Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: Singular 'They', Sex-Indefinite 'He', and 'He or She'
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Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: singular 'they', sex-indefinite 'he', and 'he or she'[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates that prior to the beginning of the prescriptive grammar movement in English, singular 'they' was both accepted and widespread. It is argued that the prescriptive grammarians' attack on singular 'they' was socially motivated, and the specific reasons for their attack are discussed. By analogy with socially motivated changes in second person pronouns in a variety of European languages, it is suggested that third person pronoun usage will be affected by the current feminist opposition to sex-indefinite 'he' – particularly since the well-established alternative, singular 'they', has remained widespread in spoken English throughout the two and a half centuries of its 'official' proscription. Finally, the implications of changes in third person singular, sex-indefinite pronouns for several issues of general interest within linguistics are explored. (Language change, sex roles and language, language attitudes, language planning, prescriptive grammar, pronouns.)

I. INTRODUCTION

There has always been a tension between the descriptive and prescriptive functions of grammar. Currently, descriptive grammar is dominant among theorists, but prescriptive grammar is taught in the schools and exercises a range of social effects. The relations between the beginning of prescriptive grammar in English and a variety of social issues were extensively explored in the early decades of the twentieth century, culminating in the work of McKnight (1928) and Leonard (1929).

Since 1930, interest has shifted elsewhere and new treatment of the subject has usually been restricted to summaries of earlier research, in textbooks for students of linguistics or English. A notable exception is Visser's monumental work (1963), which includes much new material on prescriptive grammar. More

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typical is Bloomfield and Newmark's comprehensive summary (1967: 288–325). Bloomfield and Newmark discuss prescriptive grammar as the linguistic manifestation of rationalism, of neo-classicism, and of status anxiety accompanying changes in class structure. They also trace the indirect contributions (through the rise of the vernacular) to the origins of prescriptive grammar by such diverse forces as nationalism and the anti-Latinism of the Protestant Revolution. These writers all see the inception of the prescriptive grammar movement as a whole as having significant social and psychological causes and consequences, but the specific choices of the prescriptive grammarians are rarely explored and are therefore treated as unmotivated and arbitrary.

This paper focuses on one small segment of the content of prescriptive grammar and explores the social factors behind the particular prescriptions and proscriptions that have been offered. Such an approach is suggested by Labov (1972: 64–5, n. 10), who has called for detailed investigation of a single prescribed form in order to better understand the mechanisms of change in prestige forms. The present investigation differs from the work of the 1920s not only because of its focus on the motivation behind *specific* prescriptions but also because it deals with the issue of androcentrism, which in the 1920s was apparently not discussed with regard to language, despite the attention to sex roles which was generated by the suffragists.

Because of the social significance of personal reference, personal pronouns are particularly susceptible to modification in response to social and ideological change. Two phases of attention to English third person singular sex-indefinite pronouns are explored here: first, the prescriptive grammarians' attack on singular 'they' and 'he or she', which began at the end of the 18th century and continues today; second, the current feminist attack on sex-indefinite 'he', which began in force about 1970. Changes and possible changes in English third person singular pronouns are then compared with changes in second person singular pronouns in a variety of European languages. Finally, implications of change in English third person singular pronouns for several important linguistic issues are considered.

2. SINGULAR 'THEY', SEX-INDEFINITE 'HE', AND 'HE OR SHE'

There is a tradition among some grammarians to lament the fact that English has no sex-indefinite pronoun for third person singular and to state categorically that the only course open is to use 'he' in sex-indefinite contexts. Other grammarians omit the lamentations but state just as categorically that 'he' is the English sex-indefinite pronoun. This matter has taken a new turn recently with the insistence of many feminists that 'he' should not be used when the referent includes women, and that speakers of English should find some substitute. The reaction to this demand has ranged from agreement, to disagreement, to

ridicule, to horror, but invariably the feminists' demand is viewed as an attempt to alter the English language.

In fact, the converse is true. Intentionally or not, the movement against sex-indefinite 'he' is actually a counter-reaction to an attempt by prescriptive grammarians to alter the language. English has always had other linguistic devices for referring to sex-indefinite referents, notably, the use of singular 'they' (their, them)[2] as in sentences (1)–(3).

(1) Anyone can do it if they try hard enough. (mixed-sex, distributive)
(2) Who dropped their ticket? (sex unknown)
(3) Either Mary or John should bring a schedule with them. (mixed-sex, disjunctive)

This usage came under attack by prescriptive grammarians. However, despite almost two centuries of vigorous attempts to analyze and regulate it out of existence, singular 'they' is alive and well. Its survival is all the more remarkable considering that the weight of virtually the entire educational and publishing establishment has been behind the attempt to eradicate it.

