English is a sexist language.

If that strikes you as feminist nonsense, you might find it enlightening to read Miller and Swift's Words and Women (Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976). It is a convincing account of the many ways in which English is a "unisex language" -- thoroughly male-oriented.

It is no accident that queen, princess, governess, mistress and dame have derogatory or trivialized meanings lacking in their masculine counterparts, or that virtually every term applicable to a woman has at some time been used for prostitute. One might call these fossil meanings, reflecting past attitudes, but the bulk of the book deals with modern examples of the "male is norm" syndrome. For example, we take for granted sentences like:

- Americans of higher status have more years of education ... and less chance of having a fat wife
- A new chancellor will be appointed in late summer, but he will take office in the fall
- The pioneers moved West, taking their wives and children with them.

Yet the unspoken implication is that women cannot have high status, serve as chancellors, or pioneer.

Nor is this an irrelevant linguistic quirk. Experiments with schoolchildren and college students have shown that the generic "man" and "he" (rather than the neutral "people" or "they") predispose the reader to think in terms of males (Miller and Swift, pp. 19-25+).

In its campaign against allegedly sexist aspects of English, the women's liberation movement has had certain successes. "Ms." now has a solid, if not central, position in the American system of titles. Sex-neutral titles like "chairperson" and "police officer" have become commoner, with the help of rulings such as those of the McGraw-Hill textbook editors (New York Times, 20 Oct 74, sec. VI, p. 38) and the U.S. Manpower Administration. But in one case there have been virtually no results: changing the use of "he" to refer to an antecedent of unspecified sex. Examples of such antecedents are indefinites (somebody, any chess-player), generics (a decent human being, the Average American), and sexless entities (God). Indeed, any expression referring to a person not known specifically to the...
speaker can give this problem: "The next jerk who comes in here and disturbs my work gets his/her block knocked off."

It is certainly possible to use "he or she" ("she or he"?) in such cases, but the conjunction has always seemed awkward if it had to be used repeatedly in a paragraph. Special pronouns for the purpose have therefore been proposed many times; a table of some of these proposals is given on the next page. The first entry is not, of course, a proposal; it is a common colloquial usage, attested as far back as the sixteenth century. But people have taken it up at times as an alternative to the others, so it belongs with them.

Why a new pronoun?

There are two reasons generally adduced for introducing a new pronoun: fairness to women and clarity. (Avoidance of clumsiness is often mentioned, but clumsiness only arises when one is avoiding generic "he" for one of the other reasons.)

The issue of clarity seems to have been primary in the past. If one encounters "he" or "man" in a passage, it may be impossible to tell from context whether the intended reference is to any human being, or just to a male. The resulting vagueness is particularly significant in law: women can be ignored in questions of rights (consider "all men are created equal" before suffrage -- though black men didn't have it easy either) or, conversely, be given duties not intended by the framers of a law. It is significant that the first known proposer of a common-gender pronoun, Charles Converse, was a lawyer. He wrote in 1884:

I could also urge the imperative need I have experienced as a lawyer, when making certain written or spoken statements, by reaching some part thereof where such a pronoun as "thon" must appear, else I must recast the offending sentence on the spot, or plunge on defiantly through some common, yet hideous, solecism.

Virtually all the recent proposals, however, explicitly give feminism as a reason for inventing the pronoun. For example:

Whenever I write about students or teachers ... I don't want to play the male chauvinist and act as though every pupil is "he" ... (or) that every teacher is "she". (Wilhelm)

I have recently noticed that even traditional English grammar discriminates against the woman in society. (Cringe)

I conclude this ((need)) after following for several years the discussion, fueled by the women's liberation movement, over the use of ... he, his, him. (Stern)

Clarity -- desire to show specifically that women are included -- may be a factor here, but it is not the driving motivation.
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(a) From 16 Aug 1884 comments on C. Converse's proposal.
(b) Cited in Mencken, p. 406.
(c) Cited from a letter by F. S. Pond urging its adoption. The cross-
reference under "thon", and a citation under hiser, give the
spellings he'er, him'er, his'er.
(d) Cited in D. Silverman.
(e) Cited in Middleton (a).
(f) Winning entry in a contest by the Chicago Association of Business
Communicators for such pronouns (Chicago Tribune, 23 Aug 1975).
(g) This proposal was not serious, and arose from the fact that Mrs.
Chao's Chinese accent made "he" and "she" sound identical.
"Hse" uses the palatal sibilant of Mandarin hsi, and would hardly
be used by anyone ignorant of Chinese. On the other hand, "hse"
was actually used in a widely-read book, if only in italics, so it
deserves mention.
What new pronoun?

