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I Told Him/Her/It/Them?: The Problem of Epicene Pronouns

Natalie Hall

INTRODUCTION

English speakers have felt—and often bemoaned—the gaping hole in the English pronominal system now commonly referred to as the epicene pronoun, a singular pronoun having an antecedent of unknown gender (Newman, 1997, p. 3). An example of such a pronoun is as follows: *Everyone* should be content in *his* life situation. In this sentence, everyone is an antecedent with no associated gender, and so the pronoun *his* functions as an epicene pronoun. Throughout the history of English, many epicene pronouns have been used with varying degrees of popularity and approval. Although the English language does not lack options for solving the epicene pronoun problem, it does, unfortunately, lack an option unanimously accepted by the language users. Despite prescriptive efforts to control and dictate which epicene pronouns are used, the language users ultimately are the true language changers, and clarity in this mess should be sought through studying the language of the American people—specifically, informal language.

To determine how Americans have naturally been using epicene pronouns, as opposed to the dictates of prescriptive grammar rules, this study focuses on speech patterns and informal writing. Because of their natural resistance to prescriptions, these two forms of communication tend to be more indicative of the epicenes most commonly used by Americans.¹ In this study, I seek an answer to the question of which epicene is used the most by Americans in speech and informal writing. I will use this information to determine the effectiveness of efforts to change prescriptions and traditions of epicene pronoun usage. After presenting a brief history of the use and evolution of epicene pronouns, I will present the methodology and results of the two surveys conducted in this study and then conclude with a discussion of the results. The results of the two surveys of this study indicate that a change in the gendered pronominal system is not only possible, but will occur as *they* loses grammatical number and becomes the established, genderless epicene pronoun in every grammatical situation.

CRITICAL HISTORY

2.1 *The prescription and proscription of epicene he*

The study of grammar is divided into two sections: descriptivism and prescriptivism. Descriptive grammarians study a language as it naturally changes, seeking to understand its complexities. Conversely, prescriptive grammarians react to language change by implementing rules to either stop the change or alter the course of the change. Although both of these functions are important, prescriptive grammarians take a more active role in language change than do

¹ This study does not address formal writing, for it is heavily guided by prescriptive forces and does not reflect natural language change.

descriptive grammarians. Instead of studying a language to determine how and why it is being used, prescriptive grammarians try to guide language change by implementing rules that do not necessarily align with the language practices that are commonly used. Because of this function, prescriptivism is often the culprit behind the artificial language constructions in our language.

In the case of epicene pronouns, prescriptive efforts are highly responsible for the establishment of generic *he* as standard usage. Up until 1745, usage guides did not address the issue of the epicene pronoun, leaving the individual to determine acceptable usage. This indifferent attitude began to change when Ann Fischer published *A New Grammar* (1745) and labeled generic *he* as standard use instead of generic *they*. Subsequently, Lindley Murray's prominent text *English Grammar* (1795) greatly popularized this idea, successfully establishing generic *he* as the appropriate epicene when he corrected "Let each esteem others better than themselves" as "better than *himself*" (102). After this publication, other prescriptive agents (textbooks, grammar guides, etc.) joined the ranks and also prescribed generic *he*, all the while proscribing generic *they*.² Speakers of Standard English continued to embrace this prescription, and it can be found in almost all of the formal writing, formal speech, usage guides, and grammar books of the last 200 years.

However, despite its success in usage guides and formal writing, generic *he* has never been accepted in speech, informal writing, and, in some cases, popular literature. Generic *he* disagrees with its ambiguous antecedent in gender and can often cause confusion. For this reason generic *he* has not proven to be a satisfactory epicene pronoun, leaving grammarians still searching for a replacement. From the mid-nineteenth century, grammarians have searched for a suitable replacement for generic *he*, with suggestions including singular *they*, variations on *he or she*, or a neologism³ (Baranowski, 2002, p. 380). Although an alternative solution was sought, no headway was made until the rise of nonsexist language reform. With second-wave feminism in 1970⁴, nonsexist language reform was thrust into the spotlight, resulting in dramatic changes in epicene prescription on the basis of sexism. Incredibly, within 25 years, "an eye-blink in language change," generic *he* has been generally deemed inappropriate for formal or informal use (Curzan, 2014, p. 181). A little over 200 years after its prescription, generic *he* was then proscribed from formal usage.

