Listener Differences in Non-traditional Anaphora Resolution
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Introduction

English pronouns have a rich history of being a site for conscious language change (Bodine 1975). Recent social movements away from the traditional gender binary have again brought pronouns into public discussion, with increasing acknowledgement of non-standard Preferred Gender Pronouns (PGPs) —
• mainstream sites like Facebook now allow users to choose whether they would prefer to be referred with he/she/they.
• The American Dialect Society voted for they used as a gender-neutral singular pronoun as the Word of the Year for 2015.

Is there evidence that listeners find person-known they grammatically acceptable at both subconscious and conscious levels?

Does it depend on their self-identified gender identity and/or explicit awareness of PGP?

Previous findings

• Clauses with antecedent-gender mismatching pronouns are processed slower/less accepted than those with matching pronouns (Foertsch & Gernsbacher 1997; Osterhout, Berwick & McLaughlin 1997)
• However, Love (2011) found evidence that pronouns are “shallowly processed” — participants are not sensitive to gender mismatching pronouns in narratives.
• Foertsch & Gernsbacher (1997) find that singular they pronouns were read “with equal facility” as antecedent matching pronouns.
• Looking at Swedish, Sendén, Bäck, & Lindqvist (2015) find a change over time in the explicit acceptability and reported self use of hen.

Participants

22 Participants
• 18 female
• 3 male
• 1 non binary
• 6 LGBTQ+ identified participants
• 15 straight identified participants
• 1 N/A
• Ages range ranging from 18-27

Methodology

We used a speeded grammaticality judgment task to investigate how grammatical our listeners found antecedent-known they.

• Participants listened to 140 sentences and were asked to rate, as quickly as possible, whether they found the sentence unacceptable or acceptable according to personal grammatical standards.
• completed a questionnaire on personal identities and familiarity with PGPs
• completed a short recorded interview covering their experimental strategies and their exposure and attitudes towards non-standard PGPs

Participants were recruited from the queer community at Tech, and the general population.

Stimuli for the study were recorded by a young female speaker of American English. The sentences consisted of:

• 180 target sentences (60 unique), where an unambiguously gendered name was paired with one of three reflexive pronouns:
  • Sarah gave herself a haircut. ("matching")
  • Sarah gave herself a haircut. ("mismatching")
  • Sarah gave themself a haircut. ("they")
• 160 filler sentences (80 unique) that were ungrammatical or grammatical:
  • John walked to the park. (grammatical)
  • John to the park walked. (ungrammatical)

These stimuli were split across three lists, so all participants heard equal amounts of the different types of sentences, but did not hear the same unique sentence repeat.

Insights from Interviews

“I think it’s more important to respect people’s pronouns than it is to pay attention to outdated ideas about what a singular pronoun is or is not.”

“I was conscious of the fact that the test was testing my judgements of the grammar, and I don’t really consider those to be grammatical errors. Gender, to me, is fluid, so without having any other context, I was trying to solely look at the grammatical composition of each sentence.”

“At first it was my reaction that they were unacceptable but then I realized that they were acceptable... but I had to make that conscious... I feel like a lot of grammar is just kind of instant in your head, you know? What sounds right or wrong, and then it took a while to process that no, that's not wrong.”

“I began accepting them as unacceptable... then I switched halfway through to make it acceptable”

Experimental Results

From the in-experiment survey...
• 4 participants immediately recognized the acronym PGP, all were LGBTQ+
• 14 said they heard of “preferred gender pronouns;” (5/6 LGBTQ+)!
• 7 participants did not understand the question when asked what their own PGP were (all straight)
• 9 participants said they know someone who uses pronouns other than he or she — 5 LGBTQ+, 3 straight, 1 N/A
• When asked to name PGP apart from he or she, the most common was they (11), followed by ze (4), hir (1), and de (1)

• Mismatching anaphors = 72% acceptance
• they anaphors = 37% acceptance
• Unclear if listener differences:
  • Participants who recognized acronym “PGP” were significantly more likely to accept they, but this seems to reflect that they had an acceptability bias (they were also significantly more like to accept the ungrammatical fillers).
  • Response times:
    • LGBTQ+ listeners are faster to accept “they” sentences than straight listeners.
    • This interaction only approaches significance (p= 0.064).

SUMMARY: We find that they is accepted less than mismatching pronouns, but more than ungrammatical fillers. There is weak evidence that there are listener differences in processing they, but more data needed.