

Effect of Pronoun Change on Pronoun Misattribution

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People are increasingly changing their assigned pronouns to use they/them pronouns, resulting in challenges with comprehension of “they” as a singular or plural pronoun and misgendering individuals with pronouns they do not identify with. The effect of linguistic processes and gender on the attribution of they/them pronouns have both been studied; how does pronoun change affect the likelihood of pronoun misattribution? Participants read short stories, like “Alex played Mario Kart with Liz. She had sore fingers at the end.” Asking “Who had sore fingers?” would leave only 1 possible referent if Alex used they/them pronouns and Liz used she/her pronouns, but a past perception of Alex using she/her pronouns would create ambiguity for the participants’ attribution of “she” between Alex or Liz. Pronoun change did not affect the likelihood of pronoun misattribution, perhaps due to the rather homogeneous sample of UNC undergraduate students who were native English speakers. However, participants who made mistakes in subject questions were more likely to misattribute the “she” pronoun to Alex instead of Liz. Our results suggest that more research on how an individual’s gender constructs affect pronoun attribution, as well as expanding the research sample diversity, would give insight into the process of pronoun comprehension.