Pronouns

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In English, third-person singular pronouns come in grammatically feminine and masculine forms: *she*, *her*, *hers*, *herself*; *he*, *him*, *his*, *himself*. (Here called *FM pronouns.*) There is also a neuter pronoun *it*, used to refer to inanimate objects, plants and some animals, and occasionally young children, although not adults.1 Troubles begin because feminine pronouns are appropriately used for females, and masculine pronouns for males, and yet sometimes these rules are broken. Is it simply considerate to use *she* when speaking of a transgender woman (a natal male whose sex-of-living is female), or is there more at stake?2 (Section 4.) Are any new issues raised by the recent proliferation of “non-binary” identities, with the consequent request for *they/them* pronouns? (Section 5.) Is non-binary *they* a good idea? (Section 6.) And it is feasible to follow the Swedes and add a sex-neutral (epicene) pronoun, or imitate Finnish and Hungarian by ditching FM pronouns altogether? (Section 7.) The last section briefly raises two other topics: deception and compelled speech. The first three sections discuss some preliminary issues.

1. Pronouns and sex

FM pronouns convey information about sex. (1) commits the speaker to the claim that the individual in question is female:

1. She is in the field.

If Mollie the mare is the salient animal in the field, then (an utterance of) (1) is true and unproblematic. If Boxer the stallion is in the field then there is something wrong with (1). When it is pointed out that the animal is male, an appropriate response would be ‘Whoops, he is in the field’.

Small animals of whatever sex are sometimes referred to with masculine pronouns:

2. There is a spider is the bathtub. Please get him out.

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1 See Payne and Huddleston 2002: 488-9. *It* is also used to refer to body parts. *It/its* can be someone’s “preferred pronouns”; that is the only situation in which the neuter pronoun for an adult is acceptable. *One* is a third-person singular pronoun, but cannot be used to refer to a particular individual.

2 Useful phrase *sex-of-living* taken from Cadet 2011. The brief characterization of transgender women in the text is not entirely accurate, since it omits the crucial motivational component for changing one’s sex-of-living, gender dysphoria (see section 3).
Even here, corrections can be made. If your arachnologist spouse points out that the spider is actually female, switching to *her* is appropriate. (Thus the pronoun in (2) is not like the metaphorical use of *she* to refer to boats. In that latter usage, (1) could be used correctly to make a claim about the location of a yacht on a trailer.)

We are like horses. If the animal in the field is a human female, then (1) is fine; if the animal is a human male, it isn’t. There is no special FM pronoun for humans only. If someone is in the bathroom plucking their eyebrows, next to a cat on the floor licking itself, and these are the only two occupants, then (3) is true and unproblematic just in case the person and the cat are female:

3. Every (human or non-human) animal in the bathroom is grooming herself.

If either the cat or the person is male, then there is something wrong with (3), and typically a correction would be in order. (We are ignoring whether uttering (3) in a particular context would be rude, offensive, or otherwise ill-advised.)

Interestingly, *she* is more committal for the speaker than *female*. Consider:

4. That animal is female and in the field.

(4) commits the speaker to the animal’s being female, but this vanishes under negation:

5. It is false that that animal is female and in the field.

(5) does not commit the speaker to the claim that the animal is in the field, and neither does it commit the speaker to the claim that the animal is female.

However, the parallel commitment of (1) persists if the sentence is negated. (6) commits the speaker to the claim that the referent of *she* is female, just as (1) does:

6. It is false that she is in the field.

Perhaps *she* induces a Gricean conversational implicature, to the effect that the referent is female? If so, the relation between (1) and the claim that the referent is female is like that between (7) and (8) (uttered in a suitable context):

7. The bull is in the field.

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3 FM pronouns are (or have been) used for a wide variety of personified entities, e.g. the Sun (*he*), rivers (*he*), the Moon (*she*), the Earth (*she*), storms (*she*); no such conventions are needed to apply FM pronouns to stuffed animals and toys with an obvious fictional sex.

4 According to Dembroff and Wodak (2018)—discussed in later sections—“that *she* refers to a woman is part of its meaning” (385), which is presumably a slip. (Cf. Dembroff and Wodak 2021: “our actual use of *he* and *she* marks male and female” (363).)

5 A similar point holds for other constructions which remove entailments. For instance, when (1) is the antecedent of a conditional the commitment is preserved: ‘If she is in the field, then the stable door is open’. Bound FM pronouns produce the same result: ‘If every cat washes herself, then we don’t need to bathe any cats’ commits the speaker to every contextually relevant cat being female. See Sudo 2012: 21.
8. We shouldn’t walk across the field. This is clearly wrong, because conversational implicatures like (8) are “cancellable”: ‘The bull is in the field, but he’s perfectly harmless’ removes the suggestion that we shouldn’t walk across the field. A speaker cannot similarly cancel the commitment incurred by (1):

9. #She is in the field, but that animal is not female.

That leaves two candidates for the relation between pronouns and sex. First, conventional implicature, where the implicature is semantically encoded. One of Grice’s famous examples was ‘He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave’; Grice took therefore to implicate that bravery was some kind of consequence of being an Englishman (Grice 1989: 25). (This is not cancellable, hence not a conversational implicature.) Other (more plausible) examples of conventional implicatures employ honorifics like Dr. or noun phrases like a doctor used as appositives. (10) and (11) commit the speaker to the claim that Ampleforth is a doctor:

10. Dr. Ampleforth is at the door.
11. Ampleforth, a doctor, is at the door.

The commitment is not cancellable, and it remains under negation:

12. Dr. Ampleforth isn’t at the door.
13. Ampleforth, a doctor, isn’t at the door.

One hypothesis, then, is that she conventionally implicates that the referent is female.

That is not the only possibility for the relationship between (1) and the claim that the referent of she is female. The other is presupposition, as illustrated by (14) and (15):

14. Muriel has stopped ruminating.
15. Muriel was ruminating earlier.

Someone uttering (14) presupposes (15)—that is, assumes its truth for the purposes of the conversation. (15) is part of the conversational background, not something that might be “at issue”. Thus to object to (14) with ‘You’re wrong’ is to object to the claim that Muriel is not presently ruminating; it is not to object to (15).

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7 Infelicity is marked in this chapter with #.
8 It might not be a conventional implicature either (Bach 1999: 330, Potts 2005: 213).
9 ‘Dr. Dre is at the door, but he’s not a doctor’ indicates that Dr. in Dre’s name is not the medical honorific, or the Ph.D. one.
There is a vast literature on presupposition, and much disagreement among theorists.\textsuperscript{10} For present purposes it is enough to note one difference between presuppositions and conventional implicatures, namely that presuppositions can be removed by some predicates, including non-factive attitude verbs and verbs of saying. These are called \textit{presupposition plugs} (Potts 2015: 172).\textsuperscript{11} The presupposition of (14) is not removed by negation:

16. Muriel hasn’t stopped ruminating.

But it is removed if (14) is in the scope of \textit{believe} or \textit{say}. Neither (17) nor (18) presupposes (15):

17. The farmer believes that Muriel has stopped ruminating.

18. The farmer said that Muriel has stopped ruminating.

However, conventional implicatures are unaffected. (19) and (20) commit the speaker to Ampleforth’s being a doctor:

19. The farmer believes that Dr. Ampleforth is at the door.

20. The farmer said that Dr. Ampleforth is at the door.

That might be held to decide the matter in favor of the conventional implicature hypothesis, because (21) and (22) commit the speaker to a female referent for \textit{she}:

21. The farmer believes that she is in the field.

22. The farmer said that she is in the field.

In fact, the issue is much more complicated, not least because theorists do not agree on the boundaries between presupposition and conventional implicature. This can be left unsettled here, but it will be useful to pick a side for illustrative purposes. We will think of FM pronouns as giving rise to conventional implicatures about the sex of the referent, or the sex of the creatures in the relevant domain of quantification. Nothing material will be affected if it turns out that the phenomenon is best classified as a kind of presupposition.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} For surveys see Atlas 2006, Potts 2015, Schlenker 2016.

