A guide to neopronouns, from ae to ze

By Scottie Andrew, CNN
Published 5:00 AM EDT, Sat August 12, 2023

Neopronouns like xe, ze or em are nonbinary descriptors.
Anastasiia Yanishevska/iStockphoto/Getty Images

CNN —
He's my boss; *her* dog is cute; *they* have an exam today — pronouns are a part of speech we use to refer to ourselves and others. They're an essential component of language — and, as of the last few years, among its most hotly contested, too.

Some of the most common words in the English language have gender markers, including pronouns. But not all of them are binary. Consider the singular "they," preferred by some nonbinary and trans people for whom gendered pronouns do not fit.

And then there are neopronouns ("new" pronouns), gender-neutral or nonbinary pronouns that are distinct from the common she, he and they. Neopronouns include terms like "xe" and "em," and some of them even date back several centuries, when they were introduced by writers as a solution for referring to subjects without assuming gender. Now, they're also commonly used by nonbinary and trans people.

All pronouns indicate identity and can be used to include or exclude people they describe — neopronouns included, said Dennis Baron, one of the foremost experts on neopronouns and their histories and an emeritus professor of English and Linguistics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Neopronouns should be used and respected like any other pronoun, he told CNN.

“People like to have a say in how they’re identified,” Baron said. “Refusing to let people self-identify is a way of excluding them.”

Neopronouns, explained

The most common third-person pronouns include “she,” “he” and “they.” While “she” and “he” are typically used as gendered pronouns to refer to a woman and a man respectively, “they” can be used as a gender-neutral descriptor for an individual person or a group of people. Celebrities like Janelle Monáe, Emma Corrin and Jonathan Van Ness have each said “they” is a pronoun that works for them.

Neopronouns, meanwhile, are less commonly used than those three familiar pronouns. They’re often used by nonbinary, transgender and gender nonconforming people because they offer more freedom of identity. In his book “What’s Your Pronoun?” Baron wrote that neopronouns “expand the ways that people are able to indicate their gender identity to encompass anyone who is trans or nonbinary, as well as those who choose an altogether different term to characterize their gender.”

Per the LGBTQ advocacy group the Human Rights Campaign, neopronouns are a “step towards a society where people can more fully express all parts of themselves.”

Some neopronouns were created by writers as far back as the 18th century, many of whom did not publicly identify as nonbinary, because they wanted a genderless word to describe a person or group of people — only recently have pronouns been used as a political tool for the way they’re used by nonbinary and trans people, Baron wrote. Other neopronouns are completely original to their user – some may choose to select a noun to describe themselves, like “star” or “starself” in place of binary pronouns like “she” or “herself.” These are called nounself neopronouns, but more on those later.

How to use neopronouns

Here are a few relatively common neopronouns, and how to use them, from the Human Rights Campaign. Note: Some of these pronouns may be pronounced differently based on their user.

xe/xyr *(commonly pronounced* ***zee/zeer****)*

I asked **xyr** to come to the movies. **Xe** said yes!

ze/zir or **ze/hir** (*commonly pronounced **zee/zeer** or **zee/heer***)

The teacher graded **zir** paper today, and **ze** got an A!

Ze said **hirself** that I'm **hir** favorite neighbor.

fae/faer *(commonly pronounced **fay/fair**)*

Fae told me that **faer** best friend is in town this week.

ey/em/eir *(commonly pronounced **aye/em/air**)*

I'm taking **em** to the park today. **Ey** wants to bring **eir** camera to capture the garden for **emself**!

ae/aer *(commonly pronounced aye/air)*

Ae is my best friend — most of **aer's** weekday evenings are spent at my house.

Why people use neopronouns

People may use neopronouns for the same reason someone else uses "she" and/or "they" — neopronouns may better align with one's identity. Some people may use a common pronoun, like "she" or "they," in addition to a neopronoun.

Neopronouns are ultimately a "reflection of (someone's) personal identity," according to the Human Rights Campaign, and thus the "number and types of neopronouns a person may use (are) limitless."

Dua Saleh, a musician and actor who's appeared on the Netflix hit "Sex Education," uses the pronouns they and xe. Saleh told their social media followers in 2020, after xe started to use xe pronouns, that it's "really affirming to find the pronouns that are right for you."

"I just like the neopronouns," Saleh told Complex in 2022. "I feel like they fit me better, not all the time, but they're just fitting. There's an element where I'm just like, 'Oh, this sounds really nice.' Or it sounds nice coming out of my mouth or hearing other people say it."

Trans and nonbinary people may use neopronouns because binary pronouns like "he" and "she" don't align with their identities, but neopronouns aren't exclusive to LGBTQ and nonbinary people. Gender identity and pronouns can be personal, and asking someone what their pronouns are and how they identify may be considered intrusive in some contexts, like if a person is not out, or does not have an established trust with the person asking. But if someone shares that they use neopronouns, it's important to use those pronouns when you refer to them. In many circles, it is considered polite to offer one's own pronouns before asking someone else for theirs.

