

A Verbal Hygienic Investigation of Non-Binary People's Perception of *They*

Clara Hein Damgaard
University of Copenhagen
xlb699@alumni.ku.dk / Claraheindamgaard@gmail.com

Abstract

The English language has seen an interesting change in the last couple of years. That is, a wide introduction of a singular, non-binary variety of the word “they” functioning as substitution for “he” or “she” for non-binary people. This paper examines how people who identify with the non-binary variety of “they” understand the current language and societal change they are part of. The analysis is based on qualitative interviews of non-binary Americans and draws on the theoretical framework of “verbal hygiene”, which describes the normative processes of language that everybody participates in. The findings show how non-binary “they” is essential for the participants’ sense of self. Furthermore, while the participants hesitated to make any normative statements about non-binary “they”, they did use normative statements when they distanced themselves from neopronouns. The arguments that the participants had heard against non-binary “they” often indirectly targeted non-binary identity as a whole rather than the linguistic change itself. Since this linguistic change is relatively new, the amount of research available is limited. This article seeks to contribute to this limited research with an understanding of non-binary individuals’ perception of this new function of “they” through the lens of verbal hygiene.

1. Introduction

A central and often overlooked part of language is its normative nature. We all have ideas of what “correct” language is, what is more functional and what sounds cleaner. It is not rare that we act upon these ideas. This act of linguistic normativity is what Deborah Cameron (2012) calls “verbal hygiene”. However, our individual preferences are rarely the same, which can lead to a struggle about who has the authority to define what “correct” language is. One linguistic battlefield where these conflicting desires are currently shaping the English language surrounds the introduction of the non-binary function of *they*. On the one hand, detractors of non-binary *they* argue that it is a way of liberals to control speech, that it is linguistically confusing and that it should not be considered part of the English language (Steinmetz 2019). On the other hand, supporters of this language change see this new function of *they* as being part of a larger social movement that promotes social justice (Steinmetz 2019). This article aims to explore non-binary *they* through the research question: How do people who identify with non-binary *they* understand the current language- and societal change they are part of? The perspective of non-binary people is especially interesting since they are at the epicenter of this change and the ones highlighting the need for it. Without them, there might not be a language change to explore and research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Pronouns

Before delving into the theoretical framework of verbal hygiene, it is worth taking a step back to examine the word class of pronouns and contextualize what is so extraordinary about pronoun changes. A pronoun serves as a stand-in for a noun phrase (Leech 2006: 95-96). More specifically, the category of personal pronouns, which this article is primarily interested in, functions as a stand-in for people and things (Leech 2006: 84). While there are subcategories of pronouns such as demonstrative pronouns, which include words such as *that*, *this* and *those*, they are not relevant to this article. Another interesting thing about pronouns is that it is a closed word class, meaning it contains a set number of words (Hjulmand and Schwarz 2017: 116). Below is a simple table of the standard personal pronouns in the subjective case including non-binary *they*, which is currently not included in most pronoun tables.

Table 1: English personal pronouns in the subjunctive case

First-person singular	I
Second-person singular	You
Third-person singular, masculine	He
Third-person singular, feminine	She
Third-person singular, non-binary	They
Third-person singular, neuter	It
First-person, plural	We
Second-person, plural	You
Third-person, plural	They

As seen in the table, the English language only marks gender in third-person singular pronouns, be it masculine, feminine, neuter and now non-binary. Unlike other third-person singular pronouns, however, non-binary *they* also has the potential to create ambiguity in regard to number since it shares the same form as the third-person plural pronoun *they*. Because non-binary *they* has this ambiguity along with the fact that it is not fully integrated in the English language, it is interesting to see how non-binary people understand why some people might have difficulties adapting to this new function of *they*. It is also worth noting that the singular- and plural second-person pronoun also share the same form: *you*. However, because of the fact that *you* always refers to the addressee or addressees, context will most often make it clear if it is used in its singular or plural form. With *they* it is slightly more complicated since people referred to in the third-person are less likely to be present and therefore context can be less clear.