2.2 Alternatives to generic *he*

Usage guides have taken up the cause of nonsexist language reform, and almost all popular guides now advocate the following three options for dealing with generic pronouns: use some variant of *he or she*, use third-person plural nouns, or simply recast the sentence to avoid the necessity for an epicene. However, anyone who has used any of these methods in any form of

² Other examples of early popular usage guides which advocate generic *he* include Thomas Harvey's (1878) *A Practical Grammar of the English Language*, Gould Brown's (1878) *The Grammar of English Grammars*, and Stephen W. Clark's (1870) *The Normal Grammar: Analytic and Synthetic*.

³ A neologism is a word created and then artificially introduced into the lexicon. Popular examples of pronoun neologisms are *thon*, *hir*, *hesh*, *co*, *xe*, and *E*.

⁴ Second-wave feminism arose in the 1970's and was mainly concerned with "women's reproductive rights and equal payment" (Milles, 2011, 22). Equal payment disputes sparked a rise in nonsexist language reform.

communication, especially verbal, is aware of how dreadfully impractical and awkward they are in practice. Smoothly recasting a sentence is impossible while speaking, and proves complicated in writing over long periods of time. Using third-person plurals is an effective solution, but only for a small number of epicene problems. *He or she*, despite its now common acceptance as the nonsexist alternative to generic *he*, still receives much criticism from many parties, and rightfully so⁵. Even though currently favored by prescriptivists, these three options have demonstrated their impracticality and inability to satisfactorily solve the epicene problem.

As the three common options suggested by usage guides and grammar textbooks all prove grossly inadequate in replacing generic *he*, grammarians and writers alike have long been exploring the viability of other options. One common suggestion is epicene *she*, a suggestion most popular among the feminist community. However, the problems accompanying generic *he* also accompany generic *she*—namely its overtly sexist and ambiguous nature⁶. Furthermore, aside from the feminist community, epicene *she* has gained little popularity in the last thirty years. Another common suggestion is a neologism.⁷ Believed to be the first introduced and the most popular proposal to date, *thon* was introduced in 1884 by Charles Converse. He developed this word from a blend of “them” and “one,” two common pronouns. Using sounds already common in pronouns, he believed this solution to be perfect. As Converse and many others believe, there is no way of manipulating existing language to fix the problem, requiring the creation of a new word to simply fill in the hole. However, because it is so foundational to English grammar, the pronominal system does not readily accept any changes. Consequently, English users still have not seen the adoption of a pronominal neologism.

Not surprisingly, the one solution most commonly used by writers and speakers alike rarely receives favorable mention by prescriptive forces: generic *they*. Prescriptive forces have been condemning this epicene pronoun for many years.⁸ Despite the many efforts to remove it from our language, singular *they* has shown great resilience to prescriptive efforts and has survived over the last 250 years. Many studies on the use of singular *they* have been conducted over the last forty years,⁹ and these studies simply reaffirm what the English speaker may safely guess simply by listening to everyday conversation: singular *they* is indeed alive and prevalent in almost every facet of our communication.

In addition to thriving in the language of the people, generic *they* has slowly gained popularity amongst grammarians. For example, linguists Newman (1997) and McWhorter (1998) have both offered their support of this construction. Similarly, many other writers,

⁵ John McWhorter (1998) derisively refers to *he or she* as a “cooked construction” that is “only learnable as [an] artificial second layer” (119-20). Also, *he or she* is still sexist, for one of the genders must come before the other.

⁶ Newman (1997) speaks of the duplicitousness of suggesting yet another gender-specific pronoun to replace the other, instead suggesting a complete move away from gender-specific words in the search for an epicene (50).

⁷ Baron (1986) states, “In all, more than eighty bisexual pronouns—little words such as *ne*, *ter*, *thon*, *heer*, *et*, and *ip*—have been proposed since the eighteenth century, and because many word coiners worked in isolation and received little publicity, some of the same forms were invented more than once, most notably versions of the blends *hesh*, *himer*, and *hiser*” (190).

⁸ Miller and Swift (1980) even claim that the initial “object of grammarian’s intervention was the widespread acceptance of *they* as a singular pronoun” (44). Generic *he* was provided as an alternative.

