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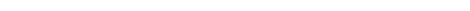 Part of the Other English Language and Literature Commons

Give us a Gender Neutral Pronoun, Yo!:

The Need for and Creation of a Gender Neutral, Singular, Third Person, Personal Pronoun

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Literature and Language Honors Thesis

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Abstract

This essay outlines the problems associated with the history and current absence of a gender-neutral third-person singular personal pronoun in the English language. The combination of the social and grammatical consequences of this language gap results in pronoun choices that are either politically incorrect or verbose. Experts' attempts to fill this language gap have failed to take root on any widespread basis; but, interestingly, middle school children in Baltimore, Maryland created and started using "yo" as their own gender-neutral third-person singular personal pronoun. Stotko and Troyer's (2007) study on this development sheds some light on exactly how students use "yo" as a third-person pronoun and proposes some theories regarding the origin of this change in language. This spontaneously produced gender-neutral pronoun has gained as much recognition as many gender-neutral third-person singular personal pronouns proposed by linguistic experts, perhaps as a result of children's unique understanding of and ability to create language. This recent development indicates that common English speakers will likely spontaneously generate a solution to the current pronoun gap, although this will probably take some time to occur.

Have you ever taken a moment to think about the English language? Sure, you speak English constantly, but you may never have thought about how it came into existence or how it compares to other languages. Many people believe there's a sizable hole in the English pronoun system that needs to be filled. English pronouns take the place of a noun in a sentence. The current pronoun system includes the first, second, and third forms of pronouns in the masculine, feminine, and neuter genders. These pronouns meet most of our needs, but English needs a singular gender-neutral third-person personal pronoun for both grammatical reasons and to avoid gender preference, or sexism, in our language. While many experts have come up with ways to solve our problem, the most talked about new gender-neutral pronoun came, not from linguistic experts, but from middle school students in Baltimore, Maryland who have started using the word "yo" in place of "he" and "she".

Interestingly, the English pronoun system used to be much more complex than it is now. Over time, it has simplified and left gaps in the language. Old English included entire other cases that have since been lost. The duel case was already on the way out when Old English was spoken, and the demonstrative case (represents something eg. "this" and "that") had far more words than our current system does. Following are charts of the pronoun systems of Old English.

First Person	Singular	Dual	Plural
Nominative	ic	wit	wē
Accusative	mec, mē	unc (uncit)	ūsic, ūs
Genitive	mīn	uncer	ūre
Dative	mē	unc	ūs

Second Person	Singular	Dual	Plural
Nominative	ūs	git	gē
Accusative	þēc, þē	inc (incit)	ēowic, ēow
Genitive	þīn	incer	ēower
Dative	þē	inc	ēow

Third Person	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter	Plural
Nominative	hē	hēo	hit	hiē *m.*, hēo *f.*
Accusative	hine (hiene)	hīe	hit	hiē *m.*, hīo *f.*
Genitive	his	hiere (hire, hyre)	his	hiera (hira, hyra, heora)
Dative	him	hiere (hire, hyre)	him	him (heom)

Adapted from Millward and Hayes, page 104

The accusative (used as a direct object) and dative cases (used as an indirect object) merged into one case by the time Middle English was spoken (Millward and Hayes, 105). Another of many changes that took place during the Middle English time-period was that gender was changed to refer to biological gender only (a living thing's sex) as opposed to grammatical gender where a noun is assigned a specific gender as in many Romance Languages. Speakers also commonly used plural pronouns as a polite singular pronoun from the thirteenth-century through the eighteenth-century to show respect to the person they were referring to. The first-person cases begin to resemble present-day English first-person pronouns when Middle English was spoken

and the demonstrative case narrowed drastically into just a few words (Millward and Hayes, 169-72).

The Early Modern period was when English pronouns really started to resemble our current system. Possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns separated, as they are today, and "it" replaced "his" as the possessive singular neuter pronoun. The interrogative case lost its reference to gender and to any distinction between plural and singular. The use of plural pronouns as a polite singular pronoun was dropped completely and the relative pronoun systems contained fewer words during this time period. At this point, the demonstrative, interrogative, and indefinite pronoun systems resembled the present-day system fairly closely (Millward and Hayes, 261-2, 4).

Modern English has a very simplified pronoun system, especially when compared to other languages or even to its own past pronoun systems. The personal pronouns have retained the most complex structure of any of the English pronoun cases, and they still only contain singular and plural numbers and the subjective, objective, and possessive cases (Millward and Hayes, 315).

