

Nounself pronouns: 3rd person personal pronouns as identity expression

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Abstract

This paper is an examination of an attempt at a preliminary definition of nounself pronouns, which are a large number of newly invented English 3rd person personal pronouns that have not been previously studied. The pronouns are created and used primarily by a virtual community on the blogging platform tumblr.com, with the first occurrence of a nounself pronoun in late 2013. The study is based on data from 134 responses to a questionnaire written by the author, distributed through tumblr.com, as well as on email-based interviews with three respondents who volunteered to be interviewed. Analysis of the data suggests that the pronouns are used to express, explore, and negotiate the identities of the respondents, in particular in relation to gender identities.

1. Introduction

In this paper I examine and attempt to give a preliminary definition of *nounself pronouns*: a large number of English 3rd person pronouns derived from various nouns and other parts of speech. An example of one such pronoun is *fae*, as exemplified below in various grammatical forms:

Fae is nice. I saw *faer*. *Fae* was hugging *faer* friend.

The pronouns have, to my knowledge, not previously been studied. They have been in existence and used by a virtual community on the blogging platform tumblr.com since late 2013. The present study is based on data I collected through a questionnaire and three email interviews in spring 2015.

I embarked on the study with the hypothesis that the pronouns reflect parts of the identities of the people they refer to. My data confirms this, and further suggests that the pronouns are also used as tools of discovering and performing identities. In addition, I wanted to see if the pronouns are used in casual conversation and offline, as I had mainly seen them as topics of meta-linguistic discussions. This paper provides an overview of the various usages and functions of nounself pronouns.

Section 2 describes pronouns as a syntactic category and their use as gender-specific reference, and the relationship between identity and language. In section 3, I account for the collection of data. Section 4 is my preliminary definition of nounself pronouns, and in section 5, I analyze and discuss the usage of the pronouns. Section 6 discusses the future of and attitudes towards the pronouns.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1 Gender identities

Throughout the paper, I will use several terms related to gender and gender identities, which will be specified in this section.

As Johnson and Repta (2002) point out, the categories of gender are “socially constructed, as humans both create and assign individuals to them”, and “ideas about gender [are] culturally and temporally specific and subject to change”. For that reason, in this paper the term *gender identity* is used to mean whichever gender a person identifies as, feels themselves to be, and refers to themselves as, not limited to the binary choices of “male” or “female”. The *gender binary* refers to the notion that the only existent genders are these two, and *nonbinary* is an umbrella term for all gender identities that do not fall squarely within either category. (For more on the problems of the sex/gender binary, see e.g. Carrera et al 2012; Johnson and Repta 2002; McElhinny 2014. For a brief case study of nonbinary identities, see Beemyn 2015). Examples of nonbinary gender identities are both identities that to some extent include one or both of the binary genders as well as identities that are completely separate from either female or male. Examples of the former are *demigirl*, which means partially identifying as feminine, and *bigender*, which means identifying as both male and female. Examples of the latter are *androgynous* and *neutrois*, which are types of “third” genders, and *agender*, which is the absence of a gender identity (*Nonbinary Wiki*).

Transgender individuals identify as a different gender than the gender they were assigned at birth, i.e. the gender they were legally recorded to be after medical professionals judged them to be this gender based on their external genitalia, and which subsequently they were presumably raised and socialized as. The term *cisgender*, on the other hand, refers to individuals who do not feel a mismatch between their gender identity and their assigned-at-birth gender.

2.2 Otherkin identities

Another relevant term is *Otherkin*, an identity that many users of nounself pronouns share. In broad terms, a person identifying as Otherkin identifies as and/or feels closely connected to a nonhuman, sometimes non-real entity (Laycock 2012:66). This entity is referred to as the person's kintype or kin. Otherkin is often considered a spiritual belief by Otherkin individuals themselves (*ibid*). The idea of sharing an identity or experiencing a close connection to a nonhuman entity is ancient and common across cultures, though the term “Otherkin” originated online (Kirby 2013:40).

2.3 Pronouns

Traditional definitions of pronouns, such as the one in *Glossary of linguistic terms*, call them a type of pro-form substituting noun phrases (2004). In practice, this is a very wide definition that includes many different kinds of words (Bhat 2004:1). Another issue with this definition is that personal pronouns do not really “substitute” anything, and e.g. demonstratives, too, can stand for other word classes (*ibid*).

Pronouns are normally considered to be semantically poor (Bhat 2004:3; Saxena 2006). Whether they are used deictically (associated with 1st and 2nd person pronouns) or anaphorically (associated with 3rd person pronouns, though as Saxena (2006) states, these can also be used deictically, such as by pointing to the person being referred to while saying “He is the one!”), the meanings, i.e. the specific referents, of personal pronouns depend on either physical/social or textual context. Pronouns in various languages may have semantic (or semantic-syntactic) content in terms of gender reference, switch-reference, expressing politeness, and more (Saxena 2006). However, the nounself pronouns examined in this paper carry much more explicit semantic descriptions of their referents.

As a final note on pronouns as a syntactic category, Saxena (2006) points out that “[U]nlike other classes of function words, pronouns undergo surprisingly rapid diachronic change.” Although she goes on to call pronouns a closed class, this “rapid change” can include the rise of new pronouns – this has happened in several languages (Luu 2015). The nounself pronouns are a fine example of this.

2.3.1 GENDER REFERENCE

The World Atlas of Language Structures’ chapter on gender distinctions in independent personal pronouns state that in their sample ~30 % of languages have such distinctions. Most are what the author calls “sex-based”, “i.e. pronouns used for male referents are masculine and those used for female [referents] are feminine” (Siewierska 2013). English, as many other European languages, is one of these; usually *she* refers to female persons and *he* to male persons. Singular *they* is used gender-neutrally and, less widely, as referring specifically to persons of a nonbinary gender.

It must be noted that the term “sex-based” is problematic in several respects, as it implies a one-to-one relationship between a person’s gender, their biological/physical body, and the appropriate pronoun to use to refer to that person (see 2.1). Consider the concept of chosen pronouns, also called preferred pronouns. These are the pronouns an individual wants others to use for referring to them. The concept is prominent in transgender and gender nonconforming communities (*Gay Straight Alliance for Safe Schools*). Not only are a person’s chosen pronouns not inferable from their appearance, but even knowing their gender identity one can’t be sure that a particular set of pronouns is correct: A person may prefer being referred to as he despite identifying as female, and as this study will show, preference may depend on things entirely different from gender.

2.4 Constructing identity through language

2.4.1 PERFORMING AND CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

I argue below that pronouns can express aspects of identity, which makes it necessary to define “identity”. Barker and Galasiński call it “an emotionally charged description of ourselves” (2001:28). In line with this we can define identity as something an individual feels *about themselves*, in which they are emotionally invested, and which they describe – implying that this description is relayed *to others*, constructing identity in a social context. Self-categorization theory

distinguishes between social and personal identity. Social identity is what one ascribes to oneself in terms of group membership, while personal identity is the individual defining themselves as a unique person in terms of how their traits differ from others' in their group (Turner *et al* 1994:454). Further, identity is not fixed; our self-perception differs between contexts, and it may be desirable to emphasize one identity in some contexts and another in others (see 5.2). Identity is fragmental, consisting of many characteristics, roles, and associations that together make up the whole. A person may even be seen as composed of many different identities (Barker and Galasiński 2001:40).

