AN INDETERMINATE PRONOUN.

A recent denunciation of the use of "their" as an epicene term for "his or her," by an editor of ability and cultivation, for whom I have much respect, moves me to set forth my views on the subject, which are not the general ones. This is not a trivial matter; probably there is not another single point of equal moment in the language, nor one with regard to which so many absurd proposals testify to its urgency. I take for my text an excellent article in the "Contributors' Club" of the Atlantic Monthly for November, 1878, from which I quote:

"We want a new pronoun. The need of a personal pronoun of the singular number and common gender is so desperate, urgent, imperative, that, according to the established theories, it should long since have grown on our speech, as the tails grew off the monkeys.

"When I was a child, and spake as a child, reckless of grammar and rhetoric, there was no trouble; but, growing mindful of the proprieties of speech, I became conscious of a need, dimly felt at first, and hardly recognized, but ever growing more imperative, until now it calls loudly every time I open my mouth to speak or take a pen to write. For instance, I am writing a story, and come to the sentence: ‘Then they had a delightful time reviewing the whole transaction, each stoutly defending the course of the other, and severely blaming’—I pause. ‘Himself’ will not do, because one of them is a woman. ‘Herself’ is out of the question, for the other is a man. Once I should have written ‘themselves,’ but now I know better. That sentence can never be finished. I must write it over again, using ‘both’ instead of ‘each,’ and failing to express my exact meaning.

"Let the eminent linguists leave the spelling reform and such trifles long enough to coin us a word which shall spare a preacher from saying, as I heard one once, ‘Let every brother or sister examine himself or herself, and looking into his or her heart, find out his or her besetting sin, and resolutely cast it from him or her.’

"I do not believe there is a writer in the country that is not hampered every time he—no, she—There! I’ve run against the old snag."

Now, I differ from this writer. 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.

That the usage is first-rate and time-honored English, I call to witness the foremost authority in the language,—to wit, Addison, passim. I can cite only one or two instances from lack of space; but will furnish more if my word is disputed. From the Spectator, No. 106: “Every one of them... seemed discouraged if they were not employed” (i. e., if he or she was not). Elsewhere Addison speaks of not blaming “any one for taking care of their health,” etc. Now, if this usage was the best English in Addison’s time, it cannot be a grammatical error in ours, whether it be accepted usage or not; and popular use of it ever since testifies to the felt need it answers.

But what warrant has it in the structure of the language? I answer, Partly the analogy of the curious tendency in several languages, including English, to condense into a single pronoun (usually plural objective) the meanings of several, leaving the exact one to be defined by the context. Thus, “you” has absorbed “thou,” “thee,” and “ye”; “your” has annexed “thine”; in French, “vous” replaces “tu” and “toi;” in German, “Sie” has left scant use for “du,” and “Sein” for “sein;” in Spanish, “usted” and “ustedes,” “su” and “sus,” have usurped part of the functions of the second personal pronoun and its variants,—the last two being far more radical changes than the one struggling against wanton prejudice to introduce itself into our own language; and so on. Partly also the analogy of an immemorial expression which even purism cannot charge with being a vulgarism,—“they say.” Here the pronoun, although mated to a plural verb and in terms referring to a number of people, is strictly an indeterminate epicene word, exactly corresponding to French on or Spanish alquien; and may not even have a plural meaning—“they tell me” meaning simply “I am told,” even if by only one person. Of course, there is no exact analogy for the disputed locution, otherwise it would not be the subject of dispute; it is precisely because it is not provided for in the general scheme of the language that the question arises. But though a slight departure from currently established usage, it is not a violent one or a new one. It is not erroneous and not vulgar.

Aside from justification by first-class writers and partial analogy, I hold it the duty of every lover of good English to give this usage their support on the ground of need and desirability. Some such word is a plain and incessant want; barbarous novelties like those I have cited will not obtain, and ought not to; and what better can we do than what has largely made this and every other language,—take existing words and press them into a service which is but a slight and entirely natural extension of their usual functions, as is shown by the perpetual cropping up of the usage in the press? Let it be borne in mind that it is a vulgarism only if good writers combine to put it under ban; if they accept and authorize it, it becomes good English ipso facto. I hope to have others reconsider their thoughtless branding of this usage as an irremediable outcast, and join with me in helping to make it a denizen of good society. The language ought not to lose a most valuable locution for inconsiderate prejudice. It surely cannot be held that there is any other law than the general consent of the educated class to determine what any word shall mean; or that this generation, alone of all in the world’s history, has lost the privilege of adding to, or extending the use of, its tools of language.

The case is simple: a sexless pronoun and pronominal adjective are great needs for daily service; a popular impulse of undying spontaneity has solved the problem in each generation for centuries by slightly enlarging the functions of words already in familiar use; shall good writers, for no reason whatever, warn this usage back to the mire and leave us as badly off as before, or accept this popular solution and give it the only authority a linguistic usage can ever claim? I think nice critics are far too apt to hold it their duty to obviate every fresh candidate for acceptance, good and bad indiscriminately; partly for the reason the German critic found fault with spring, because if he praised it or kept still, he would be only one of the crowd, but in general, to be fair, because a new word or new use of an old one
grates on the ear. But they can be as individual in blessing as in bannning; and it is as high a service to prevent an indispensable usage from being lost as to keep an essential vulgarism from being accepted. I know it will be retorted, "Of course, we can legitimize any piece of bad grammar; but the very thing that makes the difference between good and bad English is insistence on the rules of good grammar." I can only repeat that it is not in the least worse essential grammar to use "their" for "his or her," than to use "your" for "thine"; that it has been so used for at least two centuries; and that it is no further beyond our power to extend the meaning of an old word than to invent an ugly new one,—which no one has questioned our right to do.

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