Non-binary gendered reference in LGBTQ+ English:
Implications of singular 'they' for sentence processing

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How do we talk about someone without knowing their gender? Although most English speakers think of the word 'they' primarily as a plural pronoun, third person singular (3SG) 'they'/'them'/'their' ('they') has been documented in English as early as the Middle Ages. Most often 3SG 'they' is used to refer to an individual whose gender has not yet been revealed, or in discourse contexts where gender information is not salient, such as in (1) below.

(1)   Speaker A: "Someone left a message for you."
        Speaker B: "Oh, what did **they** say?"

More recently, 3SG 'they' has been adopted as a reference form within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, plus (LGBTQ+) community for English speakers who identify as outside the traditional gender binary of 'man' and 'woman' [1]. Using 3SG 'they' may cause gender or number agreement errors [6], as 'they' is most frequently a plural pronoun and does not explicitly encode gender. Yet experimental work also shows processing delays with binary pronouns like 'he' and 'she' when talking about two different men or women [3]. Crucially, addressing a person by a pronoun or name that they do not identify with can cause psychological harm to gender non-conforming people [7]. However, this is complicated by the fact that speakers use predictable patterns when referring to others, whether by a name or a pronoun [2], and disrupting this pattern causes processing delays for listeners and readers. Because of this, avoiding using a pronoun may be even more difficult than using an ambiguous one [4,5]. However, to date little research has been dedicated to documenting the prevalence of non-binary pronouns or examining how pronouns like 3SG 'they' influence sentence processing.

This study addresses this gap by quantitatively assessing the grammaticality of 3SG 'they' for explicitly LGBTQ+ referents and control referents as a function of participant identity, as well as qualitatively analyzing interview data in which participants spoke about gender non-conforming referents. For the grammaticality judgment task, 53 self-identified cisgender, heterosexual (cishet) participants and 50 self-identified LGBTQ+ participants rated 8 written experimental sentences per condition (Table 1) on a seven-point Likert scale online in Qualtrics. For interviews, eight participants were audio recorded responding to sociolinguistic discussion prompts on non-binary referents for approximately one hour each and coded by the first author.

Cumulative link model regression results indicate that LGBTQ+ participants rated 3SG 'they' as significantly more grammatical than cishet participants in all sentence contexts, X^2 (4, N = 103) = 14.74, $p < .01$. Interestingly, LGBTQ+ participants do not respond in a manner that corresponds with typical English gender biases when given a gender-biased name, finding mismatched binary pronouns nearly as acceptable as 3SG 'they' in the no context condition (Figure 1). We suggest that this result arises from LGBTQ+ in-group behavioral norms, in which gender-biased language forms are routinely deconstructed and reframed.

Furthermore, interview transcripts of eight additional LGBTQ+ and cishet participants reveal consistent patterns of stance-mitigation discourse strategies such metalinguistic explanation and hedging by cishet speakers, but not LGBTQ+ speakers (2) when using both 3SG 'they' and binary pronouns to reference gender non-conforming individuals, suggesting that socially-constrained production difficulties are based on the referent's gender identity rather than the pronominal form itself.
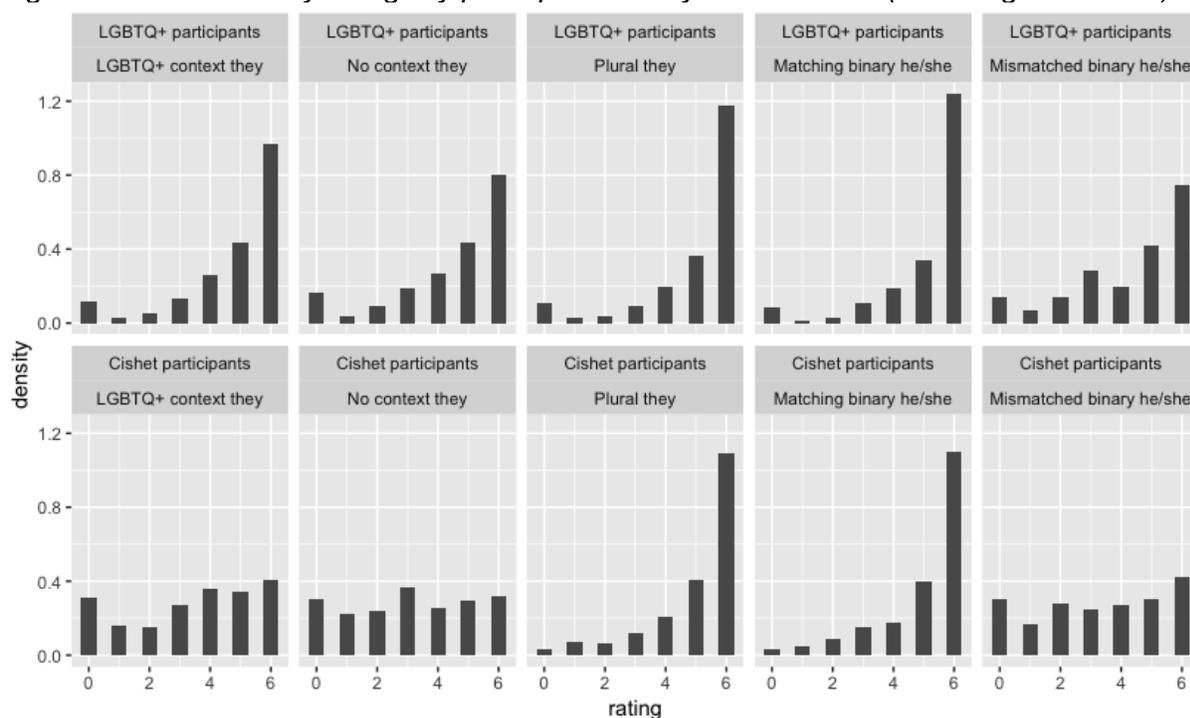
(2)   Cishet speaker: "At the time, **he**— so I'm going to say **he** for this story, I think…"
        LGBTQ+ speaker: "We always thought **he** was a lesbian…"

Together, these study results suggest that English pronominal gender biases in both production and perception are not universal, but instead may be linked to LGBTQ+ identity.

Table 1. Sample experimental sentence in all conditions

Condition	Sample sentence
(1) LGBTQ+ context they (Melissa + they)	Today my nonbinary friend Melissa mentioned that they got a really short haircut.
(2) No context they (Melissa + they)	Today my old friend Melissa mentioned that they got a really short haircut.
(3) Plural they (Ron and Melissa + they)	Recently Ron and Melissa said that they got a really short haircut.
(4) Matching binary he/she (Melissa + she)	Today my old friend Melissa mentioned that she got a really short haircut.
(5) Mismatched binary he/she (Melissa + he)	Today my old friend Melissa mentioned that he got a really short haircut.

Figure 1. Grammaticality ratings by participant identity and condition (6=most grammatical)

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