Since the 1990s, linguists have conducted several studies of how speakers construct and perform identities through linguistic behavior (McElhinny 2014; Joseph 2010). These studies suggest that speakers present – or describe, in Barker and Galasiński's terms – themselves as particular identities through linguistic features ranging from morphosyntactic structure over lexical choice to pitch and prosody (see e.g. McElhinny (2014) for an incomplete overview of studies relating to sexual and gender identity). In what Penelope Eckert (2012) calls the Third Wave of studies in sociolinguistic variation, there is a particular focus on the *construction* of identities. Speakers do not simply demonstrate their social identities, but actively create their personal identities through their stylistic choices. Identity is not “being”, but “the process of becoming” (Barker and Galasiński 2001:30, Butler 1999:33).

2.4.2 IDENTITY OF WORDS

One function of language is to be a tool for us to describe reality and negotiate how to do so. In order to describe entities and abstract elements in our lives, we assign meaning to words beyond their literal referents.

This is called connotation, as opposed to denotation (Barker and Galasiński 1999:5). Barker and Galasiński give the example *man*, whose denotation is ‘male human’ but may connote concepts like ‘toughness’, ‘strength’, ‘stoicism’ (*ibid*). It may also connote the vaguer ‘masculinity’, which in turn carries connotations to the concepts associated with *man*. These connotations have become *naturalized*: culturally integrated so that speakers don't take conscious note of them (*ibid*). Building onto this with my own example, another word in Western culture commonly associated with the aforesaid concepts is *rhinoceros*. Due to the shared connotations, we make a connection between *man* and *rhinoceros* – and between *rhinoceros* and *masculinity*. Thus the rhino is considered a “manly” animal, even though female rhinos exist.

Extending this to the present study, consider whether the process of connotation also applies to function words such as pronouns. If *he* is taken to refer to male persons, is there then the implicit assumption that these referents are also masculine, tough, strong? Research suggests yes: A famous study showed that L1 speakers of German and Spanish differ in which adjectives they will use to describe various objects depending on the word's grammatical gender in their native languages (and thus which pronoun substitutes) (Boroditsky *et al* 2003:70).

Yet specific connotations of words are not immutable or static. Hebdige (1979) described how juxtaposing signs (words or otherwise) that usually have no mutual relevance can create new connotations between them. Speakers are able to create new meanings as well as connect existing meanings to new referents. In the rest of the present paper, I explore how users of nounself pronouns use these both to create connotations to themselves as well as to create entirely new meanings for existing concepts.

3. Methods

The bulk of my data is collected through a questionnaire distributed on the blogging platform tumblr.com. The questionnaire received 175 responses. 39 were discarded due to the reported pronouns not fitting the definition below. 2 were discarded as they were suspected to be joke responses. Thus the following section analyzes 134 responses, supplemented by elaborating email interviews of 3 volunteering respondents. Self-reporting provides less reliable results than direct observation, but allows for a larger data pool and is less time consuming, which is why it was chosen as the main method.

The distributed questionnaire contains two sections, titled respectively “General information” and “Your pronouns”. The first section contains question about age, which identity markers the respondents use about themselves, and whether English is their first language. For the identity markers, the respondents are not asked to pick from a pre-made list, but can type freely in a blank text field. They are asked specifically about gender identity, whether they consider themselves transgender, whether they consider themselves Otherkin, and if they use any other identity markers they consider relevant. The second section asks about the respondent’s chosen pronouns, why they chose them and in which circumstances they use them. They are also asked to fill in their pronouns in some example sentences in order to demonstrate the inflectional paradigm. As with the identity makers, the respondents are allowed to freely type in a blank text field, and not made to choose from a list of specific pronoun sets. In general, blank text fields were used whenever possible to allow for the respondents to convey their identities and motivations as accurately as possible. Making them choose from a list of options would likely have resulted in generalization and oversimplification, as the list in question would be limited by my own imagination. This is especially true considering the very large variety of answers the questionnaire received. Appendix B contains the unfilled questionnaire.

The other part of the data is examples of authentic use of nounself pronouns in blog posts on tumblr.com. Finding authentic use was challenging for two reasons: 1) Since I question whether people use the pronouns casually or “revert” to traditional pronouns, engaging people in conversations about other persons they know to use nounself pronouns (while knowing that I am studying something related to pronouns and identity) might cause them to think about which to use and not elicit a natural response. 2) A more practical issue: Ideally I would have analyzed recorded conversations (spoken and written), but constraints of distance/time zones and privacy concerns made this unfeasible. Searching for use of the pronouns in already-public blog posts was also

laborious, as most search engines do not give clear results for function words, especially when the nominative (and most used) form of the pronoun can be confused with the source word. Additionally, in blog posts people are more likely to address others directly, thus using 2nd rather than 3rd person pronouns. Still, I was able to find several examples of authentic use.

4. Nounself pronouns

Nounself pronouns are a type of English 3rd person pronouns, which I examine as used by a semi-coherent virtual community of bloggers on tumblr.com. In my questionnaire data 78 pronoun sets are represented, but lists assembled by users themselves suggest that as much as 400 exist (see Appendix A). The earliest known use is late 2013. According to the *Nonbinary Wiki*, the first instances of the pronouns were invented by nonbinary people wanting alternatives to existing gender neutral pronouns, though they have since become associated with Otherkin identities.

The prototypical example of a nounself pronoun set is derived from a noun. A popular set is derived from *fae* (an old form of the word *fairy*). Its paradigm is as follows:

Nominative	Oblique	Adjectival possessive	Possessive	Reflexive
fae	faer	faer	faers	faerself

Besides nouns, the pronouns are commonly derived from onomatopoeia (*tok*, *purr*) and proper names. The pronouns can use the entire source word as a base as above, or reduce the stem as in this set derived from *bunny*: *bun/bun/buns/bunself*. The stem can be reduced beyond recognition, as in this set derived from *bird*: *bi/bir/birs/birself*. There are examples of differing sets derived independently from the same word, so that *bird* can also become *bird/bird/birds/birdself*. The stem may undergo ablaut in some forms, usually the nominative, as in *spri/sprout/sprouts/sproutself*.

In the possessive forms, an almost universal process is to add a morpheme <-r> or <-s> to the possessive forms, likely to mimic *her(s)/his/their(s)*.

To the oblique forms, <-r> or <-m> are often added, likely to similarly mimic *her/him/them*.

4.1 Definitional scope

I have defined nounself pronouns as prototypically transparently derived from a specific word, usually a noun. Many pronoun sets do not have this clear etymology, but still follow the same general inflectional principles (an example is *tem/tem/tems/temself*) and have similar function. Additionally, there are pronouns that predate the nounself phenomenon and the term “nounself”, such as *ey/em/eir/emself*, which respondents to my questionnaire nevertheless treat similarly in terms of their motivation for choosing the pronouns and their attitudes towards them. The term *neopronouns* is sometimes used both in my questionnaire and in metalinguistic discussions of the pronouns on tumblr. “Neopronouns” is both used as an umbrella term for all other pronouns than

she, he, they and *it*, but also as referring to pronoun sets such as *ey/em/eir/emself*, but excluding the kinds of sets that I define as nounself pronouns. The exact distinction is not obvious.

