***[Is it time we agreed on a gender-neutral singular pronoun?](https://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2015/jan/30/is-it-time-we-agreed-on-a-gender-neutral-singular-pronoun" \l "img-1)***

***[Gary Nunn](https://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2015/jan/30/is-it-time-we-agreed-on-a-gender-neutral-singular-pronoun" \l "img-1)***

*[Some argue we need one for socially progressive reasons. Others simply want one to perfect their writing. But so far more than a hundred attempts have failed.](https://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2015/jan/30/is-it-time-we-agreed-on-a-gender-neutral-singular-pronoun" \l "img-1)*

*One use for a gender neutral singular pronoun could be to refer to androgynous robots and androids.*

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Language, like life, feels easier to deal with if we arrange it into binaries: Wrong/right; Gay/straight; Labour/Conservative. Terms lurking between the two poles are often unfairly maligned. We’re often wary of anything that is neither one nor the other: Justifiable homicide; Bisexual; The Liberal Democrats.

The same goes for him/her. We seem far more comfortable when people are either men or women. The reality is different. There are people who self­-define as neither, as gender-non­binary. To those who see gender as a construct, this makes perfect sense. But the English language fails to reflect it.

A universal gender­-neutral pronoun – something to capture everything between he and she – would resolve this, and other issues. For non-­atheist progressives, it would give them a gender-neutral God. It could describe androgynous robots. A third­ person pronoun would also help us hacks with our word counts and copy neatness; writing his/hers every time (for those of us who on principle refuse to default to ‘his’) feels untidy and inelegant.

For those now considering commenting to [suggest that there’s a perfectly fine existing neutral pronoun](https://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2013/oct/18/mind-your-language-sexism) – “they” – remember that pronouns must match both gender and number. So in the case of single individuals, it’s grammatically inaccurate.

And for those complaining this is a “PC gone mad” linguistic ambush by the modern trans lobby, [this fascinating blog](http://illinois.edu/blog/view/25/31097) by Dennis Baron charts more than 100 (failed) attempts over 150 years to coin a gender­-neutral singular pronoun. The elusive term – still not agreed upon – has been labelled the ‘hermaphrodite pronoun’, the ‘bi­personal pronoun’ and the ‘unisex pronoun.’

So what should it be? Baron’s blog walks you through all the failed attempts – starting with the mid­ 19th century’s *ne*, *nis*, *nim*, and citing sci-­fi’s contributions of neologism: *co*; *xie*; *per*; *en*. As early as 1878, Napoleon Bonaparte Brown argued that the need for a new pronoun was “so desperate, urgent, imperative that ... it should long since have grown on our speech”.

In 1884, *thon*, *hi*, *le*, *hiser* and *ip* were variously suggested. *Thon* – a blend of that and one – was coined by Philadelphia lawyer Charles C Converse and Baron demonstrates how it was the closest thing to a successful attempt at entering the vernacular; it was accepted by two major dictionaries and even adopted by some writers. But it was grammatical pedantry, not feminism, that motivated Converse. He wanted a “beautiful symmetry” in English and to avoid “hideous solecisms”.

The second closest thing to enter the vernacular was named after American mathematician Michael Spivak; initially*e*,*es*, *em* (*e* wrote; *es* eyes are blue) later *ey*, *eir*, *em* (*ey* wrote; I like *em*). [Other sources](https://genderneutralpronoun.wordpress.com/tag/ze-and-zir/) attribute these pronouns (formed by dropping the th from they, their and them) to a competition run by the Chicago Association of Business Communicators, won by a Christine M Elverson in 1975. The Spivak pronouns are used today by some in the genderqueer and gaming communities.

Further proposals – *hes*, *hem*, *ir*, *ons*, *e*, *ith* , *lim*, *ler*, *lers* – sprang up, often suggested by newspapers. Readers suggested portmanteaus: *hiser*; *himer*; *hasher*; *shis*; *shim*; *heer*; *hie*. Humanist lexicon suggested *hu*, which can occasionally sound like the Kiwi accent (*hu* wrote; I like *hum*).[Jayce’s system](http://jayceland.com/blog/archive/2011/01/30/jayces-gender-neutral-pronouns/), meanwhile, suggested *jee*, *jem* (*jee* wrote; I like *jem*). You can find these, and many more, listed at[A Chronology of a Word that Failed](http://www.english.illinois.edu/-people-/faculty/debaron/essays/epicene.htm).

Why has a need for such a short and simple word been so unsuccessful? One opponent of the “bastard word form” portmanteaus, wrote in the New York Commercial Advertiser in 1884 in response to the idea of *thon*: “All attempts in this direction have failed, partly because it is always exceedingly difficult to introduce new forms into a language, unless they spring up naturally and, as it were, spontaneously.”

Grammar pedantry aside, what would be the social impact of this addition to the language? The feminist argument is as obvious as it is compelling. And in the case of gender-non­binary people, how do they get around the problem? Minding your language is important here. Shim and shemale are pejorative portmanteaus, sometimes lazily applied to trans people.

The transgender campaigning group [Press for Change](http://www.pfc.org.uk/) told me: “When transitioning [in the UK], people have to apply to the Gender Recognition Panel for recognition of their acquired gender. There’s no option for neutral or non-­heteronormative gender.” Last April,[the Australian case of Norrie](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/02/third-gender-must-be-recognised-by-nsw-after-norrie-wins-legal-battle)sparked discussion on the issue. In a landmark high court case, Norrie, 52, from Sydney, won the right for gender-non­specific Australians to be something other than male or female on their birth certificate. Norrie has expressed a preference for the Germanic *hir* for her/his, and *zie* for he/she.

I contacted the All About Trans project, who connected me with some British people who, like Norrie, identify as gender-non­binary. Nathan Gale from Scotland says having a widely recognised third pronoun would be very useful. Gale currently uses “they”, and reiterates the advice from the [Trans Media Watch style guide](http://www.transmediawatch.org/Documents/Media%20Style%20Guide.pdf): “Simply referring to people in the way they refer to themselves is usually the best way to accurately report their identity.”

I note, however, no universal gender-blind pronoun is recommended. If we all use different third pronouns, they’ll become fourth, fifth, 200th pronouns, and clarity will be lost. I believe Trans Media Watch should stop fence­-sitting and pick one, then promote it. Gale says: “I think journalists can be scared of using language that people are unfamiliar with, like non­binary for example but, people won’t become familiar with them if they’re never used in the mainstream media.”

Guardian writer Jane Fae [wrote about](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/26/brighton-council-gender-neutral-transgender) a gender-non­binary friend’s choice of language: “They don’t identify as male or female, prefer *Mx* (pronounced “Mix”) as title of choice, and feel positively excluded by forms that demand they pick from a limited list of gender­ specific titles.”

CN Lester, 30, also opts for “they” to describe their non­binary identity. They seem impatient at the slow ­rate of linguistic change: “People who transgress gender norms, and gendered language, are hardly a new phenomenon. How we refer to ourselves, and how society refers to us, is constantly changing this is just one more small shift of many.” They add: “Using trans­friendly language doesn’t have to be hard, although it might take a bit of getting used to it can be pretty exciting, to see how flexible, accommodating and inventive our language can be.”

I agree – it’s exciting how our language can reflect social progressiveness (such as the adoption of the honorific Ms). Whether you’re a grammatical purist, a feminist or a social progressive, the reasons for a uniform, unisex third pronoun are compelling. But what should it be?