Pronoun showdown 2016:

Are nonbinary pronouns and singular they ruining the language or making English great again?

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In September, 2015, the director of the University of Tennessee’s Pride Center suggested asking people what pronouns they use, because people who don’t identify as men or women might prefer something gender-neutral, like ze, hir, xe, xem or xyr. They advised, these pronouns “may sound a little funny . . . because they are new” — so you could also ask, “Oh, nice to meet you . . . What pronouns should I use?”

Then the press got wind of the story, with consequences that I’m pretty sure the Pride Center did not anticipate.
The polite suggestion that we need to be pronoun-aware brought down the wrath of the state’s conservative legislators, who promptly vowed to investigate the university for teaching language evolution.

State Senator Bo Watson, a proponent of creation linguistics, offered to slash the higher education budget by an amount equal to the cost of all these new pronouns:

“Tennessee taxpayers should not expect to be paying for this kind of stuff.”

Congressional representative and UT grad John J. Duncan, of Knoxville, Facebooked,

“This was a ridiculous overreaction to the dictates of political correctness and has made UT a laughingstock across the nation.”

Note the number of likes and shares.

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In the face of legislative pressure, the UT administration first announced that there was no official pronoun policy.
Then they excluded the post from the Office for Diversity and Inclusion website.

And now legislators want to divert funds for pronouns and diversity to bumper stickers for police cars reading “In God we trust.”
However, the web seldom forgets. A pdf of the offending suggestion is readily available online.

Here are the UT diversity pronoun options.

Choices include the standard binary pronouns — with the feminine coming first, for a change, plus three invented nonbinary pronouns, and singular they.
Tennessee’s inclusive pronoun initiative was controversial, but it was hardly unique.

Here’s another pronoun card from the University of Wisconsin, a button from Berkeley, one from the British National Union of Students.

There’s also a button and a t-shirt from a commercial website, and a name tag graphic from Ben Zimmer’s article on singular “they” in the Wall St. Journal, because pronouns are good business.

Today I will set the current flurry of interest in nonbinary English pronouns on campuses, among editors, in the press, and among our posturing elected officials, in its historical context, because the call for such pronouns goes back over 200 years, and not surprisingly, so does opposition to changing the pronoun system.

The need for a common-gender third person singular becomes apparent when we look at sentences like this:

Everyone loves ________’s mother.
Here’s how you could fill in the blank:

Everyone loves *his* mother.

That’s a problem because generic *he* frequently isn’t generic, and since pronouns are supposed to agree in gender and number with their referent, it forces the user to violate the gender agreement rule.

Everyone loves *their* mother.

Singular *they* violates number concord — even though *they* has doubled as singular and plural since the 14th century.

Everyone loves *her* mother.

Because of the grammatical glass ceiling, generic *she* never achieved widespread use.

Everyone loves *his* or *her* mother.

Always clunky, plus if you’re worried about taxpayer dollars, two pronouns costs twice as much as one pronoun.

Everyone loves *one’s* mother.

You’re kidding, right? One doesn’t even say this in England.

Given the unsuitability of these options, some language reformers thought the way to remedy the lack of a common-gender pronoun was to coin one. It would let us refer to either males or females, or to both males and females, and more recently, to refer to transgender or gender nonconforming persons as well.

Unfortunately, the coined nonbinary pronouns haven’t fared too well, not just at Tennessee, but pretty much everywhere. But we’ll get to them in a minute.
First let’s start our historical romp through pronoun-land with the generic *he*.

Generic *he* derives from the Latin notion of the worthiness of the genders. Here’s how John Lyly described it back in 1567:

> “the Masculine Gender is more worthy than the Feminine, and Feminine more worthy than the Neuter.”

19th-century grammarians would occasionally say, snarkily, that the masculine *embraces* the feminine. You can just hear them snickering into their gerunds, like they were in junior high school or something.

But from the start, critics found cases where *he* clearly signaled, “no girls allowed.”

Here’s an anti-feminist, writing in 1895, who believes women spend too much, and he wishes he had a gender-neutral pronoun so he could stop calling women *men:*
“‘The American is noted for his wasteful propensities. We say his but we mean hers.’”

Think that’s bad? It gets worse. He says,

“We may use the masculine pronoun . . . on the ground that ‘the men embrace the women,’” but if women spent less, “the men would embrace the women oftener than they do.”

It’s gonna take more than a nonbinary pronoun to solve this writer’s woman problem.

