

## BEYOND BINARY: A GENDER AND LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE RECONSTRUCTION OF PRONOUN 'THEY'

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**Abstract:** Gender discrimination occurs when individuals are consistently referred to using gender-specific pronouns, such as 'he' or 'she,' irrespective of their expressed gender identity or preference. This study examines the correlation between gender and sociolinguistic theory in constructing the pronoun 'non-binary singular they' in English. Additionally, it analyzed the factors that impact individuals' responses to its usage to propose a more appropriate approach to addressing and using 'non-binary singular they' to mitigate discrimination. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach and utilized gender equity and sociolinguistic theories for the analysis. This study conducted comprehensive library research with a conceptual framework of a literature review using secondary data. The study results showed that the concept of gender and sociocultural factors play a central role in the reconstruction of the use of the pronoun 'non-binary singular they.' In addition, understanding the English language and social attitudes towards non-binary individuals can influence their level of acceptance of the use of the pronoun 'non-binary singular they.' This finding also indicates that the higher the level of understanding of the English language and the concept of gender, and the more frequently involved with non-binary individuals, the higher the support for the use of 'non-binary singular they.' Therefore, efforts to increase an in-depth understanding of English and the concept of gender are essential to realizing gender equality through gender-inclusive pronouns: 'they.'

**Keywords:** singular they, non-binary, gender and language

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an atypical occurrence took place wherein a student affiliated with Hasanudin University asserted their identification as gender-neutral or non-binary. Regrettably, the situation culminated with the student being subjected to public bullying by the university lecturer (BBC News Indonesia, 2022). This occurrence highlights a deficiency in comprehension of advancing scientific knowledge concerning gender diversity and sexuality. Moreover, individuals who identify as artists, including singers bearing the initials JM, DL, and SS, alongside offspring of artists with the initials NH, have publicly expressed their non-binary gender identity on social media platforms. These individuals have taken the initiative to modify their preferred pronouns to 'they/them.' Despite the assertion of receiving support from their environment, several internet users persist in engaging in acts of insulting and referring to non-binary individuals using gendered pronouns such as 'he' or 'she,' which are traditionally employed to denote binary gender identities (Inez. 2022), (Pool, 2022). The emergence of gender-neutral or non-binary self-identity expression on social media, along with the use of alternative pronouns, has led to a notable linguistic development: the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they'

This reconstruction is crucial because pronouns often appear in virtual communications, interviews, biographies, and personal data forms (Floretta, 2023). Furthermore, Baron mentions in his book entitled *What's Your Pronoun? Beyond He and She*, universities in the West like Harvard and Minnesota have made pronouns become part of the inclusive movement in the world of education by carrying out several policies, ranging from offering each student to determine their pronoun, name, and gender and giving punishment or sanctions for not respecting pronouns, a person's name, and gender (Baron, 2020). Although it only functions as a substitute word, pronouns have an urgency in language effectiveness and become part of one's identity (Floretta, 2023). Then, what about non-binary individuals? Do they have pronouns as their identity?

Identifying a person with a pronoun is faced with the limitations of pronouns in English (Nabila et al., 2021), which are still limited to two binaries: 'he' for men and 'she' for women. In addition, The presence of the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' as a reference that is not limited by gender bias that can avoid sexism, be more inclusive, and not discriminate against non-binary individuals (Lauscher et al., 2022) is also still ignored by society. Many of them refer to non-binary individuals with pronouns according to their sex, regardless of the individual's personal preference or gender identity. This pronominal neglect can affect self-acceptance, leading to mental health disorders. A lecturer in psychology at Victoria University, Glen Hosking, mentioned that misgendering or the mistake of calling pronouns, especially in the immediate environment, can result in a decline in mental health. As a result, non-binary or gender-neutral people who feel disowned or validated have the potential to have suicidal ideation, display depressive symptoms, and attempt suicide (Floretta, 2023).

