



# REAL ENGLISH

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### A New Era of English: Gendered Pronouns

I was recently asked – by a student who had spent a year studying abroad – about gender-free or gender-neutral pronouns. This is an area of language that is *very important* for the people concerned, *very intimidating* for those who grew up in a different era of language, and *very confusing* for students struggling with English as a beginner or an intermediate learner.

The emergence of gender-free language begins with the idea that inclusivity means accepting everyone as they are and also allowing people to self-identify as they wish by using language - and pronouns - that validates this. Instead of gender-specifying pronouns (he/she), gender-free or gender-neutral pronouns don't indicate a person's gender. There are several gender-free pronoun options; here are the three most common (in bold).

| subjective  | objective   | possessive      | reflexive         |
|-------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| she         | her         | hers            | herself           |
| he          | him         | his             | himself           |
| <b>they</b> | <b>them</b> | <b>their(s)</b> | <b>themselves</b> |
| <b>ze</b>   | <b>hir</b>  | <b>hirs</b>     | <b>hirself</b>    |
| <b>xe</b>   | <b>xem</b>  | <b>xirs</b>     | <b>xemself</b>    |
| and others  |             |                 |                   |

#### Use of Gender-Free Pronouns

1. No Pronouns: Some people prefer to be referred to by their name instead of a pronoun; this type of phrasing often has a specific purpose - clear explanation - but quickly becomes difficult to continue ... consider the second sample sentence which a native speaker would find meaninglessly redundant – Alex, and then Alex, and then again Alex.

> Alex turned on his computer because he had work to do.

< Alex turned on Alex's computer because Alex had work to do.

2. They / Them / Theirs: They is actually a very useful pronoun in English. Consider:

> Someone left their umbrella here last night.

< Someone was probably in a hurry and left it on their way out.

They were probably in a hurry and left it on their way out.

'They' is also the most widely used gender-neutral pronoun with a history of being used this

way in English. It sounds a bit odd at first, but then it begins to make sense. Consider:

|                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| > 'Why is Jennifer up so early?' | ' <u>She</u> couldn't sleep so <u>she</u> got up.'   |
| < 'Why is Jennifer up so early?' | ' <u>They</u> couldn't sleep so <u>they</u> got up.' |

### 3. Ze / Hir / Hir

"Ze" sounds like "zee" and "hir" sounds like "here".

> Tyler? ... yea, he turned off his TV because he wanted some quiet time.

It is his TV, after all. He can decide by himself.

< Tyler? ... yea, ze turned off hir TV because ze wanted quiet time.

It is hirs TV after all. Ze can decide by hirself.

### 4. Xe / Xem / Xir

> Mary chose her favorite shirt because she was meeting friends.

She likes to choose what she wears herself.

< Mary picked out xir favorite shirt because xem was meeting friends.

Ze likes to choose what ze wears xemself.

## More Examples

Where did ze go? I saw hir right over there. I think xe is a really nice person.

This book belongs to hir. It is hirs. Tell xem that I enjoyed xir presentation.

Ze would rather do it hirself. That is something that xe should do xemself.

## Titles and Honorifics

Mr. / Ms. / Sir / Ma'am are the common honorifics used in English. For gender-free language, Mx. is most common, followed by Pr. (comes from Person), Msr. (a mix of Ms. - Mr. - sir).

Dear Mx. Anderson

Dear Pr. Suzuki

Mx. is now used in official documents in the U.K. and is included in Oxford University Press's Lexico.com (for reference, see: <https://zinsoku.jp/category/life/english/>).

## How about for Japan? How about for Education?

The "should we...?" question about using gender-free pronouns in English in Japan and teaching gender-free pronouns in English education in Japan is a difficult one. In education, it largely depends on the level - whether *elementary - junior - high school* or *beginner - intermediate - advanced*. Obviously, younger learners and those new to the language will need to capture the gendered patterns first ... the social side of English - particularly in terms of gendered pronouns - can come later. In 'communication in English in Japan,' my opinion is that the Japanese speaker of English should use the pronoun pattern that is most comfortable for them, both in terms of language and social sensitivity. If a speaker is not confident with English, using gender-free pronouns can be very difficult. If they are uncomfortable with some ideas that come with English, they should stay within their 'comfort-zone.' While politeness is important in language use, accommodating the

specific preferences of a native-speaker of English is less important than feeling confident - and comfortable - in using '*your English*.'

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