

From *The Atlantic*, June 2021.

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Original Article Link:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/06/gender-neutral-pronouns-arent-new/619092/>

CULTURE

Where Gender-Neutral Pronouns Come From By Michael Waters

People tend to think of *they*, *Mx.*, and *hir* as relatively recent inventions. But English speakers have been looking for better ways to talk about gender for a very long time.

On a frigid January day, Ella Flagg Young—the first woman to serve as superintendent of the Chicago public-school system—took the stage in front of a room of school principals and announced that she had come up with a new solution to an old problem. “I have simply solved a need that has been long impending,” she said. “The English language is in need of a personal pronoun of the third person, singular number, that will indicate both sexes and will thus eliminate our present awkwardness of speech.” Instead of *he or she*, or *his or her*, Young proposed that schools adopt a version that blended the two: *he'er*, *his'er*, and *him'er*.

It was 1912, and Young's idea drew gasps from the principals, according to newspaper reports from the time. When Young used *his'er* in a sentence, one shouted, “Wh-what was that? We don't quite understand what that was you said.”

Young was actually borrowing the pronouns from an insurance broker named Fred S. Pond, who had invented them the year prior. But in the subsequent weeks, her proposal became a national news story, earning baffled write-ups in the *Chicago Tribune* and the Associated Press. Some embraced the new pronouns—but many dismissed them as an unnecessary linguistic complication, and others despaired that the introduction of gender-neutral pronouns would precipitate an end to language as they knew it. An editor for *Harper's Weekly*, for instance, insisted that “when ‘man’ ceases to include women we shall cease to need a language.”

Today's gender-neutral English-language pronouns make space not just for two genders, but for many more, serving as a way for people who fall outside the binary of “man” and “woman” to describe themselves. In recent years especially, they've become a staple of dating apps, college campuses, and email signatures. In 2020, a Trevor Project survey found that one in four LGBTQ youth uses pronouns other than *he/him* and *she/her*, and the American Dialect Society named the singular *they* its word of the decade.

Meanwhile, commentators have forecast the demise of language once again. A 2018 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed went so far as to claim that using *they/them* pronouns amounted to “sacrilege,” and an Australian politician said that an effort to celebrate *they/them* pronouns was “political correctness gone mad.” Last month, after the singer Demi Lovato came out as nonbinary, a conservative commentator called *they/them* pronouns “poor grammar” and an example of “low academic achievement.” Bundled into these arguments is the idea that gender-neutral pronouns are a new phenomenon, an outgrowth of the internet that is only now spreading into

other spheres—suggesting that the gender fluidity they describe is also a fad.

Until relatively recently, gender-neutral pronouns were something people used to describe others—mixed groups, or individuals whose gender was unknown—not something people used to describe themselves. But even though people did not, in Young’s time, personally identify as nonbinary in the way we understand it today (though some identified as “neuter”), neutral pronouns existed—as did an understanding that the language we had to describe gender was insufficient. For more than three centuries, at least, English speakers have yearned for more sophisticated ways to talk about gender.

Likely the oldest gender-neutral pronoun in the English language is the singular *they*, which was, for centuries, a common way to identify a person whose gender was indefinite. For a time in the 1600s, medical texts even referred to individuals who did not accord with binary gender standards as *they/them*. The pronoun’s fortunes were reversed only in the 18th century, when the notion that the singular *they* was grammatically incorrect came into vogue among linguists.

In place of *they*, though, came a raft of new pronouns. According to Dennis Baron, a professor emeritus of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who wrote the definitive history of gender-neutral pronouns in his book *What’s Your Pronoun?*, English speakers have proposed 200 to 250 pronouns since the 1780s. Although most petered out almost immediately after their introduction, a few took on lives of their own.

Thon—short for *that one*—has resurfaced frequently since an attorney named Charles Converse first introduced it as a more elegant way of writing *he or she*. Converse claimed to have coined the word as far back as 1858, but it didn’t actually appear publicly in a magazine until 1884. The word made a splash in grammarian circles, and more than a decade later the publisher Funk & Wagnalls added *thon* to its dictionaries. “There was a sort of band of followers” for the word, Baron told me. “Through the 1950s and into the 1970s, there were prominent people in the U.S. who every once in a while would promote *thon*.”

The Sacramento Bee used the gender-neutral *hir* from the 1920s to the ’40s. *Mx.*—the gender-neutral equivalent of *Mr.* or *Mrs.*—was first recorded in an April 1977 edition of the magazine *The Single Parent*.

Many of these early pronouns were created either for linguistic simplicity or to include women, but none that Baron tracked from before recent decades had the explicit goal of encompassing a larger diversity of genders. “I’m sure there were people who said, ‘Hey, these pronouns aren’t me,’ but we don’t have a record of what they did after that,” Baron said. But “that doesn’t mean people weren’t talking about it.”

