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HOW DO THE SOCIAL CHANGES INFLUENCE THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE GRAMMAR?

Abstract: The paper deals with recent changes occurring in the English language due to the changes in the society itself. Every language is influenced by the changes happening in every aspect of human life, namely, in politics, economics, culture or human relations. The topic of the paper is how the changes in gender relations influence the English grammar, that is, the part of the grammar dealing with English pronouns. Nowadays, many people, transgender or others, refuse to be denoted by singular pronouns “*he*” or “*she*” – and choose the singular “*they*” instead. Although this use of “*they*” is not such a new thing, because the nonbinary pronoun “*they*” was voted the Word of the Year 2015 by American Dialect Society and again in 2019 as the Word of the Decade by the same institution, people are still sceptic about its grammatical correctness. But, this use of the pronoun is gaining in popularity, and very soon, the English language might accept these changes,

Keywords: *English language, “they”, pronoun, non-binary, gender, changes.*

It is often said that each language (no matter which) is a living thing with a life of its own, which means that it is constantly changing and that we should be aware of those changes when we speak about any thing concerning any language. Every language has its rules, and they are known as grammar. Grammar is the set of structural rules governing the composition of clauses, phrases and words in a natural language. The term refers also to the study of such rules. Grammar comprises phonology, morphology and syntax which are often complemented by phonetics, semantics and pragmatics.

All parts of language are subject to changes: morphology, semantics and pragmatics in the first place, but phonetics and syntax to some extent, too. The thing is, when language changes are in question, we do naturally expect most of those changes to occur within morphology and semantics since these areas are mostly under the influence of the happenings in the world around us. The changes

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in these areas of language are most visible because every day new words need to be produced denoting new referents in the form of objects, feelings, characteristics and actions.

When we talk about grammar, taken in its narrow sense, we can say that some parts of speech, being known as “*open word classes*”, namely nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs, change more quickly than others, so-called “*closed word classes*” which comprise pronouns, prepositions, determiners and conjunctions. Although it is true that changes within closed word classes are very rare and slow, they do occur and one of them is going to be the topic of this paper.

The question is: are all the language changes good and should all of them be accepted unquestioningly? How should language experts react to those language changes? Should they accept them or stay sceptical and wait to see what people who speak the language in question think about those happenings?

In relation to this question we come to the distinction which is made between standard and non-standard language on one hand, and between prescriptive and descriptive approach to grammar on the other. When we speak about Standard English we have in mind the variant of English that is widely used in countries in which English is a native language or mother-tongue of most people. We think of a set of language rules that are prescribed for the English language to be spoken correctly. But, as English is a *lingua franca* of the world today, which means that it is used in almost all countries of the world as a second or a foreign language, it also means that the rules of this language do not apply in the same sense in all of them. Although all the people who use English try to use it correctly, and try to do so by obeying the rules prescribed by the English grammar, they still, consciously or unconsciously, introduces light changes that do not correspond to the rules of Standard English. With time, these slight changes creep into the language and become officially accepted, at least in one region, and maybe, after a period of time, in the whole of the English speaking world. In that way, non-standard variants of English are developed. That is, interestingly, very often the case with academic texts, maybe because the matter and content they are dealing with are very specific and often hard to translate. We can give some examples which can be found within our area of work, namely, in education. For example, the English language does not have a word for our noun „*metodika*” or the adjective „*metodički*”, but the translations like “*methodics*” and “*methodical*” have been widely accepted in academic papers, although the words do not exist in the English language itself, at least not in the meanings we want them to have. Also, many compound adjectives like „*uzročno-posledički*”, „*pedagoško-psihološki*”, „*teorijsko-empirijski*”, or „*književno-kritički*” are “not obeying the grammar rules of composing and writing compound adjectives in Standard English, but are still, translated and written in the way they appear in Serbian and are widely used as correct in academic texts, at least in our Balkan region” (Ljubicic, 2019: 143).

So, the question is: should we accept such changes as regular and should the English language introduce them as regular words in its corpus? Although these examples definitely are not Standard English, we cannot deny that such forms do exist in present-day English. If we stick to the prescriptive grammar and its representatives, these words would not be accepted as correct, but the descriptive English grammar might have a different opinion. The difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammar can be understood from the definition given by Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum. In their book *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, they say: “The distinction between the prescriptive and descriptive approaches to grammar is often explained by saying that prescriptivists want to tell you how you ought to speak and write, while descriptivists want to tell you how people actually do speak and write. This does bring out the major difference between the two approaches: it is a difference in goals. However, it is something of an oversimplification, because writing a descriptive grammar in practice involves a fair amount of idealisation: we need to abstract away from the errors that people make, especially in speech...” (2002: 5).

Another point concerning language changes is the point made between a formal and an informal style. The question is: Are all the non-standard forms of English ungrammatical or are they just examples of an informal style? If most people use a language form that is shunned by prescriptivists, should that language form be shunned from the very language it self? Or, should it be left to the judgement of time which will show whether and when such language forms can eventually be accepted as regular ones.