The English language's current third-person singular personal pronouns are "he", "she", and "it". These pronouns leave a gap in our language, and the ways to fill that gap are becoming increasingly controversial. In a sentence like, "The student dropped his/her notebook" (when the gender of the student is unknown), you can write "The student dropped his notebook", but that leaves out the females. Conversely, if you write "The student dropped her notebook" then it leaves out males. You could also accurately write "The student dropped his or her notebook", but that's just wordy. You could also defer to "The student dropped their notebook", but in that

case the singular noun "student" disagrees with the plural pronoun "their". Dating back to the widely referred to "A New Grammar" book by Anne Fisher (1745), which instructed that "he" could apply to either sex, writers have simply used "he" as a gender-neutral third-person pronoun (to include females as well), but recently this deference to the masculine pronoun has been deemed sexist (O'Conner and Kellerman). More recently, I've seen some books, especially my school textbooks, use "she" or "her" as a gender neutral pronoun, but that's equally as sexist by giving deference to females (though a safer bet because people are less likely to protest "she" than they are "he"). Most writers in a formal setting alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns. They use each half the time, so gender preference is equally distributed. As an honors English student who has been asked how to handle this predicament many times by my confused peers, I was immensely interested when one of my linguistics professors brought up the subject in class.

He told us that, as a cure to this language predicament, experts have proposed potential gender-neutral pronouns to incorporate into the English language. Here's a brief table of the conjugations of some singular gender-neutral third-person personal pronouns that have been suggested by various linguistic experts over time.

Invented pronouns					
Ne	*Ne* laughed	I called *nem*	*Nir* eyes gleam	That is *nirs*	Ne likes *nemself*
Ve	*Ve* laughed	I called *ver*	*Vis* eyes gleam	That is *vis*	Ve likes *verself*
Spivak	*Ey* laughed	I called *em*	*Eir* eyes gleam	That is *eirs*	Ey likes *emself*
Ze (or zie) and hir	*Ze* laughed	I called *hir*	*Hir* eyes gleam	That is *hirs*	Ze likes *hirself*
Ze (or zie) and zir	*Ze* laughed	I called *zir*	*Zir* eyes gleam	That is *zirs*	Ze likes *zirself*
Xe	*Xe* laughed	I called *xem*	*Xyr* eyes gleam	That is *xyrs*	Xe likes *xemself*

Chart sourced from the Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog and adapted from the Wikipedia article on Gender-specific and gender-neutral pronouns.

The pronoun with the most support in linguistic circles is "Ze", probably because of its use in transgender communities; however, none of these pronoun options have been widely adopted. One possible reason these pronouns have not widely caught on may be that split support for different pronouns has stopped any one from becoming prevalent. Another is simply that many people don't feel a strong enough need for a gender-neutral third-person personal pronoun that they are willing to change their speech habits. English doesn't have any governing authority to enforce language rules, but most English speakers follow the common grammatical guidelines they are taught in school and can find in a handbook or even online. A handbook or teacher will obviously tell a writer to use a traditional pronoun. Because these standards are already established, people will most likely never even hear of these new gender-neutral pronouns unless they learn about them for social reasons.

The most vocal proponents of a gender-neutral pronoun argue not from a grammatical point of view, but one of gender equality. People of this mind argue that a gender-neutral pronoun just naturally follows other politically correct alterations to our language such as replacing words like "policeman" and "mailman" with "police officer" and "mail carrier" to include women as well as men. Studies have shown that gender bias is very real and that not only is "he" not considered to be a universally gender-neutral pronoun in practice, but many other words that should not carry a gender actually do. For instance, Donald MacKay and David Fulkerson found that study participants viewed some job titles like "lawyer" and "doctor" as masculine even if no context indicators directed readers toward that conclusion (MacKay). A 2006 follow-up study by Janet A. Sniezek and Christine H. Jazwinski showed similar results, and formed the conclusion that "generic" masculine terms do not, in people's minds, often include

women (Sniezek and Jazwinski). Biases like this could keep females from even considering careers in certain "masculine" fields, so the problem of language gender bias is strongly pursued by feminists.

Another class of people that would benefit from the addition of a gender neutral personal pronoun is that of transgender people or others that may not wish to identify with one gender or the other. Many transgender communities have developed their own gender-neutral third-person personal pronouns, which they use to make community members feel more comfortable. Communities make this change because they feel that their members should have the ability to avoid genderized categories if they do not fit into the traditional male or female groupings; but unfortunately, the English language used by the vast majority of speakers outside of the transgender communities doesn't accommodate such allowances. Transgender communities most commonly use "Zie" or "Hir" as a gender-neutral pronoun, but these words are utilized almost exclusively in transgender communities and some online text-based games, leaving transgender people to be categorized as male or female in the vast majority of social contexts (The Need for a Gender-Neutral Pronoun).

