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THE RISE OF SINGULAR THEY

Singular *they* is the use in English of the pronoun *they*, or its inflected or derivative forms, such as *them*, *their*, *themselves*, or *themselves*, as a gender-neutral pronoun to refer to a single person.

For a long time, the use of the so-called “singular *they*” was considered incorrect. This is thanks to a group of 18th century grammarians who decided that indefinite pronouns like *everyone* are always grammatically singular. So, even though they usually imply a plural even if they are grammatically singular, and though there is a lack of gender identification of such pronouns and words like *person* or *friend*, masculine singular pronouns were used for reference to them, e.g. *Everyone should*

do his best. To a modern ear, these examples sound sexist, as the person's gender is not specified, so we have no right to suggest it could only be a *he*. What is interesting, the same rule is applied in modern Spanish and German, e.g. *Wer an die Liebe seiner Erben glaubt, dem ist aller Witz beraubt*.

Today we are more likely to use the gender-balanced *his or her* – *Everyone should do his or her best*". That is a good option, until we have to compose sentences like *Everyone should do his or her best in whatever situations he or she finds himself or herself in*. It definitely sounds clumsy. Of course, one can always say *You should do your best* or *People should do their best*, but all this effort to avoid the century-old usage seems strange and unnecessary. What is more, even in Jane Austen's "Emma" written in 1815 we come across *I can think of but one thing - Who is in love with her? Who makes you their confidant?* Thus, the sentence *Everyone should do their best in the situations they find themselves in*, helps us to speak less cumbersome and to avoid sounding sexist.

Modern grammarians seem to disagree upon the appropriateness of using singular *they*. For example, let's compare the definitions of the word *egotist* or *egoist* taken from four contemporary dictionaries. The authors of Collins English Dictionary in a rather old-fashioned manner tell us that it's "*a **person** who is preoccupied with **his** own interests; a selfish person*". Their colleagues from Cambridge Dictionaries Online give us the following definition of an egotist - "*a **person** who considers **himself** or **herself** to be better or more important than other people*". As for Longman English Dictionary Online and Macmillan Dictionary, they follow the modern trend by defining an egoist as "***someone** who likes to talk about how great and important **they** think **they** are*" or "***someone** who thinks that **they** are more important than other people and need not care about them*".

There's good news for the proponents of new grammar – singular *they* has been named the Word of the Year by over 200 linguists at the American Dialect Society's annual meeting in Washington, D.C. on January, 8th 2016. Even before that, in December 2015, Bill Walsh, a copy editor at the Washington Post announced that the Post's official style guide now allows the use of singular *they*. Not all his colleagues agree with that, though. The New York Times, for example, refuses to use *they* to refer to individuals.

What gives this word new prominence is its usefulness as a way to refer to people who don't identify as *he* or *she*. This way mainstream culture recognizes and accepts transgender and gender fluid people, some of whom reject traditional pronouns.

So the linguists have voted, but will gender-neutral singular *they* actually catch on and be treated as a norm? Time will show. And as for learners of English, they should be cautious. It will be recommended for them to feel free to use singular *they* in everyday speech, but as far as academic writing is concerned, it will still be safer to use the singular third person masculine *he*, or a more cumbersome *he or she*.