Prescriptivism and the Singular "They"

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1. Introduction

A bestiary of "barbarisms" (the latter ones region-specific):
(1) Singular they: If a student fails, they can repeat the test.
(2) Preposition stranding: Who did Elvis appear to next?
(3) Non-Latin-style accusative: It is me.
(4) "only-stringing: She only read the book about cows.
(5) Split infinitives: The best thing would be to quickly leave.
(6) Affix reduplication: fixer-up-er.
(7) Denominal verbs (some): We contacted/accessed/trialed them.
(8) "Who"-contraction: Do you wanna go?
(9) Negative concord: You don’t get nothing nowhere.
(10) Non-standard inflection: I never done it.
(11) Plural marking on you: Youse aren’t real Australians.

Prescriptivism and the Singular "They"

"Hopefully I’ll leave on the noon plane" is to talk nonsense. Do you mean you’ll leave on the noon plane in a hopeful frame of mind? Or do you mean you hope you’ll leave on the noon plane? Whichever you mean, you haven’t said it clearly. Although the word in its new, free-floating capacity may be pleasurable and even useful to many, it offends the ear of many others, who do not like to see words dulled, or eroded, particularly when the erosion leads to ambiguity, softness, or nonsense. 

(23) Opinions of usage panelists (journalists etc.) in Morris & Morris (1985:289f):

a. "Hopefully" so used is an abomination and its adherents should be lynched.

b. "Slack-jawed, common, slazy."

c. "...barbaric, illiterate, offensive, dannable, and inexcusable."

d. "...to my shame I once wrote it before I learned to hate it."

e. "I can see myself writing it—but it’s wrong."

Why the invective?

1. A 20th century innovation, hopefully2 was/is perhaps not native to all speakers. Those to whom it was not native ‘reasoned’ that it must be ‘wrong’.

2. Cases where prescription is warranted (among others)

Entirely dispensing with prescription would be undesirable. Linguists forgetting this when talking to non-linguists are making their profession a sitting duck for criticism.

Correction of non-native English:

(12) There exist two possibilities to spread these informations.

(13) A child don’t learn language by direct negative evidence.

Criticism of offensive language use:

(14) Since the dawn of time, men have wondered what life means.

Advice on averting miscommunication:

(15) a. PROSECUTOR: Did you manage to put poison in Mr Smith’s drink?

b. DEFENDENT: No. [presupposes envenomation attempt]

(16) Lightlobe [Australian for lightbulb]

(17) inflammable liquids [not flammable?]

(18) Employees may only wear black shoes. [better find another job in winter...]

(19) Cockpit communication (Krifka et al 2003):

a. Not very much more fuel [pre-engine-failure euphemism]

b. Climb [to] five zero [two or zero?]

Training in prestige variety: warnings that use of some non-standard features in particular settings will have adverse consequences for their users.

3. Bad prescriptivism

3.1. Case study 1: Giving up hopefully

(20) I entered the room hopefully.

(21) Hopefully the programme won’t crash.

3.1.1. Denunciations of hopefully2

(22) This once-useful adverb meaning “with hope” has been distorted and is now widely used to mean “I hope” or “it is to be hoped.” Such use is not merely wrong, it is silly. To say,

...to my shame I once wrote it before I learned to hate it.

...happily, surely, surprisingly, regrettable, disappointingly, curiously, oddly, admissibly, alarmingly, predictably, honestly, ideally, incidentally, strikingly, intriguingly, presumably, confidentially, understandably, sadly

3.1.2. Attempts at rational arguments against speaker-oriented hopefully

See Whitley (1983:130f) on prescriptivist sources and other arguments.

A. Argument: Hopefully means ‘full of hope’, so it needs a subject capable of hoping.

- [presupposes envenomation attempt]

- [Australian for lightbulb]

- [not flammable?]

- [better find another job in winter...]

- [pre-engine-failure euphemism]

- [two or zero?]

B. Argument: Adverbs should modify verbs.

- [presupposes envenomation attempt]

- [Australian for lightbulb]

- [not flammable?]

- [better find another job in winter...]

- [pre-engine-failure euphemism]

- [two or zero?]
3.2. Case study 2: The progressive passive

(28) PROGRESSIVE PASSIVE: The house is being built (by Mr. Smith and Sons).

(29) PASSIVAL: The house is building (by Mr. Smith and Sons).

