

Title: 'They' in Australian English: non-gender-specific or specifically non-gendered?
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‘They’ in Australian English: non-gender-specific or specifically non-gendered?*

They is a candidate for a generic, non-sexist third person singular pronoun, and is used by many speakers of Australian English. An analysis of first year university essays shows that *they* is used not only as a generic pronoun, but also in other cases when the gender of the referent is simply not relevant at that point. This includes cases where the speaker is very clear about the referent’s gender, including instances where the gender of the referent has already been revealed.

Keywords:

Gender-neutral pronoun, specific referent, general referent

1. Introduction

Use of non-sexist language has been encouraged in Australia since at least 1984, when the words to the new national anthem were changed to become non-gender exclusive (in particular we now sing *Australians all* rather than the original *Australian sons*). It is well-known in linguistic circles that the so-called ‘generic *he*’ actually excludes females from its reference (eg Miller and Swift, 1976, Stringer and Hopper, 1998 and others). The main strategies available in English for using non-sexist pronouns are 1) to avoid singular referents and thus singular pronouns, 2) to repeat the noun, avoiding pronominal use, 3) use *he or she*, and 4) use *they* with a singular referent.

This study examines actual current pronoun usage by first year Australian university students, focusing on the use of non-gender specific *they* versus the gendered pronouns *she* and *he* when used to refer to third person singular referents.

Pullum (2002) says that ‘in English, the pronoun *they* is fairly strictly limited to having a plural-inflected antecedent when it is used as a referring pronoun, but there is no such restriction when it’s a bound pronoun.’ He also mentions Rachel Lagunoff’s 2007 PhD thesis at UCLA, who shows that:

‘universally quantified noun phrases like ‘everybody’ are absolutely fine with ‘they’; existential quantifiers like ‘someone’ are nearly as good; indefinite noun phrases like ‘a customer’ are still thoroughly acceptable for a lot of people, so for example just ten minutes ago in the radio studio where I am now [Radio National in Australia], I heard the receptionist say on the phone to a DJ:

‘There’s a **caller** with a musical question on Line 1. **They** realise they may have to wait.’

This example is nice, as I think it’s arguable whether *a caller* here is referential or not – I think it could be. Australians can know full-well that they are referring to a specific individual, and still use *they*.

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This current study is comparable with Mitchell (1994), who investigated non-sexist usage of pronouns with singular referents. She looked at pronoun-antecedent pairs in 125 submitted pieces of writing by students at Emory & Henry College in south-west Virginia in the United States. The students were enrolled in various writing courses, and had received instruction on non-sexist language use. Mitchell found that *he or she* was used about as frequently as singular *they*, and far more often than a single gendered pronoun alone. The current study similarly looks at student writing, but with a focus on the distribution of singular *they*, from an Australian perspective.

Australian English speakers seem to need a non-gender specific pronoun. Like many others (famously going back to Shakespeare, eg the first lines in Act IV, Scene iii of *The Comedy of Errors* 'There's not a man I meet but doth salute me,/As if I were their well-acquainted friend') they are happy to use *they*. Young speakers of Australian English do not use *he or she*, especially not in speech. Small group discussion has revealed that these speakers are often not even aware that using *they* with a singular antecedent is in any way unusual, that is, they have no prescriptivist notion that *they* should have, or conventionally has, a plural referent.

And in fact, this is supported by Australian style guides. Both the Federation Press (2007) and the Australian Guide to Legal Citation (2007) state that singular *they* is acceptable with a singular referent, specifically to avoid using a gendered pronoun or the 'clumsy' *he or she*, as shown by the excerpts in (1) and (2).

- (1) **Gender-neutral language** should be used, eg:
use: "person" rather than "man" where appropriate
use: "him or her" etc;
use: "**they**", "their" used **as singular pronouns** is acceptable;
to avoid excessive repetition of "he or she" etc;

(The Federation Press,
Style Guide for Use in Preparation of Manuscripts, p4)

- (2) 1.11 Inclusive language
Gender-inclusive language should be used. The words 'he', 'his and 'him' should not be employed as the supposedly neutral third-person singular. It is acceptable to use 'he or she', 'him or her' or 'his or her'. **It is also acceptable to use the words 'they', 'their' or 'them' as neutral singular pronouns.**
(Australian Guide to Legal Citation, p31)

They with a singular referent in Australian English has at least 2 separate uses (which we will add to after examining the current data set). The first is when the speaker is unsure of gender of referent, although the hearer knows it, as shown in the data collected from an actual interaction given in (3), and in the written example *the reader* in (4).

