# Abolishing Gender on *D*

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## 1 Singular *They*

Some speakers accept singular *they* for definite, specific antecedents, but some don't. Bjorkman (2017) has observed that speakers report different grammaticality/acceptability judgments for definite, specific uses of *they* in the singular 1.

(1)   ? That syntax professor$_1$ loves their$_1$ job.

Acceptance of singular *they* depends on context and specificity. Speakers may reject 1 but accept uses like 2, even though both antecedents are definite. Uses like 2-3 are well-attested and have been in use for much longer than those like 1.

(2)   The ideal student$_i$ never forgets their$_i$ homework.

(3)   Every student$_i$ should do their$_i$ homework.

Proper names seem to be the newest possible antecedent for singular *they*. I group proper names like 4 and definite specific antecedents like 1 together as definite specific singular *they*, or **dsT**.

(4)   % Jayden$_1$ loves their$_1$ job.

Synchronic variation suggests that the increase in use and acceptance of dsT is part of a change over time (Conrod 2018, Conrod 2019).

> **Goal**: provide a syntactic account of parameter that differentiates speakers who do and don't have dsT as part of their grammar of English, while accounting for particular restrictions on use of dsT and other English pronoun phenomena.

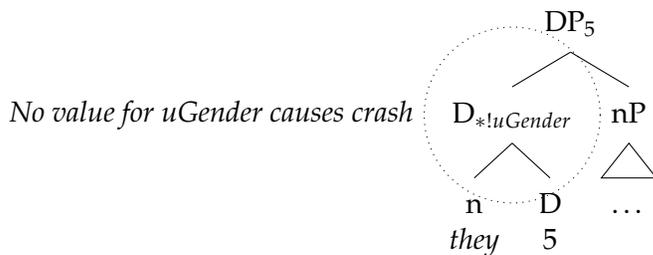# 2   Proposal: uGender parameter on referential D

> **Proposal:** dsT-speakers lack uGender on D; non-dsT speakers maintain a uGender feature on D and therefore *must* have uGender valued for *referential pronouns in particular*.

**For non-dsT speakers, the problem is gender (not number).**   This is corroborated by metalinguistic comments (cf Pullum 2003) and explains why the grammaticality variation is around specific referents, *not* all singular antecedents.
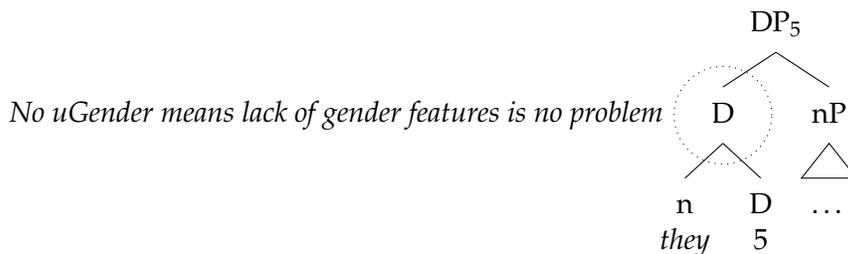
**For dsT speakers, gender is always optional**.  This goes further to explain sociopragmatic variation where gender features can be ommitted or included to adhere to different Gricean maxims (Grice 1968).

**Difference between referential pronouns and others:**  in Conrod (2019) I propose that referential pronouns are referential because pronouns succeed in moving to D through head movement.

(5)   Referential dsT for non-dsT speakers

*No value for uGender causes crash*

$$DP_5$$
$$D_{*!uGender} \quad nP$$
$$n \quad D \quad \ldots$$
$$they \quad 5$$

(6)   Referential dsT for dsT-speakers

*No uGender means lack of gender features is no problem*

$$DP_5$$
$$D \quad nP$$
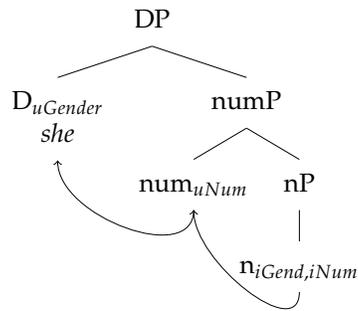$$n \quad D \quad \ldots$$
$$they \quad 5$$

**Notice uGender on D is specific to referential pronouns** – reflects the grammaticality judgments differing based on referentiality (specificity) rather than definiteness.
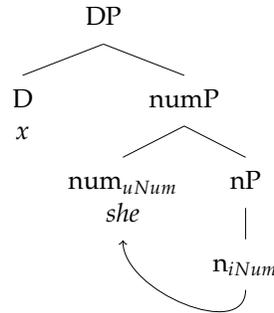
# 3   Facts following from proposal

The proposal targeting uGender on D predicts that different types of pronouns (e.g. referential vs variable) will have different restrictions for necessity of feature valuation.

