

Pronoun Trouble

By Jeffery Greb

Lately, I find some pronouns have been getting under my skin, and I've chosen to formally dig them out rather than to obsessively pick at them in the privacy of my thoughts. For the record, I've got no issues with most pronouns. Interrogative, demonstrative, reflexive, and indefinite pronouns are all doing excellent work. My issue is with personal pronouns, words that take the place of nouns directly, and only with a small subset causing trouble. More precisely, it isn't the pronouns themselves causing the trouble; it is their usage. One of these problems stems directly from improper usage, another is from the usage shifting, and the last is troubling from a purely theoretical perspective. I'll dig them out each in turn, so none of the toxins remain in my system.

Misuse of First- and Third-Person Objective

While I have no doubt this first problem is not new, it does feel like it's getting worse. I've rarely seen the specific problem occur in formal written English, although it abounds in the informal and oral forms. Specifically, it occurs when the speaker uses the objective forms of first- and/or third-person in compound subjective case. Before you pack up and go home because of that description, I ask you to stop, take a deep breath, and trust me when I tell you that even if you don't grasp the issue from my description at this point, your "ear" will understand it when you "hear" an example because your understanding of language is not based upon remembering the names of all the parts.

First-person subjective is *I*; third person subjective is either *she* or *he*. Proper use (*i.e.* as a subject) sounds like "*I* went to the movies," and "*She* went to the movies." To make a single sentence with a compound subject, the proper use is "*She and I* went to the movies." The objective forms of *I* and *she* are *me* and *her*, respectively. Plugging those forms into my sentence

(and it makes my skin crawl to do so) reveals the issue: “*Her* and *me* went to the movies,” or (even worse) “*Me* and *her* went to the movies.” You can “hear” those are sentences wrong when juxtaposed with the correct sentence, right?

If you answered yes, and I believe that is what most native English speakers would answer, then how does this mistake occur and occur so frequently? Although I have no clear answers to those questions, I can say the problem is unquestionably related to the compound nature of the subject. Native English speakers don’t say, “*Me* went to the movies” (unless it was a Tarzan movie, and the speaker is trying to be ironic), nor do they say, “*Her* went to the movies.” However, even if you change the third-person personal pronoun (*she*) back to its proper noun antecedent, someone might still say, “*Me* and *Sheila* went to the movies.” Clearly, the compound nature of the subject is the specific factor that throws off some people.

I started by saying that I believe the problem is not new. If you want indisputable evidence, however, I ask you to look elsewhere. My belief is based on the fact that the common impression for most of us of how people spoke in the past is largely grounded upon surviving formal texts written by educated people, not upon the type of analysis a linguist might perform. The rabble (*i.e.* almost everybody) of Elizabethan England did not speak like Shakespearean characters.¹ Shakespeare was writing in blank verse (unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter) most of the time, not attempting to capture the nuances of realistic speech. In fact, literature was under the heavy critical influence of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which emphasizes plot over all else, including dialogue. The innovation of realistic dialogue came much later, mostly from 19th century Americans like Mark Twain. By and large, people didn’t speak like the characters in Jane Austen

¹ I purposely selected this period because it clearly marks the adoption of the forms of Modern English over Middle English. Spelling and grammatical structures were becoming standardized, and mass printing had become so widespread that a market now existed for written forms.

or the Brontë sisters, nor like those in Nathaniel Hawthorne or E. A. Poe, which doesn't mean the characters don't utter moving or effective words, just that those words do not capture the diction and syntax of "regular" speech. I suspect in the "mind's ear" of most Americans, Brits still "sound" more like characters in a David Lean film (*e.g. Lawrence of Arabia, A Passage to India*) than a Guy Richie film (*e.g. Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels, Snatch*), although the often impenetrable mumblings of latter are more accurate for the vast majority of the U.K. population. (Imagine how Americans must sound to them!) While we can't know for certain exactly how people spoke and whether they made this same pronoun error in the past (without consulting some specific aid from a linguistic expert), I doubt our grammatical failings are anything new or special.

