

Faculty of Arts
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GENERIC AND NONBINARY PRONOUNS

USAGE, ACCEPTABILITY AND ATTITUDES

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines present-day generic and nonbinary uses of English 3rd person singular pronouns from a sociolinguistic perspective. Investigated are generic uses of singular *they*, *he*, *she*, *he or she*, and the neopronouns *ze* and *xe*. In addition, singular *they*, *ze* and *xe* are studied in nonbinary contexts, i.e. in reference to individuals who do not identify exclusively as female or male. What connects these pronouns is their relevance to gender-fair language use.

Generic pronouns have been studied extensively, with the main finding showing a male bias in supposedly gender-inclusive uses of *he*. As a result, more inclusive alternative uses such as *he or she* were previously advocated. However, the growing awareness of nonbinary identities raises new questions and concerns about the inclusivity of such binary formulations.

While there is a clear trend of moving towards gender-inclusive use with generic pronouns, a more recent linguistic change has been the emergence of nonbinary pronouns, most notably the adoption of singular *they* in reference to nonbinary individuals. Due to their novelty, nonbinary pronouns have not yet been studied extensively, but they have received considerable academic and public attention. Because nonbinary pronouns are associated with nonbinary individuals, a stigmatized minority, these pronouns have often been met with loud opposition, often polarizing language users.

The aim of the present study is to investigate ongoing changes in generic and nonbinary pronouns. The thesis focuses on three related aspects: usage, acceptability, and attitudes. While usage and acceptability help investigate ongoing changes, attitudes may reveal reasons behind such changes. These aspects are examined using online survey data from 1128 participants, including 79 nonbinary individuals. To allow for cross-linguistic comparisons, the participants comprise both native speakers of English and fluent non-native speakers of English, whose native language is either Finnish or Swedish. In addition to other background variables (e.g. age, education level), the survey also measured attitudes towards sexist language use and transgender individuals.

The survey produced both quantitative (usage, acceptability) and qualitative data (attitudes). The participants' attitudes towards the pronouns are explored using thematic analysis, while logistic regression analysis is employed to investigate the effect of the background variables (e.g. age, gender) on usage and acceptability.

The study confirms a trend shown in previous research: singular *they* has overwhelmingly become the most commonly used pronoun in generic contexts, while the use of gendered pronouns is uncommon. The data demonstrates that the reason behind this change is the perceived exclusive

nature of gendered pronouns, and, in comparison, the inclusivity and ease of using singular *they*.

They also seems to be the most used nonbinary pronoun, and considerably more participants accepted nonbinary *they* than the neopronouns. Nevertheless, many participants objected to nonbinary pronouns. One of the most common reasons was perceiving gender as a binary construct, hence viewing *he* and *she* as adequate personal pronouns. Other arguments included viewing nonbinary pronouns as grammatically incorrect or weird, but the results indicate that such arguments may simply function as an overt justification for a deeper discomfort towards nonbinary individuals. The results with singular *they* most clearly demonstrate this: while generic use was supported by nearly all participants, nonbinary use was heavily objected to, even by the same participants who accepted singular *they* in generic use. In contrast, supporters of nonbinary pronouns recognized the role of language in providing representation to individuals and groups, arguing that any pronoun a person chooses for themselves should be acceptable, a sentiment aligning with the right to self-identify.

The study also explored nonbinary individuals' relationship with pronouns. The analysis of open responses revealed a strong but complex relationship between pronouns and identity. The responses highlighted the importance of using a person's chosen pronouns. The participants described feelings of validation and acknowledgment when others respected their pronouns, and feelings of invalidation and alienation when others misgendered them or refused to use their pronouns. One additional finding was the use of multiple pronouns, depending on the context. For example, some participants reported using binary pronouns as a safety mechanism in situations in which revealing their nonbinary identity might pose an emotional or physical threat.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the current changes in pronouns are ideologically motivated, which seems to have supported the relatively rapid adoption of new uses and practices with pronouns.

PREFACE

Throughout the years, my interest in pronouns has perplexed many people, especially some native Finnish speakers. It has not always been easy to explain *why* pronouns matter, let alone why anyone should study them. While this thesis will hopefully provide some answers, my interest in pronouns was sparked long before I knew I wanted to pursue a PhD.

As a native speaker of a language that does not have gendered pronouns, from an early age I was intrigued by the question why so many other languages *do* have them. The first non-native language I learned at school was Swedish, and I still remember the day we were taught that in Swedish, you have to choose which 3rd person singular pronoun to use based on gender. This thought was hilarious to the group of 9-year-old Finnish-speaking children; why would you have to specify gender in pronouns? To the despair of our teacher, we giggled uncontrollably for the rest of the class.

Later on, when I was also learning English and German at school, I remember being somewhat baffled and suspicious about the supposedly gender-inclusive uses of *he* and *man*, which were still commonly taught to simply mean ‘humankind’. It was only after being introduced to language and gender research at the university that I learned my suspicion was justified.

My journey as a researcher began with questioning the status of so-called masculine generics. My master’s thesis focused on such constructions, but the survey study I conducted also included a question about adding a new pronoun to English. I was surprised at how strongly some of the participants objected to this proposition, and of course, became more fascinated by the topic. This fascination only increased when the Swedish *hen* (a recently adopted neopronoun) started gaining more attention, demonstrating that a new pronoun *could* be introduced in a purposeful effort to make a language more gender-fair. These paths ultimately led me to pursue a PhD, and to explore in more depth why people feel so strongly about pronouns.

While the PhD process has in many ways been personal and the work has often been solitary, I am very grateful for having been able to share parts of my academic journey with many peers and colleagues. Most of all, I want to warmly thank both of my wonderful supervisors, Dr. Elizabeth Peterson and Professor Liisa Tainio. I am extremely grateful for all the support, advice and invaluable feedback that I have received from them. While both my supervisors helped me grow as a researcher, I owe a special thank you to Liz for also helping me develop as a teacher. She has been an excellent role model, and I thoroughly enjoyed co-teaching my favorite course, Language and Gender, with her.

I would also like to thank everyone at the English unit for providing a supportive atmosphere for a PhD candidate to finish her thesis. I am particularly grateful for Dr. Anna Solin, Professor Minna Palander-Collin, Dr.

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I am grateful for the financial support provided by the University of Helsinki, the Jutikkala Fund, and the Suomalainen Konkordia-Liitto. Having full-time funding for most of my PhD made the completion of the thesis possible.

A heart-felt thank you also belongs to all my friends and family, who have continuously supported me during my academic endeavors over the years. Thank you for being there for me and reminding me of life beyond the academia. A special thank you to my dear friend Jenny (for all the ducks), and to my mother, who believed in me even when no one else would and fought for my right for a suitable education earlier in life. Without your efforts, I would not have made it to this point.

Finally, this thesis would not have been possible without the contribution of the 1128 individuals who participated in the admittedly lengthy survey study. Thank you for taking the time to respond and share your thoughts; the resulting data is the backbone of this thesis. I am particularly grateful to the nonbinary participants, who enriched the study by providing so much insight about their relationship with language, pronouns, and identity. Thank you for sharing your personal journeys; I learned so much from you, and I can only hope to be able to give something back in return with this thesis.

In Helsinki, November 8th, 2020
Laura Hekanaho

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KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Third person singular pronouns

Conventional third person singular pronouns (shortened 3PSPs) include *she*, *he*, and *it*. Also included is singular use of *they*, as well as neopronouns such as *ze* and *xe*.

Generic pronouns

Generics and generic pronouns are understood as nonspecific references to a class or group of people instead of specific members of the group.

Nonbinary pronouns

Nonbinary pronouns are understood as nonbinary individuals' chosen pronouns, other than *he* and *she* (i.e. binary pronouns). Nonbinary pronouns include singular use of *they*, as well as neopronouns.

Neopronouns

Coined pronouns such as *ze*, *xe*, *e*, *heesh*, *thon*, *per*.

Gender

Cisgender refers to individuals whose gender matches the one assigned to them at birth. *Transgender* refers to individuals whose gender does not (fully) match the gender assigned to them at birth. Included are *binary-identifying* individuals as well as *nonbinary* individuals, i.e. those who identify as female or male, and those who do not identify (exclusively) as female or male.

Misgendering

Misgendering occurs when a person is referred to with gendered (pro)nouns that do not match their gender.

Attitudes and ideologies

Attitudes broadly refers to personal *views*, *opinions*, *feelings* and *beliefs*. In contrast, *ideologies* refer to broader, community-level *beliefs* and *values*.

Sexist language

Language use that excludes, diminishes or discriminates against a group of people based on gender. The antonym is nonsexist language, describing *gender-fair* and *inclusive* language use.

Gender-exclusive language

A hyponym of sexist language for using gendered (=exclusive) terms when referring to all people.

PART I. INTRODUCTION

1 THE POWER OF PRONOUNS

As a woman [generic he] makes me feel excluded.

He is used for and always has been used to refer those things. I don't see why someone would want to change this or get offended by this.

We are mankind.

Males do not like being referred to as females. Female pronouns are not 'neutral' like male pronouns are. Feminine pronouns have a negative connotation.

New pronouns are ridiculous. Use science and reason. We are born man or woman.

People should be able to choose their preferred pronouns.

I think [nonbinary pronouns are] largely a force of identity politics trying to manufacture a grammatical norm in English.

— Participants of the present study.

This thesis delves into the polarizing effect of pronouns by exploring generic and nonbinary uses of English third person singular pronouns (henceforth, 3PSPs or pronouns)¹ from a sociolinguistic perspective. The aim is to better understand recent and ongoing changes in pronouns, asking not only what pronouns are used, but also *why*? The focus is on singular *they*, *he*, *she*, *he or she*, and the neopronouns *ze* and *xe* in generic contexts;² *they*, *ze* and *xe* will also be studied in nonbinary contexts, i.e. when used to refer to nonbinary individuals.³

1.1 WHY STUDY PRONOUNS?

Third person singular pronouns provide a fascinating object for linguistic inquiry for a number of reasons. One of the most intriguing reasons to study 3PSPs is that despite having previously been theorized to lack any independent meaning (*pronouns are just placeholders for nouns*), these supposedly semantically empty function words continue to be in the center of discussions

¹ “Pronouns” refers to 3PSPs. Reference to other types of pronouns is made explicit.

² Both neopronouns may be realized as /zi:/, but *xe* is also sometimes pronounced /ksi:/.

³ Nonbinary identities include identifying as neither female or male, having more than one gender (e.g. being *bigender* or *genderfluid*), or having no gender (e.g. *agender*) (e.g. Matsuno & Budge, 2017).

about gender and gender-fair language. If pronouns really did not matter, then surely, we would not have been talking about them so much for the past 50 years, and surely, people would not have such strong opinions about pronouns. The reason for so much controversy lies in the ideological reasons behind particular pronominal uses.

Another reason concerns the mechanisms of language change. The class of pronouns is generally slow to change, and new additions are much rarer than in the lexicon. Yet, we have been witnessing considerable, and relatively fast-paced changes in this supposedly closed class, a private club not accepting new members (e.g. Huddleston, 1984).

In present-day English, there are two big trends in 3PSPs. With generic pronouns, there has been a shift from previously prescribed use of *he* towards inclusive use with singular *they* (e.g. Balhorn, 2009; Baranowski, 2002; Paterson, 2014). With nonbinary pronouns, we are witnessing the adoption of new uses and pronouns – using pronouns such as *they*, *ze* and *xe* similarly to *he* and *she* (e.g. Zimman 2017, 2019).

While I will discuss my choice of definitions in more depth in Chapter 2, for now, suffice to say that generic pronouns are nonspecific references to a class, e.g. *children* (examples 1–3), while nonbinary pronouns are used to refer to specific, nonbinary individuals, who have expressly chosen the pronouns for themselves, instead of the *he* or *she* assigned to them at birth (examples 4–5).⁴

- (1) A child₁ loves *his₁ mother [+generic, +/-gendered]⁵
- (2) A child₁ loves *her₁ mother [+generic, +/-gendered]
- (3) A child₁ loves their₁ mother [+generic, -gendered]
- (4) Chris₁ loves their₁ mother [+specific, +nonbinary]
- (5) Clo₁ loves zir₁ mother [+specific, +nonbinary]

Textually, generic pronouns typically refer to a nonspecific NP, singular ones being in the focus of this study (e.g. *a child*, *the student*, *someone*). In contrast, nonbinary pronouns refer to a specific person, who can textually be represented by various NPs; proper names were chosen for this study (e.g. *Chris*, *Clo*).

Who is allowed representation in language?

What connects these pronouns is their relation to **gender equality and gender-fair language**. Pronouns mark both identity and group

⁴ As will be argued in more detail in Chapter 2, nonbinary pronouns can only exist if there are (standard) binary pronouns. In this sense, I do not view nongendered pronouns to be nonbinary when there are no other gender pronouns in a given language, such as Finnish.

⁵ I am using +/- to indicate that there are both [-gendered] and [+gendered] elements in the sentence. The asterisk is used to mark unacceptability, which in this case is due to social norms.

membership, thus playing an important part in regulating who is acknowledged and visible in language (Figure 1).

In generic contexts, this regulative power of pronouns can be used to exclude (examples 1–2 above), or include (3), people based on gender. In specific use, (nonbinary) pronouns offer an important linguistic identity-building tool both at the individual and group level. Further reflection requires a short – and somewhat simplified – history of recent, ideologically motivated changes in pronouns.

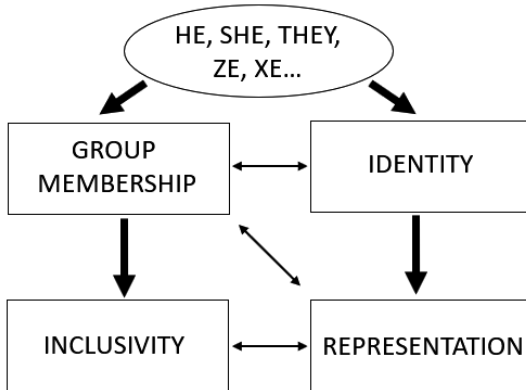


Figure 1. Pronouns, identity and group membership

The change in generic pronouns began roughly 50 years ago, as feminist scholars started challenging the previously prescribed, supposedly gender-inclusive use of *he* in generic contexts (e.g. Stanley, 1978; Silveira, 1980; Spender, 1985). Other supposedly gender-inclusive masculine words, “masculine generics” (e.g. *chairman*, *spokesman*), were targeted as well. Such language use was considered to be **male biased**. The demand was simple: visibility and inclusivity for women. Options such as *he or she*, or *spokesperson* and *spokeswoman* were advocated as replacements. Supported by numerous empirical studies, the use of masculine words in otherwise nongendered contexts was deemed **gender-exclusive** (e.g. Martyna, 1978; MacKay, 1980). As a result, the previously prescribed use of *he* in such contexts as (1) is now widely unacceptable. Indeed, **inclusivity** became a deciding factor for generic pronoun use: language use should be representative, and one gender cannot effectively represent *all people*.

Along with a growing understanding of gender and greater awareness of **nonbinary identities**, new questions about representativeness have risen. Not unlike the previous feminist discomfort with *he*, many nonbinary individuals were uncomfortable with the restrictions of the binary pronouns – the association of *he* and *she* to *female* and *male* identities.⁶ The solution was repurposing nongendered pronouns that were previously used mostly in

⁶ I use the terms *female/male* and *man/woman* interchangeably, with a preference for the former because it is easier to use as an attribute. Alphabetical order determines which term appears first.

nonspecific contexts. However, once adopted for specific use for nonbinary individuals, retaining *he* and *she* for binary-identities, such uses have become associated with a non-female, non-male identity.

Indeed, the importance of pronouns to identity has become particularly visible through transgender and nonbinary experiences. For many transgender individuals, being pronounced⁷ correctly is crucial as it signals that their identity is recognized by others; misgendering, in contrast, sends the opposite signal (see Chapter 12). Further highlighting the role of pronouns in identity-building are new but increasingly common practices such as sharing one's pronouns upon introduction (e.g. Zimman, 2019: 156, 161–162), or employing pronouns as a coming out mechanism (e.g. Darwin, 2017: 329–330).

As already demonstrated, the current changes in pronouns are ideologically motivated. However, the adoption of gender-fair language depends on broader developments in gender equality. Because of the links between pronouns and identity, nonbinary pronouns will only be fully and broadly adopted once societies let go of the gender binary ideology and accept the existence of nonbinary identities.

The pronoun is (still) political

Because of the regulative power pronouns possess, the choice of which pronouns to use has become highly politicized — different choices carry different implications. Due to their exclusive nature, the underlying implication with using (only) gendered pronouns in generic contexts, is that one gender is better or more representative than others, viewed as the prototype or standard. With nonbinary pronouns, using a person's correct pronouns signals support and acceptance of nonbinary identities, while refusing to use a person's pronouns serves as a powerful statement of non-acceptance.

It is for such reasons that pronouns continue to be in the center of discussions about gender and gender-fair language. Generic use of singular *they* is lauded for its inclusivity, and it seems like it is finally being released from its reputation as “grammatically incorrect”, endorsed by prominent linguists (e.g. Baron, 2020; McWhorter, 2018), and, only recently, even by prescriptive institutions, such as academic style guides (e.g. American Psychological Association, 2019). Nonbinary pronouns only entered public discussions more widely in 2015, after several American universities updated their registration policies to be more inclusive, allowing students to specify their pronouns (e.g. Scelfo, 2015). Ever since, nonbinary pronouns have been in the public eye, and they have continued gaining more recognition by various institutions. Even academic style guides are now expressing support for

⁷ Zimman (2019: 159) introduces this handy verbing as a shorthand for ‘using pronouns to refer to someone’.

nonbinary pronouns and advising to always use the person's chosen pronouns (American Psychological Association, 2019; Lee, 2019). However, there is a clear trend that is also demonstrated by the present study: favoring *they* over neopronouns.

Already in 2015, the American Dialect Society chose *they* as word of the year, highlighting its use as a gender-inclusive generic pronoun but also as a nonbinary pronoun (Marquis, 2016). A further triumph was experienced a few years later, when Merriam-Webster added a new definition for *they* in their dictionary: *they* as a nonbinary pronoun (Merriam-Webster, 2019). The addition was picked up by several newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* (e.g. Schmidt, 2019; Wheeler, 2019). This dictionary recognition demonstrates that nonbinary *they* has reached mainstream language use, as the addition was made based on increasing frequency of use (Merriam-Webster, 2019; see also Schmidt, 2019). The latest triumph was provided again by the American Dialect Society, who chose *they* as word of the 2010's, and "(My) Pronouns" as the word of 2019 (American Dialect Society, 2020). In contrast, neopronouns have not received as much public recognition or endorsement.

The story of nonbinary pronouns has not been all rosy. These pronouns have faced considerable opposition, even by authority figures and other influential persons. For example, as a reaction to new legislation extending discrimination and hate crimes to include gender identity and expression (thus, covering nonbinary identities as well), a Canadian professor of psychology publicly campaigned for "freedom of speech", which in this case was used as an excuse for refusing to use a person's correct pronouns (for discussion, see Cossman, 2018).⁸ Such appeals to freedom of speech and the right to be "politically incorrect" are attempts to defend the false gender binary and to reject nonbinary identities. Imagine if similar appeals were made in a widespread defense of calling cisgender women men, or refusing to acknowledge that they do not want to be called *he*? Or, if in some other context, sexist or racist slurs were defended with the same tactic?

Although already implicitly answered, one question remains: *why pronouns*? Why have pronouns become such a central topic in public discussions, instead of the nouns that we use to describe transgender and nonbinary individuals? While new identity labels such as *agender* or *gender fluid* might have caused a bit of a fuss in the beginning, it seems that the attention they received was quickly surpassed by pronouns. The simple answer is that new additions or uses in pronouns are more difficult to adopt and accept than similar changes in the lexicon. New additions to the lexicon are more frequent than additions to any pronoun class. As such, language users are more used to changes in the lexicon, and less used to changes in pronouns.

⁸ While it is good scientific practice to provide detailed information about one's sources, in some cases I have decided to slightly deviate from this practice. In this case, I am not naming the individual to indicate disapproval of their views. Nevertheless, Cossman 2018 provides more details and many readers will undoubtedly recognize the person in question.

This may already explain the role of pronouns in ongoing discussions but attempts to change pronoun use face further challenges.

In comparison to the lexicon, language users are generally not as aware of grammatical features (e.g. Kroskrity, 2000: 20–21), which may further support the misconception that grammar, or pronouns, do not change. Proposing changes in pronouns challenges this assumption, creating an extra barrier for change. What further makes changes in pronouns challenging is that pronouns are used very frequently, and largely automatically (e.g. Zimman, 2017: 93). An additional obstacle is that the ongoing changes in pronouns are ideologically motivated. Abandoning “masculine generics” requires admitting the inherent male bias in such expressions, while the very essence of nonbinary pronouns challenges a binary view of gender. With nonbinary pronouns, an additional challenge is learning to see the world in a different way, when many of us are accustomed to constant and automatic mental binary gendering.

1.2 OVERVIEW AND STRUCTURE

The overall aim of this study is to investigate *which* pronouns are used, *why* and *by whom*? To do this, three main aspects are explored: usage, acceptability and attitudes. Roughly, based on usage, one can induce what types of changes are ongoing (as per Apparent Time Hypothesis, Labov, 1994: 43–72) while studying acceptability and attitudes can help explain *why* such changes are occurring. Combined with relevant background information, the question of *by whom* can also be addressed. The main research questions are presented below.

1. Generic pronouns

- 1.1. Which generic pronouns are used?
- 1.2. Which generic pronouns are considered acceptable?

2. Nonbinary pronouns

- 2.1. Which nonbinary pronouns are considered acceptable?
- 2.2. Which pronouns do nonbinary individuals use (for themselves)?
- 2.3. What do pronouns mean to nonbinary individuals?

3. Attitudes and ideologies

- 3.1. What kind of attitudes do the participants express towards the pronouns?
- 3.2. How are these attitudes related to the use and acceptability of pronouns?
- 3.3. What kind of ideologies might underlie the participants’ attitudes?

4. Social factors

Are there differences between groups of participants based on factors such as age, gender, native language, and attitudes?

These research questions are addressed with data collected with an online survey specifically designed for the study. The data includes full responses from 1128 participants, comprising both cisgender and transgender participants, the latter group including 79 nonbinary individuals.

While distinguishing between cisgender and transgender individuals is not suitable for all contexts, for the purposes of this study it is necessary for one important reason: personal experiences with one's own pronouns. In general, the average cisgender individual has likely never needed to consider or question the pronoun assigned to them at birth (*he* or *she*). Transgender individuals, whether binary-identifying or nonbinary, have often not only considered and questioned their pronouns (along with their gender, e.g. Zimman, 2017: 94), but also switched to using different pronouns. Thus, the general hypothesis is that transgender individuals will demonstrate more supportive attitudes towards nonbinary pronouns, due to their personal experiences and greater awareness of the issue. It is highlighted that this is the only reason for distinguishing between cis- and transgender participants.

It is also acknowledged that many binary transgender individuals do not want to be called trans, but simply men and women (e.g. Ansara & Hegarty, 2014: 267; Zimman, 2014: 18). Similarly, some nonbinary individuals do not consider themselves transgender, conceptualizing the term to refer only to binary-identifying trans people (e.g. Conrod, 2019: 113). In addition, some binary-identifying individuals consider themselves nonbinary during transition, or while "questioning" (e.g. Zimman, 2017: 94-95). Yet, for many individuals, being nonbinary is not a transient identity. Overall, the definition employed for transgender (gender \neq assigned gender at birth) seems to be becoming a standard definition, as is also the case with the definition used for nonbinary (= neither exclusively female nor male).

Another important aspect in the study design concerns native language.⁹ Native language refers to the language(s) that a person speaks as (one of) their first language(s), acquired in early childhood (e.g. Mauranen, Hynninen & Ranta, 2010: 184). It follows that non-native languages are those that are learned later in life, colloquially known as "foreign languages", or in academic terms L2s. The participants of the study include both types of speakers, because English is, of course, used world-wide by both native and non-native speakers, and there may be variation in pronoun practices, and attitudes, between different types of English speakers (e.g. Pauwels, 2010). To represent non-native English speakers, both native Finnish and Swedish speakers who are also fluent in English were included in the study.

⁹ While many researchers prefer to use the term L1, I am using "native language" because this is the term used in the survey form as well, deemed more widely understandable to a general audience, and more appropriate than the gendered "mother tongue".

Finnish and Swedish speakers were chosen specifically as these languages differ from English in ways relevant to this study. Finnish lacks any gender marking on pronouns, employing *hän* and the colloquial *se* (*it*) as 3PSPs.¹⁰ The Swedish 3PSP system is very similar to English (*han* for *he*, *hon* for *she*), with the novel distinction that Swedish has recently adopted a neopronoun, *hen*, to be used both in generic contexts and as a nonbinary pronoun. As such, native Finnish and Swedish speakers provide interesting comparison groups for native speakers of English. Admittedly, the choice was also biased, and supported, by my own Finnish background and sufficient fluency in both languages.

As regards the structure, the thesis is divided into five main parts (I–V): Introduction, Theory and Background, Study Design and Methods, Results, and Final Discussion. Each part is further divided into chapters.

Part II covers the relevant theoretical and historical background. Chapter 2 provides theoretical considerations relating to the features and functions of pronouns, along with an overview of previous empirical studies. Chapter 3 explores the relationship between attitudes and ideologies, as well as their connections to language and language change. Chapter 4 then focuses on the relationship between language and gender, continuing the discussion of attitudes and ideologies by considering various aspects such as sexist language.

In Part III, the attention turns to the present study. The study design and methods of data collection are discussed in Chapter 5, while Chapter 6 introduces the methods of analysis: logistic regression analysis that was used with the quantitative data and (corpus-assisted) thematic analysis employed with the qualitative data.

The results are then presented in Part IV. Chapter 7 provides a description of the sample of participants and relevant background variables. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 cover the quantitative analysis of generic and nonbinary pronouns, while Chapters 11 and 12 comprise the qualitative analysis. Chapter 11 focuses on the participants' attitudes towards pronouns, presenting the results from the thematic analysis. Chapter 12 narrows the focus to the nonbinary participants and their relationship with pronouns. In the final section, Part V, I will summarize and consider the results from a broader perspective, along with a discussion about the limitations of the study.

¹⁰ Colloquially, *se*, “*it*”, is often used to replace *hän*. In standard Finnish, *se* is reserved for non-human objects.

PART II. THEORY AND BACKGROUND

The question underlying this thesis is simple, yet difficult to answer comprehensively: why does it matter what kind of language, and what pronouns, we use? In an attempt to provide some answers to this multifaceted question, Part II sets out to explore the intersections of language, pronouns, gender, and ideologies from various aspects.

2 PRONOUNS

This chapter begins by considering 3PSPs from a theoretical perspective. Since the focus of this study is on the social functions of pronouns, the discussion in sections 2.1 and 2.2 is limited to functions and features relevant to the present study. Last, section 2.3 provides an overview of previous studies on generic and nonbinary pronouns.

2.1 THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Pronouns at large are considered *function* words in contrast to *lexical* words (e.g. Newman, 1997: 65). Pronouns are conceptualized as function words since they form a (mostly) closed set, and they are characterized more so by their grammatical features than meaning (ibid.). Conventionally, this has meant conceptualizing pronouns as substitutes for nouns (e.g. Bhat, 2007: 1–4; Gardelle & Sorlin, 2015: 6–7; Wales, 1996: 1–4). Anaphoric pronouns have even been described as “pronoun[s] of laziness”, their function being to avoid repetition of the antecedent (Newman, 1997: 67). In this sense, pronouns are thought to lack independent meaning, and instead derive their meaning from the antecedent. In contrast, a less strict view characterizes pronouns as having low semantic content (e.g. Chung & Pennebaker, 2016: 345; Wales, 1996: 5, 9).

Third person singular pronouns are often perceived as the prototype of “personal pronouns”; personal pronouns being the prototype of “pronouns” (Wales, 1996: 1). Particularly with personal pronouns, the traditional conceptualization is unsatisfactory, as these pronouns do not simply substitute nouns, but carry additional meaning as well, for example in terms of gender (e.g. Bhat, 2007: 1; see also discussion by Newman, 1997: 64–67). This is most evident from examples in which pronouns are used as stand-alones, such as “*Do you see her?*” (e.g. Wales, 1996: 2). When (textual) antecedents are present, pronouns naturally share meaning-connections with them. However, the pronoun may affect the interpretation of the antecedent, and vice versa. In other words, the relationship between the antecedent and pronoun is not unidirectional, but instead mutual, leading Newman to characterize pronouns as “dynamic referring devices” (1997: 94).

Dissatisfaction with the traditional definition has also led some authors to conceptualize some *pro*-nouns as “*pro*-forms” instead, placing them in the same category with such classes as demonstratives (*this*, *that*), adverbs (*so*, *thus*), verbs (*do*), and determiners (*such*, *that*) (e.g. Bhat, 2007: 153–161; Wales, 1996: 4–5; see also discussion by Gardelle & Sorlin, 2015). Particularly the third person (singular) pronouns have been challenged, as their role differs from that of first and second person pronouns (e.g. see discussion by Gardelle & Sorlin, 2015). For example, Bhat divides pronouns into “personal

pronouns”, including the first and second person pronouns, and into “proforms”, including third person pronouns, and all other pronominal forms (Bhat, 2007: 6). The argument is that first and second person pronouns denote speech roles (*the speaker* and *the addressee*), while third person pronouns (and other proforms) have mostly referential functions (Bhat, 2007: 6–7). However, this classification seems to support the idea that 3PSPs are simply substitutes for nouns. Abandoning such a view, the present study considers 3PSPs to be personal pronouns with a typical function of reference to textual antecedents and/or real-life referents.

Furthermore, while pronouns are conventionally viewed as a closed class, there is ample evidence throughout the history that pronouns “are not as stable and as non-resistant to influences as might appear” (Wales, 1996: xii). The English pronoun system has gone through numerous changes in the past. For example, use of the once only plural *you* expanded to cover singular use, replacing *thee* (e.g. Crystal, 2004: 307; see Curzan, 2003 chapter 4 for more examples). The present-day situation and the emergence of nonbinary pronouns in particular further illustrates that even a “closed class” may admit new members.

2.1.1 General features and “mismatches”

English 3PSPs are marked for phi-features of animacy, person, gender and number. Of these features, gender and number are most relevant to the present study, discussed further below. Some attention is also directed to notions of definiteness, specificity, and markedness.

Third person singular pronouns also function in different cases: subjective (*she*), objective (*her*), possessive (*her car*, *hers*) and reflexive (*herself*). Sometimes the scope of personal pronouns is restricted to subjective and objective cases, while the possessives and reflexive are held separate for serving different functions (e.g. Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2006: 93; Wales, 1996: 13–14). The two possessive pronoun forms are commonly thought to have *determiner* (*her car*) and *nominal* (*hers*) functions (e.g. Wales, 1996: 13–14). The difference is that nominal possessive pronouns can function independently, while determiners only occur preceding a noun (e.g. Biber et al., 2006: 97). Particularly the latter is thought to separate determiner pronouns from personal pronouns. However, pronouns in subject and object case can also sometimes function similarly to determiners, e.g. “we linguists”, “us professors”, “you loud Americans” (e.g. Postal, 1966: 192; see also Conrod, 2019: 13–17). Hence, distinguishing pronouns that can function as determiners from personal pronouns does not seem necessary.

Indeed, pronouns can take on various atypical roles. Non-3PSP examples include the editorial *we* when referring to a singular self, or the nurse *we* referring to the addressee (e.g. Collins & Postal, 2012: 217–224). While such atypical uses fall beyond the scope of this study, a few examples for 3PSPs are provided below (examples 1–3). In example 1, the pronoun appears in subject

position but without a textual or real-life referent that it could derive its meaning from. In example 2, the pronoun is nominalized, preceded by the indefinite article. In the last example (3), the pronoun has what seems to be a typical textual antecedent, but the real-life referent is the speaker himself.

(1) *She* who laughs last, laughs best

(2) It's a *she*

(3) Daddy₁ said that *he*₁ needs to leave early [daddy refers to the speaker himself] (Collins & Postal, 2012: 217).

Pronouns can also be characterized as either (independently) referential or bound. Independently referential pronouns allow a deictic interpretation, when the pronoun refers to the real-life referent. Bound pronouns on the other hand are thought to be controlled or tied to another textual element (e.g. Higginbotham, 1980: 679; see also discussion by Newman, 1997: 74–77).

Another way to conceptualize the relationship between a pronoun and another textual element that share the same real-life referent is that of coreference, adopted in the present study (see examples 4–6 below) (e.g., Kraaikamp, 2017: 4; von Heusinger, 2002: 119).¹¹ The relationship is characterized as anaphoric when the pronoun appears after the NP (as antecedent) or as cataphoric when the pronoun appears before the NP (as postcedent). Anaphors as the prototype are the focus of the study, and thus the following discussion focuses on anaphoric relationships. In addition, the focus is on four typical types of antecedents that occur with 3PSPs: indefinite pronouns (IP, e.g. *someone, anyone*), indefinite NPs (INP, e.g. *a person, a child*), definite NPs (DNP, e.g. *the teacher, the student*) and quantified NPs (QNP, e.g. *any person, each child*) (e.g. Paterson, 2014: 41–43).

Conceptualizing the relationship as coreference helps describe contexts in which different textual elements can refer to the same real-life referent. For example, in examples 4–6, the real-life referent is Mary, represented textually by the proper name in example 4, by an NP in 5, as well as the anaphoric pronoun *she*. Thus, these elements share coreference to Mary. In comparison, in example 6, there is no other textual element that *she* refers to, instead the pronoun is used independently, and the meaning can only be interpreted from the context. Despite these different textual contexts, it does not seem necessary to claim that the meaning or even function of *she* in examples 4 and 5 would be somehow different from example 6.

(4) Mary₁ said *she*₁ likes jazz.

(5) My friend₁ said *she*₁ likes jazz [my friend= Mary]

(6) *She* likes jazz. [*she*=Mary]

¹¹ Collins and Postal (2012) provide a novel framework for types of antecedents, which may be preferable when considering a wider set of contexts and more atypical cases than the present study does.

In addition, pronouns can form coreferential pronoun chains when multiple pronouns refer to the same antecedent (or real-life referent) (see further discussion Newman, 1997: 95–101). Typically, the same pronoun is repeated in such a chain. In some contexts where the antecedent is not a specific person, the pronoun chain may even comprise different pronouns (example 7) (cf. Ackerman, 2019: 14).

(7) “A successful person₁ is someone who feels that *he or she*₁ has reached *their*₁ goals” (participant in the present study)

Sometimes multiple syntactically possible antecedents for one pronoun may be present. Particularly when the distance between the antecedent and pronoun is vast, determining the antecedent-pronoun relationship becomes more challenging (e.g. Corbett, 1991: 243).

Further features relevant when discussing (coreferential) pronouns include specificity and definiteness.¹² Specific references are such in which the real-life referent is a specific individual, known to the speaker (but not necessarily the hearer), whereas with nonspecific references neither the hearer nor the speaker knows the identity, or the identity might not even be knowable, as is the case with generic references, for example (see definition by Raumolin-Brunberg & Kahlas-Tarkka, 1997: 26). Definiteness, on the other hand, represents information that is identifiable to the speaker and hearer, while indefinite referents are assumed not to be identifiable to the hearer (e.g. Dixon, 2010: 161–162; Raumolin-Brunberg & Kahlas-Tarkka, 1997: 21). Consider examples 8–10 (adapted from Huddleston, 1988: 91).

(8) Kim was talking to *a doctor* [+specific, -definite]

(9) Kim was looking for *a doctor* [-specific, -definite]

(10) Kim called *her doctor* [+specific, +definite]

These types of features are semantic properties. While these features often match the syntactic properties in terms of definiteness, there are many cases in which they do not, hence these two levels need to be kept separate. For example, the indefinite pronoun *someone* may sometimes have a specific and definite meaning (in the sense that both speaker and hearer can identify who is meant). Consider example 11, in which *someone* could refer to the speaker’s partner, child or parent, for example, and the addressee would recognize this because that *someone* is the third person in the conversation.

(11) We are late because *someone*₁ left *his/her/their*₁ keys at home [+specific, +definite]

Because of the coreferential relationship, pronouns and the antecedents typically agree in their features. However, importantly, pronouns need not (only) agree formally with their antecedents, but instead they may also find

¹² These descriptions are sufficient for the present study, but more detailed approaches exist. For example, Newman delineates features such as opacity and individuation (which describe similar features as “specific”, “definite” and “generic”; Newman, 1997: 14, 102–111, 206).

agreement through semantic, or pragmatic, routes (e.g. Newman, 1997: 93–94, cf. *The Pronominal Agreement Condition* by Collins and Postal, 2012: 92). As such, disagreement or mismatches between particular features may occur, but such disagreement is only partial, as there will be other features that do match.

A common example is provided by the German word for “girl”, *das Mädchen*. In German, all nouns belong to a grammatical gender class and are marked either feminine, masculine or neuter. Typically, words that denote females belong to the feminine class (*die*), and words denoting males are masculine (*der*). However, there are some exceptions, such as “girl” that belongs to the neuter class (*das*). As a result, the semantic or notional gender of *Mädchen* is female, but the grammatical gender is neuter. It follows that either the pronoun *sie* (“she”) or *es* (“it”) can textually refer to *Mädchen*, depending on whether the pronoun agrees with the grammatical (*es*) or notional gender (*sie*) (e.g. Kraaikamp, 2017: 5).

While there is no grammatical gender in English, similar “mismatches” may occur, for example when a temporary identity is claimed. Ackerman illustrates such cases with examples 12–13 (Ackerman, 2019: 2, 13):

(12) *At the farmhouse, the cowgirl₁ left *his*₁ lasso in the kitchen.

(13) At the Halloween party, the cowgirl₁ left *his*₁ lasso in the kitchen.

Under typical conditions, example 12 is not acceptable, since *he* disagrees with the gender feature of *cowgirl*.¹³ In example 13, the context indicates *cowgirl* to be a temporary identity, and the pronoun finds agreement with the individual’s (more) permanent identity. These examples demonstrate that the interpretation of coreference relies not just on syntactic properties, but heavily on “discourse-level information and world knowledge” (Ackerman, 2019: 2). There are also cases in which *they* is used to refer to a gendered antecedent. I will return to the different functions of singular *they* in section 2.2, but here I provide some preliminary examples to illustrate some seeming gender mismatches:

(14) A woman₁ in *their*₁ 30’s [-definite, -specific]

(15) If there is a Barbara Wassman₁ on board, could *they*₁ make *themselves*₁ known to the cabin? (in Newman, 1997: 55) [-definite, ?specific]

(16) “[...] I simply sat down and tried to tell *somebody*₁ why I loved *them*₁ and why saying goodbye to *them*₁ was this wonderful gift [pause] I knew *she*₁ didn’t have to fight for me anymore [pause] I knew *she*₁ didn’t have to make copies of my legal documents and send them back to me”

¹³ There are atypical contexts in which even this might be possible. For example, when a male-identified person is mockingly described with a female-related term.

[?definite, +specific] (from the document *Fear of 13*, a man is talking about his wife who he has identified as such less than a minute prior to this section)

With example 14, the reference of the antecedent is nonspecific and indefinite, which supports a generic interpretation to *women* as a class. This might explain the use of *they*, but the same explanation does not account for example 15, where the reference is specified but with a level of uncertainty. Newman suggests that it is the uncertainty whether such a person is present that allows for the use of *they* in this context (Newman, 1997: 55). Yet, innovative uses of *they* also allow for example 16 as well. Under certain contexts, *they* can refer to someone known to be binary-identifying (see section 2.2.2). In example 16, the speaker talks about writing a letter to his wife, hence the context does not seem to allow for a nonspecific reading. While the use of *they* is likely triggered by the textual antecedent, *somebody*, which is typically nonspecific and indefinite, in this context, that *somebody* is a specific person, the wife, who is referenced with *she* in the following phrases.

The most typical type of mismatching, however, is known from generic contexts, where a gendered pronoun refers to a nongendered antecedent (example 17).

(17) *A pedestrian_i must be careful when *he_i crosses the street* (Gastil, 1990: 642)

Sometimes these types of reference with a masculine pronoun have been explained as the masculine being the “unmarked” gender. To briefly introduce the notion of markedness, two types can be distinguished: formal (or morphological) and functional (or semantic) (e.g. Dixon, 2010: 237; Motschenbacher, 2010: 94). Formally, lexical items are unmarked when there is no overt marking and marked when there is overt marking. For example, singular number for nouns is unmarked (*girl*), while the plural is marked (*girls*). Functionally, the difference is between terms that are used in restricted and specifiable situations, hence marked, and terms that are used in all other situations, hence unmarked (ibid.). For example, the masculine forms in many languages employing grammatical gender are typically the unmarked ones, while feminine (or other gender classes) are marked. In other words, the masculine form may be used in reference to everyone as well as in a gender-specific sense (e.g. *der Politiker*), but the feminine is marked and reserved for only gender-specific usage (*die Politikerin*) (e.g. Motschenbacher, 2010: 94).

In English, interpreting the masculine as the unmarked has been widely abandoned, and the type of reference as in 17 has been identified as male biased (see section 4.3). The question is, why can *they* refer to a gendered antecedent, but a gendered pronoun referring to a nongendered antecedent is considered unacceptable? For a general rule (with many exceptions, such as the *cowgirl* example above), I propose that *pronouns typically do not disagree with the gender of the antecedent*. This allows for reference of *they* to gendered antecedents (examples 14–16), because *they* includes female

referents (and other genders), but disallows reference to nongendered antecedents with *he* because *he* does not include all genders (example 17).

2.1.2 Generic and nonbinary functions

Since both “generic pronouns” and “nonbinary pronouns” are often used in somewhat different meanings, the choice of definitions is discussed in this section.

2.1.2.1 Generic vs. epicene

In language and gender research, generics are sometimes defined in a way that differs from a more general definition for “generic”. For example, “generic *he*” is often used to mean “epicene *he*”. Epicenes are understood as terms that can refer to all people, regardless of gender (e.g. Baron, 1981; Baranowski, 2002; Newman, 1997). Sometimes “epicene” is used to mean “nongendered”, but within this study, epicene references are understood as gender-inclusive, mixed gender and/or unknown gender.¹⁴ In this sense, epicene meaning does not necessitate using only nongendered descriptions, as long as a sense of “everyone” or “anyone” is conveyed (discussed further below, example 13).

nongendered = no gender marking

epicene = NP or pronoun conveying “everyone” or “anyone” regardless of gender

Outside of the “generic *he*” (or “generic *she*”) type usage, the term generic is not synonymous with epicene. Instead, generic is widely defined as a reference to a group or class of individuals rather than to the specific members of the group or class (Cambridge Dictionary of Linguistics, Brown & Miller, 2013; Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics, Crystal, 2009; The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Leslie & Lerner, 2016). In addition, genericness is not a stable quality of any one word or form, but instead, generic meaning is derived from the overall proposition (examples 1–3 below).

generic ≠ inherent quality

generic = semantic feature of the proposition

In English, generics can commonly be expressed with three syntactic forms: the indefinite plural, and the definite and indefinite singular (e.g. Leslie & Lerner, 2016; Lyons, 1977; McConnell-Ginet, 2012). When the main elements remain the same, these three forms are considered to represent the same generic proposition (e.g. Leslie & Lerner, 2016; Lyons, 1977: 193–194). Conveying the same proposition as the plural, the function of the singular is to

¹⁴ “Gender-neutral” is sometimes used in (some of) these senses, but because it is also sometimes used to mean “nongendered”, to avoid this ambiguity I have chosen to use the terms nongendered and epicene instead.

refer to a kind (e.g. Leslie & Lerner, 2016: section 1). Examples 1–3 demonstrate this variation.

- (1) The child is naturally curious [+generic, +singular, -gendered, +epicene]
- (2) A child is naturally curious [+generic, +singular, -gendered, +epicene]
- (3) Children are naturally curious. [+generic, +plural, -gendered, +epicene]

Each form in 1–3 may also have nongeneric uses (see examples in Leslie & Lerner, 2016). In other words, genericness is not an inherent quality of the proposition or any of its parts. Generics often express “what appear to be generalizations over individuals” (Leslie & Lerner, 2016: section 1), as in examples 1–3. There is also another type of generics that falls beyond the scope of this study, concerning “predicate properties directly of the kind” (e.g. “dodos are extinct”, *ibid.*).

While generics can express generalizations, these need not be factually accurate; they may be prototypical or otherwise possible, for example because they are stereotypical (e.g. McConnell-Ginet, 2012). The meaning of a generic proposition is not that literally every child is curious, and it does not even need to be that *most* children are curious; there only needs to be such a quality associated with children.

generic ≠ nongendered

Importantly, generics can also refer to a subgroup of individuals. Such subgroups may be social groups, such as men, or women (e.g. Leslie & Lerner, 2016; McConnell-Ginet, 2012; Mueller-Reichau, 2011). Thus, generic propositions can be gendered. Since pronouns can appear in generic contexts, it then follows that gendered pronouns may appear in generic contexts (that are gendered), as in example 5 (cf. example 4).

- (4) A child_i loves *their*_i mother [+generic, -gendered, +epicene]
- (5) A woman_i puts family before *her*_i career [+generic, +gendered, +female] (e.g. Leslie & Lerner, 2016)

The reason for the distinct use of “generic” to mean “epicene” within language and gender research is likely because much attention has been targeted at so-called “masculine generics” and “feminine generics” – masculine or feminine words that can (supposedly) be used as epicenes (e.g. Motschenbacher, 2010: 90).¹⁵ Now outdated examples in English include epicene uses of *man*, *chairman*, *fireman*, and *he*. Even though their usage has decreased, many people might still recognize (some of) such masculine uses as intended

¹⁵ Motschenbacher further reserves the term “masculine generic” only for forms that are lexically nongendered, grammatically masculine. Forms that are also lexically gendered are called “male generics” (2010: 90–94). This distinction is not necessary with English.

epicenes. For example, the use of *man* without any determiner may still be interpreted to mean humankind (example 6); similarly, using *he* independently in idiomatic expressions may still convey epicene meaning to speakers (example 7) (see further discussion by Zobel, 2015). Some other previously epicene masculine expressions might not be as easily recognizable as epicenes anymore to some speakers (example 8). Nevertheless, even if recognized as epicenes, such uses still suffer from being male biased (see section 4.3).

(6) It is man that is responsible for environmental pollution [+generic, +gendered, ?epicene]

(7) *He* who laughs last, laughs best [+generic, +gendered, ?epicene]

(8) The chairman decides who gets to speak [+generic, +gendered, ?male]

Masculine constructions such as in examples 6–8 are not rejected because they are used in generic propositions, but because they purport maleness as the standard if *man* is supposed to be epicene for *humankind*. This sentiment is rejected because we reject male as the prototype of humankind (cf. McConnell-Ginet, 2011 [1979]) and because the masculine is no longer unmarked in English. In comparison, as mentioned, in grammatical gender languages, grammatically masculine forms continue to function as the unmarked form, having both epicene and gender-specific uses. However, because there is no overt distinction between the two functions, the epicene meaning may carry a male bias (e.g. Motschenbacher, 2010: 66).

While there seems to be a strong convention of using “generic” to mean “epicene” in language and gender research (see e.g. Baron, 2020: 11), this usage results in some terminological issues with examples such as 9 and 10.

(9) A boy₁ loves *his*₁ mother [+generic, +gendered, +male]

(10) A child₁ loves **his*₁ mother [+generic, +/-gendered, ?epicene, ?male]

If we call *he* in example 10 “generic *he*” and we determine that it is unacceptable, what do we call the *he* in example 9? Furthermore, how do we convey that the proposition is generic, but it is the introduction of a gendered item that causes the loss of epicene meaning? Such issues become clear when considering some novel uses of singular *they* (further discussed in section 2.2.2), of which one example is given below (11). While in contexts such as 10 we can use “generic *he*” to mean “epicene *he*”, the same logic does not extend to contexts, in which *they* is used to refer to a gendered antecedent, as in 11. In this case, the proposition is generic, but the context is restricted to females by the antecedent, hence not epicene. This does not affect the properties of *they* as a nongendered pronoun, however.

(11) A woman₁ in *their*₁ 30s [+generic, +/-gendered, -epicene]

My solution is to adopt the general definition of “generic”, distinct from “epicene”. As such, “generic [pronoun]” is short-hand for a pronoun that is used in a generic context.¹⁶ This is consistent also with the way “generic *you*” or “generic *one*” are used: genericness is not an inherent quality for either pronoun, as both also have specific uses (even *one* as royal *one*). In addition, the conventional terms “masculine generics” and “feminine generics” are avoided, albeit sometimes referenced for clarity.

nongendered person references = epicenes

epicenes ≠ nongendered person references

Last, to demonstrate the difference between “epicene” and “nongendered”, consider examples 12–16 in light of the above delineations: while nongendered person references are by nature epicenes, not all epicenes need to be nongendered.

(12) A mother₁ loves *her*₁ child [+generic, +gendered, -epicene]

(13) A parent loves *his*, *her*, or *their* child [+generic, +gendered, +epicene] [*he* for male, *she* for female, *they* for nonbinary]

(14) A parent loves **his* or *her* child [+generic, +/-gendered, +binarist_epicene]

(15) A mother₁ loves **his* or *her*₁ child [+generic, +/-gendered,¹⁷ -epicene, ?female/male]

(16) A mother₁ loves *their*₁ child [+generic, +/-gendered, -epicene]

Three aspects need to be highlighted. First, in generic contexts where coreference occurs, epicene meaning is interpreted from both the pronoun and antecedent. As such, even though *they* as a nongendered pronoun typically carries epicene meaning, when used in a gendered context, epicene meaning is lost (example 16). Second, even if the context is gendered, the meaning can be epicene, as long as it successfully conveys the epicene meaning, as is the case with example 13. This point may be clearer from example 14, which would be epicene only from a gender binary point of view (thus marked incorrect); however, the epicene meaning does not erase the gender marking on *he* and *she*. Which leads to the third point: gendered pronouns do not become neutralized by the addition of other gendered pronouns. This is demonstrated by example 15, which is typically unacceptable. However, as in example 16, at least among innovative users, *they* as a nongendered pronoun can refer to gendered antecedents. As proposed earlier, this is because *they* encompasses everyone, causing no gender disagreement in a strict sense.

¹⁶ In the empirical part of the study, *he*, *she*, and *he or she* are only considered in generic contexts that are otherwise nongendered and epicene. As such, to avoid repetition, the attribute generic may sometimes be omitted as well.

¹⁷ [+/- gendered] means there are two gendered elements that do not match.

The discussion presented above is based on present-day usage and understanding. It may be that some of the interpretations will change if current atypical gender-mismatching scenarios become more commonly recognized and acceptable, for example as a result of greater awareness of different types of nonbinary identities.

2.1.2.2 *Nonbinary pronouns*

In the context of the present study, nonbinary pronouns are understood as pronouns other than *he* and *she* that are used to refer to specific, nonbinary individuals, who have expressly chosen the pronouns for themselves to be used as their personal pronouns, instead of the *he* or *she* assigned to them at birth. This distinction serves both theoretical and social purposes, however, most importantly, it serves a practical purpose for the present study. In other words, if this definition does not function beyond the context of this study, it is not my intention to impose a new, universal definition for nonbinary pronouns. Below, I explain why this definition is adopted, but since this is an important topic beyond the context of this study as well, I will return to consider this definition again in the final discussion, Part V. The main reasons for the definition can first be summarized as follows:

- a) binary individuals typically do not use pronouns other than *he* and *she*
→ when other pronouns are used, the association is of a nonbinary identity
- b) some nonbinary individuals may use *he* and *she*, and their identities are no less nonbinary for using binary pronouns
- c) there is ambiguity between some specific uses of singular *they*, but a need to distinguish between such uses.

Consider examples 17–22.

- (17) Mary₁ loves *her*₁ mother [+specific, +definite, +gendered, +female]
- (18) Jo₁ loves *her*₁ mother [+specific, +definite, +gendered, ?female]
- (19) Clo₁ loves *zir*₁ mother [+specific, +definite, +nonbinary]
- (20) Chris₁ loves *their*₁ mother [+specific, +definite, +nonbinary]
- (21) My friend₁ loves *their*₁ mother [+specific, ?definite, -gendered, ±nonbinary]
- (22) ?Mary₁ loves *their*₁ mother [+specific, +definite, +/-gendered, +female]

In example 17, Mary identifies as female, and uses the pronoun *she*. In example 18, Jo is nonbinary, and uses the pronoun *she*; however, the association many people might have is of a female, due to the use of *she*. Because proper names are typically followed by a gendered pronoun, the association of using any

other pronoun with a proper name is that of being nonbinary (examples 19–20).¹⁸ Hence, in such contexts, these pronouns are not necessarily interpreted as epicene (in the sense of referring to any gender).

The ambiguity between uses of *they* is demonstrated in examples 20–22. In example 20, because *they* is not commonly used to refer to proper names with binary-identifying individuals, the association is nonbinary. In comparison, in example 21, where the antecedent is an NP (*my friend*), the sentence could refer either to a nonbinary individual, or to a binary individual (represented by \pm). However, this information is not available from any linguistic element in 21, instead the interpretation would need to be derived from the broader context. For example, *my friend* might have been previously identified as *Chris*, who is known to be nonbinary and whose pronoun is *they*. In another context, the reference may be *Mary*, who typically uses *she* pronouns, but the speaker chooses to use *they* because the addressee does not know *Mary*, or perhaps gender is irrelevant for the context (see section 2.2.2 for further discussion).

This distinction is important because people’s attitudes towards linguistic items often depend on which groups are associated with such use (e.g. Garrett, 2010, see Chapter 3 in this study). For this reason, speakers who accept innovative uses of singular *they* with many types of antecedents may still reject *they* as a nonbinary person’s chosen pronoun (see also Bjorkman, 2017: 2). For example, some speakers might accept example 21 only when *my friend* refers to someone unknown to them but reject the same sentence when *my friend* refers to a nonbinary person. Hence, it is important to distinguish between *they* as a nonbinary person’s chosen pronoun and other specific uses of *they*. Indeed, if negative attitudes towards nonbinary individuals were not a factor, then it would be enough to talk of “specific *they*” (as opposed to generic use). As a solution, I use the terms nonbinary *they*, and nonbinary *ze* and *xe*, in contrast to generic *they*, and generic neopronouns.

In present-day use, example 22 is uncommon; using *they* with binary-identified, specific and definite references. To consider some hypothetical situations, if example 22 was commonly used and recognized, and *they* was used with all proper names, regardless of gender, then there would be no nonbinary association with the construction proper name + *they*. For now, there seems to be a clear association between such uses of *they* and a nonbinary identity (see also Conrod, 2019: 123, 127). As such, this use of *they* is distinctly different from nongendered pronouns in languages that have no gendered pronouns, such as Finnish, which employs *hän* (and the colloquial *se*) as the only animate 3PSP.

Hypothetically, if *they*, or a neopronoun, would replace *he* and *she* in English, then such a pronoun could function as an inherently nongendered epicene pronoun, similar to *hän*. However, as long as *he* and *she* continue to

¹⁸ There may be various reasons for choosing to use *they*. For example, some binary transgender individuals prefer to use *they* when questioning, or transitioning from *he* to *she* or vice versa. The association in present-day use may still be of being nonbinary.

be the standard pronouns associated with female and male identities, any other pronoun is likely associated with a nonbinary identity. In contrast, the Finnish *hän* is not a nonbinary pronoun; it is nongendered and epicene across all contexts, because no other, gendered 3PSP exists. In other words, the existence of a nonbinary pronoun necessitates the existence of binary pronouns. To consider another hypothetical situation: if nonbinary Finnish speakers were to adopt a new pronoun for themselves, such as the Swedish *hen*, this would likely result in associating *hän* only with binary-identifying individuals, and as a result, Finnish would have a rough gender division in pronouns (binary *hän* vs. nonbinary *hen*).

To make another cross-linguistic comparison, Swedish provides an interesting real-life example of adopting a new pronoun. In Swedish, there are conventional binary pronouns *han* for *he*, and *hon* for *she*, but relatively recently, a new pronoun has been adopted for both epicene and nonbinary use: *hen* (e.g. Bigler & Campbell, 2015: 192; Gustafsson Senden, Bäck & Lindqvist, 2015).¹⁹ The Swedish situation is different from the English “pronoun problem” in one crucial way: there was no conventional, nongendered pronoun that would have already been used in epicene generic contexts, as is the case with singular *they*. Perhaps for this reason, *hen* has gained acceptance as an epicene pronoun: it is shorter than saying *han eller hon*, “*he or she*”. However, *hen* is also used as a pronoun by nonbinary individuals. While there do not seem to be empirical studies tapping specifically into the epicene/nonbinary difference, *hen* researchers report that it is generally the less-frequently used nonbinary function that is objected more than the more-commonly used epicene function (e.g. Bäck, Lindqvist & Gustafsson Senden, 2017: 7; also Vergoossen et al., 2020).²⁰ In other words, there may be similar double-agency issues with *hen* in Swedish, as I am proposing that there is in English with *they* (e.g. example 21).

Finally, in addition to the reasons given above, I am using the term nonbinary pronoun because at least for some nonbinary individuals, it is important that their pronouns are specifically nonbinary, instead of being epicene. Some of the participants of the present study expressed such a stance, although a few also expressed the opposite — that they want to be referred to with “gender-neutral” pronouns. The latter wish is harder to fulfil, because it might require a change in the status of *he* and *she*, as discussed above. Since *they* is gaining many innovative uses, perhaps one day the pronoun will indeed take over *he* and *she* as an all-gender pronoun, and many of the issues discussed in this dissertation will be solved.

¹⁹ *Hen* was originally coined in the 1960’s, but it gained wider awareness and acceptance only in 2015, as it was included in *Svenska Akademiens ordlista* (SAOL), a descriptive dictionary provided by the Swedish Academy.

²⁰ For example, Vergoossen et al. also report on two commentators who felt that since *hen* is a nonbinary pronoun, it should not be used as an epicene pronoun (2020: 4).

2.2 ATYPICAL 3PSPS: SINGULAR *THEY* AND *ONE*

Even though singular *they* and *one* are reviewed in the same section, this is not to suggest that these uses have much in common, besides both pronouns having atypical uses as 3PSPs. While not as common as 3PSP uses of *they*, pronominal *one* requires some discussion, since it was occasionally used by the participants of the present study. Before further consideration, a discussion of number is warranted.

Grammatically, English nouns are either singular (unmarked) or plural (marked with -s), with some exceptions. Conventionally, verbs are also viewed to mark number. However, this is only realized in the 3rd person singular present tense forms for regular verbs (*he/she/it runs*, but *I/you/we/they run*), whereas most other verbs or forms are not inflected for number (e.g. modal verbs, past tense). In most cases, then, the number marking is not overt (*he/she/they wrote the letter*), but the context may still obviously be singular. As such, number cannot be determined solely based on the verb form. As a result, I have adopted a habit of talking about *overtly singular* (marked with -s) and *unmarked verb forms* (no overt marking), the context determining singularity with unmarked verb forms.

In addition to the issue with determining number based on verb inflection, there are two types of number features to consider: grammatical number and notional number. While grammatical number refers to the linguistic class (*girl* for singular, *girls* for plural), notional number refers to “the numerosity of the subject’s referent in the speaker’s mental model” (Humphreys & Bock, 2005: 689). In other words, notional number may be seen as deriving from the semantic representation of the noun, whereas syntactic number is derived from the syntactic properties of the noun, and these two need not agree (similar to how gender agreement may be realized from different sources). For example, the indefinite pronoun *everyone* is grammatically singular, but its notional number is clearly plural.

The verb forms are generally thought to agree in number with the subject of the sentence, formulated as the subject verb agreement (e.g. Humphreys & Bock, 2005: 689). However, there are also cases in which grammatically singular NPs are followed by plural verb forms, or vice versa, as in examples 1–3.

- (1) Bacon and eggs tastes good (in Humphreys & Bock, 2005: 689)
- (2) The committee has/have decided [...] (in Corbett, 2000: 187)
- (3) The data is/are false

Such examples are fairly simply explained by a mismatch between grammatical and notional number. *Bacon and eggs* is conceptualized as *one meal* (1), whereas *committee*, like other collective nouns, may be viewed either as *one unit* or in terms of comprising *several members*, allowing the plural interpretation (2). Similarly, data also allows for either singular or plural

handling (3), since the once-plural form of *datum* has been adopted to be used in the singular as well.

Furthermore, whereas grammatical number has two distinct categories (plural and singular), notional number is better viewed as a bimodal singular-plural spectrum, with a neutral space in-between (e.g. Baranowski, 2002: 383–384; Newman, 1997: 141). Particularly many nonspecific references, such as *anyone* or *a person*, resist being classified notionally as either singular or plural; the number is then conceptualized as ambiguous or neutral.

The present study adopts Newman’s classification for notional number (i–iii), with the distinction that when determining the number of *they*, both singular and number ambiguous referents (*someone*, *anyone*) support classifying *they* as a singular pronoun.

- (i) A token is classified as singular if there is only one entity composing the referent.
- (ii) A token is classified as plural if there is clearly more than one entity composing the referent.
- (iii) A token is classified as number neutral when it is not possible to discern whether there is one or more than one entity composing the referent. Usually these tokens contain a singular quantifier apart from *every* or *each* in the antecedent, or is a formally singular generic, whatever the determiner, unless there is a positive indication of singularity or singularity is evident in the context. (Newman, 1997: 142–3)

2.2.1 Singular *they* and the return of *themselves*

With singular *they*, both notional number and number marking on the verb have been used to argue against the singularity of *they*.²¹ Admittedly, cases of *they* with notionally plural antecedents (e.g. *everyone*) do support a plural interpretation of the pronoun. However, arguing that *they* is plural simply because the verb forms are not overtly marked as singular (e.g. Newman, 1997: 140) seems unsustainable when considering examples in which the antecedent is both grammatically and notionally singular (see following section for examples). Arguments about number marking also become futile in contexts where there is no overt marking on the verb form, regardless of pronoun (e.g. *he/she/they/we should walk*). Furthermore, English already has a precedent where a plural pronoun (*you*) was adopted into the singular domain (e.g. Crystal, 2004: 307), retaining unmarked verb forms in present-day English. As such, number interpretations of *they* ought to rely on the antecedent, not verb forms.

One further suggestion has been that greater distance between the antecedent and the pronoun favors agreement with notional number instead

²¹ Despite the long tradition of using singular *they* in generic contexts, arguments about the “incorrectness” of *they* have prevailed for the past few centuries (see examples in Bodine, 1975; Newman, 1997: 43–48).

of grammatical (e.g. Newman, 1997: 145–147; also discussed by Balhorn, 2004: 86; see also Corbett, 2000). However, Newman’s data does not show such an effect (1997: 182), and the examples in the following section demonstrate that *they* can appear very soon after a singular antecedent.

While notional number has become a rather popular explanation for mismatches between the number of the pronoun and its antecedent (e.g. Paterson, 2014: 38), it may also be criticized for relying on “subjective judgment” (Paterson, 2014: 158). Paterson questions whether the same antecedent may be the source for two different number interpretations (Paterson, 2014: 158–160), as would have to be the case in the example below (if one insists on viewing *they* as a plural pronoun) — *Every writer* would be notionally plural for *they*, but grammatically singular for the verb form *is*:

(4) *Every writer*₁ is nervous about *their*₁ work [\pm singular]

An alternative explanation provided for the apparent mismatches with *they* and singular antecedents is provided by Homonymy Theory, proposed by Whitley (1978: 31–32).²² While it is commonly agreed that singular *they* is derived from plural *they*, it may be the two have separated so much as to be counted as distinct forms (e.g. Paterson, 2014: 144). For Paterson (2014: 158–160), this accounts for examples such as the above: *they* is a singular pronoun here. This explanation may be particularly useful when considering nonbinary use of *they*.

While the standard reflexive form for both plural and singular *they* is currently *themselves*, the overtly singular form *themselves* is also available. While considered a singular form in present-day English, *themselves* was originally a plural form (Soanes, 2013; Wales, 1996: 127). The *Oxford English Dictionary* records of *themselves* date back to the 14th century, but it disappeared circa 1570, giving way to *themselves* and *themselves* (Soanes, 2013). The present-day *themselves* as a singular generic form surfaced in the 1970’s (Wales, 1996: 15), met with “shock and great dismay” (Whitley, 1978: 20). The form is also available in nonbinary use, but *themselves* is possible as well.²³

Since *themselves* coincides with the other singular pronominal reflexive forms in present-day English, the logical interpretation of this form is singular. Moreover, since *themselves* is the standard form, *themselves* can be interpreted to highlight the singularity of the antecedent, as Paterson indicates as well (2014: 66).

Furthermore, it seems that *themselves* may appear only with antecedents that are grammatically or notionally singular, or neutral (see also Collins & Postal, 2012: 175–176). *Themselves* is further replaceable in all contexts by the standard form, but only *themselves* occurs with grammatically plural antecedents. For example, consider examples 5 and 6.

²² Newman disagreed with this view, arguing that the transformations Whitley offers as evidence were outdated (Newman, 1997: 53).

²³ Unfortunately, this aspect was not included in the survey designed for the present study.

(5) “Everyone who embarrassed *themselves* was able to shake it off”
(Collins & Postal, 2012: 175). [+/-singular]

(6) “The recruits distinguished *themselves*/**themselves* in that exercise.”
(Collins & Postal, 2012: 176). [+/-singular]

Indeed, preliminary results from an online survey study (n=60) on the difference between these two forms suggest that *themselves* indicates plurality, but *themselves* does not (Bradley & Schmid, 2019). The results further indicate that *themselves* is considered more grammatical than the standard form in reference to singular, specific individuals (ibid.).

2.2.2 Different functions of singular *they*

Presented below are five different uses of singular *they*, with sometimes similar but distinguishable functions.²⁴ Importantly, the list may not be exclusive, and it is not a product of a systematic (meta-) analysis. Instead, the list serves a theoretical purpose for the present study, reflecting the literature review as well as many personal observations I have made in both academic and non-academic contexts.

First, the list is organized so that specificity increases with each type: Generic references represent the nonspecific end of the spectrum, while nonbinary use represents the specific end of the spectrum. Second, the order also roughly represents the development of using *they* in singular contexts: Type 1 generic use represents conventional use (corresponding to *stage 1* in Konnelly & Cowper, 2020: 4–5), while types 4 and 5 represent more recent, innovative developments (corresponding roughly to *stages 2* and *3* in Konnelly & Cowper, 2020: 4–5; see also Bjorkman, 2017; Conrod, 2019: 89–90). However, it is unclear in which order types 2 and 3 would be arranged at a historical timeline — here the increasing specificity determines the order. Third, related to the developmental line, there is also an element of gradient acceptability, highest with type 1 and lowest with type 5, although no empirical proof can be provided for types 2–4 (see Conrod 2019: 81–82).

1. Generic *they*

- a) A child₁ loves *their*₁ mother [+generic, ~singular,²⁵ -gendered, +epicene]
- b) “You’re looking for someone₁ who writes what *they*₁ believe in”
(Corpus of contemporary American English, 2012) [+generic, +singular, -gendered, +epicene]

²⁴ This section is based on a post on my research blog (Hekanaho, 2018).

²⁵ The tilde stands for number-neutral/ambiguous.

2. Generic *they* in gendered contexts

- a) “Like any girlfriend₁ with someone *they*₁ care about [...]” (Paterson, 2014: 39) [+generic, ~singular, +/-gendered, -epicene]
- b) [...] for any woman₁, waiting to hear whether or not *they*₁ have breast cancer is an extremely stressful and worrying time (Boseley, 2008 cited in Paterson, 2014) [+generic, ~singular, +/-gendered, -epicene]
- c) “What are some foolproof ways for a woman₁ in *their*₁ 30s to gain weight?” (anonymous online commentator) [+generic, ~singular, +/-gendered, -epicene]
- d) ? “[...] Met this girl₁ at a gig [...]. Asked *her*₁ out, we go out on quite a few dates [...]. I ask *her*₁ to hang again... radio silence. Can someone explain this to me? Legit, I spend all this time getting know someone_{1/2} and this is how *they*_{1/2} choose to end things. [...]” (anonymous reddit) [?generic, +singular, +/-gendered, +/-epicene]

3. Unknown/uncertain gender *they*

- a) Someone₁ phoned you this afternoon, but *they*₁ wouldn't give *their*₁ name (McConnell-Ginet, 2011 [1979]: 198) [+specific, -definite, +singular, +epicene]
- b) I saw someone₁ running away from me, but I didn't see *their*₁ face (see Bjorkman, 2017: 1) [+specific, -definite, +singular, +epicene]
- c) Smith₁ argued that pronouns can only be singular or plural but *they*₁ did not provide much evidence [+specific, +definite, +singular, +epicene]

4. *They* with known binary-identifying people

- a) [video description] “What my [...] baby₁ eats, now *they*₁'re no longer on any breast milk or formula.” (social media content creator) [+specific, +definite, +singular, +epicene]²⁶
- b) A friend₁ of mine told me that *their*₁ dog had died [+specific, -definite, +singular, +epicene]
- c) “My friend₁ left *their*₁ sweater here” (Bjorkman, 2017: 5) [+specific, +definite, +singular, +epicene]
- d) ? “I'll let my cousin₁ introduce *themselves*₁” (Bjorkman, 2017: 2) [+specific, +definite, +singular, -gendered, ?epicene] [context: addressee sees referent]

²⁶ For ethical reasons, I have decided not to provide sources for individual social media content creators or commentators, particularly when the usage is controversial and might attract hateful commentary.

- e) ? “I’ll let my sister₁ [...] introduce *themselves*” (Bjorkman, 2017: 2) [+specific, +definite, +singular, +/-gendered, -epicene] [context: addressee sees referent]
- f) “According to the police report, a woman₁ left *their*₁ purse in shopping cart by accident and when *she*₁ returned in 15 minutes, *her*₁ purse was gone. [...]” [+specific, -definite, +singular, +/-gendered, -epicene] (in a Covington Reporter article, Perez Guzman, 2017)
- g) ? The woman₁ left *their*₁ purse [+specific, +definite, +singular, +/-gendered, -epicene]
- h) * My mother₁ left *their*₁ sweater here [+specific, +definite, +singular, +/-gendered, -epicene]
- i) ? One of the mothers₁ left *their*₁ sweater here [+specific, -definite, +singular, +/-gendered, -epicene] [context: speaker knows which mother]

5. Nonbinary *they*

- a) A friend₁ of mine told me that *their*₁ dog had died [+specific, -definite, +singular, -gendered, +nonbinary] [context: friend is nonbinary]
- b) “My friend₁ left *their*₁ sweater here” (Bjorkman, 2017: 5) [+specific, +definite, +singular, +nonbinary] [context: friend is nonbinary]
- c) Sam₁ drinks *their*₁ coffee black [+specific, +definite, +singular, +nonbinary]
- d) “‘It’s grown out of the process of really seeing how Rocko has grown as an individual and an adult, seeing how Rocko₁ is *their*₁ own person, and not a child,’ [...]” [+specific, +definite, +singular, +nonbinary] (in a New York Times article, Scelfo, 2015)

Type one represents prototypical use of singular *they* in a generic context: *they* is used to refer to a nongendered antecedent such as *a child*, *anyone*, *a writer*, or *someone*. Two subtypes can be distinguished here in terms of notional number, represented by examples 1a) and 1b). Crucially, I am excluding such cases that are notionally plural (*everyone* loves *their* mother).

With example 1a), the antecedent refers generically to the class *children*. This could support a plural interpretation of *they*, but the form is clearly singular – the NP is grammatically singular, and the verb form is overtly singular. Another way to think of notional number of *they* in 1a) is in terms of each child separately loving their mother: child A loves A’s mother; child B loves B’s mother. In this sense, a notionally ambiguous or even singular interpretation is possible. Example 1b), on the other hand, fully supports a singular interpretation, but the person is non-specific, even hypothetical in this case, a member of a subgroup of writers.

Type two provides occurrences of *they* with gendered antecedents, represented by examples 2a–c), while 2d) provides a misfit example, strictly not included in type 2. In examples 2a–c), *they* is used in generic propositions to refer back to a gendered, grammatically singular antecedent. *Any* typically represents number-ambiguous referents, while indefinite NPs are singular. Arguably, such generic references have a notionally plural interpretation, yet this type of usage is still clearly distinguished from plural use of *they* with grammatically plural antecedents (cf. *women* waiting to hear whether *they* have breast cancer).

Nevertheless, there are many other types of uses where *they* is used to refer to a gendered, singular antecedent as well. Example 2d) provides an example of switching between pronouns for (possibly) the same real-life referent. The referent is already identified as a *girl*, finding coreference with *she*; when the textual antecedent changes to *someone*, the pronoun changes to *they*. Indeed, it may be the switch to using an IP that triggers *they* in this case, but there may also be a sudden switch from specific use to generalizing the situation (cf. with example 16 in section 2.1.1).

Type three moves from (mostly) generic references to more specific ones, but what connects the examples 3a–c) is the level of uncertainty concerning the gender of the referent. Example 3a) has often been used as an example of singular usage of *they*, since undeniably the reference of *someone* here is notionally and grammatically singular. The reference is also specific, but perhaps the speaker could not, or did not want to make a gender assessment based on the voice of the caller, hence *they* is used instead. The same sentiment is true for example 3b), with a visual context instead. In both examples, the indefinite pronoun may support the use of *they*. Example 3c) may not be very common, but occasionally *they* is used in present-day academic texts when referring to authors with conventionally gendered names. In some cases, the reason may be the same as with the other examples: the writer does not know or does not want to assume either binary gender with *he* or *she*. However, this usage may also be similar to type 4, if the writer uses *they* simply because they do not deem it necessary to specify gender. Naturally, the use could also be nonbinary, type 5, if the author has indicated their gender as such.

Type four represents novel use of *they* with known, binary-identifying individuals. Bjorkman and Konnelly both provide further examples and discussion (Bjorkman, 2017; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020; see also example by Newman, 1997: 155–156). Examples 4a–c) represent gender-hiding functions of *they*, best exemplified by 4a). The author in 4a) refers to their child as *they*, and they have made it clear that this use is employed to protect the identity of the child by not revealing their name or gender.²⁷ The author consistently employs this approach throughout their videos.²⁸

²⁷ There have also been a few reports of parents wanting to raise their children without assuming their gender, hence choosing to use *they* and proper names that can be used for any gender. In this case, there seems to be no such intention.

²⁸ Discussing this example, I am also employing gender-hiding functions of *they*.

Examples 4b) and c) represent a context in which the gender of the referent may not be known to the addressee, and the speaker does not deem gender relevant information, even though the speaker knows the gender. Both examples 4b) and c) could refer to either a binary-identifying or nonbinary friend (Type 5). Indeed, without knowing the broader context, it is not possible to know which use of *they* is intended in 4b–c). A further difference between 4b) and 4c) is that *a friend* is formally indefinite, while *my friend* is definite. For this reason, it may be that 4b) is acceptable to a wider audience than 4c), but the present study cannot demonstrate this effectively.

Whereas in examples 4a–c) the addressee may not know the gender of the referent, examples 4d–i) represent contexts, in which the gender of the referent is known or assumable to the addressee. Only some of these contexts seem to allow for use of singular *they*.²⁹ Examples 4d) and 4e) represent a situation where the gender is known (or assumable) to both the speaker and the addressee (see also Bjorkman, 2017: 2). Bjorkman suggests that usage such as in 4d) is acceptable to some, but not all speakers, while 4e) would generally be rejected since the textual antecedent is gendered (2017: 2, 10). It may be that the context of introducing a new, previously unknown person, allows reference with *they* for some speakers. But is the genderedness of the antecedent the only reason why 4e) seems unacceptable? Consider examples 4f–i).

Occasionally, I have observed *they* being used in reference to a gendered, specific antecedent (4f). The reference of 4f) is specific, but the textual antecedent is grammatically *indefinite* (*a woman*). This may support the use of *they* even with specific gendered antecedents – an indefinite textual antecedent is more distant than a definite one. In contrast, antecedents that are specific, gendered and formally definite do not seem to allow *they* (4g–h). Whether the use of 4f) generalizes to other types of non-definite textual antecedents (4i) is uncertain.

However, it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly allows *they* with specific and definite antecedents (e.g. 4c). Bjorkman suggests that for speakers who use *they* in this way, gender marking with pronouns has become an optional, non-contrastive feature (2017: 10). This would even support the unusual pronoun choice in 4f), but it does not explain why 4g–h) seem to be unacceptable.

Type five brings us to nonbinary use of *they*. Again, I have included two examples in which the specificity of the textual antecedent varies; *a friend of mine* remains on an indefinite level in 5a), *my friend* makes the reference more specific in 5b), while *Sam* identifies the reference as a specific person in 5c). Example 5d) simply serves to provide an authentic example, similar to 5c).

In nonbinary use, *they* functions similar to gender-specific *he* and *she*. However, importantly, *they* does not index a specific gender identity like *he* presupposes a male identity and *she* a female identity. Instead, in some

²⁹ The assessment of unacceptability is based on difficulty finding any authentic examples for *they* with definite and specific gendered antecedents (e.g. *my mother*).

contexts such as when referring to proper names, *they* broadly suggests an identity falling outside the binary.

While *they* is more than capable of functioning in singular contexts, ambiguity is present between types 4 and 5, illustrated by the identical examples 4c) and 5b). As mentioned, without the relevant extra-linguistic knowledge about the referent of *my friend*, it is impossible to know whether *they* is the friend's chosen pronoun or functioning as a gender-hiding pronoun instead. Such ambiguity in language is not an uncommon feature and need not present an obstacle to using *they* in all its various roles.

The above discussion has served the purpose of distinguishing between different uses of *they*. However, the present study was designed to only explore types 1 and 5 in more detail, and as such further discussion of other types is limited, leaving some questions unanswered.

2.2.3 Different uses of *one*

The generic *one* is an exception to the group of 3PSPs in two main ways. First, it is mostly used generically (an exception would be the royal *one*, see below). Second, the pronominal *one* seems to escape categorizing it as just one type of pronoun. In particular, there seems to be a type of generic *one* that is equivalent to prototypical generic 3PSP usage, which also surfaced from the data of the present study (see Chapter 8). Hence, *one* also deserves some discussion, albeit in a limited fashion.