Before moving on, an example of non-binary *they* is given. In the sentence “The new head of sales just got hired and apparently they are non-binary” *they* functions as a stand-in for the noun phrase “the new head of sales”. In that way, the introduction of non-binary *they* allows language users to refer to non-binary people in a much shorter and more convenient way compared to repeating the

whole noun phrase again. This knowledge of pronouns serves as a good foundation for the rest of the article.

2.2 Terms Relating to Non-Binary *They*

To alleviate any potential confusion surrounding the terms used relating to non-binary identity, a brief account of them will be given. While we should be critical of dictionaries' authority, they do serve as a good shorthand for explaining simple ideas. To begin with, *they* in the non-binary sense is "used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is non-binary" (Merriam Webster, n.d.). Furthermore, the adjective *non-binary* will henceforth refer to "... being a person who identifies with or expresses a gender identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely female" (Merriam Webster, n.d.). Finally, as the concept of *neopronouns* will be mentioned later in the analysis, a definition will be provided here. McGaughey describes neopronouns as being "new coinages that were created as an alternative to 'they'" (2020). The existence of neopronouns shows that there is not complete agreement that non-binary *they* should function as the gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun in English. If there were unanimity that non-binary *they* was the best alternative to *he* or *she*, neopronouns would have no relevance. It is worth noting that it is not only the English language that is experiencing an introduction of gender-neutral third-person pronouns. An example of this is in the Danish language where Miltersen (2018) highlights different preferences for non-binary third-person pronouns among people who did not identify with the pronouns they were assigned at birth.

2.3 Verbal Hygiene

Despite the fact that social and linguistic changes are constant and inevitable, they rarely happen without struggle. Humans desire to change their language into what they prefer and view as clean (Cameron 2012). Whether it be changing language to be less gendered or more "grammatical", humans do not leave language alone. This practice of linguistic normativity is one that all language users take part in and it is what Cameron (2012) calls "verbal hygiene". In Cameron's words, "[v]erbal hygiene comes into being whenever people reflect on language in a critical (in the sense of 'evaluative') way" (2012: 9). What necessarily follows is a dismantlement of the descriptivist/prescriptivist dichotomy of language. Cameron argues that any linguist who claims to just describe language also engages in a form of normativity and therefore prescribes language (Cameron 2012: 7). Moreover, the preference for natural or spontaneous language changes typically associated with the descriptive approach also indicates a clear value judgment or prescription (Cameron 2012: 19-20). However, the term prescriptivism is also not sufficient for describing how this practice of linguistic normativity functions since it carries clear connotations of conservatism as well as perceptions of what a "clean" language should look like (Cameron 2012: 8-9). Verbal hygiene, on the other hand, while also a practice of language normativity, does not carry with it a certain set of values (like the preference for the spontaneous or conservation of present norms). Rather, the concept forces us to think about what values we have, why we have them, and how they shape our idea of a clean language (Cameron 2012: 9-10). Consequently, it becomes clear how all language

preferences are inherently political and despite the best intentions of language users, it is impossible for them to observe language neutrally.

Another important aspect about the concept of verbal hygiene, is that the debates surrounding verbal hygiene are often about much more than just language change and preferences (Cameron 2012: 25). More specifically, in debates about verbal hygiene, language frequently serves as a stand-in for some larger issue which for one reason or another can be difficult to discuss openly. However, it can be difficult to make broad generalizations about verbal hygiene since it manifests itself in many different ways and “is not a unified and coherent discourse” (Cameron 2012: 30). In the following, an account of Cameron's discussion of the discourses surrounding grammatical and “politically correct” verbal hygiene is therefore introduced. These two debates are highlighted since the discourse surrounding non-binary *they* inevitably overlaps with both the verbal hygiene of grammar and “political correctness” as addressed in the statements of people who themselves identify by non-binary *they*.

In her discussion of grammatical verbal hygiene, Cameron takes point of departure in what she calls “the grammar crusade”, a public debate surrounding the importance of grammar and education that took place near the end of the 1980's in the United Kingdom (Cameron 2012: 78). Despite her discussion being centered around the United Kingdom, Cameron herself states “the discourse on language that will be examined here is equally available, and just as powerful, elsewhere” (Cameron 2012: 79). While on the surface this debate was about grammar, it came to represent much more than language prescriptions. When conservatives critiqued how the nation's proficiency of grammar was on the decline, grammar became a metaphor for conservative “political and moral terms: *order, tradition, authority, hierarchy and rules.*” (Cameron 2012: 95). Naturally, it is not always that people who participated in this debate fully realized that grammar became a metaphor for these values (Cameron 2012: 96). Because of this, it is difficult to ascribe intention to a person who uses this metaphor of grammar being linked with the values stated above.