Figures 1 and 2 show two different analyses of the English pronominal system; only nominative case is given, since the accusative and possessive pronouns have the same semantic ranges. Figure 1 represents the reality of the language – the pronominal system as developed and used by speakers of English, who have been striving for communicative effectiveness under a variety of social and cognitive pressures. Figure 2 represents the construct of early English gram-marians (Greaves 1594: 13–14; Poole 1646: 7–8; Wallis 1653: 97, 99; Wharton 1654: 39–42; Aickin 1693: Part II, 9–10; Lane 1700: 29; Gildon & Brighton 1711: 77; Collyer 1735: 21–4; Saxon 1737: 48, 50; Kirby 1746: 56, 80; Priestly 1761: 9–10; Buchanan 1762: 102–3; Lowth 1762: 31–5; Ward 1765: 126, 349–52; Murray 1795: 29–31), who were striving for tidy analysis under social and cognitive pressures peculiar to that small and unrepresentative subset of the English-speaking population. (One striking feature of Figure 1, the extension of the pronoun 'you' to first and third persons, falls outside the scope of this paper and is presented only so as not to falsify what, according to my best understanding, is the correct picture. This feature is to be considered in a future paper.)

Surprising as it may seem in the light of the attention later devoted to the issue, prior to the nineteenth century singular 'they' was widely used in

[2] It is generally felt that there are constraints on the occurrence of singular 'they' such that singular 'they' can not be used for he/she indiscriminately, but only with distributive quantifiers: any, every, each, and the general 'a'. Although these are the contexts in which singular 'they' most commonly occurs, more recent research (Bodine 1974) indicates that singular 'they' can occur in all four contexts in which a singular, sex-indefinite third person pronoun is required in English, namely (a) mixed-sex, distributive; (b) mixed-sex, disjunctive; (c) sex-unknown, and (d) sex-concealed.

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| PERSON | NUMBER | |
	SINGULAR	PLURAL
1st	I	WE
2nd	YOU	
3rd	IT SHE HE	THEY

FIGURE 1. English pronouns according to usage. (Two significant features of Figure 1 are the extension of 'you', which will not be discussed here, and the extension of 'they', which is the subject of this paper. Personal pronominal usages not included in Figure 1 are 'it' when used of a baby, second person plural 'ya'll' or 'you all', and impersonal 'one'.)

| PERSON | NUMBER | |
	SINGULAR	PLURAL
1st	I	WE
2nd	YOU	
3rd	IT SHE HE	THEY

FIGURE 2. English pronouns according to traditional grammatical analysis.

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written, therefore presumably also in spoken, English. This usage met with no opposition. Dozens of examples from several centuries of English literature are listed by Poutsma (1916: 310–12), McKnight (1925: 12–13; 1928: 197, 528–30), and Visser (1963: Vol. I, 75–8). In formal analyses of the English pronominal system, however, 'they' was incorrectly analyzed as only plural in meaning as in Figure 2, and nineteenth-century prescriptive grammarians tried to change the language to their conception of it. Of course, they attempted the same thing with vast numbers of English usages, but what is socially significant about this particular 'correction' is the direction in which the change was attempted.

If the definition of 'they' as exclusively plural is accepted, then 'they' fails to agree with a singular, sex-indefinite antecedent by one feature – that of number. Similarly, 'he' fails to agree with a singular, sex-indefinite antecedent by one feature – that of gender. A non-sexist 'correction' would have been to advocate 'he or she', but rather than encourage this usage the grammarians actually tried to eradicate it also, claiming 'he or she' is 'clumsy', 'pedantic', or 'unnecessary'. Significantly, they never attacked terms such as 'one or more' or 'person or persons', although the plural logically includes the singular more than the masculine includes the feminine. These two situations are linguistically analogous. In both cases the language user is confronted with an obligatory category, either number or sex, which is irrelevant to the message being transmitted. However, the two are not socially analogous, since number lacks social significance. Consequently, number and gender have received very different treatment by past and present prescriptive and descriptive grammarians of English. Of the three forms which existed in English for a sex-indefinite referent ('he or she', 'they', and 'he'), only one was selected as 'correct' while the other two were proscribed. Although the grammarians felt they were motivated by an interest in logic, accuracy, and elegance, the·above analysis reveals that there is no rational, objective basis for their choice, and therefore the explanation must lie elsewhere. It would appear that their choice was dictated by an androcentric world-view; linguistically, human beings were to be considered male unless proven otherwise.