A possible way of distinguishing is to define everything predating late 2013 as neopronouns and everything later as nounself – but this is not ideal, partly because questionnaire respondents state similar reasons for choosing both more and less prototypical sets as their chosen pronouns. Another option would be to examine whether there are different relationships between the types of pronouns and the referents' identities (see 5.3), but this will require a more in-depth analysis than is possible in the present study.

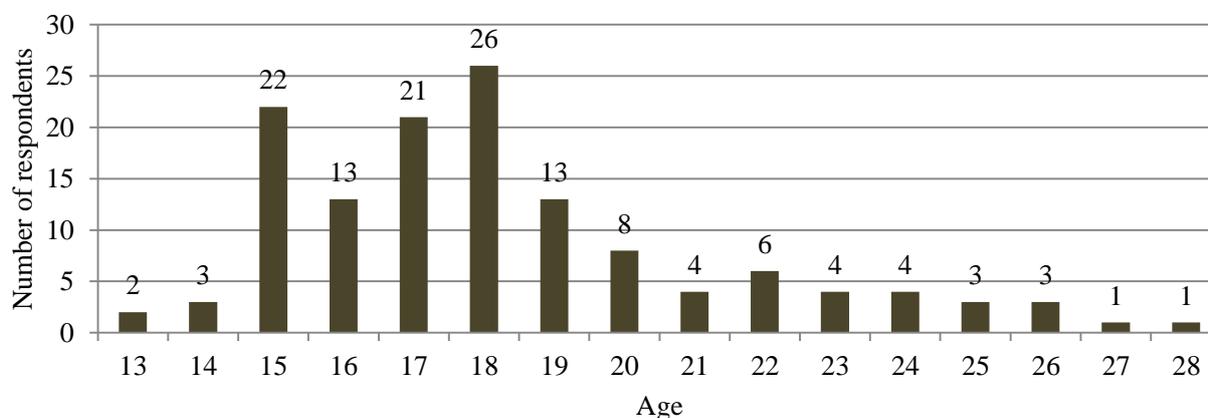
In light of this, the pronouns examined in this paper will only exclude the paradigms of *she, he, they,* and *it*. Thus this paper concerns both nounself pronouns and neopronouns, though focus is on prototypical examples.

5. Data and analysis

5.1 Demographics

77% of the respondents are between 15 and 20 years of age, the median age being 18 years. 20 have a L1 other than English, and 16 report living in a country where at least one official language is a language other than English.

Figure 1.1. – Age of respondents



The questionnaire allows respondents to type their gender identity into a blank text field, thus putting little constraints on possible answers. 43 different gender identities are represented among the respondents, only 3 identifying solely as a binary gender. 5 report not knowing/being uncertain about their gender or didn't state one. 130 respondents identify as trans or transgender (including those answering this question by stating a (neither male nor female) gender identity.) Two report uncertainty about whether the term *transgender* applies to them, and further two comment that they aren't fully comfortable with the term despite considering themselves transgender.

83 respondents identify as Otherkin, 3 of which are unsure or "still figuring it out".

No respondents identify as neither transgender/nonbinary nor Otherkin, supporting the notion that nounself pronouns are associated with these identities.

5.2 Usage

The most popular set is *fae* or variations thereof: 28 respondents list it as one of their pronoun sets. *Fae* is both the most frequent set in the questionnaire data, and also the set I saw the most when collecting authentic use.

The productivity of the derivation process is evident from the responses. 34 of the 78 sets only occur once, suggesting that many have invented their own rather than use a set someone else came up with, and/or that some people invent several sets without using all of them as their own chosen pronouns.

A majority of the respondents reported using multiple pronoun sets: 38 specifically list more than one set as their chosen pronouns, while 127 answered yes to the question, “Do you have a secondary set of pronouns to be used by people who can’t/won’t use your chosen/preferred pronouns?”

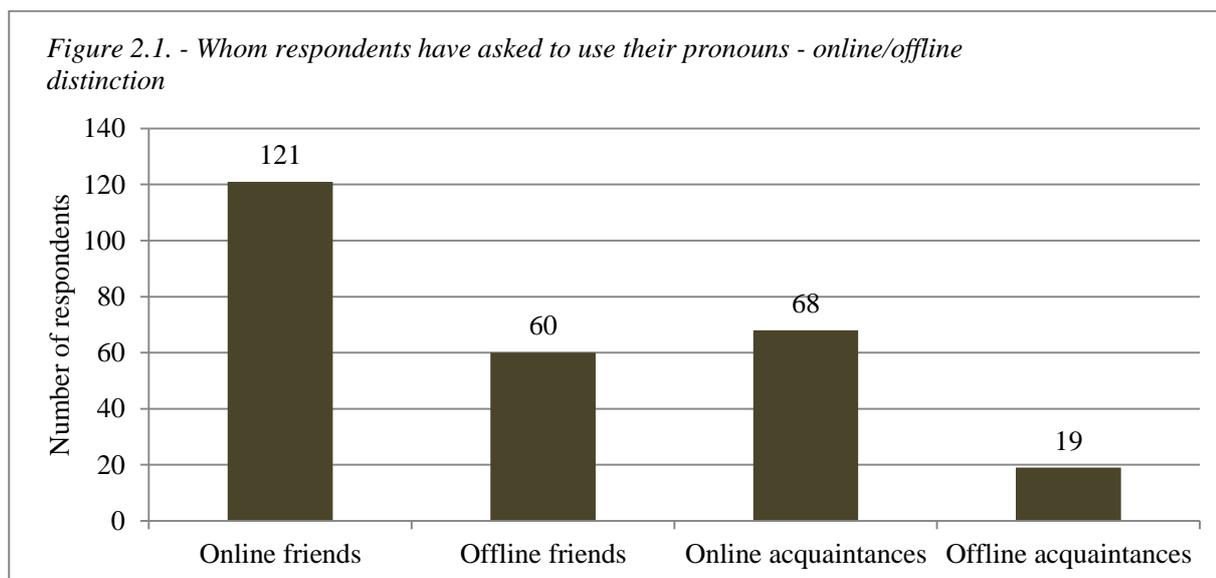
All three interviewees report that all or most people they ask to use their pronouns honor that request, though they also mention asking relatively few people. In contrast, other respondents state that not many use their nounself pronouns, or that they have trouble getting people to do so. Self-report is one thing, actual practice another, but the claim that at least some people use the pronouns is supported by examples of authentic use in blog posts:

“[...]the other day I was talking to Ariel about my problems so fae composed a to-do list email on the spot and sent it to me[...]” – tumblr user puppyfemme, October 2014.

“#fae told me to post this #so i’m not just posting faer name without permission” – tumblr user chiefmilesobrien, March 2015.