\textsuperscript{11} Terminology from Karttunen 1973: 174; Karttunen is unsure whether \textit{believe} is a plug (188-90).

\textsuperscript{12} For a defense of the conventional implicature view, see Greenhall 2007 (which makes the point about plugs mentioned in the text; see also Cooper 1983: 180-1). Although the commitment to sex is not plugged, it is (usually) backgrounded like a presupposition. (Sentences like ‘Boxer is male, but he’s not very aggressive’ do not sound redundant; cf. Potts 2005: 33-4.) Further, the commitment to sex does disappear in some contexts, e.g. ‘If this horse is a colt, I will take him to get gelded’ (cf. Sudo 2012: 33). The presuppositional view is in Kratzer and Heim 1998: 244-5, and often is assumed (e.g. Recanati 2012: 6; Dembroff and Wodak 2018: 385; 2021: 373, n. 8). For a defense, see Sudo 2012, especially 36-8; see also Stokke Forthcoming. For more on conventional implicature see Potts 2005, 2015, McCredy 2010, Schlenker 2016.

The possibility that the linguists are wrong—or at least out of date—and that FM pronouns now conventionally implicate (or presuppose) “gender identities”, will be briefly examined later (section 5, and note 39).
2. Sexing and gendering

Imagine that a person of interest to the police runs into a field. The dispatcher at headquarters does not know the suspect’s sex, but it is clear that the suspect is an adult. The police officer on the ground utters (1) — ‘She is in the field’ — into his radio, thus communicating to the dispatcher, not just the whereabouts of the suspect, but that the suspect is female. The officer and the dispatcher both know that the suspect is an adult, so the officer has also effectively communicated to the dispatcher that the suspect is a woman. In an alternative scenario, the suspect is known to be a child; in this case by uttering (1) the officer also communicates that the suspect is a girl.

Similarly, if it is known that the referent is an adult lion, then the additional information communicated by uttering (1) is that the animal is a lioness. But the fundamental semantic connection is between FM pronouns and sex. The information that the animal is a lioness can be explained as an entailment from what is conventionally implicated — that the animal is female — and the background knowledge that the animal is an adult lion.

One might think that the explanation in the case of woman is parallel. Just as adult lion and female entail lioness, adult human and female entail woman. A speaker who knows that the referent of she is an adult human is therefore committed to the claim that the referent is a woman. In fact, the entailment is routinely denied by philosophers who have proposed answers to Simone de Beauvoir’s question, What is a woman? (Beauvoir 1949/2011: 3). Although there is no consensus on an answer, there is a near-consensus that woman is compatible with male. By the same token, man is compatible with female, and (although this is rarely discussed), girl is compatible with male and boy is compatible with female. This position is sometimes motivated by the conviction that transgender (trans, transsexual) women are women and transgender men are men, or that at least some of them are, and that these people remain in their natal sex.13

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13 As Stoljar puts it, “Transsexuals keep the same chromosomes [better: stay the same sex], yet change genders” (Stoljar 1995: 274). She thus thinks that “individuals can be women without being of the female sex” (285). (This is an old idea: see Prince 1971: 171.) On Stoljar’s view, to be a woman is (roughly) to closely resemble a paradigm woman, understood as a person with female “sex characteristics”, with feelings like “menstrual cramps” and “fear of rape”, who inhabits “roles such as wearing typical female dress”, and who calls herself “a woman and [is] called a woman” (283-4). McKitrick has a somewhat similar view: to be a woman is (roughly) to have “sufficiently strong dispositions to behave in ways that are considered womanly by a social group” (McKitrick 2015: 2586). Setting aside whether these accounts are plausible as stated, or whether they include trans women (see Kapusta 2016: 513-4), they have particular difficulties when extended to include girl, which should be treated in a similar manner to woman.
Woman, man, boy, girl are often called gender terms (see, e.g., Barnes 2020; other gender terms include non-binary and agender). Since female and male are (in this usage) not gender terms, the terminology reflects the near-consensus view just explained. A related term is misgendering, which (in the case of transgender women) Kapusta takes to mean:

…something broader than simply the use of male pronouns, or of designations associated with being male…the notion includes the use of gender terms that exclude transgender women from the category woman. (2016: 502)\(^{14}\)

To “misgender” someone sounds like it involves a factual mistake—getting the person’s “gender” wrong, for instance saying of a man that he is a woman. That is not the usual understanding of the term, however, and Kapusta herself is neutral on whether transgender women are included in the category woman (i.e. whether they are women). As the quotation from Kapusta indicates, a sufficient condition for misgendering a transgender woman is simply reference to her with masculine pronouns. The misgendering terminology is confusing, and will not be used here.

Let us say that gendering is conveying that someone is a woman, man, girl, boy, non-binary person…and so on for other gender terms. (Construe conveying broadly, to include asserting, implicating and presupposing.) Sexing is conveying that someone is female or male.

Imagine that farmer Frederick, an unexceptional middle-aged male, is climbing over a stile leading into a field. Julia and her companion are looking down on the field from a nearby hill. Julia’s companion utters (1), ‘She is in the field’, pointing to Frederick. Frederick has been mistakenly sexed. Has he been mistakenly gendered? That depends.

Suppose that orthodoxy in the metaphysics of gender is correct, and that adult females of our species are not guaranteed to be women. Suppose, further, that Katherine knows this and is the utterer of (1). When Julia tries to correct Katherine by saying ‘Wrong, that’s not a woman’, Katherine protests that she never said or implied such a thing. Katherine rightly takes this “correction” to be like someone responding with ‘Wrong, that’s not a woman’ to:

23. That person is a preschool teacher.

Preschool teachers are extremely likely to be women, but someone who utters (23) is not committed to the person’s being a woman.\(^{15}\)

\(^{14}\) Kapusta also includes “designations associated…with masculinity” and a hierarchical conception of women “that marginalizes transgender women” (2016: 502).

\(^{15}\) However, one could use (23) to conversationally implicate that the person is a woman.
On the other hand, suppose that orthodoxy is wrong and that \textit{woman} is like \textit{lioness}. Suppose, further, that Benjamin is Julia’s companion in this alternative scenario; he utters ‘She is in the field’, pointing at Frederick. Benjamin knows that \textit{(adult human) female} entails \textit{woman}, and accepts Julia’s correction, ‘Wrong, that’s not a woman’. Katherine does not mistakenly gender Frederick, but Benjamin does.

This is a complication that should be kept in mind in what follows. Fortunately, as will be explained in the next section, whether the orthodox view of gender is correct is not especially relevant to this chapter.

3. \textbf{Courtesy pronouns and linguistically correct pronouns}

Tom is a transgender man. A natal female and a “tomboy” growing up, Tom suffered from \textit{gender dysphoria}, “the aversion to some or all of those physical characteristics or social roles that connote one’s own biological sex”\textsuperscript{16}. Tom’s dysphoria did not abate after puberty, and in his twenties, Tom “transitioned” to male, with the assistance of surgery and testosterone\textsuperscript{17}. Thanks to that powerful hormone, Tom’s voice deepened, fat redistributed, muscle and facial hair grew. Tom presents as a neatly bearded man in his thirties at work and in his leisure time, and uses bathrooms and facilities appropriate for his sex-of-living. Tom’s dysphoria is now greatly reduced, and he is getting on with life, concentrating on his career and relationships, and not bothering anyone else.