- (3) A: I've got a friend coming later.
B: What time did they say they'd get here?
A: About four.

- (4) If the reader wishes, they may purchase ...
[http://members.tripod.com/~Glove_r/Folse5.html]

B's use of *they* in (3) is not always 'repairable' in the sense of Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977), that is, singular-referent *they* is not seen as a troublesome part of the talk. It is not even commentable upon, or seen by the interlocutors as noteworthy. Referring to *the reader* in (4) with the non-gender-specific pronoun *they*

may even be seen as preferable to a gendered-pronoun alternative, since the reader may at times be different people.

The second use of *they* with a non-plural antecedent occurs when neither the speaker nor the hearer knows the gender of the referent, eg *someone at the door* in (5). In this case, the hearer may (4) or may not (5) know the sex of the referent. Again, this is an actual, not constructed example.

- (5) A: There's someone at the door!
B: Can you go and find out what they want?

These two uses of *they* differ only in that the referent of *they* in (3) is already known by the speaker to be a specific individual, while the referents of *they* in (4) and (5) are not known in this way. Hyman (2004: 165) refers to this as the 'indefinite gender', which is 'neither singular nor plural, nor both, nor even neither', although he discusses indefinite *you*, and calls *they* a plural pronoun, at least conventionally. These first two uses are uncontroversial and will not be discussed further.

Occasionally, however, we find *they* being used with a singular referent, when the gender (and number) of that referent is clearly known by the speaker and the hearer, eg in the following exchange which took place between two checkout boys in my local Coles supermarket, who were discussing whether or not Helen managed to sign a manifest:

- (6) (preceding context is a discussion of acquiring Helen's signature on what appeared to be a manifest of some description)
A: Did Helen resign, or is that their signature?
B: Nah, she didn't resign.
A: Is that their signature?

The preceding context (unfortunately not recorded verbatim) made it clear that it was Helen's signature that was being referred to, and not some other person's. Both interlocutors seemed to know Helen, although B seems to have known her more closely, and there is little doubt that her sex is known to both of them. Yet while B explicitly uses *she*, A uses *their* twice.

The reader may be now asking the question: are examples like (6) only used by lower socio-economic groups? In the data presented so far, it appears that this could be the case. But, as we shall see, this kind of *they* is also used in undergraduate university essays, by speakers who are presumably middle-class.

2. The data

The data which this paper is based on comes from 17 first year essays on Child Language Acquisition, selected from the total 116 essays submitted on this topic. These 17 essays represent all of the writers who used *they* with a singular antecedent in the first two pages of the 6-page essays, generally including Abstract, Introduction and Methodology sections. All of these writers also used gendered pronouns to refer to the same referent. All of the writers are Australian, with English as their first or dominant language.

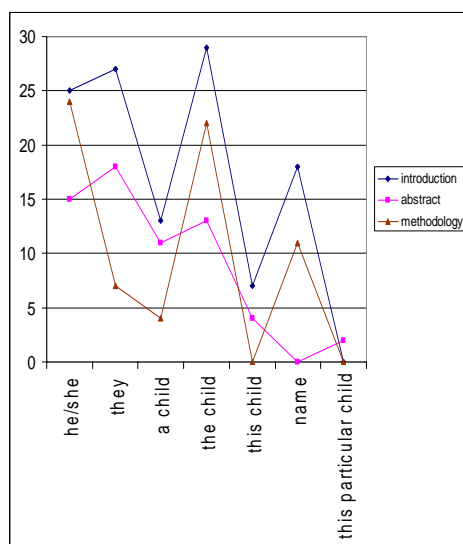
The grades these students received for these 17 essays range from 54% to 80%, i.e. *they* with a singular referent occurs in both 'poor' and 'excellent' work, including everything in between.

Additional data in the form of insights into the use of *they* by several of these students was also collected through small group discussion.

3. Findings

Students use a gendered pronoun (*he* or *she*) 15 times in the abstracts, but 25 and 24 times in the introductions and methodologies respectively (see Table 1). On the other hand, *they* is greatly preferred in the introduction, occurring 27 times, 18 times in abstracts, and only 7 times in methodologies. Another way of viewing this data is to observe that the gendered and non-gendered singular pronouns occurred with equal frequency in the abstracts and introductions, whereafter the gendered pronoun was more favoured than the non-gendered.