As the pronouns are self-chosen, individuals must actively inform and ask others to use the correct pronouns. The data shows that people are not indiscriminate in whom they ask. Generally people are more likely to be open about their pronouns in online environments than offline: see figure 2.1. Online relations also tend to be the first requestees; only 3 respondents have asked offline and not online friends, and all of these report having their pronouns listed on their blog and/or social media profile. In total 103 respondents have their pronouns listed this way. Considering that the phenomenon originated in a virtual community, a disparity between online and offline use isn’t surprising. The anonymity of the internet also means people cannot easily assume others’ gender based on appearance and thus which pronouns are “correct”, making it easier for persons to make requests.

Figure 2.1. - Whom respondents have asked to use their pronouns - online/offline distinction



There seems to be a correlation between whom individuals ask to use their pronouns and their relationship to those people. Respondents seem more likely to ask friends than family; only 18 report having asked family members. Of these, some have asked only one or few close family members, usually a sibling. Leaving the sphere of personal relationships, the number decreases further: 8 respondents have asked coworkers, classmates, and/or teachers to use their pronouns. 5 report having asked no one. Whom a person asks to use their pronouns may be a reflection of their emotional closeness – some state only sharing their nounself pronouns with people they’re comfortable with – but given the number of respondents who list their pronouns publicly this cannot be the whole explanation. Rather, chosen pronouns reflect the choice of which identity to construct and perform depending on the context. An individual may wish to present different aspects of their identity to friends, family, colleagues etc. If a person’s pronouns reflect e.g. their love of nature (section 5.3.), this trait may be irrelevant to their job and thus they may feel uncomfortable using that particular pronoun set in a work environment. Using nounself pronouns may also imply membership of e.g. transgender or Otherkin communities, which a person may not want to disclose to everyone. If one does use a pronoun set in a specific social context, this may put expectations onto the nature of the relationship and the interaction. One respondent state that “[...]people who i’m affectionate with use “bun/bun/bunself””.

The hypothesis that people purposely regulate the use of their pronouns is supported by how the majority of respondents have secondary/”auxiliary” pronouns. This is likely also related to the common criticism that nounself pronouns are hard to learn by English L2 speakers and speakers with learning disabilities (section 6). Several report having secondary pronouns for this reason. Still, some have nounself pronouns as their secondary set and a traditional set as their primary, supporting the idea. Finally, people’s openness about their pronouns is affected by others’ attitude towards them: see section 6.

5.3 Defining the self

Respondents report a variety of reasons for choosing their particular pronouns, ranging from phonetic and visual appeal to feeling an instinctive sense of “rightness”/“comfort”. By far the most prevalent reason is a connection between the pronouns and an aspect of the respondent’s identity other than gender. 60 respondents feel coherence between their pronouns and their personality, an interest or object of affection, their kintype, their name, or similar. Responses range from specific –

“I’m a very excitable and energetic person, and xe/xer pronouns make me think of energy”

– to vague:

“[My] pronouns come with certain feelings and energies attached to them, for me, I like the way they feel in reference to how my vibes feel, and how they communicate the vibes I want to give off to other people.”

Many list multiple reasons for their choice, e.g. connections to both gender and other identity aspects.

Interestingly, only 22 respondents explicitly state connection to their gender as a reason for their choice of pronouns, even though 120 respondents report feeling that their pronouns reflect their gender. There may be several explanations: First, the questions may be too vague and hence the respondents do not list every single reason they have. Second, some may consider using any other pronouns than *he* or *she* to signal a non-cisgender identity, even if others disagree. Finally and most importantly, it may not always be clear if a respondent makes a distinction between their gender and identity in general: see section 5.4. For now note that the distribution between “Connection to gender” and “Connection to identity” in figure 3.1 may be imprecise.

Figure 3.1: Respondents' stated reasons for choosing pronouns

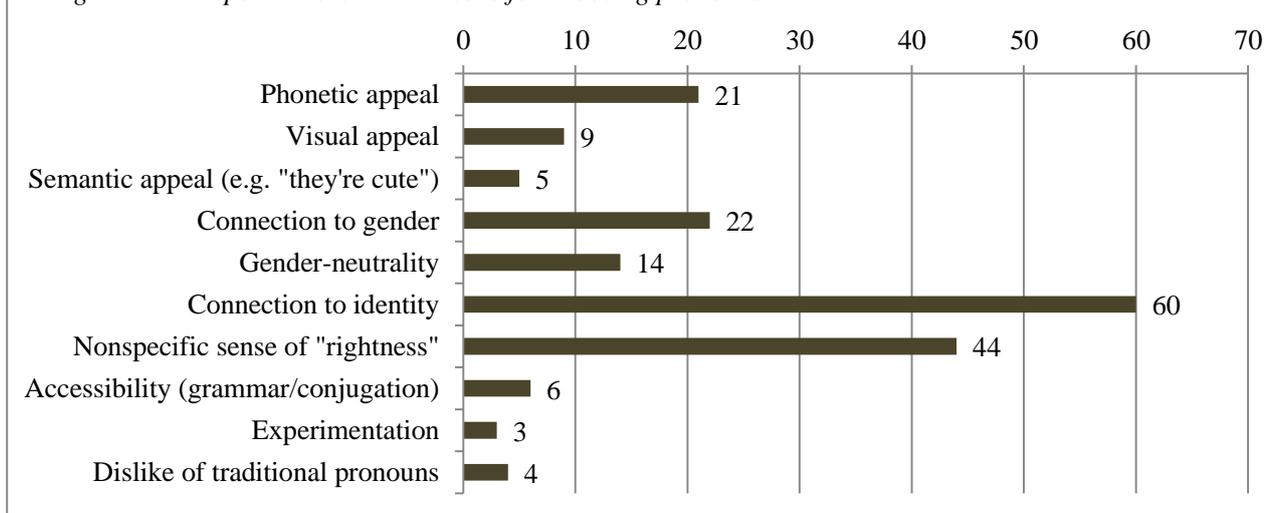
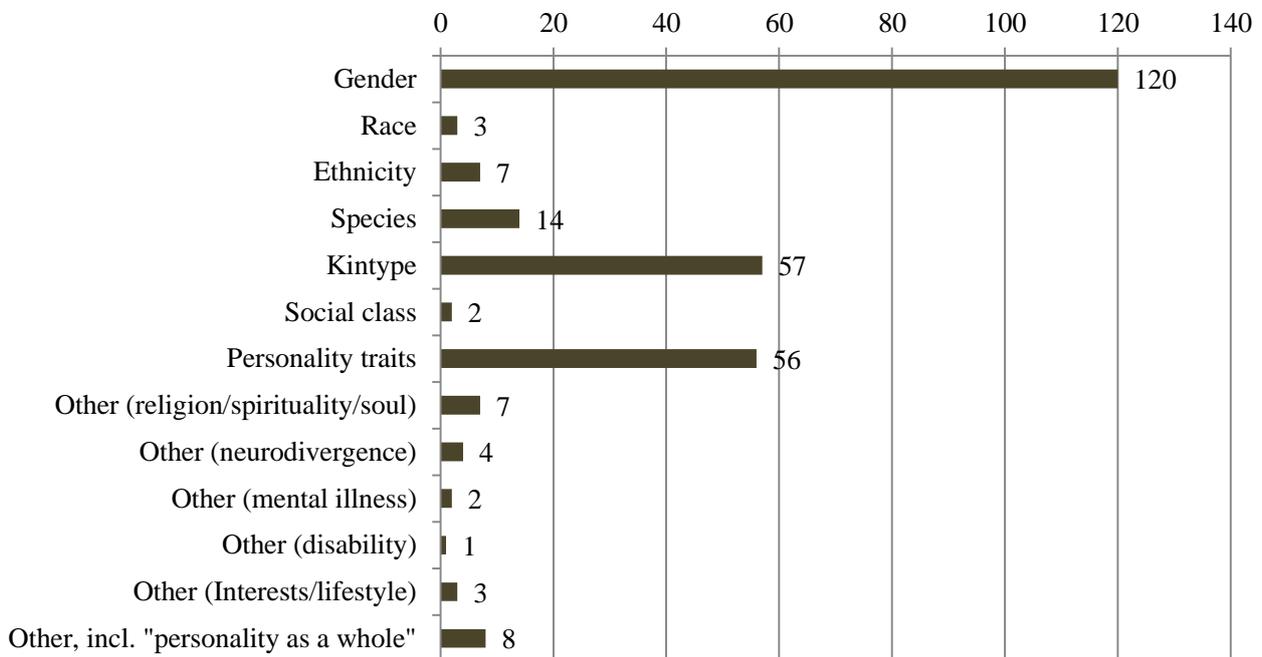


