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They

by

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> If a woman is swept off a ship into the water, the cry is 'Man overboard!' If she is killed by a hit-and-run driver, the charge is 'manslaughter.' If she is injured on the job, the coverage is 'workman's compensation.' But if she arrives at a threshold marked 'Men Only,' she knows the admonition is not intended to bar animals or plants or inanimate objects. It is meant for her.
> --Alma Graham

"I corrected a boy for writing 'no one..they' instead of 'no one...he,' explaining that 'no one' was singular. But he said, 'How do you know it was a he?'" --A teacher (Miller 38). Observers have long pointed out the ambiguity of the use of the pronoun *HE* in generic contexts and the advantages of having a true generic singular pronoun, which would be sex-neutral. In the absence of such a sex-neutral pronoun, speakers of English have been expected to utter sentences such as "Everybody should bring his book tomorrow," where the "everybody" referred to includes forty women and just one man. For centuries, speakers and writers of English have been happily getting around this obstacle by using *THEY* in such situations, yielding sentences such as "Everybody should bring their book tomorrow." Unfortunately, since the middle of the eighteenth century, prescriptive grammarians have been prescribing the use of *HE* in these situations and attacking the use of *THEY*, by arguing that the use of *THEY* is a violation of the

rule for pronoun agreement, that is, a singular noun such as "everybody" should not take a plural pronoun such as *THEY* (Frank 72).

Although the prescriptive grammarians have not explained why it is all right for a female person such as "Mary" to be referred to by a masculine pronoun such as *HE*, they have managed to make many people feel guilty about breaking the law when they use *THEY* in such sentences (Frank 73). This is not the way it should be. Because the English language lacks an acceptable singular non-gender-specific pronoun, the singular use of *THEY* to fill this void should be deemed acceptable.

Is 'He' She?

The first grammars of modern English were written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries at a time when formal schooling was only offered to boys. The male authors of these earliest English grammars wrote for male readers in an age when few women were literate. It is the belief of both Casey Miller and this author that the masculine-gender pronouns grammarians used in grammatical examples and generalizations did not reflect a belief that masculine pronouns could refer to both sexes. They reflected the reality of male cultural dominance and the male-centered world view that resulted. Males were perceived as the standard representatives of the human species, females as something else (Miller 35-36). This was clearly exhibited by the way women were treated as property.

Present-day linguists, tracing the history of the so-called generic *HE*, have found that it was invented and prescribed by the grammarians themselves in an attempt to change long-established English usage. The object of the grammarians' intervention was the widespread acceptance of *THEY* as a singular pronoun, as in Lord Chesterfield's remark (1759), "If a person is born of a gloomy

temper...they cannot help it." Nearly three centuries earlier, England's first printer, William Caxton, had written, "Each of them should...make themself ready," and the invocation "God send everyone their heart's desire" is from Shakespeare. In such usages, grammarians argued, *THEY* lacked the important syntactical feature of agreement in number with a singular antecedent. But in prescribing *HE* as the alternative, they dismissed as unimportant a lack of agreement in gender with a feminine antecedent (Miller 36).

In 1850, the British Parliament passed an actual law concerning the use of *HE* as a generic pronoun. In an attempt to shorten the language in its legislation, the Parliament declared: "in all acts, words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females..." (Frank 73). In simpler days it was certainly acceptable to refer to a genderless noun such as "customer" with masculine pronouns. But *HE* never has and never will call to mind the picture of a woman (Seifert 34).

When a adult sees a hawk riding a thermal updraft and says to a child, "Look at him soar!" the child not only learns something about how hawks fly but also that all hawks are male and, by implication, that maleness is the norm (Miller 44).

As a linguistic device imposed on the language rather than a natural development arising from a broad consensus, "generic" *HE* is fatally flawed. This fact has been demonstrated in several recent systematic investigations of how people of both sexes use and understand personal pronouns. The studies confirm that in spoken usage, from the speech of young children to the conversation of university professors, *HE* is rarely intended or understood to include *SHE*. On the contrary, at all levels of education people whose native tongue is English seem to know that *HE*, *HIM*, and *HIS* are gender-specific and cannot do the double duty asked of them (Miller 38). *HE* brings a male image to

