

From Solecism to Standard: Singular They Across Two Centuries of Usage Advice

8th Prescriptivism Conference, 25 June 2026

Morana Lukač, University of Groningen

Path to standardization¹ of singular they

"One of the most frequent vulgar errors"
(Moon, 1868)²

Word of the Year 2019
(Merriam-Webster)
Word of the Decade 2020
(APD)

¹Robertson, M., & Thompson, R. (2024). Gender, sexuality, and shifting styles: Knowledge production and codifying language use in style guides. *ex æquo*, 49.

²Moon, G. W. (1868). *The bad English of Lindley Murray*. Hatchard.

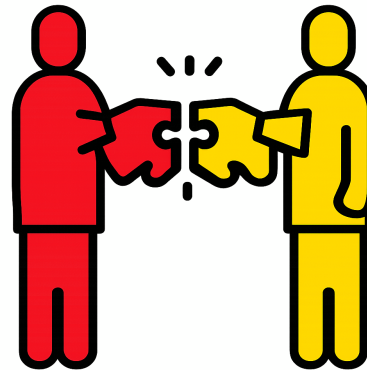
What is not debatable:

- **Whether or not the pronoun they can function in the language as a singular pronoun.**


What is debatable:

- **Whether/when we decide to allow writers to use singular they in formal, edited prose.**

(Curzan, 23 June 2026)



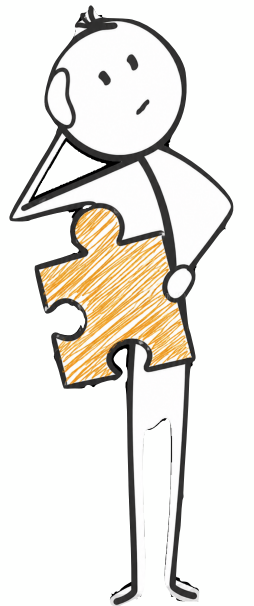
Outline

- 
- Singular they is **not** a **recent** phenomenon
 - The standardization of singular they was driven not by a single factor, but by the **interaction** of
 - usage
 - communicative need
 - gender inclusivity, and
 - changing linguistic authority
 - Its acceptance reflects changing ideas about **who** gets to define Standard English

Outline

➤ Research questions

- How have usage guides **treated** singular they since the mid-19th century?
- What **arguments** have been used to justify different positions?
- How have proposed **solutions** to common-gender reference changed over time?



Outline



➤ Data and Method

- 58 usage guides (1851–2016)
- HUGE database¹ + Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage (2015)
- Qualitative coding of:
 - stance
 - arguments
 - recommended alternatives

¹Straijjer, R. (2015). HUGE Database: User Manual. Leiden.

Which singular they?¹

- **Epicene or generic singular they co-indexed with generic or indefinite antecedents.**
{Anyone/the ideal author/each student} can write their own novel.
- **Definite specific they co-indexed with definite, specific referents.**
{My professor/that author/Dr. Ahn} has written their own textbook.
- **Nonbinary they used specifically to refer to a non-binary person.**
{My professor/Dr. Chen} has written their own monograph.

¹Konnolly, L., Conrod, K., & Bradley, E. D. (2023). "Non-binary singular they." In The Routledge Handbook of Pronouns. Routledge.

Which singular they?¹

- **Epicene or generic singular they co-indexed with generic or indefinite antecedents.**
{Anyone/the ideal author/each student} can write their own novel.
- **Definite specific they co-indexed with definite, specific referents.**
{My professor/that author/Dr. Ahn} has written their own textbook.
- **Nonbinary they used specifically to refer to a non-binary person.**
{My professor/Dr. Chen} has written their own monograph.

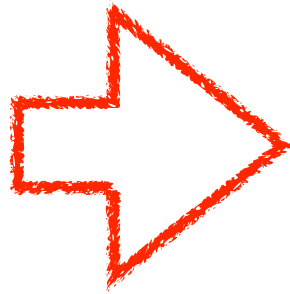
William Strunk in *Elements of Style* (2018) “bashful speakers,” who do not wish to disclose the gender of the person described, but rather construct sentences such as “A friend of mine told me that they, etc.”

