Maria Butler replies to Stevens, recommending the use of the plural they to avoid the inelegance of a neologism. She calls for teachers and the press to lift the taboo on this usage, warning that the creation of new words will disturb the shade of Noah Webster. Stevens (November 1884) remarks in turn that history shows innovation to have improved the English language. We have already borrowed heavily from French, and Stevens offers to return some of those borrowings in exchange for le. He also furnishes an example of the use of his new paradigm: “If any boy or girl will diligently pursue the course I have marked out for lim, le will surely reach the goal of his ambition.”

Emma Carleton, also replying to Stevens’s proposal, finds it shamefully “that our language should so long have suffered for a simple pronoun, and no man [sic] have risen to supply the missing word.” Consequently she offers the epicene pronoun ip:

It is a word unlike any pronoun now in use, yet with a family likeness to the impersonal pronoun ‘it,’ and susceptible of being declined similarly. It has a short, sharp, distinctive sound which will prevent its being confused with any other word now in the language; its individual characteristics being as clearly defined as those of if, it, or in, the only words for which it might possibly ever be mistaken. As it will come into our language a total stranger, albeit with strong suggestions in its face of several illustrious old Latin families, it is therefore not handicapped by a previous record of any kind, and there appears no obstacle to our readiness and rapidly becoming familiar with its appearance and signification.

[1884, 186]

Carleton concludes her proposal with an example that carefully avoids the generic masculine: “If any man or woman has sought to urge against the eligibility of this word to the vacant office in question, let ip now speak or forever after hold ips peace.”

James Rogers (1889) disapproves of thon “because every one has to be told how to pronounce it” and because it is too long. Rogers prefers “the shortest and easiest” pronouns, exemplified by his own creations, e, es, and em. Rogers derives e from he, while em comes from them, as in “Let ‘em’ come.” Working at about the same time as Converse, though outside the literary mainstream, the language reformer Elias Molee completely revised the English pronoun system in his Plea for an American Language (1888). Molee created three gender-specific third person plural pronouns, masculine hem (he + them), feminine lem (lady + them), and neuter tem (it + them), and he also devised a set of fully inflected singular and plural common-gender pronouns: ir (pronounced [i:r]), iro, and im for the singular, and thir, thiro, and thim for the plural.

The following list presents a chronology of the epicene pronouns.

c.a.1850 ne, nis, nim; hiser. New York Commercial Advertiser, 7 August 1884, 3
1868 en. Cited by Richard Grant White (1868, 241–44)
1884 thon, thons. Charles Crozet Converse (1884, 55)
     hi, hes, her. Francis H. Williams (1884, 79–80)
     le, lis, lim (from the French); unus; talis. Edgar Alfred Stevens (1884, 294)
     hiser, himer (hyser, hymer). Charles P. Sherman, The Literary World, 6 September 1884, 294
     ip, ips. Emma Carleton (1884, 186)
1888 ir, iro, im (sg.); thir, thiro, thim (pl.). Elias Molee (1888, 200–01)
1889 ons (from one). C. R. B., Writer 3:231
1890 e (from he), es, em (from them). James Rogers (1890, 12–13)
1891 hiser. Forrest Morgan (1891, 260–62)
1912 he’er, him’er, his’er, his’ers. Ella Flagg Young, Chicago Tribune, 7 January, Sec. 1, p. 7
1927 ha, hez, hem; on. The Forum 77:265–68; attributed by Mencken (1937, 460n) to Lincoln King, of Pringlar, Iowa

hesh (heesh), hizzer, himmer; on. Fred Newton Scott (Scott mentions earlier creation of on), The Forum 77:754; Mencken adds, “In 1934 James F. Morton, of the Paterson (N.J.) Museum, proposed to change hesh to heesh and to restore hiser and himer” (1948, 370).

c.a.1930 thir. Sir John Adams, cited by Philip Howard (1977, 95)
1934 she, shis, shim; gender-specific parallel to he, his, him. Cited by Philip Ballard (1934, 7–8)
1935 himorher; hes (pron. [hes]), hier (pron. [hier]), hem; his’n, her’n. “The Post Impressionist,” Washington Post, 20 August, 6
employs the slashed pronouns as feminines, and cites the latter two which employ the more traditional feminine e.