The discourse surrounding politically correct verbal hygiene manifests itself quite differently. To begin with, it is worth noting that Cameron is very critical of the term “politically correct” (Cameron 2012: 127). However, for the purposes of this article, the term will be sufficient in describing the phenomena of debates on non-sexist- or non-racist language reforms. An underlying assumption in debates on political correctness that should be highlighted is that the words we use to describe the world are not trivial (Cameron 2012: 140-144). This is proved by the fact that these debates occur in the first place. Rather, if language has sexist or racist implications, it can cause offense, confusion and a lack of social fairness (Cameron 2012: 134-136). In other words, sexist or racist language can potentially cause harm. Cameron also poses the question of who gets to decide what words mean: Is it the speaker and their intentions or the listener and their interpretations? “Who's to be master?” (Cameron 2012: 118-122). While the answer to this question will be different depending on the situation, it is an important question to ask in debates about politically correct verbal hygiene. What is certain, however, is that the individual can never have full control over the meaning of words since other people have to consent to that meaning, as described in the metaphor of the social contract (Cameron 2012: 149-150).

As stated earlier, verbal hygiene and the discourses surrounding it manifest themselves in many different ways. This article has highlighted aspects of the verbal hygiene of grammar and political correctness as both of these discourses overlap with the discourse of non-binary *they*. Moreover, the framework of verbal hygiene is useful in exploring how non-binary individuals experience the language and societal changes they are part of since it examines both their opinions of what a clean language looks like as well as the values that underlie these opinions. While many verbal hygienic investigations have been made before, none have analyzed the introduction of non-binary *they* which is likely because this language change is relatively recent.

3. Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews lend themselves well to this topic as they can be used to explore individual experiences, perceptions of language and society (Brinkmann 2013: 69) and are therefore suitable for answering the research question involving non-binary people's experience of a language change. One question that needed to be considered was whether the interviews should be conducted individually or collectively (Brinkmann 2013, 44-47). Ultimately, individual interviews are much more conducive to the purposes of this article. The first reason is that each participant is given an equal amount of attention and speaking time. Furthermore, interviewing participants individually also allows the participants to speak freely without worrying about potential judgement from other participants.

3.1 Data and Participants

An introduction of the two participants is warranted. Both participants attend the same high school outside of Philadelphia which has an economically, politically and racially diverse student body. The first participant, Charlie (a pseudonym) is a white high school senior who started going by *they* in the summer of 2020. They grew up in a diverse and progressive part of the Philadelphia metropolitan area, where they have been exposed to many walks of life. Charlie has experienced relatively strong support both from their family and especially from friends. The second participant, Alex (a pseudonym) is also a white high school senior who only started going by *they* in the early fall of 2021. However, people around them have not been as good at adapting to their new pronouns, and they are often referred to by feminine pronouns, intentionally and unintentionally. Furthermore, they also live in the Philadelphia metropolitan area but nothing more specific was mentioned. The amount of support Alex has received has also been less consistent. From friends, they experience the best of intentions. However, the friends unintentionally use the wrong pronouns on occasion. Whether or not the wrong pronouns were used intentionally or unintentionally at home was unclear. The fact that both participants have been out and have gone by non-binary *they* for so little time is not an issue since it highlights the initial experiences of openly identifying with non-binary *they*. Finally, the fact that there were only two participants arguably does not matter since the present study concerns itself with language and social change, which is spearheaded by those comfortable enough to be interviewed about it.

Because of the fact that the interviewees are located in the US, conducting in-person interviews would be very impractical. Therefore, the interviews were conducted and recorded through Zoom video call.