Between the hole in English grammar and the argument that we should have a gender-neutral pronoun for political correctness reasons, experts make a convincing case for the implementation of a third-person singular gender-neutral personal pronoun. Unfortunately, its implementation is not as easy as experts deciding that it should happen. Although evolution within language is common and natural, it very rarely happens from the top down. Sociolinguists argue that language change traditionally occurs almost exclusively from the bottom up – from everyday people filing the gaps in the language themselves instead of being

told how to speak. Attempts by ruling powers to enforce patterns of speech usually don't turn out well.

Language academies serve as examples of such a governing linguistic power and generally attempt to maintain the purity of the language they preside over. A fairly well-known example is the French Academy, which comprises forty members who are usually, but not always, experts in French writing or linguistics. Academy members make up the "rules" for the French language – what words will be used, grammar regulations, etc (*Académie française)*. One of the Academy's main goals is to preserve the French language by creating new French words for foreign words like "E-mail" or "fast food". Despite the French Academy's dedication, many English words are commonly used in French, and, from my research, it looks like the majority of native French-speakers are absolutely fine with that. The general opinion seems to be that the French Academy doesn't have much influence over the language at all, and this low level of influence is typical of language academies world-wide.

A much more recent example is currently taking place in Sweden, and actually mirrors English's own gender-neutral pronoun problem. Though it hasn't made the dictionary yet, the word "Hen" was recently added to the Swedish National Encyclopedia as a "proposed gender-neutral personal pronoun to be used instead of "Han" (he) and "Hon" (she)." Considering that "Hen" was first seriously proposed in only 1994, it has made quick progress in becoming well-known enough to enter the encyclopedia. "Hen" can be applied to objects or to people who do not wish to be referred to as either male or female (Bahadur). While I heartily applaud Sweden's gender-equal culture (the country was even named the most gender-equal country in the world by the World Economic Forum in 2010), the way educators are currently implementing "hen" may have cultural potentially detrimental side-effects. Nathalie Rothschild complains in her article,

"Sweden's New Gender-Neutral Pronoun: Hen," that those most eagerly championing "hen" are doing so for purely political reasons. Rothschild says that some Swedish experts on child-development are concerned that such a forced introduction to an "in-between" gender before children have had time to come to their own realizations about their bodies and sexualities could confuse children. By removing gender-normative behaviors, experts are subjecting children to an entirely new set of rules where any strong association with a specific gender could be seen as a taboo and discouraged. For instance, Rothschild tells of one Swedish school that removed its toy cars after boys "gender-coded them." Such an imposed control of both language and culture could lead to unwelcomed social consequences.

Alternately, gradual change to a language tends to be longer lasting, less problematic, and more likely to address gaps in a given language. For instance, English currently does not differentiate between plural and singular "you", but several dialects have solved that problem by creating plural "you" words. I personally, like many southerners, use "y'all" to address more than one person. Most of the rest of the country uses "you guys" in the same way. Residents of Kentucky and West Virginia tend to use a mixture of these two more prominent choices and opt for "you all" (Okrent). These plural "you" options are very commonly used and are a great example of how much more often words are utilized when they develop organically.

In addition to historical examples that show that language tends to progress from the bottom-up more naturally and effectively, we have two modern examples illustrating the problems faced by speedily forced linguistic change. Natural change, brought about by the majority of speakers of a given language instead of a select few, is the most enduring method of linguistic transformation.

Another common theme in new linguistic developments is the involvement of children. Humans are most open to new languages before puberty, so often children will sense aspects of language that adults may overlook. Children learn an average of ten new words per day while they're between the ages of two and six and may only have to hear a new word once or twice before learning it. For the few years following this stage, the child will learn closer to twenty words per day (O'Grady). Patricia Kuhl reports in the Ted Talks video "The Linguistic Genius of Babies" that children even learn social aspects of acquiring a new language at a young age. Babies learn new languages quickly, but they only learn from human contact, not from audio or video (2010). A 1989 study by Johnson and Newport shows that people who learned English as a second language between ages three and fifteen became significantly more proficient in English than those who learned it between the ages of eighteen and thirty-nine. Furthermore, their data resulted in a clear negative linear relationship between the child's age and his or her future proficiency (Johnson and Newport, 80). Newport elaborates in a future article that it is practically impossible to attain the language level of a native speaker without having learned the language at a young age. While some aspects of the learning process are fairly comparable between adults and children, adults often lose the ability to produce sounds that don't exist in their native language by the time they hit puberty. A child may also pick up complex grammar where it will elude an adult (Newport, 738-9).