He relayed the story of the Public Universal Friend, an 18th-century preacher who dressed androgynously and generally shunned all personal pronouns. Accounts differ as to whether the Friend’s followers referred to their leader using masculine pronouns or as just “the Friend.”

Around the same time that Ella Flagg Young was promoting her new set of pronouns, a British journal called *Urania* was publishing manifestos rallying against what it termed the “duality” of gender. *Urania* was not a particularly influential journal—during its run from 1916 to 1940, it had a circulation of just 200 to 250, as the historian Alison Oram has documented—but it was relentless in its commitment to critiquing existing British gender norms. Each issue opened with the declaration that “there are no ‘men’ or ‘women’ in Urania,” and further explained that, in the journal’s mind, “no measures of ‘emancipation’ or ‘equality’ will suffice, which do not begin by a complete

refusal to recognize or tolerate the duality itself.”

The main author of *Urania* went variously by the names Thomas Baty and Irene Clyde, and may well have identified as what we would call trans today. *Urania* regularly highlighted stories of people who transitioned or otherwise flouted gender conventions. One issue featured a trans man named Mark Weston who underwent gender-affirming surgery in 1936; the surgery, the publication wrote, “show[ed] that ‘sex is an accident’ and not determinant of character and personality.” Elsewhere in *Urania*, the editors wrote that, when it comes to a person’s gender, “we do not hold that the physical envelope matters.”

Tracing exact parallels between discussions of gender in the early 1900s and contemporary ideas of gender outside of a binary is complex, in part because our concepts of gender and sexuality have morphed over time. Although today in the U.S. we typically demarcate gender from sexuality, starting in the late 1800s sexologists pushed an idea that people who were sexually attracted to the same gender inherently belonged to a “third sex” or were, as one popular phrase put it, “gender inverts.” In other words, most people assumed that queer sexual orientation was tied to gender identity, and so any concept of a gender binary looks different then versus now. (*Urania* rejected the notion of gender inversion, but it was still operating within a context very different from today’s.) “We can never step back into where they were,” says Sage Milo, a scholar who researched *Urania* while writing their doctoral dissertation, “so there will always be that contemporary lens looking back with our systems and terminology.”

Still, the analysis of gender in *Urania*—however we interpret it—does seem to resonate with more contemporary discussions of a multiplicity of genders. “People around that time were exploring what is possible beyond binary gender,” Milo says.

Decades after *Urania* folded, in 1970, a New York feminist named Mary Orovan came up with a new pronoun: *co*. Orovan had worked in advertising and knew all about developing creative slogans. The word *co*—which roughly means “together”—already had inclusivity built into its linguistic roots. It just popped into her head one day, and she thought it had a certain ring to it. Orovan made the case for *co*—and its other variations, *cos* and *coself*—in a pamphlet she published called *Humanizing English*, which she passed around feminist circles.

Popularizing a true gender-neutral pronoun like *co*, Orovan thought, would finally abolish the supposedly neutral *he*, and would at least gesture toward including women officially in language. She told me, “We saw this ubiquitous *he* everywhere, and were we included or not included?”

Somehow, Orovan’s pamphlet reached a cooperative community in Virginia called the Twin Oaks Community. By 1972, Twin Oaks had added *co* to its official documents, envisioning *co* as a simple, gender-inclusive way to refer to members of the community. The researcher Jolane Flanigan found in 2011 that members of the community often deployed *co* to refer to someone whose gender was not known. One pregnant community member, for instance, used *co* in reference to her baby, telling Flanigan, “It doesn’t matter to me which sex *co* is and *co* will figure out *co*’s gender when *co* is ready.”

But over the years, *co*’s usage expanded. Stephan Przybylowicz, a Twin Oaks resident who manages the community’s queer organization, told me that a 5-year-old child in the community once asked them, “Are you a he, a she, or a *co*?” “I do think it’s had a positive effect on making a place for nonbinary people in the community, even if it wasn’t necessarily intended that way at its inception,” Przybylowicz said.

Other gender-neutral pronouns grew in meaning, too: By the 1990s, large numbers of people were asking to be referred to directly by them. The writer Kate Bornstein, who used the pronouns *ze/hir* to describe a character in the 1996 novel *Nearly Roadkill*, was one of the first to bring the practice into the mainstream.

Co's arc—in which the pronoun invented in 1970 to solve a linguistic limitation came to describe a new relationship with gender—would probably surprise anyone who thinks these ideas are a recent invention. In fact, the bulk of what's changed is that gender-neutral pronouns are more widespread today than ever before. The backlash to them, however, is nothing new.

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