This principle has been resisted by speakers, and to a lesser extent by writers, of English. According to Leonard (1929: 225),

> ...the minute attention to agreement, particularly of pronouns, had little effect on the writers of the period following; probably quite as many cases of reference of 'they' and 'their' to words like 'person' and 'one' and 'everybody' could be discovered in an equal number of pages of Jane Austen or Walter Scott and of Addison or Swift. And though the matter was brought to sharp focus and fully attended to by the critics of the succeeding period, there is good evidence that British usage is still about equally unfettered in

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the matter. The greater conservatism of American writers, as usual, has led them to follow this rule more carefully.

By 'conservatism' here Leonard does not mean avoidance of change and adherence to established pattern, since established pattern included singular 'they'. 'Conservatism' here means reliance on the authority of grammarians, which has been more characteristic of American writers and editors than of British writers and editors (McKnight 1925).

The advocacy by grammarians of English of the linguistic embodiment of an androcentric world-view was evident over two centuries before the invention of the proscription against singular 'they'. Wilson (1553) is one of the earliest to berate English language users who neglect to express linguistically the androcentric social order, for which Wilson claims the status of the 'natural' order.

> Some will set the Carte before the horse, as thus. My mother and my father are both at home, even as thoughe the good man of the house ware no breaches, or that the graye Mare were the better Horse. And what thoughe it often so happeneth (God wotte the more pitte) yet in speaking at the leaste, let us kepe a natural order, and set the man before the woman for maners Sake (Wilson 1560: 189; also in Mair edition 1909: 167).

Wilson elsewhere states the general principle to be followed with regard to the linguistic ordering of female and male as, 'the worthier is preferred and set before. As a man is sette before a woman' (1560: 234; also in Mair edition 1909: 208).

The same principle was repeated in the seventeenth century with reference to agreement of relative pronoun and antecedent.

> The Relative agrees with the Antecedent in gender, number, and person... The Relative shall agree in gender with the Antecedent of the more worthy gender: as, the King and the Queen whom I honor. The Masculine gender is more worthy than the Feminine (Poole 1646: 21).

Throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries English grammarians were sufficiently influenced by Latin grammar that the discussion of English syntax scarcely went beyond the Latin-derived Three Concords (subject and verb, substantive and adjective, relative pronoun and antecedent), with the above quotation from Poole being a restatement and discussion of the Third Concord. S. Saxon (1737) was among the first to enlarge upon the Three Concords, giving several distinct rules under each, as well as three additional Concords, each with their several rules, ending with a total of 33 distinct rules. But neither Poole nor S. Saxon, nor any grammarian of the intervening period whose work I have examined, specifically discusses agreement between personal pronouns and sex-indefinite antecedents. This is true despite the facts that (1) most of these grammarians include a version of the Third Concord among their

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syntactic rules and (2) until Ward (1765: 127) 'she, her, he, him' were often classed as relative pronouns. Thus, although androcentrism was present, it had not yet resulted in the proscription of singular 'they', which was still freely used along with 'he or she' and sex-indefinite 'he'.

Kirby (1746) continues the increase of syntactic rules, presenting 88 rules, among which appears the earliest example I have found of the explicit advocacy of sex-indefinite 'he'. Rule 21:

> The masculine Person answers to the general Name, which comprehends both Male and Female; as Any Person, who knows what he says (Kirby 1746: 117).

Kirby has stopped referring to the masculine gender as the 'worthier' gender, but he substitutes the 'comprehensive' masculine for the 'worthy' masculine. One eighteenth-century grammarian explicitly denied the need for having an unmarked gender ('he').

> *he* must represent a male; *she* a female; and *it*, an object of no sex...But the plural *they* equally represents objects of all the three genders; for a plural object may consist of singular objects, some of which are masculine, others feminine, and others neuter; as, *a man and a woman and some iron were in the waggon, and they were all overturned...*
>
> This frees the English, in a great measure, from the perplexity of such rules, as, 'The masculine gender is more worthy than the feminine...' These rules arise in the Latin and Greek, because the adjectives and possessive pronouns must agree, in grammatic gender, with the gender of the substantives to which they are applied; and when several substantives of different genders happen to denote a complex object, no one gender of an adjective or possessive pronoun, will suit those of such a series of substantives. And therefore neither the English adjectives, nor the plural personal, nor the plural possessive pronouns, have a distinction of gender (Ward 1765: 459–60).