The absence of a reconstructed pronoun 'they' has significant ramifications for non-binary individuals, highlighting the intricate relationship between language processes and the endeavor for gender equity in society. This relationship can be further elaborated through the relationship between language and society, which influences one's gender construction. Language and society have a reciprocal relationship: language is a product that originates from the society's culture; therefore, it is used and affects society. Consequently, language serves as a means through which individuals express their self-identity (Adnyani, 2014) and as a reflection of sociocultural transformations (Nabila et al., 2021; Tan, 2020). Moreover, it is closely intertwined with the principles of gender equality, as it facilitates the dissemination of societal norms about gender justice (Akmaliyah, 2019). Therefore, people need to take part by understanding and applying the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' by looking at it from the point of view of the concept of gender justice and the underlying linguistic theory.

The reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' that appears in the phenomenon of self-dedication as gender-neutral is challenging for everyone to accept. Some people reject this reconstruction of the use of the word 'they' because it is challenging to separate grammatical values from social values. Nonetheless, these changes are in order with broader sociocultural changes and are difficult to avoid (Konnely & Cowper, 2020). In this case, the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' can be efficiently accepted by understanding gender theory and linguistic theories, especially sociolinguistics. Therefore, over time, societal acceptance of this change will increase progressively. Moreover, it increases the utilization of the pronoun 'they' as a non-binary or gender-neutral identifier.

The reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' is a topic that is relevant to both gender justice theory and sociolinguistic theory. Gender justice theory highlights the significance of recognizing and valuing the range of gender identities, which requires the adoption of inclusive pronouns to replace gendered pronouns such as 'he' and 'she'. In contrast, sociolinguistic theory demonstrates how language and its usage can mirror and influence societal norms, including those about gender. Therefore, the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' can be analyzed through the point of view of sociolinguistic theory to see how the choice of particular pronouns can affect social understanding of gender and identity diversity.

In this context, the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' can be considered an attempt to expand the use of inclusive pronouns unrelated to specific gender identities. In this way, inclusive use of pronouns can help encourage recognition of gender identity diversity and avoid the gender discrimination that often occurs in binary-leaning languages and cultures. Thus, the analysis of the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' through the perspective of gender theory and sociolinguistics shows how language can be a crucial instrument in promoting gender justice and encouraging the recognition of gender identity diversity.

Several previous studies regarding the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' helped researchers to conduct research. First, Bradley (2020) investigated whether the pronouns 'they' and 'ze' are interpreted as gender-neutral or non-binary. The results of his research showed that the pronoun 'they' is interpreted as gender-neutral or non-binary, while the new pronoun 'ze' has not been interpreted with certainty. It indicates that the pronoun has a meaning in which social factors influence its understanding and use. Second, Ebrahimi & Husseini (2021) compared non-native Iranian and Polish English speakers using epicene pronouns. The results showed that these words are widely used in various contexts, regardless of culture. Third, Ma, Wu, and Xu (2022) explored the acceptance and interpretation of singular English pronouns by learners of Mandarin English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The results showed that EFL Mandarin speakers have high grammatical sensitivity, but longer reading time indicates difficulty in adopting singular pronouns. Fourth, LaScotte (2016) investigated the use of pronouns in English to refer to people who do not have a particular gender. The findings showed that most participants use a gender-inclusive approach in writing, but some variations do not cover all non-binary situations. Fifth, Saguy and Williams (2022) explored the use of the singular pronoun 'they' in the context of gender politics and non-binary identification. The findings point to three main uses: for nonbinary people, as a gender-neutral pronoun, and in contexts covering gender.

However, deep exploration is still required since several studies such as those carried out by Bradley (2020), Ebrahimi & Hosseini (2021), and Ma, Wu, & Xu (2022) have demonstrated that some people still perceive the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' as a disputable topic and can affect the understanding of the singularity or plurality of a reference. Furthermore, Bradley's research (2020) does not explain how to refer to individuals without mentioning gender. In addition, LaScotte (2016) needs to explain the use of pronouns in a broader context. Finally, Saguy and Williams (2022) do not explain the role of using singular pronouns in the context of gender-inclusive language and gender struggles. Therefore, the researcher tries to explore more profoundly with the same focus as previous studies, namely the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' for the third person singular. It can be the first crucial step in strengthening recognition and respect for the diversity of gender identities for promoting gender justice in society.