⁹ See Baranowski (2002), Green (1977), Cooper (1984), G. Abbott (1984), and Meyers (1990)

politicians, public figures, and even teachers have begun to adopt this once proscribed epicene. However, despite its success amongst the general public, generic *they* remains black-listed by most prescriptive agents on the grounds of its obvious failures as a replacement for a true epicene pronoun.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Survey of verbal communication

To gain data on which epicene pronouns are most prevalent in speech, I created a brief online survey and distributed it using the snowball method, utilizing social media and e-mail to send out the survey. The survey was open to any fluent English-speaker over the age of 19. Within the survey, I asked for participants to provide information on gender, age, and education level because I wanted to study these three factors in relation to pronominal selection. Before beginning the survey, participants were instructed to read the provided sentences aloud and then indicate which pronoun they naturally used to fill in the blank in the sentence. Five of the questions had definite referents with ambiguous gender, some of which are professions associated with a certain gender. Three of the other sentences contained an indefinite referent: *someone*, *whoever*, or *everyone*. I placed *someone* and *everyone* in sentences with no implied gender discrimination; these sentences tested the likelihood of pairing *they* with a singular referent. The sentence containing *whoever* referenced grocery shopping, giving the referent a subtle feminine coloring.

Next, I provided seven examples of pronominal neologisms and asked participants to indicate any neologisms of which they were aware, which they used in speech or in writing. These questions were designed to gauge the extent to which English speakers use pronominal neologisms, and to determine the general level of awareness of these commonly suggested neologisms. Finally, I asked participants to indicate on a five-point Likert scale their approval of the most prevalent epicene options: *he*, *she*, *he or she*, *they*, and a neologism. I wanted to survey public opinion of these options and to compare the results of this question against the answers provided throughout the rest of the survey to determine the level of consistency between those pronouns actually used and the perceived acceptability of those pronouns.¹⁰

3.2 Survey of *Time* magazine

I identified magazines as a suitable representation of informal writing, for magazines are not as closely guided by formal writing standards as other written genres and often have a journalistic aspect, increasing the amount of recounted speech that is included in the text. I selected *Time* magazine and conducted my study using the Brigham Young Corpus, which contains a complete collection of *Time* publications through 2006. I selected only the 46 years between 1960 and 2006 to include in my study.¹¹ Within the corpus I performed searches for the indefinite pronouns *someone*, *anyone*, and *everyone*. For each of these words, I searched for the

¹⁰ One source of error was the written nature of the survey in testing speech patterns. The data from the participants who indicated using *s/he* while speaking was not included in the results, as well as answers which were not pronouns (e.g. “the”).

¹¹ I chose this time frame to determine the prescriptions followed by writers in the 1960s and then trace the change in pronominal usage over the next 46 years.

following collocates: *he*, *his*, *they*, *their*, *his or her*, and *he or she*, setting the parameters as 0 words before and 8 words after for the first four and 8 words both before and after for the last two. I was interested in determining how and when usage from these particular pronouns changed.

After the corpus compiled the information, I manually searched through the results for every combination of collocates between the years 1960 and 2006, separating out the data by decade. I determined the function of the pronoun and noted whether each generic pronoun occurred within speech (recounted in writing) or in prose.¹² Developing percentages for each category allowed me to easily compare usage patterns for each pronoun over the five decades.¹³ Because *he or she* is inherently generic, each appearance as a collocate automatically functioned as a generic pronoun. Consequently, instead of utilizing percentages to compare overall usage of a word to generic usage, I compared the number of times this construction appeared within writing to the number of times the other epicene pronouns were used in writing. This comparison offers a better understanding of the prevalence of this construction throughout the last 46 years.

4 - Results

4.1 Time Magazine Survey

In total, I analyzed 3,214 sentences in the *Time* magazine survey, with the bulk of the data from this survey including the personal pronouns *he*, *they*, *his*, and *their*.¹⁴ This research reflects a steady decline in the usage of generic *he* between 1960 and 2000 (see Table 1); similarly, the results of generic *they* agree with the claim that generic *they* is now more prevalent in both written and verbal communication than generic *he* (see Table 2). Although singular *they* has by no means completely replaced generic *he* in this survey, the data does indicate a steady rise in the use of the former and decline in the use of the latter which suggests that this situation is not far off.

Table 1 – Percentage of generic *he* usage per decade in *Time* magazine corpus¹⁵

Generic <i>he</i>	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Anyone	88%	84%	63%	44%	26%
Someone	96%	83%	57%	52%	30%
Everyone	78%	70%	61%	25%	18%

Table 2 – Percentage of generic *they* usage per decade in *Time* magazine corpus

Generic <i>they</i>	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000

¹² Any pronoun with an indeterminable function from the given context I threw out as an outlier.