Wales (1996: 78–84) provides an extensive account of the pronominal *one*, distinguishing three types (see also Moltmann, 2006; Moltmann, 2010). Historically, *one* can be seen as a replacement for generic epicene *man* (cf. German and Swedish use), but it only appeared in subject case, whereas *one's* and *oneself* are available in present-day English (Wales, 1996: 80–81). In this indefinite function, type 1 *one* functions as an unmarked agent, lacking egocentricity (example 1).

- (1) “What *one_i* calls social conscience is often and why not a way of equating the need to give... [...]” (Radio 4, in Wales, 1996: 81)

However, *one* has also acquired functions in which it can be viewed as egocentric, similar to generic *you* (type 2, example 2), or referring to the self similarly to *I*, associated with the British royalty (type 3, royal *one*, example 3).

- (2) “*I_i* don't feel that *one_i* can ever be a therapist to somebody that *you_i* are so closely involved with emotionally [...]” (Wales, 1996: 81)
- (3) “It was a sad moment leaving *one_i*'s family on the tarmac, waving *one_i* goodbye” (Prince Charles, BBC, 26 July 1981, in Wales, 1996: 82)

The function of *one* in such egocentric usage may be that it allows the speaker to detach themselves to a greater extent than when using first person pronouns; Moltmann calls this detached self-reference (2010: 440).

I suggest that there is a further type of usage when *one* appears in a position typically occupied by a 3PSP (example 7). To illustrate the distinctions, consider Moltmann's examples in which *one* (example 4) is replaced with *someone* (example 5). This replacement test indicates that in example 4, the first *one* functions similarly to *someone*, as an antecedent to the following pronoun. However, in example 5, Moltmann has also switched the second pronoun, from *one* to *he*. I cannot address whether example 6, a modification of example 5, would also be considered idiomatic, but, the data of the present study produced *one* in similar contexts, in reference to *someone* (example 7). In example 7, *one* could be replaced by more typical 3PSPs, e.g. *herself*. Only in such contexts, then, is *one* viewed to function as a 3PSP, replaceable by more typical ones (*he, she*). More examples are provided in Chapter 8.

(4) "If *one_i* is 2 meters tall, *one_i* is tall."

(5) "If *someone_i* / a person is two meters tall, *he_i* is tall." (Moltmann, 2010: 465).

(6) ? If *someone_i* is 2 meters tall, *one_i* is tall.

(7) "A *successful person_i* is *someone_i* who has achieved happiness for *oneself_i* and caused others to gain happiness in the progress [sic]." (present study example)

2.3 GENERIC AND NONBINARY PRONOUNS IN USE

This section provides an overview of previous, mostly empirical studies on generic and nonbinary pronouns. While there is ample research on generic pronouns over the past 40 decades, nonbinary pronouns have received more attention only in recent years, hence having accumulated fewer studies thus far.

2.3.1 Generic pronouns

A selection of participant and corpus based usage studies is reviewed below; for further examples, see for example Newman (1997), and Paterson (2014). Studies on the perception of generic pronouns are reserved for section 4.3.

Early studies on generic pronouns and epicene uses employed cloze tests with student samples (e.g. Hyde, 1984; Martyna, 1978). The tests typically included measurements of pronoun use in different (stereotypically) gendered and nongendered contexts, along with filler questions. The results demonstrated that *he* was the most frequently used pronoun in both epicene and male-typical contexts, and other pronouns (*they, he or she*) were used infrequently (ibid.).

Later studies also explored generic 3PSPs in personal writing. Meyers studied American college students' (n=392) use of generic pronouns in their reflective essays written on the topic of "What is an educated person?"

(Meyers, 1990: 231). Three later studies have adopted the design in online surveys (recruiting mostly American/Canadian participants): Earp asked participants (n=64) to write about “The Moral Individual” (2012); LaScotte’s study (n=38) used “the ideal student” (2016), and Loughlin used “an ideal student” (n=623) (2019). While *he* and *he or she* were among the most used generic pronouns in Meyers (1990) and Earp (2012), in both LaScotte (2016) and Loughlin (2019), singular *they* is the most commonly used pronoun by far; although in Meyers’ study, *they* was almost as common as *he*.

While the above studies have concerned native inner circle English varieties, Pauwels (2010) reports on a survey study (n=900) conducted with Winter in 2005, which included outer circle Englishes as well. Notably, their survey targeted supporters of nonsexist language. The participants were L1 and L2 speakers from Australia, the UK, USA, Singapore, and the Philippines. The results indicated that in epicene contexts outer circle participants used *they* considerably less frequently (16–19%) than inner circle participants (49%–73%); outer circle speakers used more *he or she* (45–62%) and *he* (13–29%) than did inner circle participants (17–33% used *he or she*, 5–11% used *he*). Generic *she* was altogether infrequent (2010: 28). Pauwels notes that outer circle English, and L2 speakers tend to be influenced by (prescriptive) “linguistic norms and rules” more so than inner circle native speakers (2010: 27).

Several corpus studies have also explored generic 3PSPs. Corpus studies, however, face some additional challenges. As Adami points out, corpus studies cannot fully explore “other approaches”, such as elimination and pluralization (2009: 288). Thus, comparisons typically only include pronominal approaches (cf. Meyers, 1990). Furthermore, distinguishing between generic and specific use, as well as singular and plural use of *they*, requires either a focused context (e.g. IPs are typically followed by a generic pronoun) and/or manual inspection of occurrences (e.g. Laitinen, 2007: 109). In addition, corpus studies have often focused on heavily edited genres, including newspaper and academic writing. Such genres generally suffer from (external) prescriptive forces, and at the very least, represent well thought-out writing, and likely conscious pronominal choices (e.g. Adami, 2009: 286–287).

Paterson’s study on British English using the BE06 corpus also demonstrated the overwhelming prevalence of *they* in comparison to *he* in epicene contexts (2014: 74–75). Paterson further highlights that *they* is used across various contexts, with all types of antecedents, while the use of *he* seems to be restricted to indefinite antecedents (ibid.). Similar results were gained in Newman’s study on spoken English, based on TV interview transcripts (1997: 118–120). *They* appeared in 60% of the cases with epicene tokens, and *he* only in 25% of the instances (p. 154, 205).

In a study using the BNC (*British National Corpus*), Laitinen explored 3PSPs in fiction (“imaginative texts”) and nonfiction (“informative texts”) (Laitinen, 2007: 109). The focus was on generic *he* and *they* with epicene, indefinite anaphora. Overall, *they* was more prevalent across both genres in

present-day English, although more common in fiction. *He* was much more infrequent in both genres, with only a slight difference in favour of nonfiction (p. 111). However, the results may also reflect favoring *they* with IPs (see section below).

Both Baranowski (2002) and Balhorn (2009) found singular *they* to be the most commonly employed generic pronoun in newspaper corpora. Other pronouns were infrequent, but, with some variation in context, *he* was the second most common pronoun in both studies (ibid.) In addition, while Balhorn surveyed U.S. newspapers (2009), Baranowski used both an American and British newspaper, concluding that generic singular *they* is more commonly used by British writers than American ones, while the opposite is true for *he or she* (2002: 394; see also Paterson, 2020). Similarly, Adami found that *he* was less frequent in British English than in American English academic texts, yet generic singular *they* was not used in either variety (2009: 293).

Indeed, one genre seems to be different from those explored in the studies mentioned here: written academic texts. Using relevant sections from the *Brown Family* (ICAME collection), the *British National Corpus* (BNC), the *American National Corpus* (ANC), and the *International Corpus of English*, Adami found that *he* was more commonly employed than *they* (Adami, 2009: 282). Especially when compared to studies on non-academic genres, Adami's results demonstrate that prescriptions run deep in academic writing (2009: 294–295). Nevertheless, present-day investigation might reveal that singular *they* has managed to penetrate the academic genre as well.

Adami made a further comparison between “pre-battle texts” from the 1961 (prior to the feminist objections to epicene use of *he*) with “post-battle texts” in the 1990's, to explore the effect of nonsexist language reforms promoted from the 1970's onwards. The analysis showed a decrease of *he*, and an increase of *he or she*, yet singular *they* only occurred a few times in the 1990's dataset (2009: 290–291). Baranowski observed a similar trend in newspaper data, but with singular *they* as the most frequent generic pronoun in the mid 1990's (2002: 392).

Overall, these studies demonstrate the overwhelming prevalence of generic singular *they* in present-day use; however, they also show that intended epicene use of *he* has not been completely eliminated (e.g. Paterson, 2014: 147). Before moving on, two explanatory factors ought to be considered briefly: speaker/writer gender, and antecedent type.

When gender has been considered, the results have demonstrated that female writers use *he* in epicene contexts less often than male writers (Balhorn, 2009: 401; Laitinen, 2007: 252–260; Martyna, 1978: 134; Meyers, 1990). In Balhorn and Laitinen, female writers used more singular *they* instead, but this was not the case with Meyers, where there was no difference with *they*; the female participants instead used the construction *he/she* and even *she* more often than male participants (ibid.). Only in Newman's study was there no

difference based on gender, however, the study included relatively few different speakers (1997: 207–208).

Antecedent type has been hypothesized to affect the choice of pronoun as well (e.g. Whitley, 1978; Balhorn, 2009; Baranowski, 2002). The hypotheses have relied on notional number, suggesting that prototypical 3PSPs appear with notionally singular antecedents, while the “inherently plural” *they* is favored by notionally plural antecedents.

While *they* has generally been shown to be the most frequent pronoun with all types of antecedents (Paterson, 2014: 59–60), there does seem to be some variation. In generic contexts, IPs and QNPs in particular seem to favor singular *they*, while singular NPs favor *they* the least, showing more variation with gendered pronouns instead (e.g. Balhorn, 2009: 404–410; Baranowski, 2002: 383–385; Paterson, 2014: 59–60). Newman had similar results, further highlighting that conventionally singular pronouns were not used with notionally plural but grammatically singular antecedents (1997: 207).

In addition, there seems to be some variation among the IPs. The notionally plural IPs (*everyone/body*) seem to favor *they* more than notionally ambiguous or singular IPs (*anyone/body*, *someone/body*), while the latter have shown more variation with gendered pronouns (Balhorn, 2009: 397; Laitinen, 2007: 253). Furthermore, Laitinen’s study suggests that the [-one] forms favour *he* while the distribution of *they* and *he* is more equal with [-body]. The finding, however, is restricted to the non-fiction genre, representing more formal genres (Laitinen, 2007: 112–122).

While the above studies focus on usage, some attention has also been directed at how pronouns are processed. Generally, the studies have indicated that there is a (small) processing cost when using *they* with singular antecedents, especially if they are also specific (Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 1997; Sanford & Filik, 2007). In addition, there seems to be a processing cost also when there is a mismatch between the (stereotypical) gender of the antecedent and the pronoun (Doherty & Conklin, 2017: 730; also Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 1997). The processing aspect, however, falls beyond the scope of the present study and is not considered further (for some further discussion, see Conrod, 2019: 86–89).

Furthermore, excluded from the above discussion are generic neopronouns, due to the simple reason that these pronouns never breached mainstream usage. However, it is important to recognize that various generic neopronouns (e.g. *ze*, *ou*, *ne*, *heesh*) have been suggested at least for a few centuries (see examples in Baron, 1981; Baron, 2018; Baron, 2020). While these pronouns intended for generic use failed to gain any momentum, some of them have been adopted and repurposed as nonbinary pronouns in the 21st century. The distinction is important since the “problem” with English supposedly lacking an appropriate epicene pronoun is distinct from the need for nonbinary pronouns; as such, the failure of the generic neopronouns should not be held against the nonbinary neopronouns. Nevertheless, as the

present study suggests, it still seems that an already established pronoun is the one that prevails in both functions.

2.3.2 Nonbinary pronouns

While there is ample research on generic pronouns, nonbinary pronouns have not yet been as extensively researched, due to their relatively recent emergence (early acknowledgments include McConnell-Ginet, 2013; Stryker, 2008). Much of the recent and ongoing research focuses on innovative use of *they* more generally, including nonbinary use as the latest extension (e.g. Ackerman, 2019; Conrod, 2019; Hernandez, 2020; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020).

Most relevant to the present study, some participant-based studies have measured the acceptability (or “naturalness”, “grammaticality”) of generic versus specific use of singular *they*. As a part of a larger study, Conrod (2019) measured naturalness of *they* (as well as *he* and *she*, excluded from consideration here) with both proper names and generic antecedents (QNPs and DNPs) in an online survey (n=754) (2019: 103–106). Overall, *they* was rated higher with a generic antecedent (e.g. “The ideal barista”), when compared to a proper name that could refer to any gender (2019: 109). Furthermore, younger participants found specific use of *they* (with proper names) more natural than older participants (2019: 111–112), and transgender participants found *they* more natural than other participants (2019: 114).

Similarly, in two online survey studies (n=96, n=222), Bradley has found that generic use of singular *they* is rated more grammatical than specific use (with proper names) (2019, 2020). In the earlier study, *ze* was also tested, being rated lower than *they* in both functions (2019: 51).

Furthermore, in an MA study, online survey participants (n=722) generally accepted different types of singular use of *they* in generally described contexts, when measured with Likert-style statements (e.g. “It is generally acceptable to use ‘they’ to refer to a single person”) (Hernandez, 2020: 50–53). However, since proper names were not tested and the measurement type was also different from the above studies and from the present study, the results are not comparable.

Nonbinary neopronouns have not been included in many studies. Two recent MA online survey studies indicate that nonbinary *they* is more common and acceptable than the neopronouns (Lund Eide, 2018; Parker, 2017). In Lund Eide’s study, nearly 80% of the participants (n= 136) reported willingness to use nonbinary *they* (in reference to someone else), while only about half were willing to employ neopronouns (2018: 42–43). In Parker’s study, LGBT+ participants (n=293) rated *they* more natural than the neopronouns; however, nonbinary participants rated neopronouns more natural than other participants (2017: 19).

2.3.3 Hypotheses

Based on previous studies, the following hypotheses were formed, aligned with the research questions introduced in Chapter 1. The hypotheses will be further refined and discussed in Part IV.

In generic contexts that are otherwise epicene and nongendered:

- (i) Singular *they* is the most common 3PSP (e.g. Balhorn, 2009)
- (ii) Gendered pronouns are used rarely due to changing norms, but when, then
 - a. *he* is more common than *she* (Meyers, 1990; Earp, 2012)
 - b. *he or she* constructions are more common than either *he* or *she* alone (Meyers, 1990; Earp, 2012)
 - c. cis male participants will use *he* more often than other genders (e.g. Meyers, 1990; Balhorn, 2009); transgender participants will use nongendered and inclusive options more often than cis participants
 - d. higher education supports adherence to prescriptive norms and use of gendered pronouns (e.g. academic texts, Adami, 2009)
 - e. older participants will adhere to previous norms and use gendered pronouns more often than younger participants (as per Apparent Time Hypothesis, Labov, 1994: 43–72; see Chapter 3)
 - f. due to greater conformance to prescriptive norms, non-native speakers of English use gendered pronouns more often than native speakers of English (e.g. Pauwels, 2010: 27)
 - g. residential area affects pronoun use; “metropolitan” speakers use inclusive pronouns more often than speakers from more “rural” areas (Meyers, 1990: 234–235)
 - h. conservative values support using gendered pronouns and resisting change, while liberal values support using singular *they* (e.g. Cameron, 1995; see Chapter 4)³⁰
 - i. dismissive attitudes towards sexist language use support use of gendered pronouns, while supporters of nonsexist language use more gender-inclusive options (e.g. Swim, Mallett & Stangor, 2004: 121–126; see Chapter 4).

No formal hypotheses were formed for nonbinary pronouns due to lack of previous studies, but some trends with gender and age were nevertheless expected. Due to sharing in-group membership, transgender participants were expected to show more support for nonbinary pronouns than cisgender participants. Older participants were expected to be more resistant to change

³⁰ There has been some controversy regarding Cameron’s commentary on transgender topics on social media; I do not subscribe to the views she seems to be expressing. However, Cameron’s scientific contribution to linguistic research is considerable, and as such, I have decided not to omit references to her work.

due to being less familiar with new uses, while younger participants were expected to be more accustomed to and accepting of nonbinary pronouns.

3 LANGUAGE ATTITUDES, IDEOLOGIES AND CHANGE

One of the key aspects of this study concerns language attitudes: how people view pronouns. The aim of this chapter is to better understand the relationship between language attitudes and ideologies, and language change from a theoretical perspective. Before doing so, I want to briefly consider two related terms that are relevant for the discussion to follow: discourse, and discursive practices.

While discourse can refer broadly to language use, in Critical Discourse Studies, it is used to refer “to a specific set of meanings expressed through particular forms and uses which give expression to particular institutions or social groups” (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017: 23, citing Kress, 1989). We can thus talk of discourses relating to a specific topic, such as discourse(s) on gender (ibid.). Furthermore, discourses can be realized through different semiotic systems, including verbal language and visual sign systems (ibid.). Importantly, discourses are not mere reflections of social reality, but instead it is through discourses that social reality and knowledge is created and reproduced (e.g. Bacchi & Bonham, 2014; Reisigl, 2017: 84).

Discursive practices are then particular acts involved in creating said social reality and knowledge. While the term “discursive practice” is sometimes used in a strict Foucauldian way to refer to practices of knowledge formation that exclude language practices (e.g. Bacchi & Bonham, 2014), here it is used to encompass both non-linguistic and linguistic practices that create knowledge, social reality and meaning (e.g. Bacchi & Bonham, 2014; Reisigl, 2017: 84). One way to think of the relationship between linguistic and discursive practices is that the latter exist on a more abstract level while the former refer to specific linguistic constructions. As such, a particular discursive practice (such as identity construction) might be realized through several different linguistic practices (such as identity labels, pronouns, a stereotypically gendered way of speaking), as well as through non-linguistic practices (such as clothing and behavior) (e.g. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005: 589).

3.1 ATTITUDES AND IDEOLOGIES

Both attitudes and ideologies have been used in somewhat different meanings, and sometimes without further defining what is meant by these terms (noted by e.g. Baker, 1992: 8; Laihonen, 2008: 669; Rosseel, 2017: 6). In this study, in the broadest sense, attitudes refer to *personal views, opinions, beliefs, feelings*, etc. In contrast, ideologies can briefly be described as *community-level naturalized beliefs* (e.g. Milroy, L., 2004: 309). Ideologies are further conceptualized as abstract, upper-level constructs governing lower-level attitudes. In this sense, attitudes are considered to be local, overt

manifestations of ideologies (e.g. Milroy, L., 2004: 308; Sallabank, 2013: 64; see also Van Dijk, 2006: 116). This relationship is considered further below.

There is also another relevant, narrower definition for attitudes: an attitude is understood as an evaluative (positive/negative) orientation towards a social object (e.g. Garrett, 2010: 20). Attitudes in this narrower sense are abstract constructs which cannot be directly observed, instead they need to be inferred from verbal and/or non-verbal behavior (e.g. Baker, 1992: 11). While this definition seems to be widely used, there are different views on the causes and triggers of attitudes as well as the relationship of attitudes to behavior — such questions fall beyond the scope of this study (see Baker, 1992: 12–16; Garrett, 2010: 23–27; Oskamp & Schultz, 2005: 9–10).

The narrower attitude construct is often employed with quantitative measurements which goal is to represent a person's orientation towards a particular phenomenon with one easily interpretable value (e.g. Likert scales). Such is the case in the present study as well, as some additional aspects were measured with attitude scales (such as attitudes towards transgender individuals). The broader definition may even be viewed to include the narrower construct of attitudes.

The main focus of attitudes in the present study is on attitudes in the broader sense, and more specifically on attitudes about language — language attitudes. The term language attitudes has also suffered from similar definitional issues as discussed above, leading to the introduction of the term *language regard* to cover “nonspecialist belief about and reaction to language use” (Preston, 2011: 10–11; see also Preston, 2018). Bringing together different meanings of attitudes, this term might be helpful in some contexts, but for the present study, language attitudes is preferred for being more widely and intuitively understood.

It is further acknowledged that in some other contexts, it may be useful to distinguish between some of the notions included in the broad definition of (language) attitudes (see for example definitions by Garrett 2010: 30–35). For example, opinions might be conceptualized as overt beliefs lacking an affective component (Baker, 1992: 14; Garrett, 2010: 32). However, for the purposes of the present study, such level of detail is not necessary: it can even be argued that such notions as *opinions* or *beliefs* are simply somewhat different positions of the same spectrum, “manifestations of overall predispositions” (Sallabank, 2013: 64).

One aspect that is relevant to the present study concerns the implicit/explicit nature of attitudes. Sometimes this binary is viewed to correspond to non-verbal/ verbalizable attitudes (e.g. Carruthers, 2018: 51–52), while others relate the distinction to that of overt/covert, conscious/subconscious, or even private/public (e.g. Rosseel, 2017: 7). In simplistic terms, explicit attitudes are thought to be conscious, reflective, and even controllable, while implicit attitudes are unconscious, uncontrollable and unreflective (e.g. Rydell & McConnell, 2006: 995; but for further arguments, see Carruthers, 2018).

Conventionally it has been proposed that implicit and explicit attitudes do not always match, particularly since explicit attitudes may be affected by social desirability, by the prevalent social norms and moral values (e.g. Carruthers, 2018: 55–59). For example, a person might have implicit sexist attitudes, but they might express explicit egalitarian attitudes instead, as an act of “reputation-management” (Carruthers, 2018: 59). Carruthers further argues that the mismatch is not always necessarily between implicit and explicit attitudes as such, but between different competing attitudes, e.g. sexist views and an evaluation that all people are equal (Carruthers, 2018: 59). What is most relevant in the context of the present study is that what is explicitly expressed may not correspond to how a person truly feels.

To now consider the role of ideologies further, it is acknowledged that somewhat different definitions exist for this concept as well. At a rudimentary level, ideologies can be viewed as “sets of beliefs and values belonging to particular social groups” (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017: 23). Other formulations have highlighted the representative function of ideologies. For example, Van Dijk considers ideologies as social representations of a group, forming the group identity through shared beliefs (Van Dijk, 2006: 116). Language ideologies are sometimes defined slightly differently.

In the broadest sense, language ideologies concern the way we think about language (e.g. Seargeant, 2007: 348). Silverstein defines language ideologies as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (1979: 193). In this sense, language ideologies provide (folk) explanations for language use. While building on Silverstein’s definition, Milroy’s focus is somewhat different: language ideologies are “thoroughly naturalized sets of beliefs about language intersubjectively held by members of speech communities” (Milroy, L., 2004: 309). For Milroy, naturalization seems to be a key aspect; she posits that ideologies are typically so deeply rooted and naturalized as to become (nearly) invisible (2004: 318–319). Such naturalization concerns ideologies at large as well: once ideologies become shared widely enough, they are perceived as “common sense” or “truth” within large communities (Van Dijk, 2006: 117). Van Dijk suggests that when this happens, common beliefs lose their ideological nature (*ibid.*). For example, women’s rights were the ideological basis of the feminist movements, but gender equality has now become largely accepted, at least on the surface (*ibid.*). One might still view such common beliefs as ideologically loaded, and indeed the same sentiment might be viewed as “knowledge” or “truth” in one context but as a belief in another (e.g. Van Dijk, 2006: 131), for example the gender binary was (previously) accepted as a “fact”, but it seems clear now that the basis was always ideological (see section 4.1).

As is evident from these definitions, language ideologies are broadly about language users’ beliefs about language in relation to the social context (e.g. Kroskrity, 2000: 5). Indeed, as mentioned, ideologies are not merely ideas that an individual holds, but instead they represent shared beliefs, values, and

interests of a social group (e.g. Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017; Kroskrity, 2000: 8; Van Dijk, 2006: 116). As such, particular ideologies are related to the social context in which they reside, and they can only be understood in relation to the particular social, historical and political context (e.g. Milroy, L., 2004: 319; Rosa & Burdick, 2016). It follows that different communities may conceptualize the same language phenomenon in widely different ways (Milroy, L., 2004: 320). Yet, there is variation even within communities: language ideologies are “profitably conceived as multiple because of the multiplicity of meaningful social divisions (class, gender, clan, elites, generations, and so on) within sociocultural groups [...]” (Kroskrity, 2000: 12). Members might also accept or reject local ideologies to varying degrees (ibid.: 18).

While ideologies are connected to social groups, these groups need not be strictly distinguishable, nor do they need to be heterogeneous (Van Dijk, 2006: 119–120). For example, “feminists” may be perceived as one social group with an ideological basis, divided by space and time but united with similar core beliefs. On the other hand, not all collective groups share an ideology but may be united by practical matters instead (ibid.).

Ideologies also serve various other social functions. For example, they offer the means “to organize and ground the social representations shared by the members of (ideological) groups” (Van Dijk, 2006: 117). In addition, ideologies are employed to “promote, protect, and legitimate” the groups’ interests (Kroskrity, 2000: 8) — or resist particular social structures and power relationships (e.g. Van Dijk, 2006: 117).

Furthermore, ideologies often remain unnamed, so deeply naturalized as to not be even recognized as ideologies (e.g. Milroy, L., 2004: 318–319). Yet, particularly prevalent, powerful or maybe controversial ones may become widely known, organized under labels like feminism, socialism or neoliberalism (e.g. Van Dijk, 2006: 118). Indeed, ideologies are also driving forces in shaping discourses surrounding such notions (e.g. Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017: 23; Van Dijk, 2006: 117).

Ideologies are further considered to be relatively stable; they are acquired gradually and change slowly (Van Dijk, 2006: 116–117). On an individual level, continuous experiences and discourses may lead to changes, but changes at the group level are generally even slower (ibid.). Furthermore, the level of awareness of one’s own and others’ language ideologies varies (e.g. Kroskrity, 2000: 18–20, Van Dijk, 2006: 119); the same is true for attitudes. For example, people are generally more aware of language elements that are familiar to them, such as referential nouns, which “makes them more available for folk awareness and possible folk theorizing than, say, a rule for marking ‘same subject’ as part of verb morphology” (Kroskrity, 2000: 20–21). Silverstein also notes that linguistic forms have “multiple indexical values” for language users, regardless of whether users themselves are aware of such variation (1985: 256).

To reiterate, ideologies can be thought as abstract yet fundamental elements that control and organize lower level attitudes (e.g. Milroy, L., 2004: 308; Sallabank, 2013: 64; Van Dijk, 2006: 116, 118). A further distinction is that attitudes are personal, while ideologies are shared beliefs of a community (e.g. Van Dijk, 2006: 116, 118). Attitudes are further viewed as manifestations of underlying ideologies; in this sense, ideologies transcend specific linguistic forms or even discursive practices, but they may be inferred from such usages, for example through verbalized attitudes.

As regards studying language attitudes, the focus has often been on language varieties and regional variation, i.e. attitudes towards different languages and varieties (e.g. Baker, 1992: 2). However, attitudes towards language are manifested at all levels of language, including spelling, words, grammar, pronunciation, dialects — and pronouns (e.g. Garrett, 2010: 2).

Importantly, language attitudes are not just about the forms of language or how something “sounds” (“the inherent value hypothesis”), but are instead connected to the groups of people associated with particular language use (“the imposed norm hypothesis”, e.g. Garrett, 2010: 5; Rosa & Burdick, 2016: 104). Similarly, language ideologies are also not about “just language”, but instead “they envision and enact ties of language to identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology” (Woolard, 1998: 20). In other words, language ideologies and attitudes connect language use to particular social groups, to how the groups themselves are perceived (ibid.). Such connections between language use and particular groups, regardless of strength, may also be (partly) imagined, or largely stereotypical.

While the connection of language attitudes to specific social groups is most evident with attitudes towards different regional dialects, attitudes need not be directed at languages or dialects at large, and they need not concern regionally connected groups of people. Indeed, as mentioned, certain lexical and even grammatical elements can be connected to a specific social group in people’s minds, and the group of users may only be connected loosely, for example based on (imagined) ideological connections. For example, the present study will demonstrate that using the generic *she* is associated with being feminist, a distinct yet imagined group of users.

While there are many more nuances to the study of attitudes and ideologies, particularly two more aspects concerning the inferences one can make from (verbalized) attitudes are relevant to the present study. First, while attitudes are often learned over a time span, attitudinal evaluations can also be formed on the spot when a person is confronted with a new topic, for example when filling in a survey (e.g. Garrett, 2010: 29–30). Such evaluations are sometimes described as “non-attitudes” (ibid.). The viewpoint seems to be that such occurrences are not “real attitudes” since they are formed for a specific purpose and might not endure beyond that specific context. However, unlike ideologies, attitudes in general are not stable constructs, but indeed can change and fluctuate throughout a person’s life, perhaps in response to different social influences or even external demands (see e.g. Eaton et al.,

2009; Baker, 1992: 97–106). As such, it may be impossible to distinguish between “real attitudes” and “non-attitudes”, particularly with synchronic data.

Second, while it has been proposed above that attitudes can be inferred from discursive practices, such approaches deserve some criticism as well. Particularly viewing expressions about language as “direct reflections of deeply held beliefs” is considered problematic since it dismisses other aspects of performativity (Rosa & Burdick, 2016: 107). For example, speakers may have various reasons, such as social desirability, for expressing particular attitudes that they do not in fact possess, as discussed above. As such, drawing direct links between overtly expressed attitudes and underlying beliefs or ideologies may lead to false inferences (see also e.g. Van Dijk, 2006: 124).

3.2 LANGUAGE CHANGE AND PRONOUN PRESCRIPTIONS

The present study tracks ongoing changes in pronouns with synchronic data. As such, a brief overview of some relevant mechanisms of language change is warranted (for a more extensive account, see e.g. Labov, 1994; 2001; 2010; Kiesling, 2011).

First, the Apparent Time Hypothesis posits that synchronic data can reveal ongoing changes when considering speakers of different ages. The change is inferred from differences between younger and older generations; younger speakers are hypothesized to reflect ongoing changes, while older speakers represent conservative usage (Labov, 1994: 43–72; Cukor-Avila & Bailey, 2013; see also discussion by Conrod, 2019: section 3.1.1). One potential issue with making inferences of change from synchronic data is that it may be difficult to account for individual changes (see e.g. discussion by Conrod, 2019). Particularly with the ongoing changes in the pronoun system, many speakers of different ages may presently be learning new ways to use pronouns.

Second, the study deals with changes in a grammatical class. Generally, grammatical changes occur gradually, and subconsciously; language users typically do not consciously decide to start using grammatical elements in a new way (e.g. Kiesling, 2011: 172). However, third person singular pronouns in the present-day context may present an exception, not the least because these pronouns do carry meaning similar to lexical items, as was established in Chapter 2. Nevertheless, adoption of new pronouns or even new uses is likely more difficult than the addition of new lexical words. This is not to imply that changing basic lexicon would be common or easy either (see Greenhill et al., 2017), but new words are being introduced and adopted continuously, thus language users are likely more used to this phenomenon.

As already implied, changes in language may happen consciously or (largely) subconsciously, or they may start subconsciously and raise above the level of awareness at a later stage. In Labov’s terminology, *changes from above*

are such that are introduced by dominant social classes, often explicitly and publicly, while *changes from below* first appear in (vernacular) speech and typically go unnoticed until changes are already nearing completion (Labov, 1994: 78). A further distinguishing feature is that *changes from above* are typically led by social factors, while *changes from below* are typically driven by language-internal factors (ibid.).

Introducing new elements into a language can also be considered within the broader framework of “diffusion of innovations” (Rogers, 1962; discussed by Stuart-Smith & Timmins, 2010: 43–44). When encountering innovations, individuals engage in a multi-step process, leading either to rejecting or adopting the innovation (Stuart-Smith & Timmins, 2010: 43). Individuals may also present various stances towards innovations, ranging from early acceptance to persistent skepticism (Rogers, 1962: 247–251; discussed also by Stuart-Smith & Timmins, 2010: 44–45). The introduction of linguistic innovations, however, differs from many other types of innovations in that explicit and/or public communication about them often occurs only at later stages of the change, if at all (e.g. Stuart-Smith & Timmins, 2010: 53; cf. changes from below/above).

To now consider pronouns, there are several factors affecting the ongoing changes. First, while people generally have greater awareness of the lexicon than of grammatical features (e.g. Kroskrity, 2000: 20–21), the widespread pronoun discussions in various contexts (e.g. media, educational institutions) have undoubtedly increased awareness over 3PSPs. However, it is unclear to what extent (if any) greater awareness mitigates the difficulty of changing pronoun use at an individual level (e.g. Zimman, 2017: 93).³¹ At the very least, people experience changing their pronoun use as something difficult to do, and they may even experience requests to make changes, such as using nonbinary pronouns, as an invasive request to change their grammar (e.g. Darwin, 2017: 330).

Second, related to greater awareness, the ongoing changes in 3PSPs are ideologically motivated. The explicit introduction and advocacy, however, is likely not enough to guarantee success, instead changes in the underlying ideologies are necessary as well. Indeed, growing gender equality likely supported many of the nonsexist language reforms (see Chapter 4). Similarly, the successful adoption of nonbinary pronouns likely necessitates abandoning the false gender binary ideology.

3.2.1 Role of attitudes and ideologies in language change

Attitudes, and the ideologies behind them, are often leading forces behind changes in language (e.g. Garrett, 2010: 15; Milroy, L., 2004). In this section,

³¹ Such difficulties are present in L2 contexts as well. In my experience, even highly fluent English-speaking native Finnish speakers may continue to make mistakes with gendered pronouns. Hypothetically, one might even write a PhD thesis in English, and still once in a blue moon find themselves referring to one’s sister as a *he*.

the effect of attitudes and ideologies on language is first discussed at a general level, after which the attention turns more specifically to (explicit) language regulation.

At a fundamental level, language ideologies and attitudes guide speakers' language use, creating variation and change (e.g. Milroy, L., 2004). Such variation and change begins at the level of individual speakers, through conscious and subconscious adjustments in one's linguistic behavior (Stuart-Smith & Timmins, 2010: 40). Since language is used in interaction, such adjustments reflect and relate to how others use language as well.

The role of social groups is integral to variation and change, as one way in which variation occurs is through identity construction. In short, identities are constructed in language by conforming or distancing oneself from different types of language use, indexed to particular social groups (see below) (e.g. Milroy, L., 2004: 324–325; Stuart-Smith & Timmins, 2010). In other words, speakers use language to identify themselves as members of different social groups, simultaneously distancing themselves from others. It is through such continuous acts of conformity and divergence that particular social groups become salient, while others are considered more peripheral (e.g. Milroy, L., 2004: 324–325). To simplify matters, the language use of salient social groups gains prestige, and may become widely modeled after by others, leading to language change, whereas more peripheral language use may fade away (*ibid.*). While social groups may gain prestige within communities, within such groups, there may be central figures, often with extended ties beyond the community, that lead language change (e.g. Labov, 2001: 364). Such actors have a centering function, (re)producing elements and values towards which more peripheral members orient themselves (e.g. Blommaert, 2006: 520; Silverstein, 1998), an aspect not further explored in the present study.

In addition to such interspeaker variation, intraspeaker variation also often occurs through similar mechanisms. Such variation may occur throughout one's lifetime, along with changes in identity, but may also be context-dependent. For example, different parts of one's identity (e.g. gender, social class) may become more salient in different contexts (e.g. Milroy, L., 2004: 325). Based on such variation, one's language use may also change from context to context. Other factors that contribute to intraspeaker variation include choice of register (e.g. formal vs. casual) depending on the context or based on the audience (e.g. Kiesling, 2011: 93–94). Indeed, for Blommaert, one of the key functions of language is “[...] providing contextual cues about who speaks, in what mode, on which topic, and under what circumstances” (Blommaert, 2006: 512). Furthermore, there is also a subsequent element of personal choice, as each speaker has a personal relationship with language, and particular language use may symbolize somewhat different things to different speakers (e.g. Kiesling, 2011: 89).

Such mechanisms are (largely) explained by language use being indexical, that is, linguistic items or forms are linked or associated to particular phenomena or aspects, further linked to particular social groups (e.g. Jones,

2016: 213–214; Kiesling, 2011: 105; Milroy, L., 2004: 319–325; Silverstein, 1985). In addition, particular language use may also be indexed to other contextual factors, such as the socio-cultural setting or topic (e.g. Kroskrity, 2000). For example, some items may index different levels of formality. Such indexes are not always recognized by the speech community (*first-order indexes*), but once recognized at a metapragmatic level, the link between the form and the association may become more fixed, enregistered (*second-order indexes*). This enregistration of a particular form may develop so far as to become an expectation (*third-order indexes*) (Kiesling, 2011: 106–108, discussing Silverstein, 2003). It is particularly at the second-order stage that ideologies come into play: once a speech community begins to notice a particular linguistic form, the meaning attached to it is shaped by dominant ideologies, concerning standardness and correctness, for example (Kiesling, 2011: 108). The relationship may also be seen as mutually constitutive, if one views ideologies as emerging from second-order indexical processes (Milroy, L., 2004: 320).

3.2.2 Regulating and prescribing language use

While ideologies may be a driving force with many types of language change, they are particularly evident in attempts to regulate language, for example through standard language ideology (e.g. Milroy, J., 2001; Seargeant, 2007). Examples of perceived authorities regulating language include (prescriptive) dictionaries and grammar books, or in some cases, even specific language academies. Similarly, language is also strongly regulated in education and in any contexts in which language policies are followed (e.g. Seargeant, 2007: 348; also Milroy, J., 2001: 539). Furthermore, language use itself can be viewed as “intrinsically normative”, in that language users themselves make assessments and regulate language use (e.g. Blommaert, 2006: 520). In this sense, even the daily choices that a language user makes can be seen to have a regulative function. More concretely, language users may regulate language use in social groups by correcting what they perceive to be erroneous language use (e.g. Seargeant, 2007: 358), often appealing to perceived language authorities or to the notion of standard language.

Indeed, an important concept for language regulation is that of standard language. While standard language is often regarded as somehow neutral, the concept itself is already ideologically loaded at its very core — that there should be only one standard to measure language use to (e.g. Milroy, J., 2001; Milroy, L., 2004; Seargeant, 2007). The process of standardization requires selecting one form to be codified as the standard, based on such aspects as uniformity, commonness and prestige (e.g. Milroy, J., 2001). The logical interpretation is that the selected form is, in some way at least, superior to other available forms (e.g. Walsh, 2016: 7). It follows that the standard typically indexes power, authority, prestige and status (e.g. Blommaert, 2006: 512).

Through such mechanisms, notions of “correctness”, and of “bad” and “good” language emerge alongside standard language (e.g. Milroy, J., 2001: 535–537). Such beliefs are often so deeply naturalized as to be considered common sense; when there is variation, one form will be the correct one, and typically no justification is required as to *why* (Milroy, J., 2001: 535–536). Indeed, speakers often believe that their judgments about correctness are simply “linguistic judgments sanctioned by authorities on language” (Milroy, J., 2001: 536). Such speakers often insist their judgments are not associated with social or cultural aspects at all (e.g. the groups using the variant), yet inevitably they are (e.g. Blommaert, 2006: 512; Milroy, J., 2001: 536). Furthermore, what is considered correct is not always something inherent or self-evident, but instead even native speakers need to be explicitly taught the intricacies of correct standard language (Milroy, J., 2001: 537). This further creates division between speakers, since not all groups have equal access to the education system.

While correctness is often tied to a perceived standard language variety, the notions of “good” and “bad” language use can be much more context dependent (e.g. Blommaert, 2006: 512), concerning for example style or context-appropriateness. Often, however, “good” and “bad” are linked to standard language and correctness. For example, elements that are perceived as nonstandard are considered “bad”, further connected to low-status groups (e.g. Garrett, 2010: 5–10; see also Milroy, J., 2001). Such ideologically loaded assessments of language can affect language change as well (e.g. Blommaert, 2006: 516, discussing Silverstein, 1979: 233–234).

Closely related to standard language ideology is also the concept of linguistic purism. Linguistic purism is based on the idea that there is a superior form of language that ought to be defended and protected from the threat that is presented by language change and variation (Walsh, 2016: 7–9). Such threats to language typically concern “foreign elements” entering the language (e.g. loan words), but “contamination” may also arise from other sources, such as (native) youth language. Typically, this pure or perfect form to be protected is the current standard form, but there is no reason why one could not be puristic about nonstandard dialects as well. What separates linguistic purism from standard language ideology, as Walsh argues, is the element of protecting and wishing to purify language from corruption (Walsh, 2016: 7–9).

One key aspect for linguistic purism, and the fear of foreign elements, is familiarity. In general terms, that which is familiar and known, is considered safe and “good”, while the unfamiliar presents uncertainty (e.g. Song & Schwarz, 2009, discussing Zajonc, 1968). For example, familiar names have been shown to evoke positive stereotypes while uncommon names evoke negative ones (Harari & McDavid, 1973, discussed by Garrett 2010: 4–5). Similarly, food additive names that were more difficult to pronounce (“disfluently processed”) were rated more harmful and riskier than names that were easy to pronounce (“fluently processed”), mediated by their perceived

novelty (e.g. Song & Schwarz, 2009). Such trends may generalize further to other language items, including pronouns.

Prescribing pronoun use

Prescriptions are one specific type of language regulation. As mentioned, some cultures have specific regulative language academies. While no such single institution exists for English, English pronouns have been heavily prescribed by other means. Two related trends are relevant for the present study: the prescription of *he* as an epicene in the 19th century, and the non-sexist language reforms of the late 20th and early 21st century, aimed at dismantling the earlier prescription. This section presents an overview of the pronoun prescriptions, while Chapter 4 provides more in-depth discussion on sexist language, and nonsexist language reforms.

Most notably, in 1850, in “An Act for shortening the language used in acts of Parliament”, *he* was stipulated to be the sole singular generic pronoun to be used in epicene contexts (Evans & Evans, 1957: 222; discussed by Baron, 1981: 84; Bodine, 1975: 136). The Act stated that “the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females, and the singular to include the plural, and the plural the singular, unless the contrary as to gender and number is expressly provided” (Evans & Evans, 1957: 222). This Act was followed by “the Dictionary Act” in 1871, with similar content (see Baron, 2016). As might be expected, grammar books and dictionaries widely aligned with this prescription, strengthening its message (for further discussion see Curzan, 2003; Curzan, 2014; and Paterson, 2014).

The prescription of *he* as an epicene served two additional functions: replacing the use of *he or she* as “redundant” (e.g. Curzan, 2003: 72–73), and proscribing the use of singular *they* as “grammatically incorrect” for violating number agreement (e.g. Adami, 2009: 283; Newman, 1997: 3). As outlined previously, such assessments are often ideologically motivated, subjective views. Indeed, both *he or she* and singular *they* have occurred alongside *he* in generic contexts at least since the Middle English period (Curzan, 2003: 59, 70).³² Examples of generic singular *they* and *he or she* in Middle English texts are provided by Curzan (2003: 67–68, 71), Nevalainen (2006: 82–83), and Newman (1997: 21). Nevertheless, one form — *he* — was raised above other long-established ones, prescribed as the standard (e.g. Milroy, J., 2001).

What already highlights the ideological basis for this prescription is that while appealing to number agreement and redundancy, the prescribers overlooked the violation of gender agreement. In other words, in singular epicene contexts, both *he* and singular *they* can be argued to violate agreement, yet number triumphed over gender (e.g. Adami, 2009: 283). The argument was that *he* functions as an epicene pronoun; however, if *he* truly

³² Curzan suggests that generic singular *they* may have been used even earlier, during the Old English period (2003: 70); however, infrequency of such occurrences and the use of *hit* as a nongendered 3PSP at the time raise some uncertainty (see discussion by Paterson, 2014: 21–22).

was understood as an epicene pronoun, then why was the 1850 stipulation needed?

The use of *he* in epicene contexts was heavily prescribed and largely unchallenged for over 100 years. During this time, it gained a status of a “standard” and even “natural” pronoun that for some speakers exists even to date (as is illustrated by the present study, Chapter 11). It was only in the 1970’s that this status was challenged more broadly by contemporary (feminist) scholars.³³ The nonsexist language reformers viewed epicene use of *he* to be male biased, and advocated for more gender-inclusive options instead, mostly *he or she* or avoiding pronouns altogether (e.g. Newman, 1997: 9–10). Slowly, guidelines and grammar books followed, and the prescription of *he* was lifted. While not all regulation attempts are successful, many of the feminist language reforms seem to have been effective (e.g. Curzan, 2003: 187–188); more details are provided in section 4.3.

Yet, it took considerably longer for language authorities to start advocating the use of generic singular *they*, despite its prevalence across many genres (see section 2.3.1).³⁴ With some early exceptions, many style guides only began allowing the use of singular generic *they* in the 2010’s. For example, the American Psychological Association finally embraced singular *they* in their 7th edition style guide in 2019, recommending it over *he* and *she* in epicene contexts; *he or she* or *she or he* may continue to be used when “these pronouns match the people being described” (Lee, 2019).

Very recently, endorsement of nonbinary pronouns has started to emerge as well. As mentioned, Merriam-Webster added a definition for nonbinary use of *they* in 2019 (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Similarly, in the 7th edition, APA also highlights nonbinary use of *they*, and advocates against avoidance tactics – even if one dislikes singular use of *they* (American Psychological Association, 2019; Lee, 2019). Indeed, the APA even recognizes neopronouns in their blog (Lee, 2019). Further demonstrating modern prescriptions, (intentional) incorrect use of a person’s pronouns (or name) in public contexts is now considered gender-discriminatory in some regions (e.g. NYC Commission on Human Rights, 2019).

Last, most of the prescriptions reviewed above can be considered to represent change from above, introduced by dominant social groups; the deciding parties in 1850, and the (feminist) scholars in the 1970’s onwards. Nonbinary pronouns, on the other hand, were first introduced by the transgender community. However, wider awareness and acknowledgment required the endorsement of more dominant social groups, and language authorities – dictionaries, newspapers, educational institutions, prominent linguists, and so on (e.g. American Psychological Association, 2019; Baron, 2020; McWhorter, 2018; Merriam-Webster, 2019; Scelfo, 2015).

³³ See Baron (2016) for examples of earlier objections.

³⁴ What may seem like new usage to some, the resurgence of the generic use of singular *they* is better seen as “rehabilitation” or “restoration” (e.g. Adami, 2009: 283; Balhorn, 2009: 393).

4 GENDER AND LANGUAGE

The focus of this chapter is on gender and language, and how one affects the other. The approach to gender is discussed in section 4.1, while different manifestations of linguistic gender are reviewed in section 4.2, including a brief description of Finnish and Swedish. In section 4.3, the attention turns to sexist language, attitudes, and the feminist language reforms. Section 4.4 then considers the relationship between pronouns and gender identity, and last, section 4.5 concludes the theory section by addressing the question: why does language matter?

4.1 APPROACH TO GENDER

In this study, gender is understood as a multidimensional, biosocial construct (e.g. Ackerman, 2019: 3–10; Shattuck-Heidorn & Richardson, 2019). Conventionally, “sex” and “gender” have been considered separate concepts, representing the nature/nurture or biological/cultural division (e.g. Crawford & Fox, 2007: 481–483; Fausto-Sterling, 2005: 1493). In other words, sex refers to biological traits such as hormones and reproductive organs, while gender refers to cultural and social traits, such as gender roles and gender expression (e.g. Jahn et al., 2017). In this sense, sex is often considered to be something innate, a fixed and stable binary variable, whereas gender is “learned” or “acquired”, and can thus vary across time and cultures (e.g. Bing & Bergvall, 1996: 6; Chanter, 1995: 25; Zimman, 2014: 14).³⁵ This division is also visible when the terms *female/male* and *man/woman* are used to represent the aspects of sex and gender respectively (e.g. Ansara & Hegarty, 2014). However, this supports the cissexist notion of being “biologically female” or “biologically male”, with the implication that a transgender person can never be or become fully, authentically, “the other gender”. No such distinction is made with these terms in the present study.

While the distinction between sex and gender has served a theoretical purpose, helping us better understand how notions of masculinity and femininity are “culturally bound” (Zimman, 2014: 14), it has also often been simplified into an unrepresentative relationship with little to no interaction between the two (see discussion by Crawford & Fox, 2007: 483). Often, if acknowledging any relationship, then sex as the more stable (i.e. valid) variable has been thought to affect gender (e.g. Unger, 1979: 1086). However, this perspective creates an unnatural separation of the body and living in a body as a social being, leading to disregarding a person’s own experience of their gender as invalid if it does not match sex (e.g. Ansara & Hegarty, 2014: 259; Butler, 2004: 76; Zimman, 2014: 14–20). Furthermore, if gender was

³⁵ The adoption of the term gender also only occurred in the 1950’s, whereas “sex” was already established, see discussion by Cornwall and Rivas (2015 :400–401), and Repo (2013).

indeed something that we simply acquired or learned, then how would mismatches between sex and gender ever occur, given that sex is used to determine gender at birth, guiding parents to raise their offspring as boys or girls? Indeed, especially considering transgender experiences, there has been a growing need to reassess our understanding of sex/gender (e.g. Zimman, 2014).

After facing considerable critique, many scholars have abandoned a strict division between sex and gender as unfeasible and unrepresentative (e.g. Fausto-Sterling, 2005: 1492–1493; cf. Matsuno & Budge, 2017). The distinction between sex and gender may continue to serve some contexts on a theoretical level and ease the discussion of “biological” and “sociocultural” traits, but a new body of research indicates that sex and gender exist in mutual interaction (e.g. Shattuck-Heidorn & Richardson, 2019; Springer, Hankivsky & Bates, 2012; also, Massey, 2015). Indeed, it turns out the social/cultural can also affect the biological, as for example Fausto-Sterling demonstrates with bone health: “culture shapes bones” (Fausto-Sterling, 2005: 1491, 1517).

The biosocial approach reunites the two concepts: gender is understood as a multidimensional biosocial construct, based on both biological markers as well as sociocultural features (e.g. social/cultural norms, personal experience of gender identity) (e.g. Ackerman, 2019: 3–10, Shattuck-Heidorn and Richardson, 2019). In other words, while experiences of gender are affected by one’s physique, they are also shaped intensively by culture and the social environment, by internalized beliefs about gender and gender roles for example (e.g. Fausto-Sterling, 2000: 22; Shattuck-Heidorn and Richardson, 2019; Shields, 2008: 301).

Gender has further become understood as dynamic, interactional and intersectional, with the potential to change throughout one’s lifetime (e.g. Shattuck-Heidorn and Richardson, 2019; see also discussion of “gender becomings” by Cordoba, 2020). Indeed, “the self” is always experienced at the intersects of multiple different identity categories, which are not independent of each other, but instead mutually constitutive (e.g. Levon, 2015: 298; Shields, 2008: 301–302). Moreover, even though gender is often perceived as an individual property, it is culturally encoded and shared, reflecting or connecting to power relations (e.g. Shields, 2008: 302). As such, gender can only be understood as it relates to a specific culture in time and place (e.g. Levon, 2015: 297–298).

These changes in our understanding highlight the discursive nature of gender. Indeed, language is “one of the primary fronts on which gender is negotiated” (Zimman, 2017: 90). Even “sex”, or more precisely our understanding of it, is discursively shaped and created. The implication is not that discursive practices could directly transform material bodies, or that bodies would not exist beyond discourse, simply that the way we conceptualize sex/gender is molded socially and discursively. Hence, it is not possible to make observations about the body without being affected by the concepts we have already internalized (e.g. Butler, 1993: 2–11; Zimman, 2014: 19). Or in

other words, “our beliefs about gender affect what kinds of knowledge scientists produce about sex in the first place” and as such, “sex” can only be determined based on our beliefs about gender (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: 3, 58). This is particularly evident from how the sex/gender binary has been upheld and enforced through the mutilation of intersex bodies to fit discursively created notions of female and male bodies (see Fausto-Sterling, 2000).³⁶ Such decisions, guided by gender ideologies, can be surprisingly arbitrary, reflecting the physician’s idea of appropriate markers (e.g. size and shape of genitalia) rather than some objective reality (ibid: 55–59).

Indeed, in many cultures, the gender binary ideology has seemingly erased much of the variation in gender that has always existed. As transgender, and particularly nonbinary identities, are gaining more visibility, some people regard them as something novel, perhaps a fad that will eventually fade away. Yet, transgender people have existed far longer than the labels we now use to describe them (for examples see Blackwood, 2014; Davis, 2014; Hall & Zimman, 2010; Stryker, 2006; Stryker, 2008), as expressed below:

“People think, just because the words to describe us are new, that being non-binary is a fad. But people have always lived and felt non-binary – there’s just a label for it now. And behind that label is a community, people who respect you and lift you up. We’re not a trend. We’re humans and this is integral to our sense of self. Acknowledging our humanity and identity doesn’t harm you.” Clo, interviewed in *Guardian* (Marsh, 2016)

Adopting a biosocial perspective, the present study nevertheless focuses more so on social aspects of gender. In this regard, some further definitions are warranted. *Gender identity* is understood as one’s personal experience of their gender, often in relation to others identifying as members of the same gender (e.g. Ackerman, 2019: 3–4; Matsuno & Budge, 2017: 117; Stryker, 2008: 13). *Gender expression* refers to how a person expresses their gender identity through appearance and behavior. One’s gender expression may be based on cultural gender norms, or perhaps represent deviations from such norms (e.g. Ackerman, 2019: 3; Stryker, 2008: 12). In contrast, *conceptual gender* refers to how others perceive one’s gender, based on gender expression and their interpretation of cultural norms (e.g. Ackerman, 2019: 3). While there is often a match between these three notions, this need not be the case. For example, gender nonconforming people may express their gender in a way that is not typically associated with their gender. Or, when one’s gender is not correctly perceived by others, misgendering might occur (see section 4.4). This may become apparent when using gendered language that does not match a person’s gender identity (e.g. Ansara & Hegarty, 2014: 260; Zimman, 2017: 89).

³⁶ About 1.7% of people are intersex, having both typically female and male biological markers (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: 51–53).

4.2 GENDER IN ENGLISH, FINNISH AND SWEDISH

While this study focuses on English, other languages, particularly Finnish and Swedish, are relevant for the study design as well. As such, different types of gender systems are considered briefly below. Following the conventional classification, different languages are described as *grammatical gender*, *notional gender*, or *genderless* languages.

In short, semantic gender is realized in nouns that denote a particular (social) gender, such as “woman” and “mother”. While all types of languages employ semantic gender, genderless languages, such as Finnish, employ *only* semantic gender. The term genderless may seem misleading, but it refers to the lack of a grammatical gender system (see below) or other type of gender marking on grammatical items.

Languages that mark gender on pronouns, but do not employ grammatical gender (e.g. English), are conventionally called natural gender languages. However, the term is problematic for two reasons: first, it carries an indication of gender essentialism, and second, it implies that nouns and pronouns always agree with the “natural” gender of the referent (e.g. McConnell-Ginet, 2013: 8; Motschenbacher, 2010: 63). To avoid such implications, the term notional gender is adopted instead (following Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg: 184, and McConnell-Ginet, 2013).

In addition, many languages employ a nominal categorization system referred to as grammatical gender (e.g. Dahl, 2000; Kraaikamp, 2017). In such languages (e.g. German, Spanish), each noun belongs to a gender class, which may be based on semantic (e.g. female words belong to the *feminine* class) and/or nonsemantic/formal classification (based on morphological properties, e.g. Dahl, 2000). The gender of a word typically affects agreement with other word classes, such as articles and adjectives. While grammatical gender is often described as arbitrary or even obscure (e.g. Alvanoudi, 2014: 1; Phillips & Boroditsky, 2003: 929; Trudgill, 1999: 139), numerous empirical studies have shown that speakers *do* draw conclusions about the sex/gender of (in)animate objects in languages employing grammatical gender for masculine/feminine classes (e.g. Flaherty, 2001; Imai et al., 2014; Saalbach, Imai & Schalk, 2012; Irmen & Roßberg, 2004; Phillips & Boroditsky, 2003; see also discussion by Alvanoudi, 2014: 6–12). Grammatical gender is not discussed further, instead, the attention now turns to the characteristics of English, Swedish and Finnish.

First, as a general note, while English is spoken as a native language by hundreds of millions of people, Finnish and Swedish are spoken by relatively fewer people, about 5 and 10 million respectively. Swedish is also an official language in Finland, natively spoken by a minority of about 290 000 Finns (Official Statistics of Finland, 2018).

Second, English and Swedish are both Germanic languages, and they are both characterized as *notional gender* languages, marking gender on pronouns. Finnish, on the other hand, is a Finno-Ugric, *genderless* language

(e.g. Engelberg, 2002: 112). While there are many other differences between these languages, the following discussion focuses on linguistic gender.

Historically, both English and Swedish used to have grammatical gender. English lost grammatical gender by the end of the 14th century (e.g. Hellinger, 2001: 107), while in Swedish, the masculine and feminine classes were merged as common gender (*utrum*), existing in present-day Swedish alongside the neuter class (Hornscheidt, 2003: 341–349; Motschenbacher, 2010: 91–92).

Both English and Swedish retained pronominal gender. The Swedish 3rd person singular pronoun paradigm is very similar to English (“*hon*” for *she*, “*han*” for *he*, and “*det*” for *it*), with one considerable difference. As mentioned, Swedish has recently adopted a new 3PSP, *hen*, which can be used as an epicene pronoun in generic contexts, as well as a nonbinary pronoun (e.g. Lindqvist, Renström & Gustafsson Senden, 2019: 111). In addition, as a remnant of the previous grammatical gender classification, it is still common to use *she* in generic contexts with human nouns ending with *-a*, which used to belong to the feminine class (e.g. Hornscheidt, 2003: 350). However, Swedish also makes use of an indefinite pronoun *man*, similar to generic *you*.³⁷ It is often argued that this grammaticalized Swedish *man* is epicene, but the present study is unable to explore this aspect further.

All three languages make use of gendered compound words with *-man* (*-man* in Swedish, *-mies* in Finnish) and, less frequently, *-woman* (*-kvinna* in Swedish, *-nainen* in Finnish) (e.g. Engelberg, 2002: 113; Hellinger, 2001: 109–110; Hornscheidt, 2003: 346). In addition, Finnish uses the prefixes *nais-* and *mies-* for denoting gender, e.g. “*naislääkäri*” for *female doctor* (e.g. Engelberg, 2002: 113; Hellinger, 2001: 110); in Swedish, one would use adjectives similar to English (e.g. “*kvinnlig läkare*”). Additional feminine suffixes are available in all three languages (see Hornscheidt, 2003: 347–439 for Swedish, Hellinger 2002: 108–109 for English, and Engelberg, 2002: 113–114 for Finnish), indicating the unmarked form is masculine (e.g. *waiter*–*waitress*, “*tarjoilija*”–“*tarjoilijatar*”, e.g. Engelberg, 2016). Other features such as verbs may also be gendered (e.g. *to man*, *fraternize*, or in Finnish “*emännöidä*”/“*isännöidä*”, feminized and masculinized verbs for “*to host*”). All three languages also use masculine constructions intended as epicenes (“masculine generics”), which seem to be more common than using the feminine forms similarly, further discussed in the following section.

This brief description has illustrated that despite belonging to different classes of languages (*notional gender* and *genderless*), all three languages have many similar ways to convey gender in language; the only notable difference concerns pronouns.

Furthermore, while it may be tempting to think that *genderless* languages support gender equality more than *notional* or *grammatical gender* languages, this simplistic logic is false. For example, while Finland is ranked high in terms of gender equality in the Human Development Report (2019),

³⁷ For example, “*man måste vara försiktig*” (*you need to be careful*) and “*man ska inte ropa varg*” (*don't cry wolf*).

other countries in which genderless languages are spoken are ranked much lower, for example Hungary (Hungarian belonging to the same Uralic language family as Finnish) (e.g. Conceição, Pedro et al., 2019: 316–319). Results from a perception experiment also indicate that speakers of a genderless language (Karitiâna, a Tupí language spoken in northwest Brazil) do not automatically possess a nongendered or egalitarian worldview, but instead, coming from a culture “far from egalitarian”, may have similar biases as speakers of other types of languages (Everett, 2011). In other words, language alone is not enough to guarantee egalitarian values.

Nevertheless, results from a study comparing gender equality and type of main language spoken in 111 different countries indicate that there may be some other general tendencies (Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell & Laakso, 2012). These results indicate that countries in which semantic-based grammatical gender languages are spoken “evidence less gender equality than countries that speak natural gender or genderless languages” (2012). The results further demonstrate that countries in which notional (“natural”) gender languages are spoken have highest rates of gender equality, while genderless language countries fall in the middle (ibid.).

Prewitt-Freilino et al. suggest that notional gender languages may be more successful at “promoting gender-inclusive language, because unlike genderless languages they are able to include gender-asymmetrical forms in pronouns and nouns”, without suffering from the systematically gendered structures of grammatical gender languages (ibid.). While no in-depth exploration of this aspect can take place, it does seem that with English, Swedish and Finnish, the two notional gender languages are further ahead with attempts to make language use more gender-inclusive language.

Leading the trend, gender-inclusive language reforms in English were initiated already in the 1970’s (e.g. Curzan, 2014: 117-118). In Swedish, similar reforms seem to have started attracting wider attention in the 1990’s and early 2000’s, making Swedish known for adopting many feminist language reforms, including *hen* (e.g. Milles, 2011). In Finnish, particularly masculine occupational titles have been common, and are still used frequently (e.g. Engelberg, 2016: 14–19). Only recently have there been widespread reform attempts. Such reforms gained mainstream attention in 2017, as *Aamulehti*, as the first Finnish newspaper to do so, announced switching from masculine occupational terms (e.g. “*puhemies*”, *chairman*) to using nongendered equivalents (e.g. “*puheenjohtaja*”, *chair*). As a result, speakers of English and Swedish may be more used to gender-fair language reforms than Finnish speakers.

4.3 SEXIST LANGUAGE

Mostly focusing on English, this section provides a discussion on (non)sexist language from different viewpoints. After first briefly delineating types of

sexist language, section 4.3.1 surveys previous studies on gender-exclusive language, demonstrating the inherent male bias in using masculine words to convey epicenity. To illustrate how prevailing ideologies and subsequent attitudes can change at individual and societal levels, some of the nonsexist language reforms and reactions to them are discussed in sections 4.3.2 and 4.3.3, respectively. Last, previous studies on attitudes towards sexist language are reviewed in section 4.3.4.

Sexist language is defined as language use that excludes, diminishes, or discriminates against a group of people based on gender. This definition is adapted from Parks and Robertson (1998a: 455; 2005: 402), but importantly, rephrased to avoid cissexism and move away from a binary gender world view (see Hekanaho, 2016).³⁸ Indeed, most previous studies considering sexist language have done so from a gender binary point of view, only considering men and women (e.g. Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). For a similar reason, the term “sexist” itself is somewhat problematic if understood only in terms of “biological sex”. A more accurate description might be “genderist”, but sexist is well-established and widely understood to cover gender-based discrimination.

While this definition of sexist language also encompasses derogatory or diminishing language use, as well as asymmetrical representation of the genders (e.g. *working mother*, but no *working father*), the focus of this study is on gender-exclusive language (further illustrated in the following section). Importantly, gender-exclusive language is understood as language use that excludes any gender, whereas previous definitions have often worked within the gender binary (e.g. Stout & Dasgupta, 2011: 758). As such, paired binary terms that have previously been considered gender-inclusive (*he or she* and *men and women*) are considered **cissexist** in the present study, exclusive to other genders and supporting a gender binary ideology (e.g. Bigler & Campbell, 2015: 191–192). As regards other types of sexist language, suffice to say that they more often target women than men (see examples and discussion in Mucchi-Faina, 2005; Litosseliti, 2006: 14–15; Stahlberg et al., 2016).

Furthermore, it is highlighted that sexism in language is not an inherent feature: expressions of gender in any given language are not in themselves sexist (e.g. Stahlberg et al., 2016: 167), and language need not be sexist. As was already discussed in the previous section, the mere lack of pronominal or grammatical gender marking does not mean the language, or the society in which it is spoken, is nonsexist (e.g. McConnell-Ginet, 2011 [1979]: 186). Nevertheless, to some extent, language still reflects the shared beliefs and attitudes of a community, including those related to gender (e.g. McConnell-Ginet, 1980: 5; Stahlberg et al., 2016: 163).

³⁸ As a reaction to my criticism, Parks and Robertson agreed that their definition of sexist language “should be broadened to reflect contemporary realities”, p.c.

4.3.1 Gender-exclusive language use

When gendered words are used to refer to a specific person, the function is often referential, e.g. calling someone a *woman* based on their gender. However, gendered (pro)nouns are also used in generic, epicene contexts. The question is, what are the effects of using a gendered (pro)noun to represent “everyone”? The following discussion is focused on English, but many of the aspects, such as male bias in language, apply to other languages as well (see *Gender across languages* by Hellinger & Bußmann, 2001, 2002, 2003, and Hellinger & Motschenbacher, 2015).

Gender-exclusive language and male bias in English has been most evident in the frequent use of the masculine to represent humanness (“masculine generics”), and the lack of similarly used feminine constructions (“feminine generics”).³⁹ Such use of masculine words as intended epicenes most notably includes nouns such as *man* or *chairman*, as well as the use of *he* in generic contexts where the reference is unspecific and/or indefinite. In addition, with one exception (*ladies and gentlemen*), when both binary genders appear side by side, the masculine is typically mentioned first: *husband and wife*, *men and women*, *males and females*. Further examples of male bias in language include verb phrases such as *to man*, or *fraternize*, as well as adjectives such as *brotherly* (e.g. Silveira, 1980: 166). While many masculine constructions now have nongendered alternatives in present-day English (e.g. *firefighter*, *chair(person)*, singular *they*), the switch to more gender-fair language is relatively recent. It is thus worthwhile to consider the starting point.

The foundation for using the masculine to represent humanness lies in a patriarchal world-view, demonstrated by declarations such as in examples 1–3: the masculine was viewed to be the worthier gender.

(1) “[L]et us kepe a natural order, and set the man before the woman for maners Sake [...]” (Wilson, 1560, cited in Bodine, 1975: 134)

(2) “The Relative shall agree in gender with the Antecedent of the more worthy gender: as, the King and the Queen whom I honor. The Masculine gender is more worthy than the Feminine” (Poole, 1646, cited in Bodine, 1975: 134)

(3) “The terms which are equally applicable to both sexes [...], should be called masculine in parsing; for, in all languages, the masculine gender is considered the most worthy [...]” (a 19th century grammarian quoted in Baron, 1981: 83).

In the 1970’s, early (feminist) scholars interested in language and gender began questioning and challenging the status quo (Silveira, 1980; Spender, 1985). The general argument was that, despite good intentions, masculine words in nongendered contexts were not interpreted as epicenes, but instead supported a wider *male as norm* standard (example 4).

³⁹ Some examples might include *housewife*, *cleaning lady*, *midwife*, *stewardess*, and *lunch lady*, but nongendered equivalents were coined rather speedily once men started appearing in these roles; *homemaker*, *housekeeper*, *obstetrician*, *flight attendant* and *caterer* (e.g. Motschenbacher, 2010: 106-108).

(4) “Yet the question of what “he” and “man” really mean is fully answered neither by turning to dictionary definitions nor by consulting the intentions of their users. Good intentions are not enough, unfortunately, to guarantee that generic meaning will be conveyed. And guided tours through Latin and Old English are not enough to guarantee that the generic masculine is used clearly and fairly today.” (Martyna, 1980a: 485)

Nevertheless, use of the masculine in epicene contexts continued to be defended as “traditional” and “natural”, even by prominent linguists (e.g. Goddard et al. [Harvard Linguistics Faculty], 1971, discussed further below). Opponents were often considered to simply misinterpret the intended epicene meaning (e.g. Blaubergs, 1980: 141; Martyna, 1980a: 485). However, individual speakers do not hold the power to decide what words mean (e.g. McConnell-Ginet, 2011 [1979]: 179). Instead, meaning is constructed socially, in discursive interaction. It can even be argued that for any single interaction “[u]ltimately it is the hearer in each situation who produce[s] a meaning.” (Cameron, 1995: 16; see also Curzan, 2003: 175). In addition, word meanings are not stable, but can change drastically over time (e.g. Curzan, 2003). Thus, that *man* used to mean “*human*” in Early English (e.g. Peitsara, 2006: 115-116) carries little relevance to how the word is understood in present-day English.

In addition, academic attempts to explain the male bias have included considering the masculine as the unmarked variant (similar to how *tall* is unmarked over *short* when describing height), or as a prototypical example (similar to how the brand name *Kleenex* is used to refer to *tissues*) (e.g. Madson & Hessling, 1999; McConnell-Ginet, 2011 [1979]: 187; Moulton, Robinson & Elias, 1978: 1035).⁴⁰ Such explanations still beg the question: why should the masculine be the prototype, the unmarked, the standard? It seems this is the main question that sparked a decades-long discussion of sexist language (e.g. Spender, 1985; Stanley, 1978).

To varying degrees, early language and gender scholars argued that a patriarchal society supported the use of the masculine as the standard (e.g. Martyna, 1980b; Sklar, 1983; Spender, 1985; Stanley, 1978). Indeed, at earlier times when generally only men could receive education, enter the work force, or act in politics, many occupational masculine compound nouns referred to male-groups (e.g. Stanley, 1978: 801–802). In other words, these occupational nouns were not meant to include women.

Male dominance and viewing maleness as the standard supported the argument that masculine words would include women as well. Silveira articulated the principle of maleness representing the standard as the *people* = *male bias* (Silveira, 1980: 166–167), but it has also been described as the *Male as Norm*, or MAN, principle (e.g. Bem, 1993: 2; Braun, F., 1997: 4–5; Hellinger, 2001: 108). This principle explains the androcentrism in language, but it extends to societal norms beyond language as well. For example, in

⁴⁰ These are examples of earlier discussions. One rarely sees such arguments in present-day literature, and some of the authors may have different views on the issues today.

medicine, anatomical depictions of the human body are often male, and many female health issues were previously dismissed, as generally only male subjects were researched (see further examples in Bailey & LaFrance, 2017: 683; Beery, 1995: 427–428; Braun, F., 1997: 4–7).

Clearly, the MAN principle is strongly ideological. In language, this is best exemplified by the explicit prescription of the masculine to include the feminine (see section 3.2.2). The use of *he* in epicene contexts was prescribed over other already available options, generic singular *they* and *he or she* (e.g. Bodine, 1975: 133). But if “masculine generics” were “natural”, why should they have needed to be prescribed so heavily? In addition, there is no linguistic reason why the masculine ought to be the “unmarked”, the “prototype”, the standard. If anything, one might argue that *woman* and *she* quite literally include *man* and *he*, and hence would be more representative of men and women.

Furthermore, the MAN principle extends to seemingly nongendered contexts as well. In some cases, this can be explained by some roles being stereotypically gendered: being a *doctor* or a *surgeon* may carry a male bias, while being a *nurse* or a *teacher* carries a female bias (e.g. Litosseliti, 2006: 14–15; McConnell-Ginet, 2011 [1979]: 194; Wales, 1996: 124). Such stereotypical gendering is evident when the “other” gender needs to be attributed, e.g. in *male nurse* or *female surgeon* (e.g. Henley, 1989: 60–61; Litosseliti, 2006: 14–15). However, empirical studies have also demonstrated a wider male bias in other nongendered words (e.g. Bailey & LaFrance, 2017; Engelberg, 2016; Everett, 2011; Merritt & Kok, 1995). For example, Bailey and LaFrance demonstrated that *human* produced disproportionately more male than female interpretations (Bailey & LaFrance, 2017: 689–690). Similarly, in a perception study on Finnish, the nongendered words denoting *human* still elicited more male than female imagery among participants (Engelberg, 2016: 45–47). In a related fashion, the nongendered Finnish 3PSP *hän* is more often translated into *he* than anything else (Braun, F., 1997: 12; Engelberg, 2016: 47–49), although this might also reflect the previous prescription of *he*.

While such studies are fewer, the effect of using the masculine in otherwise epicene contexts has received considerable academic interest. With various participant-based study designs, dozens of studies have demonstrated that masculine words are not generally interpreted as gender-inclusive in otherwise epicene contexts (for further examples and discussion, see overview by Paterson, 2014: 29–37).

Early investigations include studies by Moulton et al. (1978), Martyna (1978; 1980b), MacKay and Fulkerson (1979), MacKay (1980), Hyde (1984), and Hamilton (1988); studies in the 1990’s continued with similar designs (e.g. Gastil, 1990; Switzer, 1990). These studies mostly concentrated on how *man* and *he* are perceived, often including other conditions for comparison, and controlling for context (e.g. nongendered vs. stereotypically gendered contexts). More recent studies have continued on similar paths, with various designs (e.g. Bailey & LaFrance, 2017; Miller & James, 2009). All of these

studies pointed in the same direction: masculine words do not function effectively as epicenes. Additional findings indicated that male participants made male biased interpretations more often than female participants (e.g. Hamilton, 1988: 797; Martyna, 1978: 136), which may be due to the participants thinking of themselves as exemplars of people (as per *the people* = *self bias*, Silveira, 1980: 175).

Only one study was unable to find “support” for a male bias with *he*, but when coupled with *man*, male bias emerged (Cole, Hill & Dayley, 1983). Cole et al. argued the previous studies had severe flaws in their designs, including biased responses caused by social desirability (Cole et al., 1983: 748). However, in response to this, Gastil (1990) conducted a perception study on pronouns in which the issues raised by Cole et al. (1983) were addressed: the conclusion was that *he* produced male biased imagery, while *they* and *he/she* produce more equal numbers of female and male imagery (1990: 638–640). Similarly, illustrating that *he* is indeed heavily gendered, Miller and James demonstrated that *he* is interpreted predominantly as masculine, even when coupled with stereotypically female antecedents (*housekeeper*) (Miller & James, 2009: 489).

While most studies agree that masculine constructions do not function as epicenes, there have been somewhat different results as regards which alternative would be best. In Hamilton’s study, both *he or she* and *they* elicited male biased imagery, although not as much as using *he* (Hamilton, 1988: 797–798). The results from Bailey and LaFrance indicated that while *mankind* produced the most male biased imagery, *man or woman* elicited more equal numbers of female and male images than *human* (Bailey & LaFrance, 2017: 686–690).⁴¹ Similar results were obtained by Lindqvist et al.: using a paired form *he/she* in otherwise nongendered generic contexts produced more equal numbers of female and male images than singular *they* (2019: 111–114). It may be that the added female visibility in the *man or woman* condition produced more equal representation (e.g. Mucchi-Faina, 2005). However, a recent study adapting the design from Lindqvist et al. found that singular *they* is interpreted as epicene (Bradley et al., 2019).

In addition, while only relatively few studies have explored the use of *she* in epicene contexts (and none that focused solely on *she*), it seems that the feminine suffers from the same limitations as the masculine (e.g. Hyde, 1984; MacKay & Fulkerson, 1979; Madson & Hessling, 1999). In addition, one early study also indicated that in epicene contexts, neopronouns (*E, e, tey*) were more often interpreted to include both females and males than *he* (MacKay, 1980: 445–447). More recently, Lindqvist et al. showed that generic *ze* showed no gender bias, whereas singular *they* demonstrated some male bias (Lindqvist et al., 2019: 111–114). With Swedish participants, the authors also received similar results with *hen* (ibid.).

⁴¹ The study also considered stereotypical ethnicity: when asked to identify a typical member of *mankind/human/man or woman*, there was an overrepresentation of white referents. The gender bias was consistent among both white and black referents (Bailey & LaFrance, 2017: 689–690).

Furthermore, a few studies have included attitudes as explanatory variables. McConnell and Russell demonstrated that while masculine compounds (e.g. *chairman*) were linked to masculine stereotypes, nongendered equivalents (with *-person*) were linked to feminine stereotypes; a moderator for these effects was the participants' beliefs about gender roles (McConnell & Russel, 1995: 1008–1011). Stout and Dasgupta further examined the effects of using masculine biased language in job advertisements and interviews (2011). A set of three participant experiments indicated that using masculine descriptions was considered sexist, and that female participants felt more ostracized, less motivated, and identified with the job less than did the male participants. The female participants also showed negative emotional reactions when masculine descriptions were used (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011: 760–765).

One limitation with many of the studies described above is that they have worked within a gender binary framework. For example, a typical approach has been to have participants choose female/male imagery based on example sentences, and if a word elicits as many female as male images *on average*, then the usage is interpreted to be gender-inclusive. This approach needs to be reassessed from a non-binary point of view. At least one study so far has used androgynous or nonbinary images that were rated nearly equally on masculinity and femininity scales (Bradley et al., 2019). Perhaps once people become more used to the idea of nonbinary genders, more appropriate measures might include “neither masculine, neither feminine” or “mix of masculine and feminine”.

Last, while studies thus far have concentrated on the male bias in language, gender-exclusive language concerns other genders as well; men may have similar feelings of exclusion when feminine words are used in epicene contexts (e.g. Rubin & Greene, 1991: 404–405). However, the western society is generally not systematically biased towards men, which may mediate the effect of exclusion. In contrast, those who are in the weakest position in society may be most affected by gender-exclusive language use, that is, transgender and nonbinary individuals. Future studies on sexist language ought to consider transgender and nonbinary experiences as well.

4.3.2 Changing sexist language

The previous section demonstrated what effects using gender-exclusive, sexist language can have; the focus of this subsection is on nonsexist language reforms instead. Nonsexist language, as the antonym of sexist language, broadly describes nondiscriminatory language use, including gender-inclusive and gender-fair language.

Nonsexist language can further be conceptualized as a hyponym of “politically correct” (PC) language. The general goal of PC language is to make language fair and representative, by avoiding discriminatory and offensive language in favour of more neutral, inoffensive language use (e.g. Cameron,

1995: 116; Curzan, 2014: 115; Mucchi-Faina, 2005: 190). PC language is further characterized as “language devised by and for, and to represent the worldview and experience of, groups formerly without the power to create language, make interpretations, or control meaning” (Lakoff, 2000: 91). In this sense, PC language challenges the status quo by rejecting existing labels and definitions. PC language also requires language users to “to confront the fact that words are not neutral conveyors of intended meaning; words in and of themselves carry information about speaker attitudes and much more” (Curzan, 2014: 15). In addition, the term itself has become politicized, associated with “the left”, and it has gained a negative connotation for many (e.g. Curzan, 2014: 114).

At a fundamental level, a common language is a key marker for a “common culture” and attempts to change the language can be experienced as threats to the perceived unity within a culture (e.g. Cameron, 1995: 160–163). In other words, changing language is not a matter of simply changing forms, but instead it necessitates cultural and/or ideological changes as well. Particularly with PC language, linguistic choices become political choices, and individual word choices can transfer political and social meaning to others (e.g. Curzan, 2014: 114–115). In other words, the words we use to refer to particular groups of people also carry information about how we view these people. Indeed, language possesses the power to create mental imagery, but whether and to what extent language use or the structure of a language can affect thought is a much debated issue within various fields discussing linguistic relativity (e.g. Bieswanger, Motschenbacher & Mühleisen, 2010: 10; Bigler & Campbell, 2015).