The comprehensiveness and huge size (554 pages) of Ward's work make it unlikely that he overlooked prohibitions which were considered important by his contemporaries. Rather it would appear that Kirby's and Ward's contemporaries had not yet applied the concept of the preferential masculine to personal pronouns and that Kirby's Rule 21 is best viewed as an unusually early and very incipient form of the attack on singular 'they'.

Murray (1795) sets the tone for this attack, presenting the first 'false syntax' examples I have found for singular 'they'.

> RULE V. Pronouns must always agree with their antecedents, and the nouns for which they stand, in gender, number, and person;...Of this rule there are many violations. '*Each* of the sexes should keep within *its* particular bounds, and content *themselves* with the advantages of *their* particular districts.' 'Can any one, on their entrance into the world, be fully secure that they shall not be

deceived?' 'on *his* entrance,' and 'that *he* shall.' 'Let each esteem others better than themselves;' 'than *himself* '(Murray 1795: 95–6).

Later authors expanded their sections on the 'false syntax' of singular 'they' up to several pages.

This virtual explosion of condemnation of singular 'they' culminated in an Act of Parliament in 1850, which legally replaced 'he or she' with 'he'. The Act clearly reveals a recognition that specification of both gender (for pronouns) and number (for pronouns and concrete nouns) is obligatory in English, even when such information is irrelevant to the communication. However, when the precision is unneeded it is disposed of quite differently for number, which has no social significance, than for gender. Whereas unnecessary number is to be dispensed with by the arbitrary choice of either the singular *or* plural, unnecessary gender is to be dispensed with by the use of the masculine *only*.

> An Act for shortening the language used in acts of Parliament...in all acts words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females, and the singular to include the plural, and the plural the singular, unless the contrary as to gender and number is expressly provided (cited in Evans & Evans 1957: 221).

Similarly, Kirby's Rule 21, cited above, that the masculine comprehends both male and female, is immediately followed (Rule 22) by the *equation* of singular and plural, under certain circumstances, so that either may represent the other. Thus, in Rule 22 Kirby equates 'The Life of Men' and 'The Lives of Men' (Kirby 1746: 117).

Thus, the 1850 Act of Parliament and Kirby's Rules 21–2 manifest their underlying androcentric values and world-view in two ways. First, linguistically analogous phenomena (number and gender) are handled very differently (singular *or* plural as generic vs. masculine *only* as generic). Second, the precept just being established is itself violated in not allowing singular 'they', since if the plural 'shall be deemed and taken' to include the singular, then surely 'they' includes 'she' and 'he' and 'she or he'.

This special pleading for sex-indefinite 'he' was no less strong in America than in Britain, as may be seen in the following quotation from an American prescriptive grammarian.

> *Their* is very commonly misused with reference to a singular noun. Even John Ruskin has written such a sentence as this: 'But if a *customer* wishes you to injure *their* foot or to disfigure it, you are to refuse *their* pleasure.' How Mr Ruskin could have written such a sentence as that (for plainly there is no slip of the pen or result of imperfect interlinear correction in it), or how, it having been written, it could be passed by an intelligent proof-reader, I cannot surmise. It is, perhaps, an exemplification of the straits to

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which we are driven by the lack of a pronoun of common gender meaning both he and she, his and her. But, admitting this lack, the fact remains that *his* is the representative pronoun, as *mankind* includes both men and women. Mr Ruskin might better have said, 'If a customer wishes you to injure his foot you are to refuse his pleasure.' To use 'his or her' in cases of this kind seems to me very finical and pedantic (White 1880: 416).

Another quotation from White shows his clear recognition of the social implications of grammar.

MARRY. – There has been not a little discussion as to the use of this word, chiefly in regard to public announcements of marriage. The usual mode of making the announcement is – Married, John Smith to Mary Jones; Some people having been dissatisfied with this form, we have seen, of late years, in certain quarters – Married, John Smith with Mary Jones; and in others – John Smith and Mary Jones. I have no hesitation in saying that all of these forms are incorrect. We know, indeed, what is meant by any one of them; but the same is true of hundreds and thousands of erroneous uses of language. Properly speaking, a man is not married to a woman, or married with her; nor are a man and a woman married with each other. The woman is married to the man. It is her name that is lost in his, not his in hers; she becomes a member of his family, not he of hers; it is her life that is merged, or supposed to be merged, in his, not his in hers; she follows his fortunes, and takes his station, not he hers. And thus, manifestly, she has been attached to him by a legal bond, not he to her; except, indeed, as all attachment is necessarily mutual. But, nevertheless, we do not speak of tying a ship to a boat, but a boat to a ship. And so long, at least, as man is the larger, the stronger, the more individually important, as long as woman generally lives in her husband's house and bears his name, – still more should she not bear his name, – it is the woman who is married to the man (1886: 139–40).