The form of the new pronoun is obviously a non-trivial problem: there are 26 proposals, almost all different (only "hiser" and "hem" occur in more than two proposals). Predicative possessive forms ("theirs" as against "their") are invariably ignored by proposers, and reflexives almost always are, else there might be still greater diversity.

There is consensus on one point: pronouns should be irregular. Of those that consider inflection, only Converse (thon) and Orovan (co) find a separate objective form unnecessary. (Indeed, the lack of a separate form was one of the criticisms raised against Converse's proposal in the 16 August issue.) An attempt to balance he/his/him and she/her/her-like forms is common, but not universal.

The commonest proposal is simply to legitimize singular generic "they". The Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster's Third Edition list this usage with no disapprobation whatever, but its proponents (such as Denker and Critchell) always feel the need to apologize for its ungrammaticality before proposing it. Here is one such proposal, by Amanda J. Smith:

The stellar advantage of using they in the singular is that in many forms this construction is already widely used. Indeed, English teachers exert themselves to stop students from saying, "Everyone should hang up their coat". The prevalence of this usage, incidentally, shows that plain folks as well as feminists feel a need for an impersonal pronoun ... this proposal would be far more readily accepted than a strange new word.

In short, "Did any camper forget their lunch?" may be ungrammatical, but it is clear and solves a real problem. Indeed, the grammar of the thing is its chief disadvantage, for we who love the language will find our ears offended. (Middleton (a))

Unfortunately, "they" works only with indefinite antecedents, so its use in other cases can be as jarring as a new pronoun. "Give your baby their bottle when they cry for it" sounds unnatural. (One could simply use a plural noun in all such cases, but the purpose of having a common-gender pronoun is to render such makeshifts unnecessary.) "God loves us and They will provide" is unlikely to appeal to anti-Trinitarians.

Getting the new pronoun adopted

The proposers generally ignore the question of acceptance for their pronouns. Their attitude seems to be "Here it is; try it if you like". The closest thing to an exhortation is generally a final passage which excites the reader by using all three forms in one indigestible lump:

If anyone objects, it is certainly ter right -- but in that case let...
I think the one curious exception found is worth quoting:

I suggest that a new pronoun, "z" , be adopted. I further suggest that a committee of enlightened and impartial individuals be established to evaluate the need for influential endings and to determine the best method for initiating the use of our new pronoun. (Cringle)

Prospects for the future

It does not seem likely that any of these proposals will succeed in the near future. The firmest evidence for this conclusion is the fact that all attempts thus far have been flops. Swift and Miller's tey/tem proposal appeared in two national magazines and was even used in at least one paper (Jagger), but has remained almost invisible to the public, as witness the half-dozen independent attempts since. Orovan's "co", which is used in several alternative-lifestyle communities and their magazine Communities (Miller and Swift, pp. 129-30), probably has the best prospects of any.

A second reason for failure has been expressed, "Laws are sometimes changed in advance of the public consensus, ((but)) language never is"(Strainchamps, p. 250). This is a truism if language is defined as the consensus of its speakers, and false otherwise, but is a good general rule. When successful changes of sexist vocabulary are pointed to, they tend to be promulgated guidelines, as mentioned earlier. There is little evidence that these terms (aside from the notorious "chairperson") are becoming firmly established in everyday speech. The one exception is the previously-noted "Ms." which seems to fill a widely-felt need among feminists and non-feminists alike.

The argument most often given against new pronouns is that pronouns are a closed class, very difficult to change because they are so basic and below awareness. Strainchamps' argument has full force here. English speakers may generally accept a few changes in titles handed down from above. But a new pronoun can hardly become popular -- people just won't make the effort -- without a population-wide change in attitude, comparable to that which (presumably) caused the disappearance of "thou" and "thee" from common speech. If feminists could reach a consensus on what forms to use (which they haven't) and were a tightly-knit group like the Quakers (which they aren't), they might get the pronoun in common use among themselves (as the Quakers did with "thee"). From there it might spread to other speakers.

In the absence of such a situation, though, it seems probable
that a change in pronouns will have to await a change in society.

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