The uniqueness of the data in this research lies in the in-depth analysis of the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' in English about non-binary gender identities and linguistic approaches. This article describes linguistic change and deals with gender theory and sociolinguistics. This exploration sheds light on the relationship between language and social norms, particularly in the context of gender equality. In this unique series, the articles link the findings of previous research to support social and academic relevance and highlight the potential for social change towards gender inclusiveness through the use of fair language.

Initially, this study assumed that the analysis of gender-fair reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' in English through the lens of gender and linguistics theory was expected to trigger social change toward gender equality. Understanding and applying gender-fair language in society is expected to influence awareness and behavior toward gender equality. In addition, the researchers also assumed that using gender-neutral English pronoun reconstructions would increase the use of language inclusive of all genders and strengthen positive gender awareness and gender equality in society.

Based on the background of the study above, this study aimed to obtain a clear and detailed description of how the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' in English can be analyzed through the lens of gender theory and sociolinguistic theory. In particular, this study answered two questions: 1) What is the role of the concept of gender and sociolinguistic theory in reconstructing 'non-binary singular' pronouns in English? 2) What variability affects a person's reaction to using their 'non-binary singular'?

The library research method used in this study used a literature review as a conceptual framework. This literature review examined or critically asked for information, ideas, or observations in scientific literature. It also composed theoretical and methodological contributions to the topics, namely the pronoun 'they' for the third person singular (Cooper, 2010). The data used in this study are secondary data obtained from journal articles, books, conference proceedings, theses, and official websites that discuss the pronoun 'they' for the singular third person. The data about the pronoun 'singular they' were periodically elaborated. It was accompanied by descriptive comprehension and elucidation, allowing the researcher to understand more about the problem basis of the topic under investigation and receive a description of new theories, findings, materials, and the mentality employed

when approaching problems. It also allowed the researcher to draw new conclusions and fulfill the main objective of this article, which is to describe how English word reconstruction functions when viewed from the perspective of gender and underlying linguistic theory (Knopf, 2006), (Choudhury and Das, 2021). As a result, readers grasp the impact of gender equity and linguistic theory on the reconstruction of pronouns.

This study was conducted through several stages. The first stage was to search for scientific literature on Google Scholar, Research Gate, and Semantic Scholar using the keywords 'gender and linguistics/language,' 'singular they,' and 'pronoun for non-binary.' The second stage was selecting the literature that fit the above criteria for further analysis. This research used literature published in 1975-2022, which could be accessed in full-text in pdf format in Indonesian and English with the subject of the pronoun 'they.' The third stage was reviewing the literature that meets the criteria above and has the theme of the relationship between the pronoun 'they,' the concept of gender, and linguistics. Literature content was analyzed by outlining the core of the research and looking for similarities and differences between the studies that had been reviewed. Subsequently, the conclusion is drawn through Hegel's dialectical framework, which encompasses the elements of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis (Hegel, 1910), informed by an analysis grounded in gender and sociolinguistic theory.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

### *Gender in English*

Various studies on gender have been carried out. They are a form of effort to measure and overcome all problems related to the distribution of roles so that men and women can be placed in equal and fair positions. Not only does it focus on women's or men's issues, but current gender studies also focus on how all people of different types of sex or gender get their rights equitably (Setiyaningsih, 2015).

Gender has a different meaning from sex and sexuality. According to Juditha (2015) and Raharjo (1997), sex refers to differences in the reproductive organs of men and women, while sexuality is sexual attraction, the nature or characteristics of each type of sex that is influenced by biological factors, personal psychology, and the environment. On the other hand, gender refers to views regarding the differences in roles, functions, and responsibilities between men and women, which are a social construction. This construction arises because of the habits that are agreed upon and grow in society. However, this social construction can be changed over time (Juditha, 2015).

