

# You can't be (gender-)neutral on a moving train: inclusivity and binaries in English



## THE HISTORY AND FUTURE OF SINGULAR THEY

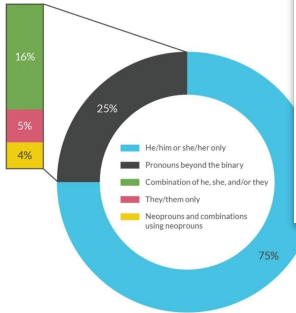
Chris M. Arn...

In some circles, the use of "theirs," and singular persons, genderfluid, or spectrum have increased with increasing decade. Unless you're a writer, or historian, the use of the singular development

## THE HAWKEYE

OPINIONS

### 'They' deserve to be respected

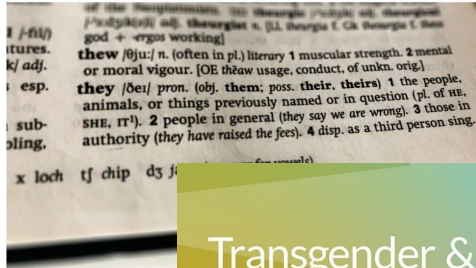


The Trevor Project

Hope Anderson, andersonhl@warhawks.ulm.edu  
March 1, 2021

## Our centuries-old use of "they" as a singular pronoun

CLIVE THOMPSON / 4:22 AM TUE JAN 12, 2021



Discover has an **old and venerable** to refer to a singular

The use of "they" recently been popularized by linguists quoted in a recent study

Transgender & nonbinary youth who have their pronouns respected by most people in their lives are **50% less likely to attempt suicide.**

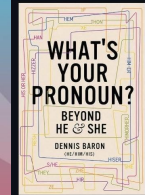
TREVOR



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## Pronominal Strife

February 27, 2021 • By Bryan A. Garner



What's Your Pronoun?  
DENNIS BARON

SINCE ITS FIRST APPEARANCE IN 2012, *virtue-speak* has become a trend. It denotes an old saying something calculated to win admiring N.



Fireworks at the White House. Photo: David J. Phillip/AP

LEA EN ESPAÑOL

The White House website adds gender-inclusive pronouns in another boost for accessibility. Contact forms on the site now include "they/them" and the gender-neutral honorific, "Mx."




17 Shares

By Brittany Valentine


January 22, 2021

Shortly after President Biden and Vice President Harris took office, mindful Internet users observed that major changes were made to the White House website. The new administration has demonstrated from the jump that they are committed to inclusion.



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## Belgian law to be updated with gender-neutral language

Wednesday, 7 April 2021




Photo by Bill Oxford on Unsplash

### THE CONVERSATION



defotoberg/Shutterstock

## No need to 'iel': why France is so angry about a gender-neutral pronoun

Albin Wagener, Université Rennes 2  
Published: December 8, 2021 3:52pm CET

✉    

Spirited public debate over language is a very French passion.

So it's no surprise that when the online edition of Le Robert, the famous French

 LIVE TV ☰

## Gender neutral wording is making German ridiculous, asserts association

07.03.2019



### Inserting \* stars into German words to make them gender neutral amounts to "nonsense," a German language association asserts. Other experts say linguistic equality and removal of patriarchal mindsets remains paramount.

The Association for German Language (VDS) decried Wednesday what it called "destructive intrusion" of gender neutral word modifications, including the recent trend of placing a "gender star" or asterisk

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## Gender Masculine, feminist or neutral? The language battle that has split Spain

A new government plans to erase gender bias in the constitution

### Stephen Burgen in Barcelona

Sun 19 Jan 2020 05:15 EST

2 years old

A showdown is looming between Spain's conservative language academy and its

# Language & Gender: Achieving Conceptual Clarity | January 19, 2024



## LGBTQ+ rights reform in Malta to include free gender-affirming surgery

Malta's Prime Minister confirms that in the future, the State will cover the costs of gender-affirming surgery for those who wish to have it.

NEWS | 14 SEPTEMBER, 2022. WRITTEN BY LET



IMAGE: KAROLLYNE HUBERT VIA UNSPLASH

During a radio interview, the Prime Minister of Malta, Robert Abela, confirmed that free gender-affirming surgery is part of the government's plans.



## 'Malta needs to develop a new pronoun for non-binary people' – Matth Chircop



By Michaela Pia Camilleri - September 12, 2022 9:15 AM



HOME NEWS DIGITAL PAPER

## It would take more than just a 'new pronoun' for Maltese to become gender-neutral

Everything, from tables, to chairs to clouds, to body-parts, is effectively 'genderless' in the English language. Maltese? Not so much.