One example of this advanced linguistic understanding by children is the organic development of a sign-language by deaf Nicaragua children. Until fairly recently, deaf Nicaraguans didn't have access to any outside help to learn to communicate despite their disabilities. The Nicaraguan government ran into a confusing problem when they finally developed the motivation and resources to provide deaf citizens with education on sign-

language; the children were uninterested in learning the sign-language they were being taught in schools, and had developed their own sign-language (*NOVA*). This impromptu language has been in the works for over thirty years now and is passed along from one deaf child to the next. Each generation of children learns the "rules" of the language and adds to it, making the language more and more complex (Kettlewell, 2004). This indicates that children can *build* language as contrasted with adults, who generally only learn new languages. It makes sense that children, who are more in tune with language than adults, would sense gaps in languages that adults might overlook or be stumped by.

This kind of healthy evolution is occurring in Baltimore, Maryland, where kids have started using the word "yo" as a gender-neutral third-person singular personal pronoun. As early as 2004, middle school teachers noticed students using "yo" in sentences like, "Yo threw a thumbtack at me." Margaret Troyer, a teacher at a Baltimore school, teamed up with Elaine Stotko, a linguistics professor at Johns Hopkins University to study this trend after Troyer enrolled in a Linguistics for Teachers course taught by Stotko. In the course, the topic of the gender-neutral third-person pronoun came up. About half of the fourteen-student class had heard their students use "yo" as a pronoun, so Troyer and Stotko began recording their findings on the phenomenon. Stotko and Troyer published the results of three tasks completed by students at Baltimore-area schools in *American Speech* journal in their 2007 article, "A New Gender-Neutral Pronoun in Baltimore, Maryland: A Preliminary Study." Troyer began by logging instances of "yo" as a gender-neutral pronoun as used by her students. The examples she collected included the following:

- "Yo was tuckin' in his shirt!"
- "Yo threw a thumbtack at me."
- "Yo been runnin' the halls."
- "Yo put his foot up."

- "Yo wearin' a jacket. A coat!"
- "You acting like I said what yo said."

- "She ain't really go with yo."

Troyer also recorded more common uses of "yo", namely as either a vocative (an attention getter, like, "Yo, get away from my locker!") or as a second-person pronoun replacement for "you" or "your" ("Yo momma"), but in many of the recorded sentences it was clear that the intended purpose of the word was as a third-person pronoun. Troyer also noticed that "yo" as a pronoun was often used congruently with a pointing motion, which indicated that students were not choosing "yo" to obscure the referent's identity. An attentive reader will also notice that some of the example sentences listed above include a gender-specific pronoun in addition to "yo" ("Yo was tuckin' his shirt in!"). In these instances, Stotko and Troyer were unsure whether "yo" was actually intended to be a gender-neutral pronoun since the gender was clearly indicated in another way (Stotko and Troyer, 2007).

A student who was interviewed in a National Public Radio (NPR) show segment concerning the study says that she uses "yo" to refer to people when she doesn't know their names (*"Yo!" Kids in Baltimore Create a Pronoun*). I'm sure many of the kids and young teens using "yo" in this way couldn't tell you that they're using a gender-neutral third-person singular personal pronoun, but nonetheless they are using "yo" impressively consistently as a pronoun. These students have almost assuredly never been taught to use a gender-neutral third-person pronoun, and yet they are using it correctly.

One interesting social aspect of the use of "yo" that was recorded in the study was that students said it almost exclusively in casual settings. In fact, Troyer observed both peers and parents correcting students for familiar use of "yo" to refer to an adult, especially one in a

position of authority. In one example, a student said "Yo handin' out papers" in reference to the teacher, but was promptly corrected by a peer who said "That's not a yo." Many students apparently felt that referring to an adult as a "yo" was disrespectful and only appropriate in casual settings where slang could be freely used (Stotko and Troyer, 2007).

After Troyer recorded these spontaneous instances, she and Stotko developed some further, more formal, tests of the purpose of "yo" as a gender-neutral pronoun. The demographic data of the students who completed the tasks in 2003/2004 showed that 97.0% were African-American, 1.3% were Hispanic, 1.2% were white, and 0.5% were Asian or Native American. 47.0% were female and 53.0% were male. Three-quarters of the student body was eligible to receive school lunch at a reduced price or for free, implying that most students were members of low socioeconomic classes.