This gender construction can limit one's expression to only two binary genders they are male and female or feminine and masculine. Then, the term non-binary or NB emerged to reject this binary gender construct (Seftian, 2022). The term non-binary has been used since the 2000s, for example, in the Haynes and McKenna collections (2001) *Unseen Genders: Beyond the Binaries*, but the idea had emerged earlier in the 1990s (Whittle in Monro, 2019). This idea is an umbrella for people who feel that their gender identity does not match or feel they can fit into the two binary genders, which are feminine and masculine (Matsuno & Budge in Monro, 2019).

The idea of the non-binary above explains that gender construction is not a standard rule. It is because how men and women are distinguished based on gender relations varies from location to place, from culture to culture, and on occasion (Rokhimah, 2014). Thus, non-binary people reject and criticize things that are influenced by the binary gender system, such as the way to dress and nouns in language that are labeled with a particular gender (Seftian, 2022).

Many languages have feminist and masculine or male and female boundaries vocabularies, such as Spanish, Arabic, and English (Setiyaningsih, 2015). Setiyaningsih (2015) said there is a gender bias in favor of one gender between women and men in English. Gender bias in English has been observed in verb tenses and grammar, as indicated by some research undertaken in the wake of the gender equality campaign. In this case, the absence of a pronoun as a reference for the neutral third-person singular is the main obstacle to English usage, which has recently created problems in the formation of grammatical structures, along with the emergence of non-binary terms.

In English, gender roles can be identified through pronouns, nouns, adjectives, and verbs, which have masculine and feminine forms. Sometimes, these words can result in gender injustice, such as unequal representation and ingrained gender stereotypes. Hence, in the 1970s, the feminist movement

promoted gender equality and challenged male dominance through gender-neutral language, including the renewal of the generic 'he' with alternatives such as the singular pronominal 'they' (Breccia, 2021). Adopt inclusive pronoun is crucial to help recognize the identity of people with non-binary gender.

According to Bodine (1975: 130), the fundamental thing of a language is pronominal because the pronoun is crucial for personal reference. By implementing gender-inclusive use of English, gender roles can be identified and interpreted more fairly and equally, and avoid unhealthy gender stereotypes. Bodine also argues that personal pronouns are sensitive to social and ideological changes, and any modification in their use can signal significant social change. Therefore, changes in the use of pronouns must be carefully analyzed because they can represent crucial milestones in social and cultural transformation (Bodine, 1975).

### ***Reconstruction of the pronoun 'they'***

Word reconstruction is a common thing, especially in the English context. While not all innovations last, language reconstruction is inevitable. The phenomenon arises from how linguistic structures, such as pronouns, are incorporated into various cultural tools that facilitate individuals' social requirements (Grammon, 2019). In this article, the researcher focused on the pronoun 'they,' which refers to non-binary individuals. Singular 'they' still face resistance from society even though they do not mind if it is used for gender neutrality. According to Konnelly and Cowper (2020), the resistance is caused by the level of involvement of speakers in the grammatical changes that develop, so the speakers may take longer to adopt these changes. Therefore, the researcher explored the aspects related to grammatical changes or reconstruction, especially in the pronoun 'they.'

By definition, a pronoun is a type of word used to refer to previously mentioned phrases or antecedents that have a gender label, which can include feminine pronouns (such as 'she'), masculine pronouns (such as 'he'), and pronouns genderless pronouns (such as 'it' or 'they'). In addition, pronouns that can be marked with numbers, such as 'she,' 'he,' and 'it,' are generally used as singular pronouns, but 'they' can also be used with a singular or plural meaning (Arnold et al., 2021). In addition, recently, the pronoun 'they' can also function as a substitute for 'we' and 'us' to avoid personal bias in writing (Nabila et al., 2021) and can be used as a reference for the third-person singular, known or unknown, commonly referred to as 'singular they.' 'Singular they' is a grammatical construct in English that refers to a person of unspecified gender (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020).