Raphael Vassallo  
6 October 2022, 8:18am  
9 min read



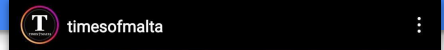
## Maltese language use predominant in state schools, English in non-state ones

Official Languages Act needed

National

April 16, 2019 | Claire Farrugia | 105

2 min read



Speak Maltese please: President urges public officials to use the language more

## Policy to promote bilingualism in primary schools launched

Tuesday, 10 January 2023, 16:21  
Last update: about 5 months ago

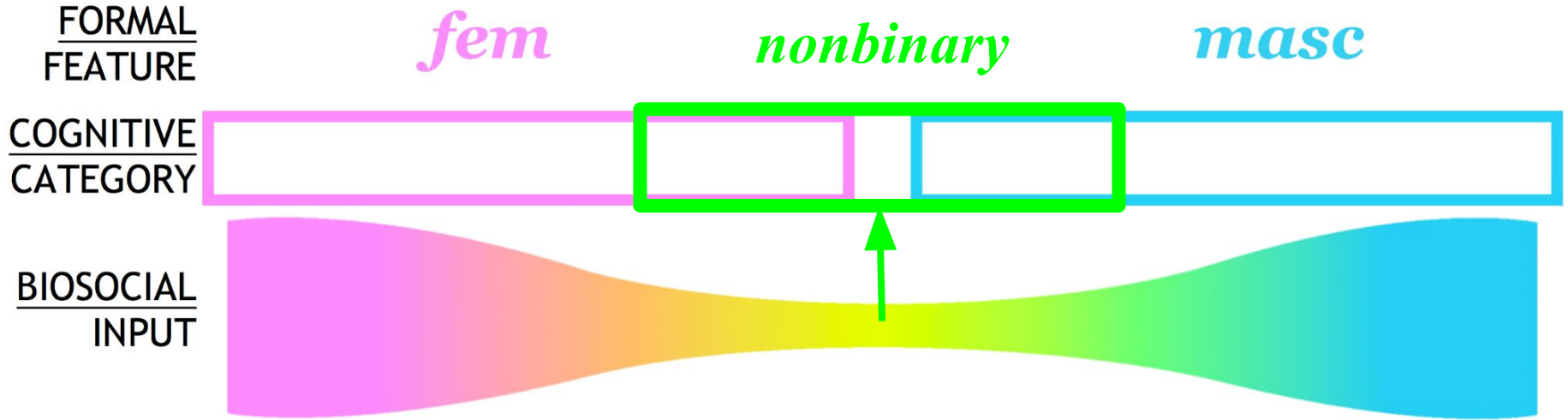


# Nonlinguistic influences on pronouns

- Misgendering is related to attitudes about transgender identities (Conrod, 2018).
- English users' willingness to participate in grammatical change of *they* is connected to socio-cultural changes (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020).
- Rejection of neopronouns is related to binary gender ideology (Hekanaho, 2020).
- Sexual orientation and gender (trans vs. cis) moderate the relationship between prescriptive grammar ideology and attitudes toward *they* (Hernandez, 2020).
- Attitudes toward Swedish neopronoun *hen* have changed over time, related to exposure in media (Sendén et al., 2019).
- **Prior beliefs and experience moderate how language users respond to and use pronouns and other gender-neutral and nonbinary forms.**

# Our previous studies

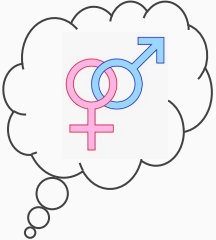

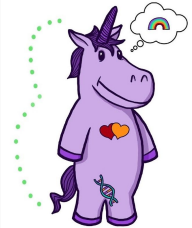
- Acceptability judgments of non-binary *they* are associated with
  - Personality factors and gender role attitudes (Bradley et al., 2019)
  - Linguistic prescriptivism and benevolent sexism (Bradley, 2020)
- Interpretation of singular *they* and neopronouns (Bradley et al. 2019b)
  - Singular *they* is generally interpreted as gender-neutral.
  - Interpretation of neopronouns depends on prior experience.
- Text-based production
  - (Almost) every English user uses singular *they* to talk about someone they know nothing about (Bradley et al, 2019c)
  - Including most L2 English users (Lukač & Bradley, in press)



- A language like English with relatively weak formal gender features relies mostly on cognitive categories for coreference resolution.
- These categories are formed via experience with gender(s).