(30) a. Our garden is putting in order... [Austen; after Denison 1998:148]
b. The street lamps were lighting... [Dickens; after Denison 1998:149]

♦ Reactions to the progressive passive (all from Visser 1973:2014; my emphasis):

(31) “a corruption of language” ... “clumsy and unidiomatic” ... “an awkward neologism, which neither convenience, intelligibility, nor syntactical congruity demands...” [1858; G. P. Marsh, Lectures on the English Language]

(32) the “fatal absurdity” [of the progressive passive consists] “in the combination of is with being; in the making of the verb to be a supplement, or, in grammarians’ phrase, an auxiliary to itself, an absurdity so palpable, so monstrous, so ridiculous, that it should need only to be pointed out to be scouted”... “a monstrosity the illogical, confusing, inaccurate, unidiomatic character of which I have, at some length, imperfectly set forth”... “It means nothing,” [1871 R. Grant White, Words and Their Uses]

(33) “…rationally or irrationally, I have an undying, never-dying hatred to is being, whatever arguments are brought in its favour. At the same time I fully grant that it is so convenient in the present state of the language, that I will not pledge myself I have never been guilty of using it.” [before 1890; John Henry Newman]

♦ I see no rational argument against the progressive passive.

♦ What is the guarantee that more modern diatribes against innovations in a language won’t look similarly ridiculous in subsequent centuries?

4. Singular they

♦ Singular they (they**w***) = they/them/their/themself/theirself/theyselfs with singular antecedent:

(34) If somebody rings, and they don’t say their name, ask them to identify themselves.

(35) In a classroom, the teacher has to know more than they explicitly teach.

(36) Whoever said that forgot to take their medication.

(37) If a student disputes the mark, send them to me.

(38) No decent person treats their friends like that.

Chaucer

(39) And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blane, / They wol come up... [ca. 1395, The Pardoner’s Prologue]

Caxton

(40) Ecche of theym sholde... make theymselvy theirselfs reedy. [1489 Sonnes of Aymon i. 39]

Sidney

(41) Now this king did kepe a great house, that euerie body might come and take their meat freely. [1580, Arcadia II. (1613) 156]

Shakespeare

(42) Arise; one knockes. /... / Hark, how they knock! [1599; Romeo and Juliet, III:3]

(43) God send every one their heart’s desire! [Much Ado About Nothing, Act III Scene 4]

King James Bible (1611)

(44) According to the number that yee shall prepare, so shall yee doe to every one, according to their number. [Numbers 15:12]

(45) Then shall thou bring forth that man, or that woman (which haue committed that wicked thing) vnto thy gates, euenn that man, or that woman, and shall stone them with stones till they die. [Deuteronomy 17:5]

(46) ...in bownesse of minde let each esteme other better then themselves. [Phl. 2:3]

Jane Austen

(47) I would have everybody marry if they can do it properly. [1814; Mansfield Park]

Thackeray

(48) A person can’t help their birth. [1848 Vanity Fair, XL; cited Jesperson 1894:30]

♦ They**w** is natural to many (most? all?) native speakers, even if they avoid it in writing.

♦ Other pronouns are unsatisfactory: he excludes females, he or she is awkward. (They**w** can only be satisfactorily avoided by rewording, e.g. using plural antecedents.)

(49) a. If a caller fails to say their name, ask them to identify themselves.

b. If a caller fails to say his name, ask him to identify himself.

c. If a caller fails to say his or her name, ask him or her to identify himself or herself.

4.1. They say nay to they

♦ Fowler (1926) calls they**w** an “error”, “old-fashioned” (!) and advocates generic he.

♦ Strunk & White (2000:60): replace they**w** with he, or else rephrase the sentence.

♦ Simon (1980), after Webster (1989:902): “… I bristle at [defenses of they**w** appealing to the fact that] “reputable writers and speakers” have used them...But the lapses of the great ones do not make a wrong right...”

♦ Times Online Style Guide (2003): ‘They should always agree with the subject. Avoid sentences such as “If someone loves animals, they should protect them”. Say instead “If people love animals, they should protect them”.’

4.2. A they-sayer’s reply to the naysayers

♦ The objection: They is plural, so it can’t have singular antecedents. Naysayers apparently think that they-sayers cannot count.

♦ But why not say instead that they has two functions: (i) plural, (ii) singular common gender? If pronoun polyfunctionality is bad, then we should ban the pronouns below:

(50) I bought her books.

(51) Ich mag sie. [German ‘I like her/them.’]

(52) No one should forswake his friends. [Is this masc. or generic in Fowlerese?]