Tom’s \textit{courtesy} pronouns are the masculine ones, the pronouns that match his sex-of-living. Tom’s colleagues all use them when talking about Tom in his absence, not out of courtesy but because it would never occur to them to do anything else. Only a few of Tom’s colleagues know that he is a trans man.

Did Tom’s transition literally change his sex from female to male? Of course, if it did, then the propriety of referring to Tom with feminine pronouns is a non-issue: this is inappropriate just as a feminine pronoun for farmer Frederick is inappropriate. However, it is implausible that Tom has changed sex. Some animals do change sex in normal ecological conditions, but mammals don’t, and Tom’s medical treatment comes nowhere near to approximating actual sex-changes in the wild: in that sense, it is cosmetic\textsuperscript{18}.

\textsuperscript{17} For some testimonies, see Devor 2016. On tomboys, see Davis 2020.
\textsuperscript{18} Sex change: Vega-Frutis et al. 2014. In the gender studies literature (and sometimes in feminist philosophy) a quite different picture of sex is presented. To take a random example: “As feminist scholars have frequently shown,
We will assume, then, that no sex change has occurred. (We could also consider a version of Tom with no medical treatment, and only a social transition; here a sex-change is not credible in the slightest. But we will stay with Tom as described.) Let us say that feminine pronouns are Tom’s (linguistically) correct pronouns: the conventional implicature of feminine pronouns, applied to Tom, is true.

Did Tom’s transition literally change his “gender” (in the technical sense) from woman to man? On orthodox views in the metaphysics of gender, it did. And if Tom is a man, then to convey that he is a woman, or not a man, is to make a factual mistake. In the terminology adopted here, it is to mistakenly gender Tom. The propriety of saying or implying that Tom is not a man, is a non-issue: this is inappropriate just as saying that farmer Frederick is not a man is inappropriate.

Now using she for Tom might well suggest to the uneducated that he is not a man, but (granted orthodoxy) that is not the pronoun’s fault. The unwanted suggestion that Tom is not a man could be removed by explaining that Tom has changed gender, not sex. Still, it is clear that at least in some circumstances, she should not be used to refer to Tom, even among the educated who accept that there are female men.

An alternative hypothesis is that woman entails female and man entails male. If this is correct, Tom is not a man, since his natal sex is his present sex. Saying that Tom is not a man is then not to make a factual mistake, just as referring to Tom by his correct pronouns is not to make a factual mistake. If (accurately) using she to refer to Tom is objectionable, presumably saying (truly) that Tom is not a man is objectionable for similar reasons.

The upshot is that, for present purposes, controversies about gender terms like woman and man can be ignored. Either man applies to Tom or it does not. If it does, then man is not worth discussing. If man doesn’t apply to Tom, then not a man or woman add little to the issue already raised by she.

sex does not precede but is enacted through the actions of its practitioners...laboratory scientists, medical providers, and policymakers. Their collective practices bring sex into existence not merely as an assigned category but as an ontological entity” (Pape et al. 2020: 2). This is not the place to examine what this means and whether it has been “frequently shown”, but it should be noted that the claims about sex just made in the text are not universally accepted. It may be that Dembroff and Wodak (see the following section) do not accept them.
4. Correct pronouns and transgender women and men

To use feminine pronouns for Tom is to correctly sex him, to conventionally implicate (or presuppose) that he is female. It is not very interesting to be told that Tom’s correct pronouns should not be used at work. Tom is not playing a frivolous game of dress-up: he has undergone drastic medical treatment (which will continue for the rest of his life) for a serious psychological condition. To use Tom’s correct pronouns would be cruel and a gratuitous invasion of his privacy. What is interesting, however, is whether it is ever permissible to use Tom’s correct pronouns in an ordinary conversational context.

Imagine that two of Tom’s close friends, who know his history, are talking about him in private. Tom’s sex is relevant to the conversation—perhaps they have read something about the effects of high levels of testosterone in natal females, and are concerned for Tom’s health. Or perhaps they are wondering if Tom, who always wanted children, could get pregnant while continuing to take cross-sex hormones. Or perhaps they are talking about the treatment of females by males, and why Tom does not receive this treatment, despite his sex. Probably it would be easier and feel more natural for them to continue to use Tom’s courtesy pronouns, as they usually do, and state Tom’s sex—somewhat awkwardly—by saying ‘He is female’. Or they could use his name, or find some euphemistic substitute for female. But what if they used his correct pronouns? Would Tom have been wronged in any way?

Dembroff and Wodak (2018—the main philosophy paper on FM pronouns) argue that he would. They give four arguments for the following claim:

\[ \text{TW} \quad \text{We have a duty not to use } he \text{ to refer to transgender women}. \]

(We can concentrate on the first three; the fourth basically comprises the first three taken together (379).) Clearly Dembroff and Wodak would endorse the corresponding thesis for transgender men, and their arguments can be presented with Tom as the example, making the appropriate substitutions. In our terminology, their generalized claim is:

\[ \text{TW/M} \quad \text{We have a duty not to use correct pronouns for transgender women or transgender men}. \]

\[ \text{375. The quotation ends with “like McGregor”, referring to Catherine McGregor, a transgender woman and former Australian military officer who transitioned in her 50s.} \]
How strong is this duty? If someone is going to be shot unless correct pronouns are used, Dembroff and Wodak would concede that the duty is overridden, but seem disinclined to make many more concessions. In particular, they think that “private acts” of using correct pronouns for transgender women or men are “bad” and “problematic”, although not as bad as doing this publicly (379).

Dembroff and Wodak’s “first and most obvious reason” in favor of not using Tom’s correct pronouns is that “it expresses disrespect towards [him] in virtue of [his] social identity, and thereby also expresses disrespect to those who share [his] social identity (i.e., other transgender [men])” (375-6).

This reason is not so obvious. When social identities come with approved ways of speaking—Doctor for physicians, Father for priests, Comrade for members of the Party, and so on—it can be impolite to leave these out. Addressing Father O’Brien as Mr. O’Brien might mildly disrespect him, and the clergy in general. But is there much, if anything, wrong with using Mr. O’Brien when speaking of him in his absence? (Note that Mr. has no incorrect conventional implicature or presupposition.) And not all social identities deserve respect anyway—perhaps including some religious identities. If using Tom’s correct pronouns is to egregiously disrespect him, that must be because of some distinctive feature of the transgender case.

And Dembroff and Wodak offer one candidate for a distinctive feature. Someone who uses Tom’s correct pronouns expresses “disrespect towards [Tom] by referring to [him] as [she], thereby communicating that [he] is a [woman]” (376).

Since gender terms like woman and man are a distraction, the point should be recast in terms of communicating that Tom is female. And that, we are supposing, is true: Tom is female.21

20 In a footnote, Dembroff and Wodak allow that “these duties might be outweighed when a paramedic needs to use gender specific pronouns to coordinate on which patient to save in an emergency” (373, fn. 3), but here they are not talking about the duty not to use correct pronouns for transgender women and men. Instead, they are talking about the duty not to use she or he for non-binary or genderqueer people (see below, section 5). Their claim in this passage is that a visibly female non-binary person may be referred to by she if lives are at stake. For a real-life example where correct pronouns for a pregnant transgender man perhaps would have saved his baby, see Stroumsa et al. 2019.

