

Roundtable 2: Proceedings from the 2013 CEA Conference in Savannah, Georgia

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All of my life I had been taught—and, in turn, taught my students,—that *under no circumstances* should one accept “they,” “them,” or “their” as a pronoun to replace a singular, even a hypothetical singular. That is, it’s improper to say, “When a person is ill, they should go to a physician.” So I have taught my students to resort, whenever possible, to the plural, as in “When people are ill, they should go to a physician,” or to say, for example, “When a person is ill, a physician should be consulted.” I have held this position as if I were the proverbial Dutch boy with his finger in the dyke.

Recently, a bright and—more importantly—eagerly energetic student informed me that he checked my position against his dictionary, where he found that—sure enough—definition 3 in *Webster’s Unabridged*, second edition, states this: “used with an indefinite singular antecedent in place of the definite masculine *he* or the definite feminine *she*.” Well, who am I (who are we?) to argue with *Webster’s*, even if it’s only definition 3?

Now, as a fine colleague reminded me, there is historical precedent for this “disagreement” which has tended to occur when there is some ambiguity about the antecedent’s number or gender or when there is a “generalization” of sorts. She points to an example in Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*: “There’s not *a man* I meet but doth salute me / As if I were *their* well-acquainted friend” (IV.iii). *Their* can be understood equally well as referring to

each man considered one at a time, or to all of them collectively.

Nevertheless, rather than surrendering the field, I made this suggestion: First, one should determine the communication's degree of formality. Then, one should *resist* giving in to this traditional number disagreement by using the various strategies we all know, such as those I just mentioned. If those strategies make the communication seem too formal or there is just no way out, then and only then should we give in. Thus, "they," "them," or "their" becomes, not the first choice, but the last.

My rather bright student seemed to be quite satisfied with this position. As for me, my finger is still in the dyke.