¹Konnolly, L., Conrod, K., & Bradley, E. D. (2023). “Non-binary singular they.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Pronouns*. Routledge.

Diachronic shift

Agreement problem

Singular antecedent → singular pronoun



Common-gender reference problem

How do we refer to a person whose gender is unknown?

Fig. 1 Diachronic distribution of usage-guide authors' stances on singular they (1851–2016)

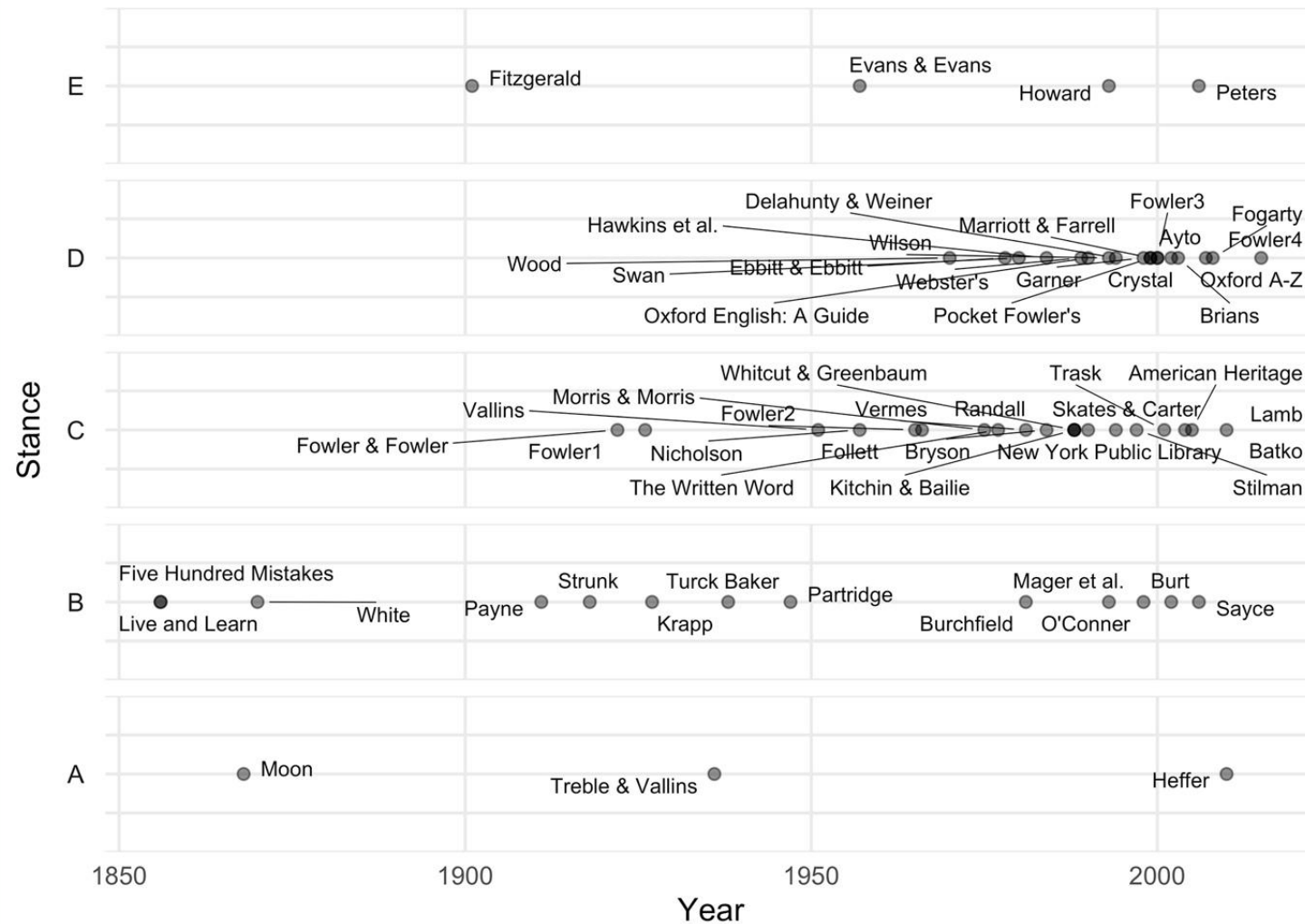