The suggestion with nonsexist language reforms was that moving towards nonsexist language use would facilitate moving towards a nonsexist society (e.g. Martyna, 1980a: 487). However, there is no consensus as to how much effect language use has on (other) ideologies or societal issues. On the one hand, if we view language as the site at which ideologies are discursively created, then it may not be necessary or possible to distinguish where language stops and where ideology begins, or vice versa (e.g. Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017: 22). Thus, language change and ideological changes may occur simultaneously, in a mutual relationship. On the other hand, at the very least, language functions “as an *index* of culturally shared or predominant attitudes and values connected with women and men, with sexuality, and with the sexual distribution of social roles and statuses” (McConnell-Ginet, 1980: 5). In this sense, language is seen as reflecting society and dominant ideologies.

The nonsexist language reforms were initiated by the second wave feminist discussions about sexist language (e.g. Bigler & Campbell, 2015: 191; Curzan, 2014: 117), often supported by research such as was introduced in the previous section (4.3.1). Nonsexist language reforms were mostly advocated in guidelines, circulated in various institutional contexts, including universities and publishing companies (see further Blaubeurgs, 1980: 135; Crawford & Fox, 2007: 482; Curzan, 2014: chapter 5; Paterson, 2014: chapter 3; Talbot, 2010:

227). The focus of these guidelines was often on male-biased language, but other types of biased language was targeted as well (see Curzan, 2014: 120, 129–130).

In general, three main tactics were advocated to avoid the use of the masculine in epicene contexts: a) neutralization (*people* instead of *mankind*), b) female-visibility (*men and women*), and c) avoidance (see e.g. Curzan, 2003: 187; Mucchi-Faina, 2005: 194–195; Strahan, 2008: 17; Wales, 1996: 119). With generic pronouns, the tactics have included avoiding pronouns altogether or using plural referents (and plural pronouns), using *she* as a stand-alone pronoun, or using both feminine and masculine pronouns either parallel (e.g. *he or she*, *he/she*) or in alternation (e.g. *he* in one paragraph, *she* in another) (e.g. Adami, 2009: 281, 288; Curzan, 2014: 119; Mucchi-Faina, 2005: 194–195). In present-day English, using singular *they* as a neutralization tactic seems to be the most common approach (e.g. Balhorn, 2004; Baranowski, 2002). However, due to its perceived status as “grammatically incorrect”, it was not generally advocated as a valid option previously (e.g. Paterson, 2014: 109–110). Similarly, the early reformers worked from a gender binary viewpoint, as nonbinary identities have only been more widely acknowledged relatively recently.

Many of the reforms have been successful, and have even become modern prescriptions (see Curzan, 2014: Chapter 5). Nongendered equivalents are now preferred over masculine and feminine forms (*chair* instead of *chairman*, *flight attendant* instead of *stewardess*) (e.g. Adami, 2009; Baranowski, 2002; Curzan, 2014: 117–119, 130–134; Earp, 2012). With generic pronouns in epicene contexts, there has been a decrease in the use of *he*, balanced by an increase of *he or she*, and depending on the genre, singular *they* (Adami, 2009; Baranowski, 2002). Other changes in English include the introduction of *Ms.*, and more recently *Mx.* (e.g. Bigler & Campbell, 2015: 191–192). Unlike the Swedish *hen* (e.g. Bigler & Campbell, 2015: 192; Gustafsson Senden, Bäck & Lindqvist, 2015), neopronouns in English have not caught on despite numerous attempts to adopt them in generic contexts (e.g. Baron, 1981).

However, it is not possible to prove a causal relationship between the advocated reforms and changes in use. It is equally possible that the nonsexist guidelines followed usage, or emerged alongside changes in usage (Curzan, 2014: 120). Indeed, the success of nonsexist language reforms has also depended on changes in attitudes and ideologies about gender and gender equality (e.g. Bigler & Campbell, 2015: 192; Curzan, 2014: 120). While such processes cannot be explored extensively, a few examples are discussed below.

A particularly illuminating example is the stance many linguists took in the 1970's. As a reaction to feminist students objecting to the use of *he* as an epicene, the Harvard Linguistics Faculty responded in an open letter:

“[...] the fact that the masculine is the unmarked gender in English [...] is simply a feature of grammar. It is unlikely to be an impediment to change in the patterns of the sexual division of labor towards which our society may wish to

evolve. There is really no cause for anxiety or pronoun-envy on the part of those seeking such changes” (e.g. Goddard et al. [Harvard Linguistics Faculty], 1971; also discussed by e.g. Talbot, 2010: 235–236; Henley, 1989: 61–62; Livia, 2001: 3–5)

Similar to the Harvard linguists, Robin Lakoff also felt that the use of *he* in epicene contexts is “too thoroughly mixed throughout the language, for the speaker to be aware each time he uses them”, and that therefore, it is not realistic to hope for changes in pronoun use; “[...] we should perhaps concentrate our efforts where they will be most fruitful” (Lakoff, 1975: 75). Yet, present-day understanding of the issue is different, reflected in many authors adopting *she* independently or alongside *he* (e.g. Cameron, 2006; Fowler, 2009; Lakoff, 2000; Talbot, 2010; Unger, 1989; Vogt, 2007; Wilton & Stegu, 2011).

A non-academic example of changes at the individual level is provided by the author Ursula K. Le Guin (discussed by Livia, 2001: 134–143, and Hekanaho, 2015: 19–20). Having first upset her readers by using *he* as an epicene in reference to all imaginary genders in her fantasy novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Livia, 2000: 137–138), Le Guin responded to the critique with the following statement:

“I call Gethenians ‘he’ because I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for ‘he/she.’ ‘He’ is the generic pronoun, damn it.” (essay *Is Gender Necessary?* Le Guin, 1979: 168).

A decade later, while commenting on her previous essay (*Is Gender Necessary?*), Le Guin had changed her mind, disapproving epicene use of *he* for being exclusive to women, and further indicating that pronoun use “shapes”, “directs”, and even “controls” thinking. In addition, she expressed disliking neopronouns, and vouched for singular *they* instead (Le Guin, 1989: 15). Nevertheless, some years later Le Guin proposed adopting the neopronoun *e* (Livia, 2000: 143), coming full-circle in her pronominal evolution.

While such examples serve to illustrate that change in attitudes and in language use is possible, some studies have also investigated whether awareness of sexist language supports using nonsexist language instead. Cronin and Jreisat measured language use after participants had first been exposed to nonsexist language in a reading task (1995). While this exposure did not completely eliminate sexist language use, the authors concluded that modeling nonsexist language use encourages using such language, adding that sexist language should also be explicitly discouraged (Cronin & Jreisat, 1995: 823–828). Similar results were also attained in a more recent study on German (Koeser, Kuhn & Sczesny, 2015: 347–351). In addition, Jacobson and Insko found that “feminist orientation” (measured with the *attitudes toward women* scale) predicted choosing *he/she* over *he* or *she*, while negative attitudes toward women predicted choosing *he* (1985).

4.3.3 Resisting nonsexist language

While many of the nonsexist language reforms have been adopted into common use, the reforms initially faced loud opposition — and some continue to be opposed. While such opposition often explicitly focuses on complaining about or ridiculing nonsexist reforms, underneath may lie a deeper resistance to politicizing and prescribing language use (e.g. Cameron, 1995: 19–26, 119; Curzan, 2014: 114–115). Indeed, nonsexist language reforms are often experienced as unnecessary governance of language, even as a violation of freedom of speech (e.g. Curzan, 2014: 115, and Blaubergs, 1980, discussed below). Nevertheless, opponents of nonsexist prescriptions may still accept and even advocate for other, more traditionally prescribed usage (e.g. Paterson, 2014: 94, discussing Pauwels, 1998). As such, it may be that “freedom of speech” simply functions as an overt justification for a deeper discomfort with the ideological motivation behind nonsexist language reforms.

Examples of many types of arguments against nonsexist language have already surfaced above, but below, the typology from two previous studies is reviewed in some detail, since the topic will be revisited when considering the results from the present study (Chapter 11). In the early 1980’s, Blaubergs identified eight main types of arguments against changing sexist language that were used in academic discussions: (1) Cross-Cultural; (2) Language is a Trivial Concern; (3) Freedom of Speech/Unjustified Coercion; (4) Sexist Language is not Sexist; (5) Word Etymology; (6) Appeal to Authority; (7) Change is Too Difficult; (8) Historical Authenticity (Blaubergs, 1980: 136). Further four categories were identified in a modified replication study by Parks and Robertson: (9) Sexism is acceptable; (10) Hostility and Ridicule; (11) Tradition; (12) Lack of Knowledge or Understanding (Parks & Robertson, 1998a: 451–457).⁴²

The Cross-Cultural arguments (category 1) question whether there is a link between sexism in language and sexism in society; if no such link exists, then, it is argued, sexist language is a non-issue. Arguments in the second category view language use as a Trivial Concern, especially in comparison to “real” or “bigger” problems, which should be in the focus instead of language use. Related to both categories is the idea that changing language does not fix societal issues. Parks and Robertson’s new category Hostility and Ridicule (category 10) includes somewhat similar trivializing comments, but in addition they contain a more explicit element of hostility towards proponents of nonsexist language.

Trivializing the issue seems to be related to the Sexist Language is Not Sexist category as well (category 4): viewing the use of masculine words in epicene contexts as sexist is just a matter of misunderstanding the way

⁴² Parks and Robertson’s data was elicited from undergraduate students who in the first study reacted to a video on sexist language, and in the second study a questionnaire on sexist language (IASNL) was used as stimulus (1998a: 449, 455).

language supposedly works. Connected to this idea are also arguments about Word Etymology (category 5): the masculine is defended as “gender-neutral” (in the meaning of epicene), “because man used to mean human”, as if word meanings could not change over time (Blaubergs, 1980: 136–142). Somewhat similarly, Appeal to Authority (category 6) gathers appeals to institutions viewed as language authorities, such as grammar books and dictionaries; Blaubergs also found comments that placed linguists as appropriate gatekeepers for language (e.g. Lakoff, 1975: 75 [45], cited in Blaubergs, 1980: 142). The general argument with this category is that if a word is defined one way, then this is the (only) correct interpretation. Based on their data, Parks and Roberton further expanded authority to include societal authority figures such as teachers, coaches and family members (Parks & Roberton, 1998a: 451). Opposite to such appeals are comments in the third category, Freedom of Speech/Unjustified Coercion, which includes arguments that view nonsexist language reforms as unnecessary governance of language and as a violation of free speech.

The seventh category brings together arguments about how Change is Too Difficult. Such arguments have been particularly common with changes in pronouns (e.g. Lakoff, 1975: 75). Parks and Roberton further expanded this category to include additional perspectives such as “fear of change”, “stubbornness” and “resistance to any change” (Parks & Roberton, 1998a: 456). Related are arguments about how language traditions are in jeopardy, categorized under Historical Authenticity (category 8); nonsexist language use is seen as a threat to established idioms (e.g. *all mankind is created equal or to each his own*), as well as to previous literary works using masculine forms as epicenes. In a similar fashion, Parks and Roberton’s Tradition category (category 11) includes comments justifying sexist language by claiming this is how language has always been used. A similar logic is present in the arguments for Sexism is acceptable (category 9), as sexist expectations or assumptions are viewed as traditional gender roles instead. Connected are also arguments in the category Lack of Knowledge/Understanding (category 12), which provide “benign excuses” to sexist language use.

While the above arguments concerned sexist language at large, Chapter 11 will demonstrate that many of these arguments can be identified with pronouns specifically, even extending to nonbinary pronouns.

4.3.4 Understanding attitudes towards sexist language

On top of the qualitative study presented above, Parks & Roberton have also developed an *Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language* (IASNL) to explore attitudes towards (non)sexist language. The IASNL taps into three aspects: a) beliefs, thoughts and opinions about (non)sexist language, b) recognition of sexist language, and c) willingness to use, and use

of nonsexist language (Parks & Robertson, 2000: 419).⁴³ A shortened version, IASNL General, focuses only on the first aspect (Parks & Robertson, 2000). The IASNL-G has been used in multiple subsequent studies by the authors, and it has been adopted by other studies as well (e.g. Douglas & Sutton, 2014), including the present study (see Chapter 5). Other approaches to studying attitudes towards sexist language use include those by Rubin & Greene, 1991 and Swim, Mallett & Stangor, 2004.

Studies on (non)sexist language attitudes have often also investigated explanatory variables. For example, age, gender, and education have been identified as influential variables. Female participants have generally been more concerned about sexist language than male participants, consequently supporting nonsexist language more than male participants; a similar tendency was found with age, as older participants were more concerned about sexist language (Parks & Robertson, 1998b; 2004; 2005; also Rubin & Greene, 1991: 402–409). In addition, in two studies exploring the effect of exposure to nonsexist language use, female participants used nonsexist language more than male participants (Cronin & Jreisat, 1995: 828, Koeser et al. 2015: 347–351). However, in one subsequent study, Parks and Robertson failed to replicate the gender effect with a non-student population (2008: 281). Instead, years of education was found to help “people understand the need for inclusive language” (2008: 282).

Additional investigations using the IASNL-G indicated that the gender difference is partly mediated by *attitudes toward women* (Parks & Robertson, 2004; 2005).⁴⁴ This relationship was further examined by Douglas and Sutton, who identified *social dominance orientation* and *system justification* as “higher order explanations” for the mediating effect of *attitudes toward women* on the gender difference (2014: 673–674). They further speculate that men might have an easier time including themselves in “masculine generics”, and therefore do not view sexist language as much of an issue as women (2014: 673–674).

Similar to the effect with *attitudes toward women*, with different instruments, Swim et al. linked disregarding sexist language to *Modern Sexist beliefs*, defined as “explicitly support[ing] gender inequality and endorse[ing] traditional gender roles” (Swim et al., 2004: 117–118). In addition to not identifying sexist language, participants with *Modern Sexist beliefs* often used sexist language themselves (2004: 121–125).

In sum, it seems that broader constructs may lie behind (gender) differences in attitudes towards sexist language use, including sexist beliefs beyond language.

⁴³ In the original article (2000), there was an error in the procedures concerning the scoring, as some of the items that needed to be reverse-scored were not (Parks & Robertson, 2001, *Erratum*).

⁴⁴ Parks and Robertson have explored other mediating factors in their studies as well, excluded from considerations since the results have not been as consistent as with *attitudes toward women*.

4.4 GENDER, IDENTITY AND PRONOUNS

In general, identities can be thought of in terms of how individuals, or even groups, see themselves in relation to others (e.g. Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017: 25). Since identities are constituted and manifested in discursive interaction, they are characterized by fluidity, as the way we understand an identity depends on context and may change over space and time (e.g. Buchholtz & Hall, 2010: 607; Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017: 25).

In this sense, while pertaining to other identities as well, gender has become to be conceptualized as performative. In Butler's words, "[gender identity] is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1999: 33). In short, we perform gender by reiterative discursive practices that index a specific gender, often unconsciously and unintentionally and only sometimes consciously and intentionally (e.g. Butler, 1993: 2; McConnell-Ginet, 2011: 28). Such indexical discursive practices include overt use of identity labels, but also many other practices that are typically associated with certain groups (e.g. Buchholtz & Hall, 2005: 593–598; see also "linguistic becomings" in Cordoba, 2020). For example, uptalk and creaky voice are often associated with (young) women (e.g. Tyler, 2015: 286; for further examples, see Buchholtz & Hall, 2010, and Joseph, 2010). In addition, while the idea of performativity may convey a sense of freedom, gender is regulated by the socio-cultural context in which it is performed, for example by the notion of normality (Butler, 1999: 43–44; Cameron, 1996: 47).

Pronouns have also been recognized as identity-building linguistic tools. While previous research has explored identity construction with pronouns through *he*, *she*, *we*, *they*, and *I* (e.g. Brewer, M. & Gardner, 1996; Sebba & Wootton, 1998; Tang & John, 1999; Timmis, 2015), transgender experiences and particularly nonbinary pronouns call for further investigation as regards connections between identity and pronouns.

In the cisgender realm, pronouns have been fairly uncomplicated. Pronouns, it was theorized previously, lack independent meaning and simply substitute for the nouns they refer to (see discussion by Wales, 1996: 1–4). Gendered pronouns were similarly thought to match with the "sex" of the referent in an uncomplicated fashion (e.g. Wales, 1996: 111). Although some scholars have also previously recognized the social and political power pronouns carry (e.g. Wales, 1996: xii), the increased public awareness and acceptance of transgender individuals has highlighted the role of pronouns in many ways, not the least because many transgender individuals decide to switch to a different set of pronouns during transition or when coming out (e.g. Zimman, 2019).

The importance of pronouns is also highlighted in the context of misgendering, and the negative effects it has on transgender people. Thus far, only a few studies have explored misgendering in more depth. McLemore's two studies (n= 115, n= 134) demonstrated that misgendering often has adverse effects on mental health (2015: 51, 70). Misgendering made the

participants feel devalued, and induced feelings of being stigmatized, which was associated with hostility and anxiety, but also marginally increased guilt (2015: 60). Misgendering also affected the participants' self-esteem and their experience of authenticity (2015: 67). Similarly, in Beemyn's study (2015), nonbinary college students (n=111) reported the fear of being misgendered in official documents and by their fellow students as one of their biggest concerns at a college campus.

Furthermore, while misgendering can be unintentional, it may also be intentional when a person refuses to recognize transgender identities (a useful list of different types of misgendering is provided by Simpson and Dewaele, 2019: 105; see also discussion by Cordoba, 2020: 166–168). Such refusals can be seen as attempts to invalidate a person's gender (e.g. Johnson et al., 2019). In contrast, being pronounced correctly can be experienced as validating (e.g. Zimman, 2019: 159). For binary transgender people, "passing" as either female or male can be an important milestone, the validation stemming from strangers using the correct pronouns or other gendered terms based on one's conceptual gender (e.g. Zimman, 2019: 159).

Fairly novel speech acts, such as sharing one's pronouns and employing pronouns as a coming out mechanism, further emphasize the role of pronouns. For example, upon introduction, pronouns might be shared along one's name: *I'm Lee, I use they pronouns* (e.g. Zimman, 2019: 161–162). Such sharing practices have been gaining ground in trans-considerate contexts, including many public contexts, such as registration forms for universities (e.g. CBS News Online, 2015; Scelfo, 2015), academic conferences and bio-sections, e.g. on Twitter.⁴⁵

While sharing one's pronouns is a personal choice, asking for other people's pronouns has also been advocated as a tactic to avoid misgendering. However, this act is potentially face-threatening as the indication is that of gender nonconformity (i.e. not passing as female/male), which may be experienced as offensive (e.g. Zimman, 2017: 93–94). Furthermore, because of the connection between pronouns and identity, asking what pronouns someone uses may also in some contexts feel intrusive and might even lead to "outing" a person against their will (ibid.). This issue might be mitigated if asking for someone's pronouns became a common practice with everyone, regardless of whether their gender expression conforms to perceived gender norms. However, it seems unlikely that such a practice would become widespread, as many cisgender people still view pronouns as a fairly uncomplicated matter, deducible from how someone presents themselves (see Chapter 11).

As the above discussion has demonstrated, pronouns are linked to gender and function as identity-building tools in many ways. This is perhaps most evident when pronouns are employed as a coming out mechanism (e.g.

⁴⁵ It seems that typically only the nominative and accusative forms of the pronoun are offered, for example *xe/xir*, sometimes followed by the possessive *xirs*. Particularly with *they*, a linguist might also be interested in the reflexive; whether *themself* or *themselves* is preferred.

Darwin, 2017: 329–330). This is possible because, in simplified terms, binary pronouns typically index a female or male identity, whereas nonbinary pronouns index an identity that is not exclusively female or male. However, reality is more complex, and there is no perfect correlation between pronouns and gender, and one's gender cannot be reliably deduced from pronoun use. Some individuals may, for example, use conventional pronouns (or the pronouns associated with their conceptual gender) in contexts where they do not wish to reveal their identity (e.g. Zimman, 2017: 94; see also Chapter 12 of the present study). Another example from a different context is the convention of using *she* (and *sister*) to refer to fellow gay men in some communities, although some degree of perceived femininity might guide this convention (e.g. Motschenbacher, 2010: 117; Zimman, 2019: 155).⁴⁶

Taking into account such complexities, one way to conceptualize the relationship between pronouns and identity is that instead of directly indexing, pronouns only presuppose gender (Zimman, 2019: 154–155, discussing Silverstein, 1985). Zimman further reports that (some) nonbinary communities are attempting to “decouple pronouns from gender presentation or identity” (2019: 161). One indication of such an attempt is the apparent switch from talking about female/male or feminine/masculine pronouns to simply referring to the pronouns as such, e.g. ‘I use *she* pronouns’ (Zimman, 2019: 161–162). Nevertheless, as demonstrated above, pronouns do carry associations about gender in many contexts.

That 3PSPs have been adopted in many relatively novel discursive acts is particularly interesting since these pronouns are typically not used by oneself, but by others. When used in reference to others, 3PSPs further serve various functions that can be connected to identity-building in a broader context. As already indicated, identities are not formed independently by the individual, but instead they are constructed intersubjectively through various mechanisms employed both at the individual and group level. Such mechanisms include acts of adequation/distinction, authentication/denaturalization, and authorization/illegitimation (Buchholtz & Hall, 2010: 23–25). In this regard, pronouns help in regulating which identities are permissible or naturalized. For example, claiming a set of nonbinary pronouns is an act of authentication, and repeated use by self and others discursively verifies nonbinary identities (see Buchholtz & Hall, 2010: 24). Identities may also be affirmed (or refused) through institutionalized power, as an act of authorization, or denaturalization (ibid). For example, despite loud opposition from influential parties, in 2017 an Act to Amend the Canadian Human Rights Code and the Criminal Code, Bill C-16, was passed to “provide equal protection of the law to trans and gender non-binary individuals” at the federal level, encompassing pronoun use (Cossman, 2018: 37, 42). Similarly, in New York City, failing to use the name or pronouns that a person identifies with is considered gender-discrimination, prohibited in

⁴⁶ Drag queens are also often referred to with *she*, but this is somewhat different since these individuals are claiming a female persona, even if only temporarily.

public contexts (NYC Commission on Human Rights, 2019: 3-5). These new acts of legislation further highlight the importance of language, and pronouns.

4.5 WHY DOES LANGUAGE MATTER?

To conclude Part II, I want to briefly address the question underlying the chapters in this section: why does language matter? There are two related points I want to emphasize: language use is not neutral, and it cannot be neatly dissected from the people who use it.

Although there is no consensus as to what degree language could affect or even determine thought (e.g. Bieswanger et al., 2010: 10; Bigler & Campbell, 2015), language does inherently possess the power to create mental imagery. In this sense, in accordance with a moderate view of linguistic relativity, language can affect the way we perceive the world. In Slobin's words, it is through language that we experience much of life:

“The language or languages that we learn in childhood are not neutral coding systems of an objective reality. Rather, each one is a subjective orientation to the world of human experience, and this orientation **affects the ways in which we think while we are speaking.**” (Slobin, 1996: 91)

Since ideologies are discursively constructed, many of our (dominant) values are also coded in the language we use (e.g. McConnell-Ginet, 1980: 5). It follows that, often, changing language is not a matter of simply changing forms, but instead it necessitates cultural and/or ideological changes as well. Because of this function, particularly with PC-related language, linguistic choices become political choices, and individual word choices transfer political and social meaning to others (e.g. Curzan, 2014: 114–115). In present-day English, there is no neutral way to use masculine words as epicenes, for example, just like there is no neutral way to use racial or sexual slurs.

It is also through similar mechanisms (and various others) that particular language use becomes associated with certain groups, or types of people (imagined or not). Because of such associations, language cannot be separated from the people who use. Thus, the attitudes we have about language are not just about the form of language, but about groups of people and their perceived characteristics (e.g. Garrett, 2010: 5; Rosa & Burdick, 2016: 104).

One answer to the question posed above, then, is that language matters because the way we use language is a reflection of our values and beliefs, signaling how we think of the world and other people. A much more simplified answer might be that language matters because it matters to people, as was clearly demonstrated by the participants of the present study.

PART III. STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

In Part III, the study design and methods are described in detail. Chapter 5 provides a description of the study design and methods of data collection, whereas Chapter 6 focuses on the methods of analysis: logistic regression and thematic analysis.

5 STUDY DESIGN AND DATA

After discussing some of the ethical questions concerning the study (section 5.1), this chapter presents the rationale for the study design (section 5.2), followed by a description of the development and implementation of the survey instrument (sections 5.3 and 5.4). Last, some general limitations regarding survey research are considered in section 5.5; a more extensive discussion of the limitations regarding the whole study is reserved for the final discussion (Chapter 13).

5.1 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study was submitted for review for the ethical committee of the University of Helsinki. The approval was granted in September 2016, and final data collection was carried out in February–March 2017. The European GDPR was not enacted at the time of data collection. The GDPR was considered in retrospect as regards data management, but since the dataset does not contain any directly identifiable information, no further actions were deemed necessary.

Several ethical guidelines were consulted before designing and conducting the survey (e.g. Buchanan & Hvizdak, 2009; Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, 2014; Fowler, 2009). Participating in the survey was deemed not to cause any direct harm to the participants. The minimum respondent age limit was set at 18 years old, since participants were sought from various countries, which may have different practices as regards studying minors.

Particular attention was paid to including transgender participants. Forming a stigmatized minority who are still subject to hate crimes, their gender identity was regarded as sensitive information. As such, to provide adequate anonymity, no directly identifiable information was gathered from the participants (e.g. e-mail address and IP address which are often collected and used to eliminate multiple responses). Following Buchanan and Hvizdak (2009), the participants were still reminded that with any information shared online, there is always a risk of information leakage.

The informed consent (see Appendix A) followed the ethical guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2014). Participation was voluntary, and the participants were also offered the chance to withdraw from the study within three weeks from participating.⁴⁷ No such requests were made. The informed consent also specified that the data would be used for research purposes and could be archived.

⁴⁷ Since no contact information was required, the participants were asked to copy and save their submission to part 1 if they felt they might have wanted to withdraw from the study later on.

At the end of the survey, the participants were informed they could contact the researcher by email in case they wanted to be notified when the results of the study would be published. Hence, the participants' anonymity was not jeopardized. A separate research blog was created to share preliminary results.

Ethical issues were likewise considered when choosing the commercial survey provider, QuestionPro. It was confirmed that the data rights belong to the researcher, that no third party would have access to the data, and that the data would not be used for any other purposes. QuestionPro's Respondent Anonymity Assurance was used to block identifiable information from the data (e.g. IP addresses, location). After exporting the required data files, the data was deleted from the survey provider's servers.

5.2 OVERVIEW OF STUDY DESIGN

The survey was designed to address the main research questions that were discussed in section 1.2, reproduced below.

1. Generic pronouns

- 1.1. Which generic pronouns are used?
- 1.2. Which generic pronouns are considered acceptable?

2. Nonbinary pronouns

- 2.1. Which nonbinary pronouns are considered acceptable?
- 2.2. Which pronouns do nonbinary individuals use (for themselves)?
- 2.3. What do pronouns mean to nonbinary individuals?

3. Attitudes and ideologies

- 3.1. What kind of attitudes do the participants express towards the pronouns?
- 3.2. How are these attitudes related to the use and acceptability of pronouns?
- 3.3. What kind of ideologies might underlie the participants' attitudes?

4. Social factors

Are there differences between groups of participants based on factors such as age, gender, native language, and attitudes?

In line with the research questions, the survey was designed to measure usage, acceptability, and attitudes. These three aspects are interrelated, and the data the survey produced is complimentary in the sense that the acceptability and attitude data can be used to help understand (changes in) usage. The overall survey design is illustrated in Figure 2 below (excluding background questions). The survey form is provided in Appendix A.

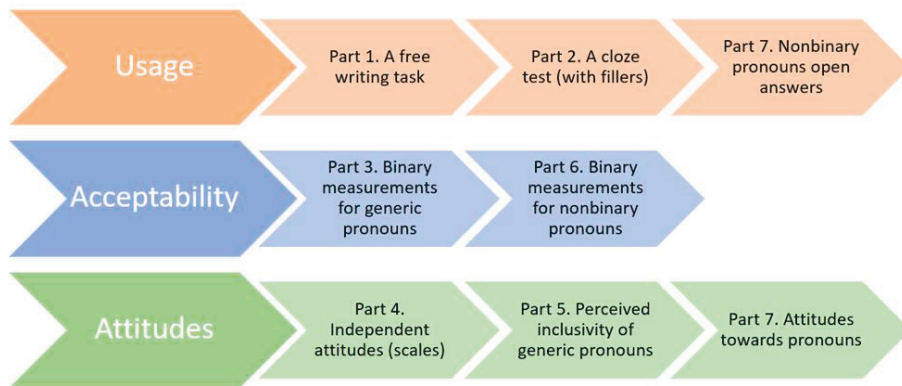


Figure 2. Survey design

The survey was advertised as a study on language use and attitudes, but it was not revealed at the beginning that the study was specifically about pronouns, or gender-related topics.⁴⁸ The purpose was to allow for a neutral measurement of generic pronoun usage in the beginning of the survey. After an initial background section, parts 1 and 2 measured generic pronoun use, the former with a free writing task and the latter with a cloze test (research question 1.1). Importantly, all measurements on generic pronouns included a nongendered, epicene antecedent. Henceforth, this is understood as the context in which the generic pronouns appeared.

Part 3 was the first task explicitly about pronouns, measuring acceptability of generic pronouns in epicene contexts, the stimulus being either a gendered, or nongendered pronoun (research question 1.2). Part 4 included Likert scales (e.g. on attitudes towards transgender individuals and on sexist language use), and additional background questions that were deemed too revealing to be included in the initial background section. Part 4 also required introducing concepts such as “sexist language” and offered a definition for “transgender”, which might affect the participants’ responses. Hence, these concepts could not be introduced earlier in the survey. Parts 5 (on perceived inclusivity of generic pronouns) and 6 (acceptability of nonbinary pronouns) both needed to be explicit, and a definition for “nonbinary” was required for the tasks. The placement of part 5 was again a matter of trying to avoid bias; however, there was no perfect solution. Along with the background information, parts 4 and 5 help answer research question 4.

In part 6, the participants were presented with the same type of task as in part 3, except they were asked to assess the acceptability of nonbinary pronouns in reference to named individuals who were identified as nonbinary (research question 2.1). Lastly, part 7 included open answer questions

⁴⁸ This level of vagueness was necessary, and it was not deemed unethical. No debriefing was considered necessary, as later parts in the survey explicitly concerned pronouns. The participants could contact the researcher when needed.

designed to elicit the participants' attitudes towards both generic and nonbinary pronouns in order to explore research question 3.1 and 3.3. After the general open answer questions, the transgender participants responded to additional questions about their relationship with pronouns, to investigate research questions 2.2 and 2.3.

An important part of the study design was for the data to allow for cross-analysis of usage, acceptability and attitudes (research question 3.2), which meant that cohesive responses on all three aspects from the same participants needed to be attained. Similarly, specific background information was also required. For these main reasons, the survey was chosen as the method of data collection. Furthermore, the survey needed to be conducted online for two related reasons. First, it was important to include nonbinary participants, a marginalized, hard-to-reach population for whom no sampling frame exists. Second, the participants were geographically dispersed, as I wanted to include both native speakers of different varieties of English as well as non-native speakers; fluent English-speaking Finnish and Swedish speakers. As already discussed in section 1.2, Finnish and Swedish speakers were included as representatives of L2 English speakers. These languages were chosen because Finnish has no gender pronouns, while Swedish has recently adopted the neopronoun *hen* alongside the conventional *han* (*he*) and *hon* (*she*).

5.3 SURVEY DESIGN

Various guidelines were consulted when constructing the survey instrument (e.g. Fowler, 1995; Fowler, 2009; Gillham, 2000), and several pilot surveys aided in enhancing the reliability (consistent across similar situations) and validity (measuring what the researcher intended to measure) of the measurements (e.g. Fowler, 2009: 87). In general, the questions were designed to be well-specified and unambiguous, and understandable to a wide range of participants. When needed, definitions for important concepts were provided (e.g. “sexist language”, “transgender”, and “nonbinary”; e.g. Fowler, 2009: 88–95; Gideon, 2012: 102).

In addition, the questions were worded as neutrally as possible, avoiding indicators for what type of answers might be considered “good” or “socially desirable” (Gillham, 2000: 26). In addition, the participants could either indicate “no opinion” or skip questions. Some researchers advocate against including an option for having no opinion, as it may encourage skipping questions too hastily (e.g. Fowler, 2009: 95), or because the option “suggests to respondents a great deal of knowledge is required to answer [...]” (Bourke, Kirby & Doran, 2016: 22). However, considering that the participants do not always have a-priori answers, it is also undesirable to force participants to produce potentially insincere or severely hasty responses if they cannot indicate “no opinion” or skip the question (also Vogt, 2007: 89). Overall, the

survey instrument was successful in producing the type of data it was designed to elicit.

5.3.1 Pilot surveys

The survey was extensively piloted before the final data collection. In total, two pre-survey tests and five pilots were conducted.⁴⁹ The two pre-surveys concerned testing the effect of antecedent type on generic pronouns and the functionality of the attitudinal scales for part 4. In addition, five pilots were conducted to prime the instrument further; one considerable issue was the length of the survey.

With the first pre-survey (n=17), it was determined that there was no difference in the participants' pronoun use in cloze tests that used indefinite pronouns either with [-one] or [-body] (e.g. *someone/somebody*). As such, this distinction was excluded from the design. As there is some evidence that *he* might be more common with [-one] forms (Laitinen, 2007: 119), perhaps due to the singular connotation, measurements in subsequent versions only included [-one] forms. Antecedent type, on the other hand, seemed to be a relevant factor, and was thus included in subsequent versions.

The second pre-survey (n=22) was conducted to test several attitude scales, including a few designed specifically for this study, as well as scales from previous studies. The scales were further developed based on the pre-survey and throughout the pilots, but some were excluded as superfluous, e.g. attitudes towards equal rights (Brewer, P., 2003) and attitudes towards modern sexism (Swim et al., 1995).

During the five pilots (total n=95), the survey instrument was cut down considerably as the first versions were too time-consuming.⁵⁰ Most notably, acceptability of generic pronouns was initially measured implicitly by asking participants to correct example sentences. This task was too time-demanding as the participants would often correct stylistic matters as well, and not just the pronoun. Hence, acceptability is measured explicitly in the final survey. In addition, the number of individual measurements was cut down by limiting the types of antecedents used with the acceptability and perceived inclusivity of generic pronouns. As a result, only part 2 includes all chosen antecedent types.

While extensive piloting helped improve the instrument, there were still some issues that were not detected, discussed further below.

5.3.2 Description of measurements

When designing the measurements for use and acceptability of generic pronouns, the type of antecedents was considered carefully. The survey was

⁴⁹ Participants were recruited from the subreddit r/SampleSize.

⁵⁰ The final survey is still extensive, with a mode completion time of 21 minutes [9, 222]; presumably some participants took breaks or multitasked.

designed to include different types of antecedents, as antecedent type has been identified as a factor affecting use of generic pronouns (e.g. Laitinen, 2007a; Paterson, 2014; Whitley, 1978). Two main aspects that were taken into account were antecedent type and antecedent neutrality (discussed below). In addition, the measurements were designed to be relatively short to avoid unnecessary complexity at the sentential level and possible issues in determining the antecedent-pronoun relationship. Thus, only constructions where the antecedent and pronoun appear within the same sentence were included.

Following Paterson (2014), the chosen antecedent types were: indefinite pronouns (IP, *anyone, someone, everyone*), indefinite NPs (INP, *a person, a child*), definite NPs (DNP, *the teacher, the student*) and NPs with quantifiers (NPQ, *every child, any person, each child*).⁵¹ Negative antecedents (e.g. *no one*) were excluded, as there is no real-life reference, and they seem to antecede pronouns more infrequently than the other antecedent types (e.g. Laitinen, 2007: 113–115). In addition, the chosen antecedents also varied in terms of notional number (e.g. *everyone, a child*).

The antecedents also needed to be nongendered and epicene, both explicitly and implicitly (i.e. not stereotypically gendered). Kennison and Trofe's list of epicene person nouns was consulted,⁵² and several antecedents were tested (Kennison and Trofe, 2003: Appendix A). *Child, student, and person* were used in parts 2, 3 and 5; other antecedents were used in part 7 examples to avoid repetition. With nonbinary pronouns, the antecedents were specific, represented by proper names that can refer to any gender. Based on previous research (Lieberson, Dumais & Baumann, 2000; Rickel & Anderson, 1981; Van Fleet & Atwater, 1997), *Lee* and *Chris* were chosen.⁵³

The aim was to use authentic examples in the survey. Examples were searched from the British National Corpus (BNC, 100 million words; 1980s–1993) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, 520 million words; 1990–2015). The COCA proved to be more fruitful. Examples were searched by using a collocate search for each antecedent + 3PSP pair (distance max 9 words).

The surrounding context required consideration as well, as the sentences needed to be generic. Such consideration was necessary since many of the antecedents can also appear in contexts where they refer to specific individuals, e.g. "*he's someone who is good at what he does [...]*" (COCA). The measurements were also designed so that only subjective (*she*) and possessive (*her*) forms were used; based on preliminary BNC and COCA searches these forms seemed to be most common in generic contexts, and it was also undesirable to further complicate the survey with the inclusion of other forms.

⁵¹ The quantifier *some* was excluded since I could not find suitable authentic examples, thus deemed rare in generic contexts.

⁵² "Gender-neutrality" was measured with a binary scale, but no other study was available.

⁵³ Unfortunately, some participants still interpreted these names as gendered, typically male, even though the instructions stated that *Chris* and *Lee* do not identify as female or male.

Furthermore, sometimes the examples needed to be modified, for example because the context was stereotypically gendered, or linguistically unsuitable for the task (e.g. the verb form was overtly singular, disfavoring *they*). There were also not enough suitable examples for generic *she* and the neopronouns, hence examples with *he* or *he or she* were modified with the aforementioned pronouns. Due to lack of adequate examples, a few measurements were also modelled after examples from previous studies (e.g. Gastil, 1990: 642; Paterson, 2014: 1–11).

Pronoun measurements

Part 1 of the survey asked the participants to complete a short writing task. The task was modelled after Meyers (1990), and Earp (2012), the latter being a modification of Meyers' approach. The aim was to elicit generic 3PSP use.

In Meyers' study, the students had written an essay assignment on "what is an educated person?" (1990: 230), but in Earp's study survey participants described their idea of 'The Moral Individual' (2012: 13). In the present study, the sentence starter for the participants was "A successful person is someone who...". This antecedent was chosen to avoid moral connotations.⁵⁴ The participants were asked to continue the sentence starter with 3–5 "full sentences", avoiding ambiguity and adherence to prescriptive rules with "grammatical sentences" (cf. Earp, 2012: 13). Part 1 was made optional, since the pilots indicated many participants dropped out when confronted with this task.

Part 2 also measured generic 3PSP use, but with cloze tests (fill-in-the-blanks), used in previous studies as well (e.g. Hyde, 1984; Martyna, 1980b). This part included 9 items on pronouns, and 11 filler items on preposition and spelling variations (e.g. *burned/burnt, fill in/out*). To further conceal the focus of the survey, the items were arranged so that there were no consecutive pronoun measurements. All chosen antecedent types were used with the 9 pronoun items. With one exception (item 18), to avoid affecting the participants' choice of pronoun, the verb forms were unmarked for number (either by using a modal verb, or past tense). Item 18 included an overtly singular verb form (*feels*) to investigate which tactics the participants would use in such a context.

When filling in part 1, the participants did not know that the survey was about pronouns. As such part 1 can be thought to represent unconscious pronoun use. In part 2, the participants needed to fill in pronouns specifically, thus likely more conscious of their pronoun use. In addition, part 2 controlled for the linguistic context more carefully, and guaranteed a measurement from each participant, whereas part 1 was optional.

In parts 3 and 5, the tasks were explicit, and the pronouns were underlined, since during the pilots some participants were confused whether they were

⁵⁴ In early pilots, the antecedent was "a good person". This seemed to trouble some participants, as they were required to think about moral issues.

supposed to react to the antecedent or the pronoun, perceiving a mismatch between generic antecedents and gendered pronouns.

Part 3 measured the acceptability of generic pronouns. On top of the conventional pronouns (*he, she, he or she*, singular *they*), the neopronouns *ze* and *xe* were also tested. At this point, no explanation was given for *ze* and *xe*. Each conventional pronoun was measured with three different antecedents, representing the notional number spectrum (*someone, everyone, a child, the average person*). The neopronouns and the more unusual order *she or he* were tested with one measurement each. In total, there were 15 measurements, and no filler questions. Since the task was transparent already, there was no need to randomize the order of items.

The instructions asked the participants to indicate with radio buttons whether the underlined pronoun in each sentence was acceptable or unacceptable. Acceptability was loosely defined as what the participant finds to be ‘natural or correct language use’. While a few participants objected to equating “natural” and “correct”, the task was still successful.

Part 5 measured the perceived inclusivity of generically used 3PSPs. Diverging from the other parts, possessive determiner forms were used to avoid repetition (*his, her*, etc.). Only two different antecedents were used, representing singular and plural notional number (*everyone* and *the average person*), since the pilots indicated this task was not dependent on type of antecedent. The participants were instructed to assess who could be included in the “non-specific human reference” of each underlined pronoun by ticking off ready options (*females, males, nonbinary individuals, all of the above*).

Part 6 measured the acceptability of nonbinary pronouns. Based on preliminary investigation, *they* and the neopronouns *ze* and *xe* were chosen as examples of nonbinary pronouns.⁵⁵ Diverging from previous measurements, the test sentences were purposefully created. Each pronoun was tested twice, with two different proper names, *Lee* and *Chris*. *They* was tested with both an unmarked verb form (*work* and *have*) and an overtly singular verb form (*works* and *has*). Importantly, because of the different functions of *they* (section 2.2.2), the instructions specified that *Lee* and *Chris* are “individuals who do not identify as female or male”, i.e. nonbinary.

The transgender participants were also asked to respond to additional questions about their own pronouns in part 7 to explore what pronouns mean to them, e.g. importance of using correct pronouns and misgendering (A1–A4, Appendix A).

Attitudes

The survey included two types of measurements of attitudes; the attitude scales in part 4 measured independent variables (that might affect usage and

⁵⁵ The choice was based on public discussions on nonbinary topics in the media and in online communities. In 2016, the use of nonbinary *they* was not as clearly prevalent as it is in present-day online communities, and *ze* and *xe* seemed to be most common neopronouns.

acceptability), while in part 7 the participants' views on pronouns were elicited with open-ended questions.

Part 4 included several Likert scales, used to measure (latent) attitudes (e.g. Lavrakas, 2008: 427–428). The participants were presented with different statements and they were asked whether they agree or disagree with each statement (on a five-point scale). Each scale included several items measuring the same attitude, improving the internal reliability of the scale (e.g. Baker, 1992: 17–18). Scale reliability was assessed with Cronbach's alpha.

A well-known issue with Likert items concerns the distance between the different options (e.g. Osborne, 2015: 172–175; Paltridge & Phakiti, 2010: 28). In short, the distance between the different options (e.g. *strongly agree* and *somewhat agree*) is not necessarily the same for each interval (e.g. Paltridge & Phakiti, 2010: 28), yet the data is often handled as ordinal. Aggregating the item scores to create a scale variable mitigates this issue (e.g. Vogt, 2007: 90). In addition, instead of the typical yet ambiguous *neither agree or disagree*, the middle option was labeled “neutral” (e.g. Nadler, Weston & Voyles, 2015: 78). The participants could also indicate “no opinion” with a scale-external option. This allowed the neutral option to retain its integrity, otherwise participants might have used the middle-point for indicating “no opinion” as well (e.g. Nadler, Weston & Voyles, 2015: 78).

While the survey form included five sets of Likert-items, only two scale variables were used in the analysis: attitudes towards (non)sexist language use, and attitudes towards transgender individuals. As such, the other scales are only discussed briefly.

The statements relating to grammar and linguistic relativity (L1–L5 in Appendix A) failed to form a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha <0.7) and were thus excluded. The items relating to feminism and gender equality (F1–F6) formed a reliable scale but were excluded for overlapping too much with the more relevant (non)sexist language scale (Pearson's correlation 0.75). The last set of Likert-items (P1–P4) concerned adopting a neopronoun into English. These items failed to form a scale and are thus excluded from the analysis (descriptive results are provided in Appendix B, Figure 45).

The attitudes towards (non)sexist language use scale (S1–S11 in Appendix A) consists of items adopted from the Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language (IASNL), which was developed by Parks and Robertson (2000).⁵⁶ However, some of the items were excluded as outdated or unfitting for the intended multi-national participant pool. Two additional items on gender equal language use (items S10 and S11) were created to compensate for these exclusions. In addition, the cissexist phrase “males and females” was changed to “all people”. Similarly, the definition provided for sexist language was reformulated to include all genders. The order of items was modified as well (see Appendix C for all changes). The modified items

⁵⁶ The original paper (2000) erroneously did not reverse code some of the items (see erratum, Parks and Robertson 2001).

functioned well as a scale (Cronbach's alpha 0.93), and a sum variable was created for the analyses, with items S1–6 reverse coded. The scale is orientated so that lower scores indicate negative attitudes towards sexist language use *and* supportive attitudes towards nonsexist language. Higher scores indicate dismissive/trivializing attitudes towards sexist and nonsexist language use.

The attitudes towards transgender individuals scale (T1–T5 in Appendix A) consists of items adopted from Walch et al. (2012: 1288). The original scale could not be used due to length (20 items). In addition, many of the items on the list dealt with specific contexts or had religious implications, deemed unfit for the present study. The modifications to the scale are provided in Appendix C. Importantly, based on advice from an in-group informant, the original terms “transgenderism” and “transgendered individuals” were modified to “transgender individuals” or “being transgender”.⁵⁷ In short, “transgenderism” has a political connotation, as if being transgender is a choice like *being feminist* or *atheist*, while “transgendered” has a connotation of adding something to the person, instead of being an inherent quality. Furthermore, transgender was defined for the participants as follows: “Transgender in this context refers to all individuals who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth and/or do not identify as female or male” (Appendix A).

Cronbach's alpha for the scale was adequate (0.91), and no reverse coding was needed when creating a sum variable. The scale is orientated so that low scores indicate positive attitudes and high scores negative attitudes towards transgender individuals. Notably, the scale seems to have failed to capture variation as regards negative attitudes. It is possible that the items are too general or vague, although the positive bias may also be partly due social desirability. It is not advised to reproduce the scale as is.

In part 7, the participants could respond to optional, open-ended questions about their “views” on the different pronouns tested throughout the survey (V1–V7 in Appendix A). This data was designed to explore *why* pronouns are accepted or rejected, thus linking attitudes (in the broader sense) to acceptability. To elicit appropriate data for this purpose, based on the pilot surveys, acceptability radio buttons were added to encourage the participants to respond to the questions, and with additional verbal guidance, to focus on thinking about acceptability in their responses.

After the pronoun questions, there was an additional question about the participants' views on gender equal language use (V8). This question was later excluded as tangential. Furthermore, two additional questions about transgender terminology were excluded as problematic, since the survey form had already specified these terms, leading many participants to use the provided definitions (TE1–TE2). In addition, many participants did not understand these questions as intended.

⁵⁷ This person had also conducted nonacademic surveys with thousands of international participants on nonbinary identity terms and thus had valuable insight (Lodge, 2019).

5.3.3 Background information

Extensive background information was gathered in the beginning of the survey form, since especially with online samples, it is important to know what type of participants you have in order to assess potential biases in the sample (e.g. Risko, Quilty & Oakman, 2006: 725). Based on the research questions and hypotheses (see section 2.3.3), the following background information was collected: age (B1 in Appendix A), gender (B2), residential area (B3–B6), ethnicity (B7), native language (B8), L2s (B9–B10), education (B11–B12), religious orientation (B13–B14), and political orientation (B15).

First, gender was elicited in free-form (B2). Ready options were deemed unsuitable, since no complete list of gender identities could be provided and using an option for “other” was undesirable. However, it was also important to distinguish between cisgender and transgender participants, as their views on pronouns likely differ due to different personal experiences. As mentioned, cisgender individuals have less likely needed to think about their pronouns, whereas transgender individuals more likely have, as many also choose to switch to a different set of pronouns than what is typically associated with their assigned gender. As such, the participants were asked to indicate if their gender was not the same as was assigned to them at birth.

Native language was elicited with existing categories and an option to specify “other” varieties (B8). The non-native speakers of English were also asked how long they had studied English (B10); this question was designed as a rough measurement for adequate fluency.⁵⁸ In addition, all participants were asked to select any L2s from a provided list that they spoke at a beginner level, deemed sufficient as regards learning 3PSPs (B9). The language questions were included since knowing other type of languages might affect the participants’ use of and views on English (e.g. Pauwels, 2010; Wasserman & Weseley, 2009).

Education level (B11) was included as higher education levels might result in greater adherence to prescriptive rules in pronoun use. The participants were also asked to indicate if they had studied any of the subjects provided in a separate list at a university level or “independently” (defined as reading scientific books or articles, B12). The purpose was to elicit information about having a background in linguistics and/or gender studies, while the other subjects were included as fillers (to not reveal the focus of the survey at this point). Both a background in linguistics and gender studies might mean being familiar with the study of language and gender, perhaps leading to greater awareness of sexist language.

Four questions were used to assess residential background (B3–B6). However, only B5 (residential area during childhood and adolescence) was used in the analyses. This question was included since Meyers suggests there might be an urban/rural divide affecting generic pronoun use (1990: 234–

⁵⁸ The participants’ written responses were also assessed roughly with fluency in mind, but there were no cases that would have been concerning as regards fluency.

235). The other questions about residential background turned out to be superfluous. The majority (about 90%) of the participants had lived only in one country (B3=B4), and, for most participants (about 90%), their native language matched (one of) the official language(s) of their country of residence (B3=B4=B8). Since native language is more important for a linguistic study, the superfluous questions about residential area were excluded.

The participants were also asked to indicate their religious (B13 and 14) and political orientation (B15). Political orientation was included as it has been suggested that conservatives might be more resistant to changes in language, valuing prescriptive approaches instead (e.g. Chapter 3 in Cameron, 1995). Since the target populations comprised different nations, political orientation could only be measured as a rough binary liberal-conservative variable.⁵⁹ Even these rather general descriptions might mean different things in different cultures. As such, this measurement merely concerns self-identification as either liberal or conservative. Both political orientation and religiousness may also affect a person's attitudes towards transgender individuals, as suggested by Walch et al. (2012). While B14 was included to assess the importance of religious beliefs, it was later excluded as nonsignificant in preliminary analyses.

The participants were also asked to report their ethnicity (B7). Ready options were used since in early pilots many of the Finnish and Swedish participants did not know how to respond, but typed in their nationality (see also Dewaele, 2010: 46). Since different nationalities were targeted, the ready categories were designed to reflect this (e.g. African American, African Finnish). This variable was only included to assess whether the sample was unknowingly white-biased. Hence, no hypotheses were formulated for ethnicity, and the variable is not included in the analyses.

Three additional background questions were included in part 4 (E1–E3), deemed too detailed to be included in the background section. Knowing that the survey concerned transgender individuals and nonbinary pronouns might have affected the participants' responses to parts 1, 2 and 3. These additional items measured a) personally knowing transgender individuals, b) previous familiarity with neopronouns and c) and self-identifying as LGBT+ or an ally. The latter was later excluded for overlapping with the participants' gender information (all transgender participants identified as LGBT+). The two former questions were hypothesized to affect acceptability of nonbinary pronouns, and generic neopronouns.

⁵⁹ For example, main political parties could be used instead if the sample was collected only from one country.

5.4 SAMPLING, DATA COLLECTION AND DATA PROCEDURES

The data was collected with an online survey in early 2017, built and hosted on a commercial platform, QuestionPro, that offered the features required for the study design.

The online survey approach allowed for targeting a) geographically widespread participants and b) transgender and nonbinary individuals, for whom no sampling frame exists. Online samples are often described as “convenience sample”, but the sampling approach of this study is better described as (nonprobability-based) quasi-purposive sampling (e.g. Daniel, 2012: 87). Specific groups were targeted to fill loose quota (n~100) based on gender, native language, age, education level, political orientation and religiousness. The data collection was monitored closely, and more participants were recruited by targeting underrepresented groups.

The survey was advertised on various social media platforms. The main source of participants (84%) was the online discussion forum Reddit.⁶⁰ Reddit consists of a multitude of subreddits for different topics or groups of people (e.g. r/Suomi, r/Feminism). As such, Reddit allowed for relatively easy access to the target populations. The survey was also advertised on a few other online forums, email lists, and on my personal Facebook and Twitter accounts, where it was shared and retweeted about a dozen times in total. In addition, an informant voluntarily shared the advertisement on their personal tumblr blog, where it was further shared 27 times. As the original tumblr blog was related to nonbinary pronouns, some of the tumblr participants (n=50, of whom 30 are nonbinary) did guess the survey related to nonbinary and/or pronoun topics.

On Reddit, the survey was advertised on several subreddits, most importantly on country-specific and age-based subreddits (to attract +30-year-old participants. A list of the subreddits is provided in Appendix B (Table 16). Notably, r/USA was not used for recruiting, as Reddit is an American-based discussion forum. Following rediquette, moderators of each subreddit were contacted prior to advertising the survey (with the exception of survey-specific subreddits). Some subreddit moderators were wary of my request to post, and some denied or continuously ignored the request.⁶¹ Most notably lacking are the subreddits r/AskTransgender, r/UnitedKingdom (strictly prohibiting surveys), several religion-specific subreddit (r/Judaism, r/Catholicism, r/Islam), as well as r/conservative. Furthermore, Reddit seems to be biased towards young, urban, cis male participants (Duggan & Smith,

⁶⁰ During March 2016, there were over 230 million unique visitors from 210 different countries on Reddit (source: <https://www.reddit.com/about/>).

⁶¹ It turned out that some of my requests had simply been overlooked, due to some initial confusion with a new moderator post system that had been implemented during the time of my data collection. In addition, some of the minority groups were tired of study invitations, and some had had negative experiences with previous researchers. Needless to say, I respected the rejections.

2013). The quasi-purposive approach only mitigated this issue to some extent (see Chapter 7 for a description of the sample).

There were also some technical issues on the survey platform during data collection, and some participants could not complete the survey. Most notably, upon posting on r/Sweden, participants could not fill in the survey due to a server-update. This explains the low number of Swedish participants (n=60). In addition, about half a dozen participants reported having issues with the form.

Furthermore, some participants reacted adversely to the content of the survey, leaving inappropriate comments on some of the subreddits (soon deleted by the moderators), along with a few hateful private messages. A few participants also revealed the purpose of the survey in their public comments. I contacted them and asked them to edit the comments so that pronouns would not be mentioned; all but one kindly agreed to do so. There was no way to control whether someone had learned about the purpose of the survey privately.

The data was exported into Microsoft Excel, where most of the data procedures were executed, including cleaning the data and (re)coding variables (described below). The data was then also exported to SPSS, which was used for statistical analyses.

As regards data procedures, the incomplete responses were first separated from complete responses; only the latter were used in the analysis. Second, the data was screened for ineligible participants based on age (under 18 years old) and native language (requirement: either English, Swedish, or Finnish as one native language). A total of 26 participants were removed: 18 due to age, six due to the native language requirement, and two as insincere.⁶² Since no directly personal information was collected, the data did not need to be (further) anonymized. Each participant was given a numeric ID based on chronological order (P1, P2, P3, ...).

Most of the variables were coded appropriately automatically, but some needed to be manually (re)coded. For example, the participants' L2s were coded based on the type of language. In addition, the "other" responses the participants typed in were coded accordingly when possible.

There was not a lot of missing data, but for a handful of participants, their responses for part 5 were missing for an unknown reason. In addition, there was a mishap in the survey form settings concerning the acceptability measurements in parts 3 and 6; the participants' radio button response was nulled if they typed anything in the comment box. The comment responses were coded manually, but as acceptability could not be elicited from all responses, there was some missing data as a result.

The attitude scales in part 4 also suffered from some missing data. Using sum variables (mean of the scale) mitigated this problem. As a threshold, the participant needed to have responded to 50% of the items in a scale to be

⁶² One indicated living on the moon, while the other used extremely racist and hateful language. Overall, tolerance for humorous and even hateful comments was high.

included. After this procedure, the (non)sexist language use scale and attitudes towards transgender individuals scale, had 9 and 21 missing cases, respectively. Further information about response variables created for the statistical analyses is provided in the results section.

5.5 COMMON ISSUES WITH SURVEYS

The main disadvantage of this study concerns the limited generalizability of the results. The sample of the present study does not represent any one target population, but instead the participants comprise multiple nationalities and cultures. Attaining a representative sample was beyond the means of the researcher.

In general, probability-based sampling techniques are typically associated with representative samples. However, they may also fail to be representative, for example due to high nonresponse. On the other hand, non-probability samples can be (fairly) representative; representativeness can be assessed by comparing the demographic composition of the sample to that of the target population (e.g. Daniel, 2012: 73). Some researchers disagree with this view, arguing that the self-selecting nature of online surveys renders representativeness impossible (e.g. Bethlehem, 2008: 20). However, there are different degrees to self-selection as well, purposive sampling methods being less self-selective than “anyone can participate” approaches (e.g. Daniel, 2012: 88).

Nevertheless, when probability-based sampling is not an option, online samples can provide a more diverse sample than the typical convenience samples, such as student samples (e.g. Risko et al., 2006: 269–270). Furthermore, purposive-like sampling techniques may help in increasing diversity and gathering adequate background information helps in assessing whether the sample is representative.

A central issue with nonprobability-based samples is that they do not allow for estimating sampling errors; coupled with representativeness issues, the options for using robust quantitative methods (inferential statistics) are limited (e.g. Daniel, 2012: 69). Although there is no consensus on the issue, some researchers argue that “if you can justify the appropriate generalizability assumptions, you can treat nonrandom samples like random samples” (Nahhas, 2007: 39).

There are also well known issues with eliciting data with survey instruments. First, it is important to acknowledge that participants might not have a-priori answers to the questions, but that their opinions might be formed only when confronted with the questions (e.g. Gillham, 2000: 10–13). As such, it is uncertain whether the responses represent “stable” constructs (see Chapter 3 for “non-attitudes”).

Second, a general concern is that the perceived purpose of the research may have undesirable effects on the participants’ responses (e.g. Baker, 1992: 18).

Study design and data

Despite not advertising the survey as a pronoun survey, or a survey about language and gender topics, both these aspects inevitably became clear to the participants when filling out the form. The possible effect is considered in Part V.

In a related fashion, the participants' responses may be affected by social desirability. In other words, participants might be reluctant to give responses that they perceive to be socially unacceptable (e.g. Baker, 1992: 12-13; Fowler, 1995: 28-29; Garrett, 2010: 44-45). For example, a participant might be reluctant to reveal sexist views, recognizing gender equality as the dominant ideology. Less-desirable views will still exist latently even if the participant explicitly conveys more socially desirable views. Furthermore, according to Fowler, social desirability is not an issue of "sensitive questions" but "sensitive answers", and that what is considered sensitive varies from person to person (1995: 29).

The so-called candor hypothesis proposes that anonymity might mitigate this problem (e.g. Risko et al., 2006: 269-270; also Garrett, 2010: 45). Complete anonymity is easiest provided with online studies, as the researcher need not have any directly identifiable information about the participant. However, it is unclear whether online survey anonymity actually increases candor. Some studies have shown that anonymity increases self-reports of socially undesirable traits (see discussion on social desirability by Lelkes et al., 2012: 1292; and Tourangeau & Yan, 2007), but one study found no improvement in candor with online samples specifically (Risko et al., 2006). Furthermore, while social desirability may be mitigated with anonymous online samples, it may also negatively affect accuracy of self-reports due to lower accountability than with identifiable participants (Lelkes et al., 2012: 1293-1296). The approach in the present study was to provide anonymity to the participants, and the quality of the data indicates that many participants were candid with their responses and also expressed socially undesirable views. However, it is not possible to estimate to what extent social desirability might have affected the responses.

Related to social desirability, surveys and especially Likert-type questions can suffer from what is known as acquiescence bias; some participants may be more likely to agree than disagree with statements, regardless of content (e.g. Garrett, 2010: 45). A common tactic to mitigate this issue with Likert-scales has been to include reversed-polarity statements. However, this tactic has also proven problematic and may cause misresponse due to the increased complexity of the task, e.g. agreeing with a negated statement (e.g. Herche & Engelland, 1996; Swain, Weathers & Niedrich, 2008). Nevertheless, some of the Likert scales employed this approach (see Appendix A).

Overall, the survey was successful in producing the type of data it was designed to elicit. In addition, although the sample cannot be said to be representative, the results generally aligned with previous research, supporting the validity of the results.

6 METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The survey produced both quantitative and qualitative data, and as such the analysis employs both types of methods as well. The methods were chosen taking into account the limitations of the sample.

The measurements on use of generic pronouns (parts 1 and 2) and acceptability of both generic and nonbinary pronouns (parts 3 and 6) produced quantitative data, while part 7 was designed to produce qualitative data. The quantitative data is explored with logistic regression analysis (discussed in section 6.1), while a corpus-assisted thematic analysis is employed with the qualitative data (section 6.2). Both excel and SPSS were utilized for data management and descriptive analysis, but all statistical analyses were carried out in SPSS.

6.1 LOGISTIC REGRESSION

Binary logistic regression was chosen as the main method for the quantitative data on usage and acceptability. With some of the survey measurements where antecedent type varied with different pronouns (parts 2 and 3), a repeated measures method might have been appropriate as well. However, preliminary exploration revealed that there was not much variation between the different measurements of the same DV, hence making this variation less interesting (see section 7.3). As such, this aspect was excluded from the modeling procedures.

For the present study, the aim with logistic regression is to build a model that best explains the outcome of the dependent variable. The modeling also heavily relies on a theoretical foundation, as hypotheses were formed based on previous studies, and variables to be tested were selected based on hypotheses. In this sense, the aim was to see if the present data match the theory (e.g. Shmueli, 2010: 290–291). This approach is best described as *explanatory modeling*, distinguished from *predictive modeling*, which aims at predicting future outcomes instead, such as risk of developing an illness (see Shmueli, 2010). In addition, the quality of the sample limited the possibility of making reliable inferences based solely on the data. Basing the modeling on theory may help mitigate this problem; if the same trends repeat over time, with different samples, it is more probable that some real variation has been captured instead of a spurious effect.

There are many advantages to using regression modeling. Previously, hypothesis testing has often relied on testing the association between two variables at a time, repeated over several different DV–IV pairs. Logistic regression provides the possibility for a multivariable approach instead. In a multiple LR model, the effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable is estimated *while* holding other independent variables in the model

constant. Furthermore, logistic regression allows for exploring for potential interactions between the variables. In addition, LR also provides estimates for effect size (in terms of odds ratios) and allows for assessing goodness of fit.

Logistic regression was also the best fit for the data. First, the dependent variables in this study are categorical, and at times the distribution of the cases is uneven (i.e. one category has the majority of cases). Second, LR allows for including both continuous and categorical independent variables. Third, LR is fairly robust as it does not require making strict assumptions about the distribution and normality of the data (e.g. Osborne, 2015: 10).

The main assumptions for logistic regression are as follows (as discussed by Osborne, 2015: 85ff):

1. the dependent variable is binary,
2. there is independence of observation,
3. sample size is adequate/the model is not overfit with too many IVs (e.g. Hosmer, Lemeshow & Sturdivant, 2013: 90),
4. the data is not too sparse (there are no empty cells when cross-tabulating the DV and IVs),
5. there is little to no multicollinearity among the independent variables,
6. there is linearity between the continuous independent variables and the logit (log odds) of the dependent variable,
7. there are no inappropriately influential cases.

In parts 3 and 6 the dependent variable was already binary (acceptable – not acceptable), but for parts 1 and 2 on generic pronoun usage, a binary variable needed to be created, further discussed in the results section. A multinomial regression model was not possible due to the low number of observations in most categories, due to the prevalence of generic singular *they*.

Generally, independence of observation requires that each participant is included in the dataset only once. There are two aspects with this assumption: that observations between groups need to be independent (i.e. the groups do not include the same participants), and that the observations within each group must be independent. In other words, each participant only participated once, and one participant is not included in two or more groups within the same categorical variable. However, independence of observation may also be violated if the participants are inappropriately homogeneous. This may be the case for example with local student samples, or other contexts in which the participants share many or most background factors with each other (Osborne, 2015: 86–87). This issue was considered with the present sample as well, since most participants derived from the same main source: Reddit. While redditors may share some qualities, the discussion forum is visited by hundreds of millions of people from various physical locations. In addition, the sampling approach targeted various demographic groups. Despite overrepresentation of certain groups (e.g. considerably more participants identify as politically liberal than conservative), the collected sample is diverse

and not inappropriately homogenous when considering the overall composition.

Assumptions 3 and 4 were checked with each model. Sample size was invariably sufficient, using the rule of thumb of 15 cases in the smaller category of the DV for each IV added to the model. In a few cases, the sparse data assumption was initially violated. This was fixed either by merging categories or excluding them from analysis.

Accurate model specification is also of importance. In short, the aim is to include all such variables that help explain the outcome, and to exclude extraneous ones (Osborne, 2015: 92). Purposeful, theory-based selection of variables supports this aim (e.g. Hosmer, Lemeshow & Sturdivant., 2013). The IVs also need to be additive, and not “multiplicative, exponential, or related in other nonlinear (nonadditive) ways” (Osborne, 2015: 95). This assumption may be violated when interactions exist between the independent variables but are not modelled accordingly (ibid.), hence adequate testing between the IVs is required. Interactions and multicollinearity among the IVs were tested, as well as the linearity between the logit of the DV and the continuous IVs (assumptions 5 and 6).

The final assumption is that each case contributes to the model fit in equal proportions (Osborne, 2015: 104). This assumption is violated when one observation is inappropriately influential, i.e. affects the model more than other cases. The detection of such inappropriately influential outliers is achieved by studying the model residuals, described further below. Such outliers may be removed to improve the model.

The model building proceeded as follows. First, two tests were conducted to detect multicollinearity among the IVs. The continuous predictors were assessed with Pearson’s bivariate correlations, using 0.7 as the threshold for high correlations. The (non)sexist language use scale and the feminism scale variables were the only variables to have a correlation higher than 0.7, leading to the exclusion of the feminism scale which was deemed less relevant for the purposes of the study. Next, multicollinearity among all IVs was assessed with VIF (variance inflation factor). None of the VIF values exceeded 2, well below the conventional threshold value of 4.

The model building followed the steps of purposeful selection by Hosmer et al (2013, section 4.2). As mentioned, the initial selection of IVs was based on previous studies. The model building started with preliminary Pearson’s chi-square tests for each categorical DV–IV pair. The initial cut-off value for inclusion was $p < 0.2$, as Hosmer et al. suggest that $p < 0.05$ may be too conservative and lead to overlooking relevant IVs (2013: 91). The two continuous attitude scale variables were included based only on external relevance.

The first model then included all variables that were significant at the 0.2 level. Next, the IVs not attaining 0.05 significance in the first model were removed in a stepwise manner using the model block 2 function, and each subsequent model was compared to the first model to guarantee no important

IVs were removed (ibid.: 91–92). First, the likelihood ratio test was used to assess whether the models differed from each other at the 0.05 level. Second, the estimated coefficients (B) in the smaller model were compared to those in the larger model. If the change in a coefficient was larger than 20%, further investigation was required (e.g. in terms of possible mediator or interaction relationships) (ibid.). After this reiterative process, the model was determined to include the main effects.

As the next step, the linearity between the logit of the DV and continuous IV was assessed with the Box-Tidwell test, using $p < 0.05$ as threshold for inappropriately high levels of nonlinearity.⁶³ When encountered with such nonlinearity, the solution was to transform the continuous variable into a categorical variable, using quartiles.

Based on practical considerations, potential interactions between the IVs were tested (Hosmer, Lemeshow & Sturdivant, 2013: 92–93). Each interaction was tested in the model block 2, allowing for comparison of two different models. If the difference between the models was significant, and the interaction term was significant at the 0.01 level, the interaction variable was added to the model (ibid.).

Once explanatory variables were chosen, the model's goodness of fit was assessed with AUROC (The Area Under the Receiver-Operator Curve, Hosmer et al. 2013: 174–178). The AUROC takes values between 0.5 and 1, i.e. from 50% chance of correct prediction to 100% accurate prediction. Hosmer et al. suggest that values higher than 0.7 indicate acceptable discrimination, values higher than 0.8 excellent discrimination and values higher than 0.9 outstanding discrimination of the category membership. However, the purpose of the modeling endeavor is also to be considered. The present study aims at explaining variation, thus allowing for somewhat more uncertainty than predictive modeling. In addition, the pseudo R-squared measure Nagelkerke R-squared was used to roughly assess the goodness of fit as well, acknowledging its limitations, such as limited comparability across models.

Last, the model residuals were investigated to detect outliers. Following Hosmer et al. (2013: 194), the model residuals were examined by plotting estimated probabilities with delta-chi-squared (ΔX^2), delta deviance (ΔD), and delta B (standardized, $\Delta \beta^{\wedge}$) values. The interpretation of the residual plots relies primarily on visual inspection, using 4 as a crude threshold for the upper ninety-fifth percentile of the ΔX^2 and ΔD values (Hosmer, Lemeshow & Sturdivant, 2013: 192). After having identified outliers from the residual plots, the outliers were inspected for covariate patterns, and their influence was assessed by comparing models excluding/including various outliers or outlier groups. If more than 20% of the effect of a (significant) coefficient was due to a small group of outliers, this supported excluding the outliers as inappropriately influential. The number of outliers causing the change was also a consideration, as it is more reasonable to keep a handful of participants

⁶³ An interaction term was tested for the continuous IV and its natural logarithm, e.g. age x age(ln). This approach was preferred over the suggestions by Hosmer et al. 2013 for ease of use.

influencing the same coefficient than it is to keep one participant responsible for a large proportion of a detected difference between groups. Exclusion of such outliers improves the model; however, the goal is not to remove all “inconvenient data” either. Instead, as Hosmer et al. highlight, the final decision of whether to exclude influential cases should rely on practical subject-matter based reasoning: “We use diagnostics statistics to identify subjects and subject matter considerations to decide on exclusion” (2013: 199). In other words, if the data are reasonable, e.g. there is a good reason why a number of cases should be influential, then this supports not excluding the influential cases. On the other hand, when influential cases affect the overall interpretation of the model (and not just one variable), their exclusion should be considered.

As a final note, regarding the interpretation of the results, the standard metric of interest in logistic regression are odds ratios. Distinct from but related to probabilities, the odds of an event happening “is the probability of that event divided by the probability of the event not happening” (Osborne, 2015: 26). Odds ratios are a way of comparing the odds of something happening between two groups; the odds ratio is the exponentiated logit, $\text{Exp}(B)$, whereas logit is the natural log of the odds (Osborne, 2015: 30–32). A common problem is interpreting odds as if they were probabilities (e.g. Osborne, 2015: 34–35). In other words, with odds we are looking at the possibility of an event happening, instead of it not happening, instead of how probable it is that the event takes place. Since the language used to accurately report regression models is somewhat rigid, the summaries and discussion in Part IV will operate at a descriptive level with simple visualizations of the data.

6.2 CORPUS-ASSISTED THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The survey gathered an unexpectedly large amount of qualitative data on the participants’ views on pronouns, about 138 000 words in total (or ~350 pages). After an initial attempt of reading through the data while coding different aspects, this approach was abandoned as too time-consuming and prone to inconsistencies with such a voluminous data set. As a solution, a corpus-assisted approach was employed: a thematic analysis guided by an initial analysis of key words and phrases, “keywords” in the loose sense.⁶⁴

Concentrating on themes that surfaced from the initial analysis provided a more efficient approach to analyzing the data. Similar approaches have been used previously, for example Guest et al. mention using KWIC searches as supplemental techniques for a thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2014: Chapter 5), and Milani reports having used “textual analysis” to complement a corpus study (2013). This approach also shares some similarities with *corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS)*, which are defined

⁶⁴ A corpus-linguistic keyword analysis was not employed.

as “[...] [the] set of studies into the form and/or function of language as communicative discourse which incorporate the use of computerized corpora in their analyses” (Partington, Duguid & Taylor, 2013: 10). However, with the present study the focus remains on what is broadly described as *attitudes*, which are explored with an analysis of *themes* at the level of meaning; the form and function of language are secondary to this goal.

Thematic analysis itself is a “foundational method for qualitative analysis”, but as Brown and Clarke argue, there is not just one way of doing thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 78). As such, it is just as important to describe the procedures of thematic analysis, as with any other method. Simplifying thematic analysis to a close reading and forming themes leaves many unanswered questions, and it supports the idea that themes exist in the data prior to the analysis, waiting to be discovered by the researcher. Indeed, thematic analysis is a versatile tool that lends itself to many different purposes, including the exploration of participants’ experiences, meanings, and realities, resulting in a realist/essentialist description of the data (ibid. 81, 83), as is the goal with this study.

Crucially, a thematic analysis always hinges on the interpretation of the researcher. Themes do not naturally emerge from the data set as if the themes would exist prior to the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 80). Themes only emerge from the *interpretation* of the data and are to a great extent subjective; the themes form from our thinking, creating links in the data according to our own understanding of what the data represent (ibid.). While the analysis is largely inductive and data-driven, it was still guided by the research question: *why* are different pronouns rejected or accepted? Indeed, the study was designed so that the attitude data could be used to explore this aspect (section 5.3). In addition, the analysis may have also been shaped by some of my preconceptions concerning pronoun discussions. Most importantly, my familiarity with previous studies on nonsexist language (Blaubergs, 1980, and Parks & Robertson, 1998a) and familiarity with public discussions relating to nonbinary pronouns meant that I already had some ideas as to what to expect from my data. Particularly the previous typology by Blaubergs (1980) and Parks & Robertson (1998a) inspired some of the themes that I formed from the data, yet their approach was not applied systematically or purposefully. Overall, the analysis was still largely exploratory.

Braun and Clarke (2006: 87–93) also provide a step-by-step guide for thematic analysis, however, this study incorporated corpus methods, and as such deviated from a purely qualitative analysis. First, as the participants were asked about their views on each pronoun separately, the qualitative data was organized in separate files created for each pronoun. Second, the qualitative data was tagged by using TagAnt (Anthony, 2015). The tags were later checked for each instance of frequent items, and some modifications were made when necessary. Third, for each pronoun, word lists for most common words and phrases were generated with AntConc (Anthony, 2018). Three other lists were generated as well: most common adjectives, most common nouns, and most

common verbs, as these were deemed easier to work with than a full word list. Moreover, common phrases were searched with n-grams, as meanings often cross word-boundaries.

The process of detecting key words and phrases was mostly intuitive. No specific criteria were used, but word frequencies were naturally of interest. For each item, the context was checked by using concordance view, KWIC-searches, and/or searching for common collocates. This was necessary for three main reasons. First, to make sure the word was tagged correctly; for example, the word “neutral” was mostly used in the compound “gender neutral” (or “gender-neutral”), but the tagging program viewed these as two separate words. Second, many of the items turned out to be negated, e.g. “not common”. Third, in order to arrange the items into categories, the initial interpretation of each item needed to be confirmed by taking a closer look at the different contexts in which the item appeared.

The items were then arranged into groups that formed preliminary themes or subthemes. These groups were used to guide the thematic analysis: each related item (e.g. “gender-neutral”) was searched in the dataset and coded accordingly. However, not each instance turned out to be relevant to the theme, hence manual coding was necessary. Next, the data was read through systematically, forming new themes and subthemes when needed. The data was coded numerically so that each code represented a specific category, while a separate codebook was used to keep track of the codes and their meanings.⁶⁵ An additional data-log was kept, including information about the coding process; I kept track of potential aspects to code, and if there were five or more responses representing a relevant aspect, I went back and coded these instances.

After the coding process, the codebook comprised nearly 200 individual categories (codes), even though many aspects that only occurred infrequently and/or were not of any specific interest were simply coded as “other”. Having so many codes resulted in some initial inconsistencies in the coding process. Thus, several checkup rounds were pursued. Once the coding was finalized, the different codes were arranged hierarchically into main themes, themes, and subthemes (see Chapter 11). During this process, some codes were merged, while others were excluded as inconsequential. While code frequencies were considered as well, theme relevance weighed more, as frequency is not necessarily an indicator of importance (Braun, V. & Clarke, 2006: 82). As a final step, thematic fields were built for each pronoun, including the most prevalent themes (see Chapter 11). In total, the final thematic fields include about 85 subthemes (i.e. different codes).

Furthermore, to allow for easier cross-analysis, the qualitative data was binary coded for each subtheme, linked to the participant’s other responses.

⁶⁵ The codebook also included all the codes produced during the first attempt of analysis (before employing corpus methods). Many of these codes turned out to be relevant for the preliminary themes, while others were excluded from the final analysis as irrelevant.

Methods of analysis

One participant could express views belonging to different themes or subthemes, and as such, one response could be coded for several different themes/subthemes. Descriptive statistics were used to explore differences between groups of participants based on their background information (e.g. age, gender, native language).

Further discussion of the analysis process and the main themes is provided in the results section, in Chapter 11. Importantly, the method described above concerns the main qualitative data on attitudes towards pronouns. There is also an additional qualitative dataset, as the nonbinary participants were asked about their relationship with pronouns. This data comprises a mere 4300 words and was handled with a close reading instead (see Chapter 12).

PART IV. RESULTS

Part IV presents the results. The sample and independent variables are introduced in Chapter 7, after which the quantitative data and results are presented in Chapters 8–10, covering generic pronoun use (Chapter 8), acceptability of generic pronouns (Chapter 9), and acceptability of nonbinary pronouns (Chapter 10). While the description of the logistic regression models is rigid, each chapter ends with a summary and discussion subsection, providing descriptive statistics for the findings. Comprising the qualitative section, Chapter 11 presents the results from the thematic analysis on the participants' attitudes towards both generic and nonbinary pronouns, while Chapter 12 focuses on the nonbinary participants and their relationship with pronouns.