Figure 3.2. Responses to the question "Do you feel your chosen/preferred pronouns reflect any of the following parts of your identity?". The options were chosen to provide as broad a range as possible. 'Species' and 'Kintype' was originally one option,



What is meant by “connection to identity”? Respondents seem to make connotations between the source words of their pronouns and concepts they connect to their identity. As described in 2.3.3., respondents may associate a concept with characteristics they consider themselves to have, and by extension make a connotation between themselves and said concept. E.g. a respondent using *bat* pronouns states feeling “connected to bats due [to] my bad eyesight, good hearing, nocturnal [and] secluded nature.” The connotations respondents make range from very specific to very general, sometimes even contradictory: Connotations to *fae* include “beauty, optimism”, “general ethereal nature”, and “playful, chaotic” as well as “serious, calm”. Connections can also be less abstract, e.g. interest in folklore/fairy tales, or behavior such as “napping and snuggling”. Unlike for traditional pronouns, the connotations between source words and identity are not necessarily culturally ingrained, making the semantics of nounself pronouns more overt.

Choosing pronouns is part of the process of identity construction. Respondents comment that nounself pronouns are often used by young people exploring their identities (matching the age range of respondents), and some explicitly report experimenting with the pronouns. Many found their pronouns on websites such as *Pronoun Dressing Room*, which have lists of existing pronouns and tools for constructing new ones, encouraging a playful and exploratory approach to pronouns. The fluidity or fragmentation of identity is further demonstrated by the number of respondents using more than one set of pronouns. Different sets may reflect different things, and respondents give different reasons for choosing different sets: e.g. “pup/pups pronouns express a level of fun and

excitement and happiness [...] in me, and fae/faer pronouns express a more chill, calm, serious, responsible me.”

5.4 Redefining gender

According to Butler, identity is tied to gender, and we perceive each other through the lens of gender (1999:22). This makes the gender binary with only its two choices very limiting. Nounself pronouns can be seen as an attempt to break free from this. By constructing new pronouns, people can construct new ways to identify and be perceived by others that are more coordinate with complex and diverse identities. As a respondent states: “Pronouns represent a reality, we just chose for that reality to be gender. It could be anything!”

Though many respondents report specifically choosing pronouns that reflect aspects of their identity other than gender, others approach it differently. They feel their pronouns do reflect their genders, but make connotations not usually made to gender. Respondents describe their “gender’s closeness to fire in terms of behavior/feeling”, and “very otherworldly sense of gender”. Some even break down otherwise ingrained connotations: “[my pronouns] feel masculine to me, but with no connections to manhood”. Of the 43 gender identities represented in the data, many are conceptually far from the traditional ‘female’ and ‘male’: e.g. “stargender” or “felisgender”.

This reflects the idea that gender is not only far more complex than ‘male’, ‘female’ and, ‘maybe a third option’, but also separate from biology. Butler speculated on this: “[G]ender is “a relation”, indeed, a set of relations, and not an individual attribute” (1999:13), and: “If sex does not limit gender, then perhaps there are genders, ways of culturally interpreting the sexed body, that are in no way restricted by the apparent duality of sex” (*ibid*:143). The nounself pronouns certainly suggest unrestricted interpretation.

6. The future

Nounself pronouns are debated intensely within the community. There are strong attitudes towards the pronouns on either side; coupled with their newness this brings their sustainability into question. This section aims to provide a brief overview of the debate.

For any language change, speakers’ attitudes are a factor in its sustainability. A sample of posts on tumblr as well as other sites (Reddit, Wordpress) reveals two main criticisms of nounself pronouns: 1) That they, unlike traditional pronouns, reflect things other than gender or make unusual connotations to gender makes it harder for transgender and nonbinary people to be taken seriously. 2) Accessibility: They are hard to learn/remember, both in terms of inflection and keeping track of who uses which set, and they are hard to translate into other languages. It is argued that they slow down communication and put disabled and L2 speakers at a disadvantage (glitterdustcyclops 2014). Debaters on the other side counter the first point by referring to respectability politics, arguing that the pronouns will neither worsen nor better the discrimination that transgender and nonbinary people already face (Ozymandias 2014). One respondent to the questionnaire states:

“[The] pronouns aren’t “responsible for cis people not taking us seriously.” Cissexism and transphobic cis people are the reason we aren’t taken seriously. People won’t even use they/their because it’s “grammatically incorrect”, so we tried to make other pronouns like xe/xem or e/em and they were “too complicated” and people still didn’t use them. Ultimately, nounself pronouns aren’t much different [.]”

As mentioned, secondary pronouns are used to address the accessibility issues.

Valid or not, critics are vocal. Respondents report being worried about reactions to their pronouns and therefore limit their use:

“I feel like a lot of people will ridicule me for using such silly sounding pronouns.”

“I’m often too afraid to ask people to use these or even admit that I use them because of all the hatred directed at people who use them.”

“I used to use nounself pronouns but the harassment I received made me go with something more conventional.”

Further, two non-users of nounself or neopronouns answered the questionnaire specifically to express dislike of nounself pronouns, calling them “a stupid fad” and “a mockery of trans people”.

In contrast, respondents themselves report very positive feelings associated with their own pronouns:

“[T]hey make me smile and feel good – especially when I’m otherwise feeling down.”

“I am really happy with them and feel very comfortable using them on the odd occasion when I talk abt myself in the third person.”

“they make me feel comfortable and happy with myself.”

