

Acceptability, production, and comprehension of definite singular *they*

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Project-Launch Overview

Motivating Question:

- What social & linguistic factors predict variation in the use & interpretation of *they*?

Core components of the project:

- Acceptability judgement task
- Sentence-completion task
- Self-paced reading task

What we want feedback on:

- How we gather our social measurements
- The best ways to target participant populations

Overview

Core Question

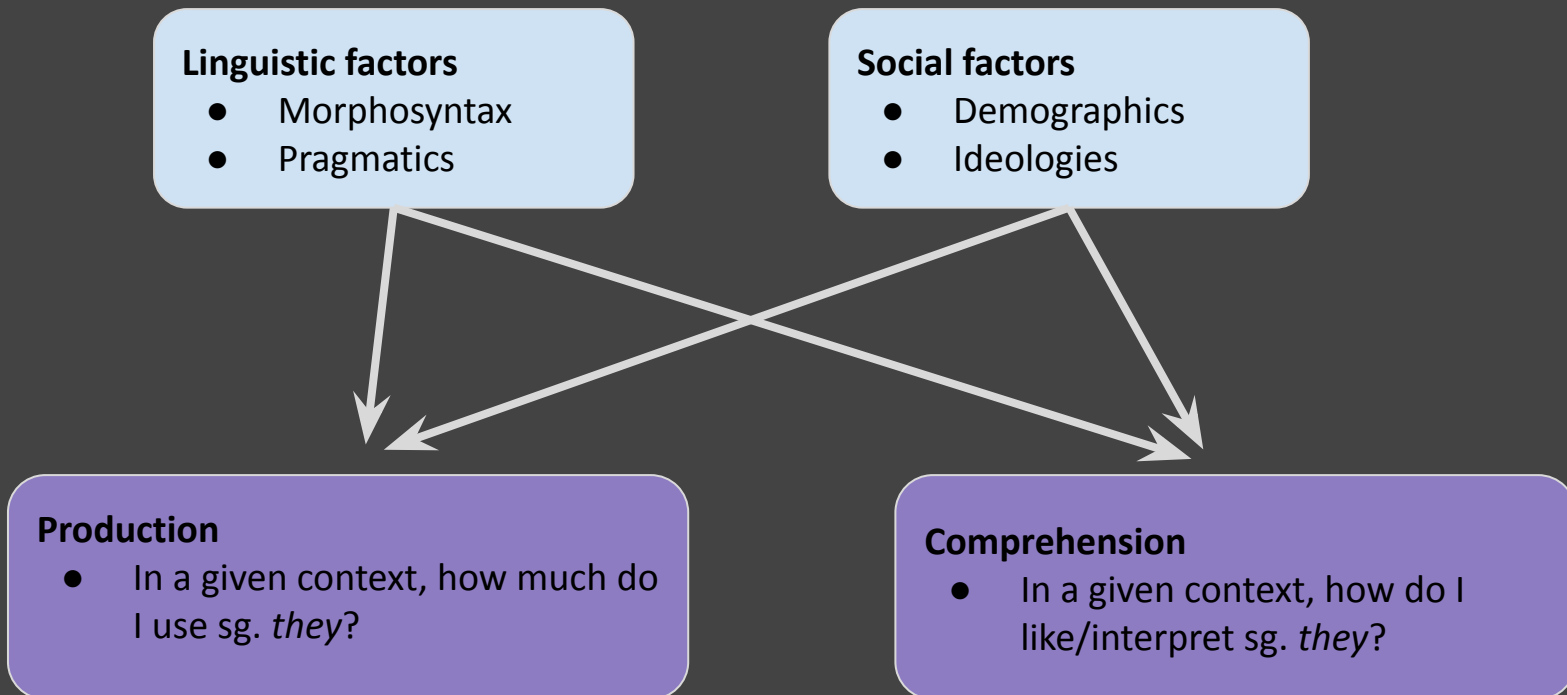
Design Factors: Linguistic

Design Factors: Social

Future Directions

Core Question

How do social/linguistic variables predict use/comprehension of sg. they?



Some Prior Findings: acceptability

Prior findings: There are patterns of acceptability that are mediated by social and linguistic factors [Ackerman 2018, Bjorkman 2017, Conrod 2019, Hekanaho 2020, Conrod et al. *in press*, a.o.]

- (1) Definite plural *they*: *Those dentists* smiled before *they* sneezed.
- (2) Quantified/indefinite *they*: *Every dentist* smiled before *they* sneezed.
- (3) Definite singular *they*: *That dentist* smiled before *they* sneezed.

	Dialect A	Dialect B	Dialect C
(1) Def. pl. <i>they</i>	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
(2) Quant. <i>they</i>	Proscribed	Acceptable	Acceptable
(3) Def. sg. <i>they</i>	Unacceptable	Liminal	Acceptable

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Future Directions

Core Components: Three Designs

Socio-pragmatics

Sentence completion

- Fill-in-the-blank, targeting syntactic positions that require pronouns

Task: Put a word in the blank to complete this sentence.