7 INDEPENDENT VARIABLES AND DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

In this chapter, some notes are first made about the choice and coding of independent variables (section 7.1), followed by a description of the sample in terms of the independent variables (section 7.2). Last, the two language-internal factors, antecedent type and notional number are discussed in section 7.3.

7.1 VARIABLE CHOICES AND NOTES ON CODING

While extensive background information was gathered from the participants, some of the variables were abandoned during preliminary analyses as excessive or unpractical (see section 5.3), while a few variables turned out to be nonsignificant throughout the analyses, discussed shortly below.

Gender

Gender was elicited in free-form. The instructions asked the participants to indicate if their gender was not the same as was assigned to them at birth (see Appendix A). For the purpose of running statistical analyses, the gender information needed to be categorized. The participants were coded as cis female, cis male, binary transgender, or nonbinary.⁶⁶ In quantitative analyses, since there were too few binary-identifying transgender participants to allow for a separate category, binary and nonbinary transgender participants are grouped together as “transgender”; this decision is also supported by these participants reacting very similarly to the main tasks (e.g. using almost exclusively nongendered pronouns). However, in qualitative analyses concerning nonbinary pronouns, the nonbinary participants are handled as an independent group.

Most of the binary-identifying participants described their gender as *female/male* or *man/woman*, specifying a transgender background or identity when appropriate. Both cisgender and transgender participants preferred the *female/male* descriptions over *man/woman*.⁶⁷ Most nonbinary participants described themselves as *nonbinary*, but included are also self-descriptions such as *agender*, *genderfluid*, and *genderqueer*.

These delineations and groupings may not be appropriate for all contexts. Distinguishing between cisgender and transgender participants is only

⁶⁶ Some participants also included information about their assigned gender at birth; this information is not relevant to the present study, hence excluded from consideration.

⁶⁷ Only 5 binary-identifying transgender participants described themselves with *man/woman*, 2 used the terms *trans masculine* and *transfemme*, interpreted as binary identities, and one only used the acronym FTM.

pursued because it is likely that the average transgender experience with pronouns differs from the average cisgender experience.

Native language

With native language, some of the least frequent categories needed to be aggregated. Most importantly, after some consideration, speakers of different UK English varieties were merged under “British English”. This was partly due to a mishap in the survey design, and partly due to the low number of participants in the Irish, Scottish, and Welsh English categories.⁶⁸ While aggregating British English speakers may not be ideal in all contexts, this choice was also supported qualitatively as there was no significant difference between the different British English varieties in any of the test variables. It also helped simplify the variable, resulting in fewer categories of more equal sizes.

Moreover, the bilingual participants are grouped together as well due to low frequency of speakers of different combinations. The mixed bilingual group (n=43) mostly includes Finnish-Swedish, English-Finnish, English-Swedish, and English-French bilinguals. Similarly, the category for “other English” comprises infrequent varieties (n=10, mostly New Zealand English speakers). However, this category was excluded from the logistic regression models as too infrequent.

Education

The majority of participants used the ready options with education, but the participants who used the “other” option needed to be coded manually. These participants often provided a more detailed description of their degree. The approach was to categorize a participant as “bachelor level” if their response indicated they had 2-4 years of other higher education, and as “graduate level” when the number of years was higher.⁶⁹ Furthermore, because there were relatively few participants with only a comprehensive level education (n=15), this group was merged with the secondary level (n=274). The same approach was taken with master’s (n=192) and doctoral level education (n=73). As a result, education includes three categories: no university level education, bachelor level education, and graduate level education.

Some nonsignificant variables

The participants’ L2s were categorized as either *notional gender*, *grammatical gender* or *genderless* (see section 4.2). The World Atlas of

⁶⁸ In the survey form, British, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh English speakers were included as ready options, but some participants were confused what was meant by “British” when the other varieties were separate. A cross-tabulation of native language and the participants’ country of residence (current and previous) revealed some inconsistencies, further supporting merging the different UK English varieties.

⁶⁹ Information about the degrees was searched online, using the participants’ other information when needed (e.g. country of residence)

Language Structures (WALS) was used to help with the classification (Corbett, 2013a; Corbett, 2013b), along with other reference sources when needed. Since every participant in the study speaks a notional gender language (English), this category was viewed as unmarked and not considered further. As a result, binary variables for knowing grammatical gender or genderless L2s were created. However, these variables were not significant predictors in any of the logistic regression models, thus not included in the analyses.

While religiousness was measured in more detail, this variable was recoded with three categories: religious (including mostly Christian denominations), nonreligious (including atheists and atheist agnostics), and other/spiritual (e.g. Buddhist, pagan, animist). Religiousness turned out not to be a significant predictor, hence excluded from the analyses.

7.2 OVERVIEW OF INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Overall, the survey gathered 1128 complete responses. There were also 814 incomplete responses, which are excluded from analysis.⁷⁰ The drop-out data was compared with the complete responses, but no clear patterns were detected.

A description of the sample is provided below. Cross-tabulations were examined across all main independent variables: age, gender, native language, education, religious and political orientation. However, only notable shortcomings in this regard are reported.

The participants' age range was 18 to 80 years (mean 29, median 26), and the sample is unbalanced towards younger generations (under 30-year-olds).⁷¹ As for gender, 54% of the participants were categorized as cis male, 36% as cis female, and 9% as transgender. Of the transgender participants, the majority (n=79) reported nonbinary identities; the rest were mostly binary-identifying individuals (n=20), but two participants could not be categorized as either.⁷² A cross-tabulation of age and gender revealed that there was only 1 transgender participant in the oldest age category (Table 1). Indeed, the majority of transgender participants were under the age of 40.

⁷⁰ Most of these participants (~80%) only filled in their background information. The informed consent specified that incomplete responses would not be used, hence these responses are excluded (see Appendix A).

⁷¹ To allow for cross-tabulations, somewhat data-driven age groups were formed: 18–23, 24–29, 30–39, 40–49, and 50–80-year-olds. The continuous variable is used in the LR models when possible.

⁷² One of these participants explained they were questioning their gender, while the other described their gender as “fairly female”.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation of age and gender. Excluded are 5 participants due to missing gender information

	age groups					Total
	18–23	24–29	30–39	40–49	50–80	
cis female	106	125	103	39	38	411
cis male	232	179	111	54	35	611
transgender	50	28	16	6	1	101
Total	388	332	230	99	74	1123

A total of 77% of the participants were native English speakers (including some of the bilingual speakers), while the rest (23%) are non-native speakers of English. Table 2 provides frequencies for the individual language groups. Notably, there was only one native Finnish, one native Swedish and one bilingual speaker in the oldest age group (50–80-year-olds). In addition, only two Swedish and six Finnish speakers reported being transgender. In other words, most of the transgender participants were native speakers of English, the majority being American English speakers (n=55).

Table 2. Native language

	n	%
American English	317	28 %
Australian English	182	16 %
British English	187	17 %
Canadian English	146	13 %
Finnish	183	16 %
Swedish	60	5 %
bilinguals	43	4 %
other English	10	1 %
Total	1128	100 %

Furthermore, the non-native English speakers' language proficiency was roughly measured by the number of years they had learned or studied English. About 80% of the non-native English-speaking participants had learned or studied English for more than 8 years, and only 4 participants reported having learned English only for 3–5 years (and none less than that).

Nearly 75% of the participants also reported having a university level education, while 26% had comprehensive or high school level education (Table 3).

Independent variables and description of participants

Table 3. Education level

	n	%
No higher education	288	26 %
Bachelor level	575	51 %
Graduate level	265	23 %
Total	1128	100 %

In addition, about 25% of the participants indicated having a background in linguistics, but only 12% in gender studies. About 70% of the participants reported knowing a grammatical gender L2 at a beginner level (or higher), while only about 11% indicated knowing a genderless L2.

Overrepresented in the sample were also nonreligious (76%) and liberal (82%) participants. Similarly, 56% of the participants considered themselves feminists, while 25% did not and 15% were neutral (item F4 in part 4, Appendix A). Notably, only two transgender participants reported being politically conservative. Furthermore, most of the participants reported a white ethnicity (90%).

The two attitudinal scales included in the analyses are attitudes towards (non)sexist language (adopted from Parks & Robertson, 1998a), and attitudes towards transgender individuals (adopted from Walch et al., 2012). Most participants indicated negative attitudes towards sexist language (mean 2.4, SD 0.95; scale 1–5 from negative to dismissive attitudes towards sexist language), and positive attitudes towards transgender individuals (mean 1.6, SD 0.9; scale 1–5 from positive to negative attitudes). Particularly the latter scale showed scarce variation, as nearly half of the participants had a score of 1. This may be due to the items being too broad or vague (e.g. “There should be no restrictions on being transgender”, see Appendix A). It may have also been more suitable to measure attitudes towards nonbinary individuals specifically, as some of the participants indicated their views were more favorable towards binary-identifying transgender than nonbinary people. In addition, there was a strong relationship with attitudes towards transgender participants and political orientation: self-identified conservative participants generally scored higher on the scale (mean 2.8), indicating negative attitudes, whereas most liberal participants scored very low (mean 1), indicating positive attitudes towards transgender individuals.

Relating to attitudes towards transgender individuals, two additional items measured personally knowing transgender individuals, and familiarity with neopronouns. In total, 71% of the participants were familiar with neopronouns prior to taking the survey, and 64% indicated personally knowing transgender individuals, including participants who were transgender themselves (most of the transgender participants also knew other transgender people, but a few did not).

The participants also responded to items measuring the perceived inclusivity of generic pronouns (part 5). Singular *they* was nearly unanimously

considered inclusive (97%), but about 25 participants marked it inclusive of only females and males. Figure 3 below illustrates the frequencies for the gendered pronouns.⁷³

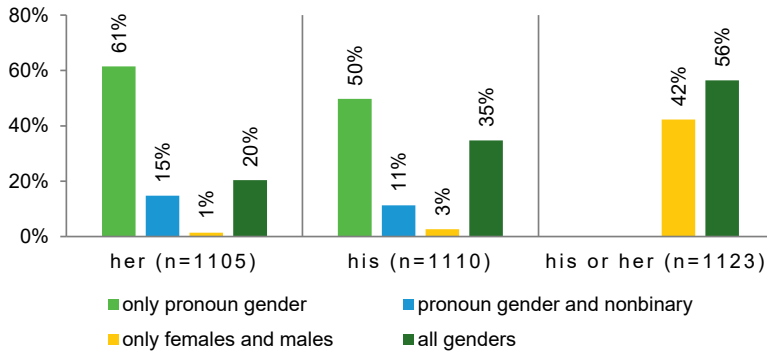


Figure 3. Perceived inclusivity of gendered pronouns. Missing responses excluded (Part 5)

Overall, the majority of participants viewed *he* and *she* to be gender-exclusive, although more participants viewed *he* to be inclusive of all genders (15 percentage point difference). A bit over half of the participants viewed *he or she* to be inclusive of all genders, while about 40% considered it to include only females and males, and not nonbinary individuals.

7.3 INTERNAL FACTORS

Both antecedent type and notional number were included in the design of parts 2 and 3, measuring usage and acceptability. Unfortunately, the inclusion of the lexical item *child* caused unexpected problems.

Different types of antecedents were used in part 2 and part 3. In part 2, IPs, NPQs, and both indefinite and definite NPs were used (see Figure 4). In part 3, only NPs and NPQs were tested, chosen to represent notionally singular (*a child, the average person*) and plural (*every child*) antecedents.

Due to the overwhelming prevalence of singular *they* in the data, the results from part 2 are presented as two figures, one including only the participants using *they* (Figure 4) and the other including only use of *he* and *he or she* (Figure 5). Other pronouns were used rarely in part 2 and are excluded from consideration; overall frequencies for part 2 are provided in Appendix B (Table 17).

⁷³ There were two measurements per pronoun, eliciting mostly consistent responses.

Independent variables and description of participants

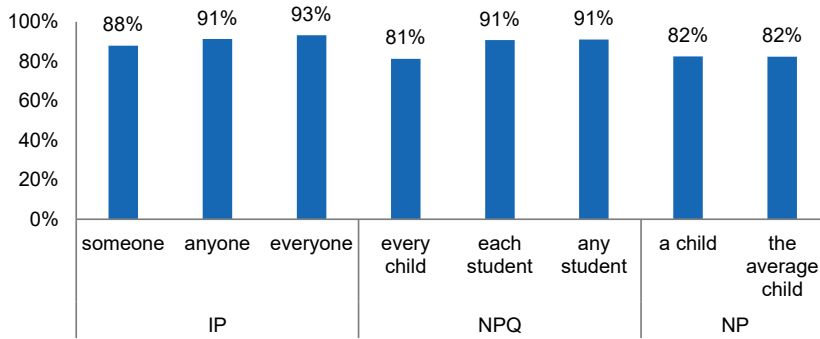


Figure 4. Part 2. Use of they per antecedent, n=1128

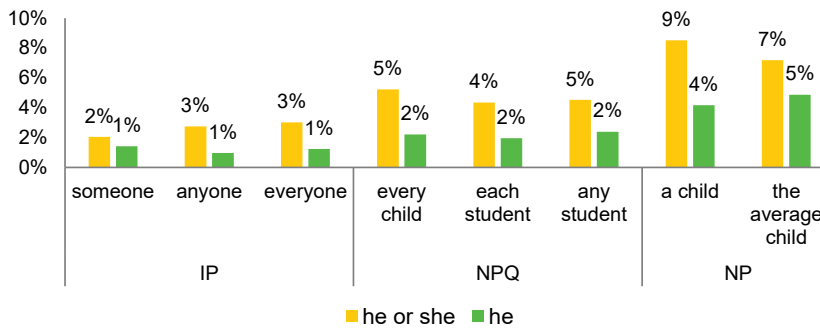


Figure 5. Part 2. Use of he and he or she, n=1128

When aggregated, *they* was used with 91% of the IPs, with 88% of the NPQs and with 82% of the NPs. Overall, the trend seems to follow notional number: the plural *everyone* has the highest *they* frequency, and the singular NPs (*a child*, *the average child*) have the lowest frequencies (Figure 4). However, the antecedent *every child* deviates from this trend; the interpretation leans towards plural, but the measurement had the lowest *they* frequency. The other two *child* antecedents show decreased use of *they* in favor of gendered pronouns, but they also represent singular NPs, which may favor conventionally singular pronouns (Figure 5). Hence, it is not possible to determine whether the item *child* or antecedent type is behind this variation.

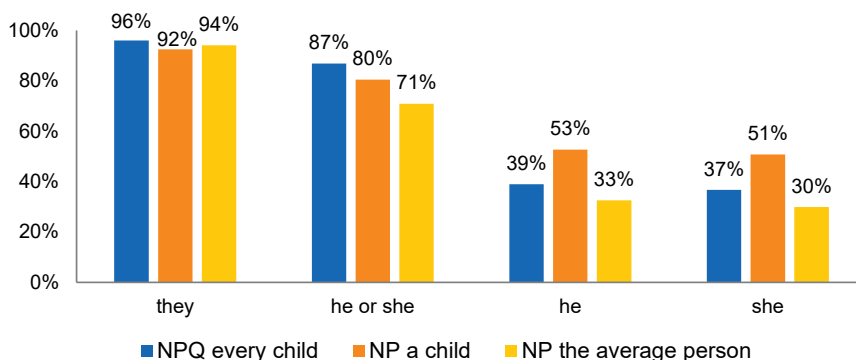


Figure 6. Part 3. Acceptability rates per antecedent, $n=1128$

A similar trend is present in the results for part 3 (Figure 6), as the acceptability rates for *he* and *she* are always higher with the *child* antecedents than with *the average person*. These results seem to suggest that the *child* antecedents in particular allow reference with binary pronouns; however, *they* is most acceptable with *every child*. The reactions to *he or she* are interesting as well. The conjoined pronouns were accepted by nearly 90% with *every child*, but only by 71% with *the average person*. Only a few participants commented on why they rejected *he or she* with *the average person*. For these participants, it was the definiteness of the antecedent that created a mismatch with the indefinite nature of *he or she*.

The *child* antecedents were explored further for patterns, but no conclusive explanation could be found for the deviance. In an early pilot survey, the antecedents *teacher* and *a journalist* were used alongside *child*. While the pilots did not include enough participants to allow for proper analyses, there is a pattern for some speakers to use a gendered pronoun with *a child*, but not with *a teacher* or *a journalist*.⁷⁴ Indeed, some participants in the final survey also noted themselves that they were reacting differently to the *child* measurements (examples 1–2 below).

(1) “I have no idea why I find it easier to accept using 'he' or 'she' to refer to a child of unknown gender than to a person of unknown gender in general. Before this survey, I didn't even know I did!” (P105, comment after P3)

(2) “It seems that either 'he' or 'she' are acceptable to use in sentences with children involved, but not with adults. 'They' or 'he or she' feels more appropriate for adults.” (P180, comment after P3)

To speculate, it may be that using gendered pronouns is a way to personalize the reference, and perhaps this use is a sign of valuing or respecting the individuality of children. My thinking here is biased by my experiences in Finnish. In colloquial Finnish, it is very common to use *se* (*it*) to refer to people, instead of the standard form *hän*. One function when using *hän* in

⁷⁴ This pattern was unfortunately not noticed during the pilots.

spoken Finnish seems to be respect, for example when referring to older people. Similarly, some parents make a point of referring to their children with *hän*, even though they might use *se* for other family members or friends. For some participants, this tendency may have transferred into English, as Finnish speakers have the highest proportion of *he* usage with *child* among the native language groups, accounting for 40% of the *he* use with *a child*, and *the average child* in part 2. Finnish speakers also have the second highest rate for using *he* or *she* with the *child* antecedents in part 2, only led by American English speakers. However, Finnish speakers were also the most frequent users of gendered pronouns in the free writing task (part 1), and the use of gendered pronouns may depend more so on following prescriptive rules. As such, no conclusion can be reached with the *child* antecedents.

In sum, the present study is unable to reliably address the effect of antecedent type, as it cannot be determined whether some of the variation is due to antecedent type or the lexical item *child*. Even so, the variation in pronoun use between different antecedents was relatively low, at highest resulting in a difference of about 20 percentage points (*the average person* vs. *a child* and use of *he* and *she*, Figure 6). Nevertheless, the results generally align with previous studies. Previous studies have demonstrated that generic singular *they* favors notionally plural antecedents (e.g. Balhorn, 2009, Baranowski, 2002). In addition, Balhorn (2009: 404) and Paterson (2014: 59–60) have suggested that NPs disfavor *they*, while IPs favor *they*. NPs, on the other hand, support use of conventionally singular, gendered pronouns (ibid.). The NPs in the present study follow this pattern, but the use of *child* introduces some uncertainty. Balhorn (2009: 397) and Laitinen (2007: 253) have further suggested that the variation among IPs is based on notional number. In this regard, there is only a very slight trend in the present study: *everyone* has the highest percentage for using *they*, followed by *anyone* and *someone*. However, the difference between *everyone* and *someone* is only 5 percentage points (Figure 4). The main result is still clear: for most participants *they* is clearly an appropriate pronoun with all types of nongendered antecedents in generic contexts.

8 USAGE OF GENERIC PRONOUNS

The use of generic pronouns was measured in parts 1 and 2 of the survey (Appendix A). In part 1, the participants were asked to write about *a successful person*. The free writing task allowed measuring generic 3PSP use implicitly. In comparison, the task in part 2 required the participants to think of pronouns specifically, as they were asked to complete fill-in-the blank tasks, 9 of which measured pronoun usage. Thus, part 1 can be thought to represent unconscious pronoun use, while part 2 represents more conscious pronoun use. The results from parts 1 and 2 are first handled separately in sections 8.2 and 8.3 respectively, while a summary and a comparison of the results is presented in section 8.4.

8.1 HYPOTHESES

The basic hypotheses were introduced in Chapter 2, further refined below. In generic contexts that are otherwise epicene and nongendered;

- (i) Singular *they* is the most common 3PSP (e.g. Balhorn, 2009)
- (ii) Gendered pronouns are used rarely due to changing norms, but when, then
 - a. *he* is more common than *she* (Meyers, 1990; Earp, 2012)
 - b. *he or she* constructions are more common than either *he* or *she* alone (Meyers, 1990; Earp, 2012)
 - c. due to automatic inclusion of their own gender, cis male participants will use *he* more often than other genders, and cis female participants will use *she* (e.g. Meyers, 1990; Balhorn, 2009); similarly, transgender participants use more nongendered tactics than cisgender participants, as they might be more aware of the need to be gender-inclusive due to personal experiences
 - d. participants with higher education levels use gendered pronouns more often than participants with no higher education, due to extended exposure to prescriptive writing norms (e.g. academic texts, Adami, 2009)
 - e. older participants use gendered pronouns more often than younger participants: Apparent Time Hypothesis (Labov, 1994: 43–72); gendered pronouns representing the norm of the past)
 - f. due to greater conformance to prescriptive norms, non-native speakers of English use gendered pronouns more often than native speakers of English (e.g. Pauwels, 2010: 27)
 - g. residential area (during childhood and adolescence) affects pronoun use; “metropolitan” speakers use inclusive pronouns

- more often than speakers from more “rural” areas (as suggested by Meyers, 1990: 234–235)
- h. conservative values support using gendered pronouns, while liberal values support using more inclusive options (e.g. Cameron, 1995)
 - i. participants with dismissive attitudes towards sexist language use gendered pronouns more often than participants who view sexist language as a problem; supporters of nonsexist language use more gender-inclusive options⁷⁵ (e.g. Swim, Mallett & Stangor, 2004: 121–126).
- (iii) some participants use more prestige forms in part 2, representing more conscious usage than in part 1 (cf. change from above/below).

Based on the above hypotheses, independent variables that were tested in the logistic regression models for both part 1 and 2 are: age, gender, native language,⁷⁶ education level, residential area (during childhood and adolescence), political orientation, and attitudes towards (non)sexist language use. In a more exploratory sense, a few other variables were also tested. These include two binary variables representing knowing grammatical gender L2s and genderless L2s, and two more detailed variables for education; background in linguistics and background in gender studies.

8.2 GENERIC PRONOUNS IN FREE WRITING

In Part 1 of the survey, a free writing task was used to elicit 3PSP usage from the participants (see Appendix A). The procedure of classifying 3PSPs in part 1 is discussed in section 8.2.1, followed by a discussion of the results at a descriptive level in section 8.2.2. The logistic regression model built for part 1 is then presented in section 8.2.3.

8.2.1 Procedure

The main interest of the free writing task was on generic 3PSP usage, and thus, other pronouns were excluded from the analysis. In addition, both pronoun case and the number of times a participant used a particular pronoun were excluded from the analysis. These aspects were deemed unmeaningful for the present study.

The analysis was carried out manually to make sure only singular generic pronouns would be included. For example, there were some instances where a

⁷⁵ What is considered gender-inclusive might vary; some participants might consider *he* or *she* as inclusive, while others might not.

⁷⁶ With native language, the category for other Englishes is excluded from the models due to including too few participants (n=10) and hence causing problems during model building.

3PSP was used but the reference was not generic. However, the main issues during the analysis concerned distinguishing between singular and plural *they* and the different uses of *one* (discussed below).

Each response was coded for the generic 3PSPs that were used, with several check-up rounds to ensure consistent coding. In general, a pronoun was considered to be singular and generic if it referred back to a notionally singular or number-ambiguous, nonspecific antecedent, such as was used in the sentence starter, *a successful person is someone who (...)*.⁷⁷ At times, the participants used other (similar) singular antecedents instead of the original antecedent, e.g. *the person*.⁷⁸ Pronouns referring to other singular antecedents were included in the analysis as long as they were generic and nongendered. There were a few cases in which gendered generic antecedents were used as well, followed by a gendered pronoun (e.g. *man... he*). Such cases were excluded from the analysis.

As regards *they*, verbal number marking was not considered in determining whether *they* was functioning as a singular or plural pronoun. As discussed in section 2.2, the lack of overt singular number marking on the verb forms does not make a pronoun plural. Instead, *they* was considered singular when it referred back to a notionally singular or number-ambiguous antecedent. When *they* referred back to a grammatically or notionally plural antecedent (e.g. *people, everyone*), it was considered to be a plural pronoun and excluded from analysis. In some responses, there were both singular and plural antecedents present (example 1 below). In those cases, the principle of closest possible antecedent was used to determine the pronoun-antecedent relationship.

(1) “**A successful person** is someone who is happy with what they have accomplished in their life. **Successful people** do things that are fulfilling and meaningful for them. *They* know what means a lot to *them*, and *they* do what is important to *them*.” (P321, underlined *theys* are classified as singular, italicized ones plural. Antecedents are in bold).

There were only a few cases where determining the number of *they* was somewhat problematic. For example, in example 2 the participant used a construction where the subject and potential antecedent of the sentence has been omitted. The missing subject was interpreted to be the original antecedent.

(2) “A successful person is someone who is one who succeeds. I know this is a tautology, but it depends on your definition. For me this means to have lived a

⁷⁷ Textually, the closest antecedent in the sentence starter is *someone*, but it refers back to the original antecedent, *a successful person*.

⁷⁸ Some participants omitted the original sentence starter provided in the instructions. Such cases were handled as if the original antecedent was present.

good life- **[missing subject]** has thought about their morality and acted accordingly. This would not be other people's definition of success.” (P288)⁷⁹

Classifying the different uses of *one* turned out to be most problematic. While the present study is unable to discuss the different uses of *one* extensively, the procedure is described shortly below.

Occurrences of *one* were expected since both Meyers (1990) and Earp (2012) reported on such usage. However, neither author provided further discussion as to what type of uses were included as “indefinite *one*”. In the present study, there were 86 occurrences of non-numerical *one*, but most of them could not comfortably be classified as third person pronouns. For example, sometimes the participants exchanged the *someone* in the sentence starter with *one*. To determine the type of *one*, a set of three replacement tests was used.

- 1) 3PSP *one*; replaceable by a prototypical 3PSP (i.e. *he* or *she*).
- 2) indefinite *one*; replaceable by *someone* (e.g. Wales, 1996: 81; or even an NP such as *a person*, e.g. Moltmann, 2006: 465)
- 3) generic *one*/first-person *one*; replaceable by generic *you* or, rarely, first-person *I* or *we* (e.g. Wales, 1996: 81–82).

The first and most important test was replacing *one* with either *he* or *she* (the prototypical 3PSPs). If this replacement led to an idiomatic expression, this supported classifying *one* as a 3PSP. The second step, then, was to determine whether *one* functioned similarly to an indefinite pronoun. *Someone* was chosen as an example since it occurred in the dataset frequently. If *one* could be replaced with *someone* more naturally than with *he* or *she*, then *one* was not counted as a 3PSP. In addition, when another pronoun was used to refer back to *one*, this supported classifying *one* as indefinite. If the replacement test with *someone* failed, a third one was used: replacing *one* with generic *you*. Again, if *one* could be replaced more naturally with *you* than *he* or *she*, *one* was not classified as a 3PSP. Examples of non-3PSP *ones* are provided in 3–5.⁸⁰

(3) “A successful person is **one** who, at least in one aspect of their life, is satisfied with their position. If they're happy with their family, job, or personal goals they're successful in some way.” (P862, indefinite *one*)

(4) “[missing subject] is content with their life. I do not believe success is measured by wealth but by happiness. If **one** is content with their situation, in my opinion they are successful.” (P530, indefinite *one*)

(5) “A successful person is someone who finds learning in each life stage, who prospers without an excess of material display, and who builds lasting

⁷⁹ One might have guessed this participant to be Finnish, since omitting the subject in Finnish is common in many contexts. However, this participant is a native English speaker.

⁸⁰ Since the replacement tests relied on my assessments, further validation was sought by asking a few native English speakers to assess a selection of replacement tests as well. Generally, the native speakers' assessments matched my own intuitions.

connections with others. Perhaps most important is succeeding on **one**'s own terms. [...]" (P1113, generic *one*)

Out of the 86 occurrences of non-numeral *one*, only 18 were classified as 3PSPs. Categorizing *one* as a 3PSP was easiest when it was used in proximity of and in reference to the original antecedent (examples 6–8). A few cases were more difficult to judge, but when *one* referred back to a textual antecedent, this supported classifying *one* as a 3PSP (example 9). Sometimes, the response included different uses of *one* (example 8).

(6) "[original antecedent omitted] Is at peace with oneself and others. Requirements may vary by person, but this is the essential requirement for me." (P1, 3PSP *one*)

(7) "A successful person is someone who has achieved happiness for oneself and caused others to gain happiness in the progress. [...]" (P36, 3PSP *one*)

(8) "A successful person is someone who, at a basic level, has achieved financial independence. *One* may be considered particularly successful if one has achieved the goals one set for oneself." (P929, indefinite *one* italicized, 3PSP *one* underlined)

(9) "[...] A successful person has set goals for him or herself and attained those goals. Whether or not a person is 'successful' is largely self-determined - i.e. others' opinions about one's success are less important than one' own - because only **the self** can evaluate one's degree of satisfaction and sense of accomplishment." (P820, 3PSP *one*)

In example 9, the first two *ones* might be replaceable by generic *you*, but for the third one, there is a new, textual antecedent present ("the self"), hence making replacement with *you* somewhat awkward, supporting a 3PSP interpretation instead. Since the number of pronouns was not relevant to the analysis, the response was coded for 3PSP *one*, regardless of whether the first two *ones* were considered 3PSPs or not.

The analysis of *one* presented above is largely purpose-driven for the present dataset, and since the present study was not designed to explore different uses of *one*, the proposed replacement tests may not be adequate in other contexts.

8.2.2 Descriptive analysis

Overall, 1022 participants (91%) completed the optional writing task. However, only 882 participants used 3PSPs. On average, these participants used 42 words and three 3PSPs in their responses. Most commonly, the participants used only one type of 3PSP in their response (n=825, 93%). These participants can be described as consistent users. Included are also participants who used a 3PSP only once (cf. Meyers, 1990).

Usage of generic pronouns

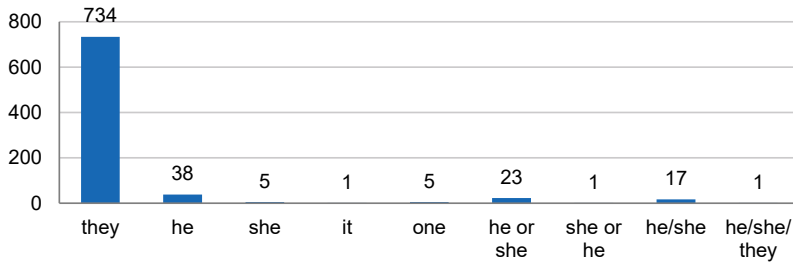


Figure 7. Part 1. Frequency of consistent pronoun use, n=825

Unsurprisingly, singular *they* was by far the most commonly used generic pronoun (Figure 7). Only 84 participants used a gendered pronoun consistently, *he* being used most frequently, followed by *he or she*, and *he/she*. The other pronouns were used only by a handful of consistent users. Only one participant used *it* (example 10 below), but only once.⁸¹ Also, only one participant used the construction *he/she/they*, which is interpreted as a nonbinary inclusion tactic (example 11).

(10) “I suppose that a successful person can present itself in any number of forms, as success is incredibly objective. [...]” (P667)

(11) “[missing subject] accomplishes goals, finishes projects, helps others, makes the world a better place, and achieves his/her/their potential.” (P149)

To consider inconsistent pronoun users as well, the presence of gendered pronouns (in any combination with nongendered pronouns) is presented in Figure 8. In other words, gendered pronouns are handled as the marked variant, and nongendered pronouns as the unmarked. In addition, for Figure 8, the different *he or she* constructions have been aggregated as one category. The category “other gendered mix” includes approaches such as alternating between *he* and *she*, or using a *he or she* construction and one of the binary pronouns (included is also example 11 above).

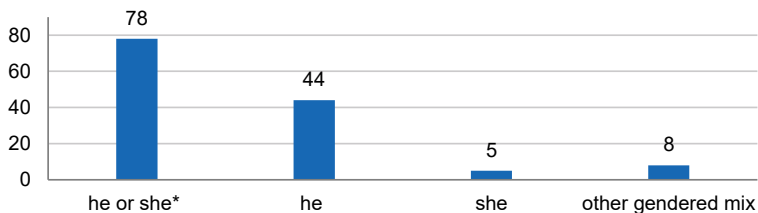


Figure 8. Part 1. Presence of gendered pronouns, n=135, *including all he or she constructions

Overall, 135 participants (15%) used gendered pronouns in part 1. Once aggregated, *he or she* constructions were the most common gendered tactic, including (s)he, s/he, he/she, she/he, he or she, she or he. The second most

⁸¹ This participant is a native speaker of American English.

common tactic was using only *he*. Interestingly, most *he* users were consistent, and only six participants used *he* along with nongendered pronouns. Furthermore, when considering inconsistent responses as well, in total 12 participants used *one* (excluded from Figure 8).

Switching pronouns

While most of the participants used a one-pronoun approach, it is worthwhile to briefly explore inconsistent approaches and consider *why* the participants might be switching between different pronouns.

In total, only 57 participants switched between different 3PSPs. Of these participants, 50 used gendered pronouns. Most of these participants, 27, switched between a *he or she* construction and singular *they*, but eight participants switched between the different *he or she* constructions, and six participants switched between *he* and a *he or she* construction.

With the most common switching type, 19 out of the 27 participants switched from using *he or she* to using *they*, and only five participants made the switch the other way around (from *they* to *he or she*), although three participants switched back and forth (examples 12–13). Moreover, surprisingly, 18 participants switched between different pronouns within the same sentence, or even clause (examples 12–14). This type of switching within anaphoric chains seems uncommon (see Ackerman, 2019: 14).

(12) “A successful person finds a life partner and makes a family. That person has a job she/he finds satisfying, and is able to provide satisfactorily for themselves and their family. [...]” (P1122)

(13) “A successful person is someone who feels that he or she has reached their goals.” (P252)

(14) “[...] Once a person realizes they cannot, should not, possess all he sees or all he wants, he become [sic] successful by choosing, in a most conscious manner, what to include in his life and how to supply for those things.” (P914)

Notably lacking from the data is a tactic often mentioned when discussing ways to avoid using *he* in epicene contexts: alternating between *he* and *she* (e.g. Blaubergs, 1978: 257; Mucchi-Faina, 2005: 195). None of the participants used this tactic, but one participant switched between the binary pronouns and *they* (example 15).

(15) “A successful person is someone who is happy. This person does not need monetary support from others to get by, which does not mean they’re rich. A successful person knows how to manage her income. Successful person isn’t afraid to admit he doesn’t know something and educates himself constantly on big and small subjects.” (P351)

The tactic this participant seems to be following is to use a different pronoun in each sentence. However, this participants’ other responses in the survey do not indicate this to be a tactic for endorsing nonbinary *they* alongside the

binary pronouns. Instead, this participant found nonbinary *they* unacceptable (in parts 6 and 7), and expressed that generic pronoun use is a an “unimportant” issue with the following comment (from part 3):

(16) “I don't believe binary is official acceptable language usage, if these even relate to gender neutral. As feminist I find it's unimportant if a sentence is formwd [sic] around he or she.” (P351)

No clear language-internal reasons for switching could be detected from the participants' responses (e.g. type of antecedent). One way to look at the switches is to view them as “slips” from intended or preferred language use to what comes naturally – or vice versa. However, one can only speculate which way the slip occurred. With *he or she*, it is possible that repeating this double pronoun construction becomes cumbersome, explaining why most switches occurred from *he or she* to *they*. This explanation is further supported by the participants' open responses later in the survey form. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 11, many participants described *he or she* as clumsy or wordy, and viewed generic singular *they* as easier to use.

Themselves

An interesting finding in part 1 was the presence of the rare but potentially (re)emerging form *themselves*. As discussed in section 2.2.1, the form *themselves* was previously used as a plural reflexive form of *they*, but has recently emerged as an overtly singular alternative for *themselves* (Wales, 1996: 15, 127).

In total, 12 participants used the form *themselves*. These responses are included in Appendix D, with additional information about the participants' gender and native language. For the nonbinary participants, their pronoun is included as well. A few examples are provided below (also included in Appendix D).

(17) “A successful person is someone who has a stable support network of other people and also participates in the network themselves to uplift other people.” (P782, American English, nonbinary: pronoun *they*)

(18) “A successful person is someone who is satisfied with how their life is. They are someone who has achieved the goals they set for themselves in something resembling the timeframe the[y] expected. [...]” (P559, British English, cis male)

(19) “[omitted subject] knows what they want in life and is determined to reach their goals. They know themselves, both their weaknesses and strong parts. [...]” (P710, Finnish, cis female)

While *themselves* is overall infrequent among the participants, it should not be disregarded as an outlier. Particularly if using autocorrection, it may take some effort to use this form, which is easily autocorrected to the standard form.

All occurrences of *themselves* refer back to a notionally and grammatically singular antecedent (one potential exception is example 5 in Appendix D, as

the antecedent is missing). Moreover, only one participant (example 6, Appendix D) used both *themselves* and *themselves*.

There seems to be no clear language-internal reason for using *themselves*, as there were no common elements or patterns in the responses that might explain the participants' choice to use this form over *themselves*. For example, if there had been other potential plural antecedents in the response that *themselves* could refer to, perhaps then *themselves* might be used to avoid ambiguity since it seems this form can only refer to notionally and grammatically singular antecedents. However, none of the responses included other potential plural antecedents. Two responses (examples 3 and 4 in Appendix D) included plural NPs ("others" and "other people"), but in contexts where they could not have anteceded *themselves* (or *themselves*).

While no linguistic pattern explains *themselves*, there might be a socially or ideologically motivated explanation. Of the 12 participants who used *themselves*, seven were nonbinary, five of whom use *they* as their pronoun.⁸² As such, it seems plausible that *themselves* is used to highlight the singularity of the pronoun – which can also be used as a nonbinary pronoun.

If *themselves* is used to highlight singularity and to support nonbinary *they*, then one might deduce that the other (cis) participants using this form might have similar reasons to those of the nonbinary participants. However, investigating the cis participants' other responses yielded mixed results: three participants expressed positive attitudes towards transgender individuals and nonbinary *they*, but two did not and even considered *they* a plural pronoun. As such, it seems there might be other reasons for using *themselves*, besides supporting the singularity of *they*.

Although the data considered here is not sufficient for generalizing, it seems that *themselves* is used to highlight the singularity of the pronoun, being used only in singular contexts in the data. It may be that *themselves* is gaining more usage among nonbinary individuals who use *they* for themselves, but further studies are required to explore this possibility.

8.2.3 Logistic regression model

There was not enough variation among the individual pronouns to allow for a multinomial regression analysis, hence a binary dependent variable was created to allow for logistic regression. The dependent variable used for the model categorizes the participants' responses as a) using only nongendered pronouns or b) using gendered pronouns or a mix of the two, as using gendered pronoun is the marked variant. The nongendered approaches mostly comprise uses of singular *they*, but also include the 12 participants using *one*, and one participant using *it*. Overall, 85% of the participants used nongendered approaches, while 15% used mixed or gendered approaches.

⁸² Unfortunately, the nonbinary participants were not explicitly asked to indicate their preferred reflective form of *they*.

Table 4 presents the main model for using gendered pronouns in free writing. During the residual analysis, 11 outliers were detected, of which 8 were considered influential. However, these participants represented the only Australian and British English speakers who used gendered pronouns. As such, their exclusion would have resulted in empty cells, and excluding only some would have inflated the ORs nearly two-fold. Since these participants only affect the respective language ORs, they were kept in the main model, while an alternative model excluding half of the influential outliers is provided in Appendix B (Table 18).

Table 4. Main LR model for generic pronouns in free writing. Inverse OR for using only nongendered pronouns; $n=778$, AUROC 0.80 [0.75, 0.84], Nagelkerke R-squared 0.27

Model 1. Use of gendered pronouns in free writing.								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	95% CI for OR		
						inverse OR	Lower	Upper
age	0.05	0.01	24.13	0.00	1.05		1.03	1.07
cis female (cis male)	0.55	0.24	5.12	0.02	1.74		1.08	2.81
American English			74.71	0.00				
Australian English	-2.19	0.56	15.40	0.00	0.11	8.95	0.04	0.33
British English	-1.55	0.45	11.90	0.00	0.21	4.70	0.09	0.51
Canadian English	-0.51	0.37	1.89	0.17	0.60		0.29	1.24
Finnish	1.29	0.29	19.95	0.00	3.64		2.07	6.43
Swedish	0.78	0.41	3.55	0.06	2.18		0.97	4.90
bilinguals	-0.53	0.67	0.62	0.43	0.59		0.16	2.20
graduate level			6.66	0.04				
no higher ed.	-0.58	0.30	3.80	0.05	0.56	1.79	0.31	1.00
bachelor level	-0.61	0.25	5.96	0.01	0.54	1.84	0.33	0.89
(non)sexist language attitudes	0.19	0.12	2.61	0.11	1.21		0.96	1.54
Constant	-3.43	0.51	44.68	0.00	0.03			

Significant predictors in the model are age, native language, education level, attitudes towards (non)sexist language, and gender. Importantly, transgender participants are excluded from the analysis since none of them used gendered pronouns, hence their inclusion would result in sparse data.

With age, the odds of using a gendered pronoun are 1.05 times higher for every one-year increase. For every 10-year increase in age, the odds of using gendered pronouns increase by 1.7. In other word, older participants more often used gendered pronouns than did younger participants.

With gender, the odds of using a gendered pronoun are nearly 2 times higher for the cis male group, when compared to the cis female group. That is, more cis male participants used gendered pronouns than did cis female participants.

With native language, out of the monolingual English speakers, American English speakers used gendered pronouns most often. However, there is some uncertainty with the ORs since there were so few Australian and British English speakers who used gendered pronouns. Overall, the trend is that when compared to American English speakers, the odds of using *nongendered* pronouns (inverse OR)⁸³ are much higher for Australian (OR 8.9) and British English (OR 4.7) speakers. The odds of using gendered pronouns are about 3.5 times greater for native Finnish speakers, when compared to American English speakers. In other words, Finnish speakers used gendered pronouns more often than native English speakers. There was no significant difference between the other language groups.

With education, participants with a graduate level education used gendered pronouns most often. When compared to the graduate level group, the odds of using *nongendered* pronouns are nearly two times higher for the no higher education and bachelor level groups.

Last, despite being a nonsignificant main predictor, the attitude-scale variable for (non)sexist language use was kept in the model, since it acts as a mediator for the gender difference (see Hosmer, Lemeshow & Sturdivant, 2014: 441–443). In other words, (non)sexist language attitudes seem to explain part of the difference based on participant gender. Since the attitude variable does not have a significant effect on the outcome variable, the mediator effect is considered indirect. The effect on the participant gender coefficient is moderate, causing a 23% decrease.

8.3 GENERIC PRONOUNS IN CONTROLLED CONTEXTS

In part 2 of the survey, the participants were presented with several fill-in-the-blank tasks. A total of 9 of these were designed to measure generic 3PSP usage, only one of which used overtly singular verb forms (item 18, Appendix A). The different measurements used different types of antecedents, resulting in some variation in the participants' responses (see section 7.3).

8.3.1 Overview

Overall, again, singular *they* was the most common pronoun used in part 2, being filled in 88% of the gaps (excluding item 18). *He or she* constructions were used in 5% of the gaps, followed by *he* in 2% of cases and *she* only in 0.3%;

⁸³ Since odds ratios above 1 are easier to interpret, the inverse odds ratios ($1/\text{Exp}(B)$) are calculated for those variables that had a significant effect on the dependent variable but an odds ratio < 1 .

one was used in 0.6% of the gaps and *it* in 0.5% (for absolute frequencies, see Table 17, Appendix B). At times, the participants also typed in non-pronouns (e.g. nouns), but these are excluded from the analysis.

Also excluded from further analysis is item 18, in which overtly singular verb forms were used. In short, the participants employed various tactics with this item, the majority choosing conventionally singular pronouns. Nearly 40% of the participants used *he or she* constructions (n=414), nearly 20% used *he* (n=200), and only 5% used *she* (n=53); 7% used *one* (n=81). About 20% still used *they* (n=233), some correcting the verb form in their response. This descriptive level is enough to conclude that for most participants, overt singular marking on the verb forms disfavor the use of generic singular *they*.

As with part 1 (generic pronoun use in free writing), for the regression analysis, a binary sum variable was created. This variable represents the participants' response type as either using only nongendered pronouns (mostly *they*), or using gendered pronouns/a mixed approach. Other approaches were considered as well, but for ease of comparison to part 1, response type was chosen as the dependent variable. The consistency of the part 2 responses was also considered: overall, 78% of the participants responded consistently to each of the 8 neutral measurements (item 18 being excluded). This was deemed sufficient to allow for creating a sum variable based on response type.⁸⁴ Overall, 81% of the participants used only nongendered pronouns in part 2, while the rest also used gendered pronouns — only 2% used only gendered pronouns. Hence the category for gendered/mixed approaches mostly includes mixed approaches.

8.3.2 Logistic regression model

Table 5 presents the main model for using gendered pronouns in controlled contexts (part 2). The model excludes 7 inappropriately influential outliers,⁸⁵ and the full model is provided in Appendix B (Table 19).

⁸⁴ While the measurements with *child* were identified as deviant, only three of the eight measurements in part 2 included this item, and as such they could be included in the sum-variable.

⁸⁵ These outliers were all in the “gendered” response category. These participants are mostly native English speakers, mostly cis female and a few transgender participants. Their impact only concerned two ORs: the transgender coefficient and the Swedish coefficient. The outliers that most affected the gender OR were excluded, inflating the transgender OR as a result.

Table 5. Main LR model for generic pronouns in controlled contexts. Inverse OR for using only nongendered pronouns; $n=1092$, AUROC 0.8 [0.77, 0.83], Nagelkerke R-squared 0.27

Model 1. Use of gendered pronouns in controlled contexts.								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	95% CI for OR		
						inverse OR	Lower	Upper
age	0.05	0.01	44.11	0.00	1.06		1.04	1.07
cis female			15.54	0.00				
cis male	-0.57	0.20	8.27	0.00	0.56	1.77	0.38	0.83
transgender	-2.15	0.74	8.43	0.00	0.12	8.61	0.03	0.50
American English			62.72	0.00				
Australian English	-2.13	0.41	27.12	0.00	0.12	8.38	0.05	0.27
British English	-1.54	0.34	20.02	0.00	0.22	4.65	0.11	0.42
Canadian English	-0.38	0.28	1.91	0.17	0.68		0.40	1.17
Finnish	0.51	0.25	4.20	0.04	1.67		1.02	2.73
Swedish	0.42	0.36	1.31	0.25	1.52		0.74	3.08
bilinguals	-0.33	0.50	0.43	0.51	0.72		0.27	1.91
no higher education			11.64	0.00				
bachelor level	0.50	0.24	4.29	0.04	1.64		1.03	2.63
graduate level	0.89	0.26	11.55	0.00	2.43		1.46	4.07
(non)sexist language attitudes	0.53	0.10	28.69	0.00	1.70		1.40	2.07
Constant	-4.31	0.46	86.34	0.00	0.01			

The significant predictors in the model are age, gender, native language, education, and attitudes towards (non)sexist language use. These predictors are the same as with the part 1 model in the previous section; the results are also similar, except for participant gender and (non)sexist language attitudes.

With age, for every one-year increase, the odds for using a gendered pronoun increase by 1.06. For a 10-year increase in age, the odds for using gendered pronouns become 1.7 times greater. In other words, older participants used more gendered pronouns than younger participants.

Unlike in part 1, in part 2, cis female participants had the highest percentage for using gendered pronouns. The odds for the cis male group to use *nongendered* pronouns are nearly 2 times greater and for the transgender group about 8.5 times greater than for the cis female group.

As with part 1, out of the native monolingual English speakers, American English speakers used gendered pronouns most often. The odds for using *nongendered* pronouns are greater for Australian (OR 8.4) and British English

speakers (OR 4.7), when compared to American English speakers. In contrast, the odds for using gendered pronouns are nearly 2 times greater for native Finnish speakers than for native American English speakers. There was no significant difference between the other language groups.

When compared to the no higher education group, the odds of using gendered pronouns are about 1.5 times greater for the bachelor level group, and about 2.5 times greater for the graduate level group. In other words, as with part 1, participants with a higher education level more often used gendered pronouns.

With attitudes towards (non)sexist language use, for each one-unit increase on the scale, the odds for using gendered pronouns multiply by 1.7. This means that participants with dismissive attitudes towards (non)sexist language used more gendered pronouns than those who supported nonsexist language. Or in other words, participants who indicated negative attitudes towards sexist language use more often used nongendered pronouns than participants who trivialized sexist language use.

8.4 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Overall, singular *they* was the most commonly used generic pronoun in both parts 1 and 2, confirming hypothesis (i) (Figure 9). Gendered generic pronouns were used infrequently in both parts, supporting hypothesis (ii).

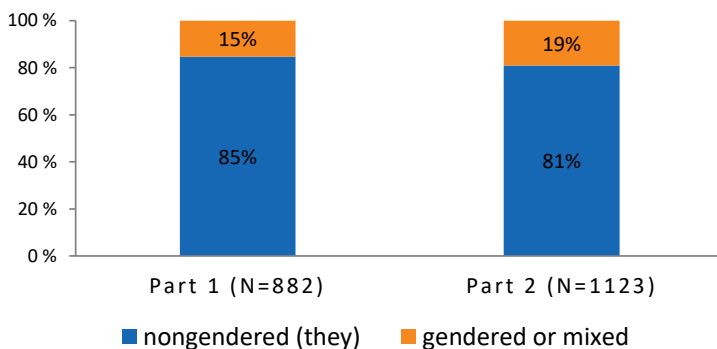


Figure 9. Response type in free writing (part 1) vs. controlled context (part 2)

In addition, *he* was more common than *she* in both parts 1 and 2, supporting hypothesis (ii)a. *He or she* constructions were more common than either of the binary pronouns in both parts, supporting hypothesis (ii)b.

The response patterns between parts 1 and 2 were explored at a descriptive level.⁸⁶ Gendered pronouns were used only somewhat more frequently in part 2, the difference being four percentage points. Indeed, this difference could

⁸⁶ There was an attempt to include both parts 1 and 2 in a single model, but due to the prevalence of nongendered approaches, the results did not reveal anything meaningful.

simply be due to part 2 requiring the participant to use a pronoun more than once, and with different types of antecedent. Closer inspection revealed that about a fifth of the participants who responded to part 1 switched to using a different approach in part 2. Of these participants, 56 switched from using a gendered/mixed approach in part 1 to using only nongendered pronouns in part 2, while 87 switched the opposite way. As such, there is only limited support for hypothesis (iii), which proposed that participants would use more prestige forms in part 2 than in part 1. If the switches are due to parts 1 and 2 representing unconscious and conscious pronoun use, then one possible explanation is that some of the participants switched to using prestige forms (i.e. conventionally singular pronouns), while others switched to using socially accepted forms (nongendered approaches, i.e. singular *they*). In other words, it may be that the participants are switching from intuitive (unconscious) usage to following a set of prescriptive *or* socially guided rules. Indeed, some participants reflected on their own use in their open responses, supporting such an interpretation (example 20).

(20) “I certainly use the generic his when I’m not thinking about it, but I’m trying to avoid it and switch to they.” (P682)

Further investigation also showed a difference based on native language. Most of the native English speakers switched from using *they* to using a mixed/gendered approach in part 2, while the opposite is true for Finnish speakers (the difference for Swedish speakers is minute). Furthermore, of the cis female participants who switched their approach, 80% switched from using nongendered approaches to using mixed/gendered approaches. There was no substantial difference among the cis male participants. This result may reflect the gender paradox, discussed further below.

The logistic regression models built for part 1 and 2 are very similar: both models have the same predictors (age, gender, native language, education level, and attitudes towards (non)sexist language), and for the most parts, the results are similar as well. However, the models are different in two ways. First, in part 1 participant gender was entered as a binary variable (cis female, cis male), since none of the transgender participants used gendered pronouns. Second, the attitude variable on (non)sexist language showed a main effect in the part 2 model, while in the part 1 model, the effect was indirect, mediating the gender difference.

Gender

Most notably, with only 4 participants deviating from the trend in part 2, transgender individuals almost exclusively used nongendered approaches. In other words, cisgender participants used more gendered approaches than transgender participants, confirming part of hypothesis (ii)c. The other part of this hypothesis posited that cis female participants would use *she* and cis male participants *he* more often than others (e.g. Meyers, 1990: 233; Balhorn, 2009: 401). With *he*, this hypothesis was true in part 1, but not in part 2. *She*, on the

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other hand, was used too infrequently to draw conclusions from. Furthermore, with the transgender participants, the results align with those from Loughlin, in whose study all 128 nonbinary participants used *they* (2019).

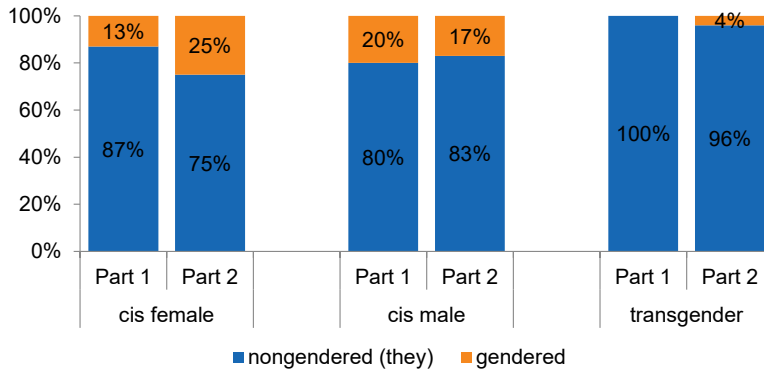


Figure 10. Response type and participant gender. Part 1 $n=879$, part 2 $n=1118$

As indicated above, a larger proportion of cis female participants used gendered approaches in part 2, compared to part 1 (Figure 10). With an added twist, the switching from unconscious to conscious pronoun use, this trend seems to reflect Labov’s gender paradox that “Women conform more closely than men to sociolinguistic norms that are overtly prescribed but conform less than men when they are not” (2001: 293).

Education

The general trend with education is that participants with a graduate level education used gendered pronouns more often than participants with lower levels of education, but there is not much of a difference between participants with no higher education and a bachelor level education. Thus, these results partly support hypothesis (ii)d. It is possible these differences are due to prolonged influence of prescriptive rules in academic contexts. For example, Adami demonstrated that the academic genre favors gendered options over singular *they* (2009); this trend seems to have only started to change in recent years. Neither of the more specific variables regarding educational background in either linguistics or gender studies turned out to be significant predictors.

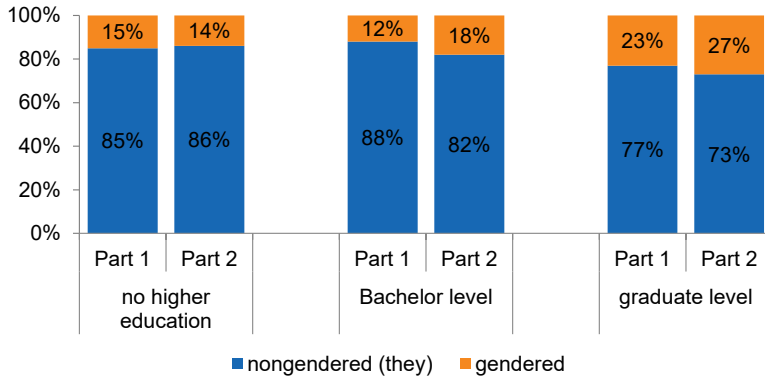


Figure 11. Response type, and education level. Part 1 n=882, part 2 n=1123

Age

The data supports hypothesis (ii)e: older participants used gendered pronouns more often than younger participants in both parts 1 and 2. These results likely reflect ongoing change; as per Apparent Time Hypothesis (e.g. Labov, 1994: 43–72), younger generations reflect change, while older generations reflect more conservative/older norms.

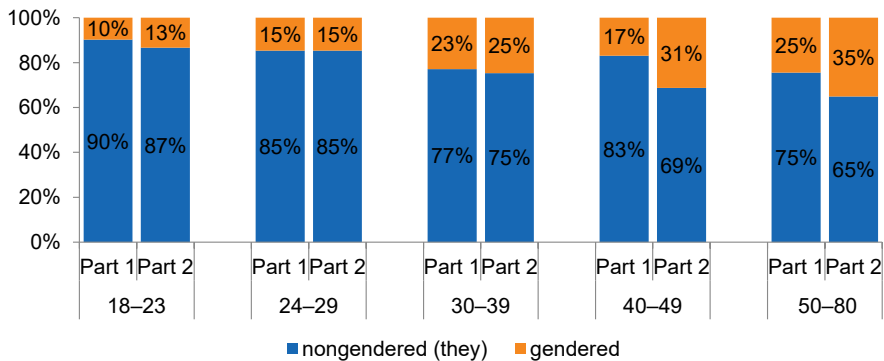


Figure 12. Response type, and age groups. Part 1 n=882, part 2 n=1123

Native language

The general trend with the native language groups is that non-native speakers of English (Finnish and Swedish speakers) used gendered pronouns considerably more often in both parts than did native English speakers, supporting hypothesis (ii)f. It is proposed that greater conformance to (outdated) prescriptive rules is behind this result, as also suggested by Pauwels (2010: 27). Indeed, the trend with Pauwels’ native and non-native English speaking participants is similar to that of the present study.

Usage of generic pronouns

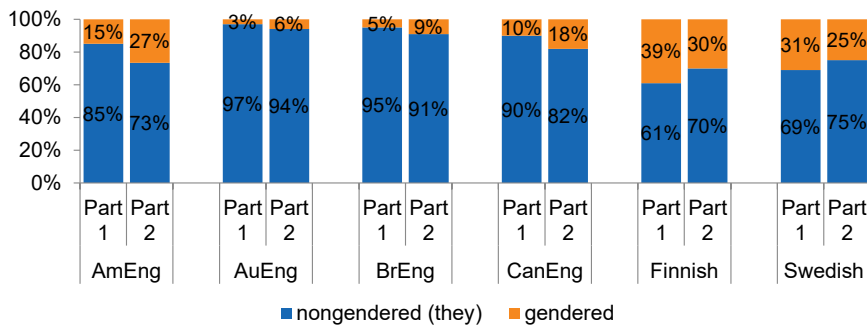


Figure 13. Response type, and native language. Part 1 $n=875$, part 2 $n=1113$. Bilinguals and other Englishes excluded

However, there also turned out to be a difference among the native speakers of English, as American and Canadian English speakers used more gendered pronouns than did Australian and British English speakers. The American/British trend roughly corresponds to Pauwels (2010), Adami (2009) and to Baranowski (2002). Based on a corpus study, Baranowski asserted that American writers more often used conservative approaches, meaning mostly *he or she*, whereas British writers most often used generic singular *they* (Baranowski, 2002). The present study indicates that Australian English speakers align with British English speakers, and Canadian English speakers with American English speakers, at least as far as generic pronoun use goes. Similarly, in Pauwels, Australian English speakers aligned with British speakers, but Canadian speakers were not included (2010).

The effect of knowing grammatical gender L2s and genderless L2s was also tested in both models but these variables turned out to be nonsignificant, hence excluded from the analysis.

Attitudes towards (non)sexist language use

The data also supports hypothesis (ii): Participants who indicated dismissive attitudes towards (non)sexist language (i.e. scored higher on the attitude scale) used gendered pronouns more often than participants who viewed sexist language as a problem and supported nonsexist language (i.e. scored low on the scale). The mean for participants using nongendered pronouns was 2.3 (in both parts), and 2.6/2.7 for using gendered pronouns in parts 1 and 2, respectively.

Last, hypotheses ii(g–h) were rejected. There is no evidence to support Meyer’s intuition of a metropolitan–rural divide in generic pronoun use (1990: 234–235), hence hypothesis (ii)g is rejected. This may, however, be partly due to the measurement level of the residential area, which was based on number of inhabitants and type of area.

While political orientation was not a significant predictor in the model, there was a substantial difference in the data. Roughly 16% of the participants

who self-identified as liberal used gendered pronouns, whereas roughly 30% of the conservative participants did so. However, based on the regression analyses, once other predictors are controlled for, political orientation has no effect on pronoun use. Even when tested as the only predictor for generic use, political orientation is not a significant predictor for generic pronoun use. There was no indication of political orientation acting as a mediating variable either. Thus, hypothesis (ii)h is rejected.

Comparison to previous studies

Furthermore, the results from the free writing task (part 1) were qualitatively compared to those from previous studies: Meyers (1990) and Earp (2012), after whose studies the task was modeled, and a few other more recent studies using a similar approach (LaScotte, 2016; Loughlin, 2019). However, different study designs, somewhat different methods, and small sample sizes (in Earp, 2012; LaScotte 2016) limit the ability to make meaningful comparisons. Suffice to say, the general trend across the studies shows an increase in use of singular *they* over time, and a subsequent decrease in gendered pronouns.

Overall, the results of the present study highlight the triumph of generic singular *they* with epicene antecedents over all other options, aligning with the trends shown in earlier research (e.g. Balhorn, 2004; Balhorn, 2009; Earp, 2012; Meyers, 1990; Paterson, 2014). Feminist language reforms have likely affected the preference for (more) gender-inclusive approaches (see section 4.3.2), while public endorsement may have helped in freeing singular *they* from the previous proscription (e.g. McWhorter, 2018; Roche, 2015).

9 ACCEPTABILITY OF GENERIC PRONOUNS

In part 3, the participants were asked to assess the acceptability of pronouns in (otherwise) nongendered and generic contexts. In this chapter, after presenting the hypotheses in section 9.1, an overview is provided in 9.2, followed by the logistic regression models in 9.3. Along with a summary, the results are discussed in section 9.4.

9.1 HYPOTHESES

Overall, the hypotheses for the acceptability of generic pronouns are based on the hypotheses formulated for usage. The underlying presumption, then, is that there is a relationship between usage and acceptance. This aspect will be briefly explored in section 9.4. No formal hypotheses were formulated for the neopronouns, but it was expected that these pronouns would be widely rejected due to their novelty.

The hypotheses concerning acceptability are that in generic contexts that are otherwise epicene and nongendered:

- (i) Singular *they* is commonly accepted (as it is widely used, e.g. Balhorn, 2009);
- (ii) gendered pronouns are accepted less frequently due to changing norms, but when, then;
 - a. *he* is accepted by more participants than *she*, due to the different status *he* has enjoyed (e.g. Hyde, 1984: 699–701)
 - b. due to increased inclusivity, *he or she* is accepted by more participants than either *he* or *she* alone
 - c. the perceived inclusivity of the gendered pronouns affects acceptability assessments
 - d. more cis male than cis female participants accept *he* since cis males are automatically included (see Meyers, 1990; Balhorn, 2009); similarly, more transgender than cisgender participants reject all gendered pronouns as gender-exclusive
 - e. older participants accept gendered pronouns more often than younger participants: Apparent Time Hypothesis (Labov, 1994: 43–72), gendered pronouns representing the norm of the past
 - f. participants with higher education levels accept gendered pronouns more often than participants with no higher education, due to extended exposure to prescriptive writing norms (e.g. academic texts, Adami (2009)

- g. due to greater conformance to prescriptive norms, non-native speakers of English accept gendered pronouns more often than native speakers of English (e.g. Pauwels, 2010: 27)
- h. conservative values support using gendered pronouns (norm of the past), while liberal values predict using more inclusive options (e.g. Cameron, 1995)
- i. participants with dismissive attitudes towards sexist language use accept gendered pronouns more often than participants who view sexist language use as a problem; participants who support nonsexist language reject gendered pronouns (e.g. Swim, Mallett & Stangor, 2004: 121–126).

9.2 OVERVIEW

The acceptability of generic pronouns was measured with three different antecedents: *the average person*, *a child*, and *every child* (see Appendix A). The deviance of the *child* antecedent was demonstrated in section 7.3. Since there is uncertainty as to what causes the variation with the *child* measurements, a few different approaches were considered (discussed shortly in section 9.4). The final models were built using only the measurements with *the average person*. Figure 14 shows the variation across pronouns. The participants reacted so similarly to the measurements with *ze* and *xe* that the results have been aggregated.

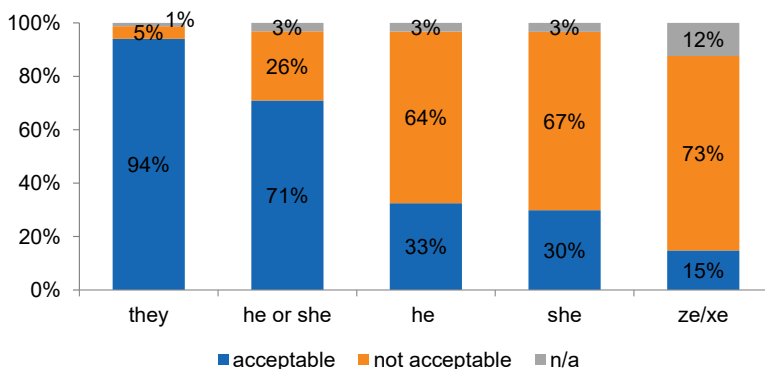


Figure 14. Acceptability of generic pronouns. Antecedent “the average person”, $n=1128$

Singular *they* was nearly unanimously found acceptable, while the other pronouns divided the participants. *He or she* was still found acceptable by the majority of participants (71%), but the solo binary pronouns were accepted by only about a third. The neopronouns were found acceptable by the least number of participants (15%), but they also have the highest number for missing responses, including undecided participants (12%).

9.3 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS

Due to nearly unanimous acceptance, no model was built for generic singular *they*. Based on the hypotheses, the following independent variables were tested for each of the other pronouns: age, gender, native language, education level, political orientation, perceived inclusivity of the pronoun in question (part 5 response), and attitudes towards (non)sexist language use. Some additional variables were tested as well: knowing grammatical gender or genderless L2s, having a background in linguistics or gender studies, and type of residential area. The results for the different models are first presented separately but discussed together in section 9.4.

Table 6 presents the main model for the acceptability of *he*. A total of 9 outliers were identified, of which 3 were deemed inappropriately influential, excluded from the main model.⁸⁷ Appendix B provides the full model (Table 20).

⁸⁷ The excluded participants were British English speakers in the acceptable response category. They affected the perceived inclusivity variable.

Table 6. Main LR model for the acceptability of *he*. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; *n*=1050, AUROC 0.78 [0.75, 0.81], Nagelkerke R-squared 0.29

Model 1. Acceptability of <i>he</i> (unacceptable).								
	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	inverse OR	95% CI for OR	
							Lower	Upper
cis female			8.15	0.02				
cis male	0.80	0.31	6.72	0.01	2.23		1.22	4.08
transgender	0.71	0.40	3.15	0.08	2.04		0.93	4.50
American English			27.38	0.00				
Australian English	1.04	0.39	7.17	0.01	2.84		1.32	6.08
British English	1.57	0.44	12.53	0.00	4.79		2.01	11.42
Canadian English	0.86	0.37	5.41	0.02	2.37		1.15	4.91
Finnish	1.17	0.40	8.61	0.00	3.23		1.48	7.08
Swedish	0.56	0.64	0.76	0.38	1.75		0.50	6.15
bilinguals	-0.98	0.65	2.28	0.13	0.38		0.11	1.34
no higher ed.			16.49	0.00				
bachelor level	-0.58	0.20	8.55	0.00	0.56	1.78	0.38	0.83
graduate level	-0.91	0.23	16.26	0.00	0.40	2.49	0.26	0.63
inclusive			116.86	0.00				
only males	1.71	0.17	102.91	0.00	5.55		3.99	7.73
males and nonbinary	1.79	0.27	43.25	0.00	5.99		3.51	10.22
only females and males	0.13	0.43	0.09	0.76	1.14		0.49	2.65
(non)sexist language attitudes	-0.40	0.09	19.61	0.00	0.67	1.50	0.56	0.80
cis female*AmEng			35.69	0.00				
cis male*AUEng	-0.67	0.52	1.66	0.20	0.51		0.19	1.41
cis male*BrEng	-1.47	0.56	6.77	0.01	0.23	4.34	0.08	0.70
cis male*CanEng	-1.05	0.52	4.06	0.04	0.35	2.86	0.13	0.97
cis male*Finnish	-1.15	0.52	4.90	0.03	0.32	3.15	0.11	0.88
cis male*Swedish	0.62	0.81	0.58	0.45	1.85		0.38	8.98
cis male*Bilingual	2.21	0.88	6.28	0.01	9.09		1.62	51.07
transgender*AUEng	-2.76	1.18	5.43	0.02	0.06	15.72	0.01	0.65
transgender*BrEng	-0.29	1.22	0.06	0.81	0.75		0.07	8.17
transgender*CanEng	-2.63	0.94	7.86	0.01	0.07	13.87	0.01	0.45
transgender*Finnish	-1.69	1.12	2.27	0.13	0.18		0.02	1.66
transgender*Swedish	-1.27	1.75	0.52	0.47	0.28		0.01	8.69
transgender*bilingual	-0.52	1.18	0.20	0.66	0.59		0.06	6.02
Constant	0.40	0.34	1.33	0.25	1.49			

The main model includes the following significant predictors: education, perceived inclusivity of *he*, attitudes towards (non)sexist language use, participant gender and native language, as well as an interaction term for the latter two variables.

With education, the odds for considering *he* to be *acceptable* are nearly 2 times greater for the bachelor level group and 2.5 times greater for the graduate level group, when compared to the no higher education category. In other words, participants with a higher education level more often accepted *he*.

The perceived inclusivity of the pronoun was also a significant predictor. Compared to viewing *he* as including all genders, the odds for viewing *he* as unacceptable are nearly 6 times greater for participants who had indicated that *he* only includes males, or nonbinary individuals and males. In other words, participants who viewed *he* as exclusive more often also viewed it as unacceptable.

With the attitudes towards (non)sexist language use, the odds of viewing *he* as *acceptable* multiply by 1.5 for every one-unit increase on the scale. In other words, participants scoring high on the scale (indicating dismissive attitudes towards nonsexist language use) more often found *he* acceptable than participants scoring low on the scale (indicating rejection of sexist language use and support for nonsexist language use).

Last, an interaction effect between participant gender and native language was detected. The reference group for this interaction term is American English speaking cis female participants. Compared to this group, the odds for viewing *he* as *acceptable* are significantly greater for cis male British English, Canadian English and Finnish speakers (bilinguals are excluded from consideration due to small group size). In addition, two of the transgender groups show a significant difference; Australian English and Canadian English speakers. However, these groups are small, introducing considerable uncertainty in terms of the effect size. This interaction term is further considered in section 9.4.

The main model for generic *she* is provided in Table 7. This model has somewhat weak discrimination ability (AUROC 0.7 [0.67, 0.74], Nagelkerke R-squared 0.16), but functions adequately enough for explanatory purposes. Nevertheless, the model statistics indicate that there are important variables missing from the model.⁸⁸ Furthermore, while half a dozen outliers were detected, their effect on the model coefficients was inconsequential, having a minute effect on only two nonsignificant coefficients. As such, no exclusions were made.

⁸⁸ Post hoc, I tested the part 4 item “I consider myself feminist” for the acceptability of generic *she*, since many participants associated this use with feminism in their open responses (see Chapter 11). However, there was no significant effect for acceptability.

Table 7. Main LR model for the acceptability of *she*. Response category 'unacceptable', for inverse OR 'acceptable'; $n=1046$, AUROC 0.70 [0.67, 0.74], Nagelkerke R-squared 0.16

Acceptability of <i>she</i> (unacceptable).								
	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	inverse OR	95% CI for OR	
							Lower	Upper
age	-0.02	0.01	8.31	0.00	0.98	1.02	0.97	0.99
cis female			4.05	0.13				
cis male	0.31	0.17	3.49	0.06	1.36		0.98	1.88
transgender	-0.09	0.27	0.11	0.74	0.91		0.53	1.56
American English			14.65	0.02				
Australian English	0.66	0.23	8.04	0.00	1.94		1.23	3.06
British English	0.68	0.23	8.58	0.00	1.98		1.25	3.12
Canadian English	0.51	0.24	4.46	0.03	1.66		1.04	2.67
Finnish	0.34	0.23	2.26	0.13	1.41		0.90	2.21
Swedish	0.77	0.35	4.87	0.03	2.17		1.09	4.31
bilinguals	0.30	0.39	0.60	0.44	1.35		0.63	2.91
inclusive			73.17	0.00				
only females	1.34	0.17	63.48	0.00	3.82		2.75	5.32
females and nonbinary	1.38	0.25	30.54	0.00	3.99		2.44	6.51
only females and males	-0.32	0.51	0.38	0.54	0.73		0.27	1.98
(non)sexist language attitudes	-0.23	0.08	7.57	0.01	0.80	1.26	0.68	0.94
Constant	0.43	0.36	1.49	0.22	1.54			

Significant predictors for *she* are age, native language, perceived inclusivity of *she*, and attitudes towards (non)sexist language. In addition, participant gender turned out to have a mediator effect on the attitude variable.

Starting with age, there is a trend of higher acceptance rates with *she* when age increases. For every 10-year unit, the odds of finding *she* acceptable increase by approximately 1.2. In other words, older participants more often accepted *she* than did younger participants.

With native language, when compared to American English speakers, the odds for viewing *she* as unacceptable are about two times higher for all other monolingual native English speaker groups as well as Swedish speakers. In other words, out of the monolingual native speakers, American English speakers were most accepting of *she*.

Similar to *he*, when viewing *she* to be gender-exclusive, the odds for viewing the pronoun as unacceptable are about 4 times greater than when viewing the pronoun as inclusive. Last, the odds of viewing *she* as *acceptable* multiply by 1.3 for every one-unit increase on the attitudes towards (non)sexist language use scale. In other words, participants who had dismissive attitudes towards sexist language more often viewed *she* as acceptable than participants with

negative attitudes. As mentioned, participant gender seems to mediate this effect; excluding gender from the model would result in a 26% increase in the attitude OR.

Unlike with *he*, there was no interaction term detected between native language and gender, and education was not a significant predictor for *she*. The (dis)similarities between the participants' reactions to *he* and *she* are discussed in section 9.4.

The main model for *he or she* (Table 8) is considerably different from the two previous models, as only age and participant gender are included as significant predictors. In addition, participant gender is entered as a binary cisgender-transgender variable, since there was no substantial difference between cis female and cis male participants (see section 9.4). Six outliers were detected, and they were all excluded from the final model as influential.⁸⁹ As with *she*, the model for *he or she* also lacks in discrimination power (AUROC 0.67 [0.63, 0.70], Nagelkerke R-squared 0.1). The full model is available in Appendix B (Table 21).

Table 8. Main LR model for the acceptability of *he or she*. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; $n=1081$, AUROC 0.67 [0.63, 0.7], Nagelkerke R-squared 0.1

Model 1. Acceptability of <i>he or she</i> (unacceptable).								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	inverse OR	95% CI for OR	
							Lower	Upper
age	-0.05	0.01	29.42	0.00	0.95	1.05	0.94	0.97
transgender(cisgender)	1.34	0.22	36.14	0.00	3.80		2.46	5.88
Constant	0.17	0.25	0.47	0.49	1.19			

The trend with age is that older participants more often found *he or she* acceptable than did younger participants. For every 10-year increase in age, the odds of viewing *he or she* acceptable increase by 1.6.

With gender, the odds for viewing *he or she* as unacceptable are about 4 times higher for the transgender group, when compared to the cisgender group. In other words, cisgender participants were more accepting of *he or she* than transgender participants.

Generic *ze* and *xe* were tested with one measurement each. However, the participants reacted so similarly to the two pronouns that the results have been aggregated. In addition, as with *he or she*, participant gender is handled as a binary variable (cisgender vs. transgender). The main model is provided in

⁸⁹ These participants were all in the “not acceptable” response category. Five were native English speakers, and 1 native Swedish speaker. 3 were cis female, 3 cis male.

Table 9. Out of a total of 17 outliers, 9 were excluded as influential.⁹⁰ The full model is available in Appendix B (Table 22).

Despite only including three explanatory variables (gender, neopronoun familiarity, and attitudes towards (non)sexist language), the model has excellent discrimination power (AUROC 0.86 [0.83, 0.9], Nagelkerke R-squared 0.39).

Table 9. Main LR model for the acceptability of generic *ze/xo*. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; n=967, AUROC 0.86 [0.83, 0.9], Nagelkerke R-squared 0.39

Model 1. Acceptability of generic <i>ze/xo</i> (unacceptable).								
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	OR	95% CI for OR	
							Lower	Upper
transgender(cisgender)	1.11	0.28	16.32	1.00	0.00	3.04	1.77	5.22
neopronoun familiarity	1.90	0.39	24.23	1.00	0.00	6.68	3.14	14.22
(non)sexist language attitudes	1.49	0.18	70.76	1.00	0.00	4.42	3.13	6.26
Constant	-2.55	0.33	58.93	1.00	0.00	0.08		

The odds for viewing *ze/xo* as unacceptable are 3 times higher for the cisgender group, when compared to the transgender group. In other words, proportionally more transgender participants marked the neopronouns as acceptable. The odds are nearly 7 times greater for viewing these pronouns as unacceptable when being unfamiliar with neopronouns, compared to being familiar with neopronouns prior to taking the survey. In other words, participants who were already familiar with neopronouns more often accepted these pronouns.

The odds for viewing the neopronouns as unacceptable multiply by 4.4 for every one-unit increase on the (non)sexist attitude scale. This effect is particularly large. In other words, participants who expressed dismissive attitudes towards sexist language use more often found the neopronouns unacceptable than participants who believed in changing sexist language use.

9.4 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Logistic regression models were built for all other pronouns except singular *they*, which was nearly unanimously accepted by the participants. Only participant gender was included in all of the models, indicating that there is considerable variation as to which factors help explain the acceptability of

⁹⁰ The outliers that were kept were cisgender participants who accepted the neopronouns, and no individual participant was more influential than the other. Excluding these participants would have also resulted in sparse data.

different pronouns. However, this may also be due to some other undetected reason.

In addition, due to some concern with some of the measurements (see 7.3), only one measurement was used as the dependent variable for the models. Nevertheless, alternative models were tested with a sum-variable in which the response mode of the three different antecedent measurements was used (*the average person, a child, every child*). Overall, the results of these alternative models did not greatly differ from the main models presented in section 9.3, but the models for *she* and *he or she* had better discrimination power.

