

My chiropractor sat down in a simple chair placed inconspicuously in the corner of the treatment room. The expectant look on her face revealed a desire to speak, to get something off her chest, and the small smirk at the corner of her lips told me that, whatever it was, it was clearly much too rebellious for the ears of her regular clientele. The typical middle-aged mothers of this slightly upscale but interminably superficial and downright dumb suburb were suitable only for mindless gossip or the like, not *serious* conversation.

The seed of her frustration lay in the growing restraints on the general freedom of speech. Recently, as I was made aware from our previous session, my chiropractor had started her own “wellness” podcast, which of course consisted of all the usual quackery that makes up the bread and butter of these sorts of things, with her guests advocating for juice cleanses and self-help books and the need to unify mind, body and soul with the help of an app downloadable to their smartphones.

After a recent airing she had received an e-mail from a disgruntled listener, instructing my chiropractor on the importance of not generalizing viewers as male. Confused as to what infraction of speech-policing she had committed, my chiropractor spent the evening listening to the podcast, two, three and even four times over. And as far as she could tell, the only statement that could have possibly been deemed somewhat generalizing was the way in which she had wrapped up the show:

“Thanks for tuning in guys, talk to you all again next week!”. The culprit? *Guys*.

– That’s ridiculous! – I said, with indignation. I, myself, use the word *guys* to refer to any group of people, even if that group is composed entirely of females. Which is to say, there is nothing inherently *masculine* about the use of the word *guys*, so long as it is in the plural form, and not the singular *guy*, which in my mind does indeed denote a male.

It was ok, she said, we all make mistakes, and now she knew better. The only pain was that she was now obliged by the **Canadian Broadcast Standards Council** to take **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Training** classes three nights a week for six months in order to sharpen up her gender awareness skills.

The conversation, having been steered in this direction, gave birth to a host of corollary topics. We drifted momentarily into the murky waters of cancel culture, then paddled lightly through the reeds of the #metoo movement, past the stilted lily pads of black lives matter, until at last we docked on the rising shores of pronouns.

Having, in my own time, followed the trails of this new trend to its logical conclusions, I grew quite delighted at its sudden appearance in our conversation, for it gave me the opportunity to elucidate my theory to a listener as receptive as my chiropractor was.

It is, I began, so *absolutely pretentious* to assert your pronouns. I declared this with a conviction that let my chiropractor know, and indeed anyone listening in for that matter, that I was not in any way concerned about abiding by the tenets of political correctness.

Before I can begin to demonstrate the merits of this proposition, it is first necessary to identify exactly what we are talking about – pronouns, that is.

A pronoun is...*a word that refers to a person or thing without calling that person or thing by their proper name*. For example, instead of saying “the coffee maker”, you can say “it”. Pronouns also apply to living things, and falling within that category, human beings.

As they refer to human beings, there are three different types of pronouns. These are; the *first-person*, *second-person*, and *third-person pronouns*. These types, by their very nature, exist

on a fluid spectrum of significance, as the *person* in question will depend upon who the speaker and listener are.

If it's been a while since your last grammar class, remember that first-person pronouns are; *I/me/mine*, that second-person pronouns are; *you/yours*, and that third-person pronouns are, in the singular; *it, he/she, him/her, his/hers*, and in the plural; *we/ours* and *they/them/theirs*.

Suppose two people are talking to one other. Their names are Fred A and Fred B. When Fred A speaks about himself, he will undoubtedly say things like; "Hello, nice to meet *you*, I'm Fred. What's *your* name?", to which Fred B will respond "Hello, *my* name is Fred, too. Nice to meet *you*."

Notice how both of the Freds refer to themselves in the first-person, and to each other in the second-person? When Fred A says "you", he is speaking about Fred B, but when Fred B says "you" he is speaking about Fred A. This is the way that pronouns work; *the person they refer to depends on who is speaking*.

Now, the key to keep in mind here is that third-person pronouns, being the ones in question, the ones that people list in their e-mail signatures and LinkedIn profiles, are only used to refer to people *who are not directly engaged in the discussion*.

Wong C and Wong D, sitting at their favourite noodle bar, are catching up and talking about their mutual friend, Wong E. Mind you, Wong E is not at the noodle bar. In fact, Wong E is not even in the country. Wong E is currently being detained in a prison facility in western China. But that is besides the point. The point is...when Wong C says to Wong D, between large slurps of Singapore style noodles; "Bad touch of luck for our comrade, Wong E, no? He almost made it out, too. Shame, really. Him and that damn lame foot of his!", Wong D will understand, by virtue of the context of the conversation, that the *he* and *him* and *his* all refer to Wong E. But Wong E is still not in the noodle bar.