“My client (Casey) was not in _____ right mind.”

Off-line acceptability

- Naturalness ratings using a Likert scale (1-5)

Task: Rate this sentence’s naturalness.

“My client (Casey) was not in their/his right mind.”

Socio-syntax

On-line comprehension

- Self-paced reading (grammaticality Maze)

Task: Read the sentence as it appears one word at a time

“Before they/he left, the tall client(s) sneezed.”

For all stimuli, antecedent nouns/names are gender-normed (pulling from Misersky et al. 2013 and Flowers 2015)

Socio-Pragmatic Studies (*usage/acceptability*)

Question: When the speaker doesn't commit to / want to reveal the gender of the (definite/specific/named) referent, when does sg. *they* get used/accepted?

<i>antecedent</i>	<u>gender not concealed</u>	<u>gender concealed</u>
<u>common noun</u>	(4a) My client, whose testimony we witnessed earlier, was not in PRONOUN right mind ...	(4c) My client, who prefers to remain anonymous, was not in PRONOUN right mind ...
<u>proper name</u>	(4b) My client Casey, whose testimony we witnessed earlier, was not in PRONOUN right mind ...	(n/a)

Usage: Sentence Completion

- **PRONOUN** = blanks

Acceptability: Likert Scale Rating

- **PRONOUN** = their/his/her

- All stimuli in the project repo at <https://osf.io/5mvpz/>
- Demo usage task at <https://farm.pcibex.net/r/WYCAgE/>

Socio-Syntactic Study (*processing*)

Broad Question: How do more conscious (off-line) acceptability/production behaviors correlate with unconscious (on-line) language-processing behavior?

Narrow Question: Given a cataphoric pronoun, what predictions do speakers of different dialects make about upcoming referent?

(5a) After they finished, that cellist took a bow.	PL pronoun ⇒ SG subject (sg. <i>they</i>)
(5b) After they finished, those cellists took a bow.	PL pronoun ⇒ PL subject
(5c) After he finished, that cellist took a bow.	SG pronoun ⇒ SG subject
(5d) After he finished, those cellists took a bow.	SG pronoun ⇒ PL subject

- All stimuli in the project repo at <https://osf.io/5mvpz/>
- Demo processing task at <https://farm.pcibex.net/r/RugJWe/>

