

PRONOUNING

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I've noticed lately in some email signatures a list of pronouns that, I'm assuming, the senders want me to use if I refer back to them. According to several sites I visited to read up on this practice, called "signposting," people and organizations are doing this to show respect for, as one site said, "transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse" human beings. As another put it, "Calling someone by a pronoun that is not theirs is just as bad as calling them by a name that is not theirs. It's careless, and repeated it becomes rude. It makes the person you're speaking about feel not-known, not-seen. If that happens to someone constantly, every day, it wears them down. It's tiring. It's painful. Don't do that to people!" [Adding your Pronouns to your Email Signature - Should you? \(hasoptimization.com\)](https://hasoptimization.com/adding-your-pronouns-to-your-email-signature-should-you/)

However, reading through sites like mypronouns.org shows that signposting pronoun choice is not really about aligning pronouns with gender identity (as one article on the site put it, "The name or pronouns someone goes by do not necessarily indicate anything about the person's gender or other identities").

Signposting is about disrupting "the normalization and privilege of assumption," that process by which someone looks at someone else and based on some set of cues assumes that that person can be referred to in certain ways. Selecting one's pronouns is a way of messing with people's minds by saying that there is no, and never has been, a necessary bond between word and chosen identity: "A person who goes by 'she' could actually be a man, a woman, both, neither, or something else entirely."

There is probably some good humanitarian impulse at heart in this assumption-breaking since it seems aimed at gearing down the abuse of people different from oneself and creating more inclusivity for more voices and narratives. No harm in promoting that.

It does, of course, plant more social landmines in the social landscape, with increased opportunities for embarrassingly mispronouncing someone (yes, that is also the name of a practice) and awkward etiquettes about how we introduce ourselves to each other: "Hello, I'm Pat, and my pronoun in casual social situations is 'she' but 'they' used as a singular pronoun in professional situations. And what are your pronouns?"

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And the sets of pronouns one might choose from (and also have to keep in mind) are very much like “let a thousand flowers bloom”—Wikipedia has a fascinating entry on the topic ([Gender neutrality in languages with gendered third-person pronouns - Wikipedia](#)).

Here are some excerpts from my reading, just to give a flavor of the grappling going on about this effort:

To keep references as neutral and ungendered as possible, some have suggested that “they” can be used as a singular pronoun, such as “The person walked into the room; they sat in the chair.” [My personal interjection: Why not “The person walked into the room and sat in the chair”?]

Yet, it may be that a person prefers that a set of proper pronouns be used when someone refers to that person (such as ze, hir, hirs, hirself). Of course, the only way to know this is to ask the person (yet the etiquette of when to ask this in the course of an interaction is unclear—in a state of evolution).

Or it could be a combination, such as “They think highly of hirself”—decoded: an individual person thinks highly of that same individual person’s singular self.

Rex Wilde Consulting suggests practice sessions to accustom one’s tongue to the new linguistic convention in order to make a sentence like “There’s a new person on my team and I really like working with them” come across as natural.

As a person who makes a living as a writer, my impulse is to rewrite rather than pronoun (and thus, perhaps, to mispronoun), both to ride herd on my cranky retrograde editorial opinions (“They think highly of themselves” used as a self-reference by a single person will never be right to me) and to avoid mishaps that, honestly, I don’t have the patience to endure:

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ORIGINAL

“She is a great student. I’m sorry, I meant to say he is a great student. He’s been reading all of the assignments very thoroughly and it’s been a pleasure to work with him.”

REWRITE

“Jan is a great student who reads all the assignments very thoroughly and is a pleasure to work with.”

The bigger question here for me, as it is always in matter like this, is does properly pronouncing increase the emancipation of humans from the predations of global capitalism or is it another instance of mistaking an ideology about internal states of being and satisfaction for a grander emancipatory narrative and program?

I tend to think the latter, but there is also truth in saying that monumental change must be built, in part, on the small-scale efforts of individuals to align their lives with openness, respect and humility along with an insistence that the others around them honor and forward those efforts (or, at the very least, shut up and get out of the way).

So, I will pronoun people as best I can but also insist that those same people see their personal struggles as part of the liberation the world needs from the death march of capitalism. Otherwise, the practice is just a selfish affectation.