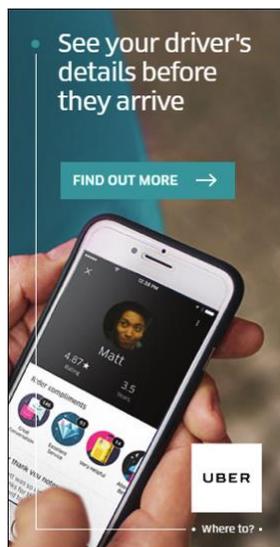


Changing pronouns: Understanding singular *they*

Pronouns are often considered to be a boring word class. Learners often believe that, unlike nouns and adjectives, the members of the pronoun group do not change much. However, this is not entirely true. When we look at how pronouns are used by English native speakers in their spoken communication today, we can see some interesting changes over time. In this handout, we use findings and examples from the British National Corpus 2014 to talk about how pronouns are used in conversations of English speakers in the UK. In particular, we are going to focus on the use of singular *they*, a feature that is very common in current spoken English.

Task 1



We will consider the changes in the use of the well-known pronoun 'they'. This pronoun usually refers to third person plural such as in this example: *'It was my birthday yesterday and my friends came over for a cake. They didn't leave till well after midnight'*. This is a very straightforward use of 'they'. However, in current English, 'they' is also used for a different function, referred to as 'singular they' in which the pronoun refers to third person singular.

Consider the following two examples from current English use in the UK that involve the use of 'they' or 'their' and discuss who these pronouns refer to.

a. Look at the advertisement from Uber and consider who 'they' refers to.

b. Consider also the following extract from an article in The Guardian entitled "Why should a primary school separate girls and boys for sports day?" written by Anna Kessel and published on 5 June 2018:

"Back in Inverness one parent reportedly said that their son had been bullied as a result of being beaten by a girl."

Task 2

Read the following concordance lines taken from conversations between British English speakers included in the British National Corpus 2014. In each example, decide whether 'they' or 'their' refer to the third person singular (SG) or third person plural (PL) and put SG or PL next to the sentences.

1	how are the sprouts? S:huh? S: how are the sprouts, are	they	acceptable? S: oh I 'm loving them	
2	accidents you've seen like bumps and stuff um I have yeah I have yeah I saw someone get their	their	front wheel bent like that was really bad They were alright it was quite a	
3	strong impression based on what you see as to what kind of person	they	are (.) you get huge amount of clues don't you when you	
4	I like wanted to buy a Minecraft realm with my friends then	they	could go on with me S: well Minecraft costs money	
5	like for a lot of people people don't like cooking and	they	don't like the effort S: yeah S: or they just don't do	
6	hanges it (.) mm I mean like a professional winer person or whatever	they	're called (.) would like (.) professional winer probably not the same	
7	always tell which hand he was writing with the person I sit next to in English broke	their	left hand which was their main hand so they had to write with their right	
8	hint with that (.) I think if you took sent a photo to someone and they	they	stopped replying you would take the hint wouldn't you	
9	there's just no point it's like asking someone if	they	're pregnant if you're not sure like just don't like	
10	contacts his lecturer and says oh I've been talking to this person and	they	're interested in about academic integrity I explained to them how you	
11	hey were travelling abroad and he lives there with her now	they	have a child and erm I was talking to him about it	

Think about the different functions of 'they' that you identified.

- Why do people use 'they' or 'their' to refer to one person?
- Can you describe the typical lexical and grammatical pattern when 'they' or 'their' are used to refer to third person singular?

Task 3

Read the following sentences and change any relevant third person singular pronouns to gender neutral plural pronouns:

Example: The teacher will give you the grade he thinks you deserve.
 The teacher will give you the grade they think you deserve.

1. You should ask the doctor and she will tell you how much you will need to pay.

2. If a person loves animals, he should protect them.

3. I saw this person on a bus and she waved at me.

4. You should ask your friend what he thinks.

5. You can ask the teacher and he or she will be happy to help.

6. I saw the librarian and she gave me the book.

7. I don't think it's a good idea to ask somebody out when you've just met him.

8. Anybody who litters should pay a fine because he has committed a crime.

Task 4

Pick one of the following topics and debate it in small groups. Make sure to practice using the third person singular form 'they' wherever appropriate.

OR

Pick one of the following topics and prepare a 2-minute speech defending your point of view on the issue. Make sure to practice using the third person singular form 'they' wherever appropriate.

- Everybody should have access to free healthcare
- Each child should have at least an hour of sport in school every day
- Every individual has the right to absolute freedom of speech
- A doctor should never work more than 12 hours straight without a break