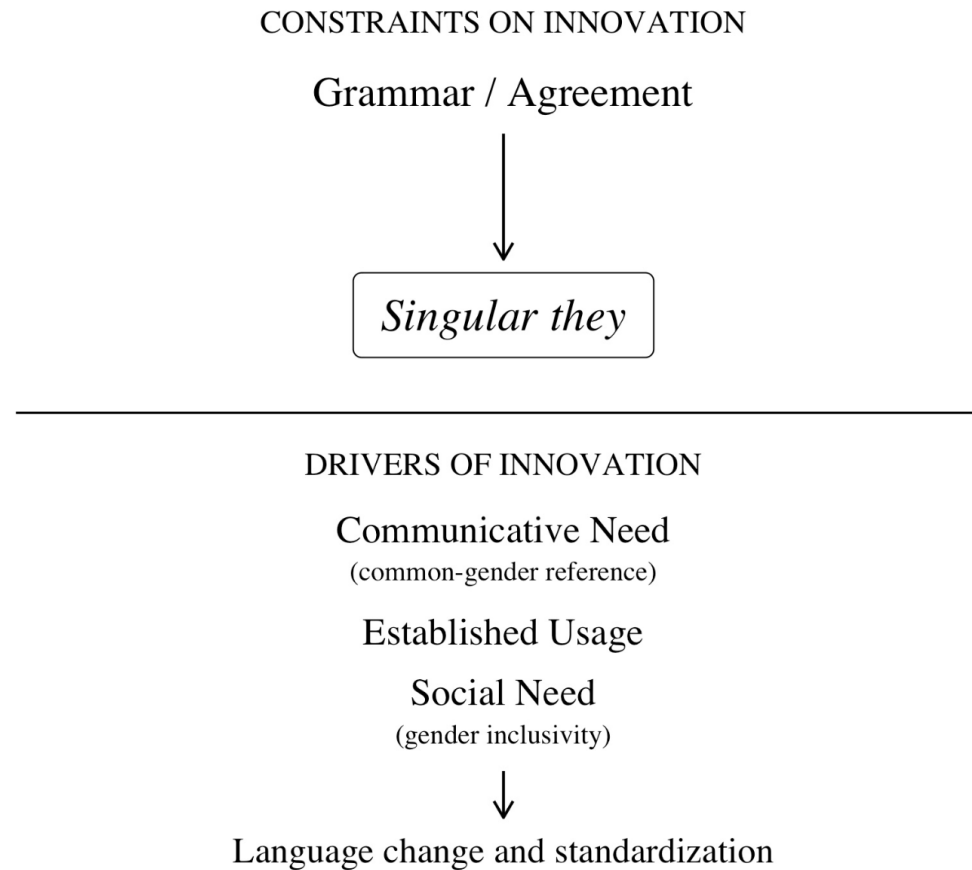


Fig. 2 **Competing considerations** in usage discussions on singular they



Agreement vs. Usage

Grammar says

Someone = singular

Someone forgot his umbrella

Usage says

Someone forgot their umbrella

Agreement vs. Usage

Grammar says

Someone = singular

Someone forgot his umbrella

— **logicism** (Pullum, 2006)¹

— Simon Heffer in *Strictly English* (2010):

“Rules in language are made by logic, not by a democratic vote.”