A consequence of this was that compared to in-person conversation, the turn-taking in the conversation was less dynamic. Each interview took between 30 minutes and 40 minutes and both interviews were conducted in early winter of 2021. The interviews followed a semi-structured approach leaning towards a more unstructured approach (Brinkmann 2013: 38-44). Both participants were asked the same five open-ended questions, but when an interesting comment occurred there was room to explore it. Naturally, the participants did not have any prior knowledge of Cameron's notion of verbal hygiene. Therefore, the questions had to be designed in a way that still explores the research topic and its theoretical framework without being unintelligible for the participants. The five fixed questions asked were:

1. When did you start using they/them¹ pronouns and what were people's initial reactions?
2. What does identifying with they/them pronouns mean to you?
3. How easily do you feel people are to adapt to they/them pronouns?
4. What kinds of resistance have you met/heard about they/them pronouns?
5. What kinds of support have you met/heard about they/them pronouns?

All the questions have an intended area of exploration. Question (1) has the purpose of both letting the participants introduce themselves and establishing the degree of social support they have experienced in regards to their new pronouns and gender identity. (2) focuses on their understanding of non-binary *they* in a way that highlights the language aspect more than the social. (3) tries to explore any potential discrepancy between social acceptance compared to how quickly people adapt to using non-binary *they*. In other words, do people support the use of non-binary *they* pronouns but have difficulties using it? (4) was inspired by Cameron's concept of verbal hygiene and aims to examine the arguments against non-binary *they*. (5) aims to do the same but with a focus on the support of non-binary *they*. Moreover, it ends the interview on a positive note.

3.2 Coding the Interviews

Before analyzing the interviews, they need to be processed. To do that, I inductively coded the interviews using the computer software ELAN (ELAN 2021). What is meant by coding the interviews inductively is that instead of starting with a predefined set of codes and then fitting them into the interviews, the codes were created after several viewings of the interviews (Brinkmann 2013: 87-88). Firstly, the interviews were coded by the questions asked and the answers given. This gave a clear overview of the structure of both the interviews. Secondly, common conversational themes between the two interviews were coded to allow for comparison between them. These inductively created codes were: the participants' personal experiences, abstract ideas about pronouns and the participants' perceptions of others' ideas about pronouns. Of course, the codes overlapped at certain points but still helped give a manageable overview of the interviews. Finally, I transcribed small parts of the interview that encapsulated the spirit of what they said for the analysis and helped answer the research

¹Despite it being less precise, I ask when they started "using they/them pronouns" in the questions instead of "identifying with non-binary *they*" since that was how both participants referred to their pronouns in the email exchanges setting up the interviews.

question. Therefore, they were transcribed using reconstructive transcription which means that the characteristics of verbal language were erased and edited so the transcription reads more like a written text (Brinkmann 2013: 87). In case of a pronoun that has anaphoric reference to somewhere outside the quote, a square bracket was added next to it with the antecedent.

4. Analysis of interviews

Now that the theoretical framework of verbal hygiene has been established alongside an account of how the interviews were conducted and processed, I begin the analysis which is divided into three subsections: *Space and Time*, where I analyze when and where the participants go by *they* and what social significance it has. This point is primarily informed by the code “participants' personal experiences”. *The Meaning of They*, which is informed by the code “abstract ideas about pronouns”, where the participants’ understanding of non-binary *they* is explored on a broader perspective than just their own experience. Finally, *The Resistance and Support of Non-Binary They* seeks to explore the broader discussion of what resistance the current change of non-binary *they* has met and is based on the final two codes. In that way, the three sections function as a reverse funnel with each building on the last and all pointing towards answering the research question of how people who identify with non-binary *they* understand the language- and societal change they are a part of.

4.1 *Space and Time*

To begin with, I examine when and where the participants are referred to by *they*, and what social implications this has. To do this, the idea of “coming out” is a useful practice to know about in order to understand what happens. In both cases, when the participants first expressed a desire to be referred to by *they*, it also coincided with them coming out as non-binary and leaving their old gender identity of woman behind. However, just like gender, coming out is not binary. Charlie stated how:

The first time I used they/them pronouns, I asked my closest friends to use them. It was around a year ago. Over the summer of 2020, quarantine gave me a lot of time to understand myself and who I am and I came to the conclusion that like ‘girl’ and ‘female’ were not terms that I identified with. So the first time I started exploring different pronouns for myself I asked my closest friends to use *them* for me. (Charlie)

