

snippets

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A Singular Note on Singular-*They/Them*

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The pronoun *they* can be used to refer to a group of people, shown in (1).

- (1) [*Talking about a group of students.*]
They are ready to meet you now, sir.

But it is also possible for *they* to refer to individuals, when the gender of that individual is either unknown or irrelevant:

- (2) [*Talking about a student who just entered the office.*]
They are sitting on the couch over there.

In fact, with recent uses of non-binary *they*, the pronoun *they* can be used in contexts like the following, talking about a particular individual:

- (3) [*Talking about Jerry, who is non-binary.*]
They are interested in physics, but not chemistry.

The uses in (2) and (3) are called SINGULAR-THEY. What is striking is that in all three contexts above, the agreement with the copula is *are* (plural copula), not *is*. The singular/plural ambiguity runs across all case forms *they*, *them* and also *their*.

Now, consider the use of *them* in the context of an expletive, starting with plural uses of *them*.

- (4) [*Talking about divorce.*]
You have children, so there {is/are} them to consider first.

Both sound OK to me. The plural agreement sounds more correct prescriptively. Another example is the following pointing context:

- (5) [*Being asked who can go along on the trip, I respond:*]
There {is/are} them! (pointing to a group of students)

Once again, both sound OK to me, even though plural agreement sounds more prescriptively correct. But now consider singular-*them* in the context of an expletive:

- (6) [*Talking about a non-binary student Jerry.*]
There {was/*were} them to consider first.

The data in (6) show that singular-*them* cannot trigger plural copula agreement in an expletive construction. Two further examples making the same point are given in (7) and (8):

- (7) [*When asked who else has been in the office, other than the one student seen entering earlier, I respond:*]
 There {was/*were} them, but I did not see anybody else.
- (8) [*When asked about who wants to go on the trip, I respond:*]
 There {is/*are} them! (pointing to one person)

The generalization from all of these cases is the following:

- (9) **Generalization:** In *there*-constructions, if the associate is singular-*them*, then agreement with the copula is singular (*is, was*).

This generalization is striking because when singular-*they* occupies the subject position, it necessarily gives rise to plural verbal agreement. So the generalization in (9) describes a distinction between agreement possibilities for singular-*they*, and agreement possibilities for singular-*them*. The judgments can be replicated in other inversion constructions. Consider predicate inversion:

- (10) a. [*Pointing to a group:*]
 What I dislike most {is/are} them.
- b. [*Pointing to an individual:*]
 What I dislike most {is/*are} them.

Putting all the facts in the paper together, we have:

- (11) a. Singular-*they* in subject position only triggers plural verbal agreement.
 b. Plural-*they* in subject position only triggers plural verbal agreement.
 c. Singular-*them* in post-copula position only triggers singular verbal agreement.
 d. Plural-*them* in post-copula position triggers either singular or plural verbal agreement.

Assuming post-copula agreement is mediated by Agree, and that Agree probes for the syntactic features of a goal, it follows that singular-*them* and plural-*them* have different syntactic structures. The challenge is to explain the agreement data in those terms.

A note on the data: One reviewer noted that for them (4), (5) and (10a) require the singular copula. I do not have an account for this variation at present.

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