Steinbach cites White's writing as an example of 'the highly entertaining manner in which some rhetoricians teach accuracy of expression' (1930: 456). It might be more entertaining if it were definitely a thing of the past. However, as will be shown below in the survey of present-day high school textbooks, it is not.

Although in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the masculine gender was generally no longer championed as the 'worthier' gender, there has remained an underlying realization of the social implications of sex-indefinite 'he'. Fowler (1926) refers to the views of the scholar Whately, archbishop of Dublin in the early nineteenth century, concerning the use of singular (distributive) 'they'.

Archbishop Whately used to say that women were more liable than men to fall into this error, as they objected to identifying 'everybody' with 'him' (Fowler 1926: 635).

Fowler himself mentions, but dismisses with a joke, the possibility that the grammarians' invention and perpetuation of the proscription against singular 'they' constitutes a social injustice.

> [The use of sex-indefinite 'he'] involves the convention (statutory in the interpretation of documents) that where the matter of sex is not conspicuous or important the masculine form shall be allowed to represent a person instead of a man, or say a man (homo) instead of a man (vir). Whether that convention, with *himself or herself* in the background for especial exactitudes, and paraphrase always possible in dubious cases, is an arrogant demand on the part of male England, everyone must decide for himself (or for himself or herself, or for themselves) (Fowler 1926: 404).

Curme (1931: 552) considers the possibility that sex-indefinite 'he' is 'one-sided', but then invokes 'the idea of the oneness of man and woman [which] is present to our feeling' as the basis for the generic use of the masculine. A linguist in Sterling A. Leonard's jury-based study[3] of current English usage rejects 'Each person should of course bear *his or her* share of the expense', on the basis that 'I prefer simply *his*. This seems to be a matter of pleasing the women' (cited in Leonard 1932: 103). Unlike these earlier commentators McCawley (1974: 103) sees no need to defend the equation of 'he' with 'person'. So un-questioningly does McCawley accept this equation that he claims that sex-indefinite 'he' carries no overtones of its primary, masculine meaning if it is used consistently in sex-indefinite contexts. On this basis McCawley further implies that the phrase 'he or she' is sexist in that it 'makes women a special category of beings' by mentioning them in addition to 'people' (i.e. 'he').

The changed social climate and the dispassionate tone in which textbooks are written today make it virtually impossible that any textbook writer in the second half of the twentieth century could make as explicitly androcentric a statement as, for instance, the tirade by White, the nineteenth-century American prescriptive grammarian quoted at length above.

To determine how the issue is taught today I surveyed thirty-three of the school grammars now being used in American junior and senior high schools. Twenty-eight of these books (Blumenthal & Warriner 1964, Grades 9, 10, 11, 12; Brooks & Warren 1958; Christ 1961, Grades 7, 8, 9, 10; Conlin & Herman 1965, Books 1, 2, 3; Greene, Loomis, Davis & Beidenharn 1965, Grades 8, 9, 10; Haag 1965–8, Books 1, 2, 3, 4; Roberts 1967; Rogers & Stewart 1967, Grades 9, 10, 11, 12; Tressler, Christ & Starkey 1960, Books 1, 2, 3, 4) condemn both 'he or she' and singular 'they', the former because it is clumsy and the latter because it is inaccurate. And then the pupils are taught to achieve both elegance of expression and accuracy by referring to women as 'he'. One of the modern

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[3] A panel of linguists, editors, writers, etc. was asked to vote on the acceptability of disputed English usages.

textbook writers does show his awareness and approval of the hierarchy implied by the use of sex-indefinite 'he', when he tells children not to use 'he or she', which is 'awkward', but instead to follow the convention that 'grammatically, men are more important than women' (Roberts 1967: 355).

