

Patching a Pothole

Language moves in one predictable direction: forward.

Go there now.

— Constance Hale and Jessie Scanlon,
Wired Style

English is wonderfully rich. It has more ways to express meaning over a broad spectrum of experience than perhaps any other language, but some “potholes” still exist in the language. Over the centuries, kludged constructions sometimes have had to be pressed into service when no other solutions availed in response to syntactical needs. (“Kludge [pronounced like *Scrooge*]: A clumsy or inelegant solution to a problem”—*The American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th edition.)

In this realm of linguistic kludges reside such formations as the first-person interrogative *aren't I?*, the contraction for *are not I?*, which logically should be *amn't I?*, for *am not I?*. Nowadays no one questions the legitimacy of *aren't I?* or the odd sequence of the words at its source, but I can imagine that the Thistlebottoms of an earlier time were considerably worked up over it.

Another pothole is the subject of this column and of the following advice, which appears buried in an obscure footnote at the bottom of page 76 of *The Chicago Manual of Style* (CMOS), 14th edition (1993):

For the editor in search of guidance in avoiding sexist connotations the following sources might be suggested: Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, and Dennis Baron, *Grammar and Gender*. Along with these and other authorities, the University of Chicago Press recommends the “revival” of the singular use of *they* and *their*, citing, as do they, its venerable use by such writers as Addison, Austen, Chesterfield, Fielding, Ruskin, Scott, and Shakespeare.

That footnote is missing from CMOS 15 (2003). At least, I couldn't find it. It makes me wonder why it was not reprinted—did it generate too much controversy?

However, the note's intent might be inferred from CMOS 15, Section 5.204 (page 233), which concludes that “credibility is lost with some readers” whenever the standard conventions to achieve gender-neutral discourse are followed. CMOS 15 declares that “it is unacceptable to a great many reasonable readers to use the generic masculine pronoun (*he*) in reference to no one in particular.” It goes on to say that “nontraditional gimmicks” (alternating *she/he*, writing *s/he*, or using the singular *they*) to circumvent the generic masculine referent are also frowned on by large numbers of other readers. So just what is the best protective footwear for the editor who must traverse this bed of coals?

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (MWCD), 11th edition (2004), weighs in on CMOS 15's quest for “invisible gender neutrality” on page 1298, saying in its usage note, “The use of *they*, *their*, *them*, and *themselves* as pronouns of indefinite gender and indefinite number is well established in speech and writing, even in literary and formal contexts.” It quotes the words of W H Auden, Jane Austen, W M Thackeray, Shakespeare, and G B Shaw to make its case. Some examples: “And every one to rest *themselves* betake” (Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece*, 1594); “I would have everybody marry if *they* can do it properly” (Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 1814); and “A person cannot help *their* birth” (W M Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 1848). MWCD 11 concludes by saying, “This gives you the option of using the plural pronouns where you think they sound best, and of using the singular pronouns (as *he*, *she*, *he or she*, and their inflected forms) where you think they sound best.”

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (AHD), 4th edition (2000), adds a further historical note in support of MWCD 11's position, stating in a usage note on page 1796, “The use of the third-person plural pronoun *they* to refer to a singular noun or pronoun is attested as early as 1300, and many admired writers have used *they*, *them*, *themselves*, or *their* to refer to singular nouns such as *one*, *a person*, *an individual*, and *each*.” To bolster

its case, *AHD 4* cites some of the same reputable authors as does *MWCD 11*. It goes on to assert how widespread the use of the singular *they* is and cites its currency in some reputable publications. It notes that “the usage is so common in speech that it generally passes unnoticed.” *AHD 4* concludes with a caveat:

However, despite the convenience of third-person plural forms as substitutes for generic *he* and for structurally awkward coordinate forms like *his/her*, many people avoid using *they* to refer to a singular antecedent out of respect for the traditional grammatical rule concerning pronoun agreement. Thus, the writer who chooses to use *they* in similar contexts in writing should do so only if assured that the usage will be read as a conscious choice rather than an error.

It seems to me that invisibility, neutrality, “where you think they sound best” (euphony), and assertion of conscious choice represent four of the five principles that should guide the editor in weighing the coupling of plural pronouns with singular antecedents. The fifth and most important is unambiguous meaning. In *Word Court* (Harcourt, 2000), Barbara Wallraff cites a sentence (page 32) that solves one problem while creating another: “Each topic in the self-esteem curriculum is covered in detail, so that the children may be aware of *their* importance.’ Is that the topic’s importance or the children’s? The distinction between singular and plural helps readers keep things straight, as long as they can trust it.”

I also observe that some usages and idioms are so engraved in granite that they cannot be altered: *Every dog has his day* just doesn’t work as *Every dog has their day* and even less as *Every dog has his or her day*. And consider *He who laughs last, laughs best*: The phrase might not intrude on the reader’s consciousness if altered to *They who laugh last, laugh best*; but *He or she who laughs last, laughs best* probably would.

With the above citations as background, and having reflected on the direction of the language during 15 years of editing work

in many disciplines, I am now persuaded that in some situations the reasoned and discreet use of the singular *they* can be considered legitimate, even in formal writing. I will refrain from reflexively correcting it as I have done in the past. Having said that, if there exists any whiff of confusion in any construction that invokes the singular *they* with a gender-determinate antecedent, I will call for revision.

In the course of researching the content for this article, I learned that Australia has begun encouraging the use of the singular *they* in its state documents to promote gender-neutral usage and avoid tiring the reader with overuse of “he or she”—to my knowledge, the first country to do so.

Chuckle of the Month

A Slightly Too Hot Line

Honda Motors listed a toll-free number in the owner’s manuals of 1.2 million Hondas and Acuras that was meant to direct their owners to a hotline operated by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The correct prefix should have been 880, not 800, a proofreading error that turned out to be costly. Because of the single incorrect numeral, callers reached a hotline where a recorded female voice urged listeners to call for an intimate “chat” at “just 99 cents per minute”, forcing Honda to dispatch more than 1.2 million postcards to owners and dealers directing them to insert the correct information in their manuals.