mind, and it does so whether editors, authors, nomads or acrobats are the subject (Miller 38). Yet use of the pronouns *HE, HIS,* and *HIM* to refer to any unspecified or hypothetical person who may either be female or male is usually justified on two grounds. First, the practice is said to be an ancient rule of English grammar long and faithfully followed by educated speakers and writers. Second, it is asserted, somewhat paradoxically, that the usage is thought to distinguish the educated from the uneducated--that everybody knows *HE* includes *SHE* in generalizations. Historical and psychological research in the past few years have produced evidence to refute both claims (Miller 35). Feminist scholars maintain that the generic *HE* and similar words "not only reflect a history of male domination" but also "actively encourage its perpetuation." For example, the ostensibly generic use of *HE* has permitted varying legal interpretations that often exclude women but always include men (Gastil 630). In 1879, for example, a move to admit female physicians to the all-male Massachusetts Medical Society was effectively blocked on the grounds that the society's by-laws describing membership used the pronoun *HE* (Miller 37). It seems that even the "educated" individuals are having a difficult time trying to find a standard rule for *HE*. More and more writers and speakers seem to agree with the feeling expressed by psychologist Wendy Martyna, who wrote, "*HE* deserves to live out its days doing what it has always done best--referring to 'he' and not 'she'" (Miller 38).

What's In A Pronoun?

Rather than rely on authority or opinion, some scholars have conducted experiments to determine whether or not today's speakers of English perceive the forms *MAN* and *HE* as generic. In one study, Joseph Schneider and Sally Hacker asked some students to find appropriate illustrations for an anthropology book with chapter headings

like "Man And His Environment," and "Man And His Family"; another group of students was given titles like "Family Life" and "Urban Life." The students who were assigned titles with the word *Man* chose more illustrations of men only, while the second group chose more pictures showing men, women and children. Other studies have confirmed the tendency to interpret *HE* and *MAN* as masculine unless the context clearly indicates they are meant generically, the contrary of what is usually claimed. One experiment conducted by Wendy Martyna that tested the usage and meaning of these words among young people, found that women and men may be using the terms quite differently. The men's usage appears to be based on sex-specific (male) imagery while the women's usage is based instead on the prescription that *HE* should be used when the sex of the person is not specified (Frank 73-74).

Studies conducted by Janet Shilbley Hyde, a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin, suggest that when people read or hear *HE*, they do not think neuter. They think male. One of Hyde's experiments tested 132 third and fifth graders who were asked to rate how well women and men could do each of several jobs: teacher; doctor; fireman or firefighter (half of the subjects were asked about the former the other half about the latter); and a fourth occupation, "wudgemaker," which was fictitious and presumably gender-neutral. Wudgemaker, of course, was her target. Hyde's results showed that the children formed strong perceptions about a person's ability to make wudges depending on the pronoun that was used in describing what a wudgemaker does. Women were rated as least able to do the job when the description used *HE*; they were rated most able to do the job when *SHE* was used in describing the duties. When neutral words or phrases were used in the description (*THEY,* and *HE* or *SHE*), men and women were both seen as able to do the job. Said Hyde: "It can be concluded that the use of *HE* affects the

stereotyping of occupations, or the schema of an occupation that children form. When children hear *HE*, even in an explicitly gender-neutral sentence, they are overwhelmingly likely to think of a male" (Borgeois 41).

Many investigators have found the male bias of the generic *HE* to be very common among high school and college students (Gastil 230). The impression that has been derived from the writings of older college students has been that many, perhaps most, of those adults use singular *THEY* as their pronoun of choice (Meyers 229). I conducted my own study to confirm this notion and found that it was indeed true. I asked my First-year Composition class to choose between three sentences, one with *HE*, one with *SHE* and one with *THEY*, which one they would most likely use in their writing. The class unanimously chose "Everyone should be sure to bring *THEIR* book to class tomorrow" to refer to a group containing both males and females. The professor opted to decline all three choices and instead make up one of his own: "All should be sure to bring their books tomorrow." This is an example of a common way writers and speakers deal with the lack of a true non-gender-specific pronoun; they avoid entirely the use of sentences that require such pronouns (Frank 72-73).

He, She And Thon?