Most of the modern textbook writers, like most of the early prescriptive grammarians, give no such explicitly androcentric justification for prescribing sex-indefinite 'he', but instead argue that sex-indefinite 'he' is 'correct', whereas singular 'they' is 'inaccurate' and 'he or she' is 'awkward'. However, the line of argument developed in connection with the prescriptive grammarians is equally applicable here. That is, disagreement of number, as in the proscribed singular 'they', is no more 'inaccurate' than disagreement of gender, as in the unproscribed sex-indefinite 'he'. Similarly, the proscribed 'he or she' is no more 'clumsy' than the unproscribed 'one or more' and 'person or persons'. Thus, these writers appear to be the docile heirs to the androcentric tradition of the prescriptive grammarians, failing to confront, if not implicitly subscribing to, the androcentric motive.

The fact that the controversy over singular 'they' has anything to do with sex seems to have escaped the notice of today's textbook writers, or if they have noticed, they are not letting the kids in on it. Twenty-five of the above twenty-eight textbooks tell students that the reason 'they' is 'mistakenly' used for a singular antecedent is that the antecedent has a plural meaning. This is obviously an inadequate explanation, since 'they' is used for antecedents with both plural and singular meaning, as may be seen in the following sentences, collected by the author from the ordinary conversation of native speakers of American English holding bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees.

(4) Did everyone say they missed you like mad yesterday?
(5) Somebody left their sweater.
(6) Not one single child raised their hand.
(7) When you call on a student, it's better if you can remember their name.

In (4), the antecedent of 'they' has a plural meaning, but the antecedents of 'they' in (5), (6), and (7) are clearly singular. Notice particularly (6) and (7). If the subjects were perceived as plural, surely the speakers would have said 'their hands' and 'their names' rather than 'their hand' and 'their name'.

Of all twenty-eight school grammars reviewed, only three gave children an adequate explanation of the use of 'they'. Although still condemning the use of 'they' in this manner, these three textbooks did give a socially and psychologically realistic assessment of why it is done. One of these realistic textbooks says,

...the pronoun *his* would apply equally to a man or to a woman. Nevertheless some people feel awkward about using *his* to refer to a woman and instead use *their* (Blumenthal & Warriner 1964: 139).

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Blumenthal and Warriner then say this is unacceptable, at least in writing, and they also advise against the use of 'he or she' because it is 'clumsy'. The second of the realistic textbooks has more to say.

> English has a problem in that it has no common gender...[in the third person singular]...The most awkward solution is to use both the masculine and the feminine pronoun: 'Everyone should raise his (or her) hand when he (or she) is ready.' We usually try to avoid this by following the convention that, grammatically, men are more important than women. For reference to mixed groups, we use just the pronoun *he*. 'Everyone should raise *his* hand when *he* is ready' (Roberts 1967: 354–5).

Roberts' next suggestion has been offered by numerous grammarians from the nineteenth century right up to writers of textbooks now being used in the schools. They say, in effect, that if you cannot bring yourself to use 'he' for women then do not use a singular subject at all, but go back and start the sentence over again with a plural subject.

> ...Sometimes we avoid the issue by pluralizing the noun phrase to which the pronoun refers. 'All the boys and girls should raise their hands when they are ready' (Roberts 1967: 355).

Actually, this advice to start the sentence over again with a clearly plural subject is a necessary escape, because some of the grammarians unable to see the frequent singular semantic content of the word 'they' are apparently equally unable to see the frequent plural semantic content of words like 'everyone' and 'everybody', e.g. sentence (4). Sentence (8) was written by a 12-year-old boy in a school composition describing a dunking by a group of classmates; it is cited as an example of hypercorrection by Leonard (1929: 224, n. 57).

> (8) When I came up, everybody was laughing at me, but I was glad to see him just the same.

None of the modern textbook writers reviewed went quite so far as to recommend sentences like (8), but they did go so far as to condemn the use of 'them' even in a sentence like (8). Sentence (9) was given as an example of bad grammar in one textbook.

> (9) Everyone in the class worried about the midyear history examination, but they all passed (Tressler, Christ & Starkey 1960; Book 4: 343).

Tressler *et al.* could not quite bring themselves to recommend 'Everyone in the class worried about the midyear history examination, but *he* all passed', so they told the pupils to rewrite the sentence, 'The class members worried about the midyear history examination, but they all passed.'

The effect on actual written and spoken usage of the movement to eradicate 'he or she' and singular 'they' is complex. The continuing attack of textbook

writers and teachers indicates that both forms are still very much a part of American English. On the other hand, the counter-attack on sex-indefinite 'he' by feminists indicates that sex-indefinite 'he' is also widely used.