In the first task, students were presented with four cartoons that each depicted two people having a conversation about a third person. Stotko and Troyer requested that the artists draw the pictures so that the third person in the picture either looked odd or was doing something unusual. This third person was female in two of the cartoons, male in one of them, and the third person's face was completely obscured in the final picture, making it impossible to distinguish this figure's gender. Thirty-eight sixth grade students were instructed to fill in empty speech bubbles in the pictures. Of these students, ten used "yo" as an attention-getter, but two of these ten also used "yo" as a pronoun. With these promising results in hand, Stotko made some modifications to the test before distributing it to more students. They asked the artist to redraw the people in the cartoons to look more like middle school-aged African-American children and to make one of the characters point at the third person in the picture. Refer to Appendix A to see the pictures used in this test.

With these changes in place, teachers distributed these tasks to one-hundred and fifteen students as part of the daily warm up activities. This time, students were instructed to use slang – "informal language, the way you talk to your friends, not the way you talk in schools" – to fill in the speech bubbles (Stotko and Troyer, 2007, page 266). Students were not told to pay attention to any specific grammatical feature or pronouns specifically. Of this set of students, forty-seven used "yo" as an attention-getter, and eight of these forty-seven also used "yo" as a pronoun or subject. The eight instances of "yo" were:

- "Yo look like a sack a** gump."

- "Yo is a clown."

- "Yo sucks at magic tricks."

- "Yo needs to pull his pants down."

- "Yo looks like a freak."

- "Yo is a straight clown."

- "Yo goin' to put that chicken in his mouth."

- "Yo, looka that dude pants. Yo is a clown."

Stotko and Troyer (2007) put together a second task based off the example gathered from the first task and the spontaneous uses of "yo" that Troyer recorded early in the experiment. First, the pair created short conversations using speech similar to that collected. They used both "yo" and standard pronouns like "he" and "she" in the sentences. They tested six different sentences (one with "she" as the pronoun, one with "he" as the pronoun, and four with "yo" as the pronoun) by asking seventy-five students to choose one of the following three possible choices for each of them:

a. I talk like this

b. Some people talk like this, but not me

c. No one talks like this

The following table shows the percentages of each option chosen for different pronouns used in example sentences.

Table 1				
Sentence Judgments				
Sentence Number	Pronoun Tested	Percentages of Responses		
		A. I do	B. Some do	C. No one does
1A	She	47.3%	48.6%	4.1%
1B	Yo	36.1%	44.4%	19.4%
2A	He	55.4%	36.5%	8.1%
2B	Yo	39.7%	45.2%	15.1%
3	Yo	35.7%	47.1%	17.1%
4	Yo	29.0%	53.6%	17.4%

Students were, once again, not told to look at any specific part of the sentence, so they could also have failed to identify with an aspect of the sentence other than the use of "yo". For instance, in the sentence, "Yo cusses", the students could have believed that no one used the word "cusses" and could have chosen option three based on that association and not a disapproval of the word "yo". The second stage of the second task was a prompt to write a conversation between two students about a third student. Refer to Appendix B for the conversation prompt.

Fifty-one students completed the conversation exercise, and ten of these included "yo" as a pronoun in their conversations. The resulting sentences using "yo" as a pronoun were:

- "Yo started rapping."

- "Yo singing a rap song. Yo is dancing."

  "Yo is jumping up and down singing."

- "Yo can really rap, yo should be a rapper."

- "Yo can't dance or sing, just like D.H."

- "Did you see that?" "Yeah, yo jumped up."

- "Yo was singing a rap song."

- "Ha, ha, ha, yo stupit [sic]."

- "Yo gave me a stuip [sic] part."

Even though these sentences refer to Tyreek, a commonly male name, the students use "yo" to identify him.

Stotko and Troyer used the examples they had collected to put together a new list of sentences using standard gendered pronouns like "he" and "she" as well as "yo" for the third and final task of their study. One-hundred and two eighth-graders and ninety-one tenth graders were given the list of thirty-five sentences and were instructed to select "yes" or "no" to indicate whether the sentence was something a person might say. Once again, the students were not instructed to pay attention to pronouns or any other specific part of grammar. To see the results for key sentences, refer to Appendix C.

The results indicate that some of the "yo" sentences were rated just as acceptable as those using "he" or "she". Another interesting aspect noted by the researchers was that the acceptability rating of a given sentence increased when "yo" as a pronoun was combined with more characteristics of African-American Vernacular English as opposed to Standard English. In sentence three, "Yo is singing a rap song", the percentage of students who indicated that

people talked that way was 55.9%. Sentence four, "Yo singing a rap song", is more characteristic of the African-American vernacular and received an acceptability rating of 66%.