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If our writer had also been a reader, he might have known that people had been coining nonbinary pronouns for more than 100 years. Here are a few of them:

ou 1792
en, han, un 1868
ne, nis, nim ca. 1850
se, 1874
um, ita 1877
e 1878, 1890
hesh, hiser 1879
thon, hi, ip, le, hiser, hersh, hae 1884
tha, zyhe 1885
he’er, his’er, him’er 1912
ir, ze, de 1888
ons 1889
hi 1890
hizer, ith, zie 1891
hoo, en 1895

Some of these are blends of he and she. Some are reduced versions of he and she. Some, like ou and un, probably come from unaspirated forms of Old English he and hēo. And some, like ip, are just cute little words dying to be adopted.

The earliest new pronoun appears in 1792 (surely earlier ones will turn up). Scottish economist James Anderson suggested ou, a pronoun already found in dialect use. Anderson actually thought English would benefit from 13 genders instead of two. His suggestions were widely ignored.

Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune, may have been behind ne, nis, and nim, thought to have been coined around 1850, as was the first hiser, a form invented over and over again.
But even though more than 100 of these invented words have been coined, none succeeded.

*Thon* and *he’er*, perhaps the most popular—and they were never *really* popular—appeared in Webster’s *New International Dictionary*, and you could look them up in your *Funk and Wagnalls*. But they were eventually dropped because not enough people used them.

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Here’s the entry for *thon* from W2; it was dropped in Webster’s Third.

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*He’er* was coined in 1912 by Ella Flagg Young, Chicago’s superintendent of schools. You think Tennessee legislators overreact to invented pronouns? Young’s pronoun actually made school principals gasp.
Some people liked Young’s pronoun: Isaac Funk, of Funk and Wagnall’s fame, wrote to the New York Times that

“these words, like Wagner’s music, are better than they sound.”

Some compliment, right?

Funk likes *thon* better, but he did add both pronouns to his dictionary.
Not everybody liked "he’er." Ben Blewett, Young’s counterpart in St. Louis, thought generic he was just fine. Why mess with success? Blewett was gracious enough to admit that when women came into their own, politically, they could use generic she.

But for George Harvey, the editor of Harper’s Weekly, he’er meant the end times for language:

“When ‘man’ ceases to include women we shall cease to need a language, and won’t care any more about pronouns.”
One of the first calls for a nonbinary pronoun was prompted by a dislike of singular *they*. In 1794, a writer styling himself “Don Alonzo” argues that a piece that appeared two weeks earlier in the *Medley*, the Bedford, MA, newspaper, written by three women using the *nom de plume*, “the Belle Assembly,” contains a grammatical error:

> the plural *them* used to refer to the singular *one*. [top example on slide]; How ungenerous it is to pitch upon some *one* of our acquaintances, tell private stories of *them*, and then industriously report *them* to be the author!

The “Belle Assembly” responds, in the second example on the slide,

> “With regard to our using the plural pronoun “them” . . . — as we wished to conceal the gender, we would ask . . . Don [Alonzo] to coin us a substitute.”

No new pronoun was forthcoming, but, in 1808, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge proposes *it*,

> “in order to avoid particularising man or woman, or in order to express sex indifferently.”

Although Coleridge was an influential writer, his readers looked upon his recommendation of *it* indifferently.
A writer in the New York *Mercury* in 1839 calls for an invented nonbinary pronoun because there’s no correct way to fill in the blank:

“We say, ‘If any lady or gentleman shall buy this article _____ shall have it for five dollars.’ The blank may be filled with he, she, it, or they; or in any other manner; and yet the form of the expression will be too vulgar to be uttered.

With no sense of irony, the writer employs generic *he* in addressing potential word-coiners:

“If anybody will get us well out of the difficulty . . . *he* will be entitled to the thanks of all persons who love to talk”

By now, the pronoun *he* was becoming controversial.

In 1845, two leading American abolitionists disputed whether *he* meant *she* as well.

Lysander Spooner argued that a woman couldn’t be president because the Constitution always refers to the president as “he.”
But Wendell Phillips disagreed:

“in grammars, as well as law, the rule used to be, that the masculine pronoun . . . included the race. . . .

The Constitution itself, in the 5th Amendment, has, ‘no person shall be compelled to be witness against himself . . .’

But, alas! according to Mr. Spooner, none of these shields cover the defenceless heads of the women!”

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And speaking of law, in 1850, England passed the “interpretation act,” which shortens English laws by making he also stand for she:

“in all acts words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females . . . unless the contrary . . . is expressly provided.”