Table 1. Frequencies of noun phrases used to refer to the subject child by the student writers.



	abstract	introduction	methodology
<i>he or she</i>	15	25	24
<i>they</i>	18	27	7
<i>a child</i>	11	13	4
<i>the child</i>	13	29	22
<i>this child</i>	4	7	0
<i>name</i>	0	18	11
<i>this</i>	2	0	0
<i>particular child</i>			

Let us now examine individual occurrences of *they* and look at when the Australian students chose to use them.

3.1 Specific gendered, non-specific non-gendered

Several students vacillated between using gendered and non-gendered pronouns. These writers differentiate between the specific, gendered child of their study, and a non-specific, non-gendered 'general' child, eg (7). There is a clear contrast here between the indefinite but specific noun phrase *a two and a half year old female child* which is followed by the gendered pronoun *she*, and the indefinite and general noun phrase *a child* which is followed by the non-gendered pronoun *they*. (This example is also compatible with Mitchell's 1994 study of *they* which classified 'child' as a 'neutral' (as opposed to inherently gendered) noun.) (In the following, [...] represents omitted chunks of texts – if the [...] occurs on a separate line, then it represents an omitted paragraph. Otherwise, the essay excerpts are to be read as continuous.)

- (7) This report looks at the speech capabilities of **a two and a half year old female child** at phase three in **her** acquisition of morphology, syntax, questioning strategy and negation strategy; this indicates that **she** is in the late multi-word stage of development.
 A young child's first language acquisition has confounded many for a long time. Despite the fact that everyone acquires their first language [...]. [...]
 In this report I have looked at **a two and a half year old child, Chantelle**, in the hope of gaining some insight into how **a child** acquires **their** first language.

A similar pattern appears in several other essays, although not always as clearly. In (8), the writer's use of *their words* and *their questioning and negation strategies* appears to be a more or less direct paraphrase of the assignment question. In this sense, the final sentence of the first paragraph does not refer to the child of the study, but to a general (and thus potentially of either sex) child. An interesting observation also is that no student used *its* to refer to their child, which would presumably be the appropriate 'non-gender specific' pronoun for *child*.

- (8) In this report I will be looking at **my child's** [This is not the student's biological child, rather it refers to the student's studied child – T.S.] production of speech. **My research participant, Liam (2;9), is the child** that I will be referring to throughout the research report. I will be addressing research questions such as what sounds and morphology were used by **the child**, what semantic classes did **their** words fall into, what is **their** questioning and negation strategy, and what stage of language acquisition is **the child** currently at.
[...]
I was able to identify patterns in **Liam's** speech when **he** pronounced words containing specific sounds.

These patterns are well established: where the gender is known, a gendered pronoun is used, but when the antecedent noun is a general one, *they* is used.

3.2 *Definite non-gendered, name gendered*

The indefinite article is not the only way to introduce a non-gendered referent, several students use a definite article, eg (9), where the gendered pronoun *she* follows the name, while the non-gendered pronoun follows *the child*. This is an excellent example of the gender of the child being obviously known to the writer, as it is given in the following paragraph, yet the gender is not relevant to the proposition in the first paragraph. Gender is relevant in the second paragraph in the sense that the child has been named, which makes the gender clear and relevant.

- (9) Abstract: After transcribing and analyzing **the child's** language I have found **their** language to be in the second stage of acquisition which is normal for **their** age group.
Introduction: In order to establish what stage of language acquisition **Acacia** is in, I am going to look at the sounds **she** is capable of producing as well as the semantic features of **her** speech.

In fact, in every essay, if the child is named, the next pronoun is gendered, eg (7), (9) and also (10). Notice, however, that if *the child* is repeated, the student is then more likely to use *they*.

- (10) In this report I will be discussing the language acquisition of **a four year old girl named Inara**. This study was conducted to discover what grammatical morphemes and inflections **the child** knew and what **they** did not know or were currently learning.

The use of *This study* to begin the second sentence in (10) seems to have 'reset' the perspective of the paper from a personal one which uses 'I', to an impersonal one. This would account for the use of *they* in the second sentence.

It is hard to argue that *the child* referred to in these examples is a 'general' child, resulting in the use of the 'general pronoun' *they*. Rather, it seems like the writers are

referring to the particular child of their study in each case, yet still choose a non-gendered pronoun. This is rather similar to the use of *their signature* in (6) earlier.

3.3 General and specific use *they*

Some students use *they* to refer to a general third person as well as a specific third person entity. In (11), the writer begins their essay with a very general noun phrase *a child*, progressing through each subsequent paragraph to the specific *the child* all the way to the particular *this child* – in each case using *they* as the pronoun. It is relevant here to note that, while the noun phrases referring to the study child start general and become specific, the gender of the child is never highlighted. Only gender-neutral nouns are used, which may explain why a gender-neutral pronoun is also consistently used.