After reviewing the data, Troyer and Stotko became worried that some of the students may have understood "yo" as a slang form of "you" in some of the sentences. They followed up this concern by asking a small selection of sixteen students to provide paraphrases of certain sentences where there could have been confusion. A small group of randomly selected students consistently paraphrased only two of the seventeen questionable sentences with the "yo" as "you". In all fifteen others, the "yo" was consistently translated to "he", "she", or a noun like "girl", "boy", or "person".

The data in this study clearly indicates that students in some Baltimore-area schools used "yo" as a gender-neutral third-person singular personal pronoun around 2004 when this study was conducted, but the source of "yo" as a pronoun and the future of its use are not as clear cut. Professor Campbell Leaper, a psychology teacher at the University of California at Santa Cruz, expressed two possible reasons that these students chose the word "yo" for this grammatical role in an interview that took place on the NPR segment, *'Yo'! Baltimore Kids Create a Pronoun*. First, he said it's possible that "yo" is a shortened version of the word "you", but this seems unlikely considering how consistently Stotko and Troyer's students differentiated between "yo" as a second and third-person pronoun in tests. Second, Leaper states that it may have been adapted from "yo" as an attention getter (attracting just one person's attention) to "yo" as a pronoun (drawing one person's attention to a third person).

Stotko and Troyer also tested some theories as to the origin of this use of "yo", but none was conclusive. None of the online sources they searched, including urbandictionary.com,

Wikipedia.com, and answers.com, referred to "yo" as a pronoun. I did some research of my own to see if any of the online sources had updated in the last several years, but these sources still held no record of "yo" as a third-person pronoun. Troyer and Stotko also checked the lyrics of several thousand rap songs to see if the students might have heard it first through music, but no instances of "yo" as a third-person pronoun were discovered.

While no further examples of "yo" as a pronoun were uncovered online, Stotko and Troyer found a teacher in a Milwaukee middle school who said that she had heard "yo" used in ways similar to those recorded in the study. The teacher was able to provide a few samples of uses that she had overheard, but when the first task of Stotko and Troyer's study was repeated in her class, none of her students used "yo" as a pronoun and there was only one use of even an attention-getting "yo".

In the 2007 class of Stotko's Linguistics for Teachers course, approximately one-fourth of the twenty enrolled teachers had heard "yo" employed as a pronoun by their students – a smaller percentage of the teachers than in the 2003 Linguistics for Teachers class. One of the teachers commented that his students told him that they used "yo" to refer to boys and "shorty" to refer to girls, which indicates that "yo" could have evolved to reflect gender in the few years between inquiries.

Another of the teachers in the 2007 class recreated some of the experiments with thirty-two eighth-graders. She had these students fill in speech bubbles for cartoon characters like previous students had in Stotko and Troyer's first task, but of the thirty-two students only two used "yo" as a gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun. This teacher also asked students to paraphrase the following five sentences:

- "Yo singing a rap song."
- "Peep yo."
- "Yo don't know Aisha."
- "I told yo to come with me."
- "Yo ripped off yo money."

For "Yo singing a rap song", 89.7% of students replaced "yo" with a third-person pronoun or noun. For "Peep yo", 75.0% replaced "yo" with a third-person pronoun or noun. For "Yo don't know Aisha", 65.4% of students replaced "yo" with a third-person pronoun or noun. Sentences "I told yo to come with me" and "Yo ripped off yo money" were inconclusive because many students interpreted "yo" as a shortened form of "you" instead of a pronoun. The results from this teacher's follow up tests indicate that "yo" as a pronoun may not be as readily in students' active vocabularies as it was in 2003, but it is still clearly present in their passive vocabularies.

As interesting as this linguistic development is, the word "yo" is not guaranteed to become widely used or widely known, or to maintain even its current prominence. The data that Stotko and Troyer collected indicates a sizeable decrease in its use in just a few years, and, realistically, this trend is likely to continue. Any widespread acceptance of "yo" as a gender neutral pronoun, if it were to occur, would likely take decades to spread. The process could be quickened by encouraging teachers to support the use of "yo", even in writing, but convincing teachers to educate their students to use something that isn't currently an accepted part of the English language would probably prove difficult. True to stereotype, convincing older members of society to change their linguistic habits may prove even more trying. Liam Stansen, a past student at Wesleyan University, even theorizes that more conservative adults might object to the word "yo" because of its association with lower socioeconomic classes (Jankie, 2008). As a twenty-one year-old southerner with older relatives who grew up in a time and place when racism was the norm, I will take this a step further by saying that I believe some people will

object to the word "yo" because they associate it with African-Americans, who are (both in many peoples' minds and statistically) associated with lower economic classes and higher crime rates.