Usage says

Someone forgot their umbrella

— Fitzgerald (1901) in *Word and Phrase* dismisses the objections to “grammaticasters” (grammandos); **follow the example of authors** (like Ruskin), who “boldly uses the plural **their** and **them** after one, any one, every one, no one, etc.”

— later: common defence on the basis of **centuries of attested use**

¹Pullum, G.K. (2006) *Ideology, Power, and Linguistic Theory*. Revised version, 13 December 2006.

Strategies for referring to a person whose gender is unknown

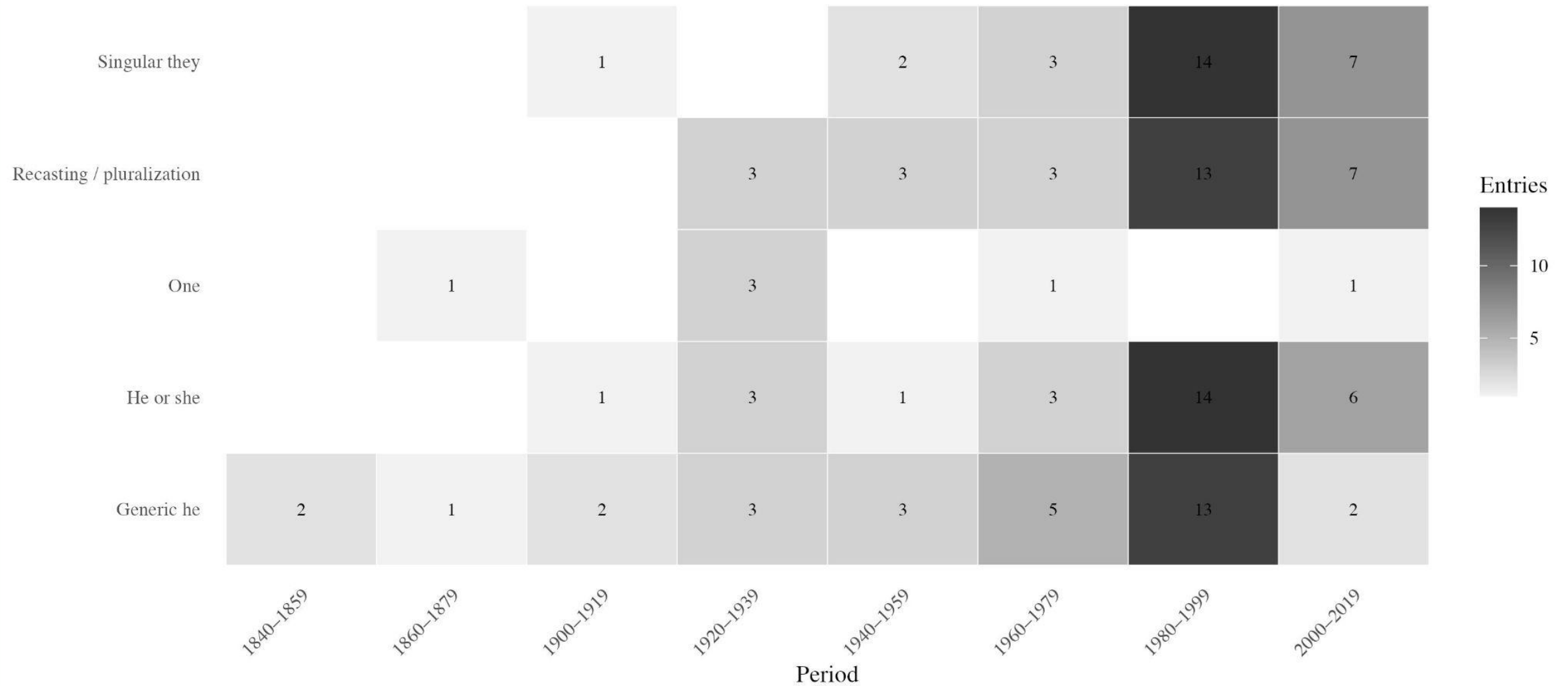
If someone forgets **his** umbrella
his or her
their