21 Dembroff and Wodak clearly think that trans women are women and trans men are men (see 2018: 386-7). By their own lights, one should not communicate that Tom is a woman because he isn’t: he’s a man, and there’s no point denying it. That should be “the first and most obvious reason” for not using Tom’s correct pronouns, rather than anything about respect. (See also fn. 8, 376, which analogizes using correct pronouns to mistakenly calling Ukrainians Russians.) Suppose Dembroff and Wodak are right, and that Tom is a man. As argued in the previous section, the problem is not with she, it is with the step from she to not a man (or woman).
(Contrast referring to Father O’Brien as *Mr. O’Brien*: in some contexts, that conversationally implicates that O’Brien is not a priest. But here what is implicated is false: O’Brien is a priest.)

Now it is also true that using Tom’s correct pronouns *could* conversationally implicate that Tom is some kind of fraud or “evil deceiver” (Bettcher 2007), and that Tom is offending against nature or God: his sex-of-living should match his natal sex. That is undoubtedly problematic. But in another context, for instance in the conversation between Tom’s friends, there is no such implication.

How are Tom’s friends disrespecting him? They are not revealing any secrets, or trying to humiliate Tom or exacerbate his dysphoria. Neither are they conveying anything false: it is true that Tom is female. Tom’s sex may be irrelevant in most contexts, but it is not entirely irrelevant, and it is relevant in the conversation between Tom’s friends.

Indeed, we may suppose that Tom himself is clear-headed on the matter, agreeing with the following remarks from a (non-fictional) transgender man:

I wasn’t identified as female at birth. My sex was observed—not assigned. It wasn’t some random and spontaneous guess. My biological sex is still relevant in many aspects of my life. The fact that I’m a trans man does not erase my biology. This shouldn’t be controversial to say.

Dembroff and Wodak’s initial argument is not very convincing, then. It has two important similarities with their other two arguments, worth noting at this point. First, the argument has nothing specific to do with pronouns. If someone said at work that Tom is female, this would be to disrespect him just as much as using feminine pronouns would. Dembroff and Wodak’s fundamental objection is (in effect) to *correct sexing*, whether implicated via pronouns or stated explicitly.

Second, the argument doesn’t just target the correct sexing of particular individuals. Correctly sexing transgender men in general is also problematic, on Dembroff and Wodak’s view. FM pronouns are still relevant in this case, since they can be anaphors to singular indefinite noun phrases like *a transgender man*, or fictional names like *Tom*.

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22 On Bettcher, see Stock 2021: 189-90.
23 https://twitter.com/UpperhandMars/status/1302078222327328769.
24 But see note 18. Dembroff and Wodak are careful not to imply anything about April Haze’s sex (see the following section), and characterize a transgender woman as having been “assigned the sex *male* at birth” (2018: 374), a circumlocution which leaves open the possibility that the assignment was a mistake. (However, *assigned male at birth* could conversationally implicate that the person is currently male, so this phrase doesn’t completely prevent correct sexing.)
Dembroff and Wodak’s second argument against using Tom’s correct pronouns is that:

it implies that we may withhold from them certain resources (understood broadly), to which they are genuinely entitled. Categorizing [Tom as a male] carries a vast number of practical implications and entitlements: it implies that [Tom] has appropriate access to [male] spaces, such as bathrooms and locker rooms… (2018: 376-7)

Tom would cause a commotion if he marched into the female bathroom, and no issues arise about Tom using the one for males. One should not be hyper-legalistic about bathroom signs. Boys may use the bathroom marked *Men*, even though boys are not men. A father may take his small daughter into a bathroom marked *♂*. Rules and regulations need to be interpreted in a flexible commonsense way. Since Tom’s being female does not imply that he is not entitled to male spaces, merely conveying Tom’s sex does not imply this either.

The analogous point applies equally to trans women, although in this case there are well-known complications. Categorizing a trans woman as female, according to Dembroff and Wodak, implies that she:

has appropriate access to [female] spaces, such as bathrooms and locker rooms; that she can appropriately take part in [female] social groups; that she can apply for scholarships, jobs, or housing intended for [female] applicants; and so on.

(377)

Dembroff and Wodak assume that trans women are entitled to these resources, and conclude that correct sexing is wrong. But, as with Tom, the fact of a trans woman’s sex does not imply that she is not entitled to female spaces, and so neither does correct sexing.

Although correct sexing does not prejudice issues about entitlement, it is disputed whether trans women are entitled to (certain) female spaces. In this respect, the situations of trans men and trans women are importantly different. To take two examples, it is not obvious that transgender women should be allowed to compete in weightlifting events for females. Neither is it obvious that transgender women should be housed among the general population in the female prison estate. These issues arise because of differences between the sexes: in the case of weightlifting, because of the male advantage in strength; in the case of prisons, because of the
asymmetric threat males pose to females.\textsuperscript{25} It is not possible to debate these issues properly without correctly sexing trans women.

Dembroff and Wodak’s third argument turns on “gender-specific norms”. The actual norm they consider in the case of trans women is “women shave their legs” (378); a corresponding norm in Tom’s case would be: men (should) take their hats off indoors. Keeping the focus on sex, let us modify that to: males (should) take their hats off indoors.

This norm does not apply to Tom, since he is not male. Suppose Tom decides to act as if the norm applies to him, and removes his hat on entering someone’s house. According to Dembroff and Wodak, using feminine pronouns for Tom would “undermine the intelligibility” of this action:

[Tom] can only be recognized to conform to or violate the norm if the norm is recognized as applying to [him]. So if Tom is [referred to] as a [she], the intelligibility of his actions and choices is undermined. (378)

However, pronouns (and correct sexing more broadly) are irrelevant. The norm does not apply to Tom, no matter how he is referred to. If this fact makes Tom’s action unintelligible, then pronouns are not to blame. And in any case, Tom’s action is still perfectly intelligible even if the norm does not apply to him. A tourist may visit a country with certain norms of greeting (say, bowing) that do not apply to foreigners; nonetheless, the polite tourist bows when meeting his hosts, even though he is not expected to. There is nothing unintelligible (or wrong, for that matter) about the tourist’s action, and the same goes for Tom.\textsuperscript{26}

We are back where we started: Tom should not be gratuitously embarrassed or humiliated or accused of a crime against nature. But there are plenty of situations where using Tom’s correct pronouns is to do none of these things.

There are further cases to consider. To wittingly use courtesy FM pronouns instead of correct ones is to participate in a kind of pretense.\textsuperscript{27} Usually that is to the benefit of the person referred


\textsuperscript{26} Another point is that although the norm as stated does not apply to Tom, plausibly the norm that is actually in force does apply to him. Suppose that Tom an overly literal-minded fellow, and has read in a book of etiquette that males should take their hats off when indoors. Good manners are important to Tom, and he naively asks his close friend Moses, “As a trans man, I am of the female sex, so does that mean that I can keep my hat on?” “Of course not”, we may imagine Moses replying, “when in Rome, and all that”.

\textsuperscript{27} See Stock 2021: ch. 6.
to, with no costs to the speaker. But sometimes the speaker may have good reasons for not using words that invert a person’s actual sex.

Here’s one example. When a married father transitions, this can be highly stressful and emotional for the family. It definitely was for the writer Christine Benvenuto and her three children, whose husband transitioned after more than twenty years of marriage. She kept to the old pronouns:

She. Pronouns, of course, become problematic around a person crossing gender lines. I still use the male variety to refer to Tracey because even now I can’t think, speak, or write about this person any other way. This results in minor conversational oddities such as the following:

Acquaintance: “Have you asked Tracey about this? What does she say?”

Me: “I have asked him. He says…” (Benvenuto 2012: 192)

Understandably, Benvenuto does not think that her difficulty in using feminine pronouns for Tracey is a problem she needs to fix.