Referential pronouns are differentiated from bound variable pronouns and predicative pronouns by head movement.
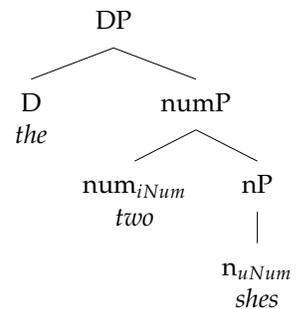
(7)  a.  Referential pronouns:

```
              DP
          /        \
    D_{uGender}    numP
       she         /    \
              num_{uNum}  nP
                           |
                    n_{iGend,iNum}
```
(head movement arrows from n to num to D)

b.  Bound variables:

```
           DP
         /    \
        D      numP
        x     /    \
        num_{uNum}  nP
           she       |
                  n_{iNum}
```
(head movement arrow from n to num)

c.  Predicative prns:

```
           DP
         /    \
        D      numP
       the    /    \
        num_{iNum}  nP
          two        |
                  n_{uNum}
                    shes
```

**Variable pronouns** generally can have or lack gender features without a crash (for both dsT and non-dsT speakers. Generic singular *they* almost universally accepted.

However, generic singular *they* apparently depends on lexical (not pronominal) antecedents – even when gendered lexical information exists. Non-dsT users will still frequently accept/produce *they* for disjunctive or otherwise all-gendered sets of possible referents:

(8)  Either Barbara or Alicia always assigns their/?her own papers (though I don't remember which

(9)  * Any woman$_i$ who wants to combat sexism should examine their$_i$ own internalized prejudices.

Difficult to explain if lexical (non-pronominal) antecedents have features that are controlling matchingness in general.

**Pronoun to pronoun matching is different.** Stricter gender-matching conditions on Condition A anaphors - singular *they* not available for any switching/alternation when bound locally:

(10)  * He$_i$ likes themself$_i$

(11)  * They$_i$ like himself$_i$

However, free (Condition B) pronouns can freely alternate between *they* and another pronoun; grammatical and attested in sociolinguistic interviews:

(12)  RRA: *His partner at the time was also dating this other person that was in our group. Um, and **they** have a very, um, **he's** a very strong and kind of controlling personality, and so **he** had kind of taken over like the whole thing, [. . . ] Ha. Yes. it kind of, that was kind of one of those things where it just- and that same person, I would see **them** more often than I would see [RRB] and **they** were trying to like convince me of these like negative things [...]*

**Takeaway: rules for matching gender must be sensitive to binding**.

**Predicative pronouns** don't act like pronouns at all – they behave more like nouns, but the meaning of them is linked to the (social) meaning of the pronouns. (Ask me for more data in QA!)

## 3.1 Ambiguity enables extension

Desiderata of explanation for singular *they* generally includes why an apparent grammatical difference doesn't cause constant interspeaker conflict; lay metalinguistic commentary around dsT doesn't suggest that this is causing people huge crashes every day. Overlap in possible structures for ambiguous contexts enables subtle extension.
Conservative non-dsT speakers will accept singular *they* in **most** contexts.

(13)   Any person who wants to succeed ought to try **their** best

Non-dsT speakers also accept *definite, epicene* singular *they* when it is *not referential*. Subtle distinction (compare: deictic vs definite).

(14)   **Utterance**: My math teacher always gives me a lower grade for doodling, they are so unfair!
**No-dsT meaning:** *No matter what math teacher I get, each math teacher grades me down for doodling – they (epicene) are unfair!*
**Possible-dsT meaning**: *This quarter my math teacher (whom you've never met, and don't know the gender of) graded me down every time I doodled – they (specific) are unfair!*
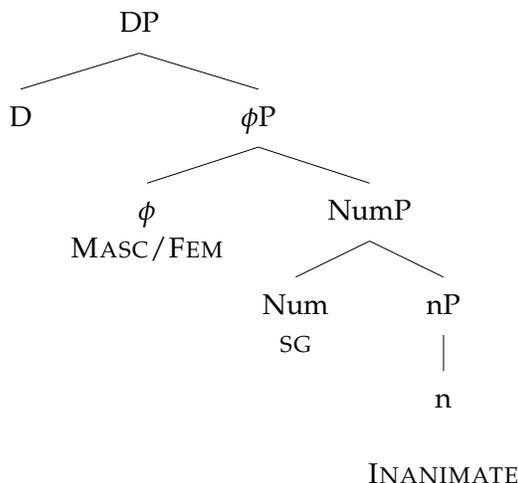
Distinction in (14) is ambiguous between non-dsT meaning (definite epicene) and possibly-dsT meaning (referential but pragmatically conditioned). Definite epicene can be captured by slightly different structure (see Elbourne 2013 on definite pronouns).

Overlapping/ambiguous readings of (14) mean that dsT-users and non-dsT users can be in contact and communicate without frequent or disastrous issues – the problems really only arise as meaning narrows (and ambiguity goes away).