I also said I suspect the problem is getting worse, but I accept this impression may be erroneous. My feeling may be based on the explosion of informal "publishing" options occurring over recent decades, which resulted in giving more exposure of such mistakes than previously. Social media provides a written voice for those who exclusively communicated orally in the past and disseminates such grammatical mistakes unlike anything before. Still, an argument can be made for a culprit. This line of thinking argues that since we have mostly stopped teaching English with a heavy emphasis on memorizing the rules of grammar in favor of teaching how to communicate effectively in various modes (thereby teaching grammar more implicitly than explicitly), people do not even understand they are making this mistake. I don't find this argument persuasive for two reasons. First, it presupposes some mythical time when Americans were better educated. When was this, exactly? The high school graduation rate in 1940 was about 50%, which is probably inflated due to the fact that the number is not based upon tracking children K-12 and many people left school and went to work (*i.e. dropped out*) at that time

before even reaching high school age. If we assume the figure is accurate, however, are we to believe further that the other 50% who failed to graduate in 1940 were somehow more fluent in English grammar than those who graduate today? Was English a subject at which most excelled and only recently became something with which many struggle? An unlikely trajectory, indeed. Second, many of the people making this mistake went to school, like me, in the era when memorization of the rules was emphasized – the golden era of sentence diagraming and other pointless educational exercises. Folks, it ain’t just the kids today saying, “Me and her went to the movies.” No, this error crosses all cultural boundaries, be they socio-economic, ethnic, education level, or others.

Whether it’s getting worse or not, please stop making this pronoun error. Why? you ask. First, and most importantly, because hearing it makes me sick. I mean that literally: every time I hear a version of *me and her*, I vomit a little in my own mouth. If you don’t care about me, which frankly seems almost unfathomable, then do it for yourself. “I don’t need to,” you say. “Me and her understand each other.” This solipsistic response reminds me of the American narrator (probably Nick Adams) of “In Another Country” when he says:

One day I had said that Italian seemed such an easy language to me that I could not take a great interest in it; everything was so easy to say. “Ah, yes,” the major said. “Why, then, do you not take up the use of grammar?” So we took up the use of grammar, and soon Italian was such a difficult language that I was afraid to talk to him until I had the grammar straight in my mind.²

Are you so sure you are understood by her? Besides, you and she are not conversing privately; you’re broadcasting it so that others, like me, can hear. And trust me, we are judging you.

Furthermore, fixing the problem is so easy and clean. Simply pause, for a split second, and posit the subject in singular (*i.e.* non-compound) form. In other words, “speak” the sentence

² Hemingway, Ernest (1927), “In Another Country” in *Men Without Women*.

with only one of the pronouns you plan to use. Try saying, “Me went to the movies” in your head to check its rightness before saying the compound version aloud. I’m guessing most of the time, if not all, the mistake would be caught before it is uttered or typed. Best of all, the check is fast, unnoticeable, and accurate. You’ll avoid both making me sick and being judged as someone too lazy to care about communicating clearly. (Clear communication is difficult under the best circumstances. Why would anyone wish to make it more so?)

Using Third-Person Plural for Singular

English’s lack of a third-person singular, gender-neutral, personal pronoun has long been noted, but the problems attendant to its absence have grown more acute.³ The problem used to be how to insert a singular pronoun for a singular antecedent without gender specificity; for example, in the sentence “When a *person* wants a great burger, that *person* should go to the Burger Barn,” no English pronoun exists to replace the second occurrence of *person* and still maintain the number agreement between the pronoun and its antecedent (the word to which it refers). For a very long time, the “proper” method to address this lack was to insert the pronoun *he* in cases of indeterminate gender, as in “When a person wants a great burger, *he* should go to the Burger Barn.” However, this fix was never satisfactory. No matter how vehemently one might try to rationalize that in this special circumstance *he* is gender neutral, the word is by definition masculine, and the argument rings unconvincing.

The second official fix was to insert the personal pronouns for both genders. My sentence in this form (“When a person wants a great burger, *he or she* should go to the Burger Barn”) isn’t too awkward, but more complex sentences quickly become cumbersome, confusing, and unreadable when trying to use *he or she* whenever a pronoun is needed. The best approach, and

³ Technically, *it* fits this description; however, *it* is only used with non-human nouns.

the one I still usually employ and advise others to use, is to always try to start with a plural noun, as in “When *people* want a great burger, *they* should go to the Burger Barn.” That way, I can use the plural pronoun *they* and continue to maintain pronoun/antecedent agreement.

Recently, however, the entire focal point of the problem has shifted. The call for a gender-neutral, third-person singular pronoun has intensified due to increasing awareness about those who do not identify with traditional gender definitions. I support this general effort. A wonderful quality of language has always been its mutability. Meanings of words shift as our needs to express new ideas, or old ones differently, arise. Similarly, new words are also coined to meet these needs. English is particularly adept at this, perhaps because it is already a mongrel made up of nearly equal parts German, French, and Latin. For examples of words shifting meaning, look at *present*, *composition*, *addition*, and *receipt*. In Shakespeare’s day, these words meant “immediate,” “terms of peace,” “title,” and “receptacle” respectively. Shakespeare also coined a minimum of 400+ new words, from *anchovy* to *fashionable* to *obscene* to *zany*.⁴ The plasticity of English allows for the language to bend to fit the needs of communication.