What about actual usage? Nounself and neopronouns are criticized for being “grammatically incorrect”, but arguments of grammatical correctness have historically been inefficient in swaying actual speech. Singular *they* was and is criticized on the same grounds yet is widely used as a gender neutral pronoun (Foertsch and Gernsbacher 1997:106). Still, numerous pronouns have been invented since at least 1884, none having gained widespread usage (Luu 2015). In addition to being already established as a pronoun, singular *they* has the advantage of being applicable to any referent of unspecified gender; considering the specificity of nounself pronouns, they will likely have a harder time gaining ground.

7. Conclusion

This study shows, based mainly on questionnaire responses, that nounself pronouns carry more meaning than just gender reference. They reflect aspects of their referents’ identities through

connotations, and do so more extensively and perhaps overtly than traditional 3rd person pronouns. However this is not the sole reason persons may have for choosing a particular set of pronouns; some choose pronouns they feel e.g. look or sound good. The creation and choice of pronouns can play a role in exploring and constructing one's identity, and be a tool in redefining social concepts, e.g. gender. Though both self-report and observations suggest that nounself pronouns occur in casual and offline conversation, their usage is restricted in part due to criticism towards them.

8. Topics for further study

Nounself pronouns are yet uncharted and there's great potential for further inquiry. Since there are two contesting terms in use, nounself pronouns and neopronouns, between which the distinction is not clear, it would be fruitful to examine the usage of and attitudes towards the two terms. For instance, do critics of nounself pronouns have the same negative attitudes towards the term neopronouns? Relatedly, there is little empirical evidence for the claim that disabled and English L2 speakers have difficulty with the pronouns. A study on this may influence the debate.

Relevant questions that do not concern the meta status of the terms include a "chicken or the egg" dilemma: Is the gender concept being redefined due to gender reference of pronouns being diversified, or are new pronouns being derived due to the concept of gender being redefined? Sociological and especially sociolinguistic research in recent years provide much basis for a less binary and biological understanding of gender, but the extent to which users of nounself pronouns take their perceptions and definitions of gender is not commonly seen in the literature. It might also be interesting to examine if users have prior knowledge of e.g. nonbinary identities, or if this is something they are introduced to through the pronouns.

Finally, a closer study of domains would be interesting. As a respondent stated, "people can use different sets of neo pronouns in different situations", but my questionnaire failed to capture the nuances in this. Generally, there seem to be many hidden depths and complexities in the functions and usage of nounself pronouns, and closer examination of these could potentially teach us much about the concept of gender and how identity in general is constructed and performed.

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Appendix A – Lists of pronouns

List of pronouns present in data from questionnaire:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a/ath/athes/atheself | <input type="checkbox"/> iz/ice/iceself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ae/aer/aers/aerself | <input type="checkbox"/> iz/iz/iz's/izself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> as/ast/asts/astrosel | <input type="checkbox"/> jee/jem/jeir/jemsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> avi/avi/avis/avisel | <input type="checkbox"/> ki/kir/kirs/kirsself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> blue/blue/blues/bluesel | <input type="checkbox"/> kit/kit/kits/kitsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bun/bun/buns/bunsel | <input type="checkbox"/> mew/mew/mews/mewsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ce/caer/caers/caersel | <input type="checkbox"/> moon/moon/moons/moonself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ce/ce/cers/cersel | <input type="checkbox"/> ne/nem/nir/nirs/nemsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cele/celes/celes/celesel | <input type="checkbox"/> ne/non/nons/nonsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> co/co/cos/cosel | <input type="checkbox"/> neb/neb/nebs/nebsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cthu/cthul/cthuls/cthulsel | <input type="checkbox"/> nos (only nominative form reported) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dae/daem/daer/daers/daemsel | <input type="checkbox"/> nov/nov/novs/novsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dark/dark/darks/darksel | <input type="checkbox"/> nyx/nyx/nyxs/nyxsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> e/em/eir/eirs/emsel | <input type="checkbox"/> phe/per/pers/persel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> e/im/er/ers/ersel | <input type="checkbox"/> pup/pup/pups/pupsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ect/ect/ects/ectsel | <input type="checkbox"/> purr/purr/purr/purrs/purrself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ee/er/ers/ersel | <input type="checkbox"/> re/rem/reir/reirs/remsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> eff/effe/effis/effesel | <input type="checkbox"/> se/sym/syr/syrs/syrself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> en/en/ens/ensel | <input type="checkbox"/> sea/sear/sear/seas/seasel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ey/em/eir/eirsel | <input type="checkbox"/> sie/hir/hirs/hirsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fae/fae/faeself | <input type="checkbox"/> smoke/smoke/smokes/smokesel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fae/faer/faer/faers/fae(r)sel | <input type="checkbox"/> sprout/sprout/sprouts/sproutsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fae/fayr/fayr/fayrs/fayrsel | <input type="checkbox"/> star/star/stars/starself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fel/feli/felis/feliself | <input type="checkbox"/> sy/syl/sylv/sylvself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fey/feyr/feysel | <input type="checkbox"/> tem/tem/tems/temsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fie/fire/fires/firesel | <input type="checkbox"/> thae/thaer/thaers/thaersel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fleur/fleur/fleurs/fleursel | <input type="checkbox"/> tiger (only nominative form reported) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> gem/gem/gems/gemsel | <input type="checkbox"/> tok/tok/toks/toksel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> gha/ghan/ghas/ghans/ghach ¹ | <input type="checkbox"/> vae/vaer/vaer/vaers/vaersel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> glub/glub/glubs/glubsel | <input type="checkbox"/> vamp/vim/vamps/vampsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> go/gor/gors/goresel | <input type="checkbox"/> vie/ver/vem/vemsel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> gryphon (only nominative form reported) | <input type="checkbox"/> voi/void/voids/voidsel |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> void/void/voids/voidsel |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> wud/wulf/wulv/wulvsel |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> xe/hir/hirs/hirsel |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> xe/xem/xem/xemsel |

¹ Interestingly, this set diverges from the standard *Xself* reflexive form: The respondent stated that the pronouns are based on Klingon pronouns, so this is likely why.

- xe/xem/xir/xemself
- xe/xem/xyr/xemself
- xe/xim/xir/xirself
- zay/zir/zirs/zirself
- ze/zem/zer/ze(r)self

- ze/zer/zems/zerself
- zhe/zhir/zhirs/zhirself
- zie/hir/hirs/hirself
- zie/zim/zir/zimself