♦ By parity of reasoning, you and Fr. vous are bad (historically plural but singular uses).
5. Analysis of they

- Proposal: A unified meaning for singular & plural they. If tenable, this shows that they's non-obeying far more elegant principles than naysayers suspect.
- Main subclaims: a) They is a default form, used when the other pronouns are unavailable. b) The intuition that they ‘means plural’ results from this.
- The table below claims to be a complete description of the semantic properties ('features') of English 3rd person pronouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Third Person Pronouns</th>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>she</td>
<td>[+3rd]</td>
<td>[-plural]</td>
<td>[+fem]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he</td>
<td>[+3rd]</td>
<td>[-plural]</td>
<td>[+masc]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it</td>
<td>[+3rd]</td>
<td>[-plural]</td>
<td>[-fem-masc]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they</td>
<td>[+3rd]</td>
<td>[+plural]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.1. Purely grammatical (i.e. non-semantic) features

- Strike-through with [+ plural] indicates that the feature is purely grammatical, not semantic.
  - They must be at least grammatically plural because of agreement facts:
    (53) If someone said that, they were mad. [*was]
    (54) I think someone hurt themselves.

- Purely grammatical, non-semantic features are nothing new:
  - Grammatical gender: German Mädchen ‘girl’: [+ neuter]
  - Pluralia tantum: trousers [+ plural]
  - English interrogative who is [+ plural]:
    (55) I heard a lot of people were present. Who [was/were] in the room?
  - Distributive pronouns (whoever, each, every, nobody, whoever) have both singular and plural properties. In (standard) English, they have the grammatical feature [+ plural]:
    (56) Everyone [is/are] here.

5.2. Underspecification

**Underspecification** (=the Elsewhere Principle): If two forms are in principle applicable, the more specific form is chosen automatically.

**Consequence:** In describing our mental knowledge of meanings, we often needn’t state what the expression does NOT mean (or even shouldn’t do so, see sect. 5.3)

Application to they: In the table, they has fewer features than the other pronouns, and is thus less specific, and will be chosen only if one or more of the features of she/he/it are inapplicable.

Illustrations

- Singular people where gender is known:

(57) Jane rang asking for you. She said to ring back.

- They is systematically excluded whenever it is available. (Presumably animals and babies can optionally be perceived as genderless. Note also that the gender features make animacy/humanness features redundant.)

- The dog is called ‘Rover’. He bites.

- They used in contexts where other pronouns are inapplicable:

5.3. Independent motivation for Underspecification

- English – a plural rule in principle applies to ALL nouns, witness its use with new nouns. But it is preempted by more specific plural rules.
  - a. two children / sheep / oxen / geese
  - b. two wugs

- a. Is it possible? - Yes, in fact it’s likely. [...likely more specific than possible]
  - b. It is possible.

5.3.1. Application to they:

- a. Egbert criticised himself. [implies: not himself]
  - b. Egbert criticised him. [implies: not himself]
  - c. As for Egbert, everyone criticised him, even Egbert.
6. General remarks on bad prescriptivism

Main characteristics of bad prescriptivism

♦ Deficient knowledge of linguistic phenomena.
♦ Language change treated as intrinsically bad.
♦ Non-objective, sometimes abusive discourse.

Some causes for (acceptance of) bad prescriptivism

Of course, not all factors apply in all cases.

A. Inability of non-experts to see weaknesses in linguistic arguments from apparent experts.
B. Differing aesthetic tastes → It sounds bad, so it’s wrong.
C. Variety differences → e.g. Americans have no feeling for the English language.
D. Desire to appear more literate → denigration of the language of others.
E. Sincere desire to protect Language, interpreted as a reified/personified speaker-independent entity. Cf. the following metaphor

**USING LANGUAGES BADLY IS HARMING PEOPLE:**

(71) They murder the language.

Others: massacre, torture, murder, knife, butcher, slaughter, crucify

(72) **eine Sprache radebrechen** ‘(lit.) break a language on the wheel’ [German]

F. Desire to help speakers of non-prestige varieties, coupled with the belief that non-standard language is inherently deficient / illogical / grammarless etc.


The linguist’s response

Merely stating that all native speakers’ grammars are equally good will not convince people influenced by the above factors.

♦ Suggestions for linguists trying to improve the situation:
  ♦ Being aware of the causes for bad prescriptivism.
  ♦ Not implying that linguists are against all prescription.
  ♦ Being able to address criticisms of ‘wrong’ language on a case-by-case basis.

7. References