To address the hypotheses: singular *they* was the most widely accepted generic pronoun (by 96% of the participants), confirming hypothesis (i). In contrast, gendered generic pronouns were accepted less frequently, supporting the general hypothesis (ii). Hypothesis (ii)a posited that generic *he* would be accepted more frequently than *she*; this hypothesis is not confirmed, since nearly equal proportions of participants found *he* and *she* acceptable (about a third of participants). However, this result should not be interpreted as *he* and *she* enjoying equal status, as revealed by the participants' open responses (see Chapter 11). Hypothesis (ii)b was confirmed: *he or she* was accepted by considerably more participants (71%) than either of the solo pronouns (~30%). No hypothesis was formulated for generic *ze/xe*, but as expected, they were rejected by the majority of participants (73%). Furthermore, these results generally align with recent studies measuring grammaticality/naturalness of pronouns, in which *they* was rated higher than either *he* or *she* (Bradley, 2020: 6; Conrod, 2019: 109).

Perceived inclusivity of gendered generic pronouns

Hypothesis (ii)c posited that the perceived inclusivity of gendered pronouns would affect the acceptability assessments. This hypothesis is supported by the data, but somewhat surprisingly, the model for *he or she* deviates from the trend; perceived inclusivity was a significant predictor only for the *he* and *she* models. This may simply be due to the measurement, which with *he or she* means categorizing responses as either inclusive of nonbinary individuals (57%) or not (43%). Indeed, the participants' open responses show that for many, inclusivity is an important factor, yet, *he or she* is deemed acceptable since it is perceived to include the majority of people (see section 11.3.1).

Perceived inclusivity was an important predictor for both *he* and *she*. Figure 15 illustrates perceived inclusivity of *she* when contrasted with the acceptability assessment; the results for *he* are very similar (see Appendix B, Figure 46 for *he*). The results were as expected: when the pronoun was perceived to be gender-exclusive (i.e. categories "only female" and "only female and nonbinary"), the participants were more likely to view the usage as unacceptable.

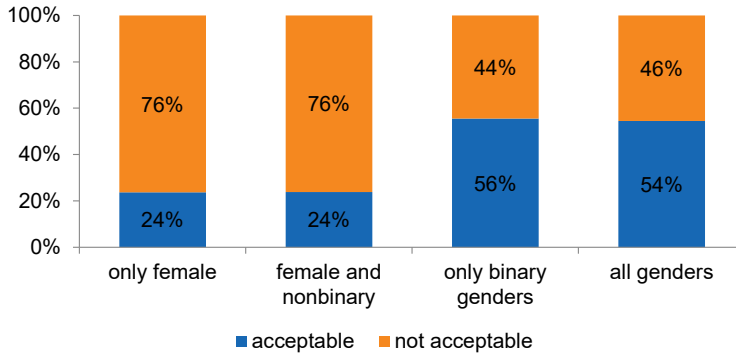


Figure 15. Acceptability and perceived inclusivity of *she*, n=1059

Gender

Participant gender was the only variable included in all models. It showed a significant effect for all pronouns, except in the *she* model there was only a mediator effect on attitudes towards (non)sexist language. In addition, in the *he* model, there was an interaction term with participant gender and native language. Figure 16 demonstrates the trends in the data.

Hypothesis (ii)d posited that cis male participants would be more accepting of *he* than cis female participants, and that transgender participants would reject gendered pronouns more often than cisgender participants. The transgender participants had the lowest acceptability rates for *he* and *he or she*, but with *she* the cis male group had the lowest acceptability rate, albeit the differences are minor (Figure 16). Somewhat more cis female than cis male participants accepted *he*. This might reflect greater conformance by cis female participants for overtly prescribed norms (gender paradox, Labov, 2001: 293). An alternative explanation might be that cis female individuals have needed to consider themselves included in masculine constructions, hence finding them acceptable (see Douglas & Sutton, 2014; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). However, the differences between cisgender participants are not vast.

Acceptability of generic pronouns

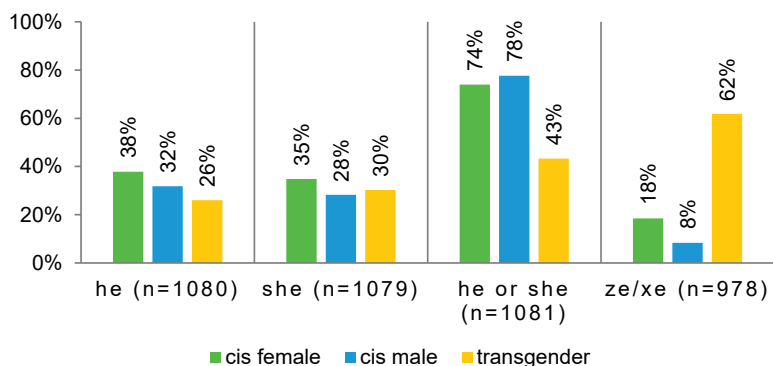


Figure 16. Acceptability of generic pronouns and gender. The “not acceptable” category is excluded for improved intelligibility when multiple pronouns are presented in the same figure

There was also a considerable difference between the cisgender and transgender participants’ reactions to *he or she* and the neopronouns. The *he or she* difference between cisgender and transgender participants may reflect heightened awareness regarding the exclusivity of the construction. From this viewpoint, it is possible that some cisgender participants viewed *he or she* as inclusive, and thus as acceptable, whereas transgender participants may have been more aware that this binary construction is exclusionary to (some) nonbinary individuals. The transgender participants also more often accepted *ze/xe* as generic pronouns. This may be due to the connotation these pronouns have for being nonbinary pronouns (see Chapter 11), hence the greater support by transgender participants, of whom most were nonbinary themselves.

Age

Hypothesis (ii)e posited that older participants would be more accepting of gendered pronouns than younger participants. However, this hypothesis is supported only by the models for *he or she* and *she*. The trends in the data are illustrated in Figure 17.

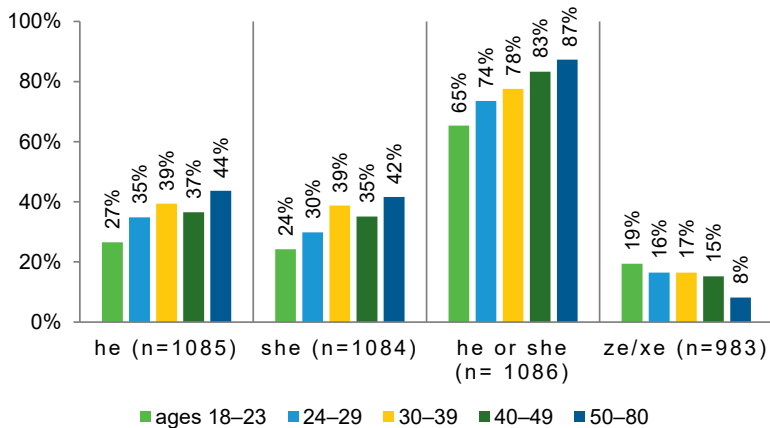


Figure 17. Acceptability of generic pronouns and age

The trend with *he or she* is clear: when age increases, so does the acceptance rate. This result may reflect the more recent prescription of *he or she* over *he*, but this study cannot adequately address this aspect. It may also be that, similarly as with the trend with gender, younger participants are more aware that *he or she* is exclusive to (some) nonbinary individuals, hence rejecting *he or she* more often than older participants.⁹¹ The patterns for *he* and *she* are less clear, but there is a slight tendency for older participants to accept these pronouns more often. The trends in the data are similar for *he* and *she*, but the model building procedure led to excluding age from the *he* model. Nevertheless, it seems that older participants more often accepted all gendered generics than did younger participants, and rejected neopronouns more often than did younger participants.

Education

Hypothesis (ii)f concerned education level: participants with higher education levels were expected to more closely conform to prescriptive norms than those with lower education levels. The data support this hypothesis, as participants with graduate level education had the highest acceptance rate for all gendered pronouns (Figure 18). However, education level was only a significant predictor for *he*, as the trends for *she* and *he or she* are less pronounced.

⁹¹ Despite many of the transgender participants belonging to the first two age groups, there was no interaction between age and gender for *he or she*, nor were the transgender participants inappropriately influential.

Acceptability of generic pronouns

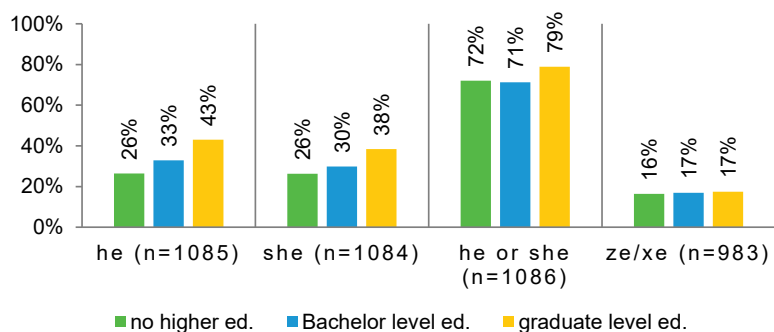


Figure 18. Acceptability of generic pronouns and education level

Prescriptive norms might explain the trend with *he* as acceptance increases with education level, but the trend with *she* is similar. It is possible the trend reflects participants with a higher education level being simply more accustomed to using gendered pronouns as generics (e.g. Adami, 2009).

Moreover, in Parks and Robertson (2008), participants who had had more education (measured in years) were more concerned about sexist language, and more positive towards gender-inclusive language use, measured with the IASNL-G, on which the (non)sexist language attitude scale of the present study is based on as well. While this general trend repeats in the present study,⁹² it is not reflected in the graduate-level educated participants rejecting gendered generics (Figure 18).

While background in linguistics and gender studies were also tested, neither variable had a significant effect in any of the models, hence excluded from analysis.

Native language

Native language was also a significant predictor for *he* and *she*. Hypothesis (ii)g suggested that non-native English speakers would more closely conform to prescriptive norms and accept gendered generics more often than native speakers. This hypothesis is not supported by the data. There was however variation based on native language (Figure 19).

⁹² Participants with a graduate level have the lowest mean on the (non)sexist attitude scale, participants with a bachelor level fall in the middle, and participants with no higher education have the highest mean.

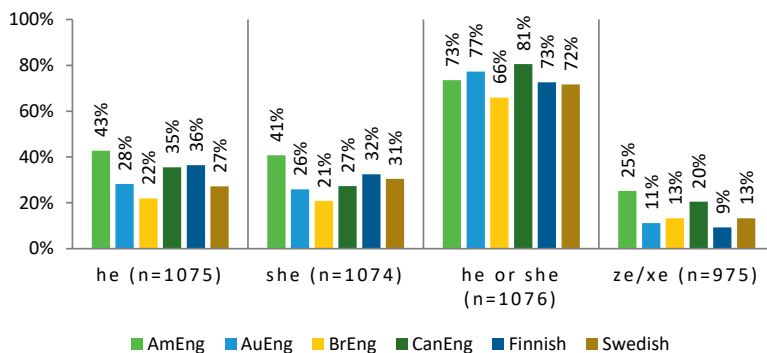


Figure 19. Acceptability of generic pronouns and native language. Bilinguals and other Englishes excluded

Overall, the monolingual American English speakers have the highest acceptance rate for all of the pronouns except *he or she*. Among the native English speakers, there is a rough trend with American and Canadian English speakers, and Australian and British English speakers; the former group has higher acceptability rates for *he* and *she* than the latter. While this might reflect a similar trend as reported by Baranowski, in whose corpus study American writers more often used conservative approaches than British writers (Baranowski, 2002), a similar pattern repeats with the neopronouns, which hardly represent conservative pronoun use. Perhaps, then, this trend reflects overall greater tolerance for different pronouns in generic contexts.

Finnish and Swedish native speakers reacted similarly to *he or she* and *she*, however, the Finnish speakers have a higher acceptability rate for *he* (36%) than do Swedish speakers (27%). The present study is unable to provide an adequate explanation for this variation based on native language. It may be, for example, that there is some other undiscovered factor affecting these results.

In addition, an interaction term was detected in the *he* model. Hence, participant gender and native language are contrasted with the acceptability ratings for *he* in Figure 20.

Acceptability of generic pronouns

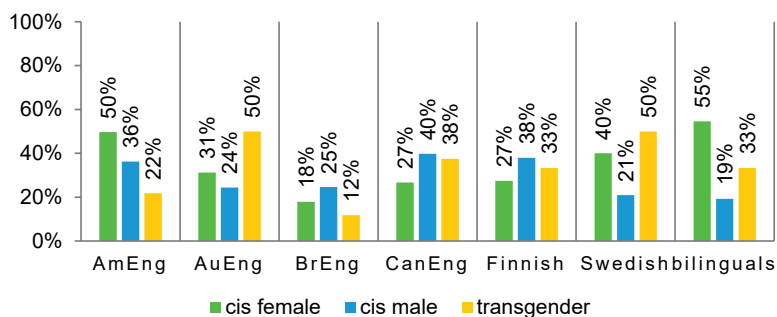


Figure 20. Acceptability of *he*, native language and gender. The proportions have been calculated for each language*gender group separately

Figure 20 demonstrates that while with the American English, Australian English, and Swedish speaking groups the trend with participant gender is that more cis female participants accepted *he* than did cis males,⁹³ for a few of the language groups the opposite trend is true. Such an opposite trend exists for the British and Canadian English groups, as well as for the Finnish group (bilinguals being excluded from consideration). No potential explanation can be provided for this trend; further studies ought to explore whether such a trend exists, or whether this might be a spurious effect, restricted to the present sample.

Moreover, the two additional language variables, knowing genderless or grammatical gender L2s, were also tested, but neither were significant predictors for the acceptability of generic pronouns.

Attitudes towards (non)sexist language use

The attitude scale variable was a significant predictor in all models, except for *he or she*. Participants who were dismissive of sexist language use more often found *he* and *she* acceptable, while participants who viewed sexist language use as something to be avoided more often rejected these pronouns. The trend was the opposite with *ze/xe*, with supporters of nonsexist language use more often finding the neopronouns acceptable than those who were dismissive of (non)sexist language. Thus, the data support hypothesis (ii)i. However, no conclusive explanation can be offered as to why this variable was not a predictor for *he or she*. One possible reason is that *he or she* is not as strongly associated with sexist language use as the other pronouns, as it is perceived to be inclusive of the majority of people (see section 11.3.1).

Neopronoun familiarity

No formal hypothesis was formulated for neopronoun familiarity, since this variable only concerns the neopronouns. In short, participants who were

⁹³ Because most transgender participants are either American English or British English speakers, the percentages for the other language groups are not representative, being based on only a handful of participants.

familiar with neopronouns more often accepted generic *ze/xe* (22%) than participants who were not familiar with these pronouns (4%). This same trend repeats with the nonbinary pronouns (Chapter 10).

Hypothesis (ii)h posited that self-identified conservative participants would support more conventional options, while self-identified liberal participants would support more inclusive options, i.e. singular *they*. However, political orientation was not a significant predictor for any of the pronouns, leading to rejecting this hypothesis. Residential area was also tested as an additional variable, but turned out to be a nonsignificant factor as well.

Usage and acceptability

The hypotheses on acceptability were based on previous studies on usage, thus relying on the premise that usage reflects acceptability, and perhaps vice versa. This aspect was also explored with the data, cross-tabulating the results from the free writing task (part 1) with the acceptability assessments for generic pronouns with *the average person* (part 3).

Table 10 demonstrates that for most participants, their acceptability assessment matched usage. However, most variation occurred with *he*, perhaps reflecting dissonance between previous but long-lasting prescriptive norms and what is now considered socially acceptable.

Table 10. *Acceptability and use of generic pronouns. Neopronouns excluded. Usage frequencies include inconsistent users*

	<i>they</i>		<i>he</i>		<i>he or she</i>		<i>she</i>
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
acceptable	715	98 %	25	58 %	62	81 %	4
not acceptable	15	2 %	18	42 %	15	19 %	1
total	730	100 %	43	100 %	77	100 %	5

Further investigation of the deviant users (i.e. mismatch between acceptability assessment and usage) provided only a few observations. First, most of the deviant *he* users are non-native speakers of English; 11 Finnish speakers and one Swedish speaker (n=12, out of 18). Most of these participants were also cis male (n=15). In contrast, most of the deviant *they* users were native speakers of English (n=10, out of 15). This may further reflect the adherence to previous prescriptive rules colliding with current social norms. However, the deviant *he or she* users (n=15) include an equal mix of native and non-native speakers.

Second, the open responses demonstrated dissonance between the participant's (implicit) acceptability assessment and (explicit) attitudes. For example, one participant vouched for generic singular *they* despite having used *he* himself (example 1), and another viewed generic *he* as incorrect grammar despite using it himself (example 2). With singular *they*, a few participants quite strongly opposed the use as incorrect, despite using the

pronoun themselves (example 3). A few participants seemed cognizant of the clash between norms, for example claiming (in)correctness but indicating personal avoidance (examples 4–5).

(1) “When the actor is unknown or unspecified, it should be always 'They'. It's respectable, it's accurate if there are one or three people involved and it doesn't take someone's personal thoughts on gender identity into question.” (P28, Finnish, cis male)

(2) “It sounds grammar-wise plain wrong. It feels like a writer's error more than anything else.” (P135, Finnish, cis male)

(3) “Using a plural word to describe a single person is like fingernails on a chalkboard.” (P679, American English, transgender)

(4) “I try to avoid these kind of constructions myself but there's no denying [sic] that they are correct usage of language.” (P568, Finnish, cis female)

(5) “This is mixed for me. I use a singular 'they' when speaking, even though I would correct myself if I wrote a singular 'they' on a paper. I would try to not use it, but I won't fault anyone for using it.” (P495, American English, cis male)

Leaving such interesting deviances aside, the main conclusion to draw is that for most participants, their acceptability assessments matched their own use of pronouns in free writing.

Overall, while many of the hypotheses were supported by the data, there was considerable variation between the models for the different pronouns. At a surface level, this simply reflects that the participants reacted differently to the different pronouns. However, when considering the potential explanations as to *why* some pronouns are rejected while others are accepted, it may be that the participants are using different criteria for the acceptability of different pronouns. Indeed, while the quantitative data alone cannot demonstrate this, the participants' open responses support this interpretation. As such, I will return to consider the reasons why different pronouns are either rejected or accepted in Chapter 11.

10 ACCEPTABILITY OF NONBINARY PRONOUNS

In part 6, the participants were asked to assess the acceptability of nonbinary pronouns in example sentences (see Appendix A). The tested pronouns were nonbinary *they*, *ze* and *xe*. *They* was tested with both overtly singular verb forms (e.g. *they works*) and unmarked verb forms (e.g. *they work*). Each pronoun was tested twice, in two different sentences. First, an overview is provided in section 10.1, followed by the regression models in section 10.2. The results are then summarized and discussed in section 10.3.

10.1 OVERVIEW

Figure 21 demonstrates that the participants reacted to nonbinary *they* and the neopronouns very differently. While the neopronouns were accepted by merely a third of the participants, nonbinary *they* with unmarked verb forms was accepted by nearly 70% of the participants. However, when overtly singular verb forms were used, nearly 90% of the participants rejected nonbinary *they*. In comparison, the participants reacted to the two different neopronouns very similarly. While inconsistent responses were not an issue with the neopronouns, 17% of the participants were unable to give an assessment on acceptability. Many of these participants left a comment expressing they were too unfamiliar with these pronouns to make the assessment, while others left comments unrelated to acceptability.

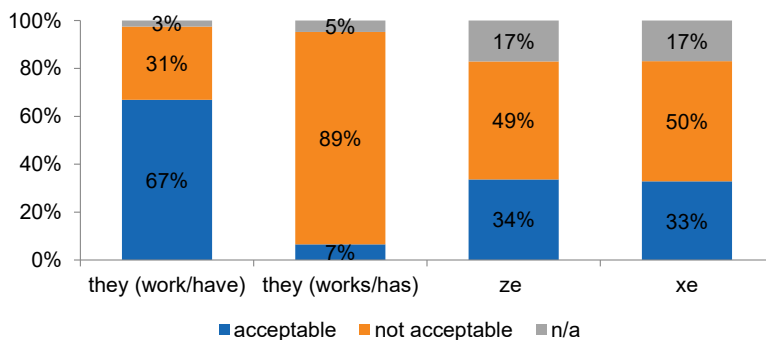


Figure 21. Overview of acceptability of nonbinary pronouns, $n=1128$, n/a includes both missing and inconsistent responses

Importantly, while nonbinary *they* (with unmarked verb forms) was tested with two example sentences, one of the measurements turned out to be unreliable. Based on the open comments, some participants were interpreting *they* as a plural pronoun in one of the measurements, despite the instructions

defining the use as singular.⁹⁴ As such, this measurement is excluded from the analysis, and nonbinary *they* with unmarked verb forms is represented by only one measurement in Figure 21 as well as in the logistic regression models, discussed below.

10.2 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS

Logistic regression models were only built for nonbinary *they* with unmarked verb forms, and both neopronouns. The measurements with nonbinary *they* with overtly singular verb forms are excluded, since the participants nearly unanimously rejected this usage.

Acceptability of the pronouns was measured with two example sentences per pronoun. For *ze* and *xe*, the respective measurements were aggregated as binary variables for each pronoun.⁹⁵ As explained above, only one measurement was used for nonbinary *they*.

Importantly, no formal hypotheses were formed for the acceptability of nonbinary pronouns, due to a shortage of previous studies. Thus, the selection of independent variables relied on some presuppositions, closer to educated guesses than hypotheses. First, I expected transgender participants to be more accepting of nonbinary pronouns than cisgender participants, due to different personal experiences with pronouns. Similarly, I anticipated that positive attitudes towards transgender individuals and knowing transgender individuals personally would support accepting nonbinary pronouns.

Second, I expected younger participants to be more open to new pronouns and uses than older participants; younger people may be more familiar with such new uses, and thus more accepting. Third, I anticipated Finnish and Swedish speakers to be open to neopronouns, due to personal experience with nongendered pronouns and/or neopronouns. Fourth, I also expected conservative and religious participants to reject nonbinary pronouns more often than liberal and non-religious participants, due to different views on gender, and language change. In addition to these variables, education level, background in gender studies, and the attitudes towards (non)sexist language use were also tested in the models.

Table 11 presents the main logistic regression model for nonbinary *they*. Two additional models are provided in Appendix B: the full model (Table 23, with no outliers excluded), and a model in which the transgender participants have been excluded (Table 24). The transgender participants nearly unanimously accepted *they*, with only 3 exceptions. These three transgender participants were identified as outliers; however, their exclusion would result

⁹⁴ The unreliability concerns the measurement “Lee has decided to get a cat. They already have a dog”. There were not many explicit plural comments with the other measurement, hence it was deemed more reliable.

⁹⁵ This approach is different than with the generic neopronouns, with which the responses to both pronouns were aggregated. The same approach could have been employed with nonbinary neopronouns, but the pronouns were kept separate to allow for comparisons.

in sparse data, requiring the exclusion of all transgender participants. Further investigation of the outliers also indicated that the three transgender outliers were not inappropriately influential on the other variables in the model, nor the cis female–male OR.⁹⁶ As such, these three transgender outliers are included in the main model (Table 11), keeping the imbalance of this group in mind. After considering the other (cisgender) outliers, 7 participants were excluded from the main model as inappropriately influential.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ The exclusion of the transgender participants causes a considerable (+20%) change only in one of the other coefficients, that of Australian English participants. Since this coefficient is nonsignificant ($p > 0.05$), it is excluded from consideration, and as such the effect of the transgender participants is inconsequential.

⁹⁷ These participants are characterized by being cis female, young, native English speakers, and all viewed *they* as unacceptable. The effect of these participants was only moderately influential, and the full model does not differ greatly from the main model.

Acceptability of nonbinary pronouns

Table 11. Main LR model for the acceptability of nonbinary they. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; $n=1043$, AUROC 0.8 [0.77, 0.83], Nagelkerke R-squared 0.32

Model 1. Acceptability of nonbinary they (unacceptable).								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	95% CI for OR		
						inverse OR	Lower	Upper
age 18–23			78.09	0.00				
age 24–29	0.65	0.21	9.47	0.00	1.91		1.26	2.88
age 30–39	1.45	0.23	39.76	0.00	4.27		2.72	6.70
age 40–49	2.05	0.30	47.36	0.00	7.80		4.35	14.00
age 50–80	2.13	0.33	41.96	0.00	8.43		4.42	16.07
cis female			11.98	0.00				
cis male	0.43	0.18	5.49	0.02	1.54		1.07	2.21
transgender	-1.37	0.62	4.96	0.03	0.25	3.94	0.08	0.85
British English			28.02	0.00				
American English	0.42	0.27	2.43	0.12	1.52		0.90	2.57
Australian English	0.07	0.28	0.06	0.81	1.07		0.62	1.85
Canadian English	0.82	0.29	8.11	0.00	2.27		1.29	4.00
Finnish	0.75	0.28	7.31	0.01	2.11		1.23	3.63
Swedish	1.55	0.37	17.11	0.00	4.69		2.25	9.75
bilinguals	1.09	0.44	6.16	0.01	2.97		1.26	7.02
liberal			6.29	0.04				
conservative	0.50	0.26	3.84	0.05	1.65		1.00	2.72
other political	-0.42	0.35	1.40	0.24	0.66		0.33	1.31
knowing transgender	0.83	0.17	24.59	0.00	2.28		1.65	3.16
(non)sexist language	0.38	0.11	12.48	0.00	1.46		1.18	1.80
transgender attitudes	0.36	0.10	11.90	0.00	1.43		1.17	1.75
Constant	-4.31	0.39	121.90	0.00	0.01			

Included in the model as significant predictors are age, participant gender, native language, political orientation, knowing transgender individuals, attitudes towards (non)sexist language use, and attitudes towards transgender individuals.

With native language, deviating from the previous models, British English speakers were chosen as the reference category as this helped bring out the

differences between the language groups (see discussion for further details). Due to issues with nonlinearity with the logit of the dependent variable, age was entered in the model as a categorical variable

Out of the age groups, the 18–23-year-olds are used as the reference group. The odds for viewing nonbinary *they* as not acceptable increase with age: for the 24–29-year-old group the odds are nearly 2 times greater, for the 30–39-year-olds about 4 times greater, and for the two oldest age groups the odds are roughly 8 times higher (40–49-year-olds, and 50–80-year-olds). In other words, older participants more often rejected nonbinary *they* than did younger participants.

Compared to the cis female group, the odds for viewing nonbinary *they* as unacceptable are 1.5 times higher for the cis male group. The odds for viewing *they* as *acceptable* are four times higher for the transgender group when compared to the cis female group. In other words, cis male participants most often rejected nonbinary *they*, whereas nearly all transgender participants accepted *they*.

When compared to British English speakers, the odds for viewing *they* as unacceptable are about 2 times greater for Canadian English and Finnish speakers, and about 4.5 times greater for Swedish speakers (the bilingual group is not homogeneous enough to draw conclusions from). Further comparisons are provided in section 10.3.

When compared to self-identified liberals, the odds for viewing *they* as unacceptable are 1.7 times greater for self-identifying conservatives. However, the lower CI bound for the liberal-conservative OR is 1 (indicating no difference), and $p=0.05$. As such, the direct effect of this variable is uncertain. Instead, a mediator relationship seems to exist between political orientation and attitudes towards transgender individuals, although the effect is not particularly large. Excluding political orientation would inflate the coefficient of the attitude scale by 17%.

Both attitudes towards (non)sexist language use and attitudes towards transgender individuals turned out to be significant predictors in the regression model. On the (non)sexist language use scale, participants who were in support of nonsexist language use (i.e. scored low on the scale) found *they* acceptable more often than participants with dismissive attitudes towards sexist language (i.e. scored high). In terms of ORs, the odds for viewing *they* as unacceptable are 1.5 times greater per one-unit change on the attitude scale.

Participants who indicated negative attitudes towards transgender individuals (i.e. scored high on the attitudinal scale) were more likely to find nonbinary *they* unacceptable; for every one-unit increase on the attitudinal scale, the odds for finding *they* unacceptable increase by 1.4. Moreover, the odds of finding *they* unacceptable are 2.3 greater for not knowing transgender people personally, compared to knowing transgender people.

The results of *ze* and *xe* are discussed together, since there were no substantial differences between how the participants reacted to these two

neopronouns neither in the data nor in the models (differences in the coefficients between the models are < 8%). The results for *ze* are presented below, pertaining to *xe* as well; the models for *xe* are included in Appendix B (Table 27, Table 28 and Table 29).

As with *they*, two additional models are provided in Appendix B: the full model (Table 25), and a model excluding influential outliers and transgender participants (Table 26). Similar to *they*, only 4 transgender participants viewed *ze* as unacceptable, and three of them were identified as outliers during the residual analysis. Further exploration indicated that these outliers were not inappropriately influential. Excluding the transgender participants did not cause considerable changes in the other variables in the model (model 3 in Appendix B), hence they are included in the main model (Table 12). A total of 14 other outliers were excluded from the main model as inappropriately influential.⁹⁸

Table 12. Main LR model for the acceptability of nonbinary *ze*. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; *n*=896, AUROC 0.9 [0.86, 0.91], Nagelkerke R-squared 0.58

Model 1. Acceptability of nonbinary <i>ze</i> (unacceptable).								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	inverse OR	95% CI for OR	
							Lower	Upper
cis female			36.22	0.00				
cis male	0.83	0.19	18.35	0.00	2.29		1.57	3.35
transgender	-2.06	0.59	12.09	0.00	0.13	7.87	0.04	0.41
neopronoun familiarity	0.76	0.22	12.06	0.00	2.14		1.39	3.28
knowing transgender	0.53	0.20	6.71	0.01	1.70		1.14	2.54
transgender attitudes	1.10	0.22	25.98	0.00	3.01		1.97	4.60
(non)sexist language attitudes	1.23	0.14	74.30	0.00	3.42		2.59	4.53
Constant	-4.49	0.37	146	0.00	0.01			

Significant predictors for *ze* are: gender, familiarity with neopronouns, knowing transgender individuals, attitudes towards transgender individuals, and attitudes towards (non)sexist language use.

Notably, age and native language were not significant predictors for the acceptability of neopronouns. In addition, since Swedish has adopted the neopronoun *hen*, a binary variable representing speaker status of Swedish was created and tested in the neopronoun models. However, this variable was excluded as nonsignificant.

⁹⁸ These participants were cisgender and most notably affected the attitudes towards transgender individuals scale, but also many of the other variables.

Compared to the cis female group, the odds for viewing *ze* as unacceptable are about 2 times greater for cis males. The odds for viewing *ze* as *acceptable* are nearly 8 times greater for the transgender group, when compared to cis females. In other words, cis male participants most often rejected *ze*, while nearly all transgender participants accepted the neopronouns.

The odds are 2 times greater for viewing *ze* as unacceptable when unfamiliar with neopronouns, compared to being familiar with neopronouns. Similarly, the odds for viewing *ze* as unacceptable are 1.7 greater when one does not know transgender people personally, compared to knowing transgender people. Notably, there are some overlaps between these variables: all transgender participants are a) familiar with neopronouns, and b) personally know transgender individuals. These aspects were taken into consideration during model building, testing for interactions and VIF, as well as making comparisons to alternative models (not included). No issues were detected with the models that would have been caused by these variables.

On the transgender attitudinal scale, per one-unit change, the odds are 3 times greater for finding *ze* unacceptable. In other words, participants with more negative attitudes towards transgender individuals more often rejected the neopronouns, compared to participants with positive attitudes towards transgender individuals. In a similar fashion, the odds of finding *ze* unacceptable rise with 3.4 for each one-unit increase on the (non)sexist language attitudes scale. In other words, participants who are dismissive of sexist language more often found *ze* unacceptable.

10.3 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Overall, the participants reacted very differently to nonbinary *they* and the neopronouns. Nonbinary *they* was accepted by nearly 70% of the participants, as long as unmarked verb forms were used. In contrast, the neopronouns were accepted by merely 33% of the participants. Since the participants reacted so similarly to the neopronouns, only the results for *ze* are illustrated below, extending to *xe*.

The logistic regression models identified gender, knowing transgender individuals, and the two attitude scales as significant predictors for the acceptability of both *they* and the neopronouns. With *they*, the participants' age, native language and political orientation were also included in the model, while familiarity with neopronouns was included in the model for the neopronouns.

Gender

Cisgender and transgender participants reacted to the nonbinary pronouns very differently. As expected, the transgender participants generally accepted both types of nonbinary pronouns (Figure 22). With cis participants, there is a clear trend, as more cis female than cis male participants accepted nonbinary

pronouns. This difference is heightened with the neopronouns, which were rejected by 80% of the cis male participants. For cis female participants, the difference between *they* and the neopronouns is not as vast. Aligning with these results, nonbinary/transgender participants rated specific use of *they* more grammatical than other participants in Bradley's study (2020: 7–8)⁹⁹ and more natural in Conrod's (2019: 114), but there was no substantial difference between the female and male ratings.

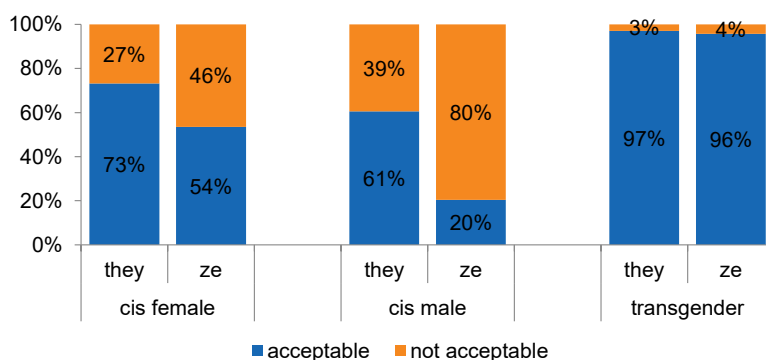


Figure 22. Acceptability of nonbinary *they* and *ze*, and participant gender. *They* $n=1081$, *ze* $n=917$

The gender difference might be explained by different personal experiences. As suggested previously, the average transgender experience with pronouns likely differs from the average cisgender experience. Remembering that most of the transgender participants are nonbinary themselves (78%), it seems quite natural that they would accept nonbinary pronouns; as will be shown in Chapter 12, most of these participants also used nonbinary pronouns themselves. The difference between the cis participants may be due to more general negative experiences with exclusive language use or inadequate linguistic representation. Many of the cis female participants might have had such experiences, perhaps explaining the greater support for nonbinary pronouns. Indeed, cis women in general have been suggested to be more affected by sexist language than cis men, thus more aware of the need for, and supportive of, nonsexist language (e.g. Douglas & Sutton, 2014; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011).¹⁰⁰

Orientation towards transgender individuals

As expected, participants who personally knew transgender individuals (or were transgender themselves) generally accepted both types of nonbinary pronouns more often than those who were not (Figure 23). The difference is

⁹⁹ The study only included 9 nonbinary participants.

¹⁰⁰ The comparison concerns only cis women and cis men because transgender people have not been considered in previous studies on sexist language; arguably, this group faces the most gender discrimination.

somewhat greater for the neopronouns; 80% of the participants who did not know transgender individuals personally rejected *ze*. The reason for this is speculated to be similar as with gender: personally knowing transgender individuals increases sympathy and support for the group, extending to nonbinary pronouns (see also Conrod, 2019: 251).

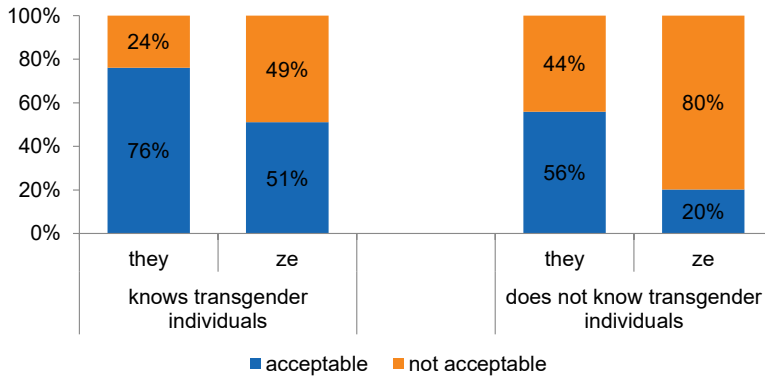


Figure 23. Acceptability of nonbinary *they* and *ze*, and knowing transgender individuals. *They* $n=1085$, *ze* $n=920$

In a similar fashion, familiarity with neopronouns increased the odds of viewing *ze* (and *xe*) as acceptable. Nearly 80% of the participants who had not encountered neopronouns prior to taking the survey rejected them as unacceptable. In comparison, 54% of those who were familiar with neopronouns still rejected them. This result may reflect a more general trend of associating “familiar” with “good” and thus acceptable, and “unfamiliar” with “bad” or “uncertain”, thus unacceptable (see e.g. Harari & McDavid, 1973; Song & Schwarz, 2009).

Related to these two variables, less positive attitudes towards transgender individuals also resulted in greater odds of rejecting both types of nonbinary pronouns. While using different measures, Hernandez also reports that negative attitudes towards transgender individuals predicted rejection of *they* in singular contexts, although proper names were not tested (2020: 54–55).

In addition, participants who were dismissive about sexist language more often rejected nonbinary pronouns than participants who were opposed to sexist language. As with the gender difference, this result can be interpreted as more general concern for injustice in language use extending to nonbinary pronouns: nonbinary individuals deserve linguistic representation, similar to how earlier feminist reformers sought for female inclusion and visibility in supposedly epicene masculine expressions. Similarly, in Bradley’s study, participants with a higher level of benevolent sexism rated specific use of *they* as less grammatical; however, hostile sexism was not a significant predictor (Bradley, 2020: 6).

Native language

As mentioned, there were additional significant predictors associated with nonbinary *they*, discussed below.

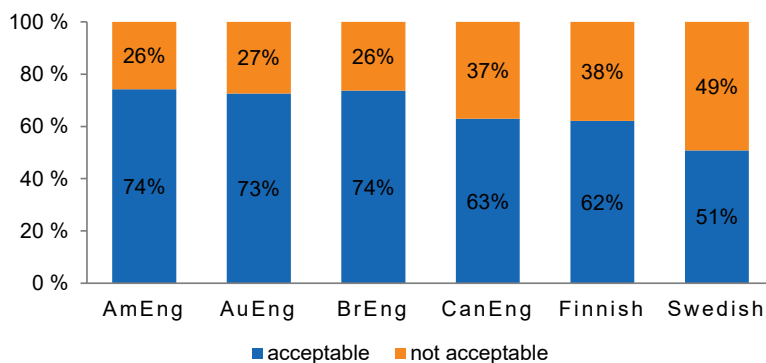


Figure 24. Acceptability of nonbinary *they* and native language. Bilinguals and other Englishes excluded, $n=1035$

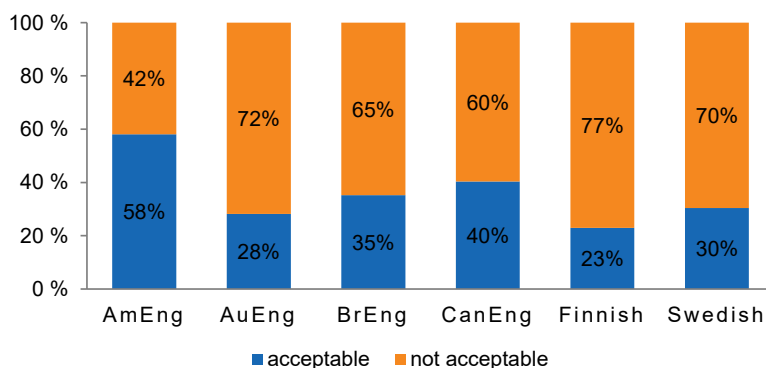


Figure 25. Acceptability of nonbinary *ze* and native language. Bilinguals and other Englishes excluded, $n=874$

With nonbinary *they*, there is a clear trend based on native language: fewer non-native than native English speakers accepted this pronoun (Figure 24). However, the Canadian English speakers deviate from this trend, having a lower acceptance percentage than the other native English speaker groups. To speculate, one reason for this difference might have to do with the loud public objections to nonbinary pronouns occurring in Canada around the time the data was collected in 2017 (for discussion, see Cossman, 2018). However, this pattern does not repeat with the neopronouns (Figure 25). Indeed, there is greater variation in the native language group acceptance rates for the neopronouns, and no general trend can be formulated. While this variable was not a significant predictor for the neopronouns, some observations can be made. Monolingual American English speakers were most accepting of

nonbinary neopronouns, whereas Finnish speakers have the highest percentage for rejecting the pronouns. Somewhat surprisingly, the Swedish speakers, many of whom are likely familiar with the Swedish neopronoun *hen*, mostly still rejected English neopronouns. Thus, the expectations based on native language stated earlier were not met in the data.

Age

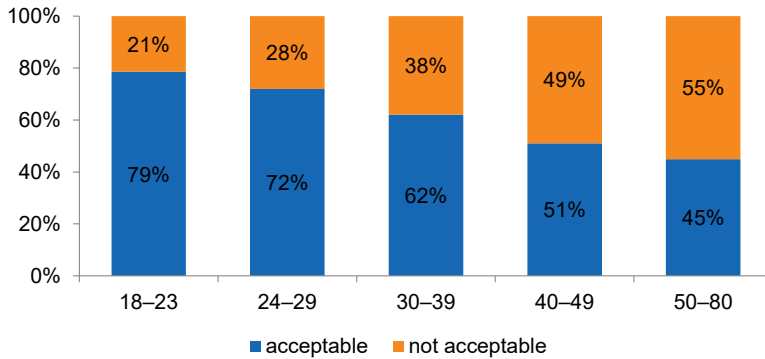


Figure 26. Acceptability of nonbinary *they* and age groups, $n=1086$

With nonbinary *they*, there was a clear trend in the responses based on the participants' age: more younger than older participants found *they* acceptable (Figure 26), as was expected. A similar trend was detected by Conrod (2019: 112), as older participants rated use of *they* with proper names much lower than younger participants. It may be that younger participants are simply more familiar with nonbinary as well as other novel uses of singular *they* (section 2.2.2). This result seems to reflect ongoing change (as per the Apparent Time hypothesis, e.g. Labov, 1994: 43–72), as also suggested by Conrod (2019: 90–92).

With the neopronouns, age was not a significant predictor. However, the data shows that 75% of the oldest age group rejected these pronouns, while there was no substantial difference between the other age groups (55%–62% of the participants in these age groups rejected neopronouns).

Political orientation

With political orientation, the data demonstrates that self-identified liberal participants more often accepted nonbinary pronouns than did conservative participants (Figure 27). However, political orientation was only included in the model for nonbinary *they*, and even then, the difference between liberal and conservative participants was border-line significant ($p=0.05$). This means that despite the considerable difference in the observed data, once controlling for other variables, the effect of political orientation is diminished. Further exploration indicated that particularly attitudes towards transgender individuals, as well as knowing transgender individuals, mediated the effect of

Acceptability of nonbinary pronouns

political orientation. Religious orientation, on the other hand, showed no particular effect in either model.

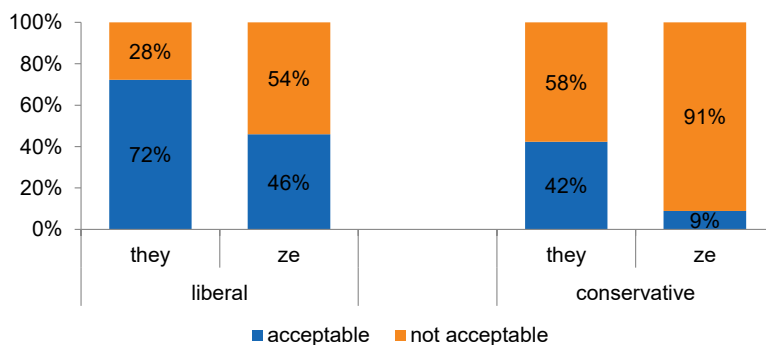


Figure 27. Acceptability of nonbinary *they* and *ze*, and political orientation. The 'other' category is excluded. *They* $n=1015$, *ze* $n=854$

Overall, the results highlight orientation towards transgender individuals as a significant factor for the acceptability of nonbinary pronouns. This is demonstrated by more positive attitudes towards transgender individuals supporting acceptance of nonbinary pronouns, as well as a similar effect with personally knowing transgender individuals. The participants' open answers further revealed more detailed reasons for either accepting or rejecting nonbinary (and generic) pronouns, as will be illustrated in the following chapter.

11 ATTITUDES TOWARDS PRONOUNS

Having discussed the quantitative results in the previous chapters, the focus now shifts to the qualitative data. This chapter explores the participants' attitudes towards both generic and nonbinary pronouns, while Chapter 12 focuses on the nonbinary participants' relationship with pronouns. No hypotheses were formed for the qualitative data; rather, the approach was explorative.

The main argument for both chapters is simple: pronouns matter. As discussed previously (Chapter 2), pronouns are often conceptualized as deriving their meaning from the context, thus lacking independent meaning of their own. However, the participants' open responses demonstrate that on top of their inherent properties (e.g. gender, number), pronouns can carry additional, more implicit meanings in specific uses, for example in terms of perceived inclusivity and connotations to particular user groups.

The focus of this chapter is on the results from the corpus-assisted thematic analysis used to explore the participants' attitudes towards pronouns. While the method was described already in section 6.2, in the following sections the nature of the data is first discussed briefly (section 11.1), followed by a description of the thematic hierarchy and an overview of the results (section 11.2) before presenting thematic fields for each pronoun separately in section 11.3. In the discussion section (11.4), the results from the thematic analysis are contrasted with several additional aspects.

11.1 THE DATA

The survey gathered about 138 000 words worth of qualitative data on the participants' responses to pronouns. Before discussing the results, a few notes regarding potential biases in the data are warranted. First, since all open-answer questions were optional, not all participants commented on each pronoun. Nevertheless, the majority of participants (n=921, 82%) did leave an open response to at least one of the pronouns.¹⁰¹

Second, as the participants were asked about their views on the different pronouns in the last section of the survey (part 7), the study design may have affected the quality of these responses. Indeed, the participants' responses reflect some of the different aspects brought up previously in the survey, particularly *(non)sexist language use* and *transgender rights*. In addition, *acceptability* was built into part 7 to guide the participants to think about this

¹⁰¹ To assess whether particular groups of participants are overrepresented in the qualitative data, demographic information between non-responding and responding participants was compared (e.g. age, gender, education). There were no considerable differences in this regard, and no group was grossly underrepresented.

aspect when leaving their open responses; hence, the responses reflect how the participants feel about the pronouns particularly in terms of acceptability.

Third, the qualitative data is derived from several sources in the survey form. The primary source is part 7 (Table 13), where the participants responded to open, optional questions about their views on specific pronouns. However, the participants also had a chance to react to the pronouns earlier in the survey form, in optional comment boxes. Relevant data from these comment boxes was included in the analysis as well, as a secondary source, coded alongside the part 7 responses (counted in the overall frequencies in Table 13). The main secondary source is Part 3 for the generic pronouns, and part 6 for the nonbinary pronouns. In addition, about 100 relevant comments for nonbinary and neopronouns were included from part 4.

Table 13. Number of open responses

Responses to pronouns.			
	P7 response	P3/P6 response	Responded to pronoun overall
<i>he</i>	632	215	681
<i>she</i>	585	220	641
<i>he or she</i>	536	143	563
singular <i>they</i>	286	41	388
generic <i>ze/xe</i>	490	211	566
nonbinary <i>they</i>	424	151	467
nonbinary <i>ze/xe</i>	587	136	634

Table 13 shows that most participants who left an open response in P3/P6 also did so in P7. This approach sometimes led to situations where the same participant was coded for seemingly contradictory views, as some participants expressed different views in different parts of the survey. There may be various reasons for such seemingly contradictory views; in some cases, responding to previous measures in the survey form may have affected subsequent responses. For example, when commenting on the acceptability of generic pronouns in part 3, the participant had not yet been confronted with questions relating to (non)sexist language use in part 4, which may have made the participant more aware of such issues when later commenting on the same pronoun in part 7. A few participants explicitly wrote that they had changed their opinion during the survey, but no widespread issue was detected. Most typically, the part 3 comments were shorter than the part 7 comments, but the content was approximately the same. For example, the participant might have reacted to *he* in part 3 by calling it *sexist*, and expanded on this view in part 7.

Last, the qualitative data is also characterized by some repetition. Some of the participants reused their response for several pronouns, for example responding the exact same way to generic *he* and *she*, or simply writing “as above” in subsequent questions. Some participants also made comments

about several pronouns under the same question. These responses were coded for the appropriate pronouns, regardless of where the original comment stemmed from. In addition, a few participants in part 3 made general comments about the conventional pronouns that could not be counted for any one pronoun (e.g. ‘it is wrong to use gendered pronouns in general statements’) and were excluded from the analysis. The sentiments were, however, already present elsewhere in the data, and since such general comments were infrequent, their exclusion is inconsequential. A similar problem concerned *ze* and *xe*, as sometimes it was not possible to distinguish whether the participant was referring to generic use or nonbinary use. As such, some uncertainty remains in this regard, but the effect on the main findings is minute.

11.2 OVERVIEW: THEMATIC HIERARCHY

The thematic analysis resulted in a hierarchical scheme, organized into main themes, themes, and subthemes (see below). While building such a framework was not the main goal for the present study, organizing the responses and categorizing them thematically helps with presenting and discussing the results, as well as seeing broader tendencies in the data.

An important feature of the analysis process is that one response could be coded for several subthemes, often representing different themes and main themes. Furthermore, while the analysis requires some delineations, this is not to suggest that the (sub)themes would all be independent of each other.¹⁰² Instead, the participants’ responses often demonstrated considerable complexity. For example, the same person may have expressed several somewhat contradictory, sometimes conditional views (e.g. ‘the usage is not acceptable now, but if it becomes more common, it might become acceptable’). In this sense, the coding process has erased some of the nuances, to an extent simplifying the data. This problem is mitigated by a more nuanced understanding of the data, reflected in the analysis; however, not all nuances or details can be adequately described with a large qualitative dataset. The focus is thus directed at the most frequent and/or otherwise meaningful findings. The thematic hierarchy is presented in Figure 28.

¹⁰² In addition, some of the subthemes might conceptually fit under several (main) themes, but since it was not meaningful to add to the complexity of the analysis, in such cases the subtheme was linked only to the best fitting (main) theme.

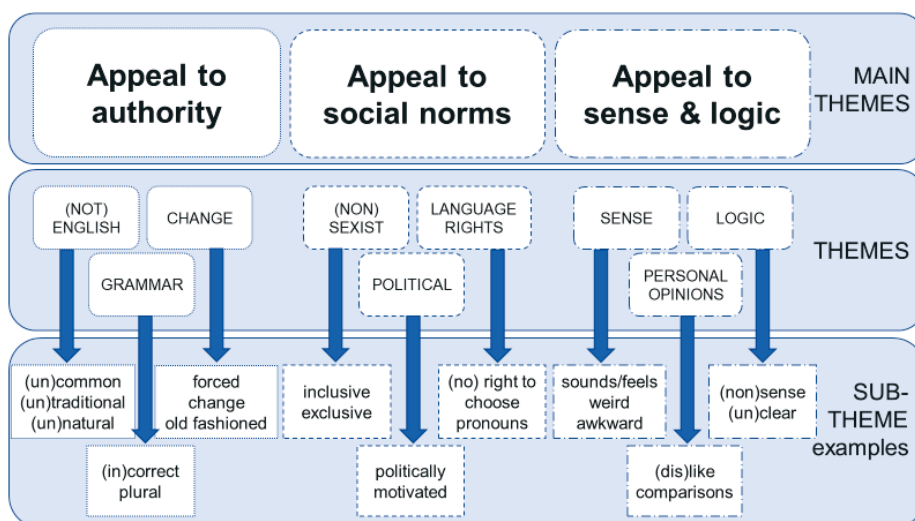


Figure 28. Thematic hierarchy

At the highest level, main themes govern lower level themes and subthemes. The main themes categorize the responses based on the type of argument the participants used: 1) **Appeal to authority**, 2) **Appeal to social norms** and 3) **Appeal to sense & logic**.¹⁰³ Middle level themes group together similar responses, further divided at the subtheme level in more detail. Importantly, Figure 28 only includes some examples of the numerous subthemes, while the main themes and themes are all included in Figure 28.

In more detail, the rationale at the main theme level is as follows. With **Appeal to authority**, the participants are seeking validation for their arguments from perceived language authorities.¹⁰⁴ Often, the reference to authority is straightforward, for example when the participants are describing a pronoun as “grammatically correct”, they are using (prescriptive) grammar as a source of authority; sometimes other authorities were referenced as well, including dictionaries and style guides. Other times, the authority is understood to be the imagined group of language users (i.e., native English speakers, possibly restricted to the participant’s own native variety). For example, some participants argued that nonbinary pronouns are unacceptable since they are so “uncommon”, or “untraditional”. The rationale is that language users (unconsciously) regulate language in their day-to-day use (e.g. Seargeant, 2007: 358), thus determining which new features are adopted, for example.

With the second main theme, **Appeal to social norms**, the participants are using social or cultural norms as the basis for their argument. For example, the participants often objected to using gendered generic pronouns as they

¹⁰³ Main themes are highlighted with bold, while themes are capitalized, and subthemes are italicized.

¹⁰⁴ While this category is borrowed from Blaubergs (1980) and Parks and Robertson (1998: 452), it has been further expanded to include “language users” as an imagined authority.

viewed these as “gender-exclusive” or “sexist”, hence appealing to gender-fair language use.

While the first two themes are characterized by seeking validation from external sources, with the third main theme, **Appeal to sense & logic**, the participants are more so appealing to internal sources; they are describing how the pronouns sound or feel, or whether the usage makes sense to them. Included under this main theme are also various more miscellaneous subthemes, grouped together loosely as PERSONAL OPINIONS. The themes are described in more detail below, along with typical examples for frequent, reoccurring subthemes.

11.2.1 Typical examples

The themes and common subthemes are described in this section to avoid unnecessary repetition when presenting and discussing the thematic fields further below. However, some pronoun-specific or infrequent subthemes are only discussed when presenting the thematic fields for each pronoun in section 11.3. Appendix E provides a complete list of subthemes with additional examples.

Starting with the main theme **Appeal to authority**, there are three themes: GRAMMAR, (NOT)ENGLISH, and CHANGE.

The GRAMMAR theme mostly includes comments about the pronoun usage being grammatically (in)correct, but similar notions of “technically correct” or just “incorrect” are included as well, along with infrequent “wrong” or “right” assessments. References to “bad grammar” are also included as *incorrect*. References to other language authorities such as style guidelines and dictionaries are included as *other authorities*. Included under GRAMMAR are also arguments about number and the *plural* nature of *they*.

(in)correct

(1) [*she*] “Again, this is grammatically correct but does not sound natural at all to me. I would naturally use ‘they’ here.” (P293, *correct, unnatural*)¹⁰⁵

(2) [[nonbinary *they*] “Sounds weird when saying it. Blatantly obvious that this is bad grammar.” (P917, *incorrect, weird*)

other authority

(3) [generic and nonbinary neopronouns] “I am familiar with these pronouns, but they are not English words, (do not appear in Collins English dictionary), they are superfluous and not required!!” (P164, *other authority, untraditional, no need*)

¹⁰⁵ The pronoun in brackets indicates to which pronoun the participant reacted, while the subtheme codes and participant ID are provided in parentheses after each excerpt.

they is plural

(4) [generic *they*] “In my mind 'they' implies plural and causes confusion when used otherwise, particularly in writing.” (P239, *plural, confusing*)

The (NOT)ENGLISH gathers notions of commonness, naturalness, and conventionality (represented by *traditional*), conveyed most often by the equivalent adjectives, but sometimes also by words like frequent (*common*), normal (*natural*), and conventional/established (*traditional*). At times the notion was also depicted with other means, for example the *common* category also includes descriptions of the participant expressing they have seen the pronoun often (example 6).

(un)common

(5) [*he*] “It's far from ideal but it's common usage so the intended meaning usually comes across.” (P258, *common, dislike*)

(6) [*he*] “I have seen this language use many times before, and I personally also feel it is an example of normal acceptable language use. (P231, *common*)

(un)natural

(7) [*he*] “It seems like natural language but I personally use 'they' when gender is unknown.” (P811, *natural, they is better*)

(8) [*she*] “Again, this is grammatically correct but does not sound natural at all to me. I would naturally use 'they' here.” (P293, *correct, unnatural, they is better*)

(un)traditional

(9) [*he*] “This is a [sic] established expression in English” (P271, *traditional*)

(10) [generic *they*] “Shouldn't be acceptable because it's not traditional, but it is very very common in my area and I've grown accustomed to it; it sounds right to me.” (P230, *untraditional, common*)

With nonbinary (neo)pronouns, there were also arguments about how these pronouns are *not real pronouns*. Included are also comments describing the neopronouns as artificial, invented or made-up.

not real pronouns

(11) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Artificial, not organic, forced. [...]” (P1025, *not real pronouns*)

(12) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Honestly, made-up pronouns like these seem ridiculous and petty to me. [...]” (P96, *not real pronouns*)

The CHANGE theme includes subthemes of two broad types: predictions or wishes for particular language change, and comments about outdatedness or restrictions in use.

The *old fashioned* includes descriptions such as archaic and outdated, and in fewer numbers, comments about how the pronoun is used by only “older people” (example 14).

old fashioned

(13) [*he*] “Seems archaic & excludes non-men. [...]” (P391, *old fashioned, exclusive*)

(14) [*he*] “I feel like this is more limited to older people. Younger people in my experience would use something like they.” (P422, *old fashioned*)

Comments more directly about language change were various, including the following subthemes: *should be avoided*, *won't catch on*, *should/might change*, *can't force language change* and *languages evolve*.

should be avoided

(15) [*he*] “I think it is sort of acceptable for people who do not realize that they are using exclusionary language, but we should try to make people pay attention to this issue and change it” (P640, *should be avoided, exclusive*)

(16) [*he or she*] “Currently acceptable but needs to change” (P515, *should be avoided*)

won't catch on

(17) [nonbinary *ze/x*e] “I've never heard these used and have a hard time imagining them catching on since 'they' is in wide use [...]” (P678, *won't catch on, unfamiliar*)

should/might change (to become acceptable/unacceptable)

(18) [generic *ze/x*e] “Acceptable but right now they are too unfamiliar outside queer contexts to be understandable to the general public. I would like to see them gain wider usage.” (P642, *should change*)

can't force language change

(19) [nonbinary *ze/x*e] “Forced and artificial. The vast majority of people would have no clue what that means. Language change should be natural.” (P327, *can't force change, weird, not real pronouns, not everyone understands*)

(20) [nonbinary *ze/x*e] “They are terribly forced pronouns and sound weird. Let language take its course instead of trying to force change.” (P739, *can't force change, weird*)

languages evolve

(21) [nonbinary *they*] “Not acceptable right now in my opinion, because that's [sic] kind of confusing, but language can evolve at it might be acceptable later.” (P74, *languages evolve, might change, confusing*)

The second main theme, **Appeal to social norms**, also comprises three themes: (NON)SEXIST, POLITICAL, and LANGUAGE RIGHTS.

The (NON)SEXIST theme includes comments relating to the perceived (non)sexist, exclusive/inclusive and gendered/nongendered nature of the pronouns, merged under the subthemes *exclusive/inclusive*, as this seemed to be the underlying reason for the comments. For example, using a gendered pronoun when referring to everyone is *exclusive*, or the usage is sexist because it is *exclusive*.

exclusive

(22) [both *he* and *she*] “Using just *he* or just *she* seems deliberately exclusive of others.” (P169, *exclusive*)

(23) [generic *they*] “To me, this is the most natural, and broadly inclusive usage.” (P207, *inclusive, natural, ideal*)

(24) [*he*] “‘*He*’ is a natural pronoun to refer to a generic unknown person or a group of people. [...]” (P23, *inclusive, natural*)

In addition, a separate subtheme was used for comments describing nonbinary pronouns as *gendered/marked*, as this was conceptually different from viewing some of the conventional generic pronouns as gendered. Included are a few comments about “othering” as well (example 26).

nonbinary pronouns are gendered/marked

(25) [generic *ze/xe*] “Unless I’m mistaken, this is for non-binary people only? [...]” (P191, *gendered/marked*)

(26) [nonbinary *they*] “Clear and concise but the ‘otherness’ may bother some people.” (P898, *gendered/marked*)

The POLITICAL theme includes comments indicating the usage is politically or ideologically loaded. Other subthemes are introduced in 11.3.

political (or ideological)

(27) [*she*] “Not established in English, conveys a sense of ideology embedded in the wording” (P271, *political, untraditional*)

(28) [generic *ze/xe*] “Politically charged, contrived, and a bit lame.” (P1110, *political, not real pronouns, weird*)

The LANGUAGE RIGHTS theme only relates to nonbinary pronouns and to the right to choose one’s own pronouns. This theme is polarized into two subthemes: *whatever is preferred* and *no need because (...)*. Commentators in the former subtheme view pronouns as a matter of personal choice, i.e. people have the right to choose how they are represented in language (examples 29–30). Comments in the *no need* category posit that nonbinary pronouns are not needed for various reasons: because *there are only two genders* (examples 32–33; including indications that one should use *he* or *she* with specific people, example 34), because *nonbinary identities are not valid*, or because *neopronouns are used by an insignificantly small minority* (example 35). The neopronouns were often viewed as unnecessary since *they already exists*

(example 31). These subthemes were coded separately, but they are connected by the same *no need* sentiment.

whatever is preferred

(29) [nonbinary *they*] “Rather let the person decide [what pronoun to use] if it is known they do not identify as male or female” (P236, *whatever is preferred*)

(30) [nonbinary *ze/xz*] “If that's what a person identifies as [,] sure” (P203, *whatever is preferred*)

no need because...

...there is they

(31) [nonbinary *ze/xz*] “I personally don't see the necessity, since 'they' is sufficient for all cases, but once again, I will attempt to defer to the preferences of the individual in question.”

...there are only two genders

(32) [nonbinary *they*] [unacceptable...] “Because they will either look female or male to me. I go by your appearance or presentation” (P915, *only two genders*)

(33) [nonbinary *ze/xz*] “Quite simply, there are two genders. One or the other.”

(34) [nonbinary *ze/xz*] “Think he or she alone should suffice” (P1145, *only two genders*)

... only a minority uses neopronouns

(35) [nonbinary *ze/xz*] “[...] in general I think that transgender people are too small a group for society at large to change it's [sic] language just to accommodate such a small group of people.” (P726, *minority, can't force change*)

... nonbinary identities are not valid (code: nonbinary negative)

In addition, the category *nonbinary identities are not valid* includes negative or even hateful comments about nonbinary individuals, such as viewing nonbinary identities as a result of a mental disorder or viewing nonbinary individuals as attention seekers. No detailed examples are provided here, since hateful comments against a minority need no further visibility. A few milder examples are provided in Appendix E.

The third main theme, **Appeal to sense & logic**, includes the SENSE and LOGIC themes, but also the more miscellaneous PERSONAL OPINIONS.

The LOGIC theme is characterized by comments appealing to comprehensibility, including indications that the usage is *confusing*, (*not understandable*), or simply *makes (no) sense*. The *confusing* subtheme also includes descriptions such as ambiguous, distracting, and unclear.

confusing(distracting)

(36) [generic *they*] “I feel as though if they is too easily confused with the plural meaning and serves to distract from the point.” (P903, *confusing*)

The subtheme *not everybody understands* also includes comments about how the pronoun is only used by a small group of people (example 39).

(not) everybody understands

(37) [*he*] “It is understood that 'he' is shorthand for 'he or she’” (P483, *everybody understands, inclusive*)

(38) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Maybe one day, but currently I don't think most people would have any idea what you were on about. [...]” (P66, *not everyone understands*)

(39) [generic *ze/xe*] “only used by fringe groups even weirder than *ze*” (P824, *not everyone understands*)

makes (no) sense

(40) [nonbinary *they*] “Makes sense, respectful, easy to accommodate in English. [...]” (P926, *makes sense*)

(41) [nonbinary *they*] “In this context the use of the word 'they' doesn't make sense, but I'm not sure why exactly.” (*no sense*)

Under the SENSE theme, there are only three subthemes: (*sounds/feels weird, wordy, and neopronouns sound like he and/or she*). The *weird* theme includes various descriptions, such as odd, strange, but also awkward, cumbersome, clunky and clumsy.¹⁰⁶

weird

(42) [*he or she*] “Acceptable but sounds overly verbose & awkward.” (P391, *weird/awkward, wordy*)

(43) [nonbinary *they*] “Sounds weird, but it would be better than one of the made up pronouns if they don't want to use he or she.” (P1027, *weird*)

Finally, the PERSONAL OPINIONS theme comprises a variety of different subthemes; only a few are mentioned here (for full list, see Appendix E). Mostly, the participants were expressing either *liking* or *supporting* the pronoun in question or expressing *dislike* (including milder variations such as “not ideal” or “not preferable” but also more hateful comments), or *personal avoidance*. Sometimes, the participants also indicated finding the usage

¹⁰⁶ While the notions of weirdness and unnaturalness are sometimes used to convey the same meaning, the distinction in this study is that the participants mostly seemed to use *unnatural* in the sense of “unidiomatic” or “not standard language”, while the *weird* comments generally seemed to lack this aspect. However, since some participants' responses offered no further elaborations, there is some conceptual overlap between these subthemes, as some *unnatural* comments could have been intended to mean *weird* and vice versa.

offensive, or *not offensive*; included are descriptions that convey a sense of “the usage does (not) bother me” (examples 46–47).

(44) [generic *ze/xe*] “I don't like the way they sound and they haven't been recognized by any means.” (P230, *dislike, untraditional*)

(45) [generic *they*] “This is my ideal usage and the one I always use.” (P1074, *ideal, personal preference*)

(46) [*he*] “It mildly irritates me. It's not difficult to use 'they' instead” (P233, *offensive, they is better*)

(47) [*he*] “Realistically, [acceptability] it's in between. It's not really right, but I'm never getting annoyed at it.” (P1121, *not offensive*)

11.2.2 Overall frequencies

While the data discussed in this chapter is inherently qualitative, the frequency of the different themes are still at times illustrative. In the following sections, the thematic fields for each pronoun are presented in quasi-quantified form as circle-packing charts. To allow for comparison across the different pronouns, Table 14 provides absolute frequencies at the theme level. In addition, absolute frequencies for each pronoun at the subtheme level are provided in Appendix B (Table 30–Table 36).

Table 14. Main themes and themes per pronouns. PERSONAL OPINIONS excluded as too heterogeneous. Darker shading highlights frequent themes

Main themes and themes per pronouns.								
	Appeal to authority			Appeal to social norms			Appeal to sense & logic	
	(NOT) ENGLISH	GRAMMAR	CHANGE	(NON) SEXIST	POLITICAL	LANGUAGE RIGHTS	SENSE	LOGIC
<i>he</i>	132	74	106	388	2	0	43	68
<i>she</i>	85	59	26	361	89	0	75	38
<i>he or she</i>	51	61	21	216	35	0	259	8
generic <i>they</i>	114	53	3	124	1	0	13	12
generic <i>ze/xe</i>	151	28	73	53	17	0	113	81
nonbinary <i>they</i>	41	153	13	20	3	100	99	103
nonbinary <i>ze/xe</i>	190	38	116	29	15	190	155	102

Overall, 921 participants commented on one or more of the pronouns. As the heatmap (Table 14) illustrates, there is considerable variation in theme frequencies across the different pronouns. The most frequent theme overall is the (NON)SEXIST theme, primarily concerning inclusivity of generic pronouns. Similarly, the LANGUAGE RIGHTS theme only concerns nonbinary pronouns, and the POLITICAL theme is most frequent with *she*. While there is more variation with the other themes, notable is that the GRAMMAR theme is most frequent with nonbinary *they*, and most of the CHANGE comments concern either *he* or the neopronouns.

11.3 THEMATIC FIELDS

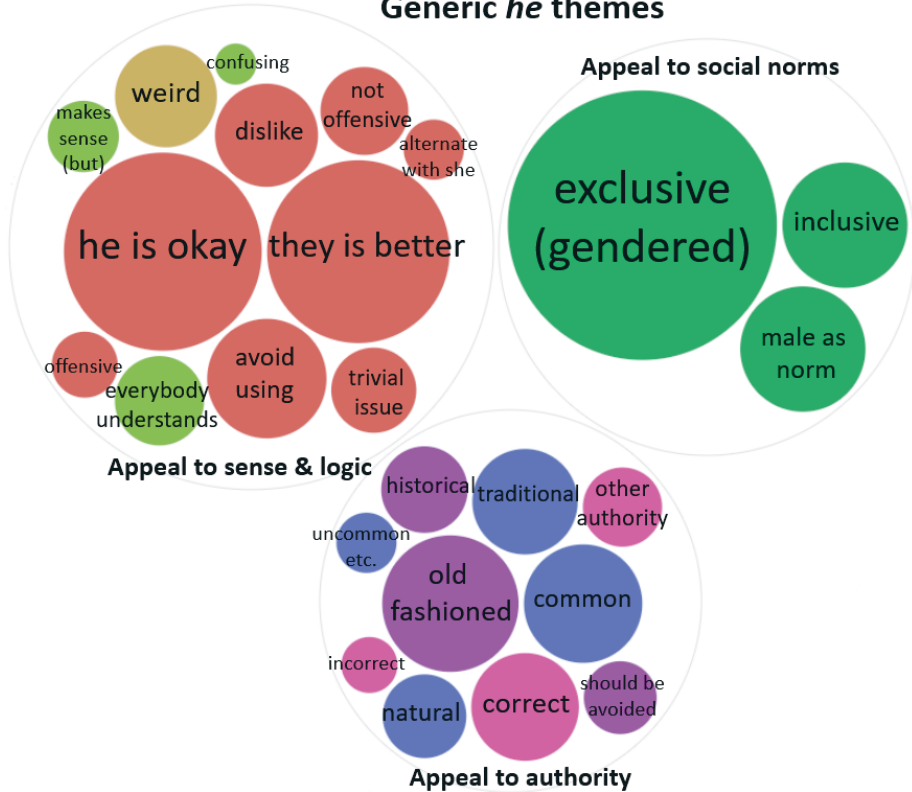
In this section, thematic fields for each pronoun are presented. The thematic fields are represented as circle-packing charts, created with RAWGraphs (Mauri et al., 2017). Each chart includes a selection of the most central subthemes for each pronoun. Additional examples of different subthemes are provided in Appendix E.

In each thematic field, the themes and subthemes are organized under the three main themes. Different colors are used to mark the themes while subthemes are represented by circle labels (see e.g. Figure 29). The size of the circles is relative to the frequency of the subtheme for each pronoun. Importantly, only rough visual comparisons can be made between thematic fields for different pronouns, because a different number of responses are included for each pronoun.

11.3.1 Generic pronouns

The thematic fields for *he* and *she* will be presented first (visualized in Figure 29 and Figure 30 respectively; absolute frequencies are provided in Appendix B, Table 30 and Table 31). These two pronouns will be discussed together, as the responses share many similarities, along with important differences.

Generic *he* themes



Appeal to sense & logic	Appeal to social norms	Appeal to Authority
LOGIC	(NON)SEXIST	GRAMMAR
SENSE	LANGUAGE RIGHTS	(NOT)ENGLISH
PERSONAL OPINIONS	POLITICAL	CHANGE

Figure 29. Thematic field for generic *he*

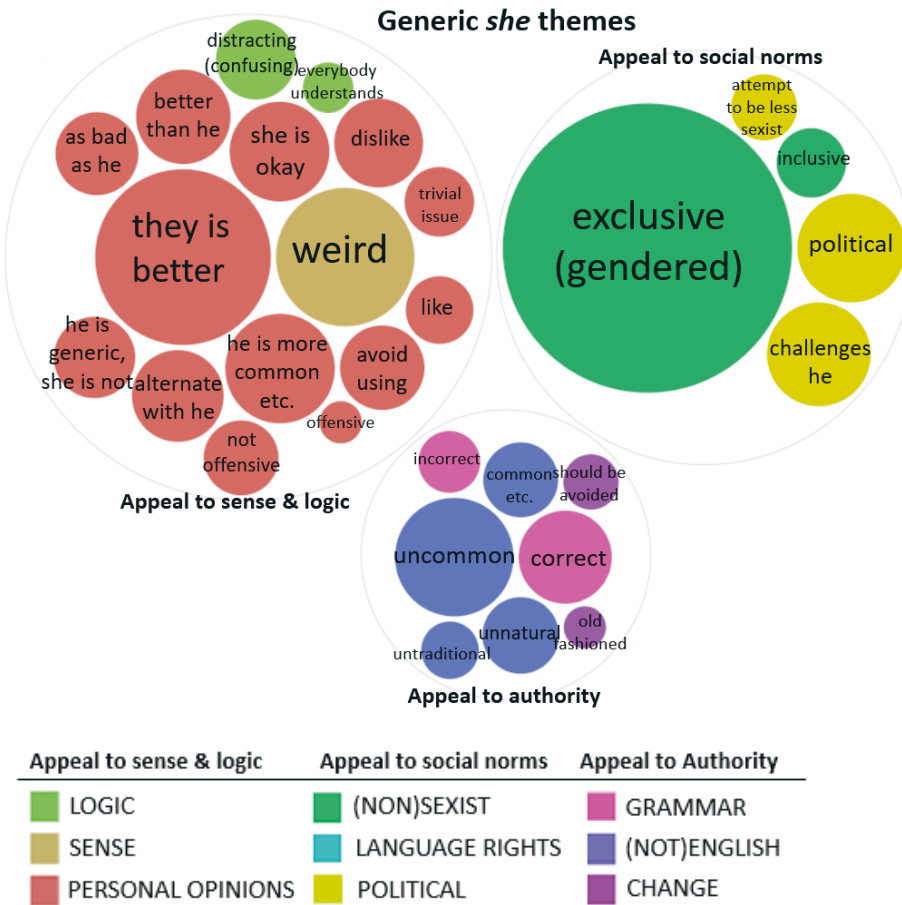


Figure 30. Thematic field for generic *she*

With the main theme **Appeal to social norms**, the (NON)SEXIST is a major theme among the responses to both *he* and *she*: for most participants these pronouns are strongly gendered and thus *exclusive*. However, there is a considerable difference in the balance of *inclusive* comments, which were notably more common for *he* than *she*. Additionally, some participants indicated that the usage was exclusive not only to cis females/males, but also to nonbinary individuals, sometimes stating so explicitly while other times using expressions like “other genders” or “non-male” to indicate a more extensive reference of gender (examples 1–2 below).

(1) [*she*] “Personally, I view it as more acceptable than solely using the male pronoun, because it doesn’t fall into the same patriarchal trap as the former and acknowledges that women may be referents. Nonetheless, it’s still cissexist in

that it doesn't acknowledge that nonbinary people may be.” (P1007, *exclusive, better than he*)

(2) [*he*] “I don't think this is acceptable due to how the word-choice appears to exclude any non-male.” (P886, *exclusive*)

A subtheme exclusive to *he* was viewing the usage to support *male as norm* ideology (including descriptions such as “patriarchal”, and “male default”).¹⁰⁷ For most participants, this was viewed as a negative trait (examples 3–4), while some participants were more indifferent (example 5).

(3) [*he*] “Male as the default pronoun seems very dated and slightly offensive to me as a woman, as though being male carries more significance.” (P270, *male as norm, old-fashioned, offensive*)

(4) [*he*] “I don't believe it's acceptable because it implies a masculine gender default. This reinforces neural connections in our brain to defaulting to thinking about men when someone's gender is unknown or unspecified.” (P297, *male as norm*)

(5) [*he*] “It's not acceptable, but as a woman I am so used to it that it barely registers to me unless pointed out.” (P242)

Yet, for some participants, their personal view on the matter weighed less than what they imagined to be the public opinion. In example 6 below, the participant demonstrates recognizing several aspects affecting the acceptability of *he*. Despite acknowledging that *he* supports a ‘harmful male as norm ideology’, for this participant, another aspect overrides this assessment: the perceived authority of language users, who this participant thinks find epicene use of *he* acceptable.

(6) [*he*] “I consider it acceptable because it is so common and has a long history of being used that way. We live in a patriarchal society and male is considered default, neutral, unmarked, and female is considered the Other. I personally avoid using 'he' in this manner because it enforces that idea of male-as-default and it is a harmful idea. But since language is an agreed upon system, and many people agree that this usage is correct, I can't justify finding it incorrect from a linguistic point of view.” (P697, *male as norm, common, traditional, avoid, correct*)

Notably, no POLITICAL comments were directed at *he*. Instead, such comments concerned the use of generic *she*, which was perceived as making a political statement, often associated with feminist and/or liberal views (examples 7 and 8). With many of these comments, the implication was that using language for political purposes is not desirable.

¹⁰⁷ The *male as norm* subtheme could also be conceptualized under the POLITICAL theme, but the (NON)SEXIST theme was deemed more relevant.

Attitudes towards pronouns

(7) [*she*] “It's something that only a strident feminist would use to make a statement.” (P686, *political*)

(8) [*she*] “This is commonly used by women authors. It sounds vaguely feminist because women use it to resist against using 'he' pronouns as a default.” (P758, *political, challenges he*)

In addition, some participants noted that the use of *she* was an *attempt to be less sexist*, for example by describing it as *politically correct* (example 9). However, many of these comments did not view this use of *she* as successful in terms of being less sexist. Yet there were still many participants who welcomed generic *she* as a way to *challenge he* (examples 8, 10 11), including comments about *she* (counter)balancing *he*. One commentator stands out for a particularly strong view on the matter: generic *she* should be normalized and used as the default pronoun to compensate for the time that *he* has been used as the default (example 11).

(9) [*she*] “It's fine but it immediately comes across as a political, PC move. Especially when used in academic contexts. I prefer 'they' over 'she' and 'he' in situations like this.” (P525, *attempt to be less sexist, they is better*)

(10) [*she*] “I say this is acceptable only because it seems to balance out the use of 'he'. [...]” (P357, *challenges he*)

(11) [*she*] “I think that 'she' should be normalized as the acceptable generic singular pronoun. During the normalization process, the contrast/subversion of the prior use of 'he' would have a positive effect on the status as women as internalized by English speakers. After the pronoun is normalized, it would continue to 'make up' for the time in which 'he' was the default.” (P699, *challenges he*)

With the GRAMMAR theme (**Appeal to authority**), generally, both *he* and *she* were described as *correct* more often than *incorrect*. In addition, with *he*, some participants also made appeals to *other authorities*. Most commonly, the participants explained that they had been taught to use *he* as an epicene at school or otherwise (example 12). Included are also references to dictionaries, and even one reference to research (example 13). However, the (*in*)*correct* comments, and in fewer numbers some of the appeals to *other authorities*, were often followed by a “but”, for example “correct but exclusive” or “common but incorrect”. Such comments demonstrate that perceived correctness is not always the only factor when considering the acceptability of a pronoun.

