

Gender inclusivity in a global language? The case of epicene pronouns in English

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Introduction

- epicene pronouns reference individuals of indeterminate gender, e.g. *the student, a person, anyone*
- the most common epicene pronouns have all been criticised:
 - he* – ‘male biased’
 - he or she* – ‘too binary’
 - they* – ‘ungrammatical’
- many previous studies of L1 use – **but what about L2 speakers?**

Methods and materials

- four completed studies using **five corpora** and an **elicitation experiment**
- student (academic) writing (= **English as a foreign language**) and published academic articles (= **English as a lingua franca**)
- frequencies of the pronouns *he, he or she, and they*
- group comparisons, e.g. between learners from 13 L1 backgrounds

Some findings

- **L1 background:** L1 speakers of languages with pervasive grammatical gender (e.g. Russian, Italian) particularly prone to using *he*
- **antecedent:** *they* esp. common with notionally plural antecedents (e.g. *anyone, every student*); *he* with male-stereotyped nouns (e.g. *prisoner*)
- **time:** increase in *they* and decrease in *he* since the 1970s in L2 English

Coming up

- researchers’ **views** on gender-inclusive language in **open access articles**
- **survey:** 117 respondents
- two researchers’ comments on the use of generic *he*:
 - “borders on unacceptable, but is not there yet”**
 - “It bothers me that this is the standard in my L1”**

Selected references

- Hekanaho, L. 2020. *Generic and nonbinary pronouns. Usage, acceptability and attitudes*. Helsinki: Unigrafia.
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- Stormbom, C. 2021. *Gendered language in flux: The use of epicene pronouns in EFL and ELF writing*. Turku: Åbo Akademi förlag.