# Not a perfect analogy, but perhaps a useful one

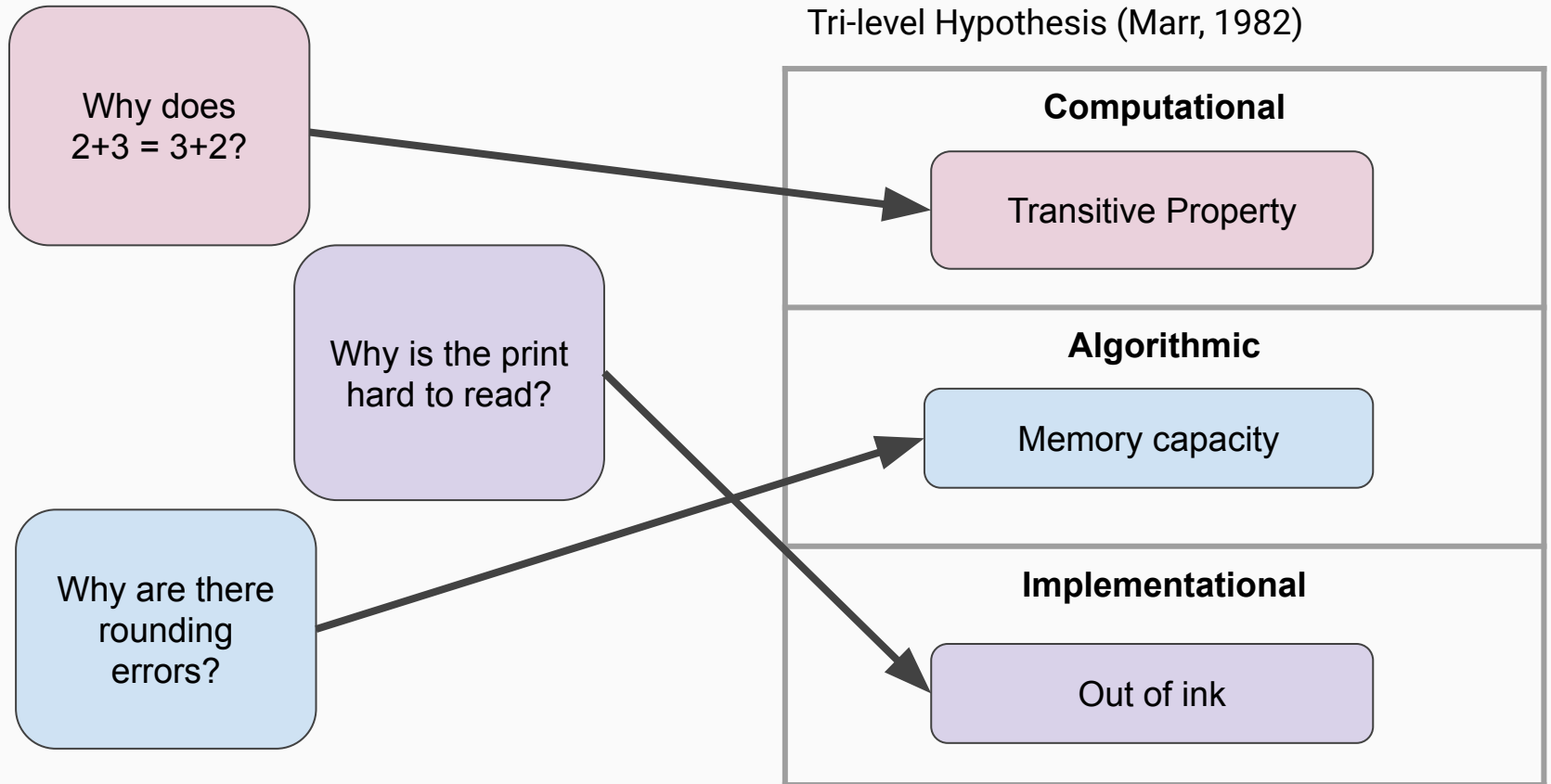
## Gender systems (Ackerman, 2019)

	<b>Conceptual</b>	
<i>ze, hij</i>	<b>Grammatical</b>	
	<i>she, he, they, xe</i>	
	<i>hän</i>	<i>elle, lui</i>
	<b>Biopsychosocial</b>	