This statement illuminates how sensitive the subject of pronouns can be. Despite Charlie not identifying with feminine terms, they were nevertheless only comfortable with their preferred pronouns around close friends initially. Firstly, this shows how there is a difference in identifying with non-binary *they* and who the participants are comfortable with referring to them as *they*. Secondly, by requesting that their friends refer to them with new pronouns, Charlie also engages in a form of verbal hygiene. The process of coming out as non-binary and being referred to by *they* was gradual for both participants. Since Alex had only been out a couple of months at the time of the interview, they were only fully comfortable being referred to as *they* at school and with their friends so far.

The high school that the participants attended also seems to be aware of the discrepancy of what pronouns are used where and tries to accommodate the students. Alex describes how:

They [every teacher] would send out a Google form and there would be a question ‘what are your preferred pronouns?’ and then another question that was ‘can I use these pronouns in front of other teachers?’, ‘can I use these pronouns in front of other students?’, ‘can I use these pronouns in front of your parents?’. So just giving the student full control of what they are comfortable with. (Alex)

The form shows how the institution of the high school clearly supports this language and societal change and how it helps codify it. Moreover, the Google form has several intended benefits. Other than being a symbolic gesture, it gives the students an opportunity to go by other pronouns in school than at home without coming out to their parents, who they are likely dependent on. Secondly, it gives the students a way to communicate discomfort with their assigned pronoun to a teacher without being forced to come out. It is worth noting that Alex who mentioned this initiative expressed some hesitation regarding its effectiveness. Despite clearly marking that they want to be referred to as *they*, Alex said “only some people really use they/them pronouns about me.” However, it can be difficult to know what third-person pronouns people use about you since you are the third person and not present in most of those situations.

For the participants, it is clearly not the case that they are either ‘out’ or not regarding their gender identity and their preferred pronouns. What seems to determine it is partly how comfortable they are in the particular context and how long they have been out as non-binary. The high school that both participants attend addresses this discrepancy by taking initiatives to make their non-binary students feel as comfortable and safe as possible.

4.2 *The Meaning of They*

It is one thing to analyze the semantic content of non-binary *they* compared to previous uses of *they*, but that does not explore how the people who identify with this new function of *they* understand it. To explore this, it is vital to analyze the participants’ own perception of what non-binary *they* means to them. When they were asked the broad question of what non-binary *they* meant to them, the answers given from the two participants were in many ways similar. Alex puts it very concisely: “They/them pronouns allow me to fully separate myself from the identity of a woman I had for so long.” Without the inclusion of non-binary *they* in the English language, the participants would not be able to be referred to in accordance with how they experience their gender and would linguistically be forced into the category of woman. However, it is not just a case of escaping womanhood as Charlie describes in this metaphor:

When I try to explain it [what *they* means to me] to cisgender people it’s kind of hard to understand since they don’t know what it’s like to have the wrong pronouns used. It feels like you’re putting on a t-shirt that fits for the first time and you are no longer suffocating. (Charlie)

Charlie's statement seems to indicate that they are aware that the experience of having the wrong pronoun used is not universal and as a way of explaining it, they use the metaphor of wearing a t-shirt so tight that you cannot breathe, to make the feeling more accessible. In that way, like with other non-sexist language reforms, introducing non-binary *they* into the English language is a question of harm reduction.