¹³ The results are expressed as the percentage of times a specific epicene pronoun was used with a particular referent in relation to the total number of epicene pronouns used per decade.

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, information given in the charts combines the data for both the nominative and possessive forms of both pronouns.

¹⁵ Values shown for Table 1 and 2 are the percentage of times each epicene pronoun was used with a particular referent in relation to the total number of epicenes used with that referent per decade.

Anyone	10%	11%	25%	33%	58%
Someone	4%	14%	32%	26%	62%
Everyone	19%	30%	35%	63%	64%

Additionally, I found examples of *he or she* used with these three indefinite referents, but they appeared infrequently throughout the 46 years. In total, *he or she* appears as a collocater of these three referents 44 times over the given time frame. Comparatively, over the same time frame, generic *he* appeared 360 times, and generic *they* appeared 182 times. Even with the expanded search parameters applied to *he or she*, a form of generic *he* appeared eight times as often as *he or she* over the 46 years; similarly, a form of generic *they* appears four times as often. This construction does not possess the same prominence of the other two epicenes pronouns; furthermore, its use does not increase or decrease over time, but instead stays relatively consistent throughout the decades. For this construction to be a significant rival to the other two main epicene pronouns of history, then its usage would be expected to increase between 1960 and 2006. The data also suggests that *he or she* has been mainly used in writing, and it had gained little acceptance within verbal communication by 2006, the most recent of the texts surveyed.

The other noteworthy element of this survey is the relationship between the epicenes used as speech and those used as prose within the magazines texts I surveyed¹⁶ (see Table 4). As shown, generic *he* has been primarily used in writing over the last fifty years, exhibiting little fluctuation in the ratio between its appearances in both speech and writing.

Table 3 – Percentage of epicene pronouns used as speech per decade in *Time* magazine corpus¹⁷

Speech	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
<i>He</i>	25%	29%	31%	16%	29%
<i>They</i>	76%	65%	61%	43%	56%

Conversely, generic *they* has always been predominately used in speech instead of writing. These findings strongly support the belief that language change begins in speech and then works its way into the written language. Beginning in verbal communication, generic *they* was eventually able to become more prominent in written communication as well. Generic *he* and *he or she*, though, were mainly written conventions and, consequently, were not able to successfully work their way into speech.

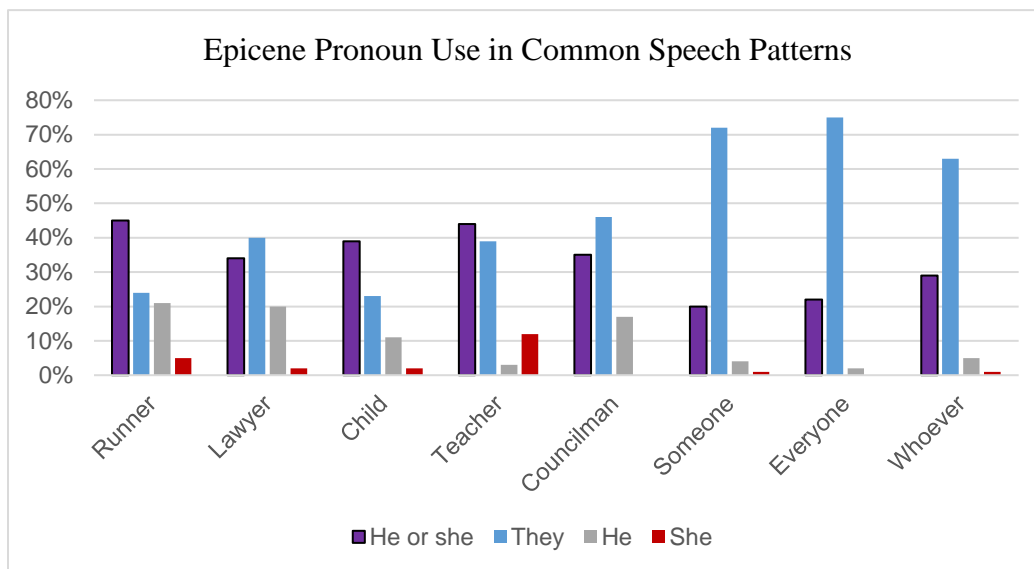
4.2 Results of Epicene Pronoun Survey

Three-hundred and four people participated in the survey of common speech patterns; however, not every participant responded to every question. Consequently, each question had a

¹⁶ Pronouns used in reported speech are counted as speech; all other pronouns are considered prose.

