Xe went to the store: Are gender-neutral pronouns breaking into a closed syntactic category?

Abstract:

As awareness of non-binary gender identities has grown, the need for gender-neutral pronouns in the English has become apparent (Moser & Devereux, 2019). Different organisations and communities have tackled this problem in different ways. On October 31, 2019, the American Psychological Association announced that they would be adding guidelines on the use of the singular “they” pronoun to their new style guide (Lee, 2019), while other groups have suggested adopting a completely new additional pronoun, as the Swedish language did in 2012 (Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, & Lindqvist, 2015; Tavitz & Pérez, 2019). Editors of the *International Journal of Transgenderism* proposed the use of “e, er” pronouns as the standard for their journal in 2016 (Moser & Devereux, 2019), while the Vancouver Board of Education added the pronoun set “xe, xem, xyr” to their policy on trans and gender non-conforming students in 2014 (Robinson, 2014; Vancouver Board of Education, 2014). The Gender Census, an annual survey of Twitter and Tumblr users who identify outside of the gender binary, reported that in 2019, 7.2% of respondents also used the pronouns “xe, xem,” making these the most commonly used neopronouns (Gender Census, 2019).

English pronouns have traditionally been considered to be part of a closed syntactic category (Frawley, 2003), but this paper will use basic diagnostic tests to show that words like “xe, xem, xyr” are consistently being used in the same way as the gender-specific pronouns “he, him, his” or “she, her, hers.” The evidence suggests that “xe, xem, xyr” are breaking into the formerly closed pronoun category. Based on this finding, this paper will investigate phonological, orthographic, and sociolinguistic factors that may affect the continued use and spread of these neopronouns.

1. Introduction

In October 2019, the American Psychological Association joined the Associated Press and the Chicago Manual of Style in accepting the use of singular “they” in cases where gender is irrelevant or unknown (Lee, 2019). However, as our understanding of gender continues to grow and evolve, this begs the question – what about individuals who identify outside the binary of male or female? These individuals are part of our society and consequently, we require language to address them and discuss them.
1.1. Gendered pronouns in English

Depending on when and where you went to school, you likely learned one of two rules for which pronoun to use in a sentence that does not specify the gender of the subject. The more gender-biased rule is to treat “he” as gender-neutral. Unfortunately for those who appreciate the simplicity of this rule – including the 1850 British Act of Parliament that made it a law (Baron, 1981; Everett, 2011) – research has shown that most English-speakers read “he” as masculine, regardless of how neutral the context may be (Everett, 2011). The alternative rule is to use “he or she” or “he/she”. While this compound pronoun has been called clunky, it gained popularity in academic style guides during the feminist movement of the 20th century and until recently, it was the recommended way of managing ambiguous gender in academic English writing.

Informally, English speakers who see the need for a gender-neutral pronoun have often turned to singular “they.” While strict grammarians argue that this use cannot be correct, as it tries to accord a traditionally plural pronoun with a singular antecedent, supporters point out that “they” has been used this way for centuries (Baron, 1981; Lobeck & Denham, 2013). However, other language users have responded to the grammarians by simply creating new pronouns to fill this perceived gap.

Unlike nouns and verbs, which are content categories and may have new words added to them, linguists and grammarians have historically considered functional categories like pronouns to be “closed” (Aarts, 2014). This means that traditionally, as Lobeck and Denham put it, “we don’t make up new [...] pronouns” (Lobeck & Denham, 2013, p.14).
However, Baron chronicled the history of epicene, or gender-neutral, English pronouns in 1981 and mentioned pronouns ranging from “thon” – created from the phrase “that one” in the 1920s – to “co,” which was adopted in an intentional community in the United States in the 1970s and which is still used today (Baron, 1981; Flanigan, 2013). The Gender Census, an annual survey of non-binary Tumblr and Twitter-users, reported over 84 gender-neutral pronoun sets being used by multiple respondents in 2019 (Gender Census, 2019). Among these neopronouns are xe, xem, and xyr, a set of pronouns that I first encountered several years ago.

Neopronouns represent an exciting possibility in the variation and change of the English language: is English flexible enough to allow xe, xem, and xyr into the formerly closed pronoun category?

2. Are they pronouns?

If xe, xem, and xyr are being used as pronouns in English, then it should be possible to replace them with either the name of the person being discussed or a noun phrase that describes that person – for example, “the student.”

2.1. Method

In order to find examples of xe, xem, and xyr in a written or spoken context, I conducted several Google searches with the search terms “xe/xem”, “xe/xem/xyr”, “xe/xem gender-neutral pronouns”, and “gender-neutral pronouns in English.” I reviewed the resulting webpages to eliminate those which mentioned the pronouns in isolation and then selected sample sentences from the webpages that remained. Most of these webpages were resources specifically intended to educate people about the use of gender-neutral pronouns.
Consequently, with the exception of (5), which I retrieved from a source I was already familiar with, the following sentences were all created with the intention of demonstrating the use of xe, xem, and xyr.

*Sample sentences using pronouns xe, xem and xyr:*

(1a) “I wonder if Al has read The Martian [...] I think that that would be a good book for xem to read if xyr book tastes run towards science fiction.”
(pronoun-sentences, 2016).

(2a) “Xe went to the park.” “I called xem.” “Xyr bird chirps.”
(Hiraeth, 2017).

(3a) “I could talk to xem all day, although xe doesn’t talk about xemself much.”
(Gender Census, 2018)

(4a) “Xe went to the movies with xyr friend who loves to hang out with xem.”
(Lynn, 2019)

(5a) “In 2018, on National Coming Out Day, xe revealed that xe identifies with both the male and female aspects of xir gender and prefers not to be confined by any expectations.”
(Jim Povolo, n.d.)