Another serious barrier standing between the English language and the development of a gender-neutral third-person pronoun is the difficulty associated with adding a new structure-class word. Form-class (or open-class) words include parts of speech like nouns and verbs that have lexical meaning and can be changed quite easily. Nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs are constantly added to English and just as often become obsolete and are discarded from everyday speech (Klammer, Thomas, and Schulz, 64-5). Structure-class (also called closed-class because new words are not added to them) words generally have a purely grammatical meaning, which makes it challenging to change their meaning. Structure-words are the glue that holds a sentence together, and can't be changed overnight without subsequently changing the collective meaning of the form-class words they fit together (Klammer, Thomas, and Schulz, 98, 124). Structure-class words like pronouns or prepositions very rarely change. Of course, we know from the history of the English language that changes to pronouns do occur, but they are usually a slight change to a word that already exists. The words for "he" and "she", "hay" and "hayuh" respectively, sounded alike in Middle English, so speakers spontaneously stated saying "she" instead of "hayuh" to create a distinction (Millward and Hayes, 170). Modern day English speakers altered the plural "you" by using "y'all" or "you guys" in an informal setting (McWhorter, 2014). Changes like this occur regularly throughout history, but quickly adding a gender-neutral third-person pronoun where none currently exists would change grammatical, lexical, and social rules all at the same time. This is likely a stretch of the imagination.

The future of the word "yo" will not reveal itself for many more years. Will this trend be no more than a passing fad, or will the kids who started it grow up and teach it to their children? Until these students become adults, there really isn't any way to predict the outcome.

My personal guess at how the gender-neutral third-person pronoun problem will play out is that "they" will transition into an acceptable pronoun for both plural and singular. Now that using only "he" or "she" is socially unacceptable, the only currently remaining grammatically correct option is "he or she". Unfortunately, "he and she" is wordy. Many people use "they" as a singular pronoun in sentences like, "A student should know that they must complete their homework." While not currently grammatically correct, people default to it because it is less verbose than "his or her". I think this change would be the easiest transition for English speakers to make because the word is already used as a pronoun in informal settings. Of course, like any linguistic change, the solution to the gender-neutral pronoun problem will likely take many years to occur, and could be wildly unpredictable.

Although the majority of people who have considered this issue likely would agree that a gender neutral pronoun would be a valuable addition to the English language, it's anyone's guess where the pronoun English speakers end up using will originate from. As many experts have tried to establish a gender-neutral pronoun, it seems like middle students in Baltimore have had the most success so far. These students have been an example of the idea that language changes more effectively from the bottom up instead of from the top down. We can only guess as to whether "yo" as a pronoun will be passed on to the next generation, but these resourceful middle school kids have given the English language the best shot at actual implementation of a third-person gender-neutral singular personal pronoun yet.