The English language has a lot of examples of such informal language uses. The most common one is the use of “*whom*” instead of “*whom*” as in the following sentences:

1. The boy, **to whom** I am talking, is my friend.
2. The boy, **who** I am talking to, is my friend.

In the first sentence, the accusative form of the relative pronoun “*who*” is used correctly and the prescriptivists will agree that this is what a formal style should be. But, the second sentence, though informal, is used widely in everyday speech by lots of people. The form “*whom*” though grammatically correct, seems to be a little obsolete.

The same thing is happening with the first person personal pronoun “*I*” and its accusative form “*me*”. Every person who uses English is familiar with the difference between the two following sentences:

1. It`s *me*.
2. It is *I*.

The first one is informal and colloquial but is widely used by almost all language speakers, and the second one, though grammatically correct, is considered a little strange and old-fashioned.

But, the thing is: the students studying any foreign language (English, in this case), should not be taught only the grammar rules prescribed by the strict language experts. They should also be introduced to other more informal, non-standard forms which are used parallel with those officially recognized as correct. The only thing important is to teach the students to differentiate informality from incorrectness.

Every year many organizations, societies and language experts, choose a word of the year. Last year, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary chose “*they*” as their Word of the Year 2019. This is not the first time that this word appeared on such lists. The non-binary pronoun “*they*” was voted the Word of the Year 2015 by American Dialect Society and again in 2019 the singular “*they*” was voted the Word of the Decade by the same institution.

What is so unusual about the word “*they*” as used in this new way? The word is a regular English *plural* pronoun, together with its other forms “*them*”, “*their*” and “*themselves*”. The Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners has a reference: ““*They*’ is a third person plural pronoun” (2001: 1619). It also says that: “*You use ‘they’ to refer to a group of people, animals or things*” (2001: 1619). But the second entry for “*they*” in this dictionary says: “*You also use ‘they’ instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’ to refer to a person without saying whether this person is a man or a woman.*” And it gives the example:

“I never saw anyone go in to buy. Whether they ever did, I don’t know.”

However, the next sentence in the same dictionary is a warning that: “Some people think this use is incorrect” (2001: 1619). Since this dictionary was first published in 1987, it seems that this use of “*they*” is not a new thing. As it seems, it is the singularity of the word and the new semantic connotation that this new use brought along, that has recently been gaining in significance.

It also seems that the changes in gender, that is, the singularity and plurality of pronouns in English are not so rare, and that they regularly occurred throughout the history of the language development. The Oxford Dictionary traces singular “*they*” back to 1375, where it appeared in the medieval romance *William and the Werewolf*. Although the language of the poem is old-style, the use of singular “*they*” to refer to the unknown person seems very modern.

This is, however, not a lone case. The singular pronoun “*you*” was first a plural pronoun that had become singular. “*You*” functioned as a polite singular for centuries, but in the seventeenth century singular “*you*” replaced the before used singular forms “*thou*”, “*thee*” and “*thy*”. These forms are, however, still used in some local dialects. In the English language now, there is no polite singular personal pronoun, as opposed to, say, the Serbian language, in which the same pronoun “*vi*”

is used as the second person plural pronoun and as a singular polite. The only difference is that the polite singular form is written with the capital letter “V”. Also, in the English language, a similar thing is happening with the first person plural pronoun “we” which is often called “*the royal ‘we’*”, because the English kings and queens, refer to themselves as “we” instead of using a common singular personal pronoun “I”. The thing is that likewise, in many academic texts, the plural “we” is used instead of the singular “I”, so the use of plural pronouns in the place of singular ones is not so rare in the English language.

From these examples, it is obvious that changes in closed noun classes (pronouns in this case), do happen in the language, and although they are slow and mainly semantical, they influence the language in general.

The language experts have been warning for a long time that singular “they” is an error, because a plural noun cannot take a singular antecedent. But many dictionaries and language manuals list the examples in which the use of singular “they” is allowed. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) and *The New Oxford American Dictionary* (Third Edition, 2010), consider singular “they” generally accepted with indefinites, and “*now common but less widely accepted with definite nouns, especially in formal contexts*”.

Michael Swan, a famous linguist, in his book “Practical English Usage” says that: “They/them/there is often used to refer to a singular indefinite person. This is common after *a person, anybody/one, somebody/one, nobody/one, and whoever, each, every, either, neither and no*. They has a plural verb in this case.

*‘If anybody calls, take **their** name and ask **them** to call again.’*

*‘Somebody left **their** umbrella in the office. Would **they**, please, collect it?’*

*‘Every individual thinks **they**’re different from everybody else’ (2005: 521).*

At first glance, this is a mismatch, because it appears that such use flouts the normal rules of agreement, but if we know that many of these words can be thought of as plural in meaning, albeit grammatically singular, such mismatch does not exist.

If we take the previous sentences into consideration, we come to the conclusion that singular “they”, “them” or “their” is convenient when the person referred to is either male or female, but also when the person’s sex is known, but that person does not want to be referred to as a man or a woman specifically. Although these uses are mainly informal, they can also be found in formal written English. Michael Swan gives an example from a British passport application form:

“Dual nationality: if the child possesses the nationality or citizenship of another country, *they* may lose this when *they* get a British Passport” (Swan, 2005: 521).