- (11) **A child** was analysed in the way **they** acquire language and how far **they** had come. **They** have advanced to the final stages of child language acquisition [...]. This data was analysed with respect to the sounds **the child** can articulate, the range and depth of topics **they** can discuss, and the complexity of grammar **they** can use [...].
This child seems capable of making almost as many consonants and consonant clusters as there are [...]. It is unclear, however, whether **they** could use the consonant [3] [...].

3.4 *They specific study child, with gendered pronouns*

In many of the students' essays (in fact, the main ones who inspired this small investigation), *they* is used to refer to the student's specific study-child. The essay sampled in (12) uses *their articulation* in the first line to refer to the indefinite and specific noun phrase *a child of 2 years, 7 months* (identifying details of the child in the study, but notice no gender is given), then changes to a gendered pronoun in the second and third paragraphs to refer to the definite (and specific?) noun phrase *the child*, before reverting back to *they* at the end of the third paragraph to refer to the definite and specific noun phrase *the child's (utterances)*. *They* is very clearly being used with a specific referent in mind, whose gender is not only known to the writer, but also the reader.

- (12) **A child of 2 years, 7 months** was recorded and **their** articulation, syntax and semantics were analyzed.
[...] Specifically, I will be looking to see that **the child** overgeneralizes when applying learned rules and **his** ability to articulate sounds. I will also be looking to see whether **his** comprehension of syntax and semantics coincide with this. Methodology. **The subject** was recorded playing with **his** mother for 30mins. **The child's** utterances were transcribed using the phonetic symbols for Australian English and then analyzed to gain an understanding of **their** language acquisition.

We have seen several cases now, where the gender of the referent is clearly known to the writer, yet it appears that it is just not relevant or important enough to be highlighted. In the opening line of (12), we see that the student has written *a child* and not *a boy*, using the gender-neutral and not gender-specific term. The second paragraph starts talking about what *specifically* the study was about, which might be the reason the gendered pronoun was used. In the third paragraph, the collocation with *mother* might be enough to force the gendered pronoun, while we see there is reversion to the non-gendered pronoun to refer to the antecedent *the child's*.

3.5 Comparison with Mitchell's study

Mitchell (1994) found that *they* was more often paired with a neutral referent such as 'child', than with a gendered one such as 'boy', 'which suggests that *they* does function as a true generic' (Mitchell, 1994: 2). In the Australian data sampled in this study (which is based on 64 pronoun-antecedent pairs, compared with Mitchell's 183 pairs), *they* refers to *the child* or *a child* 29 times, while a gendered pronoun is used 12 times. A gendered pronoun (*she* or *he*) is used 20 times to refer to a named child, a gendered noun such as *girl* or *small boy*, and *this particular child*. There is thus a slight preference by these Australians to not use gendered terms, either nouns or pronouns. Discussions with students revealed that gender is not considered a feature that is relevant to the analysis of the acquisition of syntax, morphology and phonetics.

This pattern appears in the writing of many students, and I suggest is typical of Australian English, i.e. the pronoun *they* is not just a third person plural and third person singular 'indefinite gender' or 'general' pronoun, but it is a third person 'gender not relevant to discussion' pronoun. In discussion with several of these students, a recurring phrase was that the gender 'just doesn't matter'. The gender may be not relevant due to the factors mentioned earlier, i.e. known by the hearer but not known by the speaker, thus a non-gender specific pronoun should be used to 'avoid getting it wrong'; or not known by speaker or hearer and therefore the gendered pronouns must be avoided and the non-gender-specific pronoun used instead; or, lastly, known by the speaker and sometimes the hearer, but not relevant to the proposition, so that a 'specifically non-gendered' pronoun is appropriate.

4. Further data from other sources

The idea that the gender of a referent may not be relevant to the discussion has been mentioned before: Felicity Grey's (2002) honours thesis discusses four different reasons why a person might choose to not disclose the sex of a referent. Firstly, the information might be 'deemed irrelevant' (p46), secondly, revealing the sex of the referent might be undesirable, eg for literary effect or to avoid using sexist language, thirdly, disclosing the sex of the referent might compromise the anonymity of the referent, and finally because avoidance of a sex-specific pronoun 'affords discretion and polite distance' (p48). Several examples from Grey's thesis (§4.2.2) illustrate these reasons ((13) is Grey's own data from *Mutiny* (RMIT Queer group's magazine); (14) and (15) are from a 1983 Frank Dickens comic strip and a 1992 *The London Evening Standard* article respectively quoted in Katie Wales 1996 *Personal Pronouns in present-day English*, CUP; while (16) and (17) are from Urs Weidmann 1984 *Anaphoric they for singular expressions*, in Watts & Weidmann *Modes of Interpretation*, Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 59-68).

