

GENDERED LANGUAGE: A CASE FOR THE USE OF GENDER- RELATED SINGULAR ‘THEY’

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Abstract

This paper, working on the fact that most Nigerian teachers and possibly writers are ignorant of and thus object to the use of gender-related singular ‘they’ as an alternative to the use of the generic he when both males and females are involved or when the sex of a person involved is not specified, makes a case for the use of gender-related singular ‘they’ with the objective of increasing their awareness about it. The paper relies solely on what authorities on grammar say on it to conclude that whether we are comfortable with its use or not, since this is the latest development in English, we should be ready to adapt to it. It is our belief that this paper will keep us abreast of what operates in international scholarship and save us and our students from speaking old-fashioned English

Gender studies are rooted in the belief that the English Language is sexist i.e. it makes a gender, particularly masculine gender superior to the feminine one. Many instances of male dominance/female subjugation are evident in the language. One, in respect of naming practices, the males, i.e. the fathers rather than the mothers do the naming, children bear their fathers’ (sur)names, and after marriage, women, rather than men, are renamed (Yusuf and Olateju, 2004). The result of all these naming practices, according to the feminists, is the loss of their identities. Arua (2009:67) submitted that the women in fact, have no identities apart from the fathers’ and later their husbands’.

Apart from naming practices, positive values are ascribed to masculine words while negative ones are attached to the feminine ones (e.g. wizard for a highly skillful person and witch

for a vicious one). Oloruntoba-Oju (2009:214) quoting Nilson (1977) and Kaye (1989) submitted that dictionary is a major culprit in promoting the derogatory ways in which women are portrayed. Finally and more importantly, male terms are used generically to refer to females or both males and females (e.g. For a person to be successful, he must be ready to take chances) and feminine words are formed by adding suffixes to the masculine words (e.g. *poetess* from *poet* and *hostess* from *host*). In the attempts to rid English of sexism, the feminists are now calling for the use of gender-fair language.

Gender-Fair Language

Gender-fair language, according to Lamidi (2009:195), is the use of language in a way that will not diminish the status of any sex. It is the language that is considered fair or neutral to both masculine and feminine genders such that neither will consider themselves to have been disparaged, insulted or subsumed under the other. Believing that “linguistic change is an important part of social change,” attempts have been made to eliminate sexism from the English Language (Yusuf, 1988 and 1994; Hellinger, 1991 and Williams, 2000).

As observed by Yusuf and Olateju (2004), gender-neutral options such as person or human being are now used to replace the generic or sexist man; new gender neutral pronouns such as *they* are used to replace the generic and gender biased *he* and its variants (i.e. him, his and himself) in addition to the use of dual pronouns such as *he or she* and *she or he*. Lamidi

(2009:194) quoting Quinion (Online) highlighted the proposals that have been put forward to solve the problem of gendered pronouns as: (a) substituting a plural pronoun for the gender exclusive pronoun (b) deleting the gender exclusive pronoun (c) substituting the first or second person for the third (d) revising the sentence to change the subject (e) using he or she sparingly (f) creating a new gender-neutral pronoun such as sie, hirs, hirsself, zir etc. (g) substituting an article for masculine or feminine pronoun.

Morphologically, the feminine suffix -ess is removed from words like actress and poetess. Some women now adopt fairer name practices that lead to the retention of their identities. Arua (2009) noted that women now retain their maiden names, retain their maiden names with their husbands' names or change either or both their given names and surnames outrightly. Yusuf and Olateju (2004) also observe that the title Ms is now adopted to refer to both married and unmarried women the same way Mr. is used for men. Finally, traditional proverbs are now modified and counter proverbs created to challenge the traditionally female-destroying ones. For example, the English proverb: "A woman's place is in the home" is now modified to read: "A woman's place is in the House...and the senate" (Mieder, 1985: 277 cited in Yusuf and Olateju, 2004:149).

In the same vein, the proverb: "Man proposes God disposes" has been changed to: "To propose is human, to dispose divine" (Yusuf, 1997:171 cited in Yusuf and Olateju, (Ibid). The focus of this paper, however, is to make a case for the use of gender-neutral singular 'they' instead of the generic use of *he* and its variants or *he/she* to refer to both male and female genders or to an unspecified person such as "an author", "a person" or "someone" or "anyone", with the objective of increasing the people's awareness on the use of singular 'they'.

It is our belief that this paper will keep Nigerian teachers and writers abreast of what operates internationally and our students will be taught English that will not make them old-fashioned. To achieve our aim, we shall, in the remaining parts of the paper, discuss the motivation for writing on the topic, review the existing works on the gender-related singular 'they' before going to the recommendations and conclusion.

Motivation for Writing on Gender-Related Singular 'They'.