Another example is provided by Karen White, a UK transgender woman who was charged with multiple rapes (among other offenses). White, who had not had sex-reassignment surgery, was sent to a female-only prison, HMP New Hall, where she sexually assaulted some of her fellow inmates. Stock, who uses courtesy pronouns by default, draws the line at “trans women who assault or aggress women. So, for instance, I will not call Karen White ‘she’ nor ‘her’” (Stock 2021: 210). One might think this choice is permissible.

Some feminists go much further. Jeffreys, for instance, offers a mirror image of Dembroff and Wodak’s argument from respect:

Another reason for adherence to pronouns that indicate biology is that, as a feminist, I consider the female pronoun to be an honorific, a term that conveys respect. Respect is due to women as members of a sex caste that have survived subordination and deserve to be addressed with honour. (Jeffreys 2014: 9)

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28 On gender dysphoria in adults, see Zucker et al. 2016.
29 See Biggs 2020. White was convicted of two sexual assaults against prisoners, but appears to have been accused of four; according to some reports, her commitment to a trans identity was half-hearted (Bannerman and Lister 2018).
30 As the quotation indicates, Jeffreys has other arguments:

I have chosen to use pronouns that indicate the biological sex of the persons whose work is discussed here for a number of reasons. The first is that the biological sex of transgender persons does not change and use of the pronoun of origin indicates this. This is politically important, since
On the other hand, Faye (2021: 235) would describe this as “the central belief of most anti-trans feminism: that women are a global ‘sex class’ of everyone who shares female biology”, which she thinks “specious”. No attempt will be made to referee this issue, but one can see where both sides are coming from. At least they agree that the pronoun is political.

5. Linguistically correct pronouns and non-binary people

So far we have discussed Dembroff and Wodak’s arguments for:

TW/M We have a duty not to use correct pronouns for transgender women or transgender men.

This is not their main quarry, however. (TW/M), according to Dembroff and Wodak, “is not…very controversial” (2018: 372). In their paper, (TW/M) is deployed in an argument by analogy for the corresponding claim about genderqueer or non-binary people:

NB We have a duty not to use correct pronouns for non-binary people.\(^{31}\)

The four arguments for (TW/M), slightly modified, are supposed to establish (NB).

Dembroff and Wodak’s working example of a non-binary person is the US rapper Angel Haze, “who identifies as genderqueer” (372).\(^{32}\) Postpone the issue of what being non-binary or genderqueer amounts to. Is it “gravely wrong” to refer to Haze as she (371)?

Apparently Haze does not think so:

I sound like four people when I get written about as ‘they’. It drives me crazy…Sometimes I want to be a dick and say: ‘Call me they’, just to see how seriously people take me. But they do take me seriously so it’s not that much fun.

\(^{31}\) Genderqueer is the edgy way of saying non-binary. Dembroff and Wodak’s formulation is: “we have a duty not to use binary gender-specific pronouns (he or she) to refer to genderqueer individuals like Angel Haze” (2018: 372).

\(^{32}\) Dembroff and Wodak harmlessly slide from identifying as genderqueer to being genderqueer, but it is worth noting that these are not the same. On any intuitive understanding of identifying as one may identify as an F without being an F.
If you call me ‘him’ or ‘her’ it doesn’t matter to me. I don’t consider myself of any sex. I consider myself an experience. (Smyth 2016)

Apart from the last two sentences, this sounds very sensible; for a celebrity, Haze’s level of self-importance is admirably low.

This brings out a point made by Dembroff and Wodak themselves, that their arguments do not depend on anyone’s “preferred pronouns”: “we do not think that the duty not to misgender [i.e. use correct feminine pronouns for]…Haze is explained in terms of what preferences people happen to have” (2018: 384). Haze’s “it doesn’t matter to me” notwithstanding, it is wrong to refer to her as this sentence does.

This is surprising. Admittedly, people can be oblivious to cutting remarks or other kinds of verbal insults and attacks; they can be wronged without realizing it. But can Haze—who seems to have given the matter some thought—really be this confused?

Since Dembroff and Wodak’s four arguments for (TW/M) are unpersuasive, the project of adapting them to establish (NB) is not promising. Looking at the first two arguments will be instructive, though. Before doing that, we need to say something briefly about being non-binary.

A common definition—in the words of a “non-binary sex educator” consulted by Teen Vogue—is that a non-binary person is “someone who does not identify as a man or a woman, or solely as one of those two genders” (Weiss 2018; see also Dembroff and Wodak 2018: 374). Another common more-or-less equivalent alternative is that non-binary people “identify as neither male nor female” (Dembroff and Wodak 2018: 374). But what does this mean? It is most uncharitable to interpret Haze’s “I do not consider myself of any sex” as a biological remark. Haze is a standard-issue female and she makes no attempt to disguise this fact.

33 The singer’s Wikipedia entry (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angel_Haze; accessed January 2021) claims that Haze has “begun using [sic] they/them pronouns”, but the sources for this are dated before the interview quoted in the text. Accordingly, this chapter accommodates Haze’s preferences as stated there.

The sociologist and “queer butch” Finn Mackay has a similar relaxed attitude to she and he:

Politically, I will never deny my femaleness, or my roots in women’s, feminist and lesbian communities… It is easier to let people choose what pronouns they use for me; I have friends who never refer to me as anything but ‘he’, friends who see me as in between and others who just see me as a different kind of woman. (Mackay 2021: 19)

34 Dembroff and Wodak are quoting from the Associated Press Stylebook. See also the entry for Genderqueer in WPATH 2012: 94 which uses both woman/man and female/male. The female/male alternative is better, because boys and girls usually do not “identify as men or women” (whatever this means), yet are not thereby non-binary.
Numerous self-declared non-binary people have offered explanations, and one consistent theme is that to be non-binary, or “outside the gender binary”, is to be in some respects feminine and in other respects masculine:

I don’t like to classify myself as simply ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. I tend to be most comfortable in masculine clothes, while some of the personality traits I’m most proud of are that I’m compassionate, thoughtful, and emotionally expressive—traits that are often linked with femininity. (Papisova 2018)

I find myself embracing a combination of manly and womanly characteristics. For instance, I love wearing makeup, being all smooth and shaved, baking bread and desserts, but I also like lifting weights and I am quite minimalistic with my furniture. (Novoli 2021)

If this is what being non-binary amounts to, a significant proportion of people are going to be included, but for present purposes we need not try to refine the explanation further.35

Let us now turn to the first two of the four analogous arguments for (NB). Just as using she for Tom is to (allegedly) disrespect him, so too is using she for Haze:

referring to Haze as he or she expresses disrespect towards Haze in virtue of their social identity, and thereby also expresses disrespect to those who share their social identity (i.e., other genderqueer people). It does so by communicating that Haze (they) either identifies as [male] (he), or identifies as [female] (she). (2018: 376)36

However, this is disanalogous to the corresponding situation with transgender women and men. Using she to refer to Tom communicates that Tom is female, which is true. But here the problem is said to be that using she for Haze communicates something false, namely that she is not non-binary.37

35 See also Weiss 2018, Barker and Lantaffi 2019: ch. 2, Young 2019, Windust 2020. One way of preventing being non-binary from collapsing into gender-atypicality is to conceive the former as involving a sense of kinship with gender-atypical people; that would explain why some people who are quite conformist can nonetheless rightly claim to be non-binary, and why a gender-atypical person need not be non-binary.

According to Dembroff, to be non-binary is to adopt “an unabashedly political identity”, to question “why we categorise people as women and men at all” (Dembroff 2018; see also Bornstein 1995). One problem with this is that some avowedly non-binary people also make a point of saying that they are women or men. More to the present topic, mocking someone’s political identity is not usually thought to be much of a sin. Cf. Lawford-Smith 2022: 136.