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List from: <http://destroythecistem.tumblr.com/pronouns>:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> abyss/abyss/abyself | <input type="checkbox"/> bloom/blooms/bloomself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ae/aem/aers/aemself | <input type="checkbox"/> blub/blubs/blubself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ae/aer/aers/aerself | <input type="checkbox"/> bo/bots/botself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ae/aes/aeself | <input type="checkbox"/> boo/boo's/booself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> aer/aers/aerself | <input type="checkbox"/> bow/bows/bowself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ag/ag/(ag/ags)/agself | <input type="checkbox"/> bu/buz/buzzself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ai/air/(air/airs)/airself | <input type="checkbox"/> bud/buds/budself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ai/ain/aire/aiself | <input type="checkbox"/> bug/bugs/bugself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ail/ailous/ailousself | <input type="checkbox"/> bul/bulba/buls/bulbself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> al/al/(al/als)/alself | <input type="checkbox"/> bun/buns/bunself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> am/ambs/amberself | <input type="checkbox"/> byte/bytes/byteself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ame/ameth/ameself | <input type="checkbox"/> baa/baas/baaself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> aos/aes/aeself | <input type="checkbox"/> cae/caem/caes/caeself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> aq/aqu/aqus/aqself | <input type="checkbox"/> cae/caer/caerself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> aqua/aquas/aquariuserf | <input type="checkbox"/> cancer/cans/canself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> aqui/aquis/aquiself | <input type="checkbox"/> cap/capris/capriself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ar/arcs/arcself | <input type="checkbox"/> caw/caws/cawself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ari/aries/arieself | <input type="checkbox"/> ce/cel/celloself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> astrum/astrums/astrumself | <input type="checkbox"/> ce/cer/cerself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> atmos / atmoself | <input type="checkbox"/> ce/cir/cirs/cirself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> au/aur/(aur/aur)/aurself | <input type="checkbox"/> cele/celes/celeself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> au/aut/auto/autself | <input type="checkbox"/> cer/cers/cerself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> avi/(avis/aves)/aveself | <input type="checkbox"/> ceta/cetus/cetaself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> avi/avis/avianself | <input type="checkbox"/> char/charm/chars/charsself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> avi/avis/aviself | <input type="checkbox"/> chau/chaus/chaudself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> azu/azur/azurs/azursself | <input type="checkbox"/> chem/chemis/chemiself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bar/bards/bardself | <input type="checkbox"/> cher/chers/cherself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> basil - bas/basi/basilself | <input type="checkbox"/> chi/chik/chik/chickself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> beau/beaus/beauself | <input type="checkbox"/> chi/chik/chik/chickself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bee/beets/beetleself | <input type="checkbox"/> chime/chimes/chimeself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ber/berus/beruself | <input type="checkbox"/> chir/chirs/chirpself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bi/bi/(bir/birs)/biself | <input type="checkbox"/> chirp/chirps/chirpself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bi/bir/birs/birdself | <input type="checkbox"/> chord/chords/chordself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bir/bir/birs/birdself | <input type="checkbox"/> chu/chup/chupa/chupaself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bird/birds/birdself | <input type="checkbox"/> cie/ciel/(cier/ciers)/cielself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bleu/bleus/bleuself | <input type="checkbox"/> cie/cir/(cir/cirs) /cirruself |

- ci/cin/cinnself
- citri/citrine/citriself
- clef/clefs/clefself
- cler/clers/clericself
- cloud/cloud/cloudself
- clo/cloves/cloveself
- clow/cloud/cloudself
- co/cob/cobs/cobbleself
- co/cos/cos/coself
- cog/cogs/cogself
- compu-te/computes/computeself
- coo/coo/cooself
- coo/coos/cooself
- cor/cors/corsself
- cor/cors/corsself
- cra/craf/crafs/craftself
- cre/cre/cres/creeperself
- cro/cron/crons/cronself
- cub/cubs/cubself
- cy/cyb/cyber/cybsself
- dae/daem/daer/daemself
- dae/daem/daeself
- dai/daim/dair/daimself
- dai/dais/daiself
- de/dem/der/demself
- dei/deis/deiself
- di/dim/dis/diamself
- dia/diam/diams/diamself
- dia/diamond/diaself
- do/dos/doself
- doe/does/doeself
- dol/dolphi/dolphiself or dolphinsself
- dove/doves/doveself
- dra/drag/drago/dragoself
- dre/droid/droids/droidself
- dru/drus/druidself
- dy/score/dynself
- e/em/eir/emself
- ecto/ects/ectself
- eel/eels/eelsself
- el/elks/elksself
- ele/elems/elemsself
- ely/ely or elym/elys/elyself
- eme/emer/emeraself
- en/end/ends/enderself
- en/ens/engiself
- er/eris/eriself
- esp/espe/esps/espsself
- et/ets/etsself
- ete/etes/eteself
- eth/eths/ethself
- ey/em/eir/emself
- fa/fae/faeself
- fa/fahs/fahssself
- fae/faer/faers/faersself
- faun/fauns/faunself
- fawn/fawns/fawnsself
- fawn/fawns/fawnsself
- fe/fer/(feir/feirs)/ferself (feself)
- fei/feis/feiself
- fel/felis/feliself
- fern/ferns/fernsself
- fi/fier/fierself
- fi/fighs/fiself
- fin/fins/finssself
- fir/fer/ferself
- fire/fires/fireself
- flame/flames/flameself
- fleur/fleurs/fleureself
- fluff/fluffs/fluffself
- fog/fog/(fog/fogs) /fogsself
- fog/fog/fogsself
- fran/franke/franken/frankensself
- fur/furs/fursself

- gala/galas/galasef
- gar/garn/garnself
- gear/gears/gearself
- gem/gem/gems/gemself
- gem/gemis/geminisef
- gheist/gheists/gheistself
- ghost/ghosts/ghostself
- giga/gigias/gigaself
- gill/gills/gillself
- glim/glimmer/glimmerself
- glit/glitter/glitter/glitterself
- glub/glubs/glubself
- gu/guns/gunself
- gull/gulls/gullself
- gup/gups/gupself
- guppy/guppys/guppyself
- hail/hail/hailself
- ham/hams/hamself
- harp/harpys/harpyself
- hart/harts/hartself
- haun/haunts/hauntself
- haze/hazesef
- heir/heirs/heirself
- hhrüt/hrüts/hrütself
- hir/hir/hirs/hirself
- hu/hum/hus/humself
- hu/hume/hus/huself (/humeself)
- hum/hums/humself
- hun/hunts/huntself
- hy/hydras/hydraself
- ino/dinos/dinoself
- inter/inters/interself
- ja/jas/jadeself
- ja/jem/jemself
- jay/jays/jayself
- jee/jem/jeir/jemself
- jel/jels/jelself
- jhe/jher/jher/jherself
- jup/jups/jupself
- kai/kair/kairs/kairself
- kelp/kelps/kelpself
- ki/kin/kins/kingself
- kie/kir/kir(s)/kirself
- kit/kits/kitself
- kni/knights/knightself
- kye/kyr/kyne/kyrself
- kyuu/kyuu/kyuus/kyuusef
- la/lahs/lahsself
- lamb/lambs/lambself
- leaf/leafs/leafself
- lee/lim/lis/limself
- leo/leos/leoself
- leo/leos/leoself
- li/lith/(lis/lis)/liself (lith-self)
- lib/libras/libraself
- lun/lun/lunself
- lynx/lynx/lynxself
- mae/mer/mims/merself
- mag/magi/magis/magiself
- mage/mages/ (ma-geself/maguself)
- mars/mars/marsself
- mec/mechs/mechself
- me-chie/mechien/mechs/mechself
- meow/mews/meowself
- mer/merm/mers/merself
- mer/mers/mermai/merself
- mer/mers/merself
- mera/meras/meraself
- merc/mercs/mercself
- mers/mer/merself
- mew/mews/mewself
- mi/min/mines/mineself
- mi/mir/mirself
- mist/mist/mistself

