
To Each Their Own

“Look, your worship,” said Sancho; “what we see there are not giants but windmills, and what seem to be their arms are the sails that turned by the wind make the millstone go.”

“It is easy to see,” replied Don Quixote, “that thou art not used to this business of adventures.”

—MIGUEL DE CERVANTES, *THE INGENIOUS GENTLEMAN,
DON QUIXOTE OF LA MANCHA*

They has finally gone too far.

You may think I’m denouncing the singular *they*, as in sentences like these:

Open the profile of a *friend*, and add *their* phone number so it’s easy to call *them*.

Health management allows *one* to take care of *themselves*.

As the *lover* seeks *their* beloved, so must you focus on what you want.

If you think I’m talking about this coupling of plural pronouns (*their, them, themselves*) with singular nouns (*friend, one, lover*), you’re partly right. I do avoid the singular *they*—even though people have used it for centuries and even though many style guides condone it. But when I say, “*They* has finally gone too far,” I’m talking about a recent trend. I’m talking about computer-generated sentences like these:

Jane wants to add you to *their* network.

Jim has updated *their* profile.

Oh, Jane. Oh, Jim. You have been neutered!

Even usage authority Bryan Garner, who allows that the singular—indeterminate—*they* “promises to be the ultimate solution” to what linguists call the pronoun problem³⁸ says, “*John got their coat* is ghastly.”³⁹

What are writers to do? Shall we train ourselves to shrug instead of flinching? Shall we adopt this usage ourselves as modern and inevitable?

I understand this unfortunate unpluraling of pronouns. English fails us here. It offers no word for “his-or-her.” We have no *lui*, which those lucky French can say when they mean “to him or her.” In Grammar Girl Mignon Fogarty’s words, “English has a big, gaping pronoun hole.”⁴⁰ None of our singular third-person pronouns—*he*, *his*, *him*, *himself*, *she*, *hers*, *her*, *herself*—stands in adequately for *person* or *anyone* or *each*. We have only a handful of singulars, each in some way lacking.

He: “To each *his* own” conveys an old-fashioned gender bias.

She: “To each *her* own” reverses the bias.

S/he: “To each *his/her* own,” when spoken, requires a hand motion.

He or she: “To each *his or her* own” works, but few choose this option, perhaps because it strikes many as “awkward.”⁴¹

People who reject these imperfect choices fill the need by co-opting the conveniently gender-neutral, if inconveniently plural, *they*, as in “To each *their* own.”

(When I published the original version of this essay as a guest post on Tom Johnson’s *I’d Rather Be Writing* blog on April 16, 2011, I assumed that my title, “To Each Their Own,” would give people a jolt. The jolt was on me when I picked up a magazine several weeks later

38. Garner, *Garner’s Modern American Usage*, 739–740.

39. Bryan A. Garner, e-mail message to the author, April 26, 2011.

40. Mignon Fogarty, “Generic Singular Pronouns,” *Grammar Girl* blog, October 20, 2011, <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/he-they-generic-personal-pronoun.aspx>.

41. A listener named Betty, quoted in Fogarty, “Generic Singular Pronouns.”

and discovered a full-page Honda ad with the headline “To Each Their Own” in large, 3-D letters.⁴²)

I’m not caving. I continue to finesse “the pronoun problem” by writing around it. For example, the phrase *As the lover seeks their beloved* lends itself to any of the following alternatives:

Turn singulars into plurals	<i>As lovers seek their beloveds ...</i>
Go ahead, use <i>his</i> or <i>her</i>	<i>As the lover seeks his or her beloved ...</i>
Switch occasionally between feminine and masculine	<i>lover ... his; lover ... her</i>
Switch to a direct address: <i>you</i>	<i>Lover, as you seek your beloved ...</i>
Switch to the more inclusive <i>we</i>	<i>As we lovers seek our beloveds ...</i>
Remove the pronoun altogether	<i>As the lover seeks the beloved ...</i>

Why not apply the same techniques to automated phrases? Why script “[Name] has updated their profile” when an alternative like “[Name] has an updated profile” lies so close at hand?

Alas, the day approacheth fast wherein the singular *they* shall pain the ear of humankind no more. The battle—sayest thou else?—is all but lost. Still, I make this final plea.⁴³ ~~A person must stand their ground.~~ Let us stand this ground together. Fight with me!

42. For a critique of this ad’s headline, see Richard Read, “2012 Honda Civic Comes with Ninjas, Zombies, Grammar Problems,” *MotorAuthority* blog, April 26, 2011, http://www.motorauthority.com/news/1058971_2012-honda-civic-comes-with-ninjas-zombies-grammar-problems.

43. Diction level (the degree of formality indicated by word choice and phrasing) communicates in its own way beyond the definitions of the words. Typically, you don’t want diction level to call attention to itself, but, like any other tool, sometimes it enables you to accomplish something—emphasize a point, let your voice come through, have a little fun—that you can’t do as well any other way.