Gender inclusion is NOT reciprocal — it’s that old gender double standard — in law, as in grammar, the female never embraces the male.

Despite this establishment of he as legal generic, English courts held that he also meant she for obligations like paying taxes, but not for privileges like voting.

A similar act, passed in the US in 1871, provoked questions about the politics of he.
In the 1860s, American women’s rights advocates were agitating for the vote.

By 1869, a Chicago writer reminds us that the Illinois constitution restricts voting to “male citizens.” So women could get elected, they just couldn’t vote for themselves.

That same year another writer cites the need for a common-gender pronoun, and who better to invent one than the “women’s-rights women”?

“As the laws of the grammars stand, the use of ‘he,’ when ‘she’ is meant, is an outrage upon the dignity and an encroachment upon the rights of women. It is quite as important that they should stand equal with men in the grammars as before the law—so we hand this duty of amending the language over to Mrs. Stanton and Miss Anthony.”

And in 1879, a writer complains that a new Texas law has abolished gender. The law says,

“the masculine gender shall include the feminine and neuter.”

And that means,

“suffrage becomes promiscuous in Texas [don’t get excited, that just means everyone can vote] -- and all the avenues of political preferment are open to all the sexes, masculine, feminine, and neuter.”
[It was a common rhetorical tactic at the time to make fun of your political enemies by labeling them ‘neuter.’ If you’ve been following the primaries, you see that sexual innuendo remains part of our political discourse.]

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The battle of the generic *he* continued with an 1881 report on the denial of a petition by Mrs. Belva Lockwood—the papers call her “the Washington lawyeress”—to be admitted to the Maryland bar.

To support her case, Lockwood cited a Maryland law providing that

“the masculine shall be held to include all genders except where such constructions would be absurd and unreasonable.”

In response, the Maryland court ruled

“that it would be ‘absurd and unreasonable’ in the exact words of the code, to apply the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘him’ to a woman.”

Maryland didn’t allow women lawyers until 1902. However changing the language of the law didn’t necessarily change attitudes: women were not admitted to the Maryland Bar Association until the 1950s.

That suggests that changing pronouns won’t change social attitudes today, either.

Of course, as attitudes toward gender nonconformism become more positive, pronouns become less binary.
As they say in the late-night TV commercials, but wait, there’s more.

In 1909, a Denver civic leader, Sarah Platt Decker, considered running for Congress in Colorado.

One skeptic wonders whether the use of the masculine pronoun in the Constitution might derail her candidacy:

“Strict adherents to the letter of the Constitution maintain that the presence of the masculine pronoun, and the absence of any other, obviously renders ineligible any person of the feminine persuasion.”

Platt Decker didn’t run, but the issue came up again in 1916, when Jeanette Rankin, of Montana, became the first woman elected to Congress.
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The Washington Post reported, “students of the Federal Constitution” are warning that the masculine pronoun might prevent Rankin from being seated if she won.

The relevant part of the Constitution reads, “No Person shall be a Representative... who shall not, when elected, be an inhabitant of that State in which he shall be chosen.”

Judge Barton Payne, an authority on the Constitution, said:

“The opponent of Miss Rankin might, of course, contest the election. In that event Congress would ultimately decide the matter. The laws of Montana would be taken into consideration. As for the ‘he’ in the Federal Constitution, I don’t believe it would be construed so as to prevent Miss Rankin from accepting the seat in Congress.”

Rankin did win, and she had no problem being seated.

But Rankin’s win didn’t deter the snarks from weighing in on what to call the new congressperson:

the “lady from Montana,” the “person from Montana,” or “the member from Montana”?
So far, the scope of Constitutional pronouns hasn’t been raised in relation to the present presidential race. But don’t be surprised if some pronoun-birther brings it up in the Fall.

Interestingly, when Hillary Clinton began campaigning for president, some commentators saw fit to wonder whether, if she won, she would be a woman president or a female president. As the linguist Deborah Cameron asks, why not just president?

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And now some early comments in support of singular they:

In 1879, Alexander Bain wrote one of the few nineteenth-century grammars to approve of singular they:

“Grammarians frequently call this construction an error: not reflecting that it is equally an error to apply ‘his’ to feminine subjects. The best writers furnish examples of the use of the plural as a mode of getting out of the difficulty.”

Bain observes that the conjoined his or her preserves strict grammar, but he warns, cumbrously, “this construction is felt to be too cumbersome to be kept up.”
Also in 1879, the *Atlantic* argued that if the pronoun *you* could serve as both singular and plural, “then why not *they*?”