36 Substituting male for man and female for woman. Dembroff and Wodak suggest that genderqueer people are neither women nor men (2018: 386; see also 394; cf. Young 2019: 12). That Haze is not a woman would come as news to her (Symonds 2014).

37 However, Dembroff and Wodak see no disanalogy (see note 21).
There is no good reason to convey that Haze is not non-binary, since she is and is happy to say so. But would feminine pronouns do that? Sometimes it is suggested that FM pronouns now conventionally implicate (or presuppose) “gender identities”—that she, for instance, conventionally implicates that the referent “identifies as female”.\(^{38}\) If this is right, then using feminine pronouns for Haze does conventionally implicate something false. Moreover, on this view there is no issue about Tom’s pronouns either. Using she to refer to Tom conventionally implicates that he “identifies as female”, which is false. There is therefore nothing to be said in favor of using she for Tom at all.

However, the view that gender identity has supplanted sex in the semantics of FM pronouns is not very appealing. (24) and (25) are not unfelicitous:

24. She identifies as neither female nor male.

25. He is non-binary.\(^{39}\)

And of course non-binary people themselves may prefer FM pronouns. As *Teen Vogue* reports:

Non-binary people can also have a variety of pronouns. Some go by they/them, some go by she/her, some go by both, and some go by more than that. The only way you can know is to ask. (Weiss 2018)

In some contexts referring to Haze with (correct) feminine pronouns will conversationally implicate that she is not non-binary, but in many contexts it won’t. Dembroff and Wodak’s first argument for (NB) therefore fails.

The second argument for (NB) concerns resources. Although using FM pronouns for Haze “may not imply that we may withhold existing resources”,

it suggests that we may refrain from establishing resources that are accessible to genderqueer persons. That is, to use she or he for individuals like Haze implies that they can and should fit into a binary and gender-specific organization of

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\(^{38}\) “Now, however, pronouns seem, increasingly,…to refer, not to a person’s real or perceived sex, but to something more like their gender identity” (Earp 2021: 11).

\(^{39}\) If sex no longer appears in the semantics of pronouns at all, she in sentence (1) above can never appropriately be used to refer to a horse. A less-obviously wrong view (perhaps Earp’s suggestion; see the previous note) is that FM pronouns have become polysemous with respect to their conventional implicatures (or presuppositions), implicating (or presupposing) either sex or gender identity. If this is right, the main issues of this chapter would not be affected; instead, more care would be needed in explaining the problematic-but-accurate use of she for Tom, etc. However—waiving the obscurity of “gender identity”—the view has little going for it. Consider sentences like (3) above, uttered in a context in which the domain clearly contains humans and other animals. Since it is usually presumed that non-human animals lack gender identities, the view predicts that (3) has a reading on which it sounds odd. But (3) seems completely fine.
Let us grant for the sake of the argument that Haze should be able to use special genderqueer restrooms, to have GQ or NB on her driver’s license, and so on. Using she for Haze need not suggest otherwise. An analogy: Julia, who is in a wheelchair, needs to use special restrooms for the disabled, not the standard “binary” restrooms for females. Calling Julia she obviously does not suggest that these accommodations should not be established. The second argument for (NB) also fails.

As with (TW/M), we are back where we started. Angel Haze is no more deserving of humiliation and unkindness than Tom is. If using she to refer to Haze in her presence would upset her, that is a consideration against doing so. But there is nothing evidently wrong with using her correct pronouns in private conversations, especially when her sex is relevant. And since she presents as female, her sex is considerably more relevant than Tom’s.

Having said that, is the enthusiasm for non-binary they (along with exotic coinages like ze/xir), and the consequent pressure to share one’s pronouns, a welcome development?

6. The world of they

A non-binary person may look exactly like a cisgendered normie, an ordinary woman or man, with a gendered name to match. Judith Butler, referred to with feminine pronouns in thousands of pages over many years, and as patently female as she always was, is now legally non-binary. “I am enjoying the world of ‘they’”, she remarked recently (Bollinger 2021). (They was Merriam-Webster’s word of the year in 2019.) Although Butler herself does not mind she/her, they/them are her pronouns in the more progressive reaches of journalism and academia.

Whatever being non-binary amounts to, non-binary people were around long before the word was coined. As Butler says, “When I wrote Gender Trouble [in 1990], there was no category for ‘non-binary’—but now I don’t see how I cannot be in that category” (Bollinger 2021). Butler was non-binary in 1990, despite the lack of the contemporary non-binary signal, reference with they/them pronouns.

Butler does not suggest that non-binary people were somehow deprived back in the day, because no special pronouns were in use and they were referred to by FM ones.40 Perhaps the

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40 Butler does think that “[l]earning the right pronoun... is crucial as we seek to offer and gain recognition”. This line is from a draft in which Butler erroneously used he for Amia Srinivasan. Butler swiftly apologized when
later introduction of the term *non-binary* was a positive step, allowing non-binary people to categorize themselves and understand their experiences, but pronouns are an entirely different matter.\(^{41}\) Decades past indicate that being non-binary and being correctly sexed can happily coexist. Some non-binary people are now very particular about pronouns, but a non-binary female (say) may be fine with *she*.

These points bring out a massive disanalogy between non-binary *they* and courtesy pronouns for transsexuals. Judith Butler used to be called *she*; in contrast, there was never a time when transsexuals were routinely referred to with correct pronouns. The pioneering sexologist Harry Benjamin and others in the 60s and 70s instinctively used pronouns for trans women and trans men that matched their sex-of-living.\(^{42}\) If one wanted to help these people live productive and happy lives, this was the only option. No debate was needed and none occurred.\(^{43}\) (By the same token, if one wanted to be mean, the choice of pronoun was clear.\(^{44}\))

Whether someone should be referred to with *she* or *he* used to be obvious, even if sometimes it was unobvious whether the pronoun matched the person’s sex. There was thus no need to make any announcements, or to wear pronoun badges, or to have pronouns in one’s email (or snail mail) signature. Politeness and decency brought about the desired result by themselves. And, no doubt, many trans women and trans men thought this the ideal arrangement.

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\(^{41}\) Cf. Fricker 2007: ch. 7. On the other hand, *gender-bender* (which is at least fairly close to *non-binary*) goes back to the 1970s.

\(^{42}\) See, e.g., Benjamin 1966: 14-5, 159; Benjamin’s foreword to Jorgensen 1967; Green and Money 1969: 39, 186-7, 250-1. Clinicians stated a patient’s sex when necessary, and used correct pronouns for patients before sex-reassignment.

\(^{43}\) Some people may suffer from dysphoria, have surgical and/or hormonal treatment, and describe themselves as non-binary or similar. As with the classic kind of transsexualism, it is natural to avoid correct pronouns for these people in ordinary social contexts. An example is Christie Elan-Cane, who had a bilateral mastectomy and a hysterectomy to alleviate gender dysphoria, self-describes as “non-gendered”, and prefers *per/pers* pronouns. Elan-Cane sued the UK Home Office for refusing to issue passports with a neutral X gender-marker. The UK Supreme Court recently ruled for the Home Office, finessing the pronoun issue by referring to Elan-Cane as *the appellant* (Reed et al. 2021). Another example is Eris Young, who prefers *they/them* pronouns: “My clothes, my voice and the structure of my face—after years of hormone replacement therapy—are such that I get called ‘sir’ and ‘ma’am’ in about equal measure” (Young 2019: 11).

