

Gender-inclusivity in English pronoun selection by L1 English and Spanish speakers

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Building on the rapidly expanding body of literature on learning and processing of ‘singular *they*’, this study investigates how the interaction of L1 and gender identity influence its use and uptake. Recent work suggests that singular *they* is increasingly acceptable in reference to specific individuals, whether used to indicate the referent’s nonbinary gender or the speaker’s own uncertainty (Bjorkman 2017, Conrod 2018, 2019, Konnelly & Cowper 2020, a.o.). However, these studies investigate L1 users of English. Since instruction in English often occurs in classrooms and in formal contexts where singular *they* might not have been adopted yet, we predict L2 users of English will be less familiar with it, thus be less likely to use it. If so, how do L2 English users reference specific individuals of unknown, ambiguous, or nonbinary gender? We anticipate that, if L2 English users are native users of a grammatically gendered L1 like Spanish, language transfer will lead to L2 English users to produce more gendered pronouns than L1 users. Additionally, there is evidence that certain communities of practice are more likely to produce and accept singular *they* for specific individuals (Ackerman 2020, Conrod 2018), and this is visible in coarse-grained measures like user gender (women, men, nonbinary, and ‘other’), with ‘nonbinary’ and ‘other’ genders leading in use, and ‘male’ trailing. In parallel, innovations in Spanish (while slow to be adopted generally but gaining ground in transgender and nonbinary communities) include pronouns such as *elle*, a gender-neutral alternative to *él/ella* (López 2019). Therefore, we also anticipate both L1 and L2 usage of singular *they* to vary with participant gender. If so, this supports the hypothesis that extant gendered social structures directly influence adult language acquisition and use of singular *they*.

A survey was conducted to identify the patterns in use of singular *they* in adult L1 English and L1 Spanish users (N=100, Table 1). Participants were presented with a drawing of a person doing an activity (Ribu 2020) and asked to assemble a sentence describing the image using a pool of subjects (pronouns) and predicates (past tense verb phrases). Only one predicate accurately described the image (e.g., “read a book.”), while the subjects consisted of the words “She”, “He”, “They” (Figure 1). Subjects were also asked for demographic information, including gender, age of English acquisition, and location of exposure to English.

Figure 2 shows that, contrary to our predictions, L1 Spanish users are more likely to use singular *they* than L1 English users ($z(1)=3.5$, $p<0.001$). When considering participant gender (Figure 3), nonbinary individuals lead in use of singular *they* ($z(1)=4.08$, $p<0.0001$). This contrasts sharply with English L1 men, who use of singular *they* least, whereas Spanish L1 users who aren’t nonbinary show remarkable consistency. This is consistent with the hypothesis that community of practice, specifically for trans and nonbinary individuals, is an important influence on adoption of singular *they*. We also examined response as a function of stimulus gender (previously normed) (Figure 4). All participants used *they* more frequently with nonbinary/unknown images ($z(1)=2.7$, $p=0.008$). Interestingly, nonbinary L1 Spanish users were highly consistent across stimuli, indicating that this community of practice applies singular *they* more radically than the other genders across both L1s. The higher frequency use of *they* by the nonbinary and ‘other’ individuals supports the hypothesis that community of practice is a major influence on adoption of singular *they*.

Curiously, the degree that gender categories differ from each other appears larger than the degree that L1 categories differ. This suggests that gendered social structure is a stronger influence on adoption of singular *they* than language of origin or formal language instruction. We therefore posit that L2 English users might have an *easier* time learning a novel pronominal paradigm which includes singular *they*, as compared to L1 English users, for whom the task requires reanalysis and reassembly of long-established syntactic features on a single element of the pronominal paradigm (Konnelly & Cowper 2020, Lardiere 2008).

References

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Table 1: Participant demographic categories

	L1 English	L1 Spanish
Woman	33	28
Man	12	8
Nonbinary	6	8
Other	1	4

Figure 1. Example stimulus with nonbinary image.