“It would be easy to adopt this idiom, for we are continually struggling against its use, and how delightful it would be for once to make wrong right!”

And another concerned citizen, in 1884:

“Many persons who are by no means ignorant accept, in conversation at least, the plan of using the plural common gender pronouns, ‘they, their, theirs,’ etc., indifferently as singular or plural. And in this they are not without authority of good usage,”

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*I should use “themselves,” and “they,” and “their” for the sexless forms; I have so used them for years, of set purpose, after careful thought, and purpose still to use them, despite full knowledge that they are (wrongly) considered vulgar blunders, on the authority of antiquity, analogy, necessity, and preferability; and I think all good writers should join in giving so large a body of unimpeachable current authorization to them that the mass, who are eager to know and follow good usage, may do so with easy minds, and not reach after such atrocious inventions as “thon” or “hizer,” or stick in the old slough.*
In 1891, Forrest Morgan argues that singular *they* is grammatically correct because good writers use it, and he notes that *your* for *thine* has become perfectly acceptable as well. To Morgan, singular *they* is better than “such atrocious inventions as ‘thon’ or ‘hizer.’”

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In 1900, another writer admits that grammarians have not been able to halt singular *they,* and he concedes that, even though the form is incorrect,

“usage may ultimately force a recognition of the plural pronouns as singular pronouns also when the common gender is used.”

And in 1902, the social radical Bertha Moore rejects generic *he* as “prejudicial, detrimental and unjust.” Instead, since *you* can be both singular and plural, it’s

“equally as proper to use the pronouns they, their and them, both in the singular and plural number.”
Word coiners continued to invent common-gender pronouns in the 20th century, particularly in the 1970s and 80s, a period that saw a lot of interest in nonsexist language. Even so, there’s no general agreement over which invented pronoun is best. Implicit in today’s question, “What’s your pronoun?” is the acknowledgment that there are many pronouns . . . and they have no plan.

And the issue of common-gender invented pronouns goes beyond English. The Swedish nonbinary *hen* (joining the masculine *han* and the feminine *hon*) was coined around 1996 and received official approval last year, when it was added to the dictionary of the Swedish Academy.

Even so, *hen* remains controversial. The slide shows a montage of screen caps from the Swedish/Danish television series *The Bridge*. The Swedish police detective, Saga Norén, on the right, uses *hen*, and her Danish colleague, Hanne Thomsen, on the left, sardonically questions this “politically correct” usage.
Most recently, pronoun interest has moved away from invented words and turned to the quiet and growing success of singular *they*.

Singular *they* is approved by many style guides and dictionaries, and the APA may soon revise its style book to allow singular *they*. (Rumor has it, however, that the forthcoming AP Style Book does not address the issue.)

The fourteenth edition of the prestigious *Chicago Manual of Style* actually advised writers to choose singular *they*, citing

> “its venerable use by such writers as Addison, Austen, Chesterfield, Fielding, Ruskin, Scott, and Shakespeare.” [Chicago 1993:76-77n.]

But, facing resistance from readers and editors, the current *Manual* walked back that advice:

> Many people substitute the plural *they* and *their* for the singular *he* or *she*. Although *they* and *their* have become common in informal usage, neither is considered acceptable in formal writing. [16e., (2010) 5.227]

The *Manual* tersely rejects common-gender blends like *s/he* and invented pronouns:

> they won’t succeed. And those who use them invite credibility problems.

Bryan Garner’s *Modern American Usage* disapproves of singular *they* but calls it “commonplace” and

> “the most likely solution to the single biggest problem in sexist language . . . the generic masculine pronoun.”

But the *American Heritage Book of English Usage* (1996) calls singular *they* “the alternative to the masculine generic with the longest and most distinguished history” (p. 178).

British reference works are much more accepting of singular *they*:

The *Oxford English Grammar* (1996) notes that singular *they* is readily accepted in Britain, “even in formal style” (19ff.).
And *the* British authority on usage, *The New Fowler’s Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Burchfield 1996), dismisses objections to singular *they* as unsupported by the historical record and observes that the construction is “passing unnoticed” by speakers of standard English as well as by copy editors. Burchfield finds this trend “irreversible” (776).

The *New Oxford Dictionary* (1998) not only accepts singular *they*, it uses the form in its definitions.

*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (2000, s.v.) accepts singular *they* as “well-established in speech and writing, even in literary and formal contexts.”

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* (2010) calls singular *they* “generally accepted” with indefinites, and “now common but less widely accepted” with definite nouns, especially in formal contexts.