In the present article, I have used the term “non-binary *they*” to describe this new function of *they*, and from what the participants stated above, it seems like the term is descriptive. However, when the participants were directly asked if the singular *they* pronouns necessarily pointed to an identity outside the gender binary, the answer became more complicated. While Alex's response is straightforward, “Yeah I think it does point towards me separating from the binary”, they still show a hesitancy to make normative statements about non-binary *they*. One reason for this could be that Alex wants to be inclusive and does not want to give a definition that excludes anybody. Furthermore, Charlie argued that the meaning of *they* is left entirely up to the individual who identifies with the pronoun, which means that it does not necessarily point to the non-binary. “One thing I really like about the usage of they/them pronouns and non-binary identity is that it is so ambiguous, that it really just means what people want it to mean”. Though Charlie also mentions non-binary identity here, what is noteworthy about this statement is who gets to decide what their pronouns mean. Going back to Cameron's question of who is the master of words and their meaning, Charlie seems to believe that this is entirely up to the person who identifies with the pronoun. The idea of complete control for the individual is further cemented in a later statement when Charlie discusses what they feel is positive about this change in language and society. “You can express yourself how you want and people can use multiple pronouns, all pronouns or no pronouns.” This statement has potentially radical implications. Firstly, it should be assumed that Charlie is only speaking about third-person singular pronouns, since a person having “no pronouns” at all would force people to structure their sentences in very unusual and creative ways, especially regarding pronouns in plural. Moreover, even if Charlie only comments on third-person singular pronouns, it would still be a challenge for most speakers to refer to a person who wants no singular third-person pronouns. The proposal of expecting someone to never refer to another person by personal pronouns shows the extent of control Charlie is willing to give the individual over the meaning of their own pronouns (or lack thereof). Another interesting thing about this statement is how it, if true, implies the dismantlement of the concept of verbal hygiene. If it is entirely up to the individual what their pronouns mean, then there is no linguistic normativity and thus the idea of verbal hygiene falls apart. However, despite the best of intentions, giving individuals full control over the meaning of their pronouns and having no linguistic normativity is impossible. By asking Cameron's earlier question of who is to be master of words and their meaning, it becomes apparent that other people will always to some extent have to consent to the individual's ideas of what their pronouns mean. In other words, since language is inherently social it is difficult to imagine Charlie's view, that the individual has complete control over the meaning of their pronouns, be fully realized. Nevertheless, it is possible to change social and linguistic norms so that this view of language becomes closer to reality.

For the participants, the meaning of *they* is about removing themselves from the gender binary. What underlies the need for this removal is a discomfort so great that one participant describes it as suffocating. Moreover, the participants displayed hesitation in making any normative statements about non-binary *they*, as they wanted to give full control to individuals about the meaning of their own pronouns. However, it is impossible to break free from verbal hygiene as will be further explored in the next section.

4.3 *The Resistance and Support of Non-Binary They*

Almost all language changes are met with some degree of resistance, and the introduction of non-binary *they* is by no means an exception. When the participants were asked about what kinds of resistance to non-binary *they* they had heard in the media or experienced, similar sentiments were given. One argument Charlie heard was:

the ridiculous one [argument] that *they* is not a singular pronoun which is just objectively incorrect. But unfortunately, a lot of people are under the impression that it is true. I think a big issue is just the denial of non-binary identity though. (Charlie)

Even without the framework of verbal hygiene, it is clear for the participants that when people argue against non-binary *they* it functions as a shorthand for arguing against the existence of non-binary identities. The question is then why language becomes the stand-in of non-binary identities and not something else. Obviously, without the introduction of a gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun, performing an identity outside the gender binary would be much more difficult. Therefore, it is easy to see how pronouns come to represent non-binary identities. However, this is not the whole truth, and this particular debate on verbal hygiene is about more than just the existence of non-binary identities.

One part of this larger truth can be found in a statement by Alex: “I have heard people saying the singular *they* is way too complicated, that it’s not grammatically correct, it’s such a nuisance.” The phrase “not grammatically correct” is noteworthy since it points towards the discourse of grammatical verbal hygiene and all the connotations that follow. To say that non-binary *they* is ungrammatical is reminiscent of how grammar becomes a metaphor for conservative values like tradition, hierarchy and authority (Cameron 2012: 95). The inclusion of non-binary *they* in the English language represents an attack on these values. Firstly, it undermines the traditional hierarchy of gender, since introducing this pronoun linguistically dismantles the gender binary. Secondly, the pronouns used to refer to a person are no longer determined by the authority of biological sex but are rather socially determined. While it is impossible to know if the people who call non-binary *they* ungrammatical are aware of this metaphor, it is safe to say that expressing derision towards non-binary identity more directly would be considered rude and socially inappropriate. In that way, arguments against non-binary *they* are not just about the introduction of a gender-neutral third-person pronoun but also a part of a larger debate in the U.S. surrounding conservative and progressive values. However, not only conservative people practice verbal hygiene.