To see both of these phenomena at work, consider the word *surf*. The etymology of *surf* is uncertain. It may have come from *suffe*, an obsolete word of Indic origin. Although the source of *surf* is sketchy, its first recorded use was in 1685 and in the sense of the foam produced at the margin of the ocean when a wave strikes the beach. In the early 20th century, a verb form, meaning to ride the *surf*, was added. This led in turn to *surfboard*, an object used to accomplish the verb. Since then, multiple forms, used to describe a quality of aimless motion (*e.g.* channel-surf, surf the internet), have been adopted.⁵

⁴ Many of Shakespeare’s “new words” are new in the sense of usage, *e.g.* changing a noun into a verb.

⁵ I’m not including phrases, like “Charlie don’t surf!” from the film *Apocalypse, Now!* This usage takes the word even further into figurative territory (ignoring the fact that all language is inherently symbolic for things in the world).

I took this extended detour from the pronoun issue because both a shift of current usage and new words have been offered as plausible solutions to the problem. The proposed shift is to make *they*, third-person plural, do double-duty as third-person singular as well. Proponents of this shift use a couple of arguments. First, people already use *they* in this capacity. For example, people regularly ask things like “Did they leave a message?”⁶ Second, even those who don’t misuse it are still familiar with the word, and this shift presents little cognitive work for speakers to adopt it correctly. To these two arguments, I’ll add a third: precedent. The second-person personal pronoun *you* covers both the singular and plural. *You* used to be the plural form, which is why a plural verb is still used with it. The singular form used to be *thou*, which has fallen from general usage.⁷ (*Thou* and *thee* were singular forms of *you* and *ye*.)

I disagree with these arguments. I object in principle to changing correct forms because some people cannot properly use them. (Would mathematicians allow such modifications to the language of mathematics?) I also find the fact that some people currently abuse *they* to be unpersuasive. The above example implies more current misusage of this type than is accurate. If someone said, “Your mother called,” or “Your boss called,” most people (under current usage) would ask about a message using *he* or *she*. (E.g. “Your mother called.” “Did *she* leave a message?”) *They* most frequently comes into play when the antecedent is a kind of synecdoche, a figure of speech (in this case) where the whole stands for one of its parts, as in “The dentist office called” as opposed to “Your dentist called.”

⁶ This is not an example of my making. Katy Steinmetz offers it in a blurb book review of Dennis Barton’s *What’s Your Pronoun?: Beyond He & She* (2020) in *Time* (“How They Won” [3Feb2020]). Steinmetz does not provide enough context to determine if the example comes from the book or was created for the review.

⁷ Although no one knows exactly when or why *thou* drop from use, it likely has to do with the rise of a middle class in 16th century England.

The argument that shifting the usage of *they* requires little cognitive work to accomplish seems plausible in theory. In practice, however, I've discovered otherwise. I've tried to honor requests of people I know to use *they* in reference to them in place of *he* or *she*. Fortunately, my attempts occur out of their hearing (since we rarely use third-person to refer to people in our presence) because I struggle mightily. In a written context I can do it, but in the course of speech I stumble. I am surprised by this, to find myself so inculcated by grammatical rules that I struggle to deviate from how I learned them as a young child absorbing them through dialogue. (I recognize, of course, this may just be a personal failing of my own, that others, less pedantic persons perhaps, might easily make this switch. Anyway, the counter argument is that this problem goes away as I and others of my ilk die off.)

Finally, my added argument of precedent also falls short of persuasive. *You* as both singular and plural is not free from creating confusion. Consequently, the word *y'all*, a contraction of *you-all*, came into usage about the same time as *thou* dropped out. It may have entered the southern U.S. dialect through Scottish immigrants' *ye aw*,⁸ but it has become more common throughout the country, perhaps due to its utility for distinguishing plurality. In regions outside the South, speakers typically undo the contraction; for example, they might say, "Are *you all* coming to the party?" The distinction is important to the questioner, since it helps in party preparations. *They* used similarly to *you* creates the identical issue. For example, in an article in *Time* about caring for a sick partner during the COVID-19 outbreak, the writer uses *they* for the husband. It is unclear from the context if this usage was at the request of the subject or a choice of the writer, but since gender specific pronouns are also used in the article, I assume it was the former. For the wife, *she* is used, but if the *shes* are also changed to *theys*, sentences like this

⁸ The Southern dialect seems a fertile ground for such linguistic permutations, e.g. double modals like *might could*.

emerge: “They sat down with their wife ..., who is recovering from cancer, and told [them] [they] would need to leave their apartment and stay with [their] dad for a while.”⁹ Who’s staying? Who’s leaving? Whose dad? The possibilities for confusion seem limitless.

