

Give us a Gender Neutral Pronoun, Yo!:

The Need for and Creation of a Gender Neutral, Singular, Third Person, Personal Pronoun

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Have you ever taken a moment to think about the English language? Sure, you speak English constantly, but you may never have thought about how it came into existence or how it compares to other languages. The fact is that many people believe that there's a sizable hole in English that needs to be filled with a gender neutral third person personal pronoun both for grammatical reasons and to avoid gender preference in our language. While many experts have come up with ways to solve our problem, the most talked about new gender neutral pronoun came, not from linguistic experts, but from middle school students in Baltimore, Maryland who have become aware of this language gap and started using the word "yo" in place of "he" and "she".

The English language's current third-person singular personal pronouns are "he", "she", and "it". These pronouns leave a gap in our language, and the ways to fill that gap are becoming increasingly controversial. In a sentence like, "The student dropped his/her notebook" (when the gender of the student is unknown), you can write "The student dropped his notebook", but that leaves out the females. Conversely, if you write "The student dropped her notebook" then it leaves out males. You could also accurately write "The student dropped his or her notebook", but that's just wordy. You could also defer to "The student dropped their notebook", but in that case the singular noun "student" disagrees with the plural pronoun "their".

In the past, writers have simply used “he” as a gender neutral third person pronoun (to include females as well), but recently this deference to the masculine pronoun has been deemed sexist. More recently, I’ve seen some books, especially my school textbooks, use “she” or “her” as a gender neutral pronoun, but that’s equally as sexist by giving deference to females (though a safer bet because people are less likely to protest “she” than they are “he”. Many people seem to think it’s less sexist if you’re sexist toward men.). As an honors English student who has been asked how to handle this predicament many times by my confused peers, I was immensely interested when one of my linguistics professors brought up the subject in class.

He told us that, as a cure to this language predicament, experts have proposed potential gender neutral pronouns to incorporate into the English language. Here’s a brief table of the conjugations of some of pronouns that have been suggested by various linguistic experts over time.

Invented pronouns					
Ne	Ne laughed	I called <i>nem</i>	<i>Nir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>nirs</i>	Ne likes <i>nemself</i>
Ve	Ve laughed	I called <i>ver</i>	<i>Vis</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>vis</i>	Ve likes <i>verself</i>
Spivak	Ey laughed	I called <i>em</i>	<i>Eir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>eirs</i>	Ey likes <i>emself</i>
Ze (or zie) and hir	Ze laughed	I called <i>hir</i>	<i>Hir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>hirs</i>	Ze likes <i>hirsself</i>
Ze (or zie) and zir	Ze laughed	I called <i>zir</i>	<i>Zir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>zirs</i>	Ze likes <i>zirsself</i>
Xe	Xe laughed	I called <i>xem</i>	<i>Xyr</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>xyrs</i>	Xe likes <i>xemself</i>

Chart sourced from the Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog and adapted from the Wikipedia article on Gender-specific and gender-neutral pronouns.

According to the Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog, the pronoun with the most support in linguistic circles is “Ze”; however, none of these pronoun options have been widely adopted. One possible reason these pronouns have not widely caught on may be that split support for different pronouns

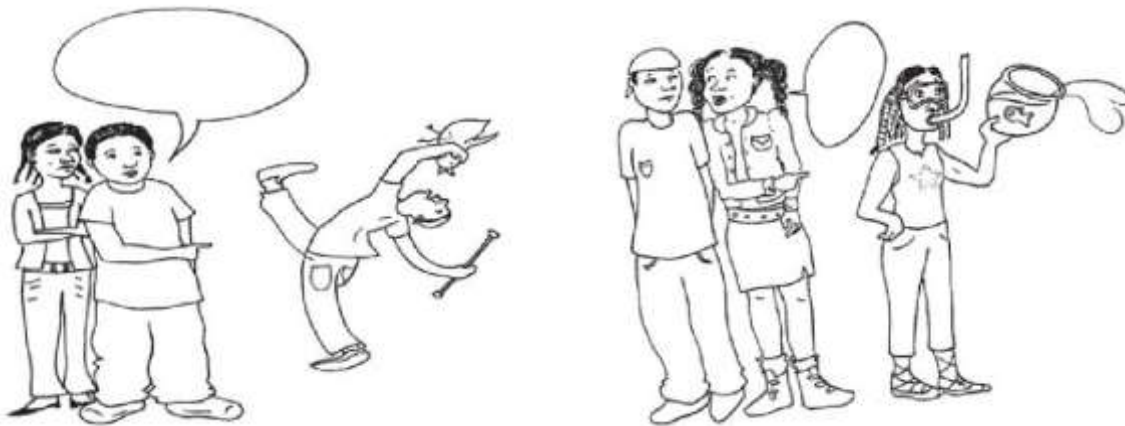
has stopped any one from becoming prevalent. Another may be simply that many people don't feel a strong enough need for a gender neutral third person personal pronoun that they are willing to change their speech habits.

On the other hand, many of the most vocal proponents of a gender neutral pronoun argue, not from a standpoint of repairing English grammar, but from one of gender equality. For example, in the article, "Is 'yo' the next 'ze'?", Jane Jankie argues that a gender neutral pronoun just naturally follows other politically correct alterations to our language, such as replacing words like "policeman" and "mailman" with "police officer" and "mail carrier" to include women as well as men. Another class of people that would benefit from the addition of a gender neutral personal pronoun is that of transgender people or others that may not wish to identify with one gender or the other (Jankie).