Among the many gender-related reforms proposed for the English language, the creation of a common-gender pronoun to replace the generic masculine *HE* in a sentence like "Everyone loves his mother" stands out as the one most often advocated and attempted and the one that has most often failed (Baron 190). There have been a series of proposals with the aim of eliminating the "pseudo-generic" use of the pronoun *HE*. Some advocate the introduction of a new sex-neutral third person singular pronoun such as *THON* to replace *HE* in situations where either sex may be meant, as in "A doctor should be careful that thon (he) does

not misdiagnose." Others advocate the use of *HE* or *SHE*, or recasting the sentence in the plural as in "Doctors should be careful that they do not misdiagnose" (Frank 84). In all, more than eighty bisexual pronouns, little words such as *NE, TER, HEER, ET* and *IP* have been proposed since the eighteenth century (Baron 190). None has found overwhelming favor with the public, however, and all have therefore been pushed aside and forgotten.

A number of books have appeared using *SHE* in generic situation, and some writers have compromised with *SHE* or *HE*. The trouble with *HE* or *SHE* form is that it becomes awkward when repeated (Miller 41). *S/HE* is a nice orthographic trick, but it is unusable either in the spoken language or in other grammatical cases: *HER/HIM* and *HER/HIS* do not collapse so neatly (Frank 87). There has also been some support for the extension of *IT* in place of the generic masculine. *A Woman's New World Dictionary* (1973) defines *IT* as a "third person neuter pronoun now acceptable to use when sex of the referent is not known. Examples: The baby was happy with its rattle; the applicant signed its name." Critics of *IT* point to its impersonal nature as their main argument against its adoption (Baron 192).

Another proposal to eliminate the generic use of *HE* is by recognizing the legitimacy of using *THEY* or *THEIR* (Frank 84). Unfortunately, the singular use of *THEY* is still deemed unacceptable for written usage. As might be expected, this solution is widely used in spoken English, even by "educated" speakers (Seifert 35). Some grammarians approve of the singular *THEY*. For example, Alexander Bain, in *A Higher English Grammar* (1879) defends its use: "When both genders are implied, it is allowable to use the plural...Grammarians frequently call this construction an error: not reflecting that it is equally an error to apply 'his' to feminine subjects. The best writers furnish examples of the use of the plural as a mode of getting out of the

difficulty" (Baron 193). In the syntax volume of his *Grammar* (1931), George Curme accepts the literary evidence of singular *THEY*, but he wrongly concludes that it is an obsolescent construction which survives only in "loose colloquial and popular speech." In *A Grammar Of Contemporary English* (1972), Randolph Quirk and his coauthors set forth a more tolerant version of this position. Singular *THEY* is labeled the informal construction, and generic *HE* the formal unmarked one, while coordinate *HE* or *SHE* is rejected as "cumbersome" (Baron 193-194).

They: Only Logical

Singular *THEY* has a long history in Modern English, stretching back to the mid-sixteenth century, and a distinguished one--it occurs in the works of Addison, Austen, Fielding, Chesterfield, Ruskin, and Scott, to cite only a few major English writers, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the absence of a singular common-gender pronoun renders "this violation of grammatical concord sometimes necessary" (Baron 193). Singular *THEY* is widely used in speech and writing and, despite the stigma of ungrammaticality that has become attached to it since the eighteenth century, the construction shows no signs of dying out. The occurrence of the plural pronoun *THEY* in reference to indefinite nouns such as *PERSON, SOMEONE* or *EVERYONE*, which are singular in form but often plural in meaning, is another example of semantic concord in English overriding grammatical concord (Baron 192-193). When we need a non-gender-specific pronoun in speech we say *THEY*. If we speak English that way today, knowing that the usage is "incorrect," we will probably be writing it that way soon. Grammar, after all, both prescribes how we "ought" to use the language and how we *do* use it (Seifert 35).

Once upon a time *YOU* was a plural pronoun only. It assumed its singular function in the days before

prescriptive grammarians were around to inhibit that kind of change. English needs a comparable third person singular pronoun, and for many *THEY* meets the need (Miller 39). Singular *THEY* has held its own against the grammarians and the antifeminists, and there are some writers who remain optimistic that singular *THEY* will one day become acceptable (Baron 196).

The case of sex-indefinite *THEY* versus generic *HE* is a special and complex one. The contest has been long and controversial, and teachers and prescriptivists have invested a great deal of energy in the fight for the "correctness" of *HE*. They have succeeded in modifying our formal written English and in creating a collective guilty conscience among speakers of English with even a few years of schooling. But they have not managed to uproot *THEY* from colloquial usage, and today, some groups of feminists have unburdened themselves of their guilty conscience and are openly advocating this usage. They know that "Everybody must pay *their* taxes" is, unfortunately, more accurate that "Everybody must pay *his* taxes" (Frank 87).