Each sentence was then inspected using a noun substitution test. This is essentially the reverse of the pronoun substitution test commonly used in syntax to determine whether or not a segment is a noun phrase (Lobeck & Denham, 2013). In this case, if xe, xem, and xyr are being used as pronouns in a sentence, it should be possible to replace them with a noun, like a name, or a noun phrase, like “the teacher” or “my neighbour.” The resulting sentences should be grammatically correct in standard English, which in this case was concluded using personal judgement as a native English-speaker.
Results of noun substitution test:

(1b) I wonder if Al has read The Martian [...] I think that that would be a good book for Al to read if Al's book tastes run towards science fiction.

(2b) The child went to the park. I called the child. The child's bird chirps.

(3b) I could talk to my friend all day, although my friend doesn’t talk about my friend much.

(4b) The student went to the movies with the student's friend who loves to hang out with the student.

(5b) In 2018, on National Coming Out Day, Jim revealed that Jim identifies with both the male and female aspects of Jim's gender and prefers not to be confined by any expectations.

2.2 Results

All five sentences remain grammatically correct after the noun substitution test. While reading or speaking the full noun or noun phrase more than once in a sentence sounds awkward, this is mainly due to the repetition. In (6), below, the same awkward construction appears when a conventional pronoun is replaced by its antecedent.

6) The politician said she expects to win the election in her riding.

The politician said the politician expects to win the election in the politician's riding.

3. Discussion

From the analysis above, it is reasonable to say that at least some English-speakers are using xe, xem, and xyr as pronouns without an assigned gender. However, the true test of these neopronouns will be whether they stand the test of time. While no one can predict this for
certain, several factors about this pronoun set seem more likely to influence its potential spread in various dialects of English.

3.1. Orthographic and pronunciation factors

Hekanaho (2018) reported that survey respondents often commented that xe (and ze, another neopronoun included in the survey) were “foreign-looking words.” This is not surprising – the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online lists only 173 entries starting with the grapheme X, the least of any grapheme. With 283,921 entries in total, this means that words beginning with X make up only 0.05% of the OED at the time of writing (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.).

In addition to being a relatively rare grapheme in English orthography, X has the added complication of representing multiple phonemes. Depending on where it appears in a word, English speakers are likely familiar with five main representations (see table 1). Borrowed words provide other representations that English speakers may be less familiar with including [x] as in the Central American name Ximena, [ʃ] as in the name of Chinese president Xi Jinping, and [ˈk] as in the southern African language Xhosa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phoneme(s) represented</th>
<th>English example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[ks]</td>
<td>axe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[gz]</td>
<td>exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ɛks]</td>
<td>x-ray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[z]</td>
<td>xylophone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ʒ]</td>
<td>luxury</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With this much variety in the first letter alone, xe, xem, and xyr may face a greater risk of mispronunciation. As these pronouns are still establishing themselves and have spread in part through online text-based communities, there is already some variation in how individuals who use these pronouns pronounce them. The sample sentences in (2a) come from a recording of a speaker who uses these pronouns, and xe pronounces the nominative form as [ze] instead of the more common recommendation [zi]. Additionally, when I first heard xe being used by a friend, it was pronounced [ʒi]. It likely would not make an enormous difference by itself, but the ambiguous pronunciation of these pronouns may discourage some English-users from using them without first being instructed on how to pronounce them.

3.2. Phonological factors

In the same way that English rarely uses the grapheme X word-initially, the phoneme [z] is relatively unusual in word-initial position. A rough search of the OED Online yields under 850 words starting with the phoneme [z] (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). That accounts for only 0.3% of entries. Additionally, most of these words are borrowings, usually from Latin or Greek.

Obviously, English has no problem adopting new words from other languages or using this phoneme word-initially. However, the standard English pronouns all start with more common phonemes – about 0.7% of OED entries begin with [ʃ], like the feminine singular pronoun “she,” and about 3.2% begin with [h]. like the masculine singular “he” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.).

Again, while this is not a terribly accurate or exhaustive method of reviewing the English lexicon, it does generate enough data to make some tentative claims. Namely, the fact that the
initial phoneme in xe, xem, and xyr has such a drastically different representation in the OED suggests that words with a word-initial [z] might be more marked or unusual to native English speakers. This may also account for the “foreign” quality that the survey respondents in Hekanaho (2018) reported.

3.3. Sociolinguistic factors

On the one hand, people exploring or taking ownership of their non-binary identity can use pronouns as a form of self-expression (Jones & Mullany, 2019). Even if someone wants to use a neopronoun set, xe, xem, and xyr are hardly the only option. The 2019 Gender Census reported that 84 non-standard pronouns were entered more than once, including ne, fae, thon, zie, and e, to name a few (Gender Census, 2019).

On the other hand, singular ‘they’ has been receiving more public support and acceptance recently (Geiger & Graf, 2019; Hekanaho, 2018; Eide, 2018) and is still by far the most-used non-binary pronoun (Gender Census, 2019), so it may be easier for those who are still adjusting to the idea of non-binary identities to use a familiar pronoun in a new way, rather than learning a completely new set of pronouns.

4. Conclusion

English, like all languages, is continuously growing and shifting to accommodate the needs of speakers. The need for a gender-neutral pronoun has been known for centuries and now, in addition to the singular “they,” true neopronouns like xe, xem, and xyr are helping to fill this gap in the English lexicon.
6. References