Overview

Core Question

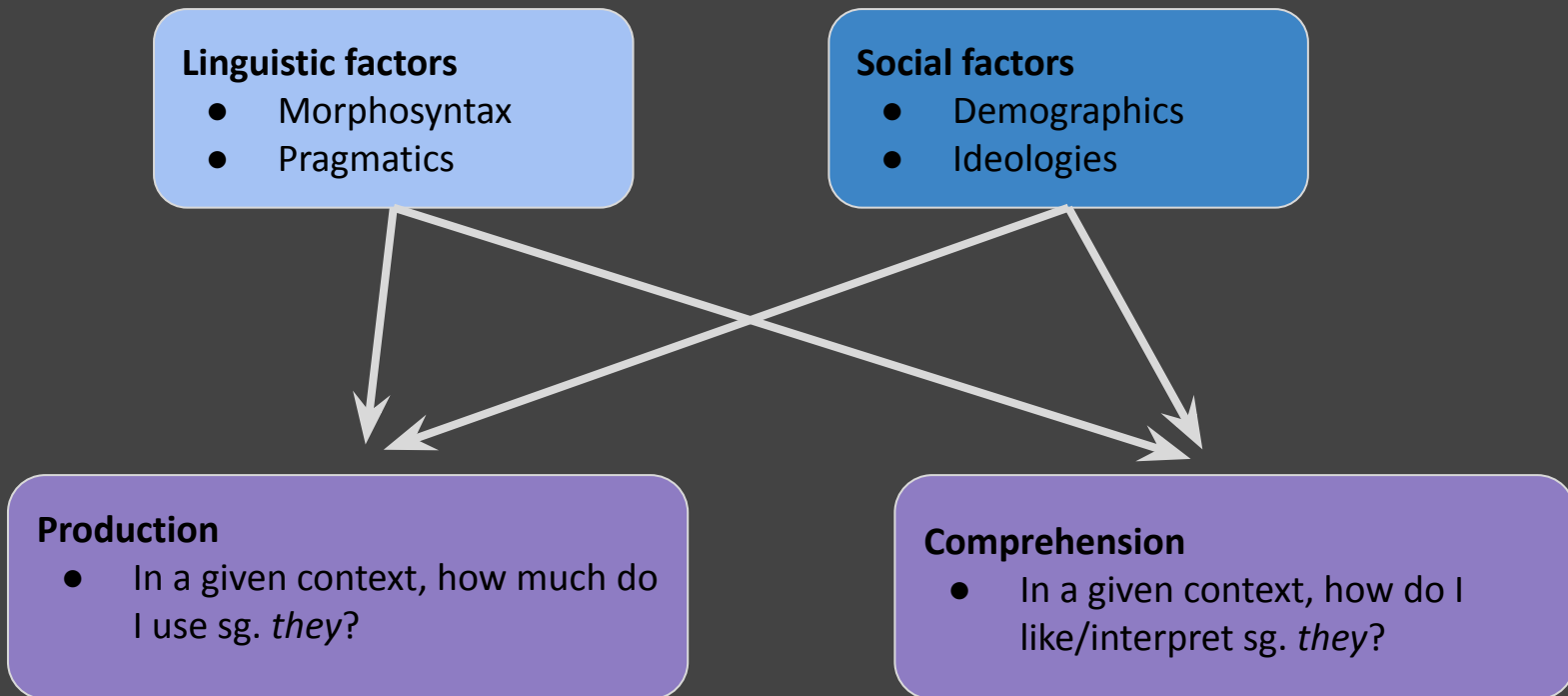
Design Factors: Linguistic

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Future Directions

Project Overview

Reminder! We have design/experimental factors (IVs) that are linguistic and social:



Targeting demographic variables

What questions would best capture these variables?

- **Gender:** cis vs. trans, non-binary vs. binary, 'naive' cis vs. 'in-the-know' cis
- **Age:** older vs. younger
- **Location:** urban vs. rural, coastal vs. heartland, place of origin vs. current location
- **Sexuality and queer-familiarity:** LGBTQ identity, queer community members, etc.
- **Factors without predictions:** socioeconomic status (profession, class, education), ethnicity, race
- **Neurotypicality** (for reading task): memory/attention disorders

Demographics questionnaire

- Link to draft: <https://bit.ly/theyQs>



Targeting ideological variables

What questions would best capture these variables?

- ***Political ideology***: conservative vs. liberal
- ***Gender ideology***: benevolent sexism, binarist views, transphobia, trans-acceptance
- ***Language ideology***: (benevolent) prescriptivism scale

Ideologies questionnaire

- Link to draft: <https://bit.ly/theyQs>



Targeting Participant Populations

- 1) No targeting specific demographics: A very large, random sample
N = 1,000 adult American native English speakers
- 2) Pre-task targeting with Prolific (with demographic/ideological surveys in the task)
 - Some large sample(s) with demographic targets
N = 500 participants, including x trans people, y women, z people under 40, etc.
 - Multiple smaller studies targeting specific populations
N₁ = 100 = 50 cis + 50 nonbinary 18-25 year olds
N₂ = 100 = 25 trans/nonbinary people in four age brackets
⋮
- 3) Pre-task targeting with our surveys:
 - Run our surveys on Prolific first, to get targeting for exp'ts as described in (2)

Overview

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Future Directions

Goals moving forward

- Social perception study to explore social meaning
- Finer-grained analysis of intersections of social variables
- Connections between sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics
- Analyze debriefing questions targeting metalinguistic awareness of pronoun variation
- Sociolinguistic interview: variation driven by conscious and/or subconscious attitudes?
- Look for ways of eliciting sg *they* or other pronouns (without clear prompt)
 - Large-scale online (not interviews) but more naturalistic (not fill-in-the-blank)
- Differences between on-line and off-line responses?
 - Conscious vs. subconscious variation (*e.g., ratings vs. reading times*)

***Sociolinguistic
Theorizing***

***Qualitative
Work***

***Quantitative
Work***

Questions Asked During Q&A

Project Repository

- Link to the repository for this project:

[`https://osf.io/5mvpz/`](https://osf.io/5mvpz/)

- This repository will host:
 - Preregistrations for each experiment
 - All experimental materials (stimuli and PClbex code)
 - Survey instruments
 - Handouts, slides, and manuscripts

Thanks and Acknowledgements

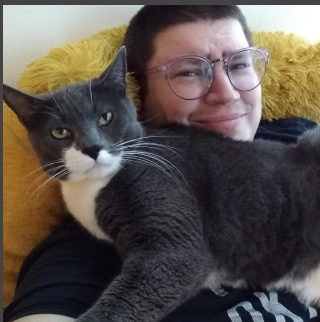
Thank You!



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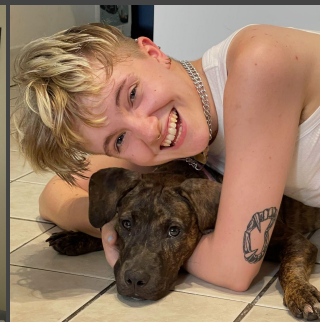
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Grammaticality Maze Task