\(^{44}\) When the UK newspaper *The Sunday People* notoriously outed the fashion model April Ashley as a transsexual in 1961, the headline had *her* in scare quotes: “‘Her’ Secret Is Out”. But that is as far as the paper went: the body of the story used Ashley’s courtesy pronouns (Seamark 2012).
Although normies and old-school transsexuals need no pronoun badges, those who do will stand out even more if they are the only ones. Hence the trend in universities and elsewhere—as yet, only partially completed—for everyone to state their pronouns, non-binary or not. Not everyone is on board: the iconic gender-bending Culture Club singer Boy George once described current pronounmania as a “modern form of attention seeking”. Unsurprisingly, this was not well-received.\footnote{Milton 2020. Retrue note 44, Boy George is a great admirer of April Ashley, who died in December 2021 (Shutler 2021).}

Still, perhaps respecting people’s pronoun preferences is a harmless indulgence, like calling Elaine’s boyfriend (in the famous Seinfeld episode), \textit{Maestro}. If using \textit{they} makes a few people feel better, why not go for it?

The downside arguably outweighs the upside. Imagine what it would be like if \textit{they} was consistently used for (often gender-atypical) self-declared non-binary people, reinforced by the normie majority’s preference for \textit{she} and \textit{he}. Feminine and masculine pronouns would be more strongly associated than they are now with gender stereotypes. Given the non-binary tendency to avoid self-ascribing \textit{woman/girl/man/boy}, and the strong link between these gender terms and FM pronouns, \textit{woman} and the rest would also be more strongly associated than they are now with gender stereotypes. \textit{Masculine woman} and \textit{masculine girl} might start to sound jarring, surely an unhealthy result. Self-declared non-binary people frequently proclaim their desire to overturn gender stereotypes, but the widespread use of non-binary \textit{they} risks producing exactly the opposite result.

There are reasons to resist the world of \textit{they}, then, along with the practice of sharing one’s pronouns.\footnote{See also Reilly-Cooper 2016, Wright 2022. For some reservations about sharing pronouns, combined with sympathy for the world of \textit{they}, see Earp 2021. Dembrow and Wodak argue against proliferating pronouns, “introducing a new gender-specific pronoun for each non-binary gender identity”, on the ground that “learning dozens is infeasible” (2018: 390). That is surely right; a more fundamental objection is that it is unclear how these many pronouns are supposed to differ. Presently used alternatives like \textit{per/pers, ey/ems, ze/hir, and fae/faer} do not seem to have \textit{different} conventional implicatures (or presuppositions). Preferences are a matter of taste: “I chose my bink/bonk pronouns because they remind me of clowns”, one bespoke pronoun enthusiast remarked (Marcus 2021).}

\textbf{7. The epicene reformation}

English does have a defect which has been long-recognized: there is no singular epicene pronoun—like the Finnish \textit{hän}—appropriate for any person. It would be convenient to have the
option of answering ‘Where does Smith live?’ (asked by someone ignorant of Smith’s sex) with some polite version of ‘It lives in London’.

A frequent claim is that masculine pronouns have a sex-neutral sense in sentences like (26):

26. Every one of us knows he is fallible.

According to the 1979 edition of Strunk and White’s classic *Elements of Style*, “He has lost all suggestion of maleness in these circumstances” (Strunk and White 1979: 60).47 If the sex-neutral *he* is genuine, that wouldn’t solve the problem, because the alleged sex-neutral sense cannot be used to answer the question about Smith. Neither can that sense appear in a sentence like (27), where Julia is female.

27. If Julia has done his homework, he can leave.

Moreover, sex-neutral *he* is a myth in any case. The chair of the local Women’s Institute cannot use (26) to state a generalization about the Institute’s membership. Here’s another sort of example:

28. If either of your parents were alive he would be horrified at what you’re doing.

(28) should have a perfectly acceptable reading with sex-neutral *he*, but it does not.48 And since FM pronouns are not human-centric, sex-neutral *he* should work for other animals. Yet (29) just invites the complaint that female foals have been ignored:

29. Every foal is suckled by his mother.

Not only did Strunk and White endorse sex-neutral *he*, they also deprecated singular *they* (Strunk and White 1979: 60). But singular *they* dates back to the fourteenth century (Lagunoff 1997: 19). (30) is fine:

30. Every one of us knows they are fallible.

Sometimes it is suggested (usually in the context of non-binary *they*) that singular *they* is the all-purpose pronoun that we need. For example, the BBC reported in 2019 that the singer Sam Smith “came out as non-binary and asked fans to use the pronouns they/them instead of he/him”. The BBC noted the ensuing grammatical controversy, but said that “these identifiers are nothing new and have actually been used throughout the history of literature”, describing the non-binary usage as “reclaiming pronouns like ‘they’ in the modern era” (BBC 2019). But this is wrong,

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47 Partly quoted in Baron 2020: 41. The supposed sex-neutral *he* is now very much out of favor, along with *mankind* (Earp 2012).
48 Example from Pullum 2021. An exception that proves the rule: if the salient deceased parents are two gay men, (28) is OK. See also Payne and Huddleston 2002: 492-3.
because the traditional singular *they* cannot be used deictically. (31) is not acceptable when pointing at farmer Frederick:

31. #They are in the field.

Neither can singular *they* be used anaphorically when the antecedent is a proper name:

32. #Napoleon is drinking their whiskey.  

Singular *they* is therefore not an all-purpose sex-neutral pronoun. When April Haze complained, “I sound like four people when I get written about as ‘they’”, her instincts were correct.

Could non-binary *they* step in to fill the breach? Using non-binary *they*, (31)—uttered when pointing at Haze—is felicitous. True, it offends against mainstream English grammar, but so what? Dembroff and Wodak point out that this is not like offending against the rules of morality (2018: 401-2); as Humpty Dumpty observed, “the question is, which is to be master—that’s all”.

However, there are two problems. The first is that (at present) non-binary *they* is not appropriate for everyone. In a typical context, (33) suggests that Smith has some preference for *they*:

33. Smith has recorded their new album.  

The second is that bucking ingrained grammar is difficult. As Pullum says, using non-binary *they* is to try to “override a constraint that has been a natural part of our unconscious grammar throughout our lives” (2021). It would probably be better to introduce a completely new pronoun, as the Swedes did with *hen*.

*Hen*, supplementing *hon* (*she*) and *han* (*he*), was originally coined in the 1960s, and took off in 2012 with the publication of a children’s book, *Kivi and Monsterdog*, in which *hen* allows Kivi’s sex to remain unspecified (Rothschild 2012). Appearing in the official Swedish dictionary in 2015, it has been a partial success. *Hen* has been steadily increasing in use, but as of 2019 the ratio of occurrences of *hen* to FM pronouns in the Swedish press was estimated at 1:122 (Svensson 2020).

Interestingly, the many similar proposals for English, dating back to the nineteenth century, have failed completely. Here are a few from a list compiled by Baron (1981):

*ne* (c. 1850); *thon* (1884); *hi* (1884); *hiser* (1884); *ir* (1888); *ons* (1889); *e* (1890)

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50 See also Dembroff and Wodak 2018: 393.
51 In a 2018 survey, nearly half of respondents said they never used *hen* (Gustafsson Sendén et al. 2021: 603).
Even the “neopronouns” ze and per are nothing new, dating from 1972 (Baron 1981: 94). The sexologist John Money once proposed the Turkish sex-neutral pronoun o “for immediate adoption into English” (Money and Tucker 1975: 117), but no one took any notice.

What about something considerably more ambitious? Dembroff and Wodak advocate for getting rid of FM pronouns altogether. They offer three arguments. The first depends on the argument for (NB) that we have already examined, so can be passed over (see Dembroff and Wodak 2018: 389-92). The last argument is that FM pronouns (and other gender markers) have “harmful effects on social cognition about gender” (398). This is a very complicated issue that cannot be treated properly here, and Dembroff and Wodak acknowledge that the “evidence is not conclusive” (396).

