

Flipped Module

Title of Module: Pronoun Reference

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Video 1: What is a Pronoun?

Pronouns are little words like "I," "they," or "this." Although they may seem unimportant, they are actually very useful and in fact necessary to effectively and clearly convey your ideas!

Noun vs. Pronoun

To understand the role of pronouns in a sentence, it is helpful to first review what a noun is. A noun is a word that typically refers to a person, place, object, or an abstract idea, such as: "writer," "classroom," "thesaurus," or "persuasion." Nouns are what we call content words, in that they convey essential units of meaning and can be easily invented. Just think of all the new nouns that were created in the languages you know this year alone!

Pronouns are closely related to nouns, because they refer back to nouns in the same sentence or passage. The noun that a pronoun is referring to is called the antecedent. Let's take a look at an excerpt from Sharma's essay, "The New Language Landscape":

"Parents often believe that speaking in flawless English from a young age, children are better equipped to work in global environments, so **they** converse in this language predominantly so that **their** child is not left behind" (Sharma 165).

In this sentence, there are several nouns: "parents," "English," "age," "children," and so on. There are also two pronouns: "they" and "their," both of which refer back to the noun "parents." By using the pronouns, the author is able to refer to its antecedent, "parents," without repeating this noun too many times. Thus, pronouns improve the overall cohesion or connectedness of your ideas while avoiding unnecessary repetitions.

Pronouns as Function Words

Unlike nouns, pronouns are what we call function words. This means that they serve more of a grammatical function in a sentence and that their meaning, or who or what is being referred to by a pronoun, is highly context-dependent. After all, the meaning of "I" depends on who is using the pronoun! Because of this inherent property of pronouns, there is more potential for ambiguity when using these words.

Inclusive Pronouns

Moreover, because pronouns are used to refer to other people, we should take care in using the pronouns that are respectful and inclusive. For example, it has become common to ask another person what pronouns they use and to provide our own pronouns. Also, please be aware that some people may ask to be addressed using the plural pronoun "they."

As you can see, pronouns are very important in everyday usage, so in this module, we will review the key characteristics of pronouns and learn how to use them appropriately in our own writing and speaking. We will also overview some common errors and strategies for avoiding them, as well as discuss the changing attitudes toward the "plural they" pronoun.

Video 2: Properties of English Pronouns

Pronouns across Languages

All languages have pronouns, but the specific types of pronouns and their properties vary widely. For example, in some languages there is only one 3rd person singular pronoun, so users of these languages may have to be extra careful when choosing between "he," "she" and "it" in English. On the other hand, some languages make distinctions in their pronouns that are lacking in English; for example, they may have a dual pronoun in addition to just singular and plural pronouns. Because there is so much variation in pronouns across languages, it is important to understand the properties of pronouns in English.

Types of English Pronouns

Pronouns in English can be divided into different categories. In this module, we will focus on two types of pronouns: personal pronouns and demonstrative pronouns. Review the two types of pronouns by taking a look at these tables:

Personal Pronouns

	Singular	Plural
1st person	I/me/my	we/us/our/ours
2nd person	you/your/yours	you/your/yours
3rd person	he/him/his she/her/hers it/its	they/them/their/theirs

Demonstrative Pronouns

	Singular	Plural
closer	this	these
farther away	that	those

Noun-Pronoun Agreement

To use English pronouns effectively, we have to remember that pronouns in this language must agree with their antecedents. Demonstrative pronouns only have to agree with their antecedents in number, but personal pronouns must agree in number, person, and gender. In addition, personal pronouns must also convey their function in the sentence – that is, whether they are used as sentence subjects or objects.

Let's take a look at two examples from Angelos' essay, "Passing the Test":

- 1) "Hasibe Koyun has **her** first German class in Istanbul on a crisp January morning" (Angelos 149).
- 2) "In 2007, the Bundestag passed a law requiring foreign spouses from most nations outside the European union to possess basic German-language skills before entering the country to join **their** husbands or wives" (Angelos 150).

In the first sentence, the pronoun "her" refers to a woman called Hasibe Koyun, and it agrees with the antecedent in number, gender, person, and grammatical function. If the pronoun did not agree with its antecedent in some way—for example, if we replaced it with the 3rd-person plural pronoun "they" or the 1st-person plural pronoun "our"—the sentence would be quite confusing to the reader!

In the second sentence, the pronoun "their" refers to the antecedent "spouses," which is a plural noun. As a result, the pronoun is also plural and uses the possessive form, as opposed to, say, the subject pronoun "they."

Compound Nouns

One more thing to note is that sometimes pronouns can refer to more than one noun, such as when the antecedent is a compound noun. Generally, compound nouns are made up of two or more nouns that are joined with the coordinating conjunction *and*, as you can see in this excerpt from Angelos:

“Koyun and another woman, a friend of hers from class, then take the stage. **They** are playing Angela Merkel and Shakira, the Colombian pop star” (Angelos 161).