The most clear-cut success of the movement to eradicate singular 'they' has been the near-universality of agreement in *discussions about* English, as opposed to its actual usage, that 'they' can not have singular meaning. A notable exception to the acceptance of the traditional analysis of English third person pronouns is Key (1972: 27–8). Key lists eight instances of lack of agreement of usage with the traditional analysis and implies that more may be found. Key's examples differ from those being discussed in this paper in that all are in some way special – nonnative speakers, homosexuals, small children, humor – whereas this discussion concerns ordinary usage.

The persistence for almost two centuries of the original movement to eradicate 'he or she' and singular 'they' suggests that the countermovement against sex-indefinite 'he' is unlikely to disappear. Furthermore, since the countermovement has more explicit social and ideological buttresses as well as a larger number of supporters than the original movement had at its inception, it is reasonable to predict that the countermovement against sex-indefinite 'he' will affect English pronominal usage. Therefore, during the next few years students of language development may have the opportunity to follow the progress of a particularly visible type of language change.

Of course it is possible that the pronominal changes foreseen by this writer will not come to pass, and contrary predictions have indeed been made. For instance, Lakoff has suggested that the current feminist attack on sex-indefinite 'he' is misguided, since 'an attempt to change pronominal usage will be futile' (1973: 75). Conklin (1973) has also expressed doubt as to whether 'so stable a portion of language as the pronominal system will yield to change'. These writers do not recognize how widespread the use of singular 'they' is at present and they also tend to see the pronominal system as a categorical given. However, looking at the wider context of language change in general, it can be seen that pronominal systems are particularly susceptible to alteration in response to social change.

3. COMPARISON WITH CHANGES IN SECOND PERSON PRONOUNS

The spread of the ideology of feudalism caused most European languages to develop two sets of second person singular pronouns, for the representation of hierarchy (Jesperson 1938: 223–4; Brown & Gilman 1960: 254–5). In both English and Russian this change came about by a process analogous to the inclusion of singularity in the pronoun 'they', i.e. the plural pronouns (English 'ye–you', Russian 'vy') were extended to include singularity. This resulted in two sets of second person singular pronouns: English 'thou–thee' (nominative and

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accusative) and Russian 'ty' for an inferior or an intimate vs. English 'ye–you' (nominative and accusative) and Russian 'vy' for a superior or a non-intimate (Brown & Gilman 1960; Friedrich 1966; Rendon 1973; Sampson 1973). Later, under the pressure of social structural changes and the beginnings of egalitarian ideology, English's second person singular pronouns contracted to a single word. More recently, second person pronouns have been undergoing change in a number of other European languages – French, German, Italian (Brown & Gilman 1960), Serbo-Croatian (Kocher 1967), and Swedish (Paulston 1971, 1974).[4]

These analyses of change in second person pronoun usage rank among the most convincing demonstrations ever given of the social motivation of linguistic change. Their importance for linguistics is that they show the futility of attempting to explain language change as taking place on an autonomous linguistic level. Their importance for sociology is indicated by Grimshaw.

I don't see how any sociologist could read the piece by Friedrich on Russian pronominal usage...without being persuaded of the imperative necessity of

(4) As thorough and insightful as these papers are with regard to manifestations of 'power and solidarity' in second person pronouns, the writers do not appear to notice analogous manifestations of sex-related 'power and solidarity', even in their own language use. For example,

'...a *man's* consistent pronoun style gives away *his* class status and *his* political view' (Brown & Gilman 1960: 276), emphasis added. 'The fact that the pronoun which is being extended to all *men* alike is T, the mark of solidarity, the pronoun of the nuclear family, expresses the radical's intention to extend *his* sense of *brotherhood*' (Brown & Gilman 1960: 276), emphasis added.

To one who is, in 1974, investigating the linguistic manifestations of androcentrism, the above quotations seem ironically myopic. Of course, such a reaction is the result of a consciousness which had not been developed in 1960. A dozen years later consciousness of sex role hierarchy was well developed. Therefore, it is even more startling to find a writer such as Gouldner, who stands out among sociologists for the strength of his claims that language reflects and molds social perception and social reality, to still be blind to *sex-related* 'ideological uses of ordinary languages and of the interests that these obscure and conceal', as shown in the following quotations (emphasis added).