¹⁷ The values shown are the percentage of instances an epicene pronoun was used as speech in relation to the total number of times the epicene was used with the given referent per decade.

varying number of responses. The results of this survey reveal that Americans do not have one commonly accepted epicene pronoun for all grammatical situations (see chart below). The eight words in the chart are the eight epicene referents used in the survey. The first five in the chart—“runner” through “councilman”—are nominal, or definite, referents, and the other three are indefinite pronouns functioning as referents. As illustrated, the use of epicene pronouns varies by the type of referent. In general, the nominal epicene referents tend to be paired with either *he or she* or *they*, both in relatively equal proportions. The indefinite epicene referents, though, show a much higher tendency to be paired with generic *they* than with *he or she*. Furthermore, although by no means an equal contender with the other two epicenes, generic *he* is still present in communication.

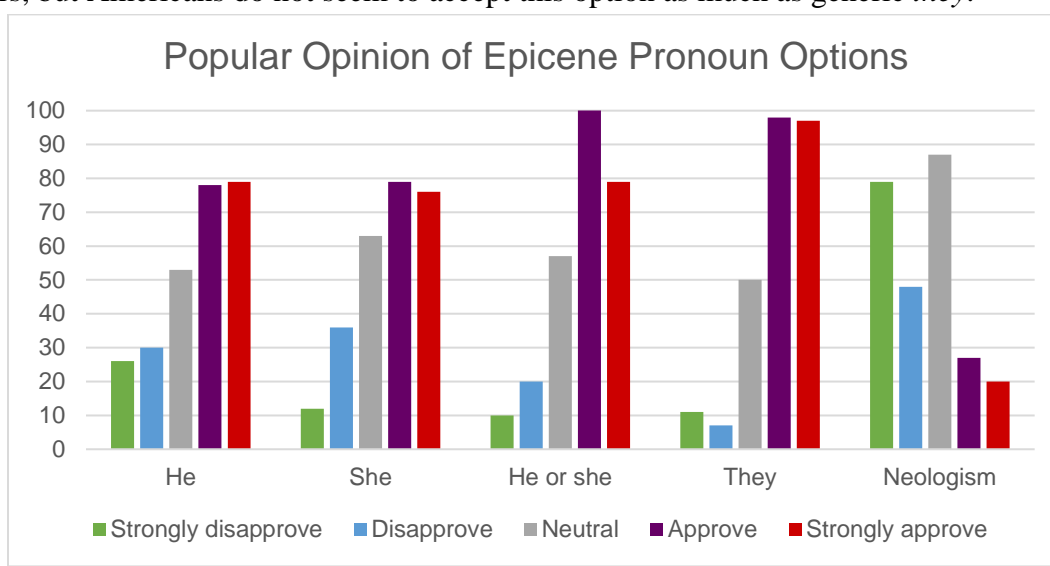


Not surprisingly, *he* appears more frequently with definite referents, words which elicit a much stronger need for gender than indefinite referents. The referents with the highest uses of generic *he*, “runner” and “lawyer,” both conform to the traditional androcentric word associations. Lawyers typically are male, and the runner, portrayed as victorious in the survey, takes on a male coloring because of physical prowess. Similarly, “teacher,” the only question with a higher number of feminine than masculine responses, is a traditionally female role; even today, the word has not lost its feminine associations. The other pronoun on the survey’s list of possible responses is *it*, and the word “child” elicited a significant number of responses of *it*. This data also complies with tradition, as children have historically been referred to as *it* before assuming their respective gender roles. Interestingly, the 15 participants who selected “other” for their own gender consistently selected a form of generic *they*. On average, 85% of the transgender participants selected generic *they*, while the remainder of the participants selected either *he or she* or *eir*.

In the second section of the survey, participants were presented with a list of seven common pronominal neologisms. Participants were asked to identify knowledge of the neologisms, neologisms they use in speech, and neologisms they use in writing. Every neologism

was recognized by at least ten percent of the participants, with *s/he*, *hir*, and *ze* respectively being the most commonly identified and used neologism by both the younger and older age groups. With the exception of *s/he*¹⁸, less than ten percent of participants claimed to use each of the neologisms in either form of communication. However, over fifty percent of transgender participants claimed knowledge of their existence, use of them in speech, and use of them in writing. Once more, *s/he*, *hir*, and *ze* were the most commonly selected neologisms.