(12) [*he*] “It's common. I've gotten used to it since elementary school, it's something that is widely taught and therefore has become neutral to me.” (P614, *common, inclusive, other authority*)

(13) [*he*] “It's not acceptable because past research has shown that women reading this statement take longer to do sentence comprehension compared to men.” (P1012, *exclusive, other authority*)

The (NOT)ENGLISH theme shows considerable differences for *he* and *she*: whereas *he* was frequently described to be *common*, *traditional*, and *natural*, *she* was more often viewed to be *uncommon*, *untraditional*, and *unnatural*. This difference is undoubtedly due to the different backgrounds the two pronouns have, generic *he* having been used much more frequently and for much longer in epicene contexts than generic *she*. While many participants commented on the *natural* and *traditional* nature of *he*, there were also a few participants who made more detailed comments, explaining that using the masculine as the unmarked form is just a normal part of language (examples 14–15). A few participants showed support for using masculine forms as epicenes in other ways (16).

(14) [*he*] “It is how the language has formed. There are languages that give genders to inanimate objects. We use the masculine as a neutral.” (P425, *traditional*, *inclusive*)

(15) [*he*] “Just like in the other major languages substantially derived from Latin, a mixed-gender group takes male pronouns.” (P1009, *appeal to other authority*)

(16) [*he*] “I’m a female and I don’t care that ‘he’ is generalized for males and females. We are mankind.” (P220, *inclusive*)

However, not all participants supported *he*: many described the usage as *old fashioned* (example 17), or only fit for *historical* or idiomatic contexts, the latter two merged as one subtheme (examples 18–19). Relating to such comments, some participants also indicated the usage *should be avoided*. *Old fashioned* and *should be avoided* comments were directed at *she* as well, although less frequently.

(17) [*he*] “Old fashioned. The norm in the past and deemed acceptable, socially and grammatically as a result of that” (P67, *old fashioned*)

(18) [*he*] “For certain idioms I recognize they come out of historical contexts (e.g. national anthems that are hundreds of years old). [...]” (P855, *historical*)

(19) [*he*] “Acceptable when forming a part of a set phrase [...]” (P648, *historical*)

Under the third main theme, **Appeal to sense & logic**, there are some obvious differences between *he* and *she* as well. With the SENSE theme, *she* received many more *weird* comments than *he*. Similarly, falling under the LOGIC theme, *she* was also more often described as *distracting (confusing)*,¹⁰⁸ sometimes specified that it is the *political* connotation that causes the distraction (example 20).

¹⁰⁸ The subtheme labels are chosen based on which notion best describes the subtheme for each pronoun. With *she*, the *distracting* comments were more frequent than *confusing* comments, hence the switch in the label.

(20) [*she*] “[...] because he/his is so much more common than she/her it comes across as specifically making a feminist point and can distract from the subject actually being discussed.” (P277, *distracting(confusing), political*)

In contrast to *she*, *he* was more often characterized as understandable (*everyone understands*), or as *making sense*, even if at times followed by other objections (example 21).

(21) [*he*] “While I will understand what is meant and accept it, it does bother me a little bit.” (P662, *makes sense (but), offensive*)

Both pronouns also gathered a variety of comments categorized as PERSONAL OPINIONS. Most often the participants indicated that there is a better option available: singular *they*. In addition, the participants expressed various stances towards *he* and *she*. The participants also made explicit comparisons between the pronouns, most often supporting the epicene nature of *he* while rejecting *she* (examples 22–23 below). Such comments are included in the subthemes *he is generic, but she is not*,¹⁰⁹ and *he is more common/natural/traditional than she*.

(22) [*she*] “She is not generically used (like 'he' is) to refer to an unknown person” (P131, *he is generic but she is not, exclusive*)

(23) [*she*] “This has to do with the tradition of using the language. Using 'she' draws attention to the gender whereas 'he' includes everyone. For me 'he' is gender-neutral in such a context.” (P1053, *he is generic but she is not, he is more traditional than she, exclusive*)

Importantly, while the *he is okay* and *she is okay* subthemes¹¹⁰ imply greater support for *he*, when also considering the *better than he* and explicit *like* comments with *she*, there is hardly any difference in the support shown for the two pronouns. However, the *dislike* comments were somewhat more frequent for *he* than for *she*. *He* was also more frequently found to be *offensive*, but both pronouns also gathered *not offensive* comments. One participant also saw a connection to a broader tendency to assume maleness (example 24).

(24) [*he*] “Most people assume it's a man, especially online, so it's not offensive.” (P501, *not offensive*)

In addition, some participants considered *she to be just as bad as he*, while others felt *she* should be used (only) in alternation with *he*. Considerably fewer participants made such remarks with *he*.

¹⁰⁹ The subtheme uses the term generic in the meaning of epicene; generic is used in the subtheme label since this is the word the participants used.

¹¹⁰ The subthemes *he is okay* and *she is okay* function as umbrella categories for various comments with this sentiment, including many of the *common*, *natural* and *traditional* comments, hence there is overlap with the (NOT)ENGLISH theme.

Some participants also reacted to *he* and *she* by indicating that generic pronoun use is a *trivial issue*,¹¹¹ sometimes making comments about how the surrounding context matters more (example 25), or how other problems are more important (example 26).

(25) [*he*] “It's clear what the text means. The 'he/she/they' part isn't really important, because you're clearly talking about *the average person* which includes ALL genders.” (P727, *trivial issue*)

(26) [*he*] “Even though I'm a feminist, I do not mind the universal He when describing all people. There are bigger fish to fry.” (P1024, *trivial issue*)

However, overall, the *trivial* comments were less frequent than expected (cf. Blaubeurgs, 1980). On the contrary, the present study demonstrates that generic pronouns matter greatly to many people.

While many of the themes that were present for *he* and *she* were found in the responses to *he or she* as well (Figure 31; absolute frequencies are provided in Table 32, Appendix B), the quantity and quality is different. Fewer participants responded to *he or she* than to either solo pronoun, indicating the usage is perceived as less problematic; the quality of the comments further show that *he or she* is generally less controversial than using either binary pronoun in generic contexts.

¹¹¹ This subtheme has been adopted from Blaubeurgs (1980) and Parks and Robertson (1998a: 452-453).

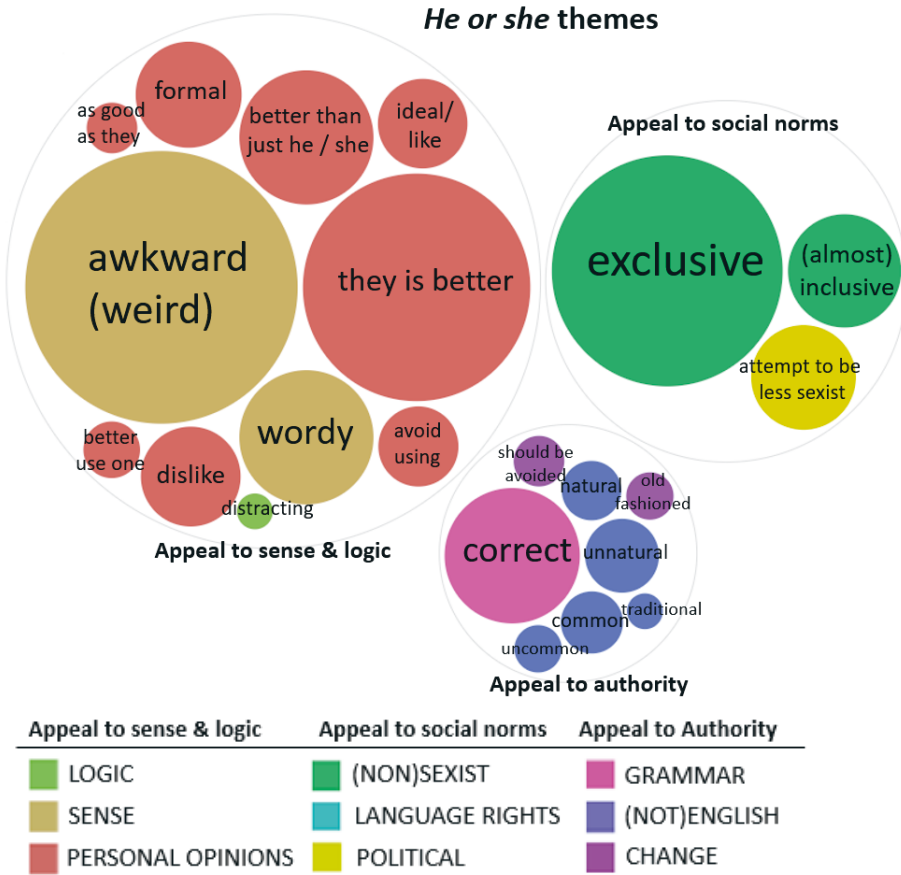


Figure 31. Thematic field for he or she

Under the **Appeal to social norms** main theme, comments about inclusivity were frequent again. Importantly, with *he or she*, the *exclusive* comments can only be interpreted as exclusive to nonbinary individuals. On the other hand, many of the *inclusive* comments conveyed that even though *he or she* is not inclusive of everyone, it is inclusive of the majority of people, which was considered adequate (examples 27–29). Fewer participants felt like *he or she* included nonbinary individuals as well (example 30).

(27) [*he or she*] “covers the vast majority of society, acceptable, not preferable.” (P123, *(almost) inclusive, dislike*)

(28) [*he or she*] “Covers such a vast majority of the population as to be acceptable for usage; they would be better though” (P426, *(almost) inclusive, they is better*)

(29) [*he or she*] “It’s generally reasonable to assume that people are going to be male or female. If a person has preferred pronouns they can let me know and I’ll use them from then on” (P168, *(almost)inclusive*)

(30) [*he or she*] “This is inclusive of all, including transgender and non-binary.” (P223, *inclusive*)

Under the POLITICAL theme, similar to *she*, many participants recognized *he or she* as an *attempt to be less sexist* (example 31), sometimes describing this usage as “politically correct” (example 32). Again, for some commentators the perceived political correctness with this use was a negative trait.

(31) [*he or she*] “Acceptable. It is more indicative that the speaker is going out of their way to be inclusive but is often awkward in practice” (P388, *attempt to be less sexist, awkward*)

(32) [*he or she*] “This is the preferred form, since it is both grammatically and politically correct.” (P807, *attempt to be less sexist, correct*)

The **Appeal to authority** main theme was not very frequent with *he or she*. One notable difference is that while *he* and *she* elicited a mix of *correct* and *incorrect* responses, *he or she* was unanimously viewed as *correct* (despite having other more negative features, such as *wordiness*). The other subthemes under this main theme were not frequent; a handful of participants felt that the construction *should be avoided*, while a few others deemed it *old fashioned*. Roughly equally few participants described the usage as *unnatural/uncommon* and *common/natural/traditional*.

The SENSE and PERSONAL OPINION subthemes under **Appeal to sense & logic** were frequent for *he or she*, while the LOGIC theme includes only a handful of *distracting (confusing)* comments. Most notably, almost half of the commentators described *he or she* as *awkward*, *clunky*, or *clumsy* (and in fewer numbers, *weird*, included in the same subtheme). The prevalence of this subtheme is not surprising, as the construction is frequently described as such in other contexts as well (e.g. examples in Curzan, 2003: 77). In a related fashion, others described the construction as too *wordy*; included are descriptions such as long, verbose and complicated (examples 33–34). However, neither awkwardness or wordiness was a reason to reject the use.

(33) [*he or she*] “Ita [sic] unnecessary and longer than it needs to be to get context across” (P167, *wordy*)

(34) [*he or she*] “This sounds fine to me. 'He or she' is long but I think it is actually nicer than just 'he' or just 'she' or an awkward switching between the two.” (P293, *wordy, better than just he/she*)

Some participants further specified that *he or she* is *awkward* in speech, the implication being that the construction is at least less *awkward* in writing. Connected to this, other participants viewed *he or she* as *formal*, often expressed to be only fit for written language (examples 35–36).¹¹² The

¹¹² It is acknowledged that formal and written language are not the same, but the participants seemed to be using these descriptions as near-synonyms.

formality aspect was not frequently brought up with *he* and *she*, but as will be shown below, singular *they* was sometimes viewed as *informal*.

(35) [*he or she*] “It’s too formal for most speech.” (P1139, *formal*)

(36) [*he or she*] “I generally would only find this acceptable in formal writing” (P619, *formal*)

The responses to *he or she* also included implications of *dislike* and personally *avoiding using he or she*. Somewhat fewer participants expressed *liking* the usage or even finding it *ideal* (merged as one subtheme). While only about a dozen participants thought that using only one of the binary pronouns would be better than using both, quite a few expressed the opposite, finding *he or she* better than using only *he* or *she*. Again, most often the participants still felt that using *they* is better; only a dozen participants felt that *he or she* was *good as they*.

Last, *she or he* was generally viewed to be more *uncommon*, *untraditional*, and *weirder* than *he or she*.

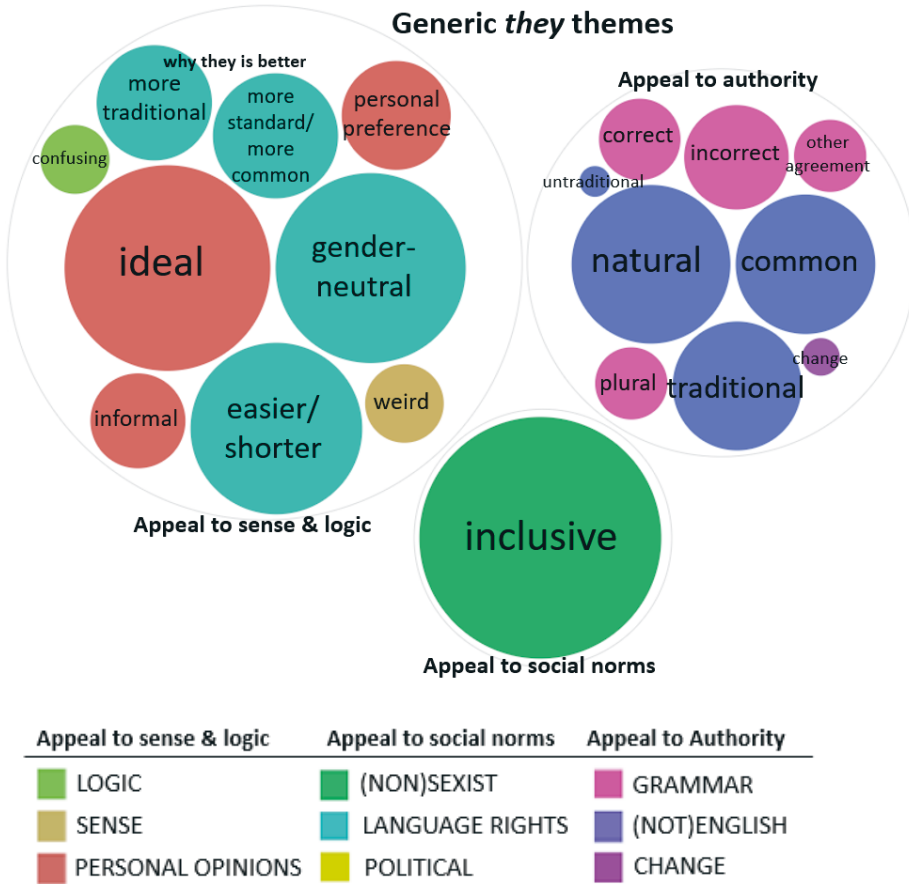


Figure 32. Thematic field for generic singular *they*

Generic singular *they* gathered the least open responses from the participants. The reason seems clear: the use of singular *they* as a generic pronoun is rather unanimously accepted and there is little controversy associated with the usage (Figure 32; absolute frequencies are provided in Appendix B, Table 33).

First, as has been evident from the previous thematic fields, the participants often conveyed that *they is better* than the other generic pronouns. In Figure 32, the reasons for considering singular *they* to be better are grouped together, represented in turquoise circles (*why they is better*); these comments were derived from the responses to the other generic pronouns. Importantly though, the *gender-neutral* comments¹¹³ from elsewhere were double-coded under *inclusive*, and the *more traditional* comments were similarly double-coded under the (NOT)ENGLISH *traditional* subtheme. This is to show overall frequency as well as the quality of *they is better* comments derived from the other generic pronouns.

Generally, the participants felt singular *they is more traditional, standard* and *common* than the other options. Singular *they* was also preferred since it is *gender-neutral*, and it is *easier/shorter* than *he or she*, which for many participants was *inclusive*.

The same features are also highlighted in the direct responses to generic singular *they*: the pronoun is viewed to be *inclusive* (**Appeal to social norms**, (NON)SEXIST), *natural, common* and *traditional* (**Appeal to authority**, (NOT)ENGLISH). In addition, some participants referenced the long history of using singular *they*, for example by naming famous authors who have used singular *they* as well (examples 37–38).¹¹⁴

(37) [generic *they*] “Singular they has been used since before Shakespeare's time, and anyone who says it's ungrammatical is a) ignoring hundreds of years of history, and b) prioritizing being pedantic over the existence of trans and nonbinary people” (P584, *traditional*)

(38) [generic *they*] “I believe singular 'they' is by far the best option the English language has for this situation. It's inclusive of every gender. It has been in use for hundreds of years, by revered authors like Chaucer and Shakespeare. Native speakers intuitively know how it functions, and I assume it's easier for most non-native speakers to pick up than neo-pronouns. [...]” (P607, *traditional, inclusive, ideal*)

Furthermore, while comments about the *traditional* nature of singular *they* were frequent, comments about *change* were not.¹¹⁵ The other comments

¹¹³ While elsewhere I have avoided using “gender-neutral”, the participants used this description, hence it was chosen as the subtheme label.

¹¹⁴ This defense tactic seems to be commonly employed in other contexts as well, such as public (online) discussions (e.g. Roche, 2015).

¹¹⁵ Two of these responses were categorized as *languages evolve* and one was a general comment about how it is difficult to make changes in language, hence it is better to use singular *they* than the neopronouns.

under **Appeal to authority** concern grammatical correctness and number agreement. Some participants made comments conveying that *they* is an inherently *plural* pronoun, however, this was typically not a reason to reject the pronoun. The *other agreement* comments also relate to the perceived number of *they*, but the difference is these commentators made explicit references to (subject-verb) agreement issues, instead of only describing *they* as a plural pronoun (examples 39). Only very few participants rejected singular *they* due to the perceived agreement issues (example 40).

(39) [generic *they*] “I won't nag people about it if they use it, but plural pronouns should not be used for singular persons.” (P1044, *other agreement*)

(40) [generic *they*] “It grates my nerves because I am an editor by profession and have a journalism degree with an English minor. Subjects and verbs must agree in number! That's one of the main rules of English grammar (and most other Romance languages [sic] as far as I know).” (P1014, *other agreement, incorrect, other authority*)

The support for generic singular *they* is further highlighted by the quality of the subthemes under **Appeal to sense & logic**: many participants indicated that singular *they* is the *ideal* generic pronoun; included are comments about personal preference. Only a few participants described the use as *weird* or *confusing*, however, some participants considered singular *they* as *informal*, best fit for spoken contexts (unlike *he or she*, which was found to be *formal* and fitting for written contexts).¹¹⁶

Unlike with singular *they*, the participants had a lot to say about the generic neopronouns, as is illustrated in Figure 33 (for absolute frequencies, see Appendix B, Table 34). The reactions to the nonbinary neopronouns were very similar, discussed in the following section.

¹¹⁶ Similarly, some of LaScotte's participants also viewed *he or she* more appropriate for formal and singular *they* for informal contexts (2016: 69-72).

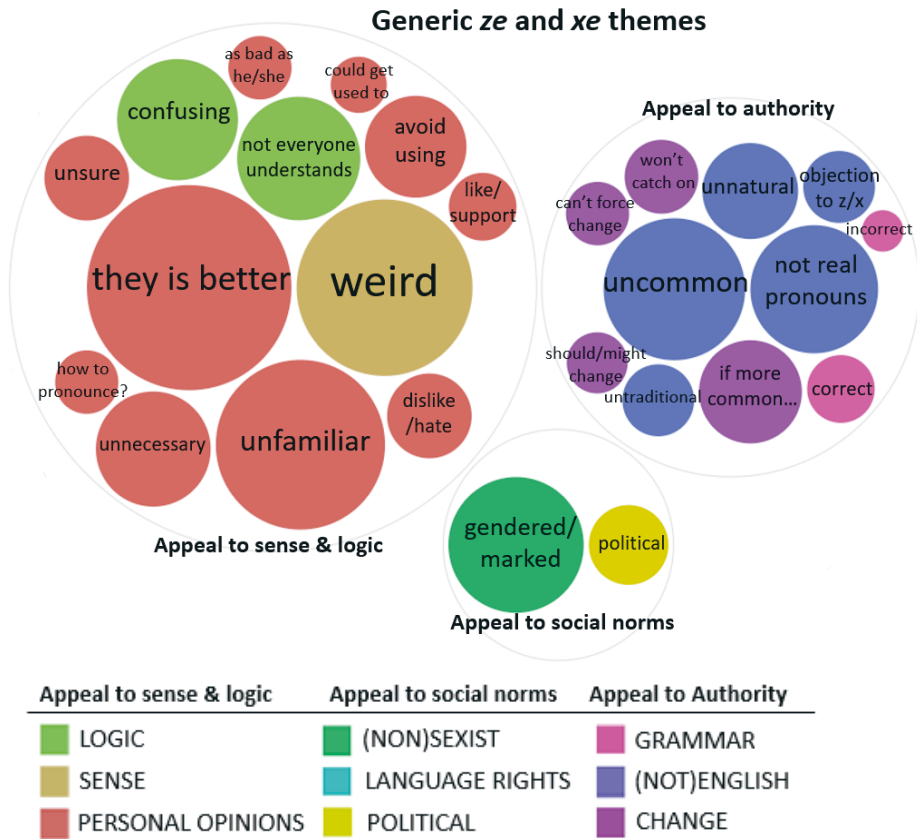


Figure 33. Thematic field for generic ze and xe

With the main theme **Appeal to authority**, the neopronouns were generally viewed to be “not English”. The pronouns were frequently described as *unnatural*, *untraditional*, and *uncommon*. In addition, many participants felt that neopronouns are *not real pronouns* at all, including descriptions such as “artificial”, “invented” or “made up” pronouns (examples 42–43). Frequent were also objections to the initial consonants, which were perceived as “alien” or “foreign” to English (example 41).

(41) [generic ze/xe] “A much better idea but i think ze and xe sound like characters from a bad science fiction film.” (P213, *objection to z and x*)

(42) [generic ze/xe] “These are not pronouns.” (P832, *not real pronouns*)

(43) [generic ze/xe] “They sound unnatural and are artificially created words. They have not been naturally created by speakers as a solution to an issue.” (P250, *not real pronouns*)

Despite not being considered as part of English, some participants did consider *ze* and *xe* to be technically or grammatically *correct*, however, such comments were almost always followed by some other objection (example 44).

(44) [generic *ze/xe*] “I’d accept the use of the gender neutral pronoun as correct grammar, but it doesn’t feel like natural usage.” (P1015, *correct but*)

The CHANGE comments further reflect the unestablished status of the neopronouns. This theme includes comments predicting the direction of change (*won’t catch on, should/might change*) as well as assessments about how language change should not be forced. The *can’t force change* subtheme is characterized by a belief that language change should happen naturally instead of being forced (examples 45–46). In other words, languages are conceptualized to change as a result of (unconscious) changes in use, whereas explicitly introducing and advocating for new pronouns is experienced as “forcing change”. While this subtheme was not very frequent, many of the commentators seemed to feel strongly about the subject (examples 45–46). Included in this subtheme are also a handful of comments describing pronouns as a closed class, the implication being that new pronouns cannot or should not be introduced (example (47)).

(45) [generic *ze/xe*] “They are terribly forced pronouns and sound weird. Let language take its course instead of trying to force change.” (P739, *can’t force change*)

(46) [generic *ze/xe*] “It’s not in regular use and while I think that language does and can and should change over time, I don’t think language change can be forced. It takes time for language to evolve [...]” (P826, *can’t force change*)

(47) [generic *ze/xe*] “Pronouns are a closed class in English so these are really odd. I’ve only ever heard them encouraged by (not used by) people who are militant in their gender equality. I think part of the problem with these too is their initial consonant, which is not that common initially in English” (P286, *can’t force change; also objection to z and x*)

In a related fashion, quite many participants left comments along the lines of *if neopronouns were more common, then they would be acceptable*, indicating that the change needs to take place before the pronoun can be considered acceptable. Included are also other similar sentiments, such as being able to get used to new pronouns if they become more common (example 48).

(48) [generic *ze/xe*] “Again weird, but I’m old. If becomes part of common lexicon I’m sure I’ll get used to it.” (P429, *if more common, ..., weird, could get used to*)

With the **Appeal to social norms** there are two frequent subthemes with the generic neopronouns: considering the pronouns to be *gendered/marked*, and finding the usage *political*. Typical *gendered/marked* comments include examples 49–51.¹¹⁷ Some of these participants were also making comparisons

¹¹⁷ Less than a dozen participants referenced the neopronouns as “gender-neutral”, not included in the thematic fields as infrequent.

to *he* and *she*, for example by conveying that the neopronouns are *just as bad as he/she* (example 51).

(49) [generic *ze/xe*] “[...] unlike 'they' which is broader, 'ze' and 'xe' do seem more like they refer specifically to non-binary people. [...]” (P251, *gendered/marked*)

(50) [generic *ze/xe*] “I normally associate *ze* and *xe* with a specific person who identifies as those pronouns [...]” (P553)

(51) [generic *ze/xe*] “*Xe* and *ze* are like *he* and *she*” (P203, *gendered/marked, as bad as he/she*)

Indeed, some participants felt that the neopronouns could not have double-agency as both nonbinary and epicene pronouns (examples 52–54); even participants who accepted neopronouns as a person’s chosen pronouns sometimes rejected their use as in epicene contexts, for the same reason as with (other) gendered pronouns. Such explicit comments are revealing, but they were not frequent enough to code separately from the *gendered/marked* subtheme.

(52) [generic *ze/xe*] “[...] People who would use 'ze' and 'xe' have probably made an individual choice to use these pronouns, so I don't think it's acceptable to use them when making general statements. [...]” (P364)

(53) “I'm fine with neopronouns but they shouldn't be used in general statements” (P555)

(54) “The use of 'third gender' pronouns *ze/xe* is no more acceptable for a generic person than *he/she* would be. [...]” (538)

Similar to generic *she*, the use of neopronouns was perceived to be *politically* motivated by some participants, but it was typically not further specified what agenda the neopronouns might serve. What was clear from the responses though was that neopronouns are associated with (extreme) liberal views (examples 55–56). With only very few exceptions (example 57), the political connotation was considered a negative feature.

(55) [generic *ze/xe*] “Great way to look like someone who is spending too much time on fringe-political websites and groups” (P108, *political*)

(56) [generic *ze/xe*] “Sounds like stupid and artificial SJW crap” (P848, *political; also weird, not real pronouns*)¹¹⁸

(57) [generic *ze/xe*] “Acceptable but kind of weird? Not a lot of people would understand. I respect the political statement it makes though.” (P762, *political, weird, not everyone understands*)

¹¹⁸ SJW is an acronym for “social justice warrior”, a negatively loaded term used for activists promoting social justice that “have gone too far” and are viewed as “nonsensical”. The term has also been reclaimed by some activists as a label for self-identification.

The most frequent main theme for the neopronouns is **Appeal to sense & logic**. As with the gendered generic pronouns, many participants expressed a preference for singular *they*. Particularly with the neopronouns, though, the participants were making comments about how these pronouns are *unnecessary because singular they already exists*. For these participants, and likely for many others, there is no pronominal gap to be filled, as has been suggested previously (e.g. discussed by Newman, 1997: 447–454). In contrast, only a handful of participants expressed that generic neopronouns could be, if not the ideal, then at least a decent alternative, expressed in the *like/support* comments (examples 58–59), as well as the *could get used to* comments (example 60).

(58) [generic *ze/xe*] “I think this is a really great way to make language more efficient and clear.” (P1014, *like/support*)

(59) [generic *ze/xe*] “I think they would be easier for people to understand, but I fully support the normalisation of new(er) gender neutral pronouns” (P546, *like/support*)

(60) [generic *ze/xe*] “Again, I just heard of these today, so they sound really weird to me. I would be down with getting used to using them, though.” (P1057, *could get used to, weird, unfamiliar*)

Considerably more participants felt neopronouns are *weird*, and many expressed *dislike*, in some cases quite strongly (*hate*), towards the pronouns. With the *weird* comments there was also a notable change in the quality of comments, exemplified by the addition of *ridiculous* to the participants’ descriptions (examples 61–62).

(61) [generic *ze/xe*] “Absolutely ridiculous. I could never take someone seriously if *xe* speaks like this.” (P839, *weird/ridiculous*)

(62) [generic *ze/xe*] “Ridiculous, I don't agree with it at all. I will never say the word *ze* or *xe* in my life.” (P866, *weird/ridiculous, avoid using*)

(63) [generic *ze/xe*] “‘Ze’ and ‘Xe’ are hyperpoliticized. I don't view them as natural and would refuse to use them, even if mandated to do so.” (P863, *avoid using; also political*)

In addition, none of the participants indicated having used neopronouns in generic contexts themselves, but quite many conveyed the opposite, that is, that they would *avoid using* neopronouns (examples 62–64 above). A few participants expressed this aspect very strongly, even declaring that they would not use these pronouns even if mandated to do so (example 64 above).

The resistance to neopronouns is likely partly explained by some participants simply being *unfamiliar* with neopronouns (example 60 above), which for some participants meant they were *unsure* how they felt about these pronouns. Similarly, the participants were also wondering *how to pronounce* the neopronouns, which was often seen as a disadvantage for the pronouns.

Finally, the LOGIC theme includes two dominant and related subthemes: *confusing* and *not everyone understands*. While the confusing comments were found with singular (nonbinary and generic) *they* and *she* as well, the reasoning the participants used seems to be different. The commentators with *they* were mostly concerned with the use being *confusing* since the pronoun could refer to some other, plural antecedent, and with *she* some felt the use was *distracting* due to being *uncommon* or *political*. In contrast, the participants generally found the neopronouns to be *confusing* because the reader would not recognize *ze* and *xe* as pronouns at all. Indeed, in part 3, where the acceptability of generic neopronouns was tested, instead of marking the pronouns acceptable or not, many participants just responded by expressions such as “who is ze? Who is xe?” Similarly, the participants were also making comments about how the neopronouns are problematic, because *not everyone understands* what they mean, since they are only used by a small minority of language users (example 64).

(64) [generic *ze/xe*] “They aren't used outside of niche instances, so most people wouldn't even know or acknowledge them. Most people would think you had bad English or made up a word.” (P501, *not everyone understands, not real pronouns*)

Yet, when the participants were asked in part 4 whether they had encountered neopronouns previously (in any context), the majority (about 70%) responded affirmatively. However, not all of these participants were familiar with what the pronouns meant, despite having encountered them somewhere.

To summarize, the responses to the generic pronouns highlight widespread support for singular *they*, which was lauded for being *gender-neutral* and thus *inclusive*, as well as defended as *traditional* and *common*. Gendered generic pronouns were generally rejected as *exclusive*, although *he* or *she* was often considered an improvement over using only *he* (or only *she*), even if the construction was frequently described as *awkward*. In contrast, the neopronouns were simply too new, *weird* and *confusing* for many participants.

11.3.2 Nonbinary pronouns

Overall, the participants reacted quite differently to nonbinary *they* and the neopronouns: *they* was received much more positively than the neopronouns. The neopronouns are discussed first, as the responses were in many ways similar to those directed at generic neopronouns, discussed above.

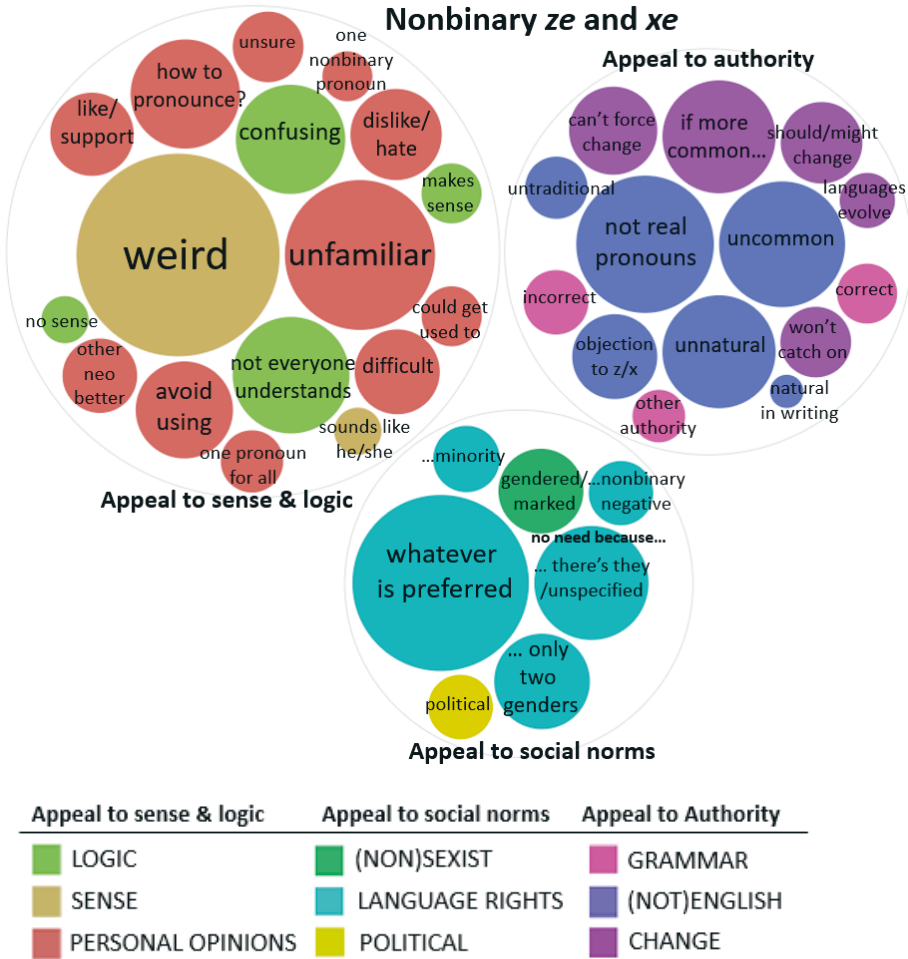


Figure 34. Thematic field for nonbinary ze and xe

Figure 34 provides the thematic field for the nonbinary neopronouns (for absolute frequencies, see Table 35 in Appendix B). Many of the subthemes are the same as with the generic neopronouns, discussed above (see Figure 33, and more examples in the previous section, pp. 183–187). Indeed, many participants either copy pasted the same answer to both questions about the neopronouns or otherwise indicated that their view was the same regardless of context. However, there were some important differences as well, most notably the addition of the LANGUAGE RIGHTS subtheme under **Appeal to social norms**.

With LANGUAGE RIGHTS, there are two polarized and roughly equally frequent perspectives: *whatever is preferred*, and *no need for nonbinary neopronouns because (...)*. With the former category, the participants were arguing that *whatever pronoun a person chooses is acceptable*, thus making pronouns a matter of personal choice (example 65). With the latter category,

other participants were arguing that these pronouns are *not needed* (examples 66–69). Four different reasons complete the sentence: binary implications (...*because there are only two genders*), minority arguments (...*because only a minority uses these pronouns*), negative group evaluations (...*because these people are ridiculous/needy, or mentally ill*),¹¹⁹ and, most commonly, *because they already fills the gap* (interpreted as the reason for unspecified *no need* comments as well).

(65) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Nonbinary people are valid and should be allowed to use whatever pronouns they feel works best for them! [...]” (P715, *whatever is preferred*)

(66) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I don't think they are necessary and I find the words themselves awkward. Xir, xe, ze - odd. 'They' already works. [...]” (P1141, *no need because they*)

(67) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I feel like we are trying to find a solution to a problem that only exists for a very small minority of people who happen to be very vocal about it. Is it worth changing language to appease to such a small group of people, who knows.” (P49, *minority*)

(68) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Not acceptable. You are born a male or a female and should therefore be referred to as one, regardless of what you think you are. There are only two sexes.” (P306, *only two genders*)

(69) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “It's ridiculous. just use their name or say what you think they are i.e. that guy that girl or that person if you're not sure.” (P748, *only two genders, weird*)

While many of the participants who believed there are only two genders still indicated being aware of others identifying as nonbinary (example 68), some participants did not seem to grasp the idea of identities beyond the binary (example 69). For these participants, pronouns were linked to a person's gender expression, or “sex”, in a seemingly uncomplicated manner.

With the other two subthemes under **Appeal to social norms**, the participants were making similar comments as with the generic neopronouns. Again, some participants considered the neopronouns to be *marked* or *gendered* for being nonbinary, and for some, the neopronouns also carried a *political* connotation. In addition to associating the neopronouns with liberalism and sometimes feminism (examples 70–71), a handful of participants imagined conservatively orientated people to object to these pronouns (examples 72–73).¹²⁰

(70) [both generic and nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Unneeded words invented by liberals in ivory towers.” (P807, *political*)

¹¹⁹ Some of these comments were also double-coded for the *dislike/hate* subtheme under PERSONAL OPINIONS.

¹²⁰ This aspect did not come up frequently enough to be coded as a subtheme.

(71) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Extremely ideologically loaded words, I would never use. Strong association with 3rd wave feminism and its negative stereotypes.” (P271, *political, avoid using*)

(72) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I think it's interesting, but I'm not sure how well it will catch on for english speakers, especially those with more conservative views.” (P244, *won't catch on*)

(73) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “[...] I think other people might have a hostile reaction, if they are conservative, and I don't think these pronouns will be widely adopted.” (P820, *won't catch on*)

As with the generic neopronouns, under **Appeal to authority**, many participants did not consider neopronouns to be *real pronouns*, or considered them too *uncommon*, *unnatural*, and *untraditional* to be part of English; many objected specifically to the consonants *z* and *x*, perceiving them as *alien* or *foreign* to English. Only a few participants expressed that these pronouns are *natural*, and even then, typically only in writing.

The participants were again also making comments about correctness, but both types of assessments were equally frequent (*incorrect/correct*). Indeed, this is a notable difference to the generic neopronoun responses, among which *correct* assessments were more frequent than the *incorrect* ones. In other words, some participants described the nonbinary neopronouns as *incorrect*, but did not make the same objection to the generic pronouns. In addition, with the nonbinary neopronouns some participants also made references to other authorities, for example dictionaries (examples 74–75). Only a few participants made such comments with the generic neopronouns (thus excluded from Figure 33).

(74) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “‘Ze’ and ‘Xe’ are not recognised by any authority in the English language and are not gramatically [sic] correct.” (P212, *other authority, incorrect*)

(75) [both nonbinary and generic *ze/xe*] “If it's in the dictionary I'm okay with it” (P723, *other authority*)

With the CHANGE theme, the participants again made comments about whether the adoption of neopronouns was likely to happen. For example, the participants were indicating that the neopronouns *should/might change* to become acceptable, or that they can only become acceptable *if they become more commonly used first*. Some participants felt it was likely that neopronouns *won't catch on*, while others objected to the explicit introduction of such pronouns by conveying that *language change can't be forced*. While these aspects were present with the generic neopronouns as well, with the nonbinary ones, there were also additional supportive comments about how changes in language are natural (*languages evolve*, examples 76–77). Only one similar comment was made with generic neopronouns (thus excluded from Figure 33).

(76) [nonbinary *ze/xz*] “If it is accepted but [sic] the people it refers to I am fine with it. I have never heard them before though so don't really feel comfortable using or pronouncing them. Language evolves all the time however so it's all good.” (P475, *languages evolve, whatever is preferred, unfamiliar, how to pronounce*)

(77) [nonbinary *ze/xz*] “establishing new words is a good thing, people should use whatever words they want for themselves and invent them if they don't exist yet.” (P665, *languages evolve, whatever is preferred*)

The subthemes under **Appeal to sense & logic** are also very similar to the ones seen with the generic neopronouns. Many participants found the nonbinary neopronouns simply *weird* (or even ridiculous) and *confusing*; the argument with the latter was often that these pronouns are not recognized by others, also reflected in the subtheme *not everyone understands*. Indeed, as mentioned, many of the participants were themselves *unfamiliar* with neopronouns, or wondered *how to pronounce them*. Some participants thought that *ze* and *xz* sound too much like *he* and *she* (example 78), the implication being that this is a negative trait as it may cause confusion.¹²¹

(78) [nonbinary neopronouns] “What is the pronunciation of *xz* and *ze*? In Australia they would almost sound the same as *she*. Which could be more contentious.” (P410, *how to pronounce*)

In addition, some participants found nonbinary neopronouns *difficult*, not knowing why there were so many and what was the difference between *ze* and *xz* (examples 79–81). Such comments were not generally directed at the generic neopronouns.

(79) [nonbinary *ze/xz*] “The English language is difficult enough without the introduction of more complexities.” (P233, *difficult*)

(80) [nonbinary *ze/xz*] “Adds too many new complicated words if every single person can have their own special pronoun” (P765, *difficult*)

(81) [nonbinary *ze/xz*] “I don't know the difference between *ze* and *xz*. [...]” (P1041, *difficult*)

As with the generic pronouns, some participants implied they *could get used to* nonbinary neopronouns, while others indicated *avoiding* these pronouns. Several participants expressed *dislike* or even hate towards these pronouns. Yet, more participants showed *support* or expressed *liking* the nonbinary neopronouns, in comparison to the generic ones (examples 82–84). A few participants even preferred neopronouns over *they* as less confusing (examples 85–86).¹²²

¹²¹ Interestingly it seems that in Swedish, *hen* being so similar to *han* and *hon* is viewed as a positive trait instead, as a few participants of the present study also indicated.

¹²² The subtheme circle is only included in the thematic field for nonbinary they, Figure 35.

(82) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Every nonbinary person's experience is different, and some do not feel comfortable using the pronoun options that the English language currently has. I think that the use of pronouns like 'ze' and 'xe' should be normalized.” (P745, *like/support*)

(83) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I like the idea, but they don't yet sound natural to me.” (P395, *like/support, unnatural*)

(84) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Extremely inclusive, a positive development with language” (P204, *like/support*)

(85) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I strongly support the widespread adoption of *ze* or *xe* (prefer *xe*) because it eliminates the confusion surrounding *they*” (P239, *like/support, neo better*)

(86) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Annoying, but better than singular *they*” (P1142, *neo better*)

Some participants also made comments about how it *makes sense* to use nonbinary neopronouns, although for others the pronouns *made no sense*. As mentioned, some participants objected to *ze* and *xe* specifically, leading some to suggest that *another neopronoun would be better* instead. Some participants felt there should be *only one nonbinary neopronoun* (examples 87–88), and a few participants expressed that there should be *one pronoun for everyone*, regardless of gender (example 89).

(87) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I'm unsure on this one. If there was one form (e.g. *Xe*, *Xir*, *Xis*) that was consistently used I'd be absolutely fine, but multiple variants with haphazard application feel wrong.” (P498, *one nonbinary neopronoun*)

(88) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “This would be ideal if everyone agreed on the same pronoun. But people seem to prefer singular *they*.” (P586, *one nonbinary neopronoun*)

(89) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Sounds unnatural. Personally, I think it would be easiest if 'he' was used for everyone. *Xe/ze* don't seem gender-neutral to me, but instead seem to really emphasize that the person does not want to be called *s/he*. Which is fine if they want to do that, but probably not the point of the word.” (P46, *one pronoun for everyone*)¹²³

Overall, despite many similarities, there were important differences in the participants' reactions to nonbinary and generic neopronouns. Most notably, some participants reacted much more strongly and negatively to the neopronouns when they were associated with nonbinary individuals (e.g. *no need* comments). However, for others it was precisely the nonbinary use that made the neopronouns acceptable, hence showing more support for this use (e.g. *whatever is preferred, like/support*).

¹²³ Even when explicitly expressing that a universal *he* would be easiest to use, the writer themselves uses singular *they*.

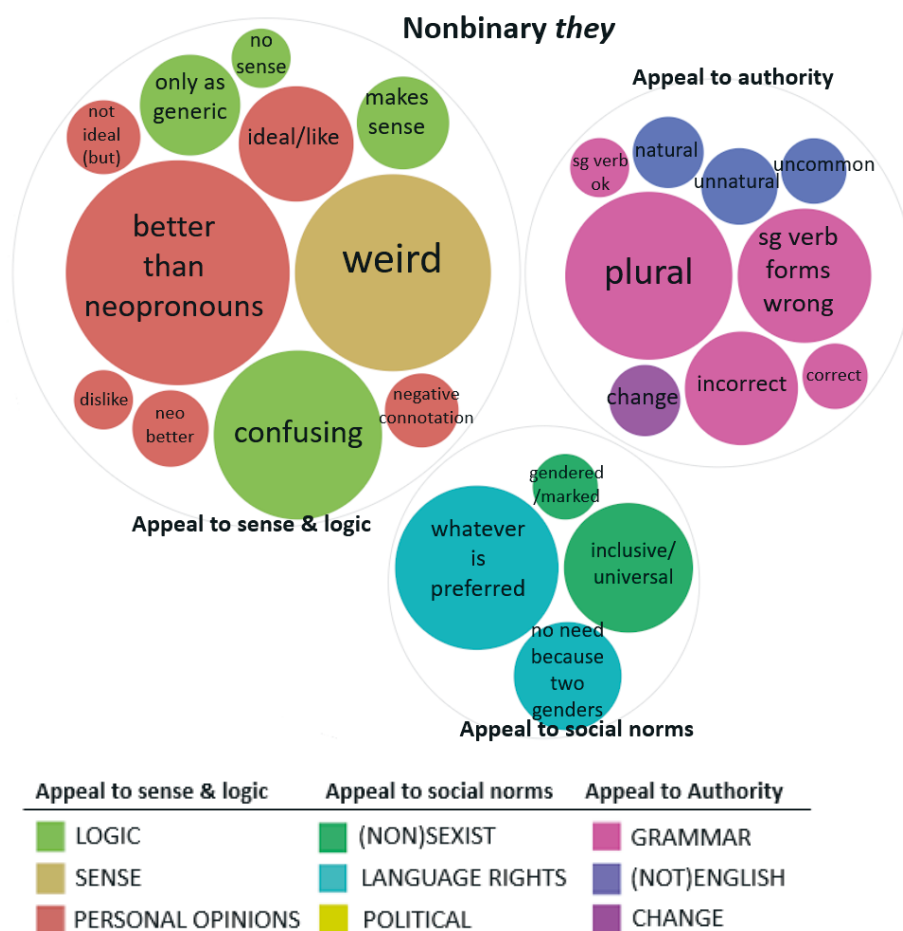


Figure 35. Thematic field for nonbinary they

With nonbinary *they* (Figure 35; absolute frequencies are provided in Appendix B, Table 36), the participants' comments reflect a variety of stances. In comparison to generic *they*, the nonbinary use was considerably more controversial. This difference will be further explored in section 11.4.4 when considering the role of ideologies, but some commentary is provided below as well.

Starting with **Appeal to authority**, the participants' arguments were mostly based on grammar. More precisely the number of *they* was perceived to be *plural*, rendering nonbinary use of *they* *incorrect* (the *correct* comments being less frequent). While arguments about plurality and incorrectness were present in the responses to generic *they* as well, they were much more frequent for nonbinary *they*. For nonbinary *they*, additional subthemes include objections to using overtly *singular verb forms* with *they* (example 90); many of these comments stem from part 6 where overtly singular verb forms were

tested (Appendix A). Notably, less than a dozen participants implied that overtly singular verb forms would (also) be acceptable (example 91).

(90) [nonbinary *they*] “They works’ is grammatically correct considering the noun is singular; however, ‘they’ is instinctively perceived as a plural pronoun, so it sounds more natural to follow with ‘work’ instead of ‘works’” (P358, *singular verb forms wrong*)

(91) [nonbinary *they*] “It seems a bit odd that the verb form is in plural but I would prefer this to a made up pronoun.” (P621, *singular verb forms acceptable*)

As an additional remark, while overtly singular verb forms were rejected by most participants, a few also used such forms in their open responses (examples 92–93, underlining added). Since these participants were specifically referring to nonbinary individuals, it seems like they were purposefully using overtly singular verb forms.

(92) “I’ll happily support someone if that’s how they wants to be addressed[...]”. (P574, native British English speaker, agender; this participant used overtly singular verb forms a few times throughout the survey)

(93) “[...] I saw my friend Z the other day, they was shopping for groceries. They is doing well and asked me to tell you to call them” participant (P1125, native American English speaker, cis male)

The participants also made comments about nonbinary *they* being *unnatural* and *uncommon* (examples 94–95); some described the use as *natural* as well (example 96), but comments about the usage being *common* or *traditional* were too scarce to include in the thematic field. In contrast, generic singular *they* was frequently described as *natural*, *common*, and *traditional*.

(94) [nonbinary *they*] “This is not the common usage, and obscures meaning more than it exposes meaning.” (P1122, *uncommon, confusing*)

(95) [nonbinary *they*] “Since the person in question is known, it does feel unnatural to use the term ‘they’” (P301, *unnatural*)

(96) “I personally know some people that want to be referred to as ‘they’. I think it’s perfectly fine and sounds natural.” (P124, *natural*)

The CHANGE theme was infrequent among the responses to nonbinary *they*, thus aggregated in Figure 35. The circle includes various comments about whether and how languages should change (examples 97–99).

(97) [nonbinary *they*] “Not acceptable right now in my opinion, because thats [sic] kind of confusing, but language can evolve at it might be acceptable later.” (P74, *might/should change*)

(98) [nonbinary *they*] “I accept it, but loathe it. As an older person it’s difficult for me to un-learn the rules of a lifetime. However, language changes and I should too.” (P1037, *change*)

(99) [nonbinary *they*] “I think this is largely a force of identity politics trying to manufacture a grammatical norm in English. I feel this, as so many other versions of Nadsat or Newspeak, is largely doomed to fail. The more people push for a specific change, the more that change will be resisted.” (P945, *can't force change*)

With the main theme **Appeal to social norms**, only two themes were frequent: LANGUAGE RIGHTS and (NON)SEXIST. Notably missing are *political* comments that were directed at the neopronouns: only one participant viewed nonbinary *they* as *political*.

With the (NON)SEXIST theme, the *gendered/marked* subtheme was much less frequent with *they* than the neopronouns. With *they*, the participants were more often arguing that because singular *they* is nongendered (or “gender-neutral”), its scope extends to all individuals. In other words, *they* is considered *universally inclusive*, and thus can also be used for nonbinary individuals (examples 100–101). Similarly, some participants saw nonbinary use of *they* as a natural extension of already existing singular uses (example 102), included in the same subtheme.

(100) [nonbinary *they*] “Acceptable for anyone.” (P375, *inclusive/universal*)

(101) [nonbinary *they*] “It's a gender neutral term that doesn't change for any gender and can't be made specific to one thing.” (P501, *inclusive/universal*)

(102) [nonbinary *they*] “It adopts an already organically present usage of singular 'they.’” (P1025, *inclusive/universal*)

With the LANGUAGE RIGHTS theme, the two subthemes are similarly polarized as with the neopronouns, but the *no need* comments were fewer and there was less variation in quality. The only frequently given reason was that there is ‘*no need* for nonbinary *they* because there are only two genders’. In other words, nonbinary *they* incited only very few *minority* comments; the same was true for negative comments directed at nonbinary individuals (excluded from Figure 35 as infrequent). However, for some participants, there was another type of a *negative connotation* with *they*, with the difference that these comments more so relate to the pronoun itself than to nonbinary individuals as a group, hence organized under PERSONAL OPINIONS instead (**Appeal to sense & logic**). These participants either felt that *they* was dehumanizing (examples 103–104), or that the plural connotation conveyed a sense of “multiple personalities” (example 105).¹²⁴

(103) [nonbinary *they*] “[...] using 'they' in that context sounds dehumanising, like 'it'.” (P126, *negative connotation*)

(104) [nonbinary *they*] “It sounds very stupid, incorrect and degrading, as in the way of taking someone's identity away. It would be better to use another

¹²⁴ Darwin reports that some genderfluid individuals prefer *they* for the plural connotation, as for some it reflects their multiple gender identities (2017: 330).

word that make them sound more human.” (P752, *negative connotation, weird*)

(105) [nonbinary *they*] “It just sounds weird. Because the person is known as singular but is being referred to as plural. It sounds like youre [sic] referring to someone with multiple personalities!!!” (P467, *negative connotation, plural, weird*)

With *they*, there are fewer subthemes under PERSONAL OPINIONS than with the neopronouns. Most frequently, the participants expressed that *they* is *better than neopronouns*. In much fewer numbers, about a dozen participants felt the opposite, that *neopronouns are better than they* (example 106).¹²⁵ Some participants also expressed that *they* is the *ideal* nonbinary pronoun, or that they simply *like* the usage. Less than a dozen of the participants explicitly expressed *dislike* (and only one was labeled *hate*), and somewhat more participants felt that even though *they* is *not an ideal solution, it's the best solution there is* (example 107).

(106) [nonbinary *they*] “I don't know. It seems like a new word or phrase would be a better idea.” (P803, *unsure, neo better*)

(107) [nonbinary *they*] “Understandable, if odd. There really is no good solution to this, which is unfortunate, but I think this is the best option.” (P442, *not ideal but..., weird*)

The SENSE theme only includes *weird* comments, which were more frequent with nonbinary than generic *they*. In comparison to the neopronouns, which were also described as ridiculous, the *weird* comments directed at *they* were more neutral. Under the LOGIC theme, many participants also found the use of nonbinary *they* *confusing*, due to the perceived ambiguity of the referent; such comments were much fewer with generic *they*. Indeed, some of the participants insisted that the nonbinary *they* presented in the examples could refer to some other, unnamed antecedent, even when the instructions emphasized that *they* referred to the named antecedents (Lee and Chris, examples 108–109).

(108) [nonbinary *they*] “I find it confusing. That is, does Chris love Chris' dog, or does Chris love Chris' and Lee's dog” (P1115, *confusing*)

(109) [nonbinary *they*] “Lee and someone else does not like tea. Chris loves a dog that he and someone else apparently own.” (P100, *confusing*)

Others argued that *they* can *only function as generic*, and/or that it makes *no sense* to use *they* as a nonbinary pronoun, the reason often being that the plural connotation is too strong to allow for truly singular reference (examples 110–111). Yet, others argued that using nonbinary *they* *makes sense* since the

¹²⁵ For these subthemes, comments from reactions to both *they* and the neopronouns have been aggregated in the thematic field for *they*.

use of singular *they* is already established (example 112), similar to the *universal/inclusive* subtheme.

(110) [nonbinary *they*] “Singular they should only be used for someone of unknown gender.” (P844, *only as generic*)

(111) [nonbinary *they*] “Once you name an individual it makes NO SENSE to then use 'they'. A general person can be 'they', George cannot be 'they'. George can only be 'he' or 'she'.” (P877, *only as generic, no sense, two genders*)

(112) [nonbinary *they*] “Singular they has long been part of the English language; using it for nonbinary individuals makes intuitive sense since it already exists.” (P565, *makes sense, traditional*)

Overall, despite many similarities, the participants reacted differently to nonbinary *they* and the neopronouns in important ways. First, there is a considerable difference as regards the quality of the **Appeal to authority** comments. With nonbinary *they*, the participants were making objections about the perceived plural nature of the pronoun, while the neopronouns were more commonly rejected as “not English”. Additionally, with the neopronouns, some participants appealed to dictionaries as a source of authority; such appeals were missing with *they*. In this sense, the neopronouns faced stronger opposition; their status as pronouns was challenged, whereas with *they*, only the appropriateness of the context was challenged.

Second, nonbinary *they* was generally received more favorably or neutrally than the neopronouns. Notably, while the neopronouns were perceived as *political*, such comments were not directed at *they* (with one exception). The neopronouns were also viewed to be *gendered/marked* by more than twice as many participants as nonbinary *they*; in contrast, nonbinary *they* was considered *inclusive* or *universal*. With the *no need* comments, there was also a considerable difference. While the neopronouns were faced with more various critique directed at the individuals who use such pronouns (*minority, nonbinary negative*), nonbinary *they* was frequently only objected due to a binary world view (*only two genders*). The *weird* comments directed at the neopronouns were also harsher in quality (“ridiculous”), as were the *dislike/hate* comments; only one *they* comment was coded as hateful.

Perhaps nonbinary *they* received fewer negative reactions since, as many participants recognized, singular use of *they* is already established in many others contexts, even with known references (see section 2.2.2). In other words, familiarity with similar uses of *they* may make nonbinary use of the pronoun easier to accept, while the neopronouns are rejected as new and unestablished, unfamiliar to many. Indeed, one of the predictors for the acceptability of nonbinary neopronouns in part 6 (section 10.2) was familiarity with such pronouns; if the participant had encountered neopronouns previously, they were more likely to accept them in the survey. This feature likely expands to explain the different reactions to *they* and the neopronouns as well, indicated by comments such as example 113.

(113) [nonbinary *they*] “It’s acceptable because I’ve heard it and it makes more sense than trying to force the use of an invented pronoun [...]” (P286)

11.4 DISCUSSION

In this section, the results from the thematic analysis are considered from several different perspectives. First, some observations are made regarding how different groups of participants responded to the pronouns. Second, the results are contrasted with the participants’ acceptability assessments, to further explore *why* the participants rejected or accepted different pronouns. Third, to connect the discussion to the broader framework of (non)sexist language use, the results are compared to previous studies. Last, the role of different ideologies as the driving force behind the participants’ responses is examined.

11.4.1 Native language and gender differences

Overall, the data was explored for patterns across subthemes (i.e., which subthemes occur together), as well as for patterns based on the participants’ background information: gender, age, education level, and native language. However, preliminary exploration only showed noticeable variation based on participant gender (discussed below). A few observations can also be made for native language, but the patterns were weaker than with gender.

First, generic singular *they* was explicitly supported by proportionally more native than non-native English speaking participants. This may be due to a different relationship with English: perhaps native speakers feel more comfortable promoting singular *they* since it is a natural part of their dominant language environment. In comparison, the new standard (singular *they*) has not yet penetrated prescriptive grammar in (all) L2 contexts (as is my own experience in the educational context in Finland), leading the non-native English speakers in doubt of whether the use is recommendable or not.

Second, some of the participants who knew Finnish and Swedish made comparisons between these languages and English. The Swedish neopronoun *hen* was also mentioned at times, often in a positive tone (examples 1–4). Often, these commentators were more supportive of neopronouns in general, but some still objected to *z* and *x* as initial consonants (example 4).

(1) [*he*] “It’s traditional and therefore should be acceptable, but I would much rather use ‘their’ in this situation, or have a third singular pronoun that is gender-neutral, such as the Swedish ‘hen’.”

(2) [*he or she*] “We have ‘hen’ in Swedish to replace ‘han eller hon’, using *ze* or *xe* instead seems simpler.”

(3) [generic *ze/xe*] “I have never heard about *ze* or *xe* pronouns but it would be great to have one neutral pronoun in English too, like in Swedish.”

(4) [nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I think it would be easier to accept *xe* and *ze* if they didn't include *x* and *z*. Compare with the Swedish gender neutral 'hen' (instead of *han*, *hon*). The difference is not as large, if a gender neutral pronoun lies close to old pronouns in spelling and pronunciation, the focus shifts to our similarities and not our differences. *Xe-* and *ze-* are not common syllables, and are perhaps harder to incorporate into our daily use.”

In addition, some Finnish participants made comments indicating that *hän* is useful, since it eliminates the pronoun issue altogether (examples 5–7).

(5) [generic *ze/xe*] “In principle this would be the way to go but the choice of pronouns, in particular using *z* and *x* in them makes it seem pseudo-exotic or pretentious. Maybe I interpret it like this since my native language is Finnish [sic], and *x* and *z* are not used there. I still think a more common letter, such as *t*, would be better.”

(6) [*he or she*] “[...] The Finnish 3rd person singular pronoun 'hän' does not specify a gender, which should explain the majority of my discomfort toward the example constructs. In short, I feel that the English way of doing this is stupid but I'm not the one who gets to decide how to write things so I obey the dumb way.”

(7) [general comment] “As a native Finnish speaker, I find pronouns specifying gender [sic] annoying.”

While these comments were too infrequent to allow for reliable conclusions, they do indicate that being familiar with the possibility of having a nongendered pronoun in a language supports a more positive attitude towards adopting similar pronouns in English as well.

The patterns detected based on participant gender were more pronounced. These patterns were explored by rebuilding thematic fields, with participant gender as the dividing variable. To simplify the figures, the main theme level has been dropped, but the themes are still marked with different colors. Some infrequent subthemes were excluded from consideration, and some subthemes were further merged to reduce unnecessary complexity (e.g. *common etc.* includes *natural* and *traditional*).

Due to space limitations, only two figures are provided: one for gendered generic pronouns (Figure 36), and one for nonbinary pronouns (Figure 37). Aggregating the data this way is possible since the participants' reactions to generic pronouns and nonbinary pronouns respectively share many similarities, however, the discussion below also considers pronoun-specific differences.

Fields for generic *they* and generic neopronouns produced less meaningful comparisons, hence no figures are provided but the pronouns will still be shortly discussed below. In addition, since there were an uneven number of cis female, cis male and transgender participants, the subtheme frequencies have been scaled based on the number of participants for each gender group (theme frequency/number of *x*-gender participants). The figures thus allow for rough

comparisons between the different gender groups. However, it is important to remember that there are many fewer transgender than cisgender participants. As a result, similar sized circles for the transgender group include many fewer participants than for cisgender groups.

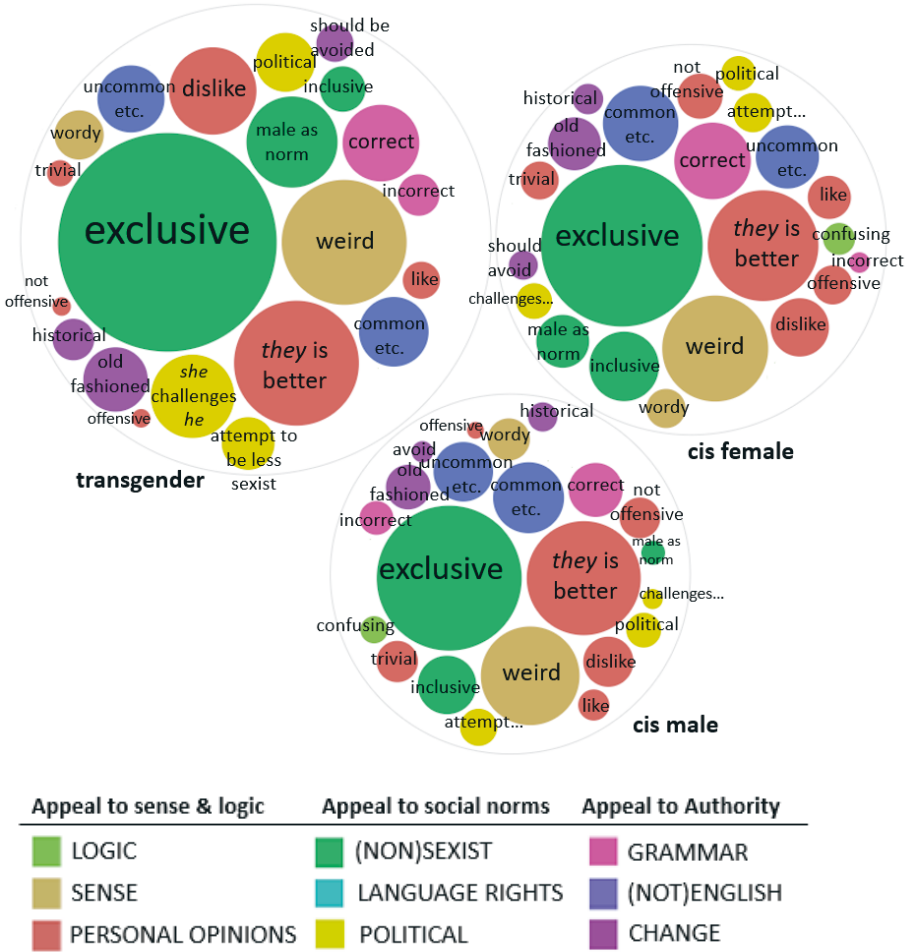


Figure 36. Thematic field for gendered generic pronouns, divided by participant gender

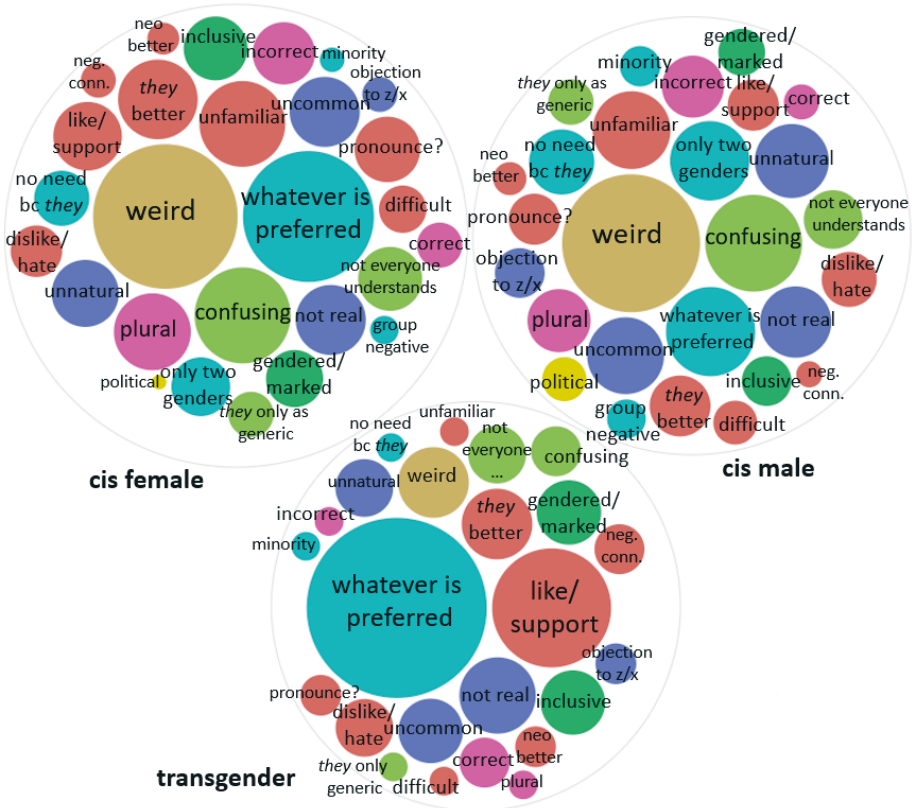
Starting with the gendered generic pronouns, the main differences concern viewing the different pronouns as either *inclusive* or *exclusive*. Transgender participants generally found these pronouns to be *exclusive*. Only three trans participants described generic *he* as *inclusive*, while the rest of the *inclusive* comments stem from cis participants. In addition, proportionally somewhat more cis female than cis male participants found the gendered generic pronouns *exclusive*. In addition, cis female and transgender participants accounted for most of the comments about generic *he* supporting a patriarchal or *male-as-norm* standard, as well as comments about how *she challenges the*

status of he. In addition, cis females provided most of the comments about generic *he* being *offensive*. When considering all gendered generics, cis female and transgender participants expressed *dislike* somewhat more often than cis male participants, as well as indicated that gendered generic pronouns *should be avoided*. Based on such patterns, the cis female and transgender participants seem to be more aware of the social implications of using gendered generic pronouns, particularly with *he*. Furthermore, with only one exception, comments about how generic pronouns are a *trivial issue* derive from cis participants.

With generic singular *they*, overall, the transgender participants supported the usage, with only a few *incorrect* assessments. Cis females more frequently objected to *they* based on *plurality*, *informality* and *incorrectness*, while more cis male participants described the pronoun as *correct*. This difference may reflect the previously observed tendency for women to “conform more closely than men to sociolinguistic norms that are overtly prescribed [...]” (Labov, 2001: 293). In other words, although most of the participants accepted the use of generic *they*, it may be that the previous proscription still affects these evaluations for some of the (cis female) participants.

With the generic neopronouns, a considerably larger proportion of cisgender than transgender participants described these pronouns as *weird*, rejected them as *not real pronouns*, and predicted that they *won't catch on*. However, some transgender participants also objected to these pronouns as *incorrect*, *confusing*, viewing them as *gendered/marked*, *just as bad as he and she*.

Attitudes towards pronouns



Appeal to sense & logic	Appeal to social norms	Appeal to Authority
LOGIC	(NON)SEXIST	GRAMMAR
SENSE	LANGUAGE RIGHTS	(NOT)ENGLISH
PERSONAL OPINIONS	POLITICAL	CHANGE

Figure 37. Thematic field for nonbinary pronouns, divided by participant gender

When considering both types of nonbinary pronouns, cisgender participants more often described these pronouns as *weird* or *confusing*, while most commonly the transgender participants simply indicated that *whatever pronoun is preferred is acceptable*. Considerably more cis female than cis male participants made such comments as well, while cis male participants accounted for most of the arguments about how *there is no need for nonbinary pronouns because there are only two genders*, as well as for the *minority* and *group negative* (i.e. *nonbinary negative*) comments directed at neopronouns. In addition, the *political* comments directed at neopronouns, most negatively loaded, stemmed almost exclusively from cis male participants. In contrast, cis female and trans participants expressed more *like* or *support* for nonbinary pronouns. Four trans participants expressed *dislike*, while cisgender

participants did so in greater numbers, and the comments were generally more negative, including *hateful* comments.

With the nonbinary neopronouns, most *not real pronouns* comments derive from cis participants, however, 7 transgender participants also objected to these pronouns with such comments. With nonbinary *they*, cis participants account for most of the grammar-related comments, viewing nonbinary *they* as *grammatically incorrect* due to the *plural* nature of the pronoun. In comparison to generic *they*, particularly cis male participants made more *plural* and *incorrect* comments with nonbinary *they*. The differences between generic and nonbinary *they* will be further explored in section 11.4.4.

The above discussion has highlighted some considerable differences in the response patterns based on the participants' gender. Most often, the differences occurred between cisgender and transgender participants, but there were some differences between cis female and cis male participants as well. This is likely due to the different experiences these participants have had (and certainly not due to "biological gender").

As argued previously, the average transgender experience likely differs from the average cisgender experience in many significant ways when it comes to gender and pronouns. Based on the above analysis, transgender and cis female participants seem to be more aware of the social meaning and implications of both generic and nonbinary pronouns than cis male participants. With generic pronouns, this was demonstrated in a greater tendency to reject gendered pronouns as *exclusive*, and support nonbinary pronouns as a part of one's right to self-identify. In more detail, one reason for the different reactions might be that regardless of their own specific identity or pronoun, the transgender participants were all familiar with the concept of nonbinary pronouns (and identities), and perhaps due to their own experiences with pronouns, they were generally sympathetic towards the nonbinary pronoun issue.¹²⁶ Cis females, on the other hand, may have experienced exclusive pronoun or language use in other contexts, perhaps thus sympathizing with the lack of adequate linguistic representation for nonbinary identities, leading to more widespread support for nonbinary pronouns than among cis male participants (cf. Douglas & Sutton, 2014; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011).

11.4.2 Supporting and opposing arguments

As the attitude data was collected to explain *why* pronouns are either accepted or rejected, in this section, the results from the thematic analyses are contrasted with the participants' acceptability assessments. For this purpose, the acceptability measurement in part 7 was used, since the participants' open responses primarily stem from part 7 as well. The acceptability measurement

¹²⁶ None of the transgender participants indicated being unfamiliar with nonbinary identities, and all of them were familiar with neopronouns.

in part 7 was more direct than in parts 3 and 6, where it was measured with example sentences (see Appendix A). Figure 38 provides an overview of acceptability in part 7.

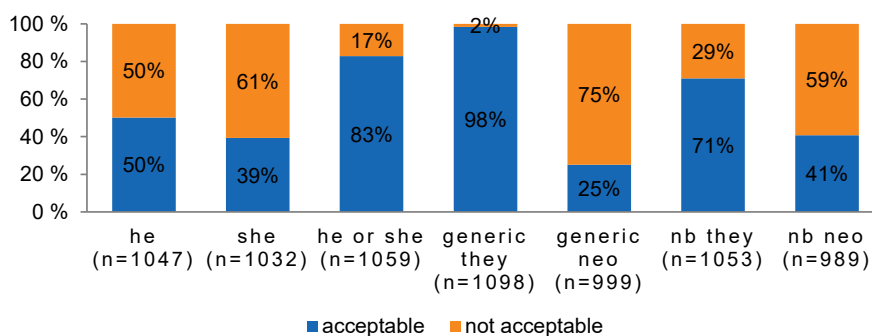


Figure 38. Acceptability in part 7. Missing responses excluded. Nb=nonbinary

Similar as with gender in the previous section (11.4.1), while pronoun-specific figures were also consulted, figures are only provided for gendered generic pronouns (Figure 39) and nonbinary pronouns (Figure 40), contrasted with acceptability. Infrequent and comparative subthemes (e.g. *they is better than neopronouns*) are excluded from consideration, but some prevalent pronoun-specific subthemes (e.g. *he supports male as norm*, or *neopronouns are unfamiliar*) are still included.

Furthermore, generic *they* is excluded from the discussion since the participants nearly unanimously accepted this pronoun. The generic neopronouns are also excluded since they are considerably different from the rest of the generic pronouns, thus aggregating the data is not meaningful. In addition, the main arguments specific to the neopronouns were also brought up with the nonbinary pronouns, hence these arguments will be considered in that context.

Absolute frequencies were used for the thematic fields, and the subthemes under each mode, “acceptable” or “not acceptable”, are arranged so that frequent ones gravitate towards the middle, and infrequent ones towards the outer edges. A rough interpretation can thus be that the bigger the circle, the more strongly it is linked to either mode of acceptability. However, since overall frequency also affects the size of the circles, comparisons between the two modes are necessary. If the subtheme is roughly equally frequent among each mode, then the relationship to acceptability can be considered as neutral. For example, the subtheme *makes sense* is roughly as frequent with “acceptable” and “not acceptable” assessments among the generic pronouns, hence the relationship is neutral.

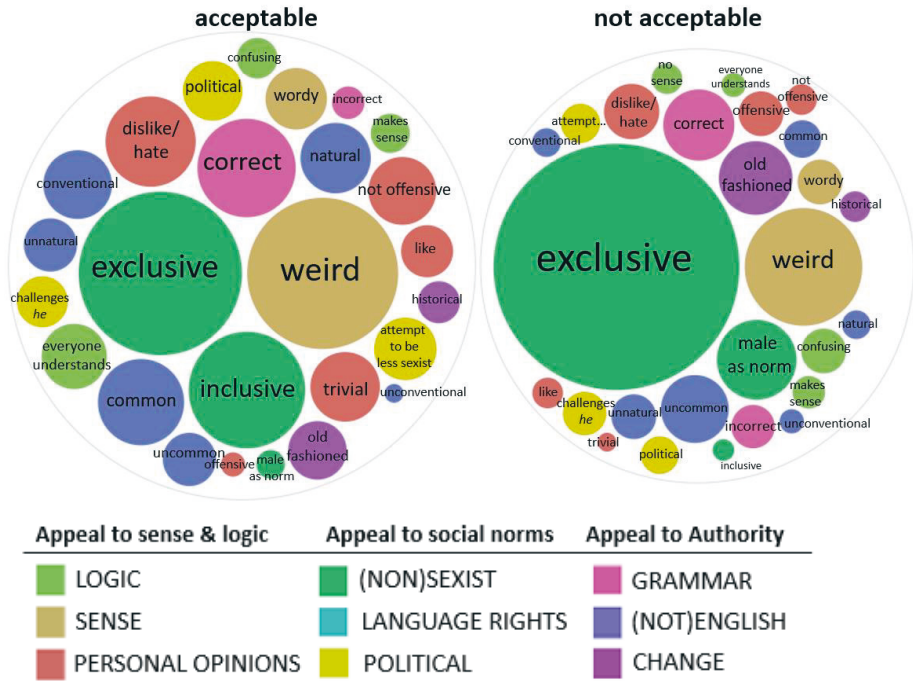


Figure 39. Thematic field for gendered generic pronouns, divided by acceptability

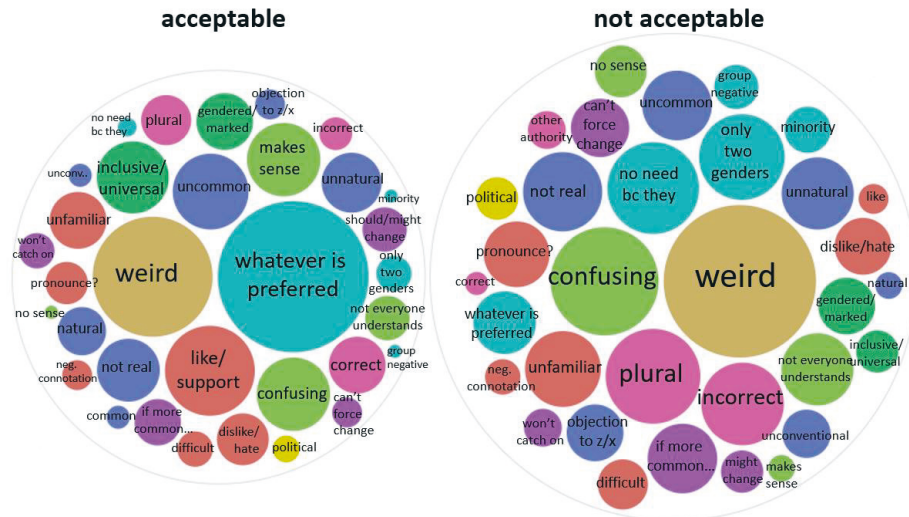


Figure 40. Thematic field for nonbinary pronouns, divided by acceptability

To start with arguments about grammar, as one might expect, most of the *incorrect* comments were linked to rejecting the pronoun, while finding the usage *correct* supported finding the pronoun acceptable. This relationship is stronger for the nonbinary pronouns, while with the generic pronouns the *correct* comments were also frequent among the “not acceptable” responses, and there were *incorrect* comments under “acceptable”. This seems to reflect the separation of correctness and acceptability that many participants verbalized (e.g. *grammatically correct but not acceptable*), likely as a reaction to how acceptability was defined in the survey as “natural” or “correct” usage. Related to *incorrectness*, with nonbinary *they*, the *plural* arguments were also strongly associated with finding the pronoun unacceptable.