1974 ne, nis, ner. Mildred Fenner (1974, 110) attributes this to Fred Wilhelms.


en, es, ar. David H. Stern, Los Angeles Times, 19 January 1974, Sec. 2, p. 4

hisorher; herorhis; ve, vis, vim. Cited by Amanda Smith, (1974, 29), who prefers singular they.


se (pron. [s]). H. R. Lee, Forbes, 15 August 1975, 86

ey, eir, en; uh. Christine M. Elverson, Chicago Tribune, 23 August 1975, Sec. 1, p. 12

h’orsh’it (facetious blend of he, she, or it). Joel Weiss, Forbes, 15 September 1975, 12


he or she; to be written as (s)he. Elizabeth Lane Beardsley, “Referential Genderization,” in Carol C. Gould and Marx W. Wartofsky, eds., Women and Philosophy (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons), 285–93

she, herm; hs (facetious; pron. “zzz”). Paul B. Horton (1976, 159–60)

it. Millicent Rutherford (1976, 11)


E, E’s, Em; one. E was created by psychologist Donald G.
MacKay (1983) of the University of California at Los Angeles.

1977

e, ris, rim. Werner Low, Washington Post, 20 February, Sec. C, 6


em, ems. Jeffrey J. Smith (using the pseudonym TINA J. Jeffrey), Em Institute Newsletter (June 1977)

1978

ae. Cited by Cheris Kramer, Barrie Thorne, and Nancy Henley, "Perspectives on Language and Communication," Signs 3:638–51, as occurring in fiction, especially science fiction


hesh, hisher, hirn; sheehy; sap (from Homo sapiens). Tom Wicker, "More About He/She and Thon," New York Times, 14 May 1978, Sec. 4, 19. Hesh, etc., proposed by Professor Robert Longwell of the University of Northern Colorado; sheehy by David Kraus of Bell Harbor, N.Y.; sap (facetiously) by Dr. Lawrence S. Ross of Hunting- ton, N.Y.; Wicker adds that several readers offered blends of he, she, and it.

heesh, hisher(s), herm, hermsself. Leonora Timm (1978, 555–65)

1979

one. Lillian Carlton (1979, 156–57)

et, ets, etself. Aline Hoffman of Sarnia, Ontario; cited by William Sherk (1979)

hir, hires, hirem, himself. Jerome Ch’en, Professor of History at York University, 6 January 1979, New York Times, 18

shey, sheir, sheirs; hey, heir, heirs. Paul Encimer favors the first over the second paradigm. The Peacemaker 32:2–3

1980

it. Herman Arthur (1980, 30–32)

1981


1982


E, Ir. Subject and possessive forms, created by the Broward County, Florida, public schools; cited by Paul Dickson (1982, 113)

1984

his. McClain B. Smith, 20 January, Ann Arbor News, Sec. A, 6

hes. Ernie Permentier, Ms., May 1984, 22

hann. Steven Schaufele takes this from Old Norse, already the source of some English pronouns; it is analogous to Finnish han. Colorless Green Newsflashes 4 (November 1984): 3

1985


PATTERNS OF NEOLOGY

There is often little or no information available to help us analyze the process whereby epicene pronouns come into being. For example, June Arnold uses na and nan, without comment, for all the third person pronouns in her novel The Cook and the Carpenter (1973), whereas in Sister Gin (1975) she silently reverts to conventional pronoun usage. Sometimes, however, the devisers of sex-neutral pronouns describe the process involved in the formation of their neologisms. This is the case with them. It is also the case for the set he’er, him’er, his’er which was coined by Ella Flagg Young in 1912 and which, like them, is included in the Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary.

Under the headline "Mrs. Ella Young Invents Pronoun," the Chicago Tribune of January 7, 1912, reports that Young, superintendent of the Chicago schools, addressed a meeting of school principals as follows:

A principal should so conduct his’er school that all pupils are engaged in something that is profitable to him’er and where the pupil is required to use knowledge in school in accomplishing his’er task. . . . I don’t see how one can map out the work for the fifth or sixth grade when he’er has always done the work in the grades above or below. [sec.1, p.7]