This example shows us that third-person pronouns are not used to refer to the person you are speaking to. Instead, they are used to refer to *someone else*. In fact, this someone else, as the example above demonstrates, does not even need to be in the same room as you, let alone the same country. Apart from being able to refer to people who are distant in space, third-person pronouns can also refer to people who have long been dead (like Hitler, or Michael Jackson), as well as fictional characters (like Kermit the Frog, or Miss Piggy).

Therefore, the first silliness of this whole farce is that the people who list their pronouns will *not actually hear you refer to them as that pronoun*.

This is exactly what makes it presumptuous; that people demand that you, in your own free time, and in your discussions with others, refer to them with the pronouns of *their choosing*, even though they are not around to hear you use them (unless of course they've bugged your cell phone – damn you Wong G!)

Before, I stated that *the person a pronoun refers to depends on who is speaking*. Now I would like to add a qualifier; *the person a pronoun refers to depends on who is speaking, not on who they are speaking about*.

This leads us to our second point: the third-person pronoun is *not* a gender identifier. It is merely a placeholder for a name. To highlight this point, we will conduct a comparative study.

In the Spanish language (which is the second most natively spoken language in the world), third-person possessive pronouns (*his* and *hers*) are represented by the same word – *su*. So, in the straightforward and simple statement "*su casa*", the *su* can either mean *his house* or *her house*. How do we know whose house it is? With context. If, throughout the discussion, we have been speaking about our mutual friend Yolanda F, then when we say "*su casa*", it is understood that

we are talking about Yolanda F's house, and that the *su* in this sentence would translate to English as *her house*.

So, it happens in Spanish, at least, that third-person possessive pronouns are *gender-neutral*. The pronoun itself has nothing to do with a person's gender. We understand who is being spoken about by means of the infinitely useful yet terribly underrated feature of context.

Why is it then that third-person possessive pronouns in Spanish are gender-neutral, but in English they are not? Are the Spaniards simply that much more advanced, culturally? Do all Spaniards have degrees in gender studies? I think not.

Let us look at another example. In English, the word *friend* is gender-neutral. If your boyfriend tells you, with a rather guarded tone of voice, that he's with his *friend* tonight, will not the idea pass through your mind that this unnamed *friend* is actually that homewrecking hussy whose eyeliner you found in his glove compartment last week? In Hispanic countries, on the other hand, girlfriends and boyfriends have absolutely nothing to worry about. The word *friend* changes depending upon whether you are referring to a girl or a boy; *amiga* or *amigo*, respectively.

Notice that while the word *friend* in English is gender-neutral, the words *girlfriend* and *boyfriend* are not. Keep in mind however that *partner* (or even significant other) can be used to replace these two gendered words. Which is to say that there *does exist* viable alternatives to using gender specific words like *girlfriend* and *boyfriend*. But there does *not exist* any sensible alternatives for the words *he* or *her*.

What does all this mean? Why are some words gender-neutral in Spanish, but not in English, and vice versa? Because that's just how each of these languages evolved. It has nothing to do with gender; it is only grammar, and grammar is not prejudiced.

There is no gender-neutral singular third-person pronoun in English. It simply does not exist. We could try to impose new and exciting pronouns like *xe/xer* or *zim/zimma* or *whogotdakeys/tomybimma?*, but this would be an artificial fix. Languages evolve organically, over time, not through strict impositions. More importantly, a gender-neutral pronoun does not need to exist. So long as the person you are speaking to understands who you are speaking about, then your job as a communicator is accomplished.

The point of communication is to be understood. It would not, in most situations, make sense to refer to a single person as a *they*, for the simple fact that it will confuse whoever you are speaking to. And, more importantly, you do not owe the effort of thought required to bastardize a perfectly functioning language just to satisfy the capricious wants of pretentious people.

Unless you are a bone-thumping neanderthal ("Uga hungry! She eat meat!"), or suffer from delusions of grandeur ("His royal highness has returned. Fetch the royal footbath, for he grows weary, and his bunions begin to ache him...") then your pronouns, the ones you use to refer to yourself, are *I/me*.

Language does not belong to any one individual. It is a medium shared between all of its speakers, and no one person can impose their own rules onto it. Indeed, it is precisely this communal nature of language that makes communication possible. To even begin to think that you can make demands on the way others speak is quite ostentatious...if not outright dictatorial.

The practice of listing your pronouns is pretentious because it assumes, for one; that the structure of the language you speak has anything to do with the way you choose to identify yourself, and two; that other people do not have the right to speak however they like. Freedom of speech ultimately means that people can say what they want, regardless of whether you'd appreciate it or not. If someone wants to call you an asshole, they can. And if you wanted to call

them a prick in return, then that is your prerogative. This is, after all, what makes freedom possible; *a give and take*.