We are motivated to write on the topic by the findings in some existing works on gender-related singular 'they' that most teachers in secondary schools and institutions of higher learning are not familiar with the use of singular 'they' and its variants (them, their, themselves) and as such mark sentences where they are used wrong (Yusuf and Olateju, 2004 and 2005). Yusuf and Olateju (2004) found out that a large number of examiners of the English language paper in the May/June 2003 Senior School Certificate Examination conducted by the West African Examinations Council were not familiar with and therefore mark its use in sentences wrong.

It is particularly interesting to note that over 71% of the PhD holders of their respondents marked the sample sentences given to them wrong. This is lamentable in that teachers at this level are expected to be most familiar with and tolerant of the latest development in the contemporary English usage through their research. To further testify to lack of familiarity with or negative attitude to the use of gender-related singular 'they', Yusuf and Olateju (2004) make reference to a couple of experiences that are particularly germane here. The first was in the year 2002 when one of their colleagues who was asked to read a draft of an academic paper edited out all occurrences of singular they. They also confess having the same experience in 2003

and 2004. They therefore conclude that if it could be indicated by lecturers in English or linguistics related departments at the university level that the use of singular they was grammatically wrong, markers at a lower level would be even less tolerant of it. Having stated our motivation for writing on the topic, let us now turn to opinions of some scholars on singular 'they'.

Scholars' Opinions on Gender-Related Singular 'They'.

One of the generally acceptable alternatives to the generic he and its variants is the use of the pairs *he/she*, *him/her*, *his* or *her*, *himself* or *herself* (see Quirk and Greenbaum, 1989; Shear, 1986; Bodine, 1998 and Williams 2000 cited in Yusuf and Olateju, 2005: 132; Oloruntoba-Oju, 1999; 132 and Lamidi, 2009). Some scholars however frown at their use on the grounds of their order (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1989 and Daniel, 2000). Daniel (2000), for instance contended that preference given to the males in the syntactic ordering of the pronouns betrays male superiority over females. Our position is that since it has been long that scholars have been clamouring for the use of singular they in addition to other options in replacement of the generic he, we need to adjust to what operates internationally. It is suffice to see what *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (2007) says on the generic he:

2 old-fashioned used in general way for referring to any person whether male or female: Everyone has a right to say what he thinks. (Pg 695)

The point we want to make here is that if a dictionary written by many reputable scholars who are mainly native users of the language can refer to the generic he as being old-fashioned, we should know that English is fast changing and if

we don't want to be speaking and writing old-fashioned English we need to change. Let us now see what *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (2001:1925) says on 'they':

2. (singular) used to refer to a person of unspecified sex: *ask a friend if they could help...*

USAGE: *The word 'they' (with its counterparts them, their and themselves) as a singular pronoun to refer to a person of unspecified sex has been used since at least the 16th century. In the late 20th century, as the traditional use of he to refer to a person of either sex came under scrutiny on the grounds of sexism, this use of they has become more common... Nevertheless, in view of the growing acceptance of 'they' and its obvious practical advantages, they is used in this dictionary in many cases where he would have been used formerly.*

From the extract above, it is obvious that they have been using 'they' to refer to a person of unspecified sex since 16th century, and we are now in the 21st century. In view of its growing acceptance, 'they' is used in the dictionary in many cases where *he* would have been used formerly. Taking the points raised above into cognizance, it will sound ridiculous if in the 21st century a Nigerian teacher, irrespective of the level at which he teaches, or an author of English textbook still claims ignorant of or marks wrong the use of singular 'they' which they have been using in other parts of the world since the 16th century. As conjectured by Lamidi (2009:2006), it is either those who are ignorant of its use have no access to current publications in the scholastic world (particularly in international journals), especially from foreign countries or they do not take active interest in the language of the materials they read. We also feel that the extremely conservative people may think its usage is illogical, unreasonable and ungrammatical. Let us now turn to what scholars have said on singular 'they'.

Quirk and Greenbaum (1989:182) in their popular textbook on grammar, *A University Grammar of English*, submitted that English has no sex-neutral 3rd person singular pronoun, and so the plural pronoun *they* is often used informally in defiance of number concord, as a substitute for the indefinite pronouns like everyone, everybody, someone, somebody, anyone, anybody etc. They argue that the plural pronouns are a convenient means of avoiding the dilemma of whether to use the 'he' or 'she' form. Their argument is exemplified with the sentences;

Has anybody brought *their* camera?

No one could have blamed *themselves* for that.

In the same way, Leech and Svartvik (1994:263) have this to say on the issue:

Nowadays (the) use of unisex they is becoming more current even in (written) English. In traditional (formal) English, the tendency has been to use he when the sex is not stated:

Everyone thinks he has the answer.