Appendix A

First set of pictures for test one
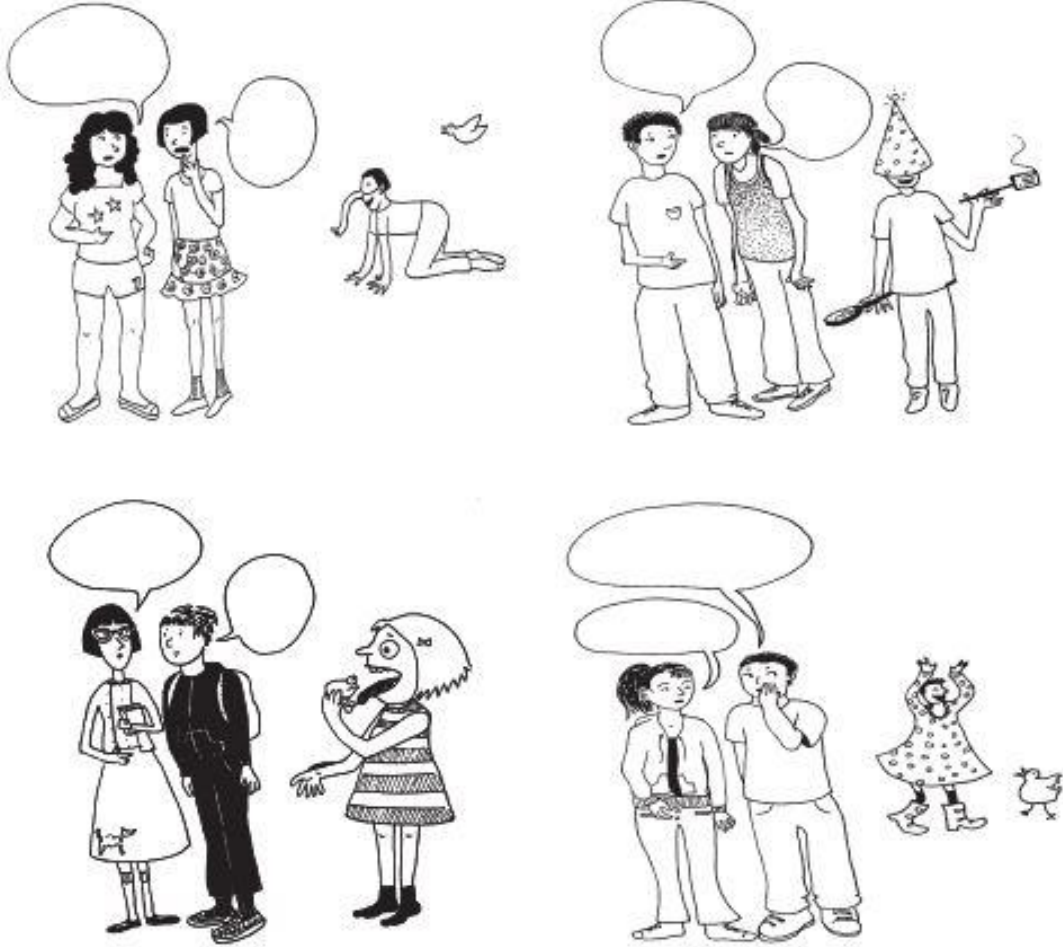
Second set of picture for test one
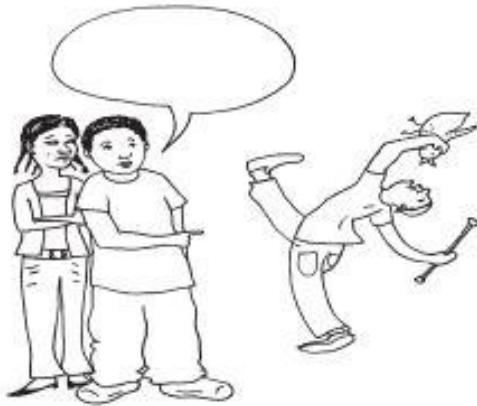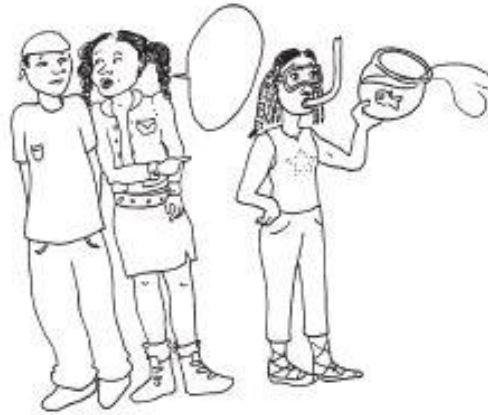
Appendix B

Tynisha and Antonie are in class. Tyreek jumps up and starts singing a rap song and dancing.

Write a conversation:

Tynisha: _____

Antonie: _____

Appendix C

Table 2						
Sentence Acceptability Judgment of Middle (percentages on left) and High School (percentages on right) Students for "yo" in Subject and Object Positions						
	Yes	No	No Response	Yes	No	No Response
Yo is singing a rap song	55.9%	40%	3.9%	51%	48%	1%
Yo singing a rap song	66%	29%	5%	73%	27%	0%
Peep him	35%	63%	2%	57%	42%	1%
Peep them	27%	69%	4%	46%	52%	2%
Peep yo	35%	61%	4%	55%	43%	2%
Peep you	12%	84%	4%	19%	79%	2%
Look at her	96%	4%	0%	91%	9%	0%
Look at yo	79%	19%	2%	88%	11%	1%
Yo crazy	88%	11%	1%	90%	9%	1%
I'm waiting for yo	66%	33%	1%	77%	23%	1%
Yo ripped off my money	44%	53%	3%	30%	69%	1%
I told yo to come with me	51%	47%	2%	84%	15%	1%
I saw yo at school	69%	27%	1%	80%	19%	1%
I don't know him	89%	11%	0%	82%	16%	1%
I don't know yo	71%	27%	1%	81%	16%	2%
Yo don't know Aisha	65%	33%	1%	65%	34%	1%
Yo don't know me	75%	23%	0%	81%	16%	2%
Yo wearing a new coat	80%	20%	0%	69%	30%	1%
She's wearing a new coat	80%	19%	1%	74%	24%	2%

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