- mix/mex/mexself
- mo/mo's/moself
- mo/mob/mobs/mobself
- mochi/mochis/mochiself
- mon/monks/monkself
- mun/muns/munself
- mun/munt/muntself
- myrrh - myr/myrs/myrrhself
- mys/myr/myrs/myrself
- na/nar/(naer/naers)/narsel (naself/naeself)
- ne/ne/(neo/neos)/neself
- ne/nem/nir/nemself
- ne/neo/neoself
- ne/nym/nis/nymself
- neb/neb/nebself
- necro/necrom/necself
- nep/neps/nepself
- ni/nic/(nic/nics)/nicself
- nim/nim/(nimbu/nimbus)/nimbuself
- nix/nix/nix/nixself
- note/note/noteself
- nov/novs/novself
- nym/nyms/nymself
- o/oxy/(oxys/oxys)/oself (oxself)
- o/oxy/oxysel
- oce/ocem/oces/ocelself
- on/onyx/onysel(yxself)
- opa/opas/opalself
- pal/pals/palalself
- pan/pans/pansel
- panth/panthes/panthesel
- paw/paws/pawsel
- pearl/pearls/pearlself
- pep/peps/pepsel
- per/per/pers/persel
- petal/petals/petalself
- pez/pezze/pezelf
- pi/pika/pisel
- pi/piscs/pisceself
- plan/plans/plansel
- plu/plur/plurself
- plum/plums/plumself
- pri/prin/prins/princesel
- prox/prox/proxsel
- pup/pups/pupsel
- purr/purrs/purrself
- qua/quar/quarsel
- rai/rain/rainself
- ram/rams/ramself
- rapt/raptor/raptsel
- rat/rats/ratsel
- rav/ravs/ravensel
- rei/reis/reisel
- rex/rex/rexsel
- ro/ros/roguesel
- roar/roars/roarsel
- roe/roes/roesel
- roo/roos/roosel
- ro/rosem/rosemself
- sa/sass/sassel
- saff/saffs/saffsel
- sa/sage/sagesel
- sagit/sagits/sagittsel
- scale/scales/scalesel
- scor/scorpios/scorpiosel
- scor/scorps/scorpsel
- sea/sear/seas/seasel
- sea/sear/seasel
- seer/seers/seersel
- ser/sera/serasel
- shark/sharks/sharksel
- shell/shell/shells/shellself
- sho/sher/shersel
- sho/shom's/shomsel

- sie/hir/hirself
- sie/sier/siers/sierself
- sik/siks/sikself
- sir/sire/siren/sirenselself
- sit/sits/sitself or sit/sit/sitself
- slee/sleet/sleet/sleetself
- snow/snow/snow/snowself
- so/sohs/sohsself
- sol/sun/sunself
- song/song/songself
- sor/sors/sorcelf
- soul/souls/soulself
- spark/sparks/sparkself
- spide/spides/spiderself
- spiri/spirs/spirself
- sprout/sprouts/sproutself
- squeak/squeaks/squeakself
- squid/squids/squidself
- squid/squids/squidself
- squir/squirt/squirts/squirtself
- stag/stags/stagselself
- star/stars/starselself
- steam/steams/steamselself
- steg/stego/stegself
- stem/stems/stemselself
- storm/storms/stormselself
- stratos / stratoselself
- sum/sums/sumselself
- sun/sun/sunselself
- sy/sky/skyself
- syl/sylv/sylvs/sylvselself
- taur/taurs/taurselself
- taur/taurus/taurselself
- tec/techs/techselself
- tech/techne/techan/techselself
- tem/tems/tempself
- ter/ters/terselself
- tey/tem/ter/temselself
- thi/thies/theifselself
- thon/thon/thons/thonself
- thy/thyme/thymeselself
- ti/ti/tis/tiselself
- tig/tigris/trigriselself
- tik/tiks/tikselself
- tok/toks/tokselself
- tour/tourm/tourmaselself
- tric/tricer/triselself
- twe/twe/(twes/tweets)/tweetself
- tweet/tweets/tweetself
- ty/tyra/tyself
- tyr/tyrs/tyrself
- umb/umber/umbers/umberself
- vae/vaer/vaers/vaerselself
- ve/vem/vir/vemselself
- ve/vis/vir/verselself
- ven/vens/venselself
- vir/virgos/virgoselself
- voi/void/voidselself
- ware/wares/wareselself
- wave/wave/waves/waveselself
- wer/weres/wereselself
- whi-sker/whiskers/whiskerselself
- whomp/whizz/whirr/whizelself
- wi/wits/witchselself
- win/wind /winds/windselself
- wit/witch/witchselself
- woof/woofs/woofselself
- wor/wors/wormselself
- wreath/wreath/wreaths/wreathselself
- wy/wir/wire/wirselself
- wy/wym/wyr/wyrself
- xae/xaer/xaers/xaerselself
- xe/xe/xer/xers/xeself (xerselself)
- xe/xem/xir/xemselself

- xe/xem/xyr/xemself
- xe/xim/xis/ximself
- xie/xem/xyr/xemself
- yo/yo/yos/yoself
- yt/yt/yts/ytself
- ze(zie)/zir/zirs/zirself
- ze/hir/hirs/hirself
- ze/zem/zeir/zeirself
- ze/zer/zer/zerself
- zed/zed/zeds/zedself
- zed/zed/zeir/zedself
- zhe/zhir/zhirs/zhirself
- zo/zom/zos/zombself

Appendix B – Questionnaire

General information

Is English your first language?

- Yes
- No

How old are you? _____

What gender do you identify as? _____

Do you identify as trans or transgender?

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

Do you identify as Otherkin?

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

Do you identify as anything else that might be relevant? _____

Your pronouns

What are your chosen/preferred pronouns? _____

Where did you first learn about the set of pronouns you use? Or if you came up with them yourself, what gave you the idea? _____

Why did you decide on these pronouns for your chosen/preferred pronouns?

Do you feel your chosen/preferred pronouns reflect any of the following parts of your identity?

- Gender?
- Race?
- Ethnicity?
- Species?
- Kintype?
- Social class?
- Personality traits?
- Other: _____

If you checked off “Personality traits” on the previous question, please specify which personality traits you feel your pronouns reflect. _____

Whom have you asked to refer to you using your chosen/preferred pronouns?

- No one
- Family
- Friends (offline)
- Friends (online)
- Educational or work environment (teachers, boss, classmates, colleagues etc.)
- Acquaintances (offline)
- Acquaintances (online)
- My pronouns are listed on my public blog and/or social media profile
- Other: _____

Do you have a secondary set of pronouns to be used by people who can't/won't use your chosen/preferred pronouns?

- Yes
- No

Using your pronouns

Please give examples of how to use your chosen/preferred pronouns (fill in the blanks):

Subject (nominative): ____ ____ happy. (e.g. “he is happy”; “they are happy”)

Object (oblique): I called _____. (e.g. “I called her”; “I called them”)

Possessive determiner: That is ____ book. (e.g. “That is his book”; “That is their book.”)

Possessive pronoun: That is _____. (e.g. “That is hers”; “That is theirs.”)

Reflexive: ____ will do it _____. (e.g. “He will do it himself”)