As stated above, I support the general effort to have a gender-neutral, third-person singular pronoun; however, I prefer the new word option. The current frontrunner for a new pronoun is *ze/zir* (subjective/objective). *Ze* (pronounced “zee”) offers a sense of familiarity through sounding like *he* and *she*. Adopting it retains the gender-specific pronouns as options while maintaining the plural form of *they* (currently inclusive of multiple genders). It also encourages people to think differently about gender, just as the adoption of *Ms.* in place of *Miss* or *Mrs.* encouraged people to think about how women were categorized by their availability to men.

Unfortunately, the other side, the proponents of pronoun shift, have a strong counterargument. *Ze* has been out in the public discourse for quite a while now without gaining traction; *ze* lacks any momentum to adoption. Language, being memetic, cannot be forced into use. Although words (and usage) can sometimes be traced back to a single individual, their adoption does not come through an exercise of that person’s will. Like physical evolution, the evolution of language occurs through the blind, unthinking pressures of natural selection. A new word cannot be willed into use any more than a bird can will its offspring to return to its ancestral theropod form.

I can foresee a day when we no longer need gender specificity at all when using pronouns, when not having the choice of *he* or *she* has no impact on the meaning we wish to

⁹ Oaklander, Mandy (30 March 2020), “In Sickness and Health” in *Time*. Here’s is the unaltered sentence: “They sat down with their wife Emily Tekampe, who is recovering from cancer, and told her she would need to leave their apartment and stay with her dad for a while.”

convey; however, indicating number will always have utility, which is why I argue for *ze*. (Using *ze* may even hasten that process, which means the world may not need to wait for me and my ilk to die off before that day comes.) Like so many other things, though, this change mysteriously does not require nor wait for my approval, and so the shift of *they* seems inevitable.

Using First-Person Possessive

The last pronoun problem could be considered something entirely “other” than a pronoun issue (perhaps an idiomatic issue). It certainly isn’t the same species of problem as the other two since the usage is completely “correct;” however, it rankles my brain whenever I am forced to do it. In a way, I’ve already mislabeled the issue because it impacts all possessive pronouns, not just first-person. Still, because the problem seems to be primarily mine, I’ll explore it from the first-person perspective to explain it.

Possessive personal pronouns indicate ownership. Instead of saying, “The car that belongs to me,” we use the first-person possessive *my* to say, “*my* car.” The problem occurs when the possession becomes self-referential. Consider the sentence: “*My* leg hurts.” Seems straightforward and problem free, and it is – at least until you have the temerity to ask, “Whose leg?” The answer, obviously, is the speaker’s. Therefore, we must conclude that the speaker *owns* a leg. “No, no, no,” the rhetorical strawman clarifies, “the leg is attached to the speaker’s body.” Then the speaker *owns* a leg and a body.

If you are confused at this point, who can blame you? And that is the issue. Language (certainly not English¹⁰) offers no easy syntactical construction other than possession to talk

¹⁰ I am aware of the cultural centricity of this issue. For example, instead of “My leg hurts” the French say, “J’ai mal à la jambe” (“I have bad [pain] in *the* leg” – not *my* leg). In my defense, however, American culture is not only currently the most dominant, but it also has the most significant disconnect with scientific reality.

about aspects of the self.¹¹ My leg, my body, and any other aspect of myself are referred to as *my possessions*; however, I don't *own* any of them; they are parts of the whole that constitutes me. If I kick your car, you may rightly say, "You kicked *my* car!" If I kick your leg, you may say, "You kicked *me*!" The former statement clearly reinforces your ownership of the car; the latter indicates your recognition that your self and your body are equivalent. (This is also why kicking your car may "pain" you emotionally, but kicking your leg sets off a cascade of physiological responses within you, culminating in the sensation of physical pain.) Of course, you may say all sorts of things if I kick you. Some, like "You kicked me," acknowledge this equivalence, and others, like "You kicked my leg," obscure the fact that when I kick your leg, I kick you.

I can feel the shrugs. Surely, what I've describe can't be a "problem" so acute it rankles me and disturbs my sleep. At best, you say, I've pointed out a peculiarity, not a problem, for, quirky as it may be, this practice is standard usage and as such it causes no confusion in those with whom we try to communicate. It conforms to the rules of English with which we all abide. Because the function of language is communication, you say, and no miscommunication occurs through using possession to describe self, no real issue exists. This objection, however, assumes communication is the only function of language.

