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Singular ‘they’: Gender stereotype endorsement and grammatical prescriptivism

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Abstract

Singular ‘they’ is regarded as less acceptable when used to refer to morphosyntactically gendered antecedents (e.g., waitress) than nongendered ones (e.g., server). However, antecedents of ‘they’ that lack morphosyntactic gender can nonetheless be stereotypically gendered (e.g., cheerleader). We assessed the extent to which rejection of singular ‘they’ is driven by endorsement of gender stereotypes. Native English speakers ($N = 98$) judged the naturalness of sentences with a singular, stereotypically gendered antecedent and either the gender-typical pronoun (e.g., ‘she’ for ‘cheerleader’), the gender-atypical pronoun (‘he’), or ‘they.’ Overall, the gender-typical pronoun was judged most natural, and ‘they’ was judged least natural. Yet a sizable subset of participants rejected ‘they’ despite signaling counterstereotypical attitudes in their ‘he’/‘she’ judgments and expressing explicit acceptance of gender diversity. These results suggest that ‘they’ remains unacceptable in part due to prescriptivist beliefs about grammar that are independent of stereotype endorsement.