If **one** forgets **one's** umbrella

People who forget **their** umbrellas



Fig. 3 Recommended strategies for common-gender reference



Gender inclusivity

- Simon Heffer (2010) argues that singular they owes its popularity to contemporary **sensitivities about inclusive language**
- First mentioning in **1870**, when Richard Grant White in *Words and Their Uses, Past and Present*, mockingly suggested that objections to generic uses of man should be referred to the next “Women’s Rights Convention”
- **From 1970s** onward (second wave feminism), serious treatment of gender inclusivity in usage guides



1870

1970s

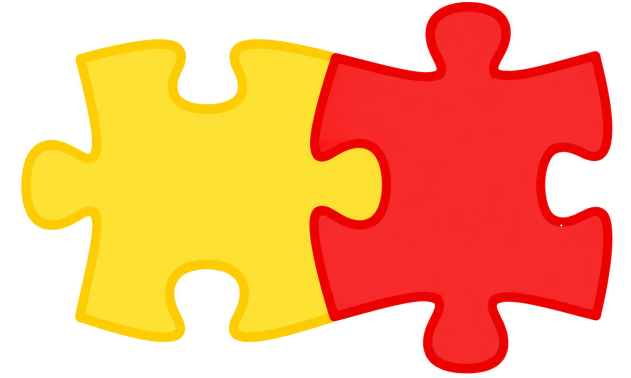
2000s

Gender inclusivity

- Simon Heffer (2010) argues that singular they owes its popularity to contemporary **sensitivities about inclusive language**
- First mentioning in **1870**, when Richard Grant White in *Words and Their Uses, Past and Present*, mockingly suggested that objections to generic uses of man should be referred to the next “Women’s Rights Convention”
- **From 1970s** onward (second wave feminism), serious treatment of gender inclusivity in usage guides
- Insufficient to explain the adoption of singular they into the Standard → even those sympathetic to the cause recommend recasting, pluralization, or using he or she



Conclusion

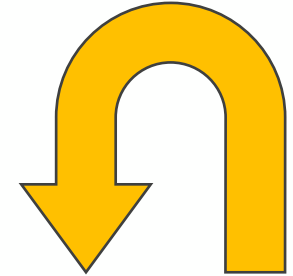


- How have usage guides **treated** singular they since the mid-19th century?
 - From condemnation → restricted acceptance → standardization
- What **arguments** have been used to justify different positions?
 - The debate shifted from grammatical agreement to communicative need, usage, and gender inclusivity
- How have proposed **solutions** to common-gender reference changed over time?
 - Standards change when persistent usage, communicative pressures, and social change outweigh traditional authority.

Conclusion

How do language ideologies change?

Conclusion



How do language ideologies change?

In the usage tradition, they change when our understanding of linguistic authority changes.

Robert Burchfield (1923–2004):

A micro history

The BBC: A Spoken Guide to English Usage (1981) written in response to listeners' complaints

- singular they “unacceptable under any circumstances”

The Oxford Guide to the English Language (1984), co-authored with Joyce Hawkins and Edmund Weiner

- “popular usage” had favored singular they for centuries and accepted it as entirely natural in informal speech

New Fowler's Modern English Usage (1996)

- increasingly acceptable in formal writing



Robert Burchfield (1923–2004):

A micro history

Some speakers use it “to avoid the awkwardness of his or her

The **BBC: A Spoken Guide to English Usage (1981)** written in response to listeners’ complaints

- singular they “unacceptable under any circumstances”

The **Oxford Guide to the English Language (1984)**, co-authored with Joyce Hawkins and Edmund Weiner

- “popular usage” had favored singular they for centuries and accepted it as entirely natural in informal speech

New **Fowler’s Modern English Usage (1996)**

- increasingly acceptable in formal writing

