

**Pronouns: Little Words That Say a Lot | Otherwords**  
**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMkXZ7cv1ik&t=9s>**  
**Transcript: <https://dontveter.com/ec/pronouns.pdf>**

Pronouns' main purpose is to replace nouns so that we don't have to repeat the same words or phrases over and over and over again.

It's really a matter of convenience. Imagine if you had to say, "Did you tell Archibald that Archibald's mother "is looking for Archibald?"

And while there are lots of different kinds of pronouns, there's one type in particular that people tend to care about the most: the personal pronoun, the short little words we use as a substitute for a person's name.

For example, "Where did Divya go?" "She went to the store."

Now you may have noticed that "they" is both singular and plural in our chart here.

That's one of the big fusses about pronouns these days.

But I'm here to tell you that singular they is nothing new.

The Oxford English Dictionary traces it all the way back to 1375.

And that's just the first time it was written down.

We use singular they all the time when referring to an unknown person, such as in "Does anyone know what they want?"

Or, "Each student took their books home with them," or if you're BBC avoiding MasterChef spoilers.

However, we know that language does change over time.

And today singular they can also refer to a known person who chooses it as their self-identified pronoun.

They was even chosen to be the American Dialect Society's word of the year in 2015.

But that's just scratching the personal pronoun's surface.

I'm Dr. Erica Brozovsky, my personal pronouns are she/her, and this is OtherWords.

Anyone who thinks pronouns can't change must not be much of a history buff, because they forgot what happened to second-person pronouns in the 17th century.

During the early modern period, English had four different second-person pronouns, thou, thee, ye and you, which Shakespeare took full advantage of.

Kind of like with the Spanish tú and usted, thee and thou were informal and familiar, while you showed more respect.

So in "Romeo and Juliet," Tybalt says, "Romeo, the love I bear thee "can afford no better term than this, thou art a villain."

While in "Richard II," York addresses the king, "O my liege, pardon me if you please."

But in the 17th century, the and thou fell out of fashion and were replaced with the catchall pronoun you.

Of course, there was a fuss. People are wary of change.

One guy in particular, George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, wrote a full-on book in 1660 calling everyone who used singular you a fool and an idiot.

And who's a fool now, buddy? I think it's you.

While nowadays you can refer to one or more people, some regions do tend to distinguish between singular you and a different plural.

The most widely used is y'all, which is typically associated with the Southern United States.

Although also found in South African Indian English, Maori English, and in parts of Canada.

Other common regionalisms in the U.S. are youse guys, you-uns, and yinz.xx Outside of the us in Trinidad, you might hear allyuh.

In Ireland, yiz, and in Barbados, wunna, and that's just English.

Many other world languages differentiate not only between singular and plural you, but also between familiar and respectful versions of you.

And some cultures just drop their pronouns a lot of the time, because the information is built into the verbs in the sentence.

When people think of personal pronouns, especially when referring to themselves, they tend to think of gender.

They is the most common gender neutral pronoun but there are even more, which is where neopronouns come in, third-person pronouns beyond he, she or they, which may be used regardless of gender expression, like ze, which dates back to at least 1864, and hir from the early 20th century, both of which are in fact entries in the Oxford English Dictionary.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ze>

People have various reasons for choosing the pronouns that they do.

And as members of society, it's our job to respect that.

Personal gender aside, personal pronouns are an interesting bunch.

Take the word we, for example, two little letters, but a whole variety of usages, like the royal we, or people saying, "We're pregnant!"

We can be used to claim group identity. Your favorite team does well, "Yeah, we made the playoffs!"

But if it didn't go so well, "They lost."

If I say, "We should hang out," I mean you and me.

If I'm telling you a story about my weekend, and I say, "We went scuba diving," the we doesn't include you.

If your waiter says, "How are we doing today?" they really just mean you.

Sometimes, we is used to deflect responsibility.

"We don't think it's a good fit."

Really, "I'm the hiring manager who isn't feeling it."

Pronouns are tiny words but they say a lot more than you think.

In "The Secret Life of Pronouns," social psychologist James W. Pennebaker theorizes that the frequency with which we use certain pronouns can point to how we're feeling, who we identify with, and even might indicate whether or not we're telling the truth.

He also found an interesting pronoun power dynamic. People in positions of authority tend to use we and you at higher rates than their subordinates.

If you're emailing your boss, you probably use more I's than they do.

I took a look at my emails and checks out.

And now you're gonna be thinking about that next time me write an email.

Pronouns deserve more credit than they get.

Our brains tend to ignore them in favor of the juicier nouns and verbs, but there's a lot going on under the surface.

Pronouns say a lot about you both loud and proud when you state your personal pronouns, and also subconsciously, in the way you think and speak and write.

We use pronouns every day in almost every sentence, and it'll be incredibly awkward to communicate without them.

In fact, every sentence I've said has a pronoun in it, except one. Good luck finding it.