Increasingly, writers who want to avoid male dominance in language use replace he with they or with he/she or with s/he in such cases.

Our point here is that if Quirk and Greenbaum could use singular *they* in 1989, and Leech and Svartvik could make their submission on it in 1994 (seventeen years ago), it will be unscholarly for a teacher irrespective of where they teach or a writer of English grammar text, regardless of the level for which they write, not to be familiar with, support the use of or mark the use of singular 'they' wrong. We are obviously familiar with other alternative to the genetic use of *he* such as *s/he, she or he* and *he or she*, and we are not against their usage. But people still have one thing or the other against them since they indicate genders. For instance, Quirk and Greenbaum (1989) are of the opinion that they are pedantic and cumbersome. English is dynamic, it keeps changing, and as teachers

and writers, we need to be abreast of what operates in international scholarship.

Kolln and Funk (1998:374) approached the issue in a more careful though equally articulate way. According to them:

When we need a pronoun to refer to an unidentified person, such as "the writer" or "a student" or just "someone", our long-standing tradition has been to use the masculine 'he':

The writer of this news should have kept his personal opinion out of it.

Someone left his book on the table.

But that usage is no longer automatically accepted. Times and attitudes change, and we have come to recognize the power of language in shaping these attitudes.

So an important step in shaping society's view of women has been to eliminate the automatic use of he and his and him when the gender of someone referred to could just as easily be female.

Furthermore, observing the occurrence of generic *he* in passages in English textbooks written decades ago, Kolln and Funk (1998) submit that it is unlikely for them to be written that way today, because those "who are involved with words... are sensitive to the power of language" and are now conscious of sexism in English. And being conscious that the English language is sexist implies being conscious of gender-fair language i.e. language that is fair to everybody regardless of their gender. And when it comes to the use of pronouns, we feel singular 'they' does it better.

Although scholars may give reasons for objecting to its use, for instance, some, according to Graglia, (1988) (cited in Lamidi, 2009:195) adduce reasons of cumbersomeness, offensiveness and grammatical confusion, we need to change with the language for international relevance. If Leech, Deuchar and Hoogenraad (1982:178) could give the sentence:"

Everyone could vote as *they* wish..." three decades ago in their special book on grammar, *English Grammar for Today: A New Introduction*, we need to flow with international scholarship.

The position of Palmer (1990) is also worthy of consideration here. He agrees that there is nothing wrong in the sentence: "Someone has left their book behind" if we believe that *their* can function as the plural possessive and also as a singular possessive when sex is unknown. He also expressly said that we should disabuse our minds of the fact that the use of singular 'they' is ungrammatical. He then concludes that its use is a "common and useful device; it is not illogical or ungrammatical, unless we decide, contrary to our observations, that '*they*,' '*them*' and '*their*' are always plural. Kolln and Funk (1998) seem to echo Palmer (1990) when they argued that since we make no distinction in the second person between singular and plural, "it is not unreasonable to do the same in the third person."

As said by Pauwells (2001:117) cited in Yusuf and Olateju (2005:145), it is evident, that singular 'they' has become the unmarked generic pronoun in (non-scripted) public speech and its use far exceeds that of any other alternative including the normative *he*. Therefore, whether one is comfortable with it or not, gender sensitivity is the revolutionary and truly novel linguistic development of our age (Cochran, 1992:33). As observed by Jacobs et.al. (1996) cited in Yusuf and Olateju (2005), the use of singular 'they' is now the emerging world standard and it is now being used by textbook writers in some parts of the world.

Now, considering the fact that many Nigerian teachers and writers are still not familiar with or skeptical of the use of singular 'they', we have some recommendations on how to increase people's awareness on its use.

Conclusion

We have so far made a case for the use of gender-neutral singular 'they' as the best alternative to the use of the generic *he* to refer to either a group of persons consisting of males and females or a person of unspecified sex. We have, to achieve our aim, made reference to two of the best available English dictionaries and some world acclaimed authorities on English grammar. We finally gave some recommendations on how to improve people's awareness on it.

Recommendations

Teachers, regardless of the level at which they teach should cultivate the habit of extensive reading. They should not limit their reading to the local textbooks / journals; they should read international journals so as to know the latest developments in their discipline.

Teachers should also not hesitate to introduce new things they discover to their students regardless of their oddity or awkwardness. It is only through this that their students will not be speaking or writing old-fashioned English.

Textbook writers also need to know that they are teachers of teachers; they should therefore introduce the latest discoveries in English to their writing as quickly as they can.

Curriculum planners should review the English curriculum to incorporate direct teaching of singular 'they'.

Courses on "Language and Gender" should be mounted in all institutions of higher learning in the country.

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