The history that had been discussed in research by Konnelly and Cowper (2020) stated that the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' to refer to individuals who are not specific and measurable in English (although not officially accepted (Baranowski, 2002)) had taken place long since the late 14th century (Balhorn, p. 91 in Konnelly and Cowper, 2020) with construction as sentences below.

- a. **No colleague** informed me **they** would not be conducting team meetings this week.
- b. **The competent manager** understands **they** have to carry **their** printed portfolio.
- c. **Every musician** realizes **they** need to practice **their** instrument throughout the early hours of the morning.

In the late nineteenth century, the pronoun 'they' was also used about any individual whose sex was known, including those who claimed to be non-binary. This pronoun is commonly referred to as the non-binary singular they. In addition to serving as a less sexist substitute for pronouns like 'he' and other more complex but equally nonsexist constructs, the pronoun 'they' is often employed by numerous individuals who identify as non-binary as their preferred pronoun. Its use is still less accepted for pronouns that include referential antecedents because it can result in ambiguity and uncertain gender (Bjorkman, p. 2 in Konnelly and Cowper, 2020). Innovative data obtained in the study are as follows.

- a. **The manager** mentioned **they** postponed the meeting.
- b. **Our youngest sibling** hurt **their** arm.
- c. **My cousin** will present **themselves** before I do.

Based on Bjorkman's research (2017), using the pronoun 'singular they' for a particular reference is becoming increasingly frequent. However, some people still do not accept the 'singular they' as a pronoun for proper names or gender-specific nouns.

Meanwhile, research conducted in the 21st century by Conrod (2018) and Bradley (2020) in Konnelly and Cowper (2020) produced more current findings. The findings of this study revealed that non-binary singular 'they' can be employed to denote a particular individual of any gender, especially in sentences that employ proper names or gender-specific nouns like the sentences below.

- a. **Sarah** stated **they** postponed the event.
- b. **Michael** injured **their** wrist.
- c. I'll have **my close friend** introduce **themselves**.

It is possible to learn more about Sarah's non-binary identification by using the non-binary singular pronoun 'they' as seen in the example sentence (a) above, where the pronoun 'they' refers to a named individual whose gender identity is unknown. Nevertheless, Konnelly and Cowper (2020) argued that not all sentences described above can be used in all situations. For example, if the speaker who speaks a sentence (a) knows that Sarah uses the pronoun 'she,' then the speaker cannot purposefully employ the singular pronoun 'they' about Sarah. Hence, the determination of grammatical correctness or incorrectness of a statement is contingent upon its appropriateness within a specific context, as exemplified by the sentence provided below, which has been adapted from the illustration presented in the study conducted by Konnelly and Cowper.

- a. **Your sister** forgot **her** umbrella here.  
("Your sister" denotes an individual identified by the pronouns she/her.)
- b. **Your sister** forgot **their** umbrella here.  
("Your sister" denotes someone, regardless of gender identity, who may or may not be familiar to the speaker and/or the listener.)
- c. **Your sister** forgot **his** umbrella here.  
("Your sister" denotes an individual, perhaps transgender, identified by the pronouns he/him/his. This individual is the sibling of the recipient of the statement.)

In addition, research by Arnold et al. (2021) titled "My pronouns are they/them: Talking about pronouns changes how pronouns are understood" looked at how people use the pronoun 'they.' This research intended to answer how listeners or readers can identify whether 'they' have a plural or singular meaning. After going through several experimental processes, the results of this study showed that knowledge of the reference background tends to impact the understanding of the pronoun 'they.' It was proven in the sentences in experiments 1 and 2. 'They' was more frequently read as a single pronoun when the researcher gave evidence that Alex used the pronoun 'they' and when Alex is the only character or the earliest character in a sentence. For example, in this sentence:

"This is **Alex**, and **they** use they/them pronoun. **Alex** went to the store. **They** bought some milk. **Alex** went running with Liz. **They** fell down" (Arnold et al., 2021, p. 1691).