The second argument is that FM pronouns can put people in “morally problematic” positions. For instance, if Frederick, a gay man, says he is going on holiday with his partner, and someone asks “Oh, is she looking forward to the sun?”, Frederick is in a tight spot if he doesn’t wish to reveal his sexual orientation (392). If the only pronoun option were the equivalent of hen, the problem would not arise.

Fair enough, but obliterating she and he will not guarantee privacy. What if Frederick and his partner are invited to a barn dance at a neighboring farm? What if someone, on hearing that Frederick and his partner have a baby, offers to donate a breast pump? Hen is not going to come to Frederick’s aid. Social attitudes towards homosexuality are a more feasible target—and of course in recent years they have been transformed.

Given the dismal failure to introduce an epicene English pronoun, the minor incursion of hen into Swedish, and the fact that mastery of FM pronouns will be needed in the future to understand the enormous past stock of English books, movies, and other media, it is unrealistic to expect that she and he could be marginalized, let alone driven to extinction. In this case, changing the world is easier than changing the word.

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52 See also Baron 2020: 185-245. The unused thon even made it into dictionaries (Baron 2020: 96).
53 A point worth noting is that Sweden was one of the most gender-equal countries in the world before hen took off and despite Swedish’s FM pronouns. For more on hen, see Vergoossen 2021. It may be that the effect of grammatically gendered nouns (as in languages like French and German) swamps any effect of FM pronouns (see, e.g., Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2012, DeFranza et al. 2020). For concerns about a common methodology in studies that purport to find effects of grammatical gender and other linguistic features, see Pepinsky Forthcoming.
54 The French are an especially hopeless case. When Le Petit Robert recently added a Gallic attempt at hen—iel—to the online version of the dictionary, the education minister denounced it as “wokisme” (Cohen and Gallois 2021).
8. Deception and compelled speech

To close, a brief mention of two other issues, neither yet addressed at any length in the philosophical literature.\(^{55}\)

The first concerns childhood transition, where a gender dysphoric child transitions socially, adopting a new name, clothing appropriate for the target gender, and is referred to with courtesy FM pronouns. The reality star Jazz Jennings, for example, socially transitioned from male to female at age five.\(^{56}\) This is a controversial practice, because social transition may make it harder for the child to desist later—to revert to living as their natal sex, avoiding surgery, treatment with cross-sex hormones, and compromised fertility.\(^{57}\)

The problem is that the use of a transitioning child’s courtesy pronouns can deceive them. Conventional implicatures (and presuppositions) are sometimes deceptive: ‘Ampleforth, a doctor, is at the door’ can be used to get someone to wrongly believe that Ampleforth is a doctor. *She*, used of a male, can be similarly used to deceive.

Return to our trans man Tom. He was never under any illusions, and others’ use of the pronoun *he* does not deceive him about his sex. But children are different. They have an imperfect understanding of sex, and the use of feminine pronouns for a young dysphoric natal male child is effectively deceptive: children are often present when adults talk about them in the third person.\(^{58}\) If *girl* is similarly deceptive, substituting *trans girl* might be a solution, but *she* and *her* are compulsory with a social transition to female.

This is not deception about trivial matters, like saying that the Tooth Fairy will come tonight or that the (open) candy store is closed. And in any case, some argue that it is even wrong to deceive children about Santa (Johnson 2010). Perhaps paternalistic considerations, invoked in many medical contexts, justify the use of courtesy rather than correct pronouns for some children, but the answer isn’t obvious. We will have to leave the problem there.\(^{59}\)

The second issue concerns compelled speech. Consider the following case:

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\(^{55}\) For some discussion of the first issue see Stock 2021: 207-11.

\(^{56}\) Jennings was one of the first to be labeled a “trans kid”. She appeared in a 2006 *Village Voice* article under the pseudonym *Nicole* (Reischel 2006). See also Tuerk 2011: 772.


\(^{58}\) On childhood development of sex labeling, sex stereotypes, sex segregation, etc. see Berenbaum et al. 2008. On young children’s understanding of FM pronouns, see Arnold et al. 2007.

\(^{59}\) On deceiving children, see Bok 1978, Bok 2011: ch. 14, Tomsons 2020. A related issue concerns rare cases of children with certain birth defects or other physiological issues who are assigned and reared in the other sex (for an example, see Gordetsky and Joseph 2015); these practices are even rarer these days than they once were.
In 2017 Maria MacLachlan was assaulted while she was waiting to attend a public meeting in London about proposed reforms to the Gender Recognition Act 2004. One of her attackers, Tara Wolf, who self-defines as a ‘trans woman’, was convicted of assault by beating in April 2018. While McLachlan was giving evidence at Wolf’s trial for the assault in the Magistrates Court, the presiding District Judge instructed her to call Wolf “she” or “the defendant”, as a matter of “courtesy”. MacLachlan has said that she tried to do this, but that because she was nervous while giving her evidence, she kept reverting to calling Wolf “he”. The judge is reported to have described this as “bad grace” on MacLachlan’s part, and to have given this as one of the reasons for his decision not to award her financial compensation for the assault. (O’Hara 2019: 55)

The Equal Treatment Bench Book provides guidance for the judiciary of England and Wales to ensure fair treatment of people appearing in court or before tribunals. Before the latest revision in December 2021 the Bench Book said: “It is important to respect a person’s gender identity by using appropriate terms of address, names and pronouns”, with no indication of exceptions (quoted in O’Hara 2019: 63). That changed in the latest revision:

…a victim of domestic abuse or sexual violence at the hands of a trans person may understandably describe the alleged perpetrator and use pronouns consistent with their gender assigned at birth because that is in accordance with the victim’s experience and perception of the events. Artificial steps such as requiring a victim to modify his/her language to disguise this risks interfering with his/her ability to give evidence of a traumatic event. (Judicial_College 2021: 336)

Another example is the New York City Civil Rights Law, which:

requires employers and covered entities to use the name, pronouns, and title (e.g., Ms./Mrs./Mx.) with which a person self-identifies, regardless of the person’s sex assigned at birth, anatomy, gender, medical history, appearance, or the sex indicated on the person’s identification. (NYCHR 2019)

Examples of pronouns in the guidance to the NYCCRL include ze/hir.

The law goes beyond requiring employees to be polite and respectful when dealing with members of the public. Preferred pronouns are not relevant in a face-to-face meeting. As written, the law requires employees to use preferred pronouns when talking about someone in private, regardless of the person’s appearance.63

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60 See also Lawford-Smith 2022: 136-7.
61 Chacko 2021 examines the Bench Book’s extensive treatment of transgender issues.
62 Preferred names are a different but related topic to preferred pronouns; on names, see Baker and Green 2021.
63 For First Amendment concerns, see Bader 2016. For a proposal for a federal version of the law, see Clawson 2019.
Should employees have to use non-standard pronouns? A more interesting question is about the conventional implicatures (or presuppositions) of standard FM pronouns. Someone who accepts that Ampleforth is at the door should not be legally forced to go the extra step, and utter ‘Ampleforth, a doctor, is at the door’—especially if Ampleforth is not a doctor. Ampleforth’s feelings are not a consideration. Are FM pronouns different, and if so, why?

* * *

One might think that pronouns present at best superficial problems, like whether to add *xe/xem* to the official list of preferred pronouns at an elite liberal arts college. But on closer examination the issues run deeper. English feminine and masculine pronouns sometimes produce an unavoidable collision between social and sexed reality.⁶⁴

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