Similarly, with generic pronouns, viewing the pronoun as *common*, *natural*, and *traditional* supported finding the usage acceptable. Finding the usage as *uncommon* was more frequent among the “not acceptable” responses, but *unnatural* and *untraditional* comments were roughly neutrally distributed between the two modes. With nonbinary pronouns, *unnatural*, *uncommon* and *untraditional* were all neutrally distributed. As such, these notions do not conclusively link to either mode of acceptability.

With subthemes related to language change, perceiving the gendered generic pronouns as *old fashioned* was more frequent when rejecting the usage. The *historical* subtheme with *he*, however, was more common when finding the usage acceptable; the comments in this subtheme relate to how epicene *he* may be used in historically authentic contexts (e.g. idioms). With nonbinary pronouns, two of the language change subthemes were associated with unacceptability (*if more common...*, and *can't force change*), while the rest are more neutrally distributed. Particularly the *can't force change* comments were often strongly and explicitly employed in arguments against the pronouns. Similarly, the subthemes *not real pronouns*, and *objection to z and x*, were both more common with “not acceptable” assessments.

With the *political* comments, mostly found with *she*, *he or she*, and both types of neopronouns, there was an interesting difference between generic and nonbinary pronouns. With the generic pronouns, the political function of the pronoun was more often perceived as something positive (*attempt to be less sexist, to challenge he*), further associated with finding the pronoun acceptable, while the *political* comments for the nonbinary pronouns were largely negative, linked to unacceptability. In other words, the ideologically, or “politically”, motivated changes in generic pronouns were accepted more often, while the ideological foundation for nonbinary pronouns was rejected more often; it may be that familiarity with such changes is partly behind this difference as well.

While the *weird* comments were frequent for both generic and nonbinary pronouns, there was no clear relationship with acceptability. With generic pronouns, there was considerable variation between the specific pronouns: with *he or she*, most of the *weird* comments (75%) were found with

“acceptable” assessments, yet with *he* the distribution between the modes was equal, and with *she* there was a strong tendency towards rejecting the pronoun. With nonbinary pronouns, *weirdness* leans towards finding the pronoun unacceptable, but was frequent among “acceptable” assessments as well.

With the nonbinary pronouns, comments about incomprehensibility (*confusing, no sense, not everyone understands*) were more strongly connected to finding nonbinary pronouns unacceptable, while the *makes sense* subtheme was linked to finding the pronoun acceptable. With the generic pronouns, however, the subthemes were more neutrally distributed, with only the *everyone understands* (with generic *he*) being clearly more frequent with “acceptable” assessments.

While many of the comments categorized as PERSONAL OPINIONS were neutrally distributed, a few observations can be made. Interestingly, while comments expressing *like* or *support* for the usage were linked to finding the pronoun acceptable, the *dislike/hate* category was more dispersed. With the generic pronouns, *dislike/hate* was unexpectedly more frequent among the “acceptable” responses, while the distribution is more neutral with the nonbinary pronouns. In other words, personal *dislike* is not always a reason to reject the usage. In addition, with the nonbinary neopronouns, the *unfamiliar, difficult, and how to pronounce* comments were only somewhat more frequent with “unacceptable” assessments. With generic pronouns, finding the usage *offensive* was linked to rejecting the pronoun, while viewing the usage as *not offensive* was strongly associated with accepting the pronoun. Similarly, viewing the generic pronoun issue as *trivial* was connected to finding the pronoun acceptable. Often these participants would accept any of the conventional pronouns, but this flexibility did not extend to the neopronouns.

Finally, the most central themes for generic and nonbinary pronouns were the (NON)SEXIST and LANGUAGE RIGHTS themes, respectively. With the gendered generic pronouns, the most frequent comments concerned the *exclusive/inclusive* nature of the pronouns. As expected, *inclusiveness* was strongly associated with viewing the pronoun as acceptable. Similarly, *exclusiveness* was strongly linked to finding the pronoun unacceptable, however, it is also the largest circle under “acceptable”. A related subtheme, viewing the generic *he* as supporting the *male as norm* principle, was almost exclusively linked to rejecting the usage. In other words, recognizing the pronoun as gendered or exclusive does not always lead to rejecting the pronoun as unacceptable, but recognizing that the usage supports gender inequality does. In contrast, with nonbinary pronouns, viewing the pronoun as *gendered/marked* does not seem to affect acceptability. The arguments about nonbinary *they* being *inclusive* or *universal*, however, were associated with finding the pronoun acceptable. With the subthemes pertaining to language rights, there was a considerable relationship to acceptability: the right to choose one’s pronouns (*whatever is preferred*) was strongly linked to accepting nonbinary pronouns, while the *no need* categories (including *only*

two genders, minority, and nonbinary negative) were linked to rejecting the pronouns. Indeed, these subthemes seem to have the most polarizing effect on the participants.

Overall, these results illustrate that acceptability may be affected by several different aspects. Most clearly associated with acceptability were subthemes related to social norms, but aspects of commonness and grammatical correctness also played a role. However, the results also demonstrated several seemingly contradicting differences between the arguments the participants used towards generic and nonbinary pronouns. For example, the perceived political function more often led to rejecting nonbinary pronouns, while with generic pronouns it was more strongly associated with finding the pronoun acceptable. Similarly, whether *weirdness* links to rejection or acceptance depends on the pronoun. In other words, these features do not directly link to either mode of acceptability, but instead can be used to argue either for or against particular usage. This seemingly free variation may reflect the differential statuses the pronouns have. The more familiar pronouns are generally more acceptable, while the more unfamiliar ones are more easily rejected (e.g. Song & Schwarz, 2009). In addition, it may be that some of the arguments the participants are using function as “overt justification” for underlying beliefs (cf. Silverstein, 1979: 193), hence, causing a seeming mismatch between their arguments and acceptability assessments (further explored in 11.4.4).

11.4.3 Pronouns and (non)sexist language discussions

In this section, I demonstrate that many of the same arguments that have been identified in previous studies on *arguments against nonsexist language* are found in present-day data as well. In addition, while generic pronouns have been in the middle of discussions about (non)sexist language use, the discussion below illustrates that arguments directed at nonbinary pronouns follow similar patterns. Indeed, the similarities are not surprising since equal and fair representation has been the leading force behind nonsexist language reforms.

Two previous studies on arguments against nonsexist language were introduced in section 4.3.3: the original study by Blaubergs (1980) and a replication study by Parks and Robertson (1998a). Both studies analyzed qualitative attitude data using a similar typology. Listed below are the main categories from Blaubergs (1980) and Parks and Robertson (1998a), as well as four additional categories provided by the latter authors (Parks & Robertson, 1998a: 452–453), compared to the subthemes in the present study. Importantly, while these studies concern (non)sexist language at large, both include explicit references to generic pronouns as well.

Previous categories

(Parks & Robertson, 1998a: 452–453)

Related subthemes in present study

1. Cross-Cultural, i.e. “*No evidence that cultures using sexist language have more sex discrimination than those using a nonsexist language [...]*”

no direct correspondence.

2. Language is a Trivial Concern, i.e. “*Sexist language is trivial compared to more serious injustices in society [...]*”

trivial

[*he*] “It's fine. People need **real problems** in life to focus on instead of this.”

[*he*] “I can see how it's exclusionary, but it's such a **minor part of a greater problem in language** that...at most it should be pointed out and moved on from. There are bigger battles to be fought.”

[nonbinary pronouns] “[...] if I have to constantly remember what weird new pronoun you want to be addressed with, I'll just get annoyed about you're [sic] insecurity about something as **simple and trivial** as the pronouns we use in everyday conversations.”

3. Freedom of Speech/Unjustified Coercion

Example: “I do **not** believe that men or women **should change** their vocabulary on account of a **few outspoken liberal women!**”

can't force language change

[nonbinary pronouns] “If you don't want to identify as male or female, that's fine, just **don't force me** to accommodate this into my everyday language.”

minority comments

[nonbinary pronouns] “I feel like we are trying to find a solution to a problem that only exists for a **very small minority** of people who happen to be **very vocal** about it [...]

[*he*] “This is the way it has always been and it seems idiotic to change it just because a **very small minority is uncomfortable with it.**”

political

[neopronouns] “Unneeded words invented by **liberals** in ivory towers.”

4. Sexist Language is Not Sexist, i.e. “*The language is not really sexist because the users do not have sexist intentions [...]*”

everyone understands, inclusive, other comments

[*he*] “[...] I would understand that **the pronoun was used for all, not simply males**”

[*he*] “I do not consider this an example of sexist language. It is inaccurate and non-inclusive, which is **not** the same as **sexist.**”

Attitudes towards pronouns

5. Word Etymology, i.e. “ <i>The original meaning of a word is justification for its use</i> ”	<i>traditional/conventional</i> [he] “He is used for and always has been used to refer those things” <i>they is plural</i> , i.e. when the pronoun is originally plural, it cannot have changed to now be singular.
6. Appeal to Authority, i.e. “ <i>The final authorities for the meanings of words are the dictionary, linguists, or people who are important in society or in our lives.</i> ”	main theme modified to include language users as an abstract authority <i>grammatical correctness, commonness, traditionality, etc.</i>
7. Change is Too Difficult and Unnecessary, i.e. “ <i>Most expressions, particularly pronouns, are too deeply ingrained to be changed by individuals [...]</i> ”	<i>introducing change/new pronouns is difficult</i> , comments in various <i>change</i> subthemes [neopronouns] “[...] trying to introduce new pronouns into the English language is going to be a difficult task .” [neopronouns] “[...] I think it is too hard to change pronouns because they are such a large part of speech. [...]” [nonbinary <i>they</i>] “As an older person it's difficult for me to un-learn the rules of a lifetime . However, language changes and I should too.”
8. Historical Authenticity, i.e. “ <i>Changing to nonsexist language would require rewriting of great literature, English idioms, and historical documents.</i> ”	no direct correspondence, but related subtheme: <i>generic he is acceptable in historical contexts, idioms, etc.</i>
9. Sexism is Acceptable Example: “A woman [...] will never be [...] equal to a man . It is a concept that needs to be faced .”	“Cissexism is Acceptable”, <i>no need for nonbinary pronouns because there are only two genders</i> [nonbinary pronouns] “You are either male or female , irrespective of your birth gender. Making something else up is fiction .”
10. Hostility and Ridicule, i.e. <i>sexist language and its opponents are ridiculous</i>	<i>weird (ridiculous), dislike/hate</i> and other <i>negative</i> comments, commonly directed at nonbinary individuals instead of opponents of sexist language.
11. Tradition, i.e., “ <i>Masculine terms are traditional in society; language has existed in society for a long time and should not be changed</i> ”	<i>traditional/conventional</i> [he] “He is used for and always has been used to refer those things” [he] “It is how the language has formed. There are languages that give genders to inanimate objects. We use the masculine as a neutral ¹ .”
12. Lack of Knowledge/Understanding, i.e. <i>benign excuses for sexist language</i> . Example: “Some people just don't know any better”	no direct correspondence, but some related comments: [he] “[...] I doubt they had malicious intent behind it [...]”

As the list above illustrates, most of the arguments identified in the two previous studies were also found in the present study, with only one exception: missing were Cross-Cultural comments. With the other categories, even when there is no direct correspondence, there are nevertheless similar elements (e.g. Historical Authenticity). Indeed, the typology from the previous studies could have been applied to the present data.¹²⁷ However, such a deductive approach might have erased some of the nuances the present study has managed to capture with a more inductive approach. For example, while the previous studies focused on arguments *against* nonsexist language, the present study explored supportive arguments as well.¹²⁸ Furthermore, the data on nonbinary pronouns provided many arguments not present among generic pronouns.

In more detail, starting with the category Sexist Language is Not Sexist, similar comments were found in the present study as well. The subthemes *everyone understands* (what is meant by *he* in epicene contexts) and *inclusive* most closely correspond to this category: if the usage is intended to be generic/inclusive/nonsexist, it cannot be sexist. In other words, intention, and not interpretation, is imagined to determine meaning. While this is the essence of category four, some participants also explicitly claimed that the use of *he* as an epicene is not sexist, even though it is “inaccurate and non-inclusive”. The implication seems to be that such language issues are too trivial to be considered sexist, as they are not as severe as other types of sexism. In this sense, then, there is a connection to the Language is a Trivial Concern category.

Since the *trivial* subtheme was adopted from the previous studies already during the analysis, this subtheme corresponds well to the original category, even though there may be more variation in the comments of the present study (see Appendix E). While the Language is a Trivial Concern category compares language issues to more severe societal issues, some of the participants of the present study viewed pronouns specifically as a trivial concern, indicating that there are bigger problems even within language use, for example sexual slurs.

As mentioned, the Appeal to Authority category was adopted and modified as a broader main theme in the present study. As such, there are many similarities with this category in the present study; one difference is that apart from one non-specified appeal to research, there were no occurrences of explicitly appealing to linguists as language authorities in the present study. Instead, appeals to grammar, commonness, and traditionality were frequent in the data. Related to Appeal to Authority are appeals to Word Etymology. This category most directly relates to comments about *generic he being traditional*, as some participants argued that since *he* has “always” been used as a generic pronoun, it ought to be continued to be used like that. For the

¹²⁷ As mentioned before, only Appeal to Authority and Language is a Trivial Concern were adopted during the analysis phase.

¹²⁸ Without further analysis, Parks and Robertson briefly mention having identified some supportive comments as well (1998a: 459).

present study, this category could also be extended to include arguments about the *plural* nature of *they*: since *they* is originally a plural pronoun, it cannot have changed to have become a singular pronoun as well.

While the original Change is Too Difficult and Unnecessary category refers to changes in generic pronouns, in the present study similar comments were mostly directed at nonbinary pronouns. The main argument is that changing pronouns is difficult or even impossible because pronouns represent a stable or even a closed class of items. Most closely related are the comments under the subtheme *neopronouns are difficult*, although this subtheme includes more specific comments as well, e.g. it's difficult that there are so many neopronouns (see Appendix E). In addition, some of the comments merged in the *can't force change* subtheme conveyed that pronouns specifically cannot be changed or are particularly difficult to change.

The *can't force change* subtheme most closely corresponds to the Freedom of Speech/Unjustified Coercion category: a person should not be forced to change their language use. However, comments explicitly referencing “free speech” or “freedom of speech” were not frequent in the present study, even though the sentiment was present in the *can't force change* comments.¹²⁹ In addition, a relevant aspect with this category concerns the perceived proponents of change: for both nonsexist language reforms and nonbinary pronouns, the leaders of change are characterized as a vocal minority of (extreme) liberals.

In addition, whereas the original categories relating to language change include comments *against* change, the present study also identified comments supporting change, viewing language change as a natural phenomenon (*languages evolve*). Furthermore, when comments about *change* were directed at generic pronouns, they were often used to argue against the use of gendered generics in epicene contexts: the use of *he* was perceived as *old fashioned*, something that *should be avoided*. In comparison, the original category includes comments supporting the continued use of generic *he* in epicene contexts.

The category Historical Authenticity is also related to language change, but it has no direct correspondence with the subthemes of the present study. However, the *historical* comments with *he* bear some similarity: the use of *he* as an epicene is acceptable in historical contexts and as part of established idioms. Much more directly applicable is the Tradition category, which in the present study is represented with the *traditional* subtheme. Many commentators used the *traditional/conventional* status of the generic *he* in epicene contexts to argue for the acceptability of this usage, but this subtheme also includes comments acknowledging the convention yet condemning the use in present-day English.

The Sexism is Acceptable category fits the present study only in a modified form: Cissexism is Acceptable (cf. Vergoossen et al., 2020: 4, discussed below).

¹²⁹ In my own experience, direct appeals to free speech are frequent in public online discussions about nonbinary pronouns

Indeed, there were no supportive comments about male superiority similar to the example provided by Parks and Robertson (see list above), but there were plenty of cissexist comments as a reaction to the nonbinary pronouns. The cissexism was most prevalent with the subtheme *no need for nonbinary pronouns because there are only two genders*. However, cissexism is also apparent in comments indicating a *minority* does not deserve their own pronouns, as well as in comments invalidating nonbinary identities (*nonbinary negative*). Furthermore, while there is no direct correspondence with the Lack of Knowledge/Understanding category, some comments in the *inclusive* or *everyone understands* subthemes seem to function similarly as benign excuses for sexist language.

The final category to be considered, Hostility and Ridicule, finds correspondence in the hateful and other negative comments included in the subthemes *dislike/hate*, *nonbinary negative*, and *weird* (although not all *weird* comments were “hostile”). The biggest difference is that while the original category includes comments making fun of supporters of nonsexist language, in the present study such comments were most often directed at nonbinary individuals, and people who support the adoption of nonbinary pronouns.

Also working with present-day data, somewhat similar results were attained in a recent study applying the typology by Blaubergs (1980) and Parks and Robertson (1998a) on arguments towards the Swedish *hen* (Vergoossen et al., 2020). With some modifications, not unlike those presented above, most of the arguments stemming from 168 participants fit the existing typology, but two additional categories were still needed: Gender Identification Is Important and Distractor in Communication (2020: 4–7). The latter category partly coincides with the *confusing/distracting* comments in the present study; *hen* is viewed to distract communication because its use is perceived as a political statement (ibid.). In this regard, the present study demonstrated similar associations with both generic *she* and the neopronouns. The former category includes comments supporting binary pronouns for their “identifying” function, while opposing *hen* as depersonalizing. This category shares some common ground with how some participants of the present study viewed nonbinary *they* as dehumanizing (*negative connotation*), but comments supporting binary pronouns for their identifying function specifically were scarce. The closest category would be the *only two genders* subtheme, as many commentators saw the binary pronouns as the only “right pronouns”; Vergoossen et al. also identified similar cissexist views in their data, coded under Cisgenderism (2020).

In addition to the aspects discussed above, the present study also identified many additional arguments, particularly with nonbinary pronouns. The most central theme in this regard concerned language rights. While the *no need* comments can be reconceptualized under the notion of Cissexism is Acceptable, the supportive comments relating to how *whatever pronoun one*

chooses is acceptable were equally prevalent and important but cannot comfortably be linked to any of the previous categories.

Overall, the present study demonstrates that many of the same arguments that were documented decades earlier are still well and alive, some having even found new ground with nonbinary pronouns. Additionally, the present study has expanded the focus from opposing arguments to supporting ones. For example, generic *they* is often preferred for being *inclusive*, while the most common source of support with nonbinary pronouns concerned the right to self-identify, and to choose one's pronouns. Furthermore, the similarities of the present study and the *hen* study by Vergoossen et al. (2020) suggest that such arguments may also extend to different languages going through similar changes.

11.4.4 Considering underlying ideologies

Building on the thematic analysis, I identified several possible ideologies underlying the participants' attitudes towards pronouns. Before discussing these ideologies in more detail, I want to shortly consider the nature of attitudes and ideologies again. As discussed in Chapter 3, while ideological beliefs are interpreted from the participants' attitudes, it is acknowledged that explicit expressions do not always reflect "deeply held beliefs" (Rosa & Burdick, 2016: 107). Other motivations besides being truthful about one's thoughts or feelings may be at play, for example a desire to comply with what is perceived to be the socially accepted response (i.e. social desirability). As such, inferences ought to be made with caution.

Explicit language attitudes may also function as lay rationalizations or justification for particular language use (e.g. Silverstein, 1979: 193). For example, even if a person explicitly opposes nonbinary *they* because it is "grammatically incorrect", grammatical correctness may simply function as an overt rationalization, disguising a deeper discomfort with nonbinary identities. To explore this latter possibility, consider the different responses singular *they* got when used as a nonbinary and a generic pronoun (Figure 41; for absolute frequencies, see Table 33 and Table 36, Appendix B).

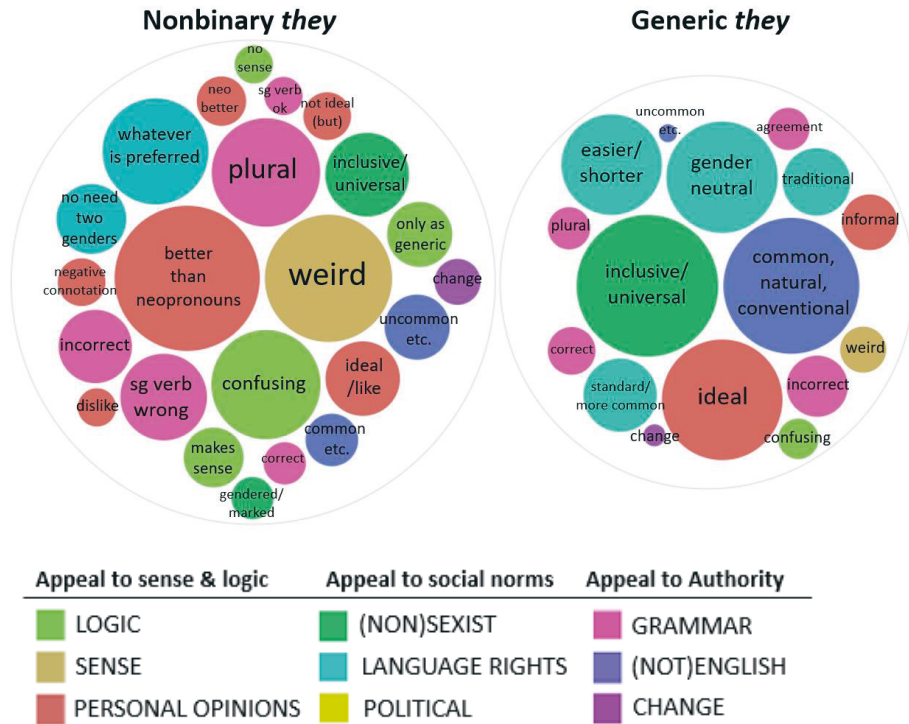


Figure 41. Thematic fields for nonbinary and generic *they*

Overall, the participants reacted very differently to the two uses of *they*: nonbinary use was much more controversial than generic use. The reasons for such different reactions may be both language-internal and external. Nonbinary *they* is used to refer to specific individuals, while generic *they* refers to unspecific antecedents. As such, notional number might be at play: generic *they* can often be understood as notionally plural, while nonbinary *they* cannot. This is highlighted when using proper names with nonbinary *they* (in the examples), making the usage undeniably singular. However, the data also suggest that there are language-external reasons for the participants to reject nonbinary use.

The main difference I want to highlight in the participants' reactions concerns perceived grammatical correctness. More specifically, arguments about singular use of *they* being *incorrect* because the pronoun is inherently *plural* were far more frequent with nonbinary *they* than with generic *they*. Furthermore, when *incorrect* comments were made with generic *they*, they were often coupled with supportive arguments (e.g. *incorrect but common/traditional/ideal*). In a similar fashion, the *confusing* arguments are much more frequent with nonbinary *they*; these arguments largely relied on *they* being perceived as a plural pronoun. To further illustrate how differently some of the participants reacted to the two uses, consider the examples below, each pair stemming from the same participant.

Table 15. Generic vs. nonbinary they

Participant	Generic	Nonbinary
P1132	“Easy to use & doesn’t leave anyone out.”	“Awkward use & feels unnatural”
P1019	“This is what I most commonly use [...] It is general”	“‘they’ and ‘their’ are plural. I don’t care what Lee or Chris ‘identify’ as. It’s either male or female, period.”
P917	“Grammatically correct”	“Sounds weird saying it. Blatantly obvious that this is bad grammar.”

Such examples raise the question whether the participants are really arguing about grammar, or whether they are using number agreement to rationalize and justify their negative orientation towards nonbinary *they*, and consequently, nonbinary individuals. The present study is unable to provide a conclusive answer, but this would explain why the same participants accept generic *they* as grammatically correct, while rejecting nonbinary *they* as ungrammatical. It is possible that even speakers who accept singular *they* with known binary individuals might reject nonbinary use of the pronoun (see section 2.2.2 and the difference between Type 4 and 5). As such, in contexts where the usage is identical (e.g. *my professor likes their coffee black*), there may be speakers whose acceptance depends on whether the referent is identified as a nonbinary or binary person (see also Bjorkman, 2017, and Konnelly & Cowper, 2020).

Such seemingly contradictory assessments were the motivation to further explore what type of ideological stances might be behind the participants’ overt evaluations. Building on the thematic analysis, several different ideologies in the participants’ responses were identified, re-verbalized as “ideological sentiments”, i.e. representative statements. Figure 42 presents the ideological sentiments (in blue circles), connecting them to example subthemes (in gray boxes), as well as to main themes (headers); the main ideologies are included at the bottom of each grouping.

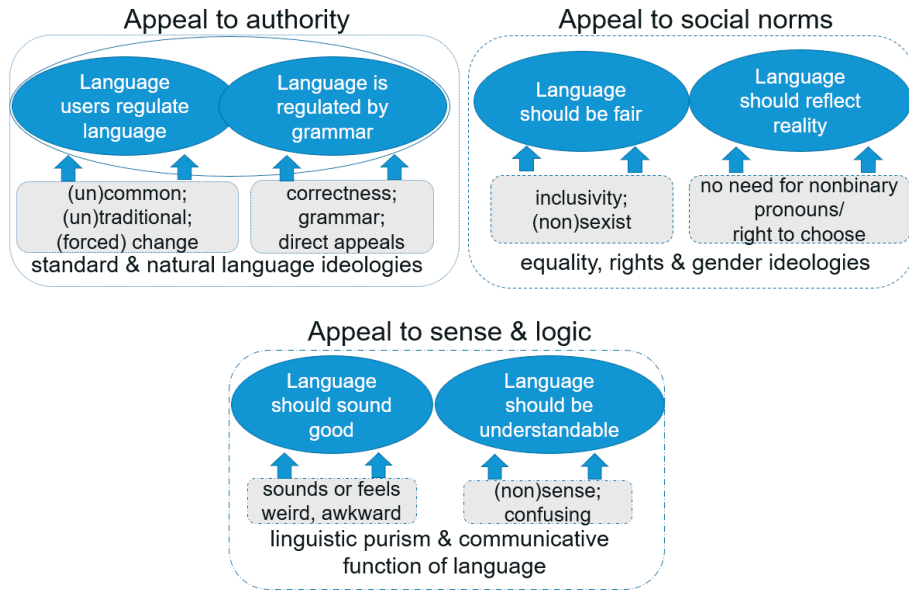


Figure 42. Ideological sentiments

Starting with the **Appeal to authority** group, the main ideology associated with these arguments concerns standard language ideology. As discussed in section 3.2.2, one of the core beliefs of standard language ideology is that there is one variety of a language that is the “right” or “correct” one (e.g. Milroy, 2001). Standard language is often unquestioned, part of “common sense”, requiring no further justification (e.g. Milroy, 2001: 535–536). This was often the case in the present data as well, although sometimes perceived correctness was justified with additional arguments, for example relating to number agreement, or commonness of the usage.

Two closely related ideological sentiments both suggesting that *language is regulated* were formed to represent standard and natural language ideologies. The difference between the sentiments concerns whether the regulation occurs internally by language users (1), or externally, by perceived language authorities such as grammar books and dictionaries (2).

1. Language users regulate language
2. Language is regulated by grammar (or other external system)

Arguments relying on notions of (un)naturalness, (un)traditionality and (un)commonness relate to the first sentiment, *language users regulate language*. This sentiment can be understood as language use being “intrinsically normative”, as language users themselves continuously make assessments about language, regulating their own language use as well as that of others (e.g. Blommaert, 2006: 520). This type of regulation occurs mostly unconsciously in day-to-day use (so to speak leading by example), but also consciously in acts of correcting others or objecting to particular language use

(e.g. Seargeant, 2007: 358). Associated with the sentiment is also an added layer of *natural language ideology*. At the core of this ideology lies the belief that languages should not be regulated “externally”, particularly when it comes to language change. New features should rise “naturally” instead, through every-day language use. In contrast, when features are introduced explicitly, this type of advocating for language change is considered *forced* and *unnatural*, even a violation of free speech. Thus, some comments about language change are also linked to *natural language* ideologies.

The second sentiment relies on *regulation by grammar*, in which grammar is understood as an abstract, external authority, realized in grammar books but also dictionaries and style guidelines for example. Arguments about grammatical correctness and number agreement rely on this sentiment.

For the second main theme, **Appeal to social norms**, two loosely related ideological sentiments were formed as well, associated with ideologies about gender and equality.

3. Language should be fair

4. Language should reflect reality

The former sentiment (3) mostly concerns generic pronouns, which many participants believed ought to be *gender-inclusive* and *nonsexist*. In this sense, language use should be fair, reflective of gender equality. However, what is considered gender-fair is dependent on gender ideologies; for example, *he or she* is only inclusive if one refuses to acknowledge that gender is not binary.

Similarly, with the second formulation (4), gender ideologies determine the direction of the sentiment: language should either reflect a binary or non-binary reality of gender. As such, either *there is no need for nonbinary pronouns since there are only two genders*, or, *whatever pronoun a person chooses is acceptable* since people have the right to self-identify and determine what terms are appropriate. In this latter sense, language rights are connected to the right to self-identify and choose one’s pronouns (and other referential terms), as we are moving away from determining gender based on bodily features (see Zimman, 2019). In a broader sense, the question concerning the right to linguistic representation, is of course connected to gender equality as well.

For the third main theme, **Appeal to sense & logic**, two loosely related ideological sentiments were also formed. However, unlike above, these two sentiments are not as directly linked to any one ideology.

5. Language should be understandable

6. Language should sound good

Instead of being explicitly tied to any broader ideology, the former sentiment (5) is characterized by prioritizing the communicative function of language. This sentiment is representative of comments rejecting uses that are *confusing*, valuing clarity of language instead. Yet, such comments seem

ideologically grounded as well, because they are more often directed at nonbinary than at generic pronouns. For example, many participants argued that the use of nonbinary *they* is *confusing* because the pronoun could also refer to another, plural antecedent; these comments were much fewer with generic *they*, even though it suffers from the same perceived hazard as nonbinary *they*. One might also argue gendered generic pronouns to cause similar confusion as nonbinary pronouns, as the pronoun might be interpreted as gender-specific instead of the intended generic use. However, such comments were generally not made with generic pronouns.¹³⁰

The latter sentiment, that language should sound good (6), relates to the prevalent *weird* comments the participants made. Admittedly, the participants' comments about a usage being *weird* could also be interpreted as euphemisms for "wrong" or "unnatural", and as such, these comments could be associated with language regulation as well. However, since many of the participants made comments such as "it's correct, but weird", these notions are separated here as well.

Loosely connected to the last sentiment is also linguistic purism, which, while distinct from, relies on standard language ideologies (see 3.2.2). In short, linguistic purism refers to the belief that there is a particular form of language that is better than others, "pure". For example, objections to language change often arise from the fear that the language is "declining" (e.g. Walsh, 2016: 1). Change, or variation, is considered a "threat" to the present, idealized use of language that ought to be protected and conserved (ibid.: 7–9). This type of linguistic purism is most evident from the participants' reactions to the neopronouns, which were experienced as *alien* or *foreign* to English, included in the *weird* subtheme. To some degree, linguistic purism might also be the driving force behind some of the *can't force change* comments.

Overall, the above discussion has highlighted several ideologies that may have guided the participants' responses. While the separation of the different ideologies above is somewhat rigid, in reality it may be that these ideologies exist side by side, perhaps competing in different contexts. For example, the same person may (overtly) object to nonbinary *they* since they do not view it as part of standard language, but with generic pronouns the social aspects may weigh more, supporting use of inclusive pronouns. Furthermore, as already implied, the researcher only has access to explicit attitudes, i.e. overt expressions, and it may often be that what is expressed does not (fully) match how the person truly thinks or feels about the issue. As such, much of the analysis relies on my personal interpretation and understanding of the broader context.

¹³⁰ The *confusing* subtheme with generic *she* is characterized by comments describing the usage as *distracting* due to being unusual and/or politically loaded.

12 NONBINARY PARTICIPANTS' PRONOUNS

In this chapter, the nonbinary participants' relationship with pronouns is explored. Most of these participants are native English speakers (n=79), the majority American English speakers (n=43); the other English speakers were a mix of British (n=14), Australian (n=6) and Canadian English (n=6) speakers. The rest were six native Finnish, three bilingual speakers and one Swedish speaker.

In the survey form, the nonbinary participants were asked to respond to additional (and optional) questions about their pronouns. These questions (items A1-A4, Appendix A) concerned which pronouns the participants use (72 responses), whether correct pronoun use is important (n=75), and how the participants felt about misgendering, by pronoun use or otherwise (n=73). In more general terms, the last question asked whether the participants had felt discriminated by the language use of others (n=74). The approach with this subset of data (about 4300 words) is best described as a close reading, paying attention to reoccurring viewpoints or themes.

12.1 OVERVIEW

In this context, nonbinary is used as an umbrella term for participants who do not identify exclusively as female or male. The majority of these participants also described themselves as nonbinary (62%), sometimes combined with other descriptors, for example “nonbinary, agender” or “masculine nonbinary”. Other identity labels the participants used include “genderqueer”, “bigender”, and “gender fluid”. What these labels mean to individual participants falls beyond the scope of the study.

Figure 43 provides a word cloud of the nonbinary participants' pronouns. Importantly, I have modified the frequencies, since otherwise *they* would overtake the less frequent pronouns (see below). What can be gathered from the word cloud already is that some of the nonbinary participants indicated using multiple pronouns; this aspect is explored in the following section.

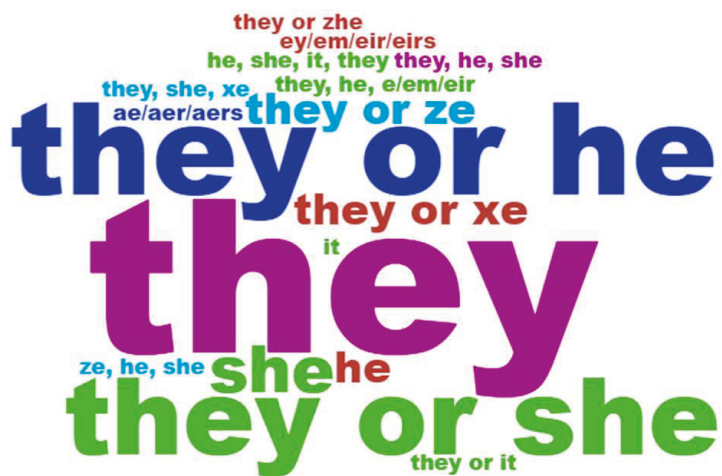


Figure 43. Word cloud: nonbinary pronouns. Size not relative to absolute frequencies, $n=72$ nonbinary participants.¹³¹

The main result is that *they* was the most common pronoun: *they* was an appropriate pronoun for about 80% of the participants, either reported as the only pronoun ($n=36$) or as one alternative ($n=23$). Notably, only 10 participants indicated using neopronouns: *ze* and *xe* were used by a handful of participants, while the pronouns *ey*, *e*, *ae*, and *zhe* were only used by one participant each, often along with other pronouns. The binary pronouns were also relatively frequent, however, only 5 participants reported using only *he* or *she*. In addition, for three participants, *it* was an appropriate pronoun. One might have assumed these participants to be Finnish, since the Finnish *se* (*it*) is employed for human reference in colloquial use. However, these participants were two (monolingual) native American English and one native Swedish speaker. These participants did not further elaborate on *it*, but a few other participants specified that they would *not* want to be referred to with *it*, as this pronoun was perceived as “dehumanizing”.

The general trend aligns with Darwin’s study on nonbinary Reddit users (2017: 329–330), as well as Parker’s online survey (2017: 16–17): *they* is more commonly used than the neopronouns (see also Cordoba, 2020: 25). This has also been the trend in the annual, international, non-academic surveys on identity labels, titles, and pronouns, conducted by Lodge. The latest results from 2019 ($n= 11\ 242$) show that about 80% of the participants used *they* (as one option), while about 30% of the participants also used *he* or *she* (Lodge, 2019). *Xe* was the most frequently chosen neopronoun (7%), followed by *ze*, *e*, and *fae* (each chosen by about 5% of the participants) (ibid.). In addition, during the 6-year span of the surveys, *they* is the one pronoun that seems to have increased in popularity (ibid.). This same trend is likely to be replicated in many (online) nonbinary communities.

¹³¹ The word clouds have been created with a browser-based freeware, www.wordclouds.com.

12.2 USING MULTIPLE PRONOUNS

About a third of the participants listed multiple pronouns (see also Parker, 2017). The participants' further comments conveyed that pronoun preference depended on context. Two main motivations for this type of pronoun variation were identified: **practical reasons** and **the context of the interaction**.

The main practical concern the participants had was ease of use. For some participants, this was a reason to accept reference with binary pronouns (examples 1–2 below), but for many the choice was between *they* and a neopronoun (examples 3–4). In other words, some participants would have ideally wanted to be referred to with a neopronoun, but they felt that asking others to use *they* was more reasonable.

- (1) “If everyone in the world was used to using 'they' I'd want that, but to avoid drama/conflict, I think it's better if people just assume and use 'she'” (P964)
- (2) “In an ideal world, I would ask people to use neutral terms, 'they/ze', however I do not do this yet because of practical reasons” (P331)
- (3) “I currently ask people to use 'they'. I wish I could realistically ask for 'xe'.” (P552)
- (4) “Singular they. Ze/zir if neopronouns catch on enough for it to be less of an uphill battle.” (P548)

There seems to be two underlying reasons for being concerned about ease of use: to avoid “being difficult” by asking others to use “more difficult” pronouns, and/or to avoid the consequences of an unfavorable or questioning response. Indeed, asking others to use nonbinary pronouns often means having to educate people about pronouns and identity (e.g. Darwin, 2017: 328–329), and/or having to defend one's own position.

The other main reason for using multiple pronouns was the context of interaction. Most commonly, the participants explained that their pronoun varies based on the relationship they have with each person referring to them. For example, friends and family might use a nonbinary pronoun, while strangers might be expected to use a binary pronoun (examples 5 and 6).

- (5) “I prefer for my friends to use they/them, but prefer strangers to use he/him.” (P557)
- (6) “[...] There are certain people in my life who use each pronoun, depending on the context of the relationship.” (P636)
- (7) “Either they/them, or the pronouns that go with the way I am presenting that day. However, this is more complicated in real life, because depending on how long I've known someone or what our history is, I may prefer that they only use he or only use she -- for example, I don't want to deal with my mom trying to use any pronouns but 'she', as she has always called me, and I want my chosen brother to call me 'he' because our relationship is that we are brothers.” (P658)

While not prevalent in the current study, for genderfluid or bigender individuals, pronoun use may be linked to their overt expression of different gender identities at a given moment (example 7), which may vary from day to day or from one context to the other (see Corwin, 2017).

Additionally, for some individuals, any pronoun that is not the one assigned to them at birth is preferable (example 8). While passing as either female or male is more familiar from the context of binary transgender individuals (e.g. Zimman, 2019: 159), for nonbinary individuals, being referred to with a pronoun that does not index their assigned gender means they have been successful in “passing” as non-female or non-male at least (see Darwin, 2017: 326).

(8) “Generally I prefer 'they' but I'm usually also okay with 'he' too, maybe because it takes me further away from the gender I was assigned at birth and do not really identify with.” (P645)

In sum, the responses highlighted that pronoun use is often more complex for nonbinary individuals, in comparison to the average cisgender experience, or even binary transgender people, who might “simply” switch from one binary pronoun to the other. For some nonbinary individuals, pronoun use might remain fluid, instead of transforming from one set of pronouns to another.

12.3 IMPORTANCE OF PRONOUNS, AND MISGENDERING

The subsequent questions concerned the importance of using correct pronouns on the one hand, and misgendering and using wrong pronouns on the other hand. Overall, only very few participants indicated being indifferent about pronouns: for the majority, correct use of pronouns was important, and using wrong pronouns and/or misgendering was experienced negatively.

However, as above, what pronoun use is desirable and how the participants experience misgendering depends on the context, most importantly on whether the individual is out as nonbinary in the given context.

First, some participants felt it would be unreasonable to expect strangers to get their pronouns right (examples 9–10). In addition, for some, being misgendered by strangers happened so frequently that they simply could not afford to be affected by it all the time (11).

(9) “Yes: although I put up with incorrect pronoun usage where I am not out, that is a source of despair.” (P532)

(10) “I can't reasonably expect strangers and people I haven't come out to do so. However, i really appreciate it when people do.” (P607)

(11) “I feel like its so complicated that I can't ascribe that much important to it, because it would just be exhausting to care and to have to constantly teach people what to call me.” (P658)

Nonbinary participants' pronouns

Second, emotional and/or physical harm was a concern for many participants. Because nonbinary pronouns indicate an identity that is not (exclusively) binary, revealing one's pronouns to be nonbinary also means revealing a nonbinary identity. As such, some participants did not feel comfortable, or safe, revealing their pronouns to people who might react unfavorably. For some participants, this meant avoiding having to educate others about the topic and having to defend their own identity. Others feared potential conflict that might cause them emotional or physical harm (examples 12–13). Dealing with such adverse responses requires emotional resources many of the participants felt they could not spare (example 14). In already existing relationships, the participants also had to consider how revealing their nonbinary identity might affect the relationship (example 15). If the other person were to react adversely, one might have to consider ending the relationship. As such, the stakes in revealing one's nonbinary identity are high.

(12) “Yes, unless I am in the company of people who may cause me harm if I were to give my correct pronouns.” (P745)

(13) “I want an easy and conflict free life, so people can use 'she'.” (P964)

(14) “[...] I don't always correct people because I often don't have the skills or energy to deal with it if they react poorly.” (P651)

(15) “I don't tell people I'm nonbinary, or what my pronouns are, if I think they're going to react poorly and I can't afford to cut them out of my life if they do. [...]” (P651)

The participants also shared their reactions to misgendering, by pronoun use or otherwise (e.g. by use of incorrect titles or nouns). While the question allowed the participants to reflect on other types of misgendering as well, most of the participants still focused on pronouns. Most of the participants reported negative reactions to misgendering (about 80%). Figure 44 illustrates the participants' descriptions (adjectives, nouns, descriptive phrases) of how it feels to be misgendered. Overall, the participants experienced misgendering as disrespectful and invalidating to their identity, inducing varying levels of feeling uncomfortable, annoyed, upset, hurt, sad or angry. The most common phrase was simply that *it hurts*.



Figure 44. Word cloud for reactions to misgendering, $n=73$ nonbinary participants

Many participants also referred to an increased sense of gender dysphoria as a result of misgendering. In this context, gender dysphoria is interpreted as discomfort arising from a mismatch between the individual's gender and perceived gender. In this sense, misgendering functions as a reminder that others do not (immediately) recognize one's gender (see McLemore, 2015).

Furthermore, misgendering was experienced as particularly hurtful when the act was purposeful, done by someone close to the person, someone who knows which pronouns to use, yet still fails to do so (examples 16–17).

(16) “It depends on the person. If it's someone close to me, it's hurtful, but it's not as big of a deal when a complete stranger does.” (P53)

(17) “It hurts. I feel pained. If I have told someone my pronoun preferences and they misgender me, I feel betrayed.” (P544)

Diverging from the majority, two participants also conveyed being indifferent to misgendering, as their own sense of identity was not affected by how others would see them (examples 18–19).

(18) “There really isn't a way to misgender me. I feel the way I feel about myself and anyone else's perception of me is irrelevant to my experience.” (P626)

(19) “I don't really have right or wrong pronouns because I'm agender and gender literally doesn't matter to me whatsoever, as long as people aren't disrespectful or malicious. [...]” (P632)

The participants also elaborated on their experiences with language-based discrimination, by pronoun use or otherwise. The majority of the nonbinary participants reported having experienced such discrimination (80%), which for many led to feelings of exclusion and invalidation. Particularly common was experiencing cissexist language as exclusionary (e.g. *ladies and*

gentlemen, he or she).¹³² Using cissexist language can be an indication of underlying negative attitudes towards nonbinary people, which is unwelcoming at the least but can also make nonbinary individuals feel unsafe (20–21).

(20) “This [*he or she*] is deliberately leaving me and people like me out. It's telling me that I don't exist. It's saying that people who were lucky enough to be male are female matter and I don't.” (P586)

(21) “Yes--people very often use language that is heterosexist and cissexist, and it's consistently made me feel unsafe. More inclusive language choices are very important to me because of that.” (P715)

In addition, a few participants also brought up the relatively common mocking of neopronouns one encounters especially online.¹³³ Even when only directed towards neopronouns, such a stance can be experienced as invalidating to nonbinary individuals at large (example 22).

(22) “I've heard several people actively mock neo-pronouns to my face, which feels invalidating and sometimes intimidating as a non-binary person even if I don't use neo-pronouns myself. It indicated that they don't respect my identity. [...]” (P607)

12.4 PRONOUNS, IDENTITY, AND POLITICS REVISITED

Overall, the nonbinary participants' responses emphasized the role of pronouns to identity. The use of (in)correct pronouns was often experienced as (dis)respectful, and as (in)validation of one's gender identity. The importance of pronouns becomes particularly evident when considering the effects of misgendering. In previous research, misgendering, or identity invalidation, has been identified as a source for “minority stress [...] with significant implications for their social and emotional well-being” (Johnson et al., 2019). In more detail, McLemore (2015) shows that misgendering can have various adverse effects on mental health, including feelings of devaluation and anxiety. The present study shows that incorrect pronoun use specifically is a source of continuous misgendering, demonstrating similar effects as Johnson et al. (2019) and McLemore (2015). However, how intensively one experiences adverse effects from misgendering may be context-dependent; intentional misgendering may be experienced as more severe than unintentional misgendering, and misgendering by friends or family may be more hurtful than misgendering by strangers (see also Cordoba, 2020: Chapter 6).

¹³² Some of Parker's participants delivered similar reports (2017: 21).

¹³³ The survey also attracted a few cisgender participants who made jokes about identifying as inanimate objects or asking to be addressed by absurd titles, serving the purpose of mocking neopronouns and the people who use them.

The present study demonstrates a strong yet complex relationship between nonbinary identities and pronouns. Such a link has already been clearly demonstrated among binary transgender individuals, for whom being referenced correctly with *he* or *she* is a sign of “passing” (e.g. Harrison, 2013: 17–18; Zimman, 2019: 159). However, as illustrated above, for many nonbinary individuals, pronoun use is more complex. Instead of transforming from *he* to *she* (or vice versa), for nonbinary individuals, pronoun use may be fluid, or dependent on context.

While Zimman points out that nonbinary communities have been attempting to decouple pronouns from identity (2019: 161), for the participants of the present study pronouns seemed to be linked to their identity. This is highlighted by the implications of (in)correct pronoun use. Being pronounced correctly, and passing as nonbinary, is experienced as validating, a sign of respect indicating that the person acknowledges and accepts nonbinary identities. In contrast, as is evident particularly from the participants’ reactions to being misgendered, the use of wrong pronouns is experienced as invalidating to one’s identity. Particularly explicit refusals to use correct pronouns are considered deeply disrespectful, the adverse effects intensifying by “social proximity” (see Cordoba, 2020: 168–169). Pronoun use, then, is one way in which nonbinary (and other transgender) identities are either affirmed or rejected (e.g. Zimman, 2019: 154–155; cf. Buchholtz & Hall, 2010).

What further highlights the link between pronouns and identity is how some participants did not wish to reveal their pronouns in contexts that felt unsafe or unwelcoming, but instead used binary pronouns. In other words, revealing that one uses nonbinary pronouns also indicates a nonbinary identity.

Yet the responses also demonstrated that for some nonbinary individuals, there is no *one* correct pronoun, but several alternatives. For some this was a result of having a bigender or fluid identity, for others pronoun use was negotiated from one relationship to another, highlighting the interactional aspect with pronouns: **who am I to you**. Not all individuals wish to renegotiate their existing relationships. For example, if they have been a *brother* to their sibling for a few decades already, they wish to continue being a *brother* and a *he* in that relationship. Clearly, gender and pronoun use is more complex, transformative or fluid, to many nonbinary individuals than to the average cisgender person.

Overall, it seems that while nonbinary pronouns do not directly index a particular identity, in the present-day context they *do* index an identity that falls beyond the binary. This was also demonstrated by the (cisgender) participants’ responses to nonbinary pronouns, handled in Chapter 11.

Furthermore, in section 4.4, pronouns were considered in terms of political and/or ideological acts. Particularly acts of refusal and support were visible in the dataset. Using the wrong pronouns was considered disrespectful and invalidating, and the severity increased if the person was using the wrong

pronouns on purpose. Some participants reported that acquaintances or even family members explicitly refused to use their pronouns. Such refusals are often coupled with arguments about how difficult it is to start using new pronouns, or by appealing to “grammar rules”. However, while adjusting one’s pronoun use is cognitively challenging (e.g. Zimman 2017, 2019), refusing to use someone’s pronouns can hardly be interpreted as a neutral act, simply as a “grammatical preference”. As established above, pronouns are linked to identity, and as such, refusing to use nonbinary pronouns is interpreted as refusing to recognize nonbinary identities. Similarly, one participant mentioned a tactic (cis) people sometimes employ when they are uncomfortable using nonbinary pronouns: they avoid using pronouns altogether. While perhaps not as hurtful as direct misgendering, an avoidance tactic is ultimately a refusal to use nonbinary pronouns, even if the act is indirect and passive.

In the present-day context, refusing to use a person’s pronouns is interpreted as taking a stance against a person’s right to self-identify and choose their pronouns, regardless what the person feels like their motivation for such a refusal is. In this regard, the situation is comparable to someone insisting using masculine constructions as epicenes: even with “good intentions”, the usage carries ideological values about male superiority with it (see Chapter 4). In contrast, using nonbinary pronouns referentially signals support for nonbinary individuals. Yet, sometimes people may use these pronouns only to comply with what they perceive to be the social standard in the context, disguising more negative attitudes towards nonbinary individuals. In other words, even when people overtly seem to respect others’ pronouns, they might not (fully) accept nonbinary identities.

PART V. FINAL DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore reasons for the changes that are occurring in 3rd person singular pronouns in English. The general aim was to investigate which pronouns are used, and why. In focus were *he*, *she*, *he or she*, *they*, *ze* and *xe*. The pronouns were examined in epicene generic contexts, while *they*, *ze* and *xe* were also studied in nonbinary contexts. What unites these pronouns is their connection to ideologies about gender and equality.

Gender-fair language has been the goal of nonsexist language reforms for many decades already. At the very core of nonsexist language is the idea that different genders (and sexualities) should have fair representation in language. This basic proposition certainly extends beyond the realm of gender, to self-determination and minority rights (e.g. Barten, 2015). The present study has further demonstrated both theoretically and empirically that these language rights should extend to nonbinary individuals and pronouns.

13 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In this final chapter, the main results from the survey study (n=1128) are first summarized and discussed (see also discussion in Chapters 8–12), followed by a discussion of limitations and notes for future research.

13.1 GENERIC PRONOUNS

With generic pronouns, the trend in usage was clear: nongendered options were favored over gendered pronouns. Singular *they* was used by over 80% of the participants. *They* was particularly favored by transgender participants (n=101), of whom only four ever used gendered pronouns. In other words, the variation with gendered pronouns occurred among the cisgender participants. This variation showed further differences based on the participants' age, education level, and native language. Particularly older participants, participants with a higher education level, and non-native speakers of English used gendered pronouns more often than other participants. The trend with education and non-native speakers of English likely reflects (outdated) prescriptive rules, which are followed more closely in academic and L2 contexts (see Adami, 2009; Pauwels, 2010: 27–28). The younger participants' preference for *they*, on the other hand, likely reflects ongoing change (as per Apparent Time Hypothesis). In addition, participants who demonstrated more negative attitudes towards sexist language use in general were more likely to use nongendered pronouns themselves, already indicating that gendered pronouns were rejected due to their exclusive nature.

The general trend with acceptability reflected usage: singular *they* was accepted by almost all speakers in a generic context (94%), whereas using only *he* or only *she* was accepted only by about a third of the participants. The majority of participants (71%) accepted the conjoined *he or she*, while the neopronouns were generally rejected (accepted by only 15% of the participants). However, the investigation of independent variables revealed no one trend present for the acceptability of generic pronouns. Only somewhat more transgender participants rejected *he* and *she* than did cisgender participants, but the difference was greater with *he or she*, which was accepted by 75% of cisgender and only 43% of transgender participants. In contrast, considerably more transgender (62%) than cisgender (8% of male and 18% of female) participants accepted the generic neopronouns.

In addition, dismissive attitudes towards sexist language supported finding *he* and *she* acceptable, however, this trend did not repeat with *he or she*, likely because this construction is not as strongly associated as being gender-exclusive (see also Chapter 11). Indeed, the perceived inclusivity of the pronoun was only a significant factor for *he* and *she*; participants who viewed these pronouns as gender-exclusive more often rejected them than

participants who viewed them as gender-inclusive. There was also a consistent trend with education: participants with higher education levels more often accepted gendered pronouns. The other trends in the data were much less pronounced and inconsistent across the pronouns.

The participants' open responses revealed in more detail *why* the pronouns were accepted or rejected. Most clearly the responses reflected the sentiment that **language use should be fair**. The gendered pronouns were frequently described as *exclusive*, and there was a clear association to finding the usage unacceptable. While most participants seemed to reject gendered pronouns as epiphenomena, some still expressed explicit support for masculine epiphenomena, or accepted any pronoun because they viewed the issue as *trivial*. In contrast, singular *they* was most commonly lauded as *inclusive*. It was also frequently described as *natural*, *common* and *traditional*, and for many participants, it was the *ideal* choice. Indeed, many participants reacted to all other options by stating that *they is better*.

There was also a considerable difference between the different gendered pronouns: considerably more participants found *he* and *he or she* inclusive than *she*. Indeed, when comparing the solo binary pronouns, it was clear that the participants recognized the more established status of *he*, reflecting **standard language ideologies**. However, many participants felt that in addition to being *correct*, **language should also sound good**, leading them to object to *he or she* as *awkward* or *clumsy*. Yet, because the usage was still recognized as established, this perceived *weirdness* did not lead to rejection — unlike with the neopronouns. Indeed, the neopronouns faced considerable resistance, being perceived not only as *weird* and *confusing*, but even their status as pronouns was challenged.

Other common connotations for the gendered pronouns included viewing *he* as *old fashioned* and supporting a patriarchal worldview (*male-as-norm*). In comparison, *she* was perceived as less established, often leading to rejection of the pronoun, but sometimes the novelty was considered refreshing instead. Most notably though, *she* was seen as a **political choice**, challenging the status of *he*. Similarly, the use of *he or she* was also recognized as an *attempt to be less sexist*, even though for some participants there was a negative connotation with what was perceived to be politically correct language. Nevertheless, many participants believed **language should change to become more gender-fair**. Such attempts to change language were associated with liberal values, while conservatives were imagined to oppose such changes — the same division applies to nonbinary pronouns (see Curzan, 2014: 114; Cossman, 2018: 66–67).

13.2 NONBINARY PRONOUNS

With nonbinary pronouns, there was also a clear trend: nonbinary *they* triumphed over the neopronouns both in terms of general acceptability and use by nonbinary individuals.

Nearly 70% of the participants found *they* acceptable in nonbinary contexts, while only a third of the participants found neopronouns acceptable. As expected, there was a clear difference between cisgender and transgender participants in this regard: transgender participants accepted both types of pronouns, with only a handful of exceptions. This nearly unanimous support likely reflects recognizing that the right to choose one's pronouns is linked to the right to self-identify, which is crucially important to all transgender people, overriding personal preference; even the transgender participants who found neopronouns somehow undesirable still supported their use.

There was also a clear difference between cis female and cis male participants, as cis male participants rejected nonbinary pronouns more often, the difference being greatest with the neopronouns. This result may be due to cis women in general having been personally more affected by sexist language, compared to cis men, leading to greater awareness, and **support for nonsexist language** (e.g. Douglas & Sutton, 2014; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). This reasoning is further supported by the data, as negative attitudes towards sexist language predicted acceptance of nonbinary pronouns. As such, I suggest that personal experiences with sexist language expands to sympathy towards nonbinary individuals not having a representative, widely-accepted pronoun.

Furthermore, I propose that the ability to sympathize with the (nonbinary) pronoun issue is also the reason why **positive attitudes towards transgender individuals** and knowing transgender individuals personally supported finding nonbinary pronouns acceptable. This trend was particularly pronounced with the neopronouns: 80% of those participants who did not know transgender individuals personally rejected these pronouns. Similarly, Conrod also reports that, based on open comments, “social proximity or membership in a wider LGBT+ community” might result in higher ratings for specific use of *they* (Conrod, 2019: 251). The present study suggests the social proximity effect extends to neopronouns as well (see also Cordoba, 2020: 168–169).

Additionally, there was a clear trend with age: younger participants more often accepted nonbinary *they* than older participants. As mentioned, this result likely reflects ongoing change (as per Apparent Time hypothesis, Labov, 1994: 43–72), as also suggested by Conrod (2019: 90–92). Ongoing change may also be reflected in the general trend with native language. On average, native speakers of English more often found nonbinary use of *they* acceptable than non-native speakers. A double-effect may be at play here: on the one hand, non-native speakers may adhere to prescriptive rules more closely than native speakers. On the other hand, language change often starts with native

speakers, thus they might be more familiar with novel uses, such as the innovative uses of *they*.

In a related fashion, what seems to be a key factor for the differential reactions towards *they* and the neopronouns is familiarity with the usage (see Harari & McDavid, 1973; Song & Schwarz, 2009). Singular uses of *they* are arguably familiar to most people, while the neopronouns were completely new to many participants. Indeed, **familiarity with neopronouns predicted acceptance in both generic and nonbinary contexts**. The participants' open responses further support this interpretation in many ways. For example, whereas *they* generally escaped such objections, the neopronouns were often explicitly rejected as *not real pronouns*, and the consonants *z/x* were perceived as "foreign" to English, aligning with ideologies about linguistic purism (e.g. Walsh, 2016). Indeed, perhaps an ideology underlying and connecting many opposing arguments is that language change is a **threat to culture**, to the norms and status quo. After all, a common language is experienced as one of the key aspects of a common culture and attempts to change language at least temporarily disturb that imagined unity.

It is the perceived threat to culture that seems to have divided the participants in their general orientation towards nonbinary pronouns. While the participants employed many types of overt arguments to reject nonbinary pronouns, I propose that the polarizing effect is most importantly due to nonbinary pronouns challenging the binary gender ideology. In other words, the nonbinary pronouns were rejected as they do not fit a **binary gender ideology**, tied to the sentiment that **language should reflect reality**. This sentiment, however, was also shared by many of the supporters; because there are nonbinary identities, we should also have words and pronouns to describe them. The most common reason for accepting nonbinary pronouns was a belief that *whatever pronoun a person chooses is acceptable*, conceptualizing choice of pronouns as a person's right, further linked to the right to self-identify (e.g. Zimman, 2019). This notion is of course supported by a **non-binary gender ideology**. However, I cannot claim that all participants who viewed pronouns as a matter of personal choice were doing so because they accept nonbinary identities. Due to substantial and largely positive (mainstream) media attention regarding nonbinary pronouns and identities, it is possible that some participants perceived accepting a person's chosen pronouns as the socially desirable response.

My proposition that binary gender ideologies lie behind the participants' objections to nonbinary pronouns is supported by the differential reactions towards singular *they* as a generic and nonbinary pronoun. Whereas generic *they* was lauded as *traditional, common, ideal, gender-neutral* and *inclusive*, nonbinary *they* was rejected as *grammatically incorrect (plural), weird* and *confusing* (i.e. ambiguous with plural meaning). In comparison, generic singular *they* was argued to be *confusing* or *incorrect* much less frequently, and even then, such arguments generally did not lead to rejecting the usage. The difference between generic and nonbinary use of *they* is that the

acceptance of the former does not challenge binary gender ideologies (see also Conrod, 2019: 130). Based on such evidence, it seems that even behind seemingly benign objections to nonbinary pronouns often lie deeper ideological beliefs about gender binarism, and standard language ideology is simply used as a camouflage for an underlying discomfort with nonbinary identities (cf. language ideologies as rationalizations; Silverstein, 1979: 193).

It is also possible that the difference between generic and nonbinary *they* observed in this study is partly due to the type of antecedents used in the measurements (generic kind-referring NPs versus proper names with nonbinary *they*). To further empirically discern whether *they* is rejected in nonbinary contexts, in addition to the generic–nonbinary distinction, future studies should test specific use of *they* that allow for both nonbinary and gender-hiding interpretations (see section 2.2.2). In a related fashion, future studies ought to also include both nonbinary and cisgender participants, as the present study has demonstrated a considerable difference between these groups and their views on pronouns.

Last, the thesis also explored the nonbinary participants' relationship with pronouns in more detail. Since the previous chapter was devoted to this topic, only a short summary is provided here. Overall, the responses demonstrated a **strong yet complex relationship between nonbinary identities and pronouns**. As is well-known, nonbinary pronouns do not link to any one identity in the same way as *he* and *she*. While a clear majority of nonbinary participants used *they* as their personal pronoun, some reported using different pronouns in different situations, demonstrating that pronoun use may also be fluid. Yet, only for a few participants was this a function of a fluid identity — for others, the reason for using multiple pronouns was practical or a matter of self-protection. For example, some participants were concerned that nonbinary pronouns are difficult for others to use, while others wished to avoid having to educate others about new pronouns and uses. In addition, since nonbinary pronouns index an identity that is not (exclusively) female or male, sharing one's pronouns often means outing oneself as nonbinary. Consequently, sharing one's pronouns to new people may be accompanied with a concern for physical and emotional safety in terms of having to deal with adverse reactions. In contrast, binary pronouns — and passing as cisgender — provide safety. Nevertheless, the price may be discomfort resulting from continuous misgendering, which functions as a reminder that others do not (immediately) recognize one's gender (e.g. McLemore, 2015), leading to feelings of invalidation (e.g. Johnson et al., 2019). Purposeful misgendering was, understandably, considered most hurtful.

13.3 LIMITATIONS AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

The greatest limitation concerning the study design is the restricted generalizability of the sample. The sample does not represent any one target

population, but the quasi-purposive sampling approach helped in attaining a sample adequate for the purposes of this study. Having gathered extensive background information also allowed assessing which groups are over- or underrepresented. Most notably, overrepresented are participants who self-identified as politically liberal (82%), and who indicated positive attitudes towards transgender individuals; the participants who self-identified as politically conservative often demonstrated more negative attitudes towards transgender people. As such, the results may be biased towards higher acceptance of nonbinary pronouns than would be found among a more balanced sample.

The majority of participants also had a university-level education (about 75%) and considered themselves nonreligious (76%). No similar trend was detected as with political orientation and attitudes towards transgender individuals. Most participants were also white (90%), but ethnicity was not explored further. Future studies might explore more heterogeneous samples in this regard.

In a related fashion, as a result of the quasi-purposive sampling approach, the transgender participants are mostly nonbinary individuals ($n=79$), and there were only 20 exclusively binary-identifying transgender participants. Nevertheless, binary-identifying transgender individuals might also provide an interesting perspective on pronoun issues, which is largely missing from the present study.

The conservative handling of the background variables during the analyses is also a limitation (see Levon, 2015). A more intersectional approach might have been appropriate, but attempts to fully integrate intersectionality with quantitative methods have often not been completely satisfactory (e.g. Shields, 2008: 304). Despite these limitations, the results demonstrated clear trends that mostly aligned with previous studies, supporting the validity of the main findings.

13.3.1 Problematic measurements

One limitation with the pronoun measurements was that the study could not reliably address antecedent type. While antecedent type was included in the study design, due to the unexpected deviance of the *child* measurements, the detected effects could not be decisively assigned to antecedent type (see section 7.3). Since it seemed that the participants were specifically reacting to the lexical item *child*, some of these measurements were excluded from further analyses. As a result, the final logistic regression models for the acceptability of generic pronouns were based on only one measurement (with the antecedent *the average person*).

In addition, some of the Likert-items measuring additional attitudinal factors turned out to be superfluous or problematic and were excluded from the analysis (see section 5.3). Similarly, some of the background

measurements were also excluded either as problematic or nonsignificant throughout the analyses.

Some of the open questions regarding nonbinary participants' relationship with pronouns also turned out to be less than ideal. For example, I did not expect the participants to report using multiple pronouns (see Chapter 12). This aspect could have been better explored with more precise questions about pronoun use. Nevertheless, many of the nonbinary participants volunteered additional information, and as such the analysis did not greatly suffer from the question design.

A more general concern regards the overall survey design, as some parts of the survey may have had undesirable effects on the participants' responses (e.g. Baker, 1992: 18). Despite not advertising the survey as a pronoun survey, or as a survey about language and gender topics, both these aspects inevitably became clear to the participants, as most of the tasks were transparent, i.e. the participants could easily see what was being measured. While it is not possible to measure the effect of this transparency, a small number of participants explicitly stated that the act of filling out the survey and being prompted to think about specific topics made them change their opinion or think about the topic in a new way. With generic pronouns, the main concern was the effect of introducing the concept of sexist language. While the survey design helped secure earlier measurements, this might have affected the participants' open responses in the last part of the survey (part 7). In particular, the introduction of sexist language (in part 4) might have increased the number of participants viewing gendered pronouns as exclusive. However, such comments were also frequently made earlier in the survey (in part 3), before the participants had been confronted with the definition for sexist language.

In a similar fashion, defining "acceptability" for the participants was necessary but the definition also turned out to be problematic; what the participant views as natural or correct language use. Some participants reported that their sense of what is "correct" differed from what they viewed as "natural". Both correctness and naturalness were also central subthemes in the thematic analysis, but this is at least partly due to the participants having been guided to think of such aspects.

A further concern is that some participants were unfamiliar with nonbinary identities and/or nonbinary pronouns, and as such the survey prompted them to form opinions on new topics. However, with nonbinary pronouns, it is difficult to assess whether or to what extent the instrument affected the responses. The measurements on nonbinary pronouns needed to be explicit, i.e. it was specified that the pronouns referred to individuals who do not identify as female or male. It is possible that the wording of the instructions supported accepting nonbinary pronouns and demonstrating positive attitudes. For example, there were a few participants who expressed that they had never thought about nonbinary individuals nor their pronouns, but that if such identities exist, they should have fair representation in language. Nevertheless, there was enough opposition to assert that the survey did not

lead all participants to support nonbinary individuals and their pronouns. Overall, more indirect approaches might have produced somewhat different results with both acceptability and attitude measurements. Further studies might benefit from employing indirect approaches.

Finally, there are some limitations with the quantitative methods employed in this study as well. One such limitation concerns the variables used in the regression models for generic pronouns. With use of generic pronouns, some variation was erased by the binary approach (nongendered vs. gendered/mixed pronoun use). However, due to the prevalence of *they*, there was not enough occurrences of the different gendered pronouns to allow for a multinomial approach. Modeling with repeated measures in different conditions might have been effective as well, but this approach was abandoned for the same reason; the prevalence of *they* and lack of variation. Indeed, more sophisticated modeling approaches might have been desirable at times, for example, in teasing out response patterns between use of generic pronouns in free writing and controlled contexts. Similarly, exploring the relative importance of explanatory variables might have brought additional insight (e.g. Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2010), but was not pursued, as the analysis was deemed sufficient.

13.3.2 Are nonbinary pronouns marked?

In Part II, I provided a definition for nonbinary pronouns: nonbinary pronouns are pronouns other than *he* and *she* that are used to refer to specific, nonbinary individuals who have expressly chosen the pronouns for themselves to be used as their personal pronouns, instead of the *he* or *she* assigned to them at birth. Most importantly this decision was led by practical reasons in the context of the present study, and it may not be suitable for other contexts.

From a social point of view, I do not feel like I, as a cis person, can determine how nonbinary pronouns should be conceptualized. Therefore, I have tried to “listen” to the nonbinary participants, and even before I had participants to listen to, I sought out advice from in-group members. However, nonbinary pronouns were handled as marked for being nonbinary throughout the study, and there are some concerns with this approach. Perhaps most importantly, the survey form was designed with this assumption, which is reflected in the measurements and the resulting data. Hence, circular reasoning needs to be avoided; the data cannot be used to conclusively argue whether nonbinary pronouns are marked or not.

A related problem is that I started out this process assuming nonbinary pronouns indeed have a function as identity-building tools for nonbinary individuals. In addition, while the nonbinary participants’ relationship with pronouns turned out to be one of the most important aspects of the study (Chapter 12), the survey items producing the data were designed as additional questions, and in hindsight, they were not always detailed enough. For example, the questions were not designed to elicit whether the nonbinary

participants feel like their pronouns are specifically nonbinary or nongendered.

Nevertheless, perhaps some indication is provided by how the participants chose to describe their pronouns – only half a dozen nonbinary participants explicitly described nonbinary pronouns or their own pronouns as “gender-neutral”. On the other hand, my interpretation is that most nonbinary participants considered their pronouns as their personal pronouns, reflecting their nonbinary identities rather than hiding them. One participant made this very clear:

“[...] but I think it a mistake in the long term to entrench new language that conflates gender-neutral (indeterminate) and neutral gender (nonbinary) in a single word. For me to use singular they would, to put it simply, be erasing my gender, not defining it.”

In addition, it seems that for many cisgender participants, nonbinary pronouns are indeed marked, particularly the neopronouns. This interpretation is supported by data deriving from part 3 of the survey form (acceptability of generic pronouns), where the participants were encountered with the neopronouns for the first time. While many were simply confused by the neopronouns, those already familiar with the nonbinary function often objected the use of these pronouns in epicene contexts with similar arguments as with *he* and *she*; gendered pronouns cannot effectively function as epicenes. At this point, the participants were not provided any definition for the neopronouns; nonbinary pronouns, or other transgender topics had not been introduced yet. Data from subsequent parts in the survey further suggested that for many participants, the neopronouns were marked for being nonbinary. For example, even participants who accepted the neopronouns as a person’s chosen pronouns often rejected them in generic use, some specifying that these pronouns suffered from the same issue as *he* and *she* in epicene contexts. In comparison, *they* seems to be more capable of functioning both as a generic and nonbinary pronoun.

With *they*, future studies would benefit from investigating a wider selection of different uses. As has already been highlighted, in present-day English there are innovative uses of specific *they* that can be interpreted either as gender-hiding or as nonbinary (section 2.2.2). While the present study only explored generic and nonbinary uses of *they*, the open responses demonstrate that some speakers are rejecting nonbinary use of *they* due to gender ideologies, even when explicitly appealing to perceived grammar rules. In addition, even when the context is not specified as nonbinary, some people might still associate specific use of *they* with being nonbinary (e.g. *Lee likes their coffee black; my professor likes their new house*), as seems to have been the case with some of Conrod’s participants (2019: 105–106, 123). Future studies ought to take this aspect into consideration whilst exploring different uses of *they*.

In a related fashion, while I have scratched the surface of semantics in Chapter 2, it is beyond the scope of this work to build a more comprehensive

theoretical understanding for generic and nonbinary functions of pronouns. Particularly the premise provided in section 2.1.2 was built to solve some of the terminological issues that surfaced during the writing process. Hence, its usefulness might be restricted to the context of the present study and 3PSPs. Future research on pronominal meaning might benefit from delving deeper into such matters.

13.3.3 Are nonbinary pronouns political?

One question that also concerned some participants was the perceived political nature of nonbinary pronouns. While nonbinary pronouns are inherently an act of challenging the gender binary, not all nonbinary people consider or want their choice of pronouns to be considered a political act. For most of the nonbinary participants, the choice of pronouns seemed to be more guided by a sense of **who am I** on a personal level, rather than being first-and-foremost a socio-political statement. This seems distinct from some other types of linguistic challenges. The (previous) feminist language reforms were guided by a socio-political aim that women should have fair representation in language. However, in comparison to nonbinary individuals, women did not completely lack identity-building linguistic tools. Similarly, while a cis person may wish to be referred to with nongendered terms or pronouns because they do not want their gender to be highlighted in a particular context, a cis person can choose when to default back to claiming gendered terms when it is important to them — this also seems distinct from not having widely accepted and recognized terms at all.

Nevertheless, choices regarding which terms we use when referring to other people are hardly neutral. Instead, the choice to either use or refuse to use a person's pronouns (or other appropriate terms) is deeply "political", signaling acceptance or rejection of transgender identities. In broader terms, as discussed in section 4.4, identities are intersubjectively regulated by such mechanisms as adequation/distinction, authentication/denaturalization, and authorization/illegitimation (Buchholtz & Hall, 2010: 23–25). These mechanisms are also present in the links between pronouns and identity. Using nonbinary pronouns positions users as part of the same (imagined) group of nonbinary individuals, simultaneously creating distance from binary identities. In addition, claiming a set of nonbinary pronouns is also an act of authenticating the use, and continued use by the individual and others discursively verifies nonbinary identities (cf. Buchholtz & Hall, 2010: 24). However, identities can also be rejected through acts of denaturalization, illustrated for example by parodic performances (ibid.). With nonbinary pronouns and identities, an example of this are demeaning jokes about identifying as inanimate objects or different species, or requests to be referred to by absurd titles. Similarly, identities may be illegitimized through various acts that dismiss, censor or ignore particular identities or their representation (ibid.). In this sense, viewing gender as binary dismisses the possibility of a

wider spectrum. In contrast, identities may also be affirmed through institutionalized power (*ibid.*). Such institutional authorizations are only starting to surface (e.g. NYC Commission on Human Rights, 2019), but the direction seems to be supportive of nonbinary identities – and pronouns.

In the end, the question whether nonbinary pronouns are political escapes a definite answer. On the one hand, claiming a set of nonbinary pronouns for oneself may simply reflect the individual's wish to have accurate linguistic representation. On the other hand, the mere existence of nonbinary pronouns already challenges the ideological foundation of the gender binary. As such, any act either supporting or rejecting nonbinary pronouns is linked to ideologies about gender. In this sense, one can hardly escape making a statement when using, or refusing to use, nonbinary pronouns.

13.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Overall, the results corroborate that the changes we are witnessing in English 3PSPs are indeed ideologically motivated: language is purposefully being changed to become more gender-fair and representative. The present study has highlighted that pronouns are not by any means empty of meaning, but instead they are important markers of identity, both on a personal and communal level. In addition to their more inherent meanings, in specific contexts pronouns may acquire further connotations and associations. In this way, some pronoun uses may become politicized, as seems to be the case with generic and nonbinary pronouns. This was demonstrated by the passionate and sometimes even vehement arguments the participants employed in their responses to both types of pronouns, but in particular with nonbinary pronouns. The short and simple conclusion is: pronouns matter.

Last, I want to address one more topic: the motivation and aim of the study. When I started working on my PhD, at least consciously I imagined my motivation to be more or less just scientific curiosity. Early on, when some of the participants accused me of having an “agenda” with the survey, particularly with nonbinary pronouns, I naively thought to myself, why would I, a non-native-English-speaking cis person have an agenda with English pronouns?

I have since learned that while a researcher may hope to make a small change in the world, the process may also change the researcher. The participants of this study, and other informants, have helped me learn more about pronouns and their meaning to identity. But it also required maturing as a researcher and becoming more aware of how so-called social justice can be advanced via research before I was fully ready to embrace an “agenda” with my research: to raise awareness and understanding about why language and pronouns matter, to support gender-fair language, and to help normalize nonbinary pronouns and identities.

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Appendix A: The survey form

[Informed consent]

Thank you for your interest in this survey. The survey is a part of a PhD dissertation currently being conducted at the University of Helsinki by doctoral student Laura Hekanaho. The purpose of this research project is to study language use and attitudes. If you wish to know more about the study, or have any questions regarding the survey, please contact me at laura.hekanaho@helsinki.fi. This research project has been approved by the ethical review board of the University of Helsinki.

This survey will be held online until February 10th 2017.

You are welcome to participate in this survey if you are over 18 years old and a) a native speaker of English (any variety) or b) a native Finnish or Swedish speaker who speaks English fluently. *If you have taken part in a pilot for this survey, please do not participate again*

The survey consists of 7 parts and will take approximately 15-30 minutes to fill in, depending on your own input. On the first page you will be asked to give information about your background (e.g. gender, education, age), and the rest of the survey concentrates on language use and attitudes (parts 1-7). Please notice that once you have moved on from one part to another, you cannot go back.

The data will be used for research purposes. The data will be archived after this study has been conducted and may be used for other research purposes as well.

The responses to this survey are collected anonymously (e.g. no directly identifiable information is collected and your IP will not be visible to the researcher). All information will be handled confidentially. Please take into account, however, that with any information shared online there is always a chance of information leakage due to hacking etc.

Participation is voluntary. You may quit the survey at any time, in which case your answers to parts 1 through 7 will not be used in the analysis. Your background information may still be used to identify what demographic groups dropped out of the survey. If you want to completely remove your answers from the study or you have already submitted your answers and wish to withdraw from the study, you may do so within 3 weeks of your submission by contacting me at laura.hekanaho@helsinki.fi. Please take into account that since no contact information is required, in order to delete your responses, your submission will have to be identifiable. If you think you might want to withdraw later on, please copy and save your answer to part 1 (after the background information) on your computer; this can be later used to identify

your submission along with the background information you are asked to provide.

Finally, your participation is highly appreciated, but no compensation is offered.

If you agree to the aforementioned, please tick the box below and then press 'next'. If you do not agree, please exit the survey by either closing your browser or clicking the 'exit survey' button in the top-right corner of this page.

I agree to the terms and wish to continue

-----[page break]-----

Background information.

[B1] Age (in years): _____

[B2] Gender (Please indicate if your gender is not the gender you were assigned at birth): _____

[B3] Current country of residence [ready options excluded]

[B4] Where did you spend most of your childhood and adolescence (ages 0-18)? [ready options excluded]

[B5] In what type of city or town did you spend most of your childhood and adolescence (ages 0-18)?

- The capital of the country or other metropolitan city
- Other larger city (over 100,000 inhabitants)
- Smaller city or town (under 100,000 inhabitants)
- Small town or village
- Other (please specify): _____

[B6] Have you lived in another country (other than in question 3 or 4) for more than 3 years? [options: yes/no/other]

[B7] Ethnicity [ready options excluded; e.g. *African American, Asian Finnish, ...*]

[B8] Native language(s).

- American English
- Australian English
- British English
- Canadian English
- Finnish
- Irish English
- Scottish English
- Swedish
- Welsh English
- Bilingual Finnish-Swedish
- Bilingual English-Finnish
- Bilingual English-Swedish
- Other (please specify): _____

[B9] What other languages do you speak? Include all languages that you know at least at a beginner level, that is, you have studied the language either at school or independently, you can understand and construct simple sentences, and you can have short conversations over every-day topics.