In the first sentence, the compound noun “Koyun and another woman” refers to two people, which is why the second sentence uses the plural pronoun “they” to agree with its antecedent.

Video 3: Common Errors in Pronoun Usage

Now that we have reviewed the most important properties of pronouns in English, let’s go over some common errors when using pronouns.

Multiple Antecedents

One common error in using pronouns happens when there are several equally viable antecedents in the same sentence or sometimes in the previous sentence. For example, take a look at this sentence:

Andrew and James competed fiercely for the office of treasurer, but in the end, **he** won handily.

Here, the nouns “Andrew” and “James” are both names of men, so the masculine pronoun “he” could refer to either one of them. As a result, there is no way to know who won the election! One way to revise this ambiguous sentence is to replace the ambiguous pronoun with the actual antecedent, as in:

Andrew and James competed fiercely for the office of treasurer, but in the end, **Andrew** won handily.

Broad Referent

A similar type of pronoun ambiguity to the one we just discussed occurs when there are multiple potential antecedents, and the author uses too broad of a referent, such as “this,” “that,” “it,” or “they” to refer to a specific idea. For example, note the use of the demonstrative pronoun “this” in the following sentence:

By advertising on television, pharmaceutical companies gain exposure for their prescription drugs. Patients respond to **this** by requesting drugs they might not need.

It is not clear whether “this” is referring to “advertising on television” or “gaining

exposure for their prescription drugs.” To avoid this problem, we should make sure that pronouns refer to specific nouns rather than to whole ideas or sentences. To fix this error in this sentence, we can replace the ambiguous pronoun with a specific noun. For example, we could say:

By advertising on television, pharmaceutical companies gain exposure for their prescription drugs. Patients respond to **the ads** by requesting drugs they might not need.

Unclear Use of “They” or “It”

The last common error is when we use the pronouns “they” or “it” without an explicit antecedent. The antecedent is often implied by the author but is not spelled out. Let’s take a look at these examples:

- 1) In Europe, **they** have implemented pre-entry language requirements for individuals looking to join their spouses.
- 2) In the article, **it** states that “pre-entry language requirements for foreign spouses are increasingly common in an immigration-weary Europe” (Angelos 151).

In the first sentence, the pronoun “they” has no explicit antecedent, so it’s not clear if the author is referring to the test makers, government officials, or some other group of people. A good way to fix this issue is to replace “they” with a specific noun or noun phrase, like “certain countries” or “local governments.”

In the second sentence, it sounds like the pronoun “it” is referring to the “article,” which creates an unnecessary repetition and leads to an inaccuracy. After all, it’s not the article that is stating something, but the author! Thus, this sentence can be revised by replacing “it” with the author’s name, as shown here:

In the article, **Angelos** states that “pre-entry language requirements for foreign spouses are increasingly common in an immigration-weary Europe” (151).

Video 4: Singular “They”

In the final video of this module, we will discuss the use of the plural pronoun “they” to refer to a singular noun. This usage is often referred to as “singular they” and can be seen in the following example:

When a teenager rebels, **they** make their parents angry.

In this sentence, the singular noun “teenager” is the antecedent of the pronoun “they.” At first glance, this may seem like an error! After all, “they” is technically a plural pronoun, so shouldn’t we only use it to refer to plural nouns?

Debate over Singular "They"

Depending on who you ask this question, you may get a different response. Some see “singular they” as a recent development that is incorrect and should be avoided. However, historical linguists have shown that “singular they” is not in any way new: In fact, it has been used in English since at least the 14th century! It’s only recently that “singular they” became regarded as wrong by some.

Singular "They" Today

Despite some objections against “singular they,” this usage is becoming more and more acceptable in spoken English and even in academic writing. “Singular they” is most commonly used when we are unsure of the antecedent’s gender or when we want to include all genders, as in these examples:

When a teenager rebels, **they** make their parents angry.

Every foreign national who wants to enter a country legally is typically required to present **their** passport.

Alternatives to Singular "They"

That said, if you do want to avoid using “singular they,” there are some alternatives. One solution is to use “his or her” or “he/she” instead of “they,” as in these sentences:

When a teenager rebels, **he/she** makes their parents angry.

Every foreign national who wants to enter a country legally is typically required to present **his or her** passport.

This usage is quite common, but note that it can sound a little awkward, especially when the pronouns are repeated a lot.

Another solution to avoid “singular they” is to change the antecedent to its plural form. Take a look at these revised sentences:

When teenagers rebel, **they** make their parents angry.

All foreign nationals who want to enter a country legally are typically required to present **their** passports.

As you can see in these sentences, changing the antecedent to its plural form may also require other grammatical adjustments, such as changing the verb to its plural form as well.

Instructor Resources

“Leveling the Playing Field for Class Participation.” *Teaching Writing*.
<https://www.bu.edu/teaching-writing/resources/leveling-the-playing-field-for-class-participation/>

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