The other portion of this survey asked participants to indicate on a five-point Likert scale their views on the five most common epicene pronouns (refer to chart below). This data reveals the wide variety of opinions English speakers hold on epicene pronouns. The epicene option meeting with the most disapproval is the neologism, while the option meeting with most favor is *they*. *He or she*, as seen in the previous responses to the survey, also meets with approval from English speakers, but Americans do not seem to accept this option as much as generic *they*.



CONCLUSION

5.1 Effectiveness of prescriptions and proscriptions

As the data reveals, Americans hold a wide variety of opinions on epicene pronouns, preventing the presence of one unanimously accepted epicene pronoun. Although generic *he* has largely diminished over the last forty years of the feminist social reform, both the text survey and speech survey confirm that this prescription has not yet lost its foothold. Conversely, the prescription of *he or she* has not proven quite as successful, for Americans have not truly embraced this construction. The data collected from *Time* magazine is quite revealing: in over fifty years, the construction appeared only forty-four times in print, used either in verbal or written examples. Even generic *he*, which was facing fierce resistance, appeared much more throughout those years than *he or she*. Therefore, this construction has not caught on beyond formal speech and writing, nor will it in the foreseeable future.

¹⁸ 88% of participants indicated that they use this neologism in normal conversation. This data is faulty, because this neologism is not possible in verbal communication. The conclusion is that participants misunderstood the question and data should not be considered.

As the prescription of *he or she* has been a failure, so has the proscription of generic *they*. Although Americans may heartily agree that *they* is a plural pronoun and should be used as such, the survey results communicate the opposite message. Americans regularly take advantage of this construction's natural lack of gender and use it as an epicene pronoun. Despite its grammatical incorrectness, Americans have used singular *they* for centuries simply because the word is a natural part of our lexicon; what is natural is comfortable, and what is comfortable is used. As generic *he*, *they*, and *he or she* have demonstrated, prescriptive efforts at suppressing or incorporating words into the lexicon are only as successful as the language users allow them to be. The changes that the people make themselves are those which are most successful.

5.2 Trends in Epicene Pronoun Usage

The process of identifying the most commonly used pronoun is complicated by the lack of one unifying prescription or usage. Age, education level, social values, gender, and grammatical factors all seem to play a role in determining which epicene an individual will choose in a situation. Despite the varying usages, the survey results indicate that generic *they* is the most prevalent of the generic pronouns in both speech and writing. According to the speech survey, *he or she* is the second most common epicene; according to the text survey, though, it had not gained much prevalence by 2006 in either speech or writing. In studying the data, some other usage trends are apparent.

The most obvious of these trends is the tendency for English speakers (and less frequently writers) to match generic *they* with an indefinite pronoun. In the speech survey, participants selected *they* for an indefinite referent more than twice as often as they selected *he or she*, and the *Time* survey data confirms this trend. The three indefinite referents tested were followed by generic *they* or *their* more often than the other epicene options. The *Time* survey also showed this trend in epicene usage for indefinite referents. Despite their respective grammatical classifications, all three referents were paired with the plural *they* more often than singular *he*. This trend suggests that English users are comfortable pairing the genderless *they* with an indefinite pronoun having no gender associations. Although obvious references to humanity, words such as *someone*, *anyone*, and *everyone* lose human association because of their inherently generic nature. Consequently, speakers and writers have an easier time using a completely generalized epicene pronoun with an indefinite referent. This data also suggests that English-speakers have turned the pairing of indefinite pronouns and epicene *they* into a mere grammatical construction. Instead of consciously considering gender in relation to an indefinite referent, people simply match the word (e.g. *someone*) with *they* and do not even consider the possible gender of the referent. Such a construction simplifies communication and further implants the use of epicene *they* in English.

