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He said, Ze said

Rachel Vipond  
_Iowa State University_

Nailah Fitzgerald  
_Iowa State University_

Isaac Biehl  
_Iowa State University_

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He said, Ze said
You know what they say about people who assume…

BY RACHEL VIPOND  DESIGN NAILAH FITZGERALD  PHOTO ISAAC BIEHL

he said
said
You know what they say about people who assume...

By Hayden Moffit, this student expresses her frustration with the default use of binary gender pronouns.

Thrust into the chaos of freshman orientation, you met more people than you could remember. You tried to remember their name, major, hometown... and preferred personal pronoun? Chances are, probably not.

Preferred pronouns aren’t the sexiest topic, but they’re an important one. Katy Jaekel, a professor of queer studies at Iowa State who prefers the pronouns she/her/hers, explains that while sex is based on science, gender is “socially constructed—it’s not real.”

Whether a person chooses to go by binary—that is, “he” or “she”—pronouns or something less traditional, preferred pronouns can be a crucial part of their identity. Though it may be an abstract concept for some, learning and using the pronouns a person feels best represents them comes down to respect. Because sex is biological and gender is a social construct, it cannot always be assumed that someone would like to be addressed with traditionally assumed pronouns. In a society obsessed with being politically correct, this may seem like yet another nit-picky thing to keep in mind. What sets personal pronouns apart is their intimate connection with personal identity.

“I don’t think that there’s necessarily anything political in calling people what they want to be called,” Jaekel explains.

Hayden Moffit, a junior in architecture, prefers to be referred to using the gender-neutral pronouns they/their/theirs but has used others over the years.

“Growing up, I was never the most comfortable with pronouns, but I didn’t know anything else really existed,” they explain.

Experimenting with personal pronouns has given Moffit the means to better understand themselves as well as more options in their gender identity.

“I identify as trans, so going by a different name and changing my pronouns was a long process,” they say. “My pronouns still kinda fluctuate [...], so the option of neutral pronouns are really cool.”

So, what has kept gender-neutral pronouns from catching on? Jaekel explains that a number of factors seem to have slowed their widespread use.

Important to note is that there is not just one gender-neutral pronoun. Some choose to go by “they” where others might prefer “ze” or “hu” (pronounced “huh”), says Jaekel. The issue then becomes integrating them into everyday conversation. Because schools teach children “he” or “she” as singular pronouns and “they” as plural, there will likely be those Jaekel refers to as the “knower,” who have a grasp on grammar and use it to aggressively correct others.

“It’s sort of an act of linguistic violence to strip them of their gender,” says Jaekel.

Pronouns:

Humself
Hus
Hu
Themself
Theirs
Their
Them
They
Adding that the enforcement of gender-binary pronouns will always leave some people excluded and on the fringes. “Linguistically, we’ve been operating under this gender binary: You are either male or female,” she explains. Gender has been traditionally considered “either/or,” but she says that it’s actually very fluid.

Traditional ideas of gender in themselves have slowed the widespread use of gender-neutral pronouns, Jaekel explains. Because gender has been socially constructed as very rigid, it can be troubling to feel your gender is being questioned.

“A lot of people have a lot of fear that [asking for a person’s pronouns] will be an insult,” Jaekel says. When in reality, “we’re asking a question a lot like names.”

Another fear people often have, Jaekel explains, is not knowing how to use the pronouns someone has provided them and ultimately looking foolish. How do you conjugate “ze?” If you don’t know, it may follow that you avoid using it altogether.

Savanna Falter, a freshman in pre-industrial design who prefers the pronouns she/her/hers, had not encountered the use of preferred pronouns before college. In a queer studies class, she found herself exposed to a concept of gender and accompanying etiquette she hadn’t before encountered. She made mistakes, especially at first, she explains, but found that “you have to just keep training yourself to get it right.”

Do people get upset when she makes mistakes? Not really, she says. It all comes down to a person’s intent in their language, Falter explains, noting that people should “keep in mind that you should stay positive, [the person making the mistake was] probably not trying to offend anyone.”

Moffit emphasizes that if a person has good intent, they won’t give them trouble for their mistakes.

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