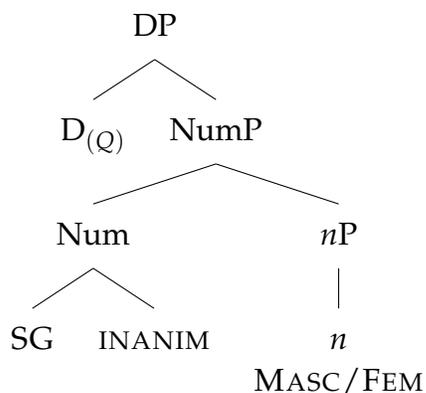# 4   Comparison with alternative accounts

Two similar previous accounts of innovative singular *they*: Bjorkman (2017) and Konnelly and Cowper (2017) use DM feature-based insertion rules and matching conditions between pronouns and lexical items.

(15) **Bjorkman (2017)** structure:

```
                DP
          ┌─────┴─────┐
          D           φP
                 ┌─────┴─────┐
                 φ          NumP
              MASC/FEM   ┌────┴────┐
                        Num        nP
                        SG         │
                                   n

                              INANIMATE
```

Different sizes of projection spell out for different pronouns (a la Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002); φP or NumP for quantifier-bound, DP for full pronouns

(16) **Konnelly and Cowper (2017)** structure:

```
              DP
          ┌────┴────┐
        D_{(Q)}    NumP
              ┌─────┴─────┐
             Num          nP
          ┌───┴───┐       │
         SG    INANIM     n
                       MASC/FEM
```

Features of Num head copied to $D_Q$ for quantifier-bound pronouns; MASC/FEM are optional adjunct features for dsT users

## 4.1 Lexicalist approach

**Agreement depends on gender features of proper names**: for the innovative dialect described by Bjorkman (2017) (and for Konnelly and Cowper's Stages 1 and 2) agreement between pronouns and proper names depends on names having formal gender features; but in the absence of gender features, *they* can appear. Hence:

(17) a. Mary$_i$ likes herself$_i$
     b. * Mary$_i$ likes themself$_i$

(18) a. Taylor$_i$ likes herself$_i$
     b. Taylor$_i$ likes themself$_i$

5

Contrast between (17b) and (18b) is due to lack of gender features on certain lexical nouns and names; *Taylor* is a gender neutral name, so doesn't have any gender features and doesn't conflict with *they*.

Difference between conservative/innovative dialects (Bjorkman 2017, Stages 1 and 2 for Konnelly and Cowper 2017) is lack of gender features on lexical items which can allow for default/elsewhere agreement.

**Issues**:

- most innovative dsT speakers have no problem with (17b)

- not clear how names get assigned features in the first place

- gender neutral names: multiple homophonous lexical entries, or a single underspecified lexical entry? (If the latter: why do non-dsT speakers still object to dsT for neutral names?)

## 4.2   Radical feature-free lexicalist approach

**Agreement depends on lexical entries of antecedents, but innovative speakers have lexicons with no gender features**. For Konnelly and Cowper (2017) most innovative variety (Stage 3) always allows *they* as an option regardless of antecedent.

"The change in the English pronominal system at Stage 3 ... is subtle. In fact, the pronominal system remains exactly as it was; all that changes is the status of the gender features themselves, specifically, whether they are required contrastive features or optional modifier features"

**Issues**:

- learnability or lexicon reorganization; Konnelly and Cowper (2017) suggest speakers may move directly from Stage 1 to Stage 3 – by deleting features from all lexical items, or by reanalyzing features as optional?

- optional adjunct features still (in a way) privative - unless it is predicted that you could get both on one item (suggesting a double-gendered, rather than no-gendered, possibility)

- syntax-proper representation of the parameter not (strictly speaking) the most Borer-Chomsky Conjectural possible version (this is a theory hygeine issue; I don't know that it makes different empirical predictions)

## 4.3   Compare: reference approach (not lexical)

**My proposal does not depend on lexical features of antecedents**. Features are either optional (dsT speakers) or obligatory (non-dsT speakers) but are determined with regard to a referent, *not* a name or lexical DP.

**Same insight captured with different theoretical mechanism**:  unvalued uninterpretable feature (gender) causing a crash is, in some ways, a different way of saying that certain (contrastive/privative) features are obligatory. Rather than have grammar-external metafeatural information of obligatoriness, this is represented directly in the syntax (specifically on the specification of D)

**Advantages**:

- No need to worry about names switching gender; learning new names depends on the referent (and social/world knowledge) rather than formal features

- A single parameter explains the *specificity* issue – particularly where non-dsT users will reject singular *they* ONLY with proper names (not with otherwise-very-definite antecedents)

- Movement between stages requires no lexical reorganization or feature deletion

- Captures the same insights as optional adjunct features, but through a different lens

# 5   Summary

> **Main Takeaway:** reanalysis of singular *they* allows for speakers to acquire the pronominal system without uGender on D; lack of uGender on D allows *they* to expand to more specific uses.

- ✓ **parameterization** explains sociolinguistic variation
- ✓ **head raising** explains different restrictions on different pronoun uses

**This analysis provides support for:**

- **different structures for different subtypes of pronouns**  (cf Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002)

- gender-free analysis of singular *they* (cf Bjorkman 2017, Konnelly and Cowper 2017)

- framework for understanding relationship between formal features in the syntax and their use in sociopragmatic context

# References

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