However, the participants in this study were limited to native speakers of English so that the singular 'they' is easier to understand because it is common in America and England, as shown by research conducted by Nunberg (2016). As proof, in 2019, the American Dialect Society made the selection 'they' as the word of the decade and 'My Pronouns' as the term of the year, acknowledging the prevailing usage of the singular 'they' to denote non-binary gender and the associated advocacy for employing pronouns to express gender identity (ADS, 2020). It shows that using the pronoun 'they' as a reference to the third-person singular has become prevalent. Additionally, it should be noted that the term 'non-binary singular they' has been included in leading dictionaries, such as Merriam-Webster (2019), and has received recognition in academic style guides, including the American Psychological Association (APA, 2019).

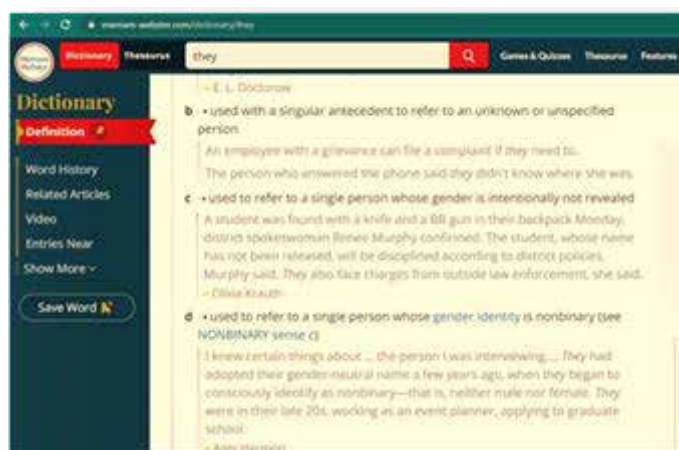


Figure 1. Definition of Singular 'they' (Source: [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com))

Furthermore, the singular 'they' can also be influenced by gender expectations in the antecedents it refers to (Doherty & Conklin, 2017), (Foertsch et al., 1997). As with the antecedent of 'mechanic,' although one does not know whether a mechanic is a woman or a man, mechanics are stereotypically a male occupation. The level of expectation regarding the gender antecedent positively correlates with the difficulty level in incorporating the singular 'they' into language usage. In contrast, Moulton et al. (2020) study showed that the inclusion of antecedents can enhance the acceptance of the usage of 'singular they,' even in situations where the listener is aware of the gender of the antecedent. According to Moulton et al. (2020), this study also demonstrated that linguistic antecedents can signal gender neutrality in speech, allowing for the utilization of the singular they.

The acceptance of the singular 'they' has also been tested in several experimental studies. One of them is research by Ma et al. (2022). Experiments in this study were conducted on Chinese English students with the qualification of understanding speed in sentences that use non-binary pronouns. The findings indicate that in contrast to native English speakers, both cohorts of Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, comprising English majors (higher proficiency) and non-English majors (lower proficiency), do not employ the singular pronoun 'they' irrespective of their level of language skill. Nevertheless, a further experiment demonstrated that both Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) groups, similar to native English speakers, did not experience any disruption in their reading due to their frequent utilization of the singular form. However, it is worth noting that the ability level influenced the online interpretation in their second language (L2). According to Ma et al. (2022), the challenge faced by Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in embracing the use of the 'singular they' stems from the need to reorganize their preexisting understanding of plural characteristics associated with the term 'them' inside their cognitive lexicon, as well as to adjust to the sociocultural conventions of the target language. Furthermore, a study conducted by Ebrahim and

Hosseini (2021) examined the utilization of epicene pronouns (including he, she, he/she, and singular they) among English non-native speakers (NNSs) from Iran and Poland. This research specifically investigated the influence of cultural factors, social background, and native language (L1) on using these pronouns. Consequently, the single pronoun 'they' has emerged as the prevailing choice due to its gender-neutral nature.