In addition to expressing our thoughts, language also holds the power to influence our thinking. George Orwell dramatizes this phenomenon in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought."¹² Much of that novel is a demonstration of how the totalitarian regime at its center accomplishes this corruption through *doublethink*, "... the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both

¹¹ English always seems to offer some sort of workaround. For example, one might say, "I am experiencing leg pain," in the place of "My leg hurts," but it is difficult to do so without sounding more cyborg than human.

¹² Orwell, George (1949), *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

of them.” The populace must embrace concepts like “War is peace” and “Freedom is slavery” under threat of torture and murder. The protagonist Winston Smith must learn to accept two plus two doesn’t simply equal four; *sometimes* they equal four. “Sometimes they are five. Sometimes they are three. Sometimes they are all of them at once.” He and the rest of the populace must accept these manipulations of language because torture and murder are only a means to an end. Acceptance of this linguistic fluidity is the true key to maintaining power. As it is explained to Smith, “We do not merely destroy our enemies; we change them.” Indeed, it is not until Smith loves Big Brother (the anthropomorphic symbol of the state) that he can be executed.¹³

Although the manipulation of thought through language is purposeful in Orwell’s dystopic vision, in most cases the limitations of language are neither a means to an end nor sinister; however, without words to express a concept, the concept cannot flourish. For example, the language of the Amondawa of Amazonia constrains their ability to conceive of time as an abstraction outside of direct action.¹⁴ The Amondawa were not in contact with the outside world until 1986, which makes them an excellent group for researchers to study in a variety of contexts, language being one. The tribe lacks a word for *time* or even periods of time, such as *month* or *year*. Consequently, as researcher Chris Sinha says, although they can talk about events and sequences of events, “What we don’t find is a notion of time being independent of the events which are occurring; they don’t have a notion of time which is something the events occur in” (*op. cit.*). Therefore, a phrase like “working through the night” has no meaning for them.¹⁵

While my problem with the self-referential *my* may still be obscured by haze, I hope you’re beginning to sense it coming into focus, enough so that I can state the issue directly: the

¹³ Smith’s impending execution is clearly implied at the end of the novel.

¹⁴ Palmer, Jason (20 May 2011), “Amondawa tribe lacks abstract idea of time, study says,” *BBC News*.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-13452711>

¹⁵ Not all researchers of Amazonia agree with this assessment.

self-referential *my* forces upon us a dualistic sense of self, a sense of two separate *I*'s.

Specifically, this usage encourages a cognitive split between a physical self and a contemplative self, a split between body and mind. It posits a version of self extraneous to and different from the body, the self of Descartes's "*Cogito, ergo sum*" ("I think, therefore I am").¹⁶ Every time we say *my leg, my body*, as if they are the same as *my car*, the reality of *materialism* (in this case the fact that my physical body and my consciousness are one) grows slightly more remote and difficult to understand. From the use of *my leg*, the idea of a supernatural universe is reinforced, albeit unconsciously, and a reality of a physical universe governed by laws of science diminishes incrementally. It *feels* like truth that I exist beyond the physical body, and so we accept this perception *as reality*, although we arrive at this acceptance absent any other supporting evidence. Many things that we perceive are illusions, however. Our perceptions tell us the sun travels across the sky daily, for example, rather than the physical reality of the earth's rotation. Unlike the apparent motion of the sun, however, language constantly reinforces the apparent dualism separating us from our bodies. Is it any wonder we still face rampant superstition and distrust of the veracity of scientific inquiry in the 21st century when our thoughts are controlled thusly? And so, I remain rankled and sleepless when I consider where our species might be and what dangers to our survival still daunt us that might have been alleviated had our language developed ever so slightly in a different direction. Who can say what accomplishments we have failed to yet attain because our language limits our thoughts and thereby slows our understanding? All this from a two-letter word we continue to use unthinkingly as we hurtle along through time and space.¹⁷

¹⁶ Descartes, Rene (1644), *Principles of Philosophy (Principia Philosophiae)*.

¹⁷ The question remains unanswered as to the nature and number of other limits to our thinking and understanding that have been retarded due to cognitive boundaries created by language. (Is the question even answerable?)

As for me, I feel much better now that I've pulled these festering pronoun thorns from under my skin. Although they leave behind a painful lesion, these thorns no longer pump poison into my system, and the redness and swelling will eventually subside. Whether or not my opinions on the topic matter enough to effect any sort change, the language itself matters; its use is at the center of our humanness.¹⁸ As such, it is also at the center of the good and the bad acts humans perpetrate on each other and the planet we share, so it is worth some extra effort to pay attention to it.

¹⁸ In fact, it may be the defining quality. See Dennett, Daniel C. (2017), *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds*.