“People who aren’t used to thinking about what pronouns others use to refer to themselves might make assumptions about someone else’s pronouns based on their name or appearance,” CNN’s Harmeet Kaur wrote in 2021. “But those assumptions can be incorrect and similarly hurtful because they imply a person has to look a certain way to demonstrate their gender identity.”

“It’s polite to honor a person’s identity when speaking to them or about them,” Baron told CNN. “Using inclusive language, not just inclusive pronouns but other self-identifiers as well, can facilitate discourse by showing respect.” Examples of those self-identifiers can include terms like “parent” instead of “mother” or “father,” or “sibling” instead of “sister” or “brother.”

Neopronouns have a long history

Baron said that he’s found over 200 neopronoun “coinages,” many of which were created before the 20th century, more than 120 years before the “current pronoun debates.”

Previous pronoun debates revolved around the non-inclusivity of using “he” as a generic pronoun (as in the Bible: “He that is without sin among you, let him be the first to cast a stone”), because “he” often only referred to men, Baron told CNN. The issue became more pressing when the women’s rights movement gained traction in the 19th century.

And so, linguists and other intellectuals started proposing new “generic” pronouns that could be used to describe people without specifying their genders. Some of them were created from existing English words, like “ou,” repurposed from a term in some dialects in England, or from other languages, like “le,” which in French means “the.”

And then there were words that Baron said filled a “semantic black hole,” words that didn’t exist until they were invented, likely, just for this purpose. For example, “heer,” “hiser” and “himer” were proposed by Ella Young, the first woman superintendent of Chicago public schools, in 1912, he said. “The English language is in need of a personal pronoun of the third person, singular number, that will indicate both sexes,” Young told Chicago Tribune reporters at the time.

Referring to some words, such as “hir” and “ze,” as “neopronouns” may not even be technically correct, Baron wrote in “What’s Your Pronoun?” Both of those examples are over 100 years old: “Hir” was used in the Sacramento Bee in 1920, and “ze” was used by a writer known only by the initials JWL in 1864. (JWL proposed that the gender-neutral “ze” find a place in Noah Webster’s early dictionaries; Webster died before the piece on “ze” could reach him, Baron wrote in 2018.)

But the neopronoun “thon”*did* make it into the Merriam-Webster dictionary in 1934, defined as “a proposed genderless pronoun of the third person.” Baron wrote that the composer and lawyer Charles Crozat Converse introduced the pronoun “thon,” a contraction of “that one,” in the mid-to-late 19th century but didn’t start promoting

its use until 1884, when critics and editorial writers debated whether it would resonate with readers. It was dropped from Webster's dictionary in 1961, Baron wrote, after failing to widely catch on.

Baron and other language historians credit some internet communities with proliferating neopronouns in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The mathematician Michael Spivak used a variety of preexisting gender-neutral neopronouns in his 1990 software guide "The Joy of TeX," which were also used by many members of LambdaMOO, an early online program where users could choose pronouns, including the "Spivak pronouns" e, em, eir and emself, to match their avatars.

Even though there were dozens of neopronouns that made it into print in the 19th and 20th centuries, most of them didn't make a huge impact upon their introduction or were lost to time, Baron said. During that time, the public was resistant to language change, and men in positions of power often didn't take issue with a lack of gender-neutral pronouns, Baron wrote.

Today, people's resistance to neopronouns likely stems from their use by nonbinary and trans people, Baron said. The rights of trans people, particularly youth, have come under attack in state legislatures in more than half of US states in the last year, attempting to restrict them from access to gender-affirming health care, playing school sports or their ability to change their gender markers on legal documents. Understanding and using someone's pronouns is one way to show solidarity and respect toward trans people.

An intro to nounself neopronouns

Leaf, sun, star — nounself pronouns are neopronouns that use nature and other inspirations as nonbinary or genderless descriptors. Linguist Jason D'Angelo told The New York Times that nounself pronouns were popularized on the social platform Tumblr around 2012 and 2013 and remain in use among members of fandoms who may take their nounself pronouns from the properties they enjoy.

For someone who uses the nounself pronoun "leaf," that may look like: "I hope **leaf** knows how proud we are that **leaf** is getting to know **leafself** better!" or "**Leaf** arrived at the coffee shop before me; I was mortified to have been late to meet **leaf**."

In a 2016 paper on the emerging pronouns, Danish linguist Ehm Hjorth Miltersen wrote that nounself pronouns offer a way for people to establish identity beyond just gender. By finding one's desired nounself pronouns, one can "can construct new ways to identify and be perceived by others that are more coordinate with complex and diverse identities." Miltersen wrote that one nounself pronoun user who responded to their questionnaire wrote that they sometimes use "pup/pupself" pronouns to "express a level of fun, happiness and excitement … in me."

Some critics of nounself pronouns feel that the words sound “silly” or “make it harder for transgender and nonbinary people to be taken seriously” since the terms are often much newer and less commonly used than other pronouns, Miltersen said.

Baron noted, though, that all words, in any language, were “invented” at one point.

“Like it or not, lots of new words pop up every day,” Baron said.