

# CHANGES IN SINGULAR *THEY*

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# OVERVIEW

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Singular *they* is undergoing a change in progress

- This is my friend Hayden<sub>i</sub>. **They<sub>i</sub>** are a computer programmer.

Production of singular *they* for non-generic referents varies by age and gender

More gender categories

Change from above

# Attitudes towards singular *they*

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Language commentators say:

- It's Good!
  - You should try to use it to avoid sexist language, or to avoid misgendering someone
- It's Bad!
  - The number mismatch is incorrect, *he* is a perfectly fine generic alternative (nonbinary people are not a consideration))
- It's Hard!
  - It's good in theory but it just sounds ungrammatical to me, I can't remember to use it, I don't understand how to use verbs with it

# BACKGROUND

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Syntacticians working on singular *they* say there is a change

(Bjorkman 2017, Konnelly and Cowper submitted)

Conservative grammar:

- *they* + quantifiers (*everyone, someone, no one*)
- **Someone** forgot **their** backpack.

Intermediate grammar:

- *they* + indefinites (*a student, some professor*) or some definites (*the ideal student*)
- **A student** forgot **their** backpack.

Innovative grammar:

- *they* + definite, specific referents (*my best friend, Devon, that professor*)
- **Kirby** forgot **their** backpack.

# METHODOLOGY

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Bigger study: how misgendering correlates to attitudes about transgender people (Conrod 2016)

Why is there so much singular *they* in this study?

- Designed to elicit pronouns intentionally
- Conditions where gender of (real-life or fictional) referent was unclear, people didn't know each other, or lots of nonbinary referents

Tasks (for the pronouns part)

- Dyadic interviews (acquaintances and strangers)
- Solo interviews
- Film clip responses (*Boy Meets Girl*, 2013)

# METHODOLOGY

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## Subjects:

- Recruited transgender people first, then paired with either an acquaintance (of their choice) or a stranger (I recruited)
- n=22, 20 speakers analyzed so far
- Collected fall 2016-winter 2017 with field recorder by 1 interviewer (me)

## Gender of participants

| Feminine-aligned | Masculine-aligned | Neither |
|------------------|-------------------|---------|
| 11               | 5                 | 6       |

## Age of participants

| Teens | Twenties | Thirties | Forties | (Fifties) | Sixties | Seventies |
|-------|----------|----------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|
| 2     | 11       | 3        | 4       | (none)    | 1       | 1         |