When asked about the potential ambiguity associated with non-binary *they*, the participants did not seem to mind it, though Alex did say “I guess it could be confusing.” However, this potential confusion did not appear to matter much. Interestingly, when asked about the ambiguity of non-binary *they*, both participants started thinking of neopronouns. Alex’s statement about neopronouns was illuminating in many ways:

I don’t really know how I feel about neopronouns. Like, I respect people who use them, but they don’t really make sense to me. I know that that’s probably like not great. Maybe I just need to read into them or something. (Alex)

This was the most explicit instance of Alex practicing verbal hygiene. Their linguistic preferences are clearly displayed; they favor a world in which *they* becomes the gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun and not a neopronoun. Interestingly though, they are very aware and critical of their own preferences and seem to refer to a “correct” set of linguistic norms that include neopronouns. In the beginning of this part of the analysis, Charlie also states how people who do not think *they* can be singular are “objectively incorrect”, which also points to this set of “correct” linguistic norms. This shows how everyone practices linguistic normativity, though the purposes might vary, and thereby underlines the relevance of studying language change through the lenses of verbal hygiene. Some people intentionally use the wrong pronoun to cause harm, others express genuine confusion. While it is impossible to be certain if people are doing it intentionally or not, most people will intuitively make an educated guess and act accordingly. Charlie also mentioned neopronouns when discussing the ambiguity of non-binary *they* and while they were less direct about it, they still show a preference for one over the other.

I think in a way, the ambiguity makes it easier for people to use it [non-binary *they*] because they’re used to using it. It’s not like introducing neopronouns to them like *ey/em* or *ze/zir*, that they aren’t used to using. It feels like I am making a change without making a huge change. (Charlie)

Compared to neopronouns, non-binary *they* is both easier to use and less disruptive of people’s expectations according to Charlie. While this is not as explicit a case of verbal hygiene as Alex’s statement, it builds on the assumption that language ought to be clear and easy to use. In that way, Charlie displays an implicit preference for *they* over neopronouns. Going back to Charlie’s earlier statement about who gets to decide what their pronouns mean, this slight preference necessitates that despite the best intentions, no individual can hold full power of what the words describing them mean. Charlie believing that neopronouns are more disruptive than non-binary *they* shows how they are also partly attributing meaning to the individual’s pronouns. Finally, Charlie’s earlier statement about a person referred to by all pronouns or by no pronouns and the potentially radical implications that followed also indicates that, like to the detractors of non-binary *they*, pronouns have come to represent non-binary identity as a whole to them as well.

Everyone practices verbal hygiene in one way or another. Detractors of non-binary *they* call it confusing and ungrammatical while at the same time criticizing the existence of non-binary identities

and trying to preserve conservative values. On the other hand, the participants who identified with non-binary *they* felt unease about making any normative statement about language but still did so as they displayed a slight preference for non-binary *they* over a neopronoun.

5. Conclusion

The answer to how non-binary people experience the language- and societal change they are part of is neither wholly positive nor negative. While the introduction of non-binary *they* still meets considerable resistance, it also meets significant support. For the two participants, the resistance manifests itself in people intentionally referring to them using the wrong pronoun and calling non-binary *they* “not grammatical”. In that way, criticism of non-binary *they* is reminiscent of how grammar previously has been a metaphor for conservative values. The support that the participants experienced has been both institutional and social. The high school the participants attended made initiatives to make students more comfortable with their new pronouns. Socially, they especially experienced support from their peers who generally did not have trouble adapting to the new function of *they*. Nevertheless, both participants only went by their non-binary pronouns in certain spaces as they did not feel comfortable with them everywhere. This was despite the fact that they both state how much comfort non-binary pronouns bring them. Interestingly, both participants hesitated in making any normative statements surrounding non-binary *they* but at the same time seemed to refer to a set of linguistic norms in which there is a clear line between what was and was not “correct” language. However, both participants hesitatingly made normative statements regarding neopronouns which they distanced themselves from. While this article only had two participants, it is worth keeping in mind that there are not many non-binary people and they are spearheading this language and societal change. In that way, this article gives a unique understanding of how one part of the English language is changing.

6. References

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