3:** Screenshots of IAT, showing instructions, image stimuli, and word stimuli, respectively.

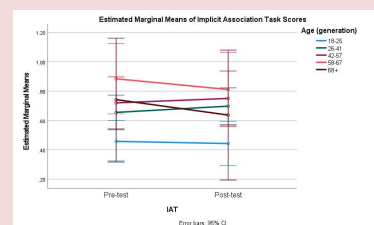
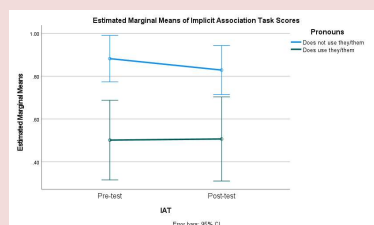
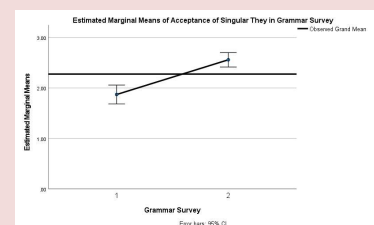
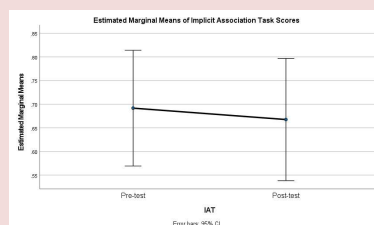


*"“They” feels like it conveys a sense of distance and non-closeness (does that make sense?).”*

## Analysis & Discussion

- We found support for our hypothesis
  - Explicit attitudes changed** after the intervention
  - Implicit attitudes did not change** after the intervention
- Open-ended responses showed many participants changed their minds **because of the intervention**
- Responses by participants who disagreed with singular they sometimes used singular they in their responses, suggesting differing understandings of grammar or the presence of dissonance
- Analysis comparing pronouns of participants revealed that **those who use they/them have a significantly higher association between the pronoun they and individual people**
  - Suggests singular they when used for a specific individual is more implicitly grammatically correct for those who use it for themselves
  - Also suggests that **constant use of the pronoun in this fashion can impact implicit association**
- Analysis comparing age of participants by generation revealed that **younger generations have a significantly higher association between the pronoun they and individual people**
  - Could be controlled by impact of age on reaction time
  - Suggests singular they is more implicitly grammatically correct for younger people
- Future research: examining other demographic divisions, qualitative analysis of open-ended responses, building database of IAT responses

*"Gender is a social construct, words only have the meaning we give them, and pronouns are ultimately meaningless outside of what a person wants to be called."*



**Figures 4-7:** Estimated Marginal Means. IAT scores were not significantly different after an intervention, while explicit acceptance of singular they was significantly higher.

*"After learning about the origin and original intents of personal pronouns in the English language, I have been persuaded to believe that individuals can use the "singular they" pronoun."*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Esposito for her help and guidance, Catalin Veghes for developing the IAT for online distribution the Language, Language, Learning, & Cognition Lab members for their assistance, and my friends who supported the study and aided with pilot testing.