Furthermore, it was shown that approximately half of the Polish students and a third of the Iranian participants demonstrated familiarity with the singular pronoun 'they' since they had gained knowledge on this subject from private institutions and schools (Ebrahim & Hosseini, 2021). Moreover, a study conducted by Bradley (2019) has demonstrated that the use of the singular pronoun 'they' has been widely acknowledged as a gender-neutral form of reference, encompassing those who identify as non-binary (Bradley et al., 2019). A recent study conducted by Stormbom (2019) demonstrated that the singular pronoun 'they' is becoming more prevalent in academic writing in L2 English. This particular pronoun is frequently employed with various epicene antecedents, as recent usage data indicates (Stormbom, 2019).

To the experimental results that have been contained in several studies above regarding acceptance of the singular 'they,' APA style has summarized the rules for using the 'singular they' that can be efficiently accepted so that it can be used to construct gender-neutral words that can avoid gender discrimination in language, as below (or see APA, 2022).

- Always use a person's self-identified pronoun, including when they use the singular "they" as their pronoun.
- Also, use "they" as a generic third-person singular pronoun to refer to a person whose gender is unknown or irrelevant to the context of the usage by following the forms below.

Table 1. Forms of the singular "they."

Form	Example
they	Casey is a gender-fluid person. They are from Texas and enjoy tacos.
them	Every client got a care package delivered to them.
their	Each child played with their parent.
theirs	The cup of coffee is theirs
themselves (or themselves)	A private person usually keeps to themselves [or themselves].

Source: [apastyle.apa.org](https://apastyle.apa.org)

- Do not use "he" or "she" alone as generic third-person singular pronouns.
- Use combination forms such as "he or she" and "she or he" only if these pronouns match the described people.
- Do not use combination forms such as "(s)he" and "s/he."
- If you do not know the pronouns of the person being described, reword the sentence to avoid a pronoun or use the pronoun "they" by following the strategies below.

Table 2. Alternatives to the generic singular "they."

Strategy	Example
Rewording the sentence	I delivered a care package to the client.
Using the plural	Private people usually keep to themselves.

Source: [apastyle.apa.org](https://apastyle.apa.org)

### *Sociolinguistics in the reconstruction of the pronominal 'they'*



According to language, sociolinguistics comes from "socio" and "linguistic." "Socio" means society, while "linguistic" refers to linguistics. Meanwhile, according to the term, sociolinguistics is the study of language and its use in a community. In this very general concept, three fundamental elements must be understood: language, society, and their relationship to one another (Ibrahim, 2014).

In discussing language and gender, most of the research has focused on one particular theory of language. As with scientific research studying gender differences in language, it usually refers to mainstream linguistics and the theory of language variation, namely sociolinguistics (Cameron, 1992). The observation mentioned above holds in examining grammatical 'gender' within nominal classification systems. According to Meyerhoff and Ehrlich (2019), their research indicates that in Western European languages, wherein noun gender holds significant grammatical importance, the discourse surrounding the implementation of 'gender inclusive' forms, both in speech and in writing, serves as a reflection of societal perspectives on gender. The usage and interpretation of the singular 'they' in English can be understood in two ways. Firstly, it is employed as a nonspecific form of epicene, as Baranowski (2002) and Everett (2011) discussed. Secondly, it functions as an epicene pronoun with specific and individual references, as explored by Smith et al. (2012).

Furthermore, several social attitudes about gender and prescriptive linguistics, which affect the grammatical assessment of the singular 'they,' which is a core challenge to speaker acceptance, have also been described by several studies. To begin with, the results of an attitude test conducted by Hernandez et al. (2018) found that people who disagreed with transgender people tended to accept the singular 'they' less, and those who agreed with transgender people tended to receive the 'singular they.' The same thing was also found in Hekanaho's study (2022), which stated that research participants refuse to use the pronoun 'they' for non-binary because they believe that gender only consists of two conflicting choices: male and female. In addition, Devin Grammon, an Assistant Professor specializing in Sociolinguistics in Spain, posits that individuals who criticize the usage of the singular pronoun 'they' are likely approaching the matter from a prescriptive grammar perspective, which emphasizes adherence to strict rules rather than a descriptive grammar perspective, which seeks to explain how speakers employ linguistic forms in various contexts. In essence, the singular usage can be deemed linguistically incorrect when viewed through the lens of advocating for the standard language as the preeminent form, surpassing all other variations and linguistic usages (Grammon, 2019). The resistance against adopting the singular 'they' can be attributed to sexist views toward gender and the influence of prescriptive linguistics (Bradley, 2020).