Between the hole in English grammar and the argument that we should have a gender neutral pronoun for political correctness reasons, experts make a convincing case for the implementation of a third person gender neutral personal pronoun. Unfortunately, its implementation is not as easy as experts deciding that it should happen. Although evolution within language is common and natural, it very rarely happens from the top down. I have been taught in my linguistics classes that language change traditionally occurs almost exclusively from the bottom up – from everyday people filling the gaps in the language themselves instead of being told how to speak.

This kind of evolution is occurring in Baltimore, Maryland, where kids have started using the word "yo" as a gender neutral third person personal pronoun. As early as 2004, middle school teachers noticed students using "yo" in sentences like, "Yo threw a thumbtack at me."

Margaret Troyer, a teacher at a Baltimore school, teamed up with Elaine Stotko, a linguistics professor at Johns Hopkins University to study this trend. In a study published in *American Speech* journal in 2007 by Stotko and Troyer, they had 115 students look at a series of cartoon drawings with empty dialogue bubbles around drawn people. Students were told to fill the speech bubbles in with slang language. To further encourage students to use slang, researchers represented young African Americans in the drawings to reflect to demographic of the schools the students attended. The drawings were created in such a way to get students to recreate conversations that they would have had casually with their classmates. One issue that was not addressed in the study was why the pictures featured people performing such unusual actions. I suspect that this was to give the students something obvious to address in their speech bubbles. 47 of the students used “yo” as an attention getter, but 8 of the students also used “yo” as a pronoun. Some of these sentences were, “Yo sucks at magic tricks”, “Yo looks like a freak”, and “Yo is a straight clown”. These are two of the pictures used in the study:



Photos sourced from *National Public Radio's* article, *Yo, Peep, Yo! The Birth of a Gender Neutral Pronoun*.

Interestingly, students tended to use gender specific pronouns (he and she) when the gender of the person in the picture was clear, but according to Stotko and Troyer's research the

students used “yo” in a gender neutral way when creating speech bubbles about “weird” drawn figures that were harder to put in a clear gender category like the figure holding the baton and bird in the left picture. One of the students interviewed in the National Public Radio (NPR) show segment *“Yo!” Kids in Baltimore Create a Pronoun* said that she uses “yo” to refer to people when she doesn’t know their names. I’m sure many of the kids and young teens using “yo” in this way couldn’t tell you that they’re using a gender neutral third person personal pronoun, but nonetheless they are using “yo” impressively consistently as a pronoun. These students have likely never been taught to use a gender neutral third person pronoun, and yet they know how exactly how to use it.

Professor Campbell Leaper, a psychology teacher at the University of California at Santa Cruz, expressed two possible reasons that these students chose the word “yo” for this grammatical role, in an interview that took place on the NPR segment, *‘Yo’! Baltimore Kids Create a Pronoun*. First, he said, it’s possible that “yo” is a shortened version of the word “you”. Second, it may have adapted from “yo” as an attention getter (attracting one person’s attention) to “yo” as a pronoun (drawing one person’s attention to a third person).

As interesting as this linguistic development is, the word “yo” is not guaranteed to become widely used or widely known, or even to maintain its current prominence. It seems likely that any widespread acceptance of “yo” as a gender neutral pronoun would take at least decades to occur. The process could be quickened by encouraging teachers to support the use of “yo”, even in writing, but convincing teachers to educate their students to use something that isn’t currently an accepted part of the English language would likely prove difficult to do. True to stereotype, convincing older members of society to change their linguistic habits may prove even more trying. Liam Stansen, a past student at Wesleyan University, even theorizes that more

conservative adults might object to the word “yo” because of its association with lower socioeconomic classes (Jankie). As a twenty year-old white girl with older relatives who grew up in a time and place when racism was the norm, I will take this a step further by saying that I believe some people will object to the word “yo” because they associate it with African Americans, who are (both in many peoples’ minds and statistically) associated with lower economic classes and higher crime rates.

Americans do, however, have an example to follow, of a country that is very quickly incorporating a gender neutral pronoun into their language. While it hasn’t made the dictionary yet, the word “Hen” was recently added to the Swedish National Encyclopedia as a “proposed gender-neutral personal pronoun” to be used instead of “Han” (he) and “Hon” (she). Considering that “Hen” was first proposed in 1994, it has made quick progress in becoming well-known enough to enter the encyclopedia. “Hen” can be applied to objects or people who do not wish to be referred to as either male or female (Rothschild).

Hopefully, as other countries make similar politically correct changes to their language, the push for a gender neutral third person personal pronoun will strengthen. The future of the word “yo” will not reveal itself for many more years. Will this trend be no more than a passing fad, or will the kids who started it grow up and teach it to their children? Until these students become adults, there really isn’t any way to predict the outcome.

Although the majority of people who have considered this issue likely would agree that a gender neutral pronoun would be a valuable addition to the English language, it’s anyone’s guess where the pronoun English speakers end up using will originate from. As many experts have tried to establish a gender neutral pronoun, it seems like the middle schools in Baltimore have

had the most success so far. These students have been an example of the idea that language changes more effectively from the bottom up instead of from the top down. We can only guess as to whether “yo” as a pronoun will be passed on to the next generation, but these resourceful middle school kids have given the English language the best shot at actual implementation of a third person gender neutral personal pronoun yet.

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