The *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (Peters 2004) says that singular *they* with indefinites has become “unremarkable—an element of common usage.”

Even though some people still dislike the form, the *Guide* tells us, “that kind of response . . . is no longer shared by the English-speaking population at large,” and it counsels, “Writers who use singular *they/them/their* are not at fault” (538).

Even so, this recent comment by a Writing Center director at the University of Toronto suggests a bifurcated approach to dealing with singular *they*:
“Using a plural pronoun to mean a singular is grammatically incorrect. However, it’s become a statement of personal identity to use a gender neutral pronoun for some writers in context. . . .

“When it’s used strategically in that context, it’s not an error; it’s a choice.”

The problem is, how to tell when they is intentional and when mistaken.

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Singular they is reasonably uncontroversial when used for people in general, as in

Everyone loves their mother.

But when the referent is a specific individual, and more narrowly, a named person, some may hesitate:

If a student wants to change major, they should contact an advisor.

If a student wants to change their major . . .

Meet Dylan. They prefer the pronouns they, them, and their.

Dylan prefers their burger medium rare.

Dylan prefers mustard; they want ketchup, but no onions.

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The pronoun paradigm changes, although slowly. And a plural pronoun can become singular, no problem.

Here are some pronoun changes in English since the middle ages:

• Singular they appears ca. 1370 in writing, surely earlier in speech.

• singular you pops up in the 17th-century (accompanies loss of thou, thee, thy, and ye)

• singular you leads to rise of new disambiguating plural forms of you:

  o y’all; youse; yins; and most recently, you guys, particularly in speech; and then there’s all y’all, doubly plural just in case y’all has started acting like a singular.
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The advantages and disadvantages of invented pronouns:

Advantages:

- They fill a gap in the pronoun paradigm
- They are high profile, calling attention to the emerging politics of the nonbinary
- They recognize a person’s right to control how they’re spoken or written about

Disadvantages:

- They are high profile, calling attention to the emerging politics of the nonbinary.
  - In a more positive light, they’re useful for now, but when gender nonconformity becomes more ordinary, politicized pronouns may just get in the way.
- They are unfamiliar, hard to pronounce.
- They can be perceived as strident, or a waste of taxpayer dollars.
- There are a lot of them, rather than just one, and there’s no clear mechanism for selecting a finalist, or even a short list.

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The advantages and disadvantages of singular they:

Advantages:

- It’s a natural pronoun with a long history.
- Those who object to singular they use it when they’re not paying attention.
- Objections to the form’s ungrammaticality are easy to ignore, since singular they is pretty universal, even among those who object to it.
- Singular they is easier to use when referring to an unidentified specific person or a person in general.
- But increasingly, singular they appears as a referent for named persons as well.

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Disadvantages:

- It drives the sticklers nuts. (that may actually be a plus)
• People aren’t so comfortable using singular *they* for specific, named, individuals, especially when the referent is in the same syntactic unit as the pronoun.

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Pronoun systems change slowly, but they do change.

The pronoun changes of the past didn’t ruin the language: it’s not dead. Nor did they make English great. That was done by writers like Shakespeare, though not without the help of armies, navies, fast food, and rock ’n roll.

The generic *he* pops up, zombie-like, from time to time, but for all intents and purposes, *he* is pretty much stake-through-the-heart dead.

Invented pronouns have yet to catch on, but still, people keep on trying, which suggests there’s a need for them. The problem is, not enough people are paying attention to these new words. The coiners of nonbinary pronouns might do well to consider making a YouTube video.

I’ve called these invented pronouns “the words that failed.” But unlike the generic *he*, they’re not dead yet. Are invented pronouns any more likely to succeed now that they’re being used by some members of the gender-nonconforming community?

Probably not, given that there’s still a relatively small number of speakers adopting them;

there isn’t a single invented pronoun, but several;

and non-users may be either puzzled by or resentful of these new words.

Plus, as we’ve seen lately, several high-profile transgender persons (Caitlyn Jenner, Chelsea Manning, several transgender prisoners petitioning the courts to assert their rights), are adopting traditional binary pronouns.

In contrast, singular *they* continues to spread and gain the approval of dictionaries, editors, and usage guides.

As a natural pronoun, not an invented one, singular *they* appeals to speakers and writers looking for a nonbinary, inclusive pronoun, and it appeals to those who don’t give these matters much thought at all.

So now it’s your turn to answer the question: Are nonbinary pronouns and singular *they* killing the language or are they making English great again?