[ready options excluded]

[B10] If English is not your native language, please indicate for how many years you have studied English at school. If you have not studied English at school, please choose 'other' and specify how you have learned English.

[ready options excluded]

[B11] What is the highest level of education you have completed? If you are currently studying, please choose the degree you are currently studying for.

- Comprehensive schooling: elementary and junior high school (peruskoulu/ grundskola)
- Secondary schooling: High school or vocational school (lukio, ammatikoulu/ gymnasium, yrkesskola)
- Bachelor level
- Master level
- Doctoral level
- Other (please specify): _____

[B12] Have you studied any of the following subjects either at a university/college level or independently? Studying independently in this context refers to reading scientific books or articles on the subject.

- Anthropology (e.g. cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology),
- Communication studies (e.g. journalism, information),
- Education (e.g. teacher training, education sciences),
- Gender studies (e.g. women's studies, men's studies, transgender studies)
- Health and Medicine (e.g. medicine, psychiatry, health services),
- Humanities (e.g. theology, philosophy),
- Law and Political science (e.g. jurisprudence, political science),
- Linguistics (e.g. general linguistics, sociolinguistics),
- Social and behavioral sciences (e.g. sociology, psychology).
- Other (please specify): _____

[B13] Which of the following would best describe your beliefs?

- Agnostic
- Atheist
- Atheist Agnostic
- Christian – Anglican
- Christian – Catholic
- Christian – Evangelical Lutheran
- Christian – Protestant
- Islam – Sunni

- Islam –Shia
- Judaism – Orthodox
- Judaism – Conservative
- Judaism– Reform
- Other (please specify): _____

[B14] Is religion important to you?

- Yes
- Somewhat
- No
- Other (please specify): _____

[B15] Which of the following would best describe your political views?

- Very liberal
- Somewhat liberal
- Somewhat conservative
- Very conservative
- Other (please specify): _____

[B16] Where did you come across this survey? [ready options excluded]

-----[page break]-----

The purpose of this survey is to study language use. There are no right or wrong answers, so you should not worry about what grammar books might imply to be correct or incorrect language use. You can answer all language related questions based on what feels most natural to you.

Part 1

In this part, your task is to describe what in your view is ‘a successful person’. You do not need to worry too much about what you write. You may write freely, but please use full sentences. Please continue the following with 3-5 sentences: “A successful person is someone who...”.

If you cannot think of anything, please continue to the following page.

-----[page break]-----

The purpose of this survey is to study language use. There are no right or wrong answers, so you should not worry about what grammar books might imply to

be correct or incorrect language use. You can answer all language related questions based on what feels most natural to you.

Part 2

In this part, please fill in the blanks in the sentences. You can fill in more than one word if needed. If you cannot think of anything, please write “I don’t know”. If you don’t think anything should be added, leave it blank. Phrases and words such as *college students*, *anyone*, and *the child* refer to people in general, i.e. they do not refer to any particular person.

[Fillers marked with a *]

1. If you get injured, you should go _____ hospital.*
2. Anyone can learn how to paint if _____ can find the time to practice every day.
3. The students were asked to enroll _____ the courses online.*
4. My friend studies Chemistry _____ University*
5. Every child should know that _____ can always ask for help from the teacher.
6. It’s no use crying over _____ milk.*
7. Everyone should try to focus on what _____ can do best.
8. The children were trying to learn how to write, they had already _____ how to read*
9. In the shop, we had to stand _____ line for 30 minutes.*
10. Each student knew that _____ should finish the assignment before the deadline.
11. Three students were chosen to play _____ football team.*
12. What harm can come from gossiping about someone if _____ will never find out.
13. College students often come home _____ weekends*
14. Any student who feels that _____ might be getting sick should stay home from school.
15. There was a fire and the house _____ down.*
16. When a child learns to read, _____ can do more at school.
17. The results of the study were different _____ what we had hypothesized.*
18. A person is only as old as _____ feels.
19. Could you please fill _____ this form?*
20. The average child learns to read before _____ can write.

At this point, do you think you know what the purpose of this survey is? If yes, please write below what you think the purpose of the survey is. You can also guess.

-----[page break]-----

Part 3

In this part you are presented with different sentences that include a pronoun expression. You are asked whether the underlined pronoun expression in each sentence is acceptable or unacceptable. 'Acceptable' in this context refers to an expression that *you* would view as natural or correct language use. Please read the whole sentence before answering.

1. The campaign has set a goal of making sure every child gets the food they need.
2. The campaign has set a goal of making sure every child gets the food he needs.
3. The campaign has set a goal of making sure every child gets the food she needs.
4. The campaign has set a goal of making sure every child gets the food he or she needs.
5. The campaign has set a goal of making sure every child gets the food she or he needs.
6. You can't make a child who has had all the sleep they need go back to sleep
7. You can't make a child who has had all the sleep he needs go back to sleep
8. You can't make a child who has had all the sleep she needs go back to sleep
9. You can't make a child who has had all the sleep he or she needs go back to sleep
10. The average person believes they watch too much TV.
11. The average person believes he watches too much TV.
12. The average person believes she watches too much TV.
13. The average person believes he or she watches too much TV.
14. The average person believes ze watches too much TV.
15. The average person believes xe watches too much TV.

[Ready options for each sentence separately: Acceptable, Not acceptable, Other + text box]

Comments (optional):

-----[page break]-----

Part 4

In this part you are presented with different statements and you are asked whether you agree or disagree with these statements. There is also an option for “no opinion”, which you can also choose if you do not wish to answer. With all of the statements you are asked to think about the situation in your current place of residence, for example ‘our society’ refers to the society you are currently living within

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree for each of the following statements.

[Options for each statement: Strongly agree – Somewhat agree – Neutral – Somewhat disagree – Strongly disagree | No opinion]

- [L1] Using proper grammar is important.
- [L2] Grammar can change.
- [L3] Words may affect the way we view things.
- [L4] Grammar is needed for the language to remain structured.
- [L5] Language can affect our perception of the world.

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree for each of the following statements. Transgender in this contexts refers to all individuals who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth and/or do not identify as female or male.

- [F1] Feminists ignore the issues of men.
- [F2] Feminism strives for equal rights for all genders.
- [F3] Feminism is not needed anymore in our society.
- [F4] I consider myself a feminist.
- [F5] Our society should strive for gender equality for men and women.
- [F6] Our society should strive for gender equality for men, women and transgender individuals.

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree for each of the following statements. *Sexist language in this context refers to using gendered expressions that exclude, trivialize or diminish a group of people based on gender.*

- [S1] We should not change the way the English language has traditionally been written and spoken
- [S2] There is no such thing as sexist language use.
- [S3] Women who think that being called a “chairman” is sexist are misinterpreting the word “chairman”
- [S4] Worrying about sexist language is a trivial activity
- [S5] If the original meaning of the word “he” was "person", we should continue to use “he” to refer to all people
- [S6] The English language will never be changed because it is too deeply ingrained in the culture
- [S7] The elimination of sexist language is an important goal
- [S8] Sexist language is related to sexist treatment of people in society
- [S9] Although change is difficult, we still should try to eliminate sexist language
- [S10]. Using gender equal language is important.
- [S11] Using gender equal language supports gender equality

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree for each of the following statements. *Transgender in this context refers to all individuals who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth and/or do not identify as female or male.*

[T1] It would be beneficial to society to recognize being transgender as normal.

[T2] Transgender individuals are a viable part of our society.

[T3] Transgender individuals should be accepted completely into our society.

[T4] There should be no restrictions on being transgender.

[T5] There is nothing wrong with being transgender.

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree for each of the following statements. *3rd person singular pronouns refer to pronouns such as he and she. Gender neutral pronouns in this context refer to pronouns such as they, ze, and xe, which can be used in generic contexts, for example when the gender of the referent is not specified. For example: "A child needs to know that they are loved". Non-binary individuals in this context is used as an umbrella term to refer to all individuals who do not identify as female or male. Pronouns that are sometimes used to refer to non-binary individuals include they, ze and xe.*

[P1] There should be a specific 3rd person singular pronoun that could be used when referring to non-binary individuals.

[P2] There should be a gender neutral 3rd person singular pronoun in English other than singular they that could be used in generic contexts when the gender of the referent is not known.

[P3] We do not need a specific 3rd person singular pronoun for non-binary individuals.

[P4] There is no need for a new gender neutral generic 3rd person singular pronoun in English since singular they is sufficient.

[E1] Prior to taking this survey, were you familiar with new pronouns such as ze and xe? For example, had you seen or heard someone use these pronouns previously?

Yes, I am familiar with these pronouns.

I use these (or some of these pronouns) myself.

I have seen or heard someone else use these (or some of these) pronouns.

No, I did not know about any of these pronouns previously.

Other (please specify): _____

[E2] Are you or have you personally been in contact with any transgender individuals? There is no need to indicate your own gender in this question; question 2 in the beginning of this survey already asked about your gender. Transgender is used as an umbrella term to refer to all individuals who do not identify with their original gender assigned at birth and/or do not identify as female or male.

- Yes, some of my friends and/or family members are transgender.
- Yes, some of my acquaintances are transgender.
- No, I do not know anyone who is transgender.
- Other (please specify): _____

[E3] Do you consider yourself to be a part of the LGBT community? LGBT refers to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities.

- Yes, I consider myself to be a part of the LGBT community.
- No, but I am sympathetic to their overall aims (e.g. equal rights for all sexuality and gender minorities).
- No.
- Other (please specify): _____
- Comments (optional): _____

-----[page break]-----

Part 5

In this part, you are presented with sentences which include a non-specific human reference and a pronoun expression referring to the non-specific human reference. You are asked 'who could be included in the sentence'. All of the sentences refer to a group of people in general, i.e. they do not refer to any particular person. The pronoun expression in each sentence is underlined, but please read the whole sentence. *Non-binary individuals in this context is used as an umbrella term to refer to all individuals who do not identify as female or male.*

1. Everyone has their own opinion about politics.
2. The average person will lose about a third of their muscle mass during their adult life.
3. Everyone who hears a song relates it to her own experience.
4. The average person spends roughly 32% of his or her income on housing.
5. The average person sleeps away a third of his life.
6. Everyone can get through his or her down days
7. Everyone who doesn't have his head stuck in a hole knows who the president is.
8. The average person can only hold five hundred faces in her memory.

[Ready options for each sentence separately: Females, Males, Non-binary individuals, All of the above, no opinion]

Comments (optional):

-----[page break]-----

Part 6

In this part you will be presented with different sentences and you will be asked which ones you find acceptable. 'Acceptable' in this context refers to a sentence that you would view as natural or correct language use. You can also make your own suggestions or comments by choosing 'other'.

In the following sentences Chris and Lee are individuals who do not identify as females or males. For each of the examples, the underlined pronoun in the second sentence refers to the individual in the first sentence.

1. Have you met Chris? They work at the local shop.
2. Have you met Chris? They works at the local shop.
3. Have you met Chris? Xe works at the local shop.
4. Have you met Chris? Ze works at the local shop.
5. Lee has decided to get a cat. They already have a dog.
6. Lee has decided to get a cat. They already has a dog.
7. Lee has decided to get a cat. Xe already has a dog.
8. Lee has decided to get a cat. Ze already has a dog.

[Ready options for each sentence separately: Acceptable, Not acceptable, Other + text box]

Comments (optional):

-----[page break]-----

Part 7

This is the final part. There are several questions about language use and you can choose which ones to answer, or not answer any of them. There are also some specific questions for transgender individuals at the end, but everyone is welcome to comment. If you do not wish to answer any of the following questions, please scroll down to submit your answers.

'Acceptable' in the first 7 questions refers to language use that you would find 'correct' or 'natural' language use.

[V1] What is your view on he when it is used generically to refer to an unknown person or a group of people? For example: "Everybody has his own opinion"; "Anyone who puts his mind to it can rise to the top"; and "The average person believes he watches too much TV".

- Acceptable
- Not acceptable

- Comments (e.g. why do you view this usage as acceptable/ not acceptable)

[V2] What is your view on she when it is used generically to refer to an unknown person or a group of people? For example: “A child must be careful when she crosses the street”; “An artist is someone who follows her passion”; and “Everyone has her own story to tell”.

- Acceptable
 Not acceptable
 Comments (e.g. why do you view this usage as acceptable/ not acceptable)

[V3] What is your view on using he or she or similar constructions when talking about an unknown person or a group of people? For example: “Everyone should get the health care he or she needs”; “A better leader is somebody who gets more out of the people he or she leads”; and “The more you tell your doctor, the better he or she can help you”.

- Acceptable
 Not acceptable
 Comments (e.g. why do you view this usage as acceptable/ not acceptable)

[V4] What is your view on singular they when it is used generically to refer to an unknown person or a group of people? For example: “Each person is the center of their own universe”; “Anyone who says they love to fight is a liar or a fool” and “I feel bad when someone gets their feelings hurt”.

- Acceptable

- Not acceptable
- Comments (e.g. why do you view this usage as acceptable/ not acceptable)

[V5] What is your view on singular they when it is used to refer to an individual who does not identify as female or male? For example, in the following examples they refers to Lee and Chris respectively (and not to some other referents): “Lee said they don’t like tea” and “Chris loves their dog”.

- Acceptable
- Not acceptable
- Comments (e.g. why do you view this usage as acceptable/ not acceptable)

[V6] What is your view on new pronouns such as ze and xe when they are used to refer to an individual who does not identify as female or male? For example: “Jo said ze doesn’t like coffee” and “Terry was going out but xe could not find xir keys”.

- Acceptable
- Not acceptable
- Comments (e.g. why do you view this usage as acceptable/ not acceptable)

[V7] What is your view on new pronouns such as ze and xe when they are used in generic contexts? For example: “Is there anyone who says ze doesn’t like chocolate?” and “It’s always nice to meet someone who knows what xe is doing”.

- Acceptable
- Not acceptable
- Comments (e.g. why do you view this usage as acceptable/ not acceptable)

[V8] What is your view on gender equal language use? For example, using words like chair or chairperson instead of chairman, and not using man or mankind to refer to all people.

- I support gender equal language use
- I think gender equal language use is needed
- I do not think gender equal language use is needed
- Comments (e.g. why do you think gender equal language use is needed/ not needed)

The following questions relate to terms that are used when talking about transgender individuals.

[TE1] Is there an umbrella term you prefer to use when talking about individuals who do not identify with the gender that was assigned to them at birth?

[TE2] Is there an umbrella term you prefer to use when talking about individuals who do not identify as female or male?

The following questions are targeted for transgender individuals, but everyone is welcome to comment.

[A1] Which pronouns do you want people to use when referring to you?

[A2] Is it important to you that people use the correct pronouns when talking about you?

[A3] How would you describe your feelings when someone uses the wrong pronouns when referring to you and/or misgenders you?

[A4] Have you ever felt discriminated by the language use of others?

Thank you for participating!

If you wish to learn more about the study, you can contact me at laura.hekanaho@helsinki.fi.

The PhD thesis is expected to be published in 2019, but preliminary results may be shared earlier. If you wish to receive a notification when the results are published, please send an e-mail to laura.hekanaho@helsinki.fi and I will add you to a separate e-mail list (you cannot leave your e-mail address with this form).

Feedback:

Appendix B: Additional tables and figures

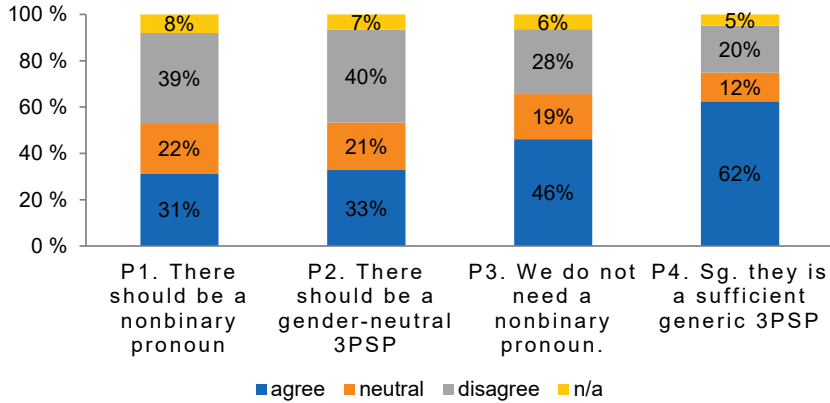


Figure 45. Part 4 pronoun items, n=1128

Table 16. Targeted subreddits. March 2017 subscriber counts in parentheses

Country-specific subreddits	Age-specific subreddits	Religion-specific subreddits	Other subreddits
r/Suomi (55,330)	r/Over30Reddit (5,685)	r/Christianity (119,665)	r/lgbt (132,534)
r/Wales (5439)	r/AskRedditOver60 (402)	r/religion (24,861)	r/Feminism (65,046)
r/Ireland (108,963)	r/30PlusReddit (966)	Survey-specific subreddits	r/linguistics (80,699)
r/Scotland (29,614)	r/40something (2,996)	r/SampleSize (46,182)	r/NonBinary (2,255)
r/NorthernIreland (9,663)	r/Over40 (227)	r/participants (588)	
r/Australia (132,236)	r/RedditForGrownups (27,386)	r/Assistance (34,029)	
r/Sweden (148,059)	r/AskWomenOver30 (11,787)		
r/Canada (246,027)			

Table 17. Part 2 frequencies per antecedents. * he or she constructions have been aggregated

	<i>they</i>	<i>he</i>	<i>she</i>	<i>he/</i> <i>she*</i>	<i>other</i> <i>comb.</i>	<i>one</i>	<i>it</i>	<i>other</i>	<i>n/a</i>	Total
P2.5. Every child	917	25	4	59	2	16	1	99	5	1128
P2.10. Each student	1024	22	2	49	2	0	0	18	11	1128
P2.14. Any student	1027	27	2	51	1	0	1	5	14	1128
P2.16. A child	930	47	6	96	1	1	17	15	15	1128
P2.20. The average child	929	55	11	81	1	1	25	5	20	1128
P2.2. Anyone	1030	11	2	31	3	25	0	20	6	1128
P2.12. Someone	991	16	2	23	1	4	0	76	15	1128
P2.7. Everyone	1051	14	2	34	1	8	0	10	8	1128

Table 18. Model 2 for using gendered pronouns in free writing. Inverse OR for using only gender neutral pronouns; n=769, Nagelkerke R-Squared 0.33. Excluded are 8 influential outliers comprising Australian and British English speakers

Model 2. Use of gendered pronouns in free writing.								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	95% CI for OR		
						inverse OR	Lower	Upper
age	0.05	0.01	23.16	0.00	1.06		1.03	1.08
cis male (cis female)	0.66	0.26	6.54	0.01	1.93		1.17	3.20
American English			72.43	0.00				
Australian English	-2.93	0.75	15.13	0.00	0.05	18.79	0.01	0.23
British English	-2.93	0.76	14.94	0.00	0.05	18.75	0.01	0.24
Canadian English	-0.62	0.39	2.56	0.11	0.54		0.25	1.15
Finnish	1.31	0.30	19.68	0.00	3.71		2.08	6.63
Swedish	0.78	0.42	3.49	0.06	2.19		0.96	4.96
bilinguals	-0.83	0.79	1.11	0.29	0.44		0.09	2.04
graduate level			7.57	0.02				
no higher ed.	-0.68	0.32	4.71	0.03	0.50	1.98	0.27	0.94
bachelor level	-0.67	0.26	6.49	0.01	0.51	1.95	0.31	0.86
(non)sexist language attitudes	0.20	0.13	2.59	0.11	1.23		0.96	1.57
Constant	-3.60	0.56	41.84	0.00	0.03			

Table 19. Model 2 for using gendered pronouns in controlled contexts. Inverse OR for using only gender neutral pronouns; n=1099, Nagelkerke R-Squared 0.24. No outliers excluded

Model 2. Use of gendered pronouns in controlled contexts.								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	inverse OR	95% CI for OR	
							Lower	Upper
age	0.05	0.01	38.78	0.00	1.05		1.03	1.07
cis female			13.60	0.00				
cis male	-0.54	0.19	7.65	0.01	0.58	1.71	0.40	0.86
transgender	-1.47	0.54	7.32	0.01	0.23	4.35	0.08	0.67
American English			57.17	0.00				
Australian English	-1.79	0.36	24.88	0.00	0.17	5.99	0.08	0.34
British English	-1.39	0.32	18.66	0.00	0.25	4.03	0.13	0.47
Canadian English	-0.42	0.27	2.41	0.12	0.65		0.38	1.12
Finnish	0.43	0.25	3.01	0.08	1.53		0.95	2.48
Swedish	0.33	0.36	0.82	0.36	1.38		0.69	2.79
bilinguals	-0.39	0.49	0.65	0.42	0.67		0.26	1.76
no higher education			10.30	0.01				
bachelor level	0.43	0.23	3.40	0.07	1.53		0.97	2.41
graduate level	0.81	0.25	10.16	0.00	2.24		1.36	3.68
(non)sexist language attitudes	0.52	0.10	29.09	0.00	1.69		1.39	2.04
Constant	-4.03	0.45	81.72	0.00	0.02			

Table 20. Model 2 for the acceptability of *he*. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; *n*=1053, Nagelkerke *R*-squared 0.28). No outliers excluded

Model 2. Acceptability of <i>he</i> (unacceptable).								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	95% CI for OR		
						inverse OR	Lower	Upper
cis female			8.28	0.02				
cis male	0.80	0.31	6.71	0.01	2.22		1.21	4.05
transgender	0.74	0.40	3.35	0.07	2.09		0.95	4.58
American English			24.98	0.00				
Australian English	1.04	0.39	7.18	0.01	2.83		1.32	6.05
British English	1.29	0.41	9.81	0.00	3.62		1.62	8.11
Canadian English	0.87	0.37	5.49	0.02	2.38		1.15	4.91
Finnish	1.17	0.40	8.61	0.00	3.22		1.47	7.03
Swedish	0.56	0.64	0.76	0.38	1.75		0.50	6.13
bilinguals	-0.96	0.65	2.23	0.14	0.38		0.11	1.35
no higher ed.			15.00	0.00				
bachelor level	-0.54	0.19	7.59	0.01	0.59	1.71	0.40	0.86
graduate level	-0.86	0.22	14.82	0.00	0.42	2.36	0.27	0.66
inclusive			115.04	0.00				
only males	1.70	0.17	102.72	0.00	5.49		3.95	7.63
males and nonbinary	1.70	0.26	41.06	0.00	5.46		3.25	9.17
only females and males	0.13	0.43	0.09	0.77	1.14		0.49	2.63
(non)sexist language attitudes	-0.39	0.09	18.89	0.00	0.68		0.57	0.81
cis female*AmEng			32.82	0.00				
cis male*AUEng	-0.66	0.52	1.65	0.20	0.52		0.19	1.42
cis male*BrEng	-1.18	0.54	4.82	0.03	0.31	3.26	0.11	0.88
cis male*CanEng	-1.05	0.52	4.12	0.04	0.35	2.87	0.13	0.96
cis male*Finnish	-1.14	0.52	4.86	0.03	0.32	3.12	0.12	0.88
cis male*Swedish	0.61	0.80	0.58	0.45	1.84		0.38	8.92
cis male*Bilingual	2.18	0.88	6.17	0.01	8.88		1.58	49.79
transgender*AUEng	-2.71	1.17	5.32	0.02	0.07	15.03	0.01	0.67
transgender*BrEng	-0.78	0.96	0.66	0.42	0.46		0.07	3.02
transgender*CanEng	-2.63	0.94	7.88	0.00	0.07	13.85	0.01	0.45
transgender*Finnish	-1.68	1.11	2.27	0.13	0.19		0.02	1.66
transgender*Swedish	-1.27	1.75	0.53	0.47	0.28		0.01	8.62
transgender*bilingual	-0.52	1.18	0.20	0.66	0.59		0.06	5.97
Constant	0.35	0.34	1.06	0.30	1.42			

Table 21. Model 2 for the acceptability of he or she. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; n=1087, Nagelkerke R-squared 0.084. No outliers excluded

Model 2. Acceptability of he or she (unacceptable).								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	inverse 95% CI for OR		
						OR	Lower	Upper
age	-0.04	0.01	19.03	0.00	0.97	1.04	0.95	0.98
transgender(cisgender)	1.33	0.22	36.12	0.00	3.76		2.44	5.80
Constant	-0.16	0.23	0.45	0.50	0.85			

Table 22. Model 2 for the acceptability of generic ze/xo. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; n=976, Nagelkerke R-squared 0.33. No outliers excluded

Model 2. Acceptability of generic ze/xo (unacceptable).								
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	OR	95% CI for OR	
							Lower	Upper
transgender(cisgender)	1.22	0.27	20.42	1.00	0.00	3.37	1.99	5.71
neopronoun familiarity	1.84	0.36	25.78	1.00	0.00	6.28	3.09	12.77
(non)sexist language attitudes	1.10	0.15	56.26	1.00	0.00	3.00	2.25	4.00
Constant	-2.02	0.30	44.52	1.00	0.00	0.13		

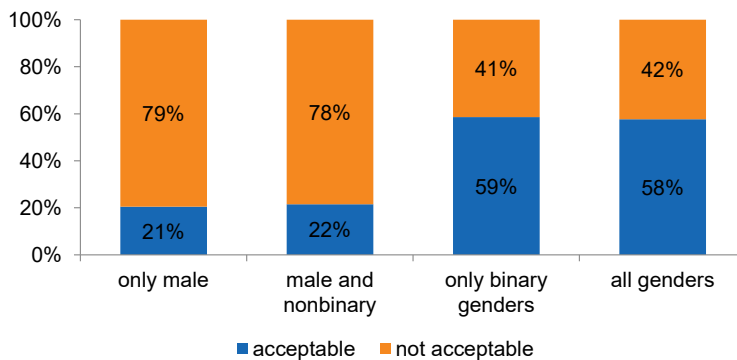


Figure 46. Part 3. Acceptability and perceived inclusivity of he, n=1068

Table 23. Model 2 for the acceptability of nonbinary they. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; n=1050, Nagelkerke R-squared 0.3. No outliers excluded

Model 2. Acceptability of nonbinary they (unacceptable).								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	inverse OR	95% CI for OR	
							Lower	Upper
age 18-23			69.77	0.00				
age 24-29	0.59	0.20	8.34	0.00	1.80		1.21	2.69
age 30-39	1.30	0.22	33.89	0.00	3.66		2.37	5.67
age 40-49	1.89	0.29	42.12	0.00	6.62		3.74	11.72
age 50-80	1.96	0.32	37.14	0.00	7.10		3.78	13.33
cis female			11.61	0.00				
cis male	0.36	0.18	4.02	0.04	1.43		1.01	2.04
transgender	-1.53	0.61	6.22	0.01	0.22	4.61	0.07	0.72
British English			25.02	0.00				
American English	0.38	0.26	2.12	0.15	1.46		0.88	2.43
Australian English	0.03	0.27	0.01	0.91	1.03		0.60	1.76
Canadian English	0.75	0.28	7.09	0.01	2.11		1.22	3.67
Finnish	0.66	0.27	5.96	0.01	1.93		1.14	3.28
Swedish	1.43	0.37	15.12	0.00	4.16		2.03	8.54
bilinguals	0.97	0.43	5.12	0.02	2.64		1.14	6.13
liberal			6.09	0.05				
conservative	0.48	0.25	3.56	0.06	1.61		0.98	2.64
other political	-0.43	0.35	1.50	0.22	0.65		0.33	1.29
knowing transgender	0.77	0.16	22.37	0.00	2.16		1.57	2.98
(non)sexist language attitudes	0.33	0.10	9.83	0.00	1.39		1.13	1.71
transgender attitudes	0.35	0.10	11.78	0.00	1.42		1.16	1.73
Constant	-3.93	0.37	111.59	0.00	0.02			

Table 24. Model 3 for the acceptability of nonbinary they. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; n=945, Nagelkerke R-squared 0.28. Outliers and transgender participants excluded

Model 3. Acceptability of nonbinary they (unacceptable).							
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	95% CI for OR	
						Lower	Upper
age 18–23			73.34	0.00			
age 24–29	0.62	0.21	8.54	0.00	1.85	1.22	2.80
age 30–39	1.44	0.23	39.01	0.00	4.23	2.69	6.65
age 40–49	1.92	0.30	40.93	0.00	6.83	3.79	12.30
age 50–80	2.11	0.33	40.76	0.00	8.24	4.31	15.73
cis female (cis male)	0.45	0.18	6.02	0.01	1.57	1.10	2.26
British English			26.84	0.00			
American English	0.48	0.27	3.12	0.08	1.61	0.95	2.74
Australian English	0.10	0.28	0.14	0.71	1.11	0.64	1.92
Canadian English	0.86	0.29	8.79	0.00	2.36	1.34	4.17
Finnish	0.78	0.28	7.98	0.00	2.19	1.27	3.78
Swedish	1.48	0.38	15.53	0.00	4.41	2.11	9.23
bilinguals	1.14	0.44	6.63	0.01	3.12	1.31	7.42
liberal			6.21	0.04			
conservative	0.51	0.26	4.00	0.05	1.67	1.01	2.75
other political	-0.39	0.35	1.20	0.27	0.68	0.34	1.36
knowing transgender	0.82	0.17	24.34	0.00	2.27	1.64	3.14
(non)sexist language attitudes	0.35	0.11	10.29	0.00	1.41	1.14	1.75
transgender attitudes	0.37	0.10	12.65	0.00	1.44	1.18	1.77
Constant	-4.27	0.39	118.12	0.00	0.01		

Table 25. Model 2 for the acceptability of nonbinary ze. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; n=910, Nagelkerke R-squared 0.51. No outliers excluded

Model 2. Acceptability of nonbinary ze (unacceptable).								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	inverse	95% CI for OR	
						OR	Lower	Upper
cis female			39.56	0.00				
cis male	0.81	0.18	19.85	0.00	2.25		1.57	3.21
transgender	-2.08	0.56	13.67	0.00	0.12	8.03	0.04	0.38
neopronoun familiarity	0.63	0.20	9.45	0.00	1.87		1.25	2.78
knowing transgender	0.41	0.19	4.67	0.03	1.51		1.04	2.19
transgender attitudes	0.60	0.16	14.05	0.00	1.82		1.33	2.49
(non)sexist language attitudes	1.07	0.13	69.18	0.00	2.92		2.27	3.76
Constant	-3.53	0.31	131	0.00	0.03			

Table 26. Model 3 for the acceptability of nonbinary ze. Response category “unacceptable” for inverse OR “acceptable”; n=802, Nagelkerke R-squared 0.49. Transgender participants and outliers excluded

Model 3. Acceptability of nonbinary ze (unacceptable).								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	95% CI for OR		
						Lower	Upper	
cis female (cis male)	0.84	0.19	18.80	0.00	2.31	1.58	3.37	
neopronoun familiarity	0.76	0.22	12.04	0.00	2.13	1.39	3.27	
knowing transgender	0.53	0.20	6.77	0.01	1.70	1.14	2.54	
transgender attitudes	1.10	0.22	26.01	0.00	3.02	1.97	4.61	
(non)sexist language attitudes	1.19	0.15	66.21	0.00	3.29	2.47	4.38	
Constant	-4.41	0.38	138	0.00	0.01			

Table 27. Main LR model for the acceptability of nonbinary xe. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; n=897, AUROC 0.9 [0.88, 0.92], Nagelkerke R-squared 0.59

Model 1. Acceptability of nonbinary xe (unacceptable).								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	inverse	95% CI for OR	
						OR	Lower	Upper
cis female			35.70	0.00				
cis male	0.80	0.19	16.70	0.00	2.22		1.51	3.25
transgender	-2.18	0.60	13.34	0.00	0.11	8.86	0.04	0.36
neopronoun familiarity	0.70	0.22	10.22	0.00	2.02		1.31	3.10
knowing transgender	0.52	0.21	6.42	0.01	1.69		1.13	2.53
transgender attitudes	1.11	0.22	24.81	0.00	3.03		1.96	4.68
(non)sexist language attitudes	1.26	0.15	75.10	0.00	3.53		2.65	4.70
Constant	-4.45	0.37	141	0.00	0.01			

Table 28. Model 2 for the acceptability of nonbinary xe. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; n=911, Nagelkerke R-squared 0.52. No outliers excluded

Model 2. Acceptability of nonbinary xe (unacceptable).								
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	inverse	95% CI for OR	
						OR	Lower	Upper
cis female			39.47	0.00				
cis male	0.79	0.18	18.72	0.00	2.21		1.54	3.17
transgender	-2.17	0.57	14.74	0.00	0.11	8.77	0.04	0.35
neopronoun familiarity	0.60	0.21	8.70	0.00	1.83		1.22	2.74
knowing transgender	0.42	0.19	4.67	0.03	1.51		1.04	2.21
transgender attitudes	0.62	0.17	14.02	0.00	1.86		1.34	2.57
(non)sexist language attitudes	1.09	0.13	68.99	0.00	2.97		2.30	3.85
Constant	-3.50	0.31	127	0.00	0.03			

Table 29. Model 3 for the acceptability of nonbinary xe. Response category “unacceptable”, for inverse OR “acceptable”; n=803, Nagelkerke R-squared 0.48. Transgender participants and outliers excluded

Model 3. Acceptability of nonbinary xe (unacceptable).							
Independent variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	OR	95% CI for OR	
						Lower	Upper
cis female (cis male)	0.80	0.19	17.11	0.00	2.23	1.53	3.27
neopronoun familiarity	0.70	0.22	10.21	0.00	2.01	1.31	3.09
knowing transgender	0.52	0.21	6.47	0.01	1.69	1.13	2.52
transgender attitudes	1.11	0.22	24.82	0.00	3.03	1.96	4.69
(non)sexist language attitudes	1.22	0.15	66.98	0.00	3.40	2.53	4.55
Constant	-4.37	0.38	133.04	0.00	0.01		

Table 30. Subtheme frequencies for he

Main theme	Theme	Subtheme	n
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	common	58
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	natural	29
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	traditional	46
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	uncommon etc.	15
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	incorrect	13
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	correct	48
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	other authority	26
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	should be avoided	22
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	historical	31
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	old fashioned	77
Appeal to social norms	(NON)SEXIST	exclusive	300
Appeal to social norms	(NON)SEXIST	inclusive	65
Appeal to social norms	(NON)SEXIST	male-as-norm	65
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	confusing	7
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	makes sense (but) everybody	21
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	understands	33
Appeal to sense & logic	SENSE	weird	43
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	dislike	44
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	avoid using	59
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	they is better	138
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	he is okay	162
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	not offensive	32
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	offensive	18
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	trivial issue	30
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	alternate with she	15

Table 31. *Subtheme frequencies for she*

Main theme	Theme	Subtheme	n
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	common etc.	22
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	uncommon	55
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	unnatural	23
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	untraditional	13
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	incorrect	15
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	correct	34
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	old fashioned	7
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	should be avoided	12
Appeal to social norms	(NON)SEXIST	exclusive	328
Appeal to social norms	(NON)SEXIST	inclusive	19
Appeal to social norms	POLITICAL	political	46
Appeal to social norms	POLITICAL	challenges he	42
Appeal to social norms	POLITICAL	attempt to be less sexist	17
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	everybody understands	10
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	confusing	25
Appeal to sense & logic	SENSE	weird	75
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	they is better	121
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	she is okay	39
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	he is more common etc.	47
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	he is generic but she is not	26
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	better than he	35
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	just as bad as he	27
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	dislike	31
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	not offensive	22
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	offensive	7
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	trivial issue	19
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	alternate with he	33
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	like	18
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	avoid	28

Table 32. *Subtheme frequencies for he or she*

Main theme	Theme	Subtheme	n
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	common	12
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	natural	11
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	conventional	4
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	uncommon	7
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	unnatural	17
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	incorrect	0
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	correct	57
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	should be avoided	8
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	old fashioned	7
Appeal to social norms	(NON)SEXIST	exclusive	166
Appeal to social norms	(NON)SEXIST	(almost) inclusive	40
Appeal to social norms	POLITICAL	attempt to be less sexist	34
Appeal to sense & logic	SENSE	awkward (weird)	231
Appeal to sense & logic	SENSE	wordy	56
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	distracting	4
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	ideal/like	25
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	dislike	31
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	better than just he/she	56
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	better use one pronoun	10
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	formal	35
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	they is better	161
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	just as good as they	8
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	avoid using	20

Table 33. *Subtheme frequencies for generic they*

Main theme	Theme	Subtheme	n
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	common	41
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	natural	53
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	conventional	35
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	untraditional	2
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	incorrect	23
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	correct	14
Appeal to authority	NUMBER	plural	11
Appeal to authority	NUMBER	other agreement	11
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	change	3
Appeal to social norms	(NON)SEXIST	inclusive	123
Appeal to sense & logic	SENSE	weird	13
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	confusing	10
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	ideal	89
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	personal pref.	25
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	informal	19
Appeal to sense & logic	WHY THEY IS BETTER	easier/shorter	62
Appeal to sense & logic	WHY THEY IS BETTER	gender- neutral/inclusive	76
Appeal to sense & logic	WHY THEY IS BETTER	more standard/more common	33
Appeal to sense & logic	WHY THEY IS BETTER	traditional	28

Table 34. *Subtheme frequencies for generic ze and xe*

Main theme	Theme	Subtheme	n
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	uncommon	70
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	unnatural	32
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	untraditional	18
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	not real	57
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	objection to z and x	18
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	incorrect	6
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	correct	16
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	won't catch on	19
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	if more common...	37
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	should/might change	13
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	can't force change	14
Appeal to social reasons	(NON)SEXIST	gendered/marked	64
Appeal to social reasons	POLITICAL	political	22
Appeal to sense & logic	SENSE	weird	108
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	confusing	51
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	not everyone understands	53
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	they is better	146
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	dislike	25
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	like/support	16
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	how to pronounce?	14
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	unfamiliar	100
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	as bad as he/she	14
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	could get used to	11
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	avoid using	36
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	unsure	25
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	no need	46

Table 35. *Subtheme frequencies for nonbinary ze and xe*

Main theme	Theme	Subtheme	n
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	natural in writing	4
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	uncommon	57
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	unnatural	46
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	untraditional	14
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	not real	68
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	objection to z and x	26
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	incorrect	15
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	correct	13
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	other authority	10
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	won't catch on	18
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	if more common...	46
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	should/might change	24
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	can't force language	28
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	languages evolve	11
Appeal to social norms	(NON)SEXIST	gendered/marked	26
Appeal to social norms	POLITICAL	political	15
Appeal to social norms	LANGUAGE RIGHTS	whatever is preferred	112
		no need because...	
Appeal to social norms	LANGUAGE RIGHTS	...they/unspecified	47
Appeal to social norms	LANGUAGE RIGHTS	...only two genders	33
Appeal to social norms	LANGUAGE RIGHTS	...minority	16
Appeal to social norms	LANGUAGE RIGHTS	...nonbinary negative	15
Appeal to sense & logic	SENSE	weird	148
Appeal to sense & logic	SENSE	sounds like he/she	8
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	makes sense	13
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	doesn't make sense	8
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	confusing	43
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	not everyone understands	49
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	dislike	30
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	like/support	25
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	avoid	34
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	new pronouns are difficult	26
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	how to pronounce?	43
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	unfamiliar	81
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	unsure	18
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	could get used to	13
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	other neo better	20
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	one nb pronoun	9
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	one pronoun for all	14

Table 36. *Subtheme frequencies for nonbinary they*

Main theme	Theme	Subthemes	n
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	natural	13
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	uncommon	11
Appeal to authority	(NOT)ENGLISH	unnatural	15
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	incorrect	33
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	correct	11
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	plural	72
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	singular verb forms wrong	46
Appeal to authority	GRAMMAR	singular verb forms ok	9
Appeal to authority	CHANGE	change	13
Appeal to social norms	(NON)SEXIST	gendered/marked	11
Appeal to social norms	(NON)SEXIST	inclusive/universal	43
Appeal to social norms	LANGUAGE RIGHTS	whatever is preferred	69
Appeal to social norms	LANGUAGE RIGHTS	no need bc only two genders	30
Appeal to social norms	LANGUAGE RIGHTS	minority	2
Appeal to social norms	LANGUAGE RIGHTS	nonbinary negative	5
Appeal to sense & logic	SENSE	weird	99
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	makes sense	22
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	doesn't make sense	9
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	confusing	73
Appeal to sense & logic	LOGIC	only as generic	26
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	better than neo	129
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	neo better	15
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	dislike	9
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	negative connotation	14
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	ideal/like	34
Appeal to sense & logic	PERSONAL OP.	not ideal (but)	14

Appendix C: Attitude scales

Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language (Section I), Parks and Robertson 2000: 453.	Attitudes towards (non)sexist language use "--" original used without modifications. Italics indicate modifications. (Items S1–6 reverse coded for sum variable)
1. Women who think that being called a "chairman" is sexist are misinterpreting the word "chairman."	Item 3. "--"
2. We should not change the way the English language has traditionally been written and spoken.	Item 1. "--"
3. Worrying about sexist language is a trivial activity.	Item 4. "--"
4. If the original meaning of the word "he" was "person," we should continue to use "he" to refer to both males and females today.	Item 5. "If the original meaning of the word "he" was person, we should continue to use "he" to refer to <i>all people</i> ."
5. When people use the term "man and wife", the expression is not sexist if the users don't mean it to be.	Excluded as outdated ('husband and wife' returns 1110 hits in COCA, 'man and wife' only 158)
6. The English language will never be changed because it is too deeply ingrained in the culture.	Item 6. "--"
7. The elimination of sexist language is an important goal.	Item 7. "--"
8. Most publication guidelines require newspaper writers to avoid using ethnic and racial slurs. So, these guidelines should also require writers to avoid sexist language.	Excluded as unfitting for target populations.
9. Sexist language is related to sexist treatment of people in society.	Item 8. "--"
10. When teachers talk about the history of the United States, they should change expressions, such as "our forefathers," to expressions that include women.	Excluded as unfitting for target populations.
11. Teachers who require students to use nonsexist language are unfairly forcing their political views upon their students.	Excluded based on pilot reliability analyses.

12. Although change is difficult, we still should try to eliminate sexist language.	Item 9. "--"
	Item 10. Using gender equal language is important.
	Item 11. Using gender equal language supports gender equality.
The attitudes toward transgendered individuals scale: Psychometric properties Walch et al (2012).	Attitudes towards transgender individuals "--" original used without modifications. Italics indicate modifications.
1. It would be beneficial to society to recognize transgenderism as normal.	Item 1. It would be beneficial to society to recognize <i>being transgender</i> as normal.
2. Transgendered individuals should not be allowed to work with children.	Excluded as too context-specific.
3. Transgenderism is immoral.	Item 5. <i>There is nothing wrong with being transgender.</i>
4. All transgendered bars should be closed down.	Excluded as too context-specific.
5. Transgendered individuals are a viable part of our society.	Item 2. <i>Transgender individuals</i> are a viable part of our society.
6. Transgenderism is a sin.	Excluded due to religious implication.
7. Transgenderism endangers the institution of the family.	Excluded as too context-specific.
8. Transgendered individuals should be accepted completely into our society.	Item 3. <i>Transgender individuals</i> should be accepted completely into our society.
9. Transgendered individuals should be barred from the teaching profession.	Excluded as too context-specific.
10. There should be no restrictions on transgenderism.	Item 4. There should be no restrictions on <i>being transgender.</i>
For further items, see original study.	

Appendix D: Uses of *themselves*

(1) “(...) In the end, the only one who can determine whether their life was 'successful' is individual themselves.” (P673, American English, nonbinary: pronoun *xe*, but *they* is acceptable also)

(2) “A successful person is someone who achieves what they want in life. They know themselves and their desires very well, they set implicit or explicit goals for themselves, and they achieve those goals. This might mean success financially, in their relationships, or changing the world. The important thing is that they asked themselves what they wanted, and then went out and got it.” (P718, American English, nonbinary: pronoun *they*)

(3) “A successful person is someone who is capable of ensuring the wellbeing of others along with themselves. (...)” (P745, American English, nonbinary: pronoun *they* or *it*)

(4) “A successful person is someone who has a stable support network of other people and also participates in the network themselves to uplift other people.” (P782, American English, nonbinary: pronoun *they*)

(5) “Meet the goals they set out for themselves. (...)” (P1097, American English, cis female)

(6) “A successful person is someone who perceives themselves to be successful within whatever construction, structures, system or framework they believe they are measuring themselves within.” (P467, Australian English, cis female)

(7) “A successful person is someone who is satisfied with how their life is. They are someone who has achieved the goals they set for themselves in something resembling the timeframe they expected. (...)” (P559, British English, cis male)

(8) “A successful person is someone reaches their full potential. Ideally, they is able to support themselves and their family (if any) whilst contributing something useful back to society.” (P574, British English, nonbinary: pronoun *ey*)

(9) “A successful person is someone who sets realistic objectives for themselves and generally achieves them.” (P580, British English, nonbinary: pronoun *they*)

(10) “A successful person is someone who feels happy and satisfied with their accomplishments in life as well as feels happy and comfortable with themselves, both mentally and physically. (...)” (P644, French, Dutch, English; nonbinary: pronoun *they*)

(11) “A successful person is someone who doesn't need anyone else to validate themselves. (...)” (P11, Finnish, cis male)

(12) “[omitted subject] knows what they want in life and is determined to reach their goals. They know themselves, both their weaknesses and strong parts. (...)” (P710, Finnish, cis female)

Appendix E: List of subthemes

Appeal to authority

GRAMMAR

incorrect (including: grammatically incorrect, technically incorrect, wrong, bad grammar)

[*she*] “Not acceptable grammar wise [sic]” (P279, *incorrect*)

[singular *they*] “Ita [sic] bad grammar” (P167, *incorrect*)

[nonbinary *they*] “Grammatically not correct and sounds wrong.” (P116, *incorrect*)

correct (including: grammatically correct, technically correct, proper grammar)

[*he*] “Grammatically correct, but exclusionary” (P207, *correct, exclusive*)

[*he or she*] “It is the most grammatically correct choice, but sounds awkward and makes sentences unnecessarily long and complicated.” (P1015, *correct, weird, wordy*)

other authority (including references to dictionaries, style guides, specific grammar rules, the educational system)

[*he*] “It has been taught to me as such and I see it everywhere. I feel 'they/their' fits better still.” (P100, *other authority, common, they is better*)

[generic & nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I am familiar with these pronouns, but they are not English words, (do not appear in Collins English dictionary), they are superfluous and not required!!” (P164, *other authority, untraditional, no need*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “These constructs are not in general use, and contribute to confusion. They are not, at this time, part of the shared code of the English language. This may change over time.” (P556, *other authority/shared code, uncommon, confusing, might change*)

[*he or she*] “It's clunky, but that is the proper usage -- and just about every style guide agrees on this.” (P1014, *other authority*)

plural (including: references to group or to multiple people)

[nonbinary *they*] “It's a plural pronoun and therefore should not be used in the singular.” (P554, *plural*)

[nonbinary *they*] “It doesn't fit. 'They' refers to a group.” (P43, *plural*)

other agreement comment

[generic *they*] “Their' is plural. He/She is singular. It is grammatically incorrect to use their in a sentence, the subject of which is singular. I feel like I'm alone in this opinion though, since everyone uses their anyway.” (P1114, *other agreement, plural, incorrect*)

singular verb forms with nonbinary they are wrong/ok (mostly reactions from part 6)

[nonbinary *they*] “Acceptable but slightly jarring due to traditional grammar” (P37, *singular verb forms ok*)

[nonbinary *they*] “[...]‘they works' is ungrammatical.” (P126, *singular verb forms wrong*)

[nonbinary *they*] “They works' would sound like an error made by a non-native English speaker. 'They has' sounds erroneous.” (P180, *singular verb forms wrong*)

(NOT)ENGLISH

common (includes: usual, everyone uses the pronoun)

[*he*] “While it's common, it's alienating for a lot of people, and helps bolster up the patriarchy that lives in people's subconscious.” (P553, *common, male-as-norm*)

[*he*] “I think it is acceptable, as it is so commonly used, but I would prefer use of 'they'.” (P14, *common, they is better*)

[generic *they*] “It just sounds right. Everyone I know uses singular 'they' for these types of situations.” (P124, *common*)

uncommon (includes: unusual, no one uses the pronoun)

[*she*] “Exclusionary, but also it sounds jarring in my ear, because it is an uncommon usage. [...]” (P566, *uncommon, exclusive, weird(jarring)*)

[*she*] “I wouldn't use 'she' in this way, and I don't think anyone else would either.” (P788, *avoid using, uncommon*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “I think I mostly find it not acceptable because I haven't been exposed to it in common usage.” (P211, *uncommon*)

natural (includes: normal)

[*he*] “He' is a natural pronoun to refer to a generic unknown person or a group of people. I don't consider it emphasizing the gender as much as when using 'she' instead.” (P23, *natural, inclusive, he is generic but she is not*)

[*he*] “It sounds natural to me because I have heard it since childhood, but it does strike me as needlessly unequal.” (P409, *natural, common (heard since childhood), exclusive (unequal)*)

unnatural

[*she*] “I feel it is unnatural (I’m so used to he) and an attempt to be gender inclusive. I prefer they.” (P1139, *unnatural, attempt to be less sexist, they is better*)

[nonbinary *ze/x*e] “Way too uncommon to feel natural.” (P14, *uncommon, unnatural*)

traditional (includes: conventional, established, standard)

[*he*] “It is traditional but I do not like the construction of male as generic” (P642, *traditional, dislike*)

[*he*] “This is a established expression in English” (P271, *traditional*)

untraditional (includes: unconventional, unestablished, nonstandard)

[*she*] “It’s unacceptable because you start the sentence with a word which is inclusive such as everyone but then use the word ‘she’ which is an exclusive pronoun. Also the pronoun ‘she’ has historically not been used in the way the ‘he’ has been.” (P492, *untraditional, he is generic/traditional but she is not*)

[*she*] “There is no history of that usage, so it is immediately understood to specify females.” (P295, *untraditional, he is generic/traditional but she is not*)

[nonbinary *ze/x*e] “These are not part of the official language.” (P8, *untraditional*)

not real pronouns (includes: made up, artificial, manufactured, invented)

[nonbinary *ze/x*e] “[...] They were made up by the LGBT community and aren’t used outside of it. If they naturally evolved to be used in English then it wouldn’t be an issue. At this point it’s easier to use ‘they’ and that persons [sic] name.” (P845, *not real pronouns, not everyone understands*)

[generic *ze/x*e] “‘He or she’ serves the same purpose without inventing words or genders.” (P807, *not real pronouns*)

[generic *ze/x*e] “t [sic] seems like an unusual and kind of artificial way of speaking, but I wouldn’t bother getting angry over it.” (P949, *not real pronouns, uncommon, not offensive*)

objection to z and x

[nonbinary *ze/x*e] “I haven’t heard them before and find it odd that x and z are the chosen consonants.” (P793, *objection to z/x*)

CHANGE

historical (includes: acceptable in idiomatic contexts)

[*he*] “Historically it’s acceptable, but I think it’s better to use ‘they’ for a non-specified group. Sometimes ‘he’ covers both male and female.” (P250, *historical, they is better*)

[*he*] “Acceptable grammatically and in historical context, but causes speakers of the language to view male pronouns as the standard/neutral, and so men as the standard/neutral.” (P984, *historical, grammatically correct, male as norm*)

[*he*] “For certain idioms I recognize they come out of historical contexts (e.g. national anthems that are hundreds of years old). (...)” (P855, *historical*)

old fashioned (includes: archaic, outdated)

[*he*] “It's a little outdated.” (P610, *old fashioned*)

[*he*] “I view this as archaic and something that people should be educated about not using due to sexism.” (P584, *old fashioned, should be avoided, exclusive*)

[*he*] “No longer acceptable even though this is what I grew up with. It's easy to amend the language used to be more inclusive.” (P1132, *old fashioned*)

[*he or she*] “It's fine, but it sounds formal and outdated.” (P314, *old fashioned, formal*)

should be avoided

[*he*] “It would be better to say they, but socially (depending where you are from) this can be challenging if it is already so ingrained in your language to say he. It is behaviour that can be and should be changed.” (P460, *should be avoided, they is better*)

[*he*] “I believe it's acceptable because it's common language use but I also think we should stop using 'he' as the default gender pronoun.” (P406, *should be avoided, common*)

[*she*] “To be avoided but not totally unacceptable. Fine if gender use is alternated, esp if they is used part of the time” (P944, *should be avoided, alternate with he*)

[*he or she*] “Acceptable, but it shouldn't be.” (P446, *should be avoided*)

should/might change (to become acceptable/unacceptable)

[*she*] “Sounds and feels wrong as a result of what is mentioned above. Should be acceptable” (P67, *should change*)

[*he or she*] “but unfortunately exclusionary and likely to be an area of change soon.” (P944, *exclusive, might change*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “I wish this was more widespread and accepted as a neutral pronoun, applicable to more than non-binary people” (P957, *should change*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “Perhaps this will become acceptable in a decade, but at the present time, it is still novel and nonstandard.” (P133, *might change*)

won't catch on

[generic *ze/xe*] “Not likely to catch on passively” (P1124, *won't catch on*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “Again, they aren't inherently unacceptable. It's just very hard to imagine them coming into widespread, natural usage. I think the singular 'they'

has already become the common vernacular usage.” (P207, *won't catch on, they is better*)

[nonbinary *ze/xz*] “(...) I cannot see them overtaking 'they' in casual conversation.” (P525, *won't catch on, they is better*)

if (neopronouns were) more common, ... (they might become acceptable)

[nonbinary *ze/xz*] “While at present they sound odd, with some use they would easily become normal.” (P662, *if more common (...), weird*)

[generic *ze/xz*] “Ok to use, and if it would become norm could use it myself too. Currently I wouldn't use it personally, 'cause of political connotations. Don't mind if someone uses it and understand the meaning.” (P1, *if more common (...), avoid using, political*)

[generic *ze/xz*] “Perhaps this will become acceptable in a decade, but at the present time, it is still novel and nonstandard.” (P133, *if more common (...), untraditional*)

can't force change

[nonbinary *ze/xz*] “You can't force change on a language (just look at l'Académie Française's attempts to stymie Anglicization). People will speak how they speak and any change will happen gradually over decades. You can't force made up words into everyday speech.” (P909, *can't force language change, not real pronouns*)

[generic *ze/xz*] “I think they and their would be more acceptable. I have never heard *xe* or *ze* outside of an academic discussion and although I think a gender neutral singular pronoun would be useful I don't believe it is possible to impose it on a language. If one were to arise it would have to develop naturally.” (P490, *can't force change, they is better*)

languages evolve

[nonbinary *ze/xz*] “It can be annoying to explain, but language is evolving and changing. These pronouns lack the history of they, but to refuse to use them due to newness is silly. New words are being invented and used all the time (...)” (P671, *languages evolve*)

Appeal to social norms

(NON)SEXIST

exclusive (includes: sexist, gendered, biased, alienating)

[*he*] “'He' in English language refers to men but the sentences clearly refer to 'everyone' so...” (P639, *exclusive*)

[*he*] “(...) A gender-specific pronoun shouldn't refer to the same person/group in a sentence where a gender-neutral term was already used.” (P922, *exclusive*)

[*she*] “Acceptable if the children in question are indeed all female.” (P19, *exclusive*)

[*she*] “I wouldn't use this term as it does seem unnecessarily combativeness and exclusive when we have more accurate / inclusive terms we can use at our disposal. (...)” (P162, *exclusive*)

[*she*] “Again, when you first refer to a group of people, you can't assume gender.” (P82, *exclusive*)

inclusive (includes: gender-neutral, generic)

[*he*] “I have no issue with the word *he* covering both genders because it's a blanket statement that covers everyone, I don't think it's a big deal.” (P1145, *inclusive, trivial*)

[*she*] “I Have no issue including all under 'her'” (P401, *inclusive*)

[*she*] “It is used generically, therefore I think it is acceptable.” (P1084, *inclusive*)

[*he or she*] “I think this construct as if it's a spectrum. From *he* to *she* and everything in between” (P26, *inclusive*)

[generic *they*] “This is acceptable due to the fact that the language is gender-neutral and includes everybody.” (P416, *inclusive*)

they is inclusive/universal (hence nonbinary use is acceptable)

[nonbinary *they*] “Its how you would refer to anyone. I don't see the reason not to refer to a non binary individual in a different term, it feels discriminatory.” (P178, *inclusive/universal*)

[nonbinary *they*] “It just seems an extension of the generic singular *they* usage (as when used to refer to an unknown person or a group of people) and thus feels natural.” (P558, *inclusive/universal, natural*)

generic he supports male-as-norm principle (includes: male default, male superiority, patriarchal)

[*he*] “Use of the male pronoun where a gender neutral pronoun should go is excluding people who aren't male, and reinforces the patriarchal idea that the male experience is the only normal experience.” (P527, *male as norm [exclusive]*)

[*he*] “The use of *he* to refer to any gender presupposes that the male gender is the default descriptor. Since women make up more than 50% of the population it would actually be statistically more accurate to use *she*.” (P223, *male as norm*)

(nonbinary pronouns are) gendered/marked

[nonbinary *they*] “Acceptable if you don't know that they want to be referred to differently, and you aren't outing them as non-binary without permission.” (P955, *gendered/marked, whatever is preferred*)

[nonbinary *they*] “This is borderline for me. These sentences are jarring and direct attention towards the persons non-binary nature rather than what the sentence actually means.” (P439, *gendered/marked, weird (jarring)*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Jesus, the who mess is because English already has too many (2) gendered pronouns. Let us not add more!” (P323, *gendered/marked*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “This just looks ridiculous. How do you pronounce the x? In a way, one could argue it reinforces the idea of non-binary people as space aliens.” (P939, *gendered/marked, weird, how to pronounce*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “I’m no longer sure on the meaning of these pronouns. Are they non-binary or non-gendered. they cannot be both. [...]” (P123, *gendered/marked, as bad as he/she, they is better*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “Xe and ze are like he and she. They is better for generic.” (P203, *gendered/marked, they is better*)

LANGUAGE RIGHTS

whatever pronoun is preferred (is acceptable)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I don’t want anyone to feel uncomfortable so I would respect their wish to be identified with a different pronoun even though I’m not a fan of the pronouns” (P50, *whatever is preferred*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “If the people to whom these pronouns apply and relate accept these terms, they [sic, then] they are acceptable in my view” (P67, *whatever is preferred*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “It’s acceptable when that’s the individual’s preferred pronoun.” (P133, *whatever is preferred*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “If those are a person’s pronouns, then of course *xe/ze* should be referred to with those pronouns.” (P673, *whatever is preferred*)

there is no need for nonbinary ze/xe because there is they

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Singular *they* doesn’t prefer a gender, so there’s no need for a new word.” (P1012, *no need because they*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I think it’s unneeded as the ‘*they*’ is already a gender-neutral pronoun.” (P886, *no need because they*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I see no need to create new words when ‘*they*’ works perfectly well.” (P1068, *no need because they*)

there is no need for nonbinary pronouns because there are only two genders

[nonbinary *they*] “Lee and Chris are either male or female.” (P115, *only two genders*)

[nonbinary *they*] “It is really confusing because we know the identity of the individual. Normally we can now replace ‘*they*’ with the correct ‘*he*’ or ‘*she*’.” (P449, *confusing, only two genders*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Usage is unacceptable as these ‘*ze*’ and ‘*XE*’ words have no real need. He or She is dependant [sic] on the sex of a person, not one’s gender in these cases. (...)” (P227, *only two genders*)

there is no need for nonbinary neopronouns because such a small minority uses these pronouns

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “[...] To now accommodate such changes for the sake of political correctness seems backwards to me, and for what purposes I do not know, given that 'singular they' is more than sufficient to untangle complicated sentence structures. [...] To turn the language on its head not for the small minority of transgender people, but the small minority of THAT minority--these people who do not identify with a gender, seems absurd to me.” (P825, *minority, they is better, political*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “[...] People who do not identify as male or female are statistically a tiny proportion of the population.[...]” (P1052, *minority*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I feel widespread use and acceptance of new neutral pronouns would be difficult given the small demographic of those that would use them [...]” (P973, *minority*)

there is no need for nonbinary pronouns because nonbinary identities are not valid or real (code: nonbinary negative)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Gender is not that complicated. Jo and Terry should get psychological help.” (P425, *nonbinary negative, only two genders*).

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “[...] *ze* and *xe* are bound to fail because tending to the special snowflakes is not a priority for most people.” (P877, *nonbinary negative*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “People who don't identify with the gender binary have a mental illness and society as a whole should not subvert hundreds of years of linguistic tradition to accommodate a incredibly tiny, mentally unstable minority. (P844, *nonbinary negative, minority*)

POLITICAL

political (includes: ideological, feminist, making a point)

[*she*] “I haven't seen this done very often. I would consider it acceptable (unlike using 'he' generically, which I marked unacceptable) because I imagine that when it is used, it is done to make a point.” (P985, *political, uncommon*)

[*she*] “The use of the word 'she' in this context is a statement of political belief that male-dominant society should be replaced with female-dominant society. It is not a statement of desire to move from a male-dominant society to an equality society.” (P441, *political*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “Plus, I feel that anybody using a word like this would be mostly be doing it to get a reaction, so they can't [sic] about sexism and etc” (P563, *political*)

she challenges he

[*she*] “Better than male in a sense of correcting for sexism, but it's still inaccurate!” (P647, *challenges he, exclusive*)

[*she*] “I appreciate the attempt to counteract the generic 'he', but feel that this is a form of over-correction that fails to address the root of the problem with gendered pronouns in the English language.” (P953, *challenges he, exclusive*)

[*she*] “I say this is acceptable only because it seems to balance out the use of 'he'. I don't like it, but I wouldn't argue that it is wrong.” (P357, *challenges he, dislike*)

attempt to be less sexist (includes: politically correct)

[*she*] “Not gender neutral. It may sound more (pardon the awful expression) 'politically correct' but it's really just swapping one gender bias for another.” (P70, *attempt to be less sexist, exclusive*)

[*she*] “Acceptable because it is understandable. But is [sic] gives me the impression that the speaker/writer is trying to be 'politically correct' in a linguistically [sic] unnatural manner.” (P1052, *attempt to be less sexist, unnatural*)

[*he or she*] “Feels a bit unnatural and artificial. Makes sense only if there is an actual point of referring to both sexes. Political correctness really ruins the language.” (P73, *attempt to be less sexist, unnatural, weird*)

Appeal to sense & logic

SENSE

weird (includes: odd, strange, funny; awkward, clunky, clumsy, cumbersome; annoying, jarring, stupid, dumb, ridiculous)

[*she*] “Sounds strange. Takes me longer to process and detracts from the message.” (P327, *weird, confusing*)

[*he or she*] “I find it an acceptable but clumsy way of speaking or writing. I think they works much better.” (P106, *awkward*)

[*he or she*] “I find he or she constructions clunky and awkward to say.” (P354, *awkward*)

[nonbinary *they*] “I've never heard it before so it would sound a bit weird.” (P333, *weird, unfamiliar*)

[generic *ze/xz*] “I think it's a little silly.” (P1099, *weird*)

neopronouns sound like he and/or she

[nonbinary *ze/xz*] “Only problem is that some of them sound similar to the binary pronouns.” (P661, *sounds like he/she*)

LOGIC

everyone understands

[*he*] “Generally accepted and understandable but closed-minded and exclusive.” (P262, *exclusive, everyone understands*)

[*he*] “It's mostly understood to be acceptable and correct, but I think that should change. I and most other people I know would probably use 'they' or 'their' instead.” (P632, *correct, everyone understands, should change, they is better... they is more common*)

[*she*] “It is generally understood that this use may also refer to 'he'.” (P97, *everyone understands*)

not everyone understands

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Very few understand those words and they feel alien.” (P43, *weird, not everyone understands*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “At this time this sounds /very/ artificial. I would not understand this as natural speech. I would be very surprised if I encountered this outside of a social justice context or outside of a trans-centered space.” (P758, *not everyone understands, unnatural, not real pronouns*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “I'll adopt these words when they are actually used and understood by a significant part of the population. Currently they're far from it” (P258, *if more common (...), uncommon, not everyone understands*)

confusing (includes: distracting, unclear, ambiguous)

[*she*] “This is acceptable; however, when she is used generically my first thought is often that the writer is making a political point which can distract from the overall text.” (P27, *political, confusing*)

[*she*] “It's acceptable only because he and him are acceptable ways to refer to everyone. But it sounds unnatural and makes me pause when I hear it.” (P798, *unnatural, distracting/confusing*)

[nonbinary *they*] “Seems confusing as to my knowledge this would reference a group of people.” (P89, *plural, confusing*)

[nonbinary *they*] “This does not sound natural and can cause ambiguity. For example, I interpret 'Chris loves their dog' as the dog being co-owned by Chris and some other person, or by other people not including Chris. I would never interpret the singular they referring to Chris in this case.” (P23, *unnatural, confusing*)

makes sense (includes: 'I get it')

[*he*] “Those sentences read ok and make sense. They/their would be better” (P438, *makes sense, they is better*)

[*he or she*] “I chose 'acceptable' because it reads well in my mind and makes sense, however it is exclusive to use this term and I don't like to see it.” (P320, *makes sense, exclusive, dislike*)

[nonbinary *they*] “Yes, this sounds 'weird', but I feel like in context of referring to a non-binary person, it makes perfect sense.” (P454, *makes sense, weird*)

doesn't make sense (includes: ‘I don’t get it’)

[*he*] “Just doesn't make sense. It should be Any man.” (P828, *no sense*)

[nonbinary *they*] “It just doesn't work for me.” (P352, *no sense*)

[generic *ze/xz*] “Nonsense! Not acceptable! This is why we have you and they.” (P195, *no sense, they is better*)

they functions only as generic

[nonbinary *they*] “‘They’ should only be used when referring to an unknown person or multiple people. If Lee and Chris were born male, they should be referred to as ‘he’.” (P305, *only as generic, plural, only two genders*)

[nonbinary *they*] “In these contexts it doesn't make sense to refer to one person using ‘they’ or ‘their’.” (P1006, *no sense, only as generic*)

[nonbinary *they*] “I do not feel comfortable using ‘they’ to describe a singular, specific individual. The singular ‘they’ in my usage is for an unidentified individual.” (P1058, *only as generic*)

PERSONAL OPINIONS

generic they is better than other generic pronouns

[*he*] “I would use they, but if it feels more natural to someone, who am I to judge?” (P73, *they is better*)

[*she*] “Just use they if you're going to change things up.” (P352, *they is better*)

[*he or she*] “They would be preferred.” (P3, *they is better*)

[*he or she*] “This I'd say is acceptable, however using ‘they’ instead would be way more natural.” (P98, *they is better*)

generic they is better because...

... it's easier/shorter

[*he or she*] “Acceptable, but why use 3 words when you can use one ‘they’.” (P110, *they is better, ... because easier/shorter*)

[*he or she*] “I prefer ‘they’ because it's a shorter expression” (P305, *they is better, ... because it's easier/shorter*)

... it's gender-neutral/more inclusive

[*she*] “We have a word for cases where we refer to persons of unknown gender or all genders, ‘they’.” (P98, *they is better, ... because it's gender neutral*)

[*he*] “What's wrong with using their? It takes no more effort and includes everyone” (P578, *they is better, ... because it's gender neutral*)

... it's more common

[*he*] “Acceptable but I find 'they' is a lot more common.” (P390, *they is more common*)

[*he or she*] “I would use they in this context and I think most people I know would too.” (P632, *they is better, they is more common*)

... *it's traditional/has been used historically*

[*he or she*] “It shows an attempt to be gender inclusive, but is awkward and wordy when the singular 'they' exists, and has for centuries.” (P909, *attempt to be less sexist, weird, wordy, they is better... has been used historically*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “They has been used as singular since Shakespeare (at least!). I think it is too hard to change pronouns because they are such a large part of speech. To change chairman to chair or to add the title Ms. is fairly trivial in comparison. I also feel insisting on new pronouns will make people who are currently unsupportive of or antagonistic to non-binary people's rights very resistant to changing their minds.” (P1139, *they is better... has been used historically*)

he is okay (includes the subthemes *common, traditional, inclusive*, some of the comments in *everyone understands*)

she is okay (includes the subthemes *common, inclusive*, some of the comments in *everyone understands*)

X better than he/he and she

[*she*] “Again, I find it feels dated, and is no less cissexist, but using 'she' more often is preferable to defaulting to 'he' all the time.” (P263, *exclusive, old fashioned, better than he*)

[*she*] “It has some of the same issues of gender-neutral he without the centuries of use. It's not perfect but I like it better. Also fine grammatically.” (P537, *correct, he is traditional she is not, better than he*)

[*he or she*] “Better than just one pro noun [sic] but still not inclusive enough.” (P537, *better than he and she, exclusive*)

X is just as bad as he/he and she

[*she*] “Sounds refreshing and beautiful for a change, but would really be just as bad as 'he'.” (P19, *like, just as bad as he*)

[*she*] “This is acceptable as well, although it seems to suffer from the same problem as the use of 'he.' Evening out the use of gendered pronouns does nothing to deal with the gender problem.” (P1103, *just as bad as he*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “same for why he and she aren't; too gendered to be used in situations of ambiguity. they is the only acceptable in situatons [sic] where gender is unknown, then others can be adopted when specified” (P714, *gendered/marked, just as bad as he and she, they is better*)

she should be alternated with he (or less frequently vice versa)

[*she*] “It is more acceptable to me when it is alternated with 'he'” (P1002, *alternate with he*)

[*she*] “Used when the author alternates between he and she indicating a non specific singular person.” (P1079)

[*he*] “I understand that he is meant to be all inclusive so I don't mind when it is used in this universal way. I do try to sprinkle 'she' into my writing instead of he at least 50% of the time.” (P211, *inclusive, alternate with she*)

informal (includes: not fit for written language)

[generic *they*] “Totally fine. Preferred. It's not common in writing, but absolutely is in informal speech and many people don't realize it. I'd be happy to see this adopted more widely.” (P1032, *like, informal*)

[generic *they*] “Acceptable in informal talk, not formal writing. It will take some time before the formal register morphs this way; informal registers are already there.” (P1122, *informal*)

[generic *they*] “Casual use only.” (P66, *informal*)

formal (includes: not fit for spoken language)

[*he or she*] “It's fine. A little clunky for informal speech.” (P1032, *formal*)

[*he or she*] “Prefer to use they; takes too long while speaking. In writing it is okay to use the he/she, s/he.” (P1027, *formal, they is better*)

[*he or she*] “I use this myself in lieu of a neutral pronoun such as in finnish. However, this adds complexity in the sentence and does not fit well in spoken language.” (P10, *wordy, formal*)

not offensive (includes: not harmful, not bothersome)

[*he*] “I an [sic] not offended by it, nor do I think it is morally wrong or excluding. Personally I would use their in the first two sentences, and he or she in the last one. (P45, *not offensive (no harm), inclusive, they is better*)

[*she*] “I have no issue with people using he or she for an unknown. It's a personal preference.” (P946, *not offensive*)

[generic *ze/xz*] “It would seem different to me, but nothing I would have a problem with/would deem unusual once the meaning was explained.” (P979, *weird, not offensive*)

offensive (includes: harmful, bothersome)

[*he*] “It's linguistically acceptable. If the person is a non-native speaker I would tell myself they might have been taught this and might not realise it's offensive.” (P995, *offensive, correct*)

[*he*] “I view it as acceptable due to how I was taught English and how I've been exposed to it. 'He' is sometimes used in this way and it doesn't feel like improper

use of language to me but it does kind of rub me the wrong way.” (P37, *offensive, other authority*)

trivial issue (includes: not important, ‘I don’t care’, there are bigger problems)

[*he*] “The word itself is less important than the context, personally.” (P485, *trivial*)

[*he*] “I don't think it matters if he, she or something else is used” (P458, *trivial*)

[*she*] “It's not strictly unacceptable to me, but 'she' feels weird. It's unconventional, and feels like a forceful yet unnecessary introduction of gender equality into language. It's a petty change.” (P96, *weird, untraditional, attempt to be less sexist, trivial*)

personally avoid using

[*he*] “I always wondered as a kid why he was used, I never used it myself personally and always used a form of they/their” (P203, *avoid using, they is better*)

[*he or she*] “It is somewhat better than just using 'he' or 'she' alone. However, in spoken language it can be quite clumsy, so I prefer not to use these kind of constructions myself.” (P124, *better than he and she, formal, avoid using*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I don't really care. I will accept people's usage of it but I wouldn't use it myself until it is actually an accepted word in multiple dictionaries and is being frequently used.” (P742, *avoid using, other authority, if more common...*)

like/support (includes: ideal, refreshing)

[*she*] “I think this is a great thing to do.” (P406, *like/support*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “I don't see these in common usage very much, but I approve. I also dislike the 'xe/xir' pronouns because the pronunciation is somewhat ambiguous, while 'ze/zir' is unambiguous.” (P331, *uncommon, like/support*)

dislike/hate (includes: not preferred)

[*she*] “Acceptable, but not ideal.” (P48, *dislike*)

[*he or she*] “It's acceptable but I hate it with a passion.” (P440, *dislike*)

[generic *they*] “My gut tells me it is wrong and I don't like it, but it is very common in speech.” (P340, *informal, dislike*)

(they is) ideal (includes: own preference)

[generic *they*] “I feel most comfortable with 'they', it feels the most correct.” (P37, *ideal, correct*)

[generic *they*] “I think this is what should be used, always.” (P202, *ideal*)

[generic *they*] “I think this is best. It's truly neutral and not clunky like combined 'he/she' constructions. It includes all gender identities.” (P332, *inclusive, ideal*)

not ideal (but)

[nonbinary *they*] “I think it sounds a bit clunky and is probably not the ideal solution to using transgender pronouns, but otherwise wouldn't think much of it if I heard it being used that way.” (P826, *weird, not ideal (but)*)

[nonbinary *they*] “Acceptable for now since we don't have much of anything better to use, but very inelegant given potential confusion with plural / 'unknown person' sense of the word.” (P1146, *confusing, not ideal (but)*)

unsure

[nonbinary *they*] “This is a new experience for me and I haven't formed an opinion at all... this survey is the first time I've been exposed to the use of pronouns 'ze' and 'xe' and I've no idea of their correct use.” (P380, *unsure, unfamiliar with neopronouns*)

[generic/nonbinary *ze/xe*] “This is the first time on coming across such nouns, and I haven't had time to formulate an opinion.” (P450, *unsure, unfamiliar with neopronouns*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “I'd need to think about it more.” (P384, *unsure*)

no need for generic neopronouns

[generic *ze/xe*] “I feel that this is unnecessary since 'they' does the trick.” (P626, *no need, they is better*)

[generic *ze/xe*] “I don't like the pronoun and view it as unnecessary” (P927, *dislike, no need*)

nonbinary they is better than the neopronouns

[nonbinary *they*] “Unusual, but more acceptable than ze or xe.” (P470, *they is better*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Not completely against it, but it just doesn't sound natural to me. I would rather use 'they'.” (P185, *unnatural, they is better*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I think singular they is already fine and don't find new pronouns added to English as necessary or useful.” (P354, *no need, they is better*)

nonbinary neopronouns are better than they

[nonbinary *they*] “Confusing. A new, inclusive singular word would be better.” (P1137, *confusing, neo better*)

[nonbinary *they*] “Better to use a new word.” (P733, *neo better*)

[nonbinary *they*] “It is the wrong pronoun. Since there is no appropriate pronoun, the context becomes important and 'ze' or 'xe' would be advisable. This is at least clear that gender is referring to sex.” (P1040, *neo better*)

negative connotation with nonbinary they (includes: dehumanizing, 'multiple personalities')

[nonbinary *they*] "Neither chris nor lee are plurals so unacceptable - it sounds like they have a dissociative identity disorder or are in a partnership. It lacks clarity and is confusing." (P213, *plural, negative connotation, confusing*)

[nonbinary *they*] "You know, it kind of invalidates their personhood. 'They' feels so generic that when used with a specific individual it kind of erases that individual's defined individuality." (P961, *negative connotation, only as generic*)

new pronouns are difficult (includes: there are too many new pronouns, what is the difference between ze/xe)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] "Adds too many new complicated words if every single person can have their own special pronoun, just use they, it is less confusing and gender neutral." (P765, *difficult, confusing, they is better*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] "I find these very clunky myself. If we start coming up with new pronouns for every single type of gender variation, nobody is going to know what to call anyone." (P789, *weird, difficult*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] "While ze and xe clarify some points, since I'm not really familiar with their use, it's still a bit hard to sort out. But I can see the benefits of having them because it clears up who they are." (P1085, *unfamiliar, difficult*)

how to pronounce neopronouns? (includes: pronunciation is difficult/ambiguous)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] "I've never come across them in use, have no idea how 'xe' is pronounced, have no idea of the distinction between 'ze' & 'xe' & don't think anyone would understand me if I started using them. Language that nobody else can understand & has no generally agreed meaning isn't proper communication." (P126, *unfamiliar, not everyone understands, how to pronounce?*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] "Interesting idea but I don't even know how to pronounce these options." (P850, *how to pronounce?*)

unfamiliar with neopronouns (includes: never heard)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] "Not familiar with usage of ze/xe" (P247, *unfamiliar*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] "No idea what those mean" (P336)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] "Have not heard of them" (P414)

could get used to

[nonbinary *they*] "It sounds so weird! But I could probably get used to it." (P105, *weird, could get used to*)

[nonbinary *they*] "I'm still getting used to it...but I am 60 years old." (P991, *could get used to*)

there should be only one nonbinary neopronoun

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “Maybe if there was a single universally accepted one.” (P61, *one nonbinary neopronoun*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I don't know how I feel about it because to me it seems confusing. I would prefer one word universally accepted, such as 'ze' and not 'xe', as that seems a bit complicated because.. would they not be pronounced the exact same way?” (P601, *unsure, confusing, one nonbinary neopronoun*)

there should be one pronoun for all, regardless of gender

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I think there should be only one pronoun as gender neutral” (P1063, *one pronoun for everyone*, possibly *one nonbinary neopronoun*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “One decided upon gender neutral pronoun would be acceptable.” (P48, *one pronoun for everyone*, possibly *one nonbinary neopronoun*)

[nonbinary *ze/xe*] “I don't think it is necessary to have a new, separate word. Will each of LGBTQ need their own pronoun? I say we should use 'they' for everyone.” (P810, *no need, difficult, they is better, one pronoun for everyone*)