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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Gender neutral pronouns: A modest proposal

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Professionals working with gender dysphoric individuals understand that gender is not binary and that some individuals are uncomfortable identifying as either male or female. The *International Journal of Transgenderism* (IJT) has been a pioneer in advocating for the human rights of people with gender nonconforming identities. As part of that advocacy, we believe that creating and using nonbinary gender neutral pronouns (GNPs) would lessen the frustration and angst these individuals feel when the “wrong” pronoun is used.

GNPs would shield gender nonconforming individuals from the indignity of having strangers assume their gender and allow these individuals to avoid declaring a gender. Currently, when interacting with someone, we assume the other person’s gender with our choice of gendered pronouns. Sometimes a person’s attributes (dress, appearance, voice, etc.) may suggest the use of the “wrong” pronoun, which can be felt as hurtful and insensitive. The use of GNPs would allow a more respectful approach and avoid inadvertently offending the person. GNPs facilitate individuals presenting themselves in a manner more consistent with their own self-image.

The value of GNPs should not be underestimated. In the same way that Mr. and Ms. do not imply the marital status of an individual, these pronouns would not imply the gender of the individual. GNPs are useful when referring to those with either fluid or fixed gender identities. GNPs would be used when the gender of the person is not known, when noting the gender is superfluous, or when a person expresses a desire to be referred to in that manner. Gendered pronouns would not disappear. They could be used when the gender

was known, when noting the gender would simplify the communication, when individuals indicate their pronoun preference, or when the pronouns would clarify the communication (e.g., He gave his book to her). GNPs would not force gender dysphoric individuals to choose a gender before they are ready to do so, would provide a respectful alternative for individuals who are not comfortable with either masculine or feminine personal pronouns, would create an alternative for those who do not want to reveal their gender, and would create a way for individuals to respectfully refer to someone whose gender is not known. We are not suggesting any change to the policy of letting individuals choose the pronouns they prefer and responding with their preferred pronouns. Use of GNPs (either the suggested GNPs or another GNP system) would be optional for any papers submitted to IJT. Nevertheless, an approved system may simplify the tasks of the editors, reviewers, and authors.

Everyday language can be both a product and a driver of societal changes. Personal pronouns and honorifics are the words that most directly allow us to define who we are and how we wish to be regarded in the world. The honorific *Ms.* was proposed as early as 1901 as a respectful way to address a woman whose marital status was not immediately known (Zimmer, 2009). This compromise between *Miss* and *Mrs.* retained familiar elements of both, and its pronunciation reflected the colloquial speech pattern of both titles. By adopting and using *Ms.*, feminists, academia, and mass media were instrumental in promoting that change. It gradually became the standard address throughout mass media.

Table 1. Proposed gender-neutral pronouns.

Nominative (subject)	Oblique (object)	Possessive adjective/determiner	Possessive pronoun	Reflexive
Traditional pronouns				
<i>He</i>	<i>him</i>	<i>his</i>	<i>his</i>	<i>himself</i>
<i>She</i>	<i>her</i>	<i>her</i>	<i>hers</i>	<i>herself</i>
Our suggestion				
<i>E</i>	<i>er</i>	<i>er</i>	<i>ers</i>	<i>erself</i>

E [i] is pronounced as a long e, as in he and she.

Er [əɹ] is pronounced like her without the h.

Ers [ɜɹz] is pronounced like hers without the h.

Ersel [əɹ'self] is pronounced like herself without the h.

A number of novel forms of gender neutral personal pronouns have been proposed (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender-specific_and_gender-neutral_pronouns). Each has problems, which have deterred widespread use. They seem hard to learn, hard to pronounce consistently, feel awkward, violate grammar rules (e.g., use of *they* as a singular pronoun), and do not resemble standard pronouns sufficiently; none have been accepted by any influential group or have been used consistently.

Rather than have the IJT editorial staff and editors research which GNP system to adopt, we have a suggestion. Our proposed GNP system resembles standard pronouns, is easy to learn, pronounce, and will fit easily with English grammar. If this system is not acceptable for any reason, a different system can be chosen, but we believe a system needs to be chosen and used. It may be useful to publish a statement about the use of GNPs and a “cheat sheet” in each publication to help readers adapt.

We believe the adoption of a GNP system by IJT will lead to its standardized use. If IJT can demonstrate that GNPs can work, we believe that other professional journals (and style guides) will adopt them. If the professional journals adopt GNPs, then the lay press may also adopt the system, and from there it will

enter into popular culture. We propose that IJT use GNPs in all their communications (see Table 1).

There is also a need for a nongendered honorific, so the individual does not have to be identified by their gender as *Mr.* and *Mrs./Miss/Ms.* do. In Britain, *Mx.* [mɪks] (rhymes with *mix*, *fix*) has gained some acceptance (see <http://uktrans.info/attachments/article/249/mxevidencelowres.pdf>). A person can be referred to respectfully as *Mx. Smith*, not indicating the individual's gender.

The last issue to be addressed would be the use of an honorific in a communication wherein there is a power differential between individuals; for example, the store clerk at the end of a transaction might say thank you, sir, or thank you, madam/ma'am. This is beyond our current proposal, but *mezz* [mɛz] (a made-up word) seems to solve this problem. Adoption or rejection of *mezz* should not affect the rest of our proposal for using gender neutral pronouns.

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Reference

Zimmer, B. (2009, October 25). On language: Ms. *The New York Times*. Retrieved March 29, 2015 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/magazine/25FOB-onlanguage-t.html>.