Meanwhile, other participants accepted the pronoun 'they' for non-binary as a matter of self-identity because they believe one must be free to identify themselves without being limited by the gender binary as applied by society (Hekanaho, 2022). The studies by Ackerman et al. (2018) and Breccia (2021) identified a correlation between individuals' awareness of gender diversity and their acceptance of using the singular pronoun 'they.' As the speaker's interaction frequency with transgender and non-binary individuals increases, acceptance of the singular 'they' also increases. Hence, it suggests that social and linguistic change are intimately connected and perhaps mutually reinforcing in a 'singular they' context.

In addition, from the perspective of sociolinguistic variations, Conrod (2018) noted that the reconstruction of the singular 'they' is a change from above, which means that this change originates from the scope of the speech community above the threshold of the speaker's awareness. The introduction of the non-binary singular pronoun 'they' originated from non-binary individuals who opted not to align themselves with traditional gender categories of male or female. However, it is not necessarily prestigious in large societies, perhaps only in some communities where gender plurality is recognized and supported (Conrod, 2018). It is evident from the statement mentioned above that

pronouns possess political implications, and historical evidence indicates that language evolution can be influenced by cultural and political factors (Grammon, 2019).

Vice versa, changing language can also help create a social environment that is more inclusive and respects gender diversity. In this case, descriptive grammar can provide a broader understanding of the actual language because it is not limited to formal rules and takes the variations and changes in language use over time. Thus, the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' and its use in the right situation can influence the social understanding of gender diversity and identity so that it can show respect and recognition of gender diversity in society.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to reconstruct the pronoun 'they'. On the one hand, the aim is to investigate the relationship between the concept of gender and the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' in English and, on the other hand, to investigate how the process of constructing the pronoun 'them' and how it can influence and influence people's social attitudes. The findings showed that in constructing the pronoun 'they' in English, there is interference from the concept of gender and sociocultural language. In addition, this study also found the factors behind the acceptance or rejection of society for their 'non-binary singular.' The main factors are the understanding and perception of grammar and social attitudes in non-binary individuals. This study argued that the reconstruction of the pronoun 'they' has considerable benefits if it is understood and can be applied to individuals with non-binary gender or gender neutral because they can express their identity. The material from this study can be used as open material in the educational curriculum so that students can understand the use of the pronoun 'non-binary singular they'. In addition, this research proposes to politicians, society, and even individuals with non-binary gender to mutually contribute to encouraging the use of their 'non-binary singular' through official writings, public speeches, textbooks, and social media appropriately. It will be an asset for creating a more inclusive and respectful environment for gender equality.

The research on using the pronoun 'they' in the context of reconstruction discussed in this article has several limitations. This article only used library research methods to discover the factors influencing people's reactions to using the pronoun 'non-binary singular they'. Mass studies must research using observation methods, interviews, or questionnaires to gain more concrete knowledge about what factors society rejects or accepts in pronouns 'non-binary singular they'. Another limitation of this paper is that it only got reaction data from native English speakers and English learners (L2) from China, Iran, and Poland. Therefore, this paper proposes further research to explore the reactions to the reconstructive pronoun 'they' from more non-native speakers from various countries, especially Indonesia. In addition, this study also did not examine the psychological impact of rejecting the pronoun 'non-binary singular their.' Thus, this can be a topic for further research. It is hoped that this research can provide material for discussion for further research. Overall, this research has shown that a detailed analysis of the reconstructive word 'they' can reveal social relations in English, especially in gender studies. Therefore, it has a crucial role in efforts to realize gender justice.

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