## Tri-level Hypothesis (Marr, 1982)

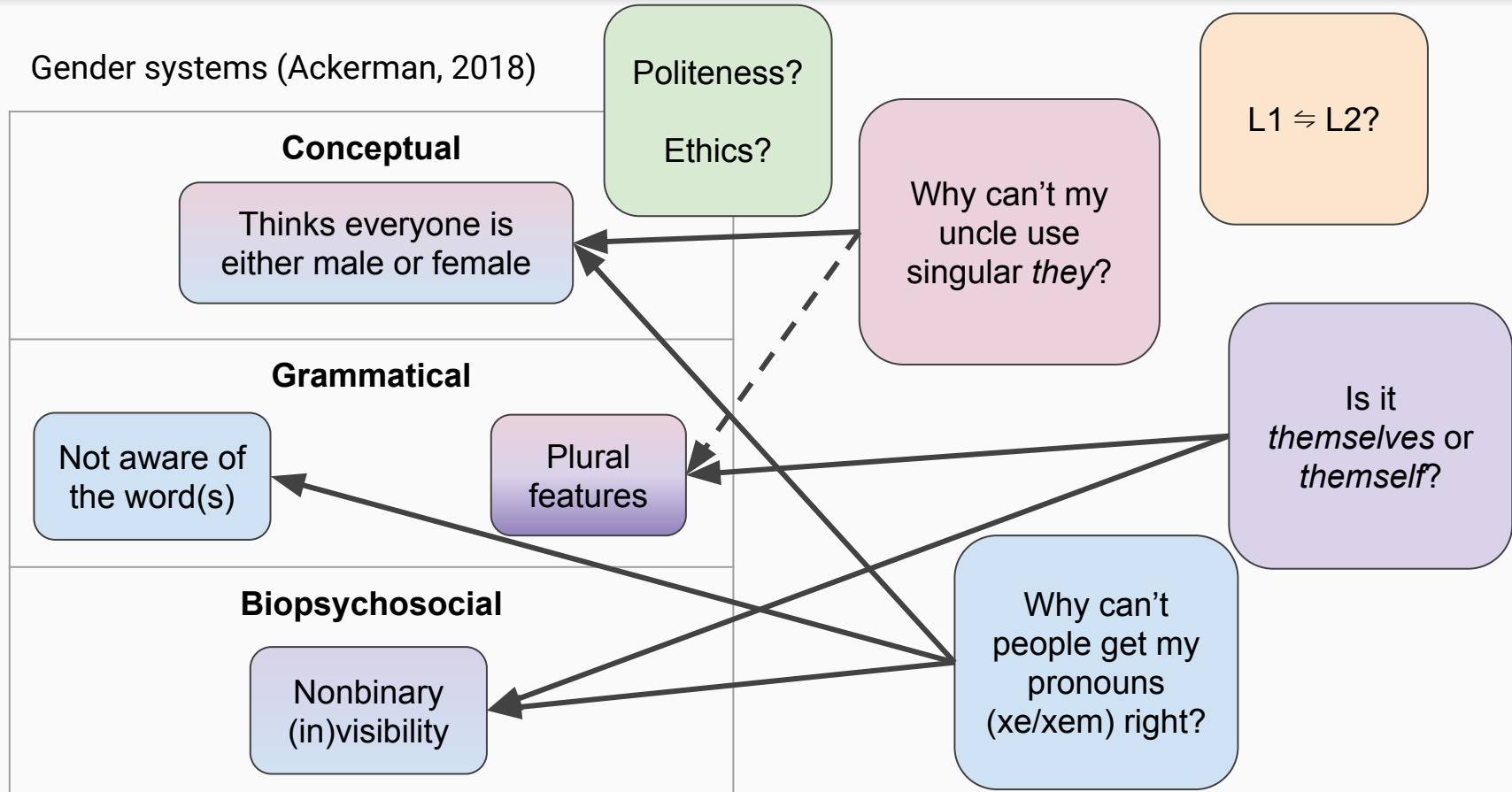
<b>Computational</b>
<i>What?</i>
<b>Algorithmic</b>
<i>How?</i>
<b>Implementational</b>
<i>Where?</i>

# Levels of Explanation





# Levels of Explanation



## *They* does a lot...

- Epicene
- Unknown
- Concealment
- Nonbinary
- And probably more...

Everyone should bring their own pencil.

Who does that driver think they are?

My friend doesn't like their colleague because they smell.

Max prefers to cut their own hair.

# What does it mean to be

- Neutral
- Fair
- Inclusive
- Accurate
- Nonbinary

Saying nothing about (the referent's) gender?

To whom?

Includes all possible/likely referents?

What do (or "should") grammatical features index?

Queering norms.

# Thank you!



**PennState**  
Brandywine

- *Neutral* and *fair* are quite contentious.
- *Inclusive* is tricky, too, but perhaps more operationalizeable!

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