

# BBC Learning English

## Q and A of the Week 你问我答

### On the subject of pronouns

#### 代词：他，她，它或他们？



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**Rosie:** Hi and welcome to Question and Answer of the week. I'm Rosie and today Helen is with me to talk about pronouns.

**Helen** Oh... that sounds fascinating. 什么是 pronoun?

**Rosie:** Pronouns Helen, you know – *I, you, he, she, it, we* and *they*. It might sound quite basic, but there are some complicated uses of pronouns in English.

**Helen:** 啊，你说的是代词，比如 *he, she, they*，不过有时候挺容易把他们给搞混的。今天我们的问题来自宋宇飞同学：

#### Question

I'm Song Yufei (宋宇飞) from Dandong, Liaoning. I'm very confused about pronouns. The other day I heard an English saying: *He that runs fast will not run long*. Here the pronoun is *he*. I also read this in a news report: "Britain and *her* partners are helping to rebuild roads and bridges and buildings." Here the pronoun is *her*.

The two sentences are both talking about a person whose sex is unknown or a thing without sex. But why we don't use the pronoun *it*? And why sometimes *he* and sometimes *her*? May using a particular pronoun such as *he* show no respect to the other sex? I would appreciate it if you can answer my question.

**Helen:** 宋宇飞同学想知道为什么英语里 在不知道某人性别时，我们会用 *he* 男性他，而有时候在说起东西时，我们却会用 '*she*' 女性她。为什么不用 *it* 它？

**Rosie:** This is a really useful question as a lot of students get confused about using pronouns. Let's have a look at the first part of the question: why do we use *he* to refer to someone when a person's sex is not known?

**Helen** 小宋同学给我们举了一个例子： *He that runs fast will not run long*. 为什么这里是 *he*，其实我们并不知道这说的到底是男性还是女性？

**Rosie:** This is called the generic *he* in English and it's used when we're talking about people generally, rather than about a man or a woman specifically. You often find this in sayings or in general statements.

**Helen** Right, 这么说这个一般的他 generic *he* 可以在我们并不知道某人性别的情况下使用。Isn't that a bit sexist? 这算不算性别歧视？

**Rosie:** Well, it's the way that language evolved, but some people *do* think it's sexist. And that's why a lot of people would use the pronoun *they* to refer to a person in a general way.

**Helen** Hang on... *they*? 可是 *they* 不是指两个或两个以上的人吗？

**Rosie:** It's usually used for more than one person, but we can sometimes use it for one person – it's a bit like the generic *he* we talked about. Let's have a look at some examples of this use of *he* and *they*:

### **Inserts**

*He who pays the piper calls the tune!*

*If someone knocks at the door and you answer in your pyjamas, what will they think of you?*

*A student has just emailed us but they didn't give their name.*

**Helen** 第一个例子是一个成语，意思是谁出钱，谁说了算。我们并不知道这个谁是男还是女，但习惯用语中用 *he* 来代表了这个人。So here the generic *he* is used to refer to 'a person'.

**Rosie:** That's exactly right. And in the other examples the pronoun *they* is used. So we heard: *a student has just emailed us but they didn't give their name.* We don't know whether the student is a man or a woman, so we use *they*.

**Helen** 第二个和第三个例子中，代词 *they* 也是指一个人，而且我们也不知道这个人的性别。The pronoun *they* can refer to a person when we don't know their sex.

**Rosie:** Yes – and you just used it in that sentence: *It refers to a person when we don't know their sex.* Now, I think we've talked enough about *they* and the masculine *he*. Let's move on to talk about the feminine pronoun *she*.

**Helen** 记得小宋同学还问到为什么在提起国家的时候，英语用 *she* 女性她？In English we sometimes use *she* to refer to countries, boats or cars.

**Rosie:** We do. And Song Yufei gives a good example from a news report, which is 'Britain and *her* partners'. So Britain is seen as a *she*, as a feminine thing. And people use *she* to refer to cars and boats too.

**Helen** 代词 *she* 女性她往往也被用于船只和汽车。Often men name their ships after a woman they love, like their wife or their mother. So the pronoun *she* is almost like a term of affection for some objects. 用女性她可能是因为以前男人

以他们的母亲或爱人的名字给船只起名，所以后来爱车，爱船也就沿用了 *she* 这个代词。

**Rosie:** I often hear men refer to cars as *she*... They say things like:

**Insert**

*Look at this car I bought, isn't she gorgeous?*

**Rosie:** But it's a subjective thing and many people would just use *it*.

**Helen** 当然不是所有人都对汽车或船只有这种感觉，所以很多人也会用 *it* 动物它来代表一件东西。

**Rosie:** Well, have *you* talked enough about pronouns, Helen?

**Helen:** Yes, *I* have. *We* have, in fact. I hope *you* have learnt something today, whether *you* are a *he* or a *she*... or a *they*, an *I* or even a *we*.

**Rosie:** OK Helen ... you're not making sense. It's time for us to go. If you have a question, you can email it to [question.chinaelt@bbc.co.uk](mailto:question.chinaelt@bbc.co.uk). Bye!

**Helen:** Bye!