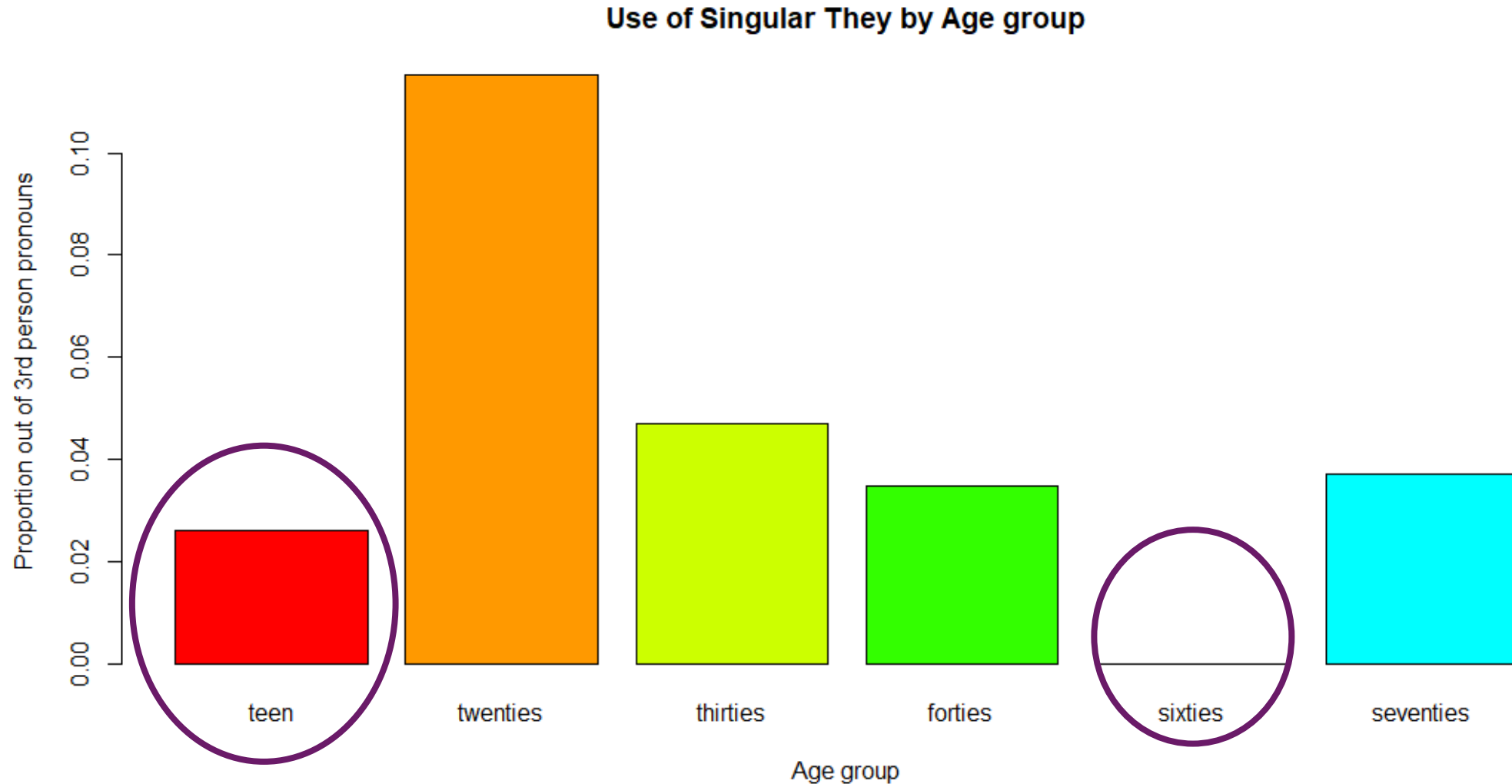
# RESULTS: summary

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Age differences: people in their twenties are leading

Gender differences: nonbinary people are leading, followed by women

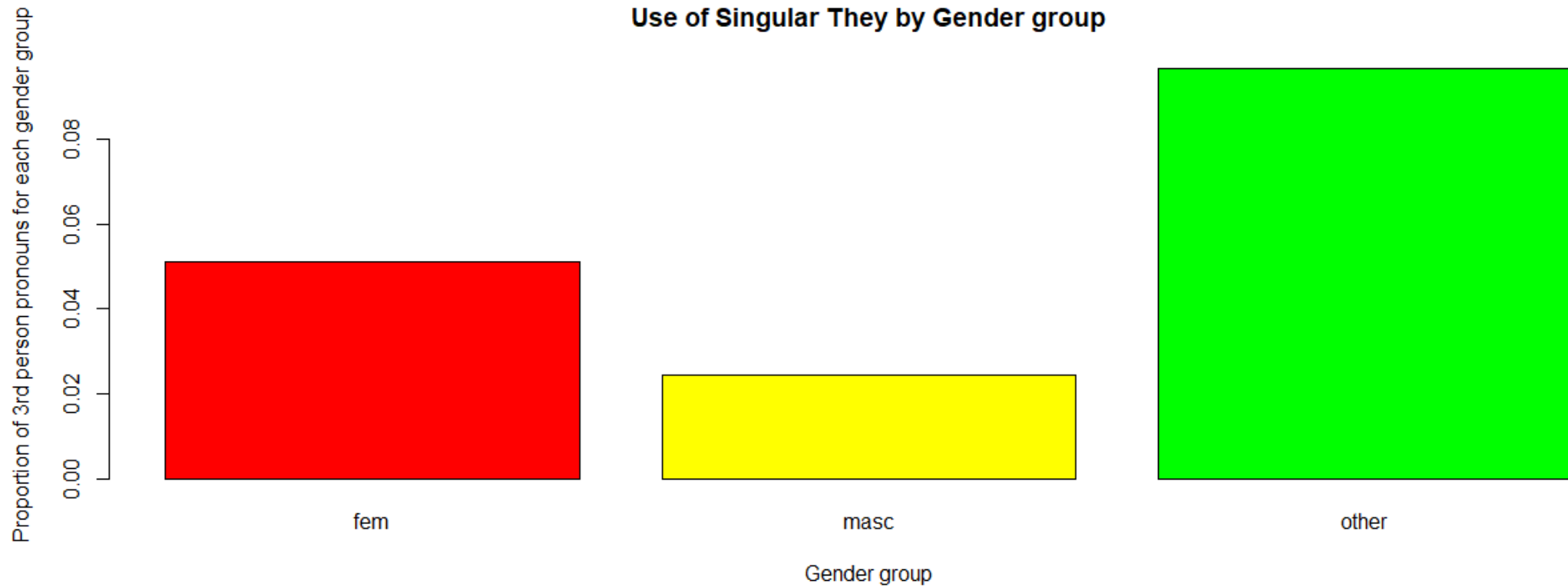
# RESULTS: age differences





# RESULTS: gender differences

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# DISCUSSION

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## Apparent time change

- Unclear if there's also individual change (teens → twenties?)

Gender categories: are nonbinary people generally more innovative than other genders?

- Nonbinary genders have more reason to explicitly align themselves with sg. *they* –and probably have more nonbinary friends (Ackerman 2018)
- More studies need to explicitly recruit and analyze nonbinary people when you think a change is happening

# DISCUSSION

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## Change from above

- **The usual:** people are aware of this change, talk about it, and can identify their own use of it without linguistic training.
- **The unusual: this is not necessarily a prestigious variable**
  - language commentary is both for and against this change (though the tides may be turning lately)
  - the gender politics are also mixed. There is possible stigma in some social contexts attached to this variable
  - Change coming from groups with high **salience** but not necessarily high **status**

# CONCLUSION

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**Singular *they* is undergoing a change**—apparent time data shows that younger speakers use non-generic singular *they* more frequently

Changes from above are not always necessarily prestigious—more investigation into changes coming from low-status, high-salience groups

We need to be analyzing more than two genders when looking at language change

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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