

What Quakers Can Teach Us About the Politics of Pronouns

In the 17th century, they also suspected that the rules of grammar stood between them and a society of equals.

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A depiction of the wedding of William Penn and Hannah Callowhill in 1696.
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Pronouns are the most political parts of speech. In English, defaulting to the feminine “she/her” when referring to a person of unspecified gender, instead of the masculine “he/him,” has long been a way of thumbing one’s nose at the patriarchy. (“When a politician votes, *she* must consider the public mood.”)

More recently, trans, nonbinary and genderqueer activists have promoted the use of gender-inclusive pronouns such as the singular “they/their” and “ze/zir” (instead of “he/him” or “she/her”). The logic here is no less political: If individuals — not grammarians or society at large — have the right to determine their own gender, shouldn’t they get to choose their own pronouns, too?

As with everything political, the use of gender-inclusive pronouns has been subject to controversy. One side argues that not to respect an individual’s choice of pronoun can threaten a vulnerable person’s basic equality. The other side dismisses this position as an excess of sensitivity, even a demand for Orwellian “newspeak.”

Both sides have dug in. To move the conversation forward, I suggest we look backward for an illuminating, if unexpected, perspective on the politics of pronouns. Consider the 17th-century Quakers, who also suspected that the rules of grammar stood between them and a society of equals.

Today the Quakers are remembered mainly for their pacifism and support for abolition. Yet neither of these commitments defined the Quaker movement as it emerged in the 1650s from the chaos of the English Civil War. What set the Quakers apart from other evangelical sects was their rejection of conventional modes of address — above all, their peculiar use of pronouns.

In early modern England, the rules of civility dictated that an individual of higher authority or social rank was entitled to refer to himself — and to be referred to by others — with plural, not singular, pronouns. (A trace of this practice survives today in the “royal ‘we.’”) The ubiquitous “you” that English speakers now use as the second-person singular pronoun was back then the plural, while “thee” and “thou” were the second-person singulars.

When Quakerism emerged, proper behavior still required this status-based differentiation. As one early Quaker explained, if a man of lower status came to speak to a wealthy man, “he must *you* the rich man, but the rich man will *thou* him.”

Quakers refused to follow this practice. They also refused to doff their hats to those of higher social standing. The Quakers’ founder, George Fox, explained that when God sent him forth, “he forbade me to put off my hat to any, high or low; and I was required to *thee* and *thou* all men and women, without any respect to rich or poor, great or small.”

The Quakers thus declared themselves to be, like God, “no respecter of persons.” So they *thee*-ed and *thou*-ed their fellow human beings without distinction as a form of egalitarian social protest. And like today’s proponents of gender-inclusive pronouns, they faced ridicule and persecution as a result.

But there is also an important difference between the Quakers and today’s pronoun protesters. While modern activists argue that equality demands displays of equal respect toward others, the Quakers demonstrated conscientious *disrespect* toward everyone. Theirs was an equality of extreme humility and universally low status. Even the famously tolerant founder of Rhode Island, Roger Williams, couldn’t stand the Quakers and complained of the “familiarity, anger, scorn and contempt” inherent in their use of “thee” and “thou.”

Indeed, the trend in pronouns at that time was toward a leveling up, not a leveling down. By the middle of the 17th century, in response to increasing geographic and social mobility, the plural “you” had begun to crowd out the singular “thee” as the standard second-person pronoun, even for those of a lower social station. This meant that everyone would soon become, effectively, entitled — at least to the honorific second-person plural.

One might expect principled egalitarians like the Quakers to celebrate a linguistic process whereby all social ranks experienced an increase in dignity. But Fox and his followers looked on the universal “you” with horror, as a sign of the sin of pride. Long before he founded Pennsylvania, the Quaker William Penn would argue that when applied to individuals, the plural “you” was a form of idolatry. Other Quakers produced pamphlets citing examples from more than 30 dead and living languages to argue that their use of “thee” and “thou” was grammatically — as well as theologically and politically — correct.

The Quaker use of “thee” and “thou” continued as a protest against the sinfulness of English grammar for more than 200 years. (In 1851, in “Moby-Dick,” Herman Melville could still marvel at “the stately dramatic thee and thou of the Quaker idiom.”) But eventually, in the 20th century, even the Quakers had to admit that their grammatical ship had sailed.

Modern practitioners of pronoun politics can learn a thing or two from the early Quakers. Like today's egalitarians, the Quakers understood that what we say, as well as how we say it, can play a crucial part in creating a more just and equal society. They, too, were sensitive to the humble pronoun's ability to reinforce hierarchies by encoding invidious distinctions into language itself.

Yet unlike the early Quakers, these modern egalitarians want to embrace, rather than resist, pronouns' honorific aspect, and thus to see trans-, nonbinary and genderqueer people as equally entitled to the "title" of their choosing.

To their critics, however, allowing some people to designate their own pronouns and expecting everyone else to oblige feels like a demand for distinction. Yes, some of these critics may be motivated by "transphobic" bigotry. But others genuinely see such demands as special treatment and a violation of equality. They themselves experience "he" and "she" as unchosen designations. Shouldn't everyone, they ask, be equally subject to the laws of grammatical gender?

According to the Quakers, both sides are right: Language reflects, as well as transforms, social realities. But the dual demands of equality and respect aren't always in perfect harmony. Sometimes they are even in conflict. Respect can require treating people unequally, and equality can mean treating everyone with disrespect.

At present, the battle over the third-person singular subject in English seems to be resolving itself in the direction of the singular "they" — at least when referring to a person of unspecified gender. ("When a politician votes, *they* must consider the public mood.") Pedants naturally complain. They argue that applying a plural pronoun to a singular subject is simply bad English. But as linguists note, spoken English has been tending that way for many years, long before the issue became politicized.

If the rules of grammar are indeed an obstacle to social justice, then the singular "they" represents a path of least resistance for activists and opponents alike. It may not be the victory that activists want. Still, it goes with the flow of the increasing indifference with which modern English distinguishes subjects on the basis of their social position. More fittingly, if applied to everyone, "they" would complete the leveling-up progress of equal dignity that "you" started centuries ago.

Of course, a 17th-century Quaker would be likely to dismiss the singular "they" as diabolically bad grammar. But hey, who asked them?

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