The use of singular “*they*” came into focus and arose further discussion about its grammaticality when it became a matter of politics and social conventions and not only a matter of grammar itself. As we have already said, some years ago the first comments and statements about the use of singular “*they*”, given by famous people, appeared in British and American newspapers. At first, those were the people who declared themselves as gay or transgender, but soon they were supported by other people who had no problem with their real gender at all. Public was surprised when the famous hitmaker Sam Smith said in a newspaper article: “*I want to be referred to as they/them*.” “The text goes on like this: “The ‘How Do You Sleep’ hitmaker has chosen what pronouns *they* would like to be referred to from now on after a ‘lifetime of being at war with *their* gender’”. Many other celebrities joined the group and pronounced themselves “*non-binary*” or “*gender-fluid*”, using the singular “*they*” as their personal pronoun. Singular “*they*” did not only shake the grammar rules of English, it also led to some morphological changes, some of them being seen in the coinage of the new words as are the two already mentioned in the previous sentences: “*non-binary*” and “*gender-fluid*”. The changes in one segment of a language always lead to changes in other segments of the same, as can be seen from the above-mentioned examples.

Nonbinary “*they*” takes a plural verb, despite its singular referent. Merriam-Webster Dictionary explains that: “We recently announced the addition of the non-binary ‘*they*’ / that is , ‘*they*’ as it is used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary – and a lot of people had some questions, ‘*why?*’ being primary among them. The answer to that question is no different than it is for any other word. All new words and meanings that we enter in our dictionaries meet three criteria: meaningful use, sustained use, and widespread use. Nonbinary ‘*they*’ has a clear meaning; it’s found in published texts, in transcripts, and in general discourse; and its use has been steadily growing over the past decades. English speakers are encountering nonbinary ‘*they*’ in social media profiles and in the pronoun stickers applied to conference badges. There’s no doubt that it is an established member of the English language, which means that it belongs in Merriam-Webster’s dictionaries”.

The choice of non-binary “*they*” as the word of the decade reflects a hitherto unimaginable fact that even a personal pronoun can rise to the top of such a list. Ben Zimmer, the chair of the American Dialect Society’s New Words Committee and language columnist for the *Wall Street Journal* said: “When a basic part of speech like the pronoun becomes a vital indicator of social trends, linguists pay attention. The selection of ‘(my) pronouns’ as Word of the Year speaks to how the personal expression of gender identity has become an increasing part of our shared discourse. That trend is also reflected in *singular ‘they’* being chosen as Word of the Decade, with a growing recognition of the use of ‘*they*’ for those whose identities don’t conform to the binary of ‘*he*’ and ‘*she*’.”

The choice of gender specific pronouns and the awareness of freedom of self-expression have become something that goes without saying. It is now a matter of social politeness to ask a person to decide what personal pronoun he/she wants to be addressed with. Sharing one's pronouns and asking for others' pronouns when making introductions is a growing trend in US colleges. For example, when new students attended orientation sessions at American University in Washington DC a few months ago, they were asked to introduce themselves with their name, hometown, and preferred gender pronoun. "*We ask everyone at orientation to state their pronouns,*" says Sara Bendoraitis, of the university's Center for Diversity and Inclusion, "*so that we are learning more about each other rather than assuming*". At the University of Vermont, which has led this movement, students can choose from "*he*", "*she*", "*they*" and "*ze*", as well as "*name only*" – meaning they don't want to be referred to by any third-person pronoun, only their name.

CONCLUSION

Whether we like it or not, "*they*" is now a recognized and *grammatically* correct singular pronoun. The singularity of this pronoun taken in the sense it is used nowadays in social contacts with other people, has not yet been fully recognized in written dictionaries. But, as the things are, this phenomenon will soon enter the corpus of the English language, and, apparently, will stay in it forever. It will be, and already is, the example of how the language is influenced by the political, social and psychological changes in society and the example of how they all go hand in hand.

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КАКО ДРУШТВЕНЕ ПРОМЕНЕ УТИЧУ НА ГРАМАТИКУ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА?

Резиме

Рад се бави најновијим променама које су се десиле у енглеском језику услед промена у самом друштву. Сваки језик је под утицајем промена које се дешавају у сваком аспекту људског живота, као што су политика, економија, култура или људски односи. Тема рада је како промене у родним односима утичу на енглеску граматику, односно део граматике који се бави енглеским заменицама. Данас многи људи, трансродни или други, одбијају да буду означени заменицама у једнини „он” или „она”, и уместо тога бирају једнину „они”. Иако ова употреба „они” није тако нова ствар, јер је небинарна, заменица „они” проглашена је за реч године 2015. од стране Америчког дијалекатског друштва, а и поново 2019. године као реч деценије, од исте институције, људи су још увек скептични у погледу њене граматичке исправности. Употреба ове заменице постаје све популарнија и енглески језик врло брзо би могао прихватити ове промене.

Кључне речи: енглески језик, „они”, заменица, не-бинарни, пол, промене.