- (13) I was talking to **a member of Queer RMIT** and mentioned I had a boyfriend, **they** asked me: 'So you're bisexual?'
- (14) Tea-lady: Mr Gordon Blue – **someone** was an extra spoonful of sugar in **their** tea.
Chef: Impossible. It will upset all my calculations.
Tea-lady: But **he** is insisting! And it's **sweet-tooth Bristow, one of our best customers**.
Chef: Sacre bleu! Pop round to Sainsbury's.
- (15) Lady Antoni, 60, was careful not to name Worden, merely describing the 'lack of perception' of '**one critic who I'm not very fond of**', and commenting 'I'm glad **they**'re not here today'.

- (16) If there is a **Barbara Wassman** on board, could **they** make **themselves** known to the cabin.
- (17) I know a **member of this club** who, for the obvious reason of being **chairman of the nominating committee**, cannot nominate **themselves**.

In each of these examples, the speaker appears to be deliberately not disclosing the sex of the referent, yet the speaker knows that the identify of the referent is a unique and specific individual in each case. *They* in (13), (14), (15) and (17) is clearly referring to a specific, un-identified individual; and although in (16) the specific individual is named, it could be argued that this is a generalised antecedent fitting the description of 'some person who happens to be called Barbara Wassman', and that this is therefore an instance of generalised *they*. Thus, (16) may be a use of general *they*, but (13), (14), (15) and (17) are clearly instances of the 'specifically non-gendered' use of *they*.

An example from spoken discourse seems to follow the same rules. There is a specific referent in mind, but when a general, non-gendered noun is used to introduce the referent, the 'gender not relevant' *they* pronoun is used. Once the gender of the referent is revealed in *an older man*, a gendered pronoun follows.

- (18) Speaker is female, born 13.09.1987 and grew up just out of Adelaide
 @ overlapping speech
 + high rising terminal
 / rephrase/ restart

LDE: the first day I went down this hill + like I didn't know how to stop +

AG: (laughs)

LDE: so the best way to stop was just to @ fall over @

AG: @ fall over yeah @

LDE: on your bum + yeah fall on my butt + just kept going +

AG: oh

LDE: took **a person** out with me (laughs)

AG: oh no

LDE: like went under **their** / behind **their** knee +

AG: yep

LDE: it was like / it was **an older man** +

AG: yep

LDE: and **his** ski like went and whacked into my knee + and like swelled up + and I can't even remember + it's just like I was all like black and bruised + and I'm like great @ I'm like @

AG: @ oh god @

LDE: I don't get to ski for another couple days

AG: yeah

LDE: but um (.) I felt so sorry for this man cause I mean I just closed my eyes and dropped to the ground straightaway apparently I was went right like / like the back of his legs and he just like fell and flipped over me (laughs) I'm like oh no (.) poor thing

AG: (laughs)

LDE: anyway he made sure I was all right like I was yeah but what about you +

AG: yep [example courtesy Averil Grieve]

This usage of *they* may not be completely restricted to Australian English, also it seems more prevalent here. Shawn Johnson, an American, mentions the use of *they* to 'hide [the] gender' of a referent, as opposed to indicating uncertainty of the gender (Johnson, 2004). He gives the example in (19).

(19) **A friend of mine** asked me to go help **them** with an assignment.

So it appears that people outside of Australia have heard of this ‘specifically non-gendered’ usage of *they*, even while promoting the ‘rule’ that *they* may be used only for non-gender specific, non-referential antecedents.

And lastly, the ‘gender not relevant’ use applies not only to specific referents, but also to gendered non-specific referents, as shown in (20).

(20) You’ve got, y’know, **John Smith** in your class, but, y’know, you haven’t *seen them* for six weeks.

[KB, Monash Tutor Induction session 2007]

5. Summary

We have seen several different uses of *they* in first year essays by Australian university students, as well as examples of specific *they* from other Australian sources, both written and spoken. *They* is used when 1) the writer is unsure of the gender of the referent; 2) the writer is referring to a general meaning or denotation of the expression, not a unique referent of the antecedent; or, importantly for speakers of Australian English, 3) the writer does know the gender of the referent, but this is not relevant for the hearer/reader at that particular point.

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