'Rational theorizing means...dialectic and dialogue among committed *men* joined in a common-language-speaking community' (Gouldner 1972: 13). 'The manner in which...other forces mold *men's* behavior is not always known to them, partly because they simply may not have ways of perceiving them, given the ordinary languages with which they relate to the world' (1972: 14). 'It is essentially the task of social theory, and the social sciences more generally, to create new and "extraordinary" languages, to help *men* learn to speak them, and to mediate between the deficient understandings of ordinary language and the different and liberating perspectives of the extra-ordinary languages of social theory...To say social theorists are concept-creators means that they are not merely in the knowledge-creating business, but also in the language-reform and language-creating business' (1972: 15–16). '...social theory provides... an extraordinary language with which *men* can become aware of the ideological uses of ordinary languages and of the interests that these obscure and conceal' (1972: 54).

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incorporating a sociolinguistic dimension into sociological research and theory (1974: 5).

4. IMPLICATIONS

Careful observation of change in English pronominal usage could contribute to our understanding of a number of issues of general importance within linguistics including (*a*) continuing linguistic enculturation, (*b*) conscious vs. unconscious change, and (*c*) compensatory adjustment within the linguistic system.

(*a*) The only aspect of post-childhood linguistic enculturation which has received much attention is vocabulary learning. Grimshaw is foremost among scholars calling for a broad investigation of all kinds of later language learning. He states,

> ...studies of language acquisition – like their companion studies of socialization done by sociologists – frequently tend...to ignore continuing linguistic and other socialization. I have recently had occasion to try and find out what is known about continuing language and other socialization of older adolescents and young adults. The answer thus far seems to be 'very little' (1973: 584).

Because the particular language forms under discussion here have ties with age-related concerns and awarenesses they are a likely source of information on continuing language acquisition. No stable age differentiation is predicted, however, since as feminists grow older they are unlikely to return to the pronominal usage, sex-indefinite 'he', which they have rejected.

(*b*) Much of the writing on language change prior to 1960 pictures language change as slow, inexorable, unconscious, largely unmotivated drifting within free variation. Although sound change is still far from understood, the last dozen years of work by Labov and his followers have clearly demonstrated that free variation is not so free and sound change is not so unmotivated nor always so unconscious. The same has been documented for morphology and syntax by Rubin, who concludes,

> On the basis of the already reported cases, it seems reasonable to presume that any aspect of the language code or language usage is susceptible to conscious change provided that the necessary motivation and proper field for implementation exists (1972: 8).

And,

> From the above examples, we can see that language structure has been molded deliberately to serve a number of different motivations, ranging from purely communicative to purely socio-political (1972: 10).

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Although the extent to which a speech community's members talk about talking varies from culture to culture, and between individuals within any single culture (Hymes 1961), most communities promote sufficient leisure, intro- spection, and argumentation to assure that differential acceptance and promo- tion of linguistic forms will play some role in lexical and grammatical change. As English pronominal usage is increasingly affected by the feminist counter- movement discussed in this paper, it will provide an ideal opportunity to study differences in language change among those who make a conscious decision and deliberate effort to change, among those who are aware that the change is taking place but have no particular interest in the issue, among those who are oblivious to the change, and among those who are consciously resisting the change.

(c) It is rare that linguists have the opportunity to analyze changes and adjust- ments in the relatively tightly structured pronominal system of a language at the very time when the systematic change is taking place. Such an opportunity is now being continuously exploited for Swedish second person pronouns by Paulston (1971; 1974) who is consequently able to provide an unusually complete record and analysis of the change. Baseline description of present day English third person pronominal usage coupled with continual monitoring of usage trends offers another such opportunity for the detailed investigation of systematic change in progress.

In most instances of multiple, related language changes it is impossible to extricate from the near-simultaneous changes what is cause and what is effect, especially when the changes are studied after the fact. However, if change (for example, the pronominal change discussed here) is anticipated, or detected at its inception, it should be possible to hypothesize about areas of language in which compensatory adjustments might take place (for example, a general weakening of number concord, for which there is no particular social pressure) and to subject those areas of potential instability to continuing observation.

5. CONCLUSION

Personal reference, including personal pronouns, is one of the most socially significant aspects of language. As such, it is particularly likely to become the target of deliberate efforts to bring symbolic representation of interpersonal relations into line with the way those relationships are structured in either the ideal or behavioral patterning of the members of a speech community. With the increase of opposition to sex-based hierarchy, the structure of English third person pronouns may be expected to change to reflect the new ideology and social practices, as second person pronouns did before them. Analysis of the processes and results of this change can further elucidate the contributions of social forces to language development.

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