

He, she, yo!

Roderick Ramage wonders whether lawyers should take the lead in promoting a new gender-neutral pronoun



Photo: AP/PA Photos

Have the pupils at middle school and high school in Baltimore solved our linguistic dilemma?

What does this sentence, in the rule book of a care home, mean?

"Where a complainant notifies the other residents of a complaint, they must lodge a section 12 notice within 14 days."

You can tell that it was written by a sociologist or social worker because of the politically correct "they". A journalist would be just as likely to have used "they" instead of thinking what he or she means to say, but is

unlikely to have been commissioned to write a care home rule book. According to the *New Scientist*: "The lack of a gender neutral personal pronoun in English has bothered people for at least two centuries."

A strict grammarian, parsing that sentence, would have no difficulty in ascertaining what it says. The operative words are "they must lodge a...notice", the word "they" is plural and, as the only other plural in the sentence is "the other residents", the people who must lodge the notice are the other residents. The likelihood, however, is that the intention was that the complainant, whether male or female, must lodge the notice.

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"A linguistics expert at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland...was fascinated when in 2004 a teacher in her linguistics for Teachers class asked, 'Have you ever heard kids using "yo" when they mean he or she?'"

About half the teachers taking the course had also heard 'yo' used in this way, leading Statko and Margaret Troyer (one of the teachers) to research this development, which they have now documented in the linguistic journal *American Speech*, DOI:10.1215/00031283-2007-012.

They found that from at least 2004 to the present day, middle school and high school students in Baltimore have been using 'yo' as a gender-neutral personal pronoun...Both researchers agree that a sentence-translating exercise produced compelling results:

"They translated yo as he/she pretty consistently," says Troyer. "This showed me that students are not only using a new slang word because it's cool, they are actually aware of the meaning of what they are saying..."

Dennis Baron, a professor of English and linguistics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who has written extensively about this history of failure [other gender neutral pronouns], says the emergence of 'yo' is remarkable because it seems to be a spontaneous grass-roots phenomenon...While the prospects of 'yo' being accepted into the established family of pronouns appear slim, Baron doesn't rule it out. "All it takes is a way to break out of the narrow range of use into the broader community of speakers, and while that's not likely, it could happen."

SACRIFICING ELEGANCE

For lawyers this is no problem, because the Law of Property Act 1925 (LPA 1925), s 61 enacts that the masculine includes the feminine and vice versa, and the use of "he", "him" and "his" as neuter pronouns is technically correct and leads to simpler language than the use of gender neutral expressions such as "he or she" or "he/she" or "(s)he". However, although technically correct, many legal documents are read less by lawyers than by the people who use them, and these people, who as our customers must by definition be right (even when they are not), are not particularly interested in LPA 1925, s 61. The answer, for clarity, would have been to have substituted for "they" either "he or she", which is inelegant, or "the applicant", which is repetitious. In a legal document, where clarity is paramount and there is no other way of being clear, elegance must be sacrificed.

YO!

What we need is a neutral third person singular pronoun. In French they have "on", but the English equivalent "one" is too regal in its connotations, and the German "man" cannot readily be adapted to English without creating more problems than it purports to solve. Help is now at hand: not the US cavalry, but the schoolchildren of Baltimore, Maryland. A candidate of a new pronoun, according to the *New Scientist* of 5 January 2008, is "yo", but not as in "Yo, Blair" (see box, left).

So where will the breakout come? I do not suggest that we rewrite Sir Charles Sedley *Parting*: "As freely as we met we'll part,/Each one possessed of yo's own heart", but we might think of rewriting my opening example as follows:

"Where a complainant notifies the other residents of a complaint, yo must lodge a section 12 notice within 14 days."

There will then be no doubt who must lodge the notice.

My dilemma is whether we lawyers should lead the way or whether the adoption of "yo" by a set of crusty lawyers will be the kiss of death to this tender shoot of linguistic good sense.

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