Because this study analyzed epicene usage in both written and verbal communication, trends in the development of both branches of communication can be discussed. Overall, the surveys reveal a close correlation between both communication venues. However, the two different surveys produced conflicting data on the use of *he or she*. Its limited presence in the *Time* survey indicates that this construction has not been successfully adopted into the American

language. In the speech survey, though, *he or she* was selected almost as often as generic *they* when paired with a definite referent. Apparently, this construction has been more successfully incorporated into speech than into writing. Two considerations must be made at this point, however. The data from the speech survey was gathered in 2014, while the most recent text analyzed dates back to 2006. An eight year gap exists between these two surveys, a gap which could allow for an increase in the use of *he or she* in written text. A further study of more recent issues of *Time* magazine would be required to verify this situation. Additionally, due to the written nature of the speech survey, participants may have subconsciously responded to the sentences with formal speech patterns rather than normal speech patterns. Similarly, when individuals become self-conscious of how they are speaking, they tend to revert to carefully controlled, formal communication practices. This inherent defect of the survey may also account for the differing data on the frequency of the use of *he or she* in both speech and writing.

Despite the difference in usage of *he or she*, both of the surveys demonstrated that generic *they* is the most prevalent epicene pronoun currently in use. Both venues of communication have developed similarly in this respect. Singular *they* is one of the two choices most frequently selected for definite referents, the most prevalent epicene pronoun with indefinite referents, and the most widely approved epicene. Moreover, the younger age group taking the survey consistently selected *they* over *he or she*, while indicating higher levels of approval for the former. This information suggests that those people have embraced generic *they* more than the previous generations of English speakers. Not only does this information inspire hope that old prescriptions can eventually fade away, but it also inspires the hope that Americans are finally moving towards one epicene pronoun, signaling a possible end to the current epicene mess.

5.3 The Possibility of Pronominal Change

Wielding the fact that pronouns are a part of a closed class of words, grammarians have long claimed that pronominal change is a monumental process and not easily achieved. Indeed, they are correct. Although history does provide examples of such change, these examples are scarce. Nevertheless, pronominal change is not only possible, but necessary. As established, following the proscription of generic *he* almost forty years ago, Americans have still not adequately filled the hole left by the suppression of *he*. Consequently, the natural conclusion is that the English pronominal system must change to meet the needs of society.

As the English language continues to grow and adapt to the demands of society, the most likely word to fill in the epicene gap is generic *they*.¹⁹ Of all the epicene pronoun options, singular *they* has been in English the longest and has proven the most popular pronoun of spoken English. As Hook comments,²⁰ the best solution will be to use a familiar construction and

¹⁹ Curzan comments, “With these competing prescriptions of what should be seen as acceptable solutions to the generic pronoun problem, the one that adheres to current spoken usage—and in this case also has a long history of usage—will probably eventually prevail (80).

²⁰ Donald Hook (1991) represents the opinions of many linguists when he states, “The best solutions have invariably been those which have not introduced wildly unfamiliar forms, but, rather, have relied on the utilization of familiar constructs used in new ways.”

modify it as the language demands. Generic *they* is quite familiar, as it is already being prominently used in speech and informal writing. This usage has also been sneaking into formal writing for the past couple of decades.²¹ As writers continue to use generic *they*, this epicene pronoun will eventually gain the support of the population and will become a useful, natural part of the language.

One of the main objections to officially adopting generic *they* in English is the great potential for ambiguity when *they* loses number distinction. Unarguably, *they* used as an epicene pronoun will cause confusion; however, humans are imperfect communicators, and we will never completely escape ambiguity. The other main objection to epicene *they* is its classification as a plural pronoun. Prescriptive rules clearly define *they* as a plural pronoun, a definition zealously guarded by prescriptivists since the birth of modern English. Nevertheless, our language boasts one pronoun that has changed in number. Earlier in the history of English, *thou* was a singular second person pronoun and *you* was a plural second person pronoun. Over time, English dropped *thou*, leaving only *you* for the second person pronoun. *You* did not change in number but became a generalization which covered both number categories. The current usage of generic *they* is mirroring the historic change of *you*. Prescriptive agents must someday face this undeniable change and accommodate it in their rules.

Although generic *they* is not a perfect solution to the epicene problem, it is the best option. The survey results indicate that *they* is the most probable epicene option to gain acceptance by both the general populace and the prescriptive grammarians, alone making it the option with the best chance of survival. Furthermore, what is needed is not a completely generic singular pronoun; English already has *it*, which has come to be used as a sexless pronoun. Instead, English needs a genderless singular pronoun that can be used with humanity and can be used by all people in all types of communication. Singular *they* promises to be such a pronoun.

²¹ Newman (1992) notes that “in language familiarity breeds inconspicuousness” (50).

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