

Themselves

It is not every day that a new pronoun appears.

In *ET1*, we looked at the many artificial pronouns that have been proposed to help us escape (if we feel like escaping) from the generic *he* and the composite (*s*)*he*. The newcomers are a motley horde, including *co*, *et*, *han*, *hesh*, *jhe*, *na*, *person*, *thon*, and *ws*, together with such reflexives as *coself*, *etsel*, *hanself*, and *wself*, but evidently no *heshelf*, *jheself*, *naself*, or *personself*. To date, not one has caught on.

In the meantime, singular *they*, as in 'Ask anybody and they'll tell you', has been making steady inroads into the standard language. It appears to be colloquially accepted everywhere, and is increasingly respectable in Britain, but in the US it continues to make arbiters of usage frown.

About two years ago, it occurred to me that a new reflexive derived from singular *they* might soon emerge – might indeed already have emerged, somewhere. Just as singular *you* long ago had *yourself* and the royal *we* had *ourselves*, so at the end of the 20th century it seemed likely that singular *they* would produce *themself*. So I sat back and waited for a specimen to appear.

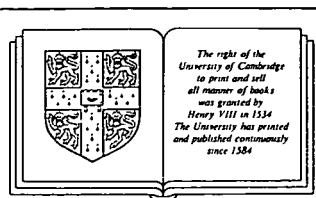
Nothing happened. I at length asked Oxford and Chambers if they had ever come across *themself*. Intriguingly enough, both proved to have a small file on it, including such citations as:

- 1978 *American Speech* Volume LIII 20: 'Even *themself*, a form that is received with shock and great dismay, dates from the fifteenth century in its singular sense.'
- 1984 I. Hislop, *Listener*, 23 Feb: 'It is not an actor pretending to be Reagan or Thatcher, it is, in grotesque form, the person *themself*.'
- 1987 A. Thomas Ellis in *The Times*, 9 Sep: 'I think somebody should immediately address *themself* to this problem.'

So the usage proves to be ancient, if very rare (at least in print), and apparently, but not surprisingly, it can hurt. Its time, however, may have come, and so I cordially invite sharp-eared, hawk-eyed readers to send in citations and comments which in due course we can collate and publish.

Tom McArthur

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