De, den, hen, and the rest
A pilot study of the use of gender-neutral and nonbinary/genderqueer pronouns in Danish

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Abstract

The Danish language, like many other 'Western' languages, does not have any human-referent gender neutral third person singular pronoun that is "officially" recognized in the sense that it is taught in language classes, used in public documents, or included in most dictionaries. Nevertheless, many individuals prefer being referred to with pronouns that do not designate that individual as either female or male, which prompts linguistic innovation and creativity. This article is a pilot study presenting the initial results of a 7-question survey investigating the use of gender neutral and nonbinary/genderqueer pronouns in Danish. Based on 75 responses, it is found that the pronouns most people prefer others to refer to them with are de 'they' (the third person plural), den 'it' (the third person singular common gender, conventionally used to refer to objects and non-pet animals), and hen (third person singular neologism), as well as hun 'she' and han 'he'. The survey targeted two groups of respondents: 1) Nonbinary/genderqueer individuals and 2) Women and men who wish to be referred to with pronouns other than hun/han. The final section of the article suggests several topics for further research of gender neutral and nonbinary/genderqueer pronouns, both in Danish and in other languages.

Introduction

In many languages, particularly in what is commonly referred to as 'the Western world', female persons are traditionally referred to with one specific pronoun ('she' in English) and male persons with another ('he'). However, a person may wish to be referred to with other pronouns, such as gender neutral or nonbinary/genderqueer pronouns (see e.g. Miltersen 2016:39; see section 2.3 of the present article for terminology). In many languages, there is not a conventional or normative option for gender neutral pronouns. In the case of Danish, there are four third person singular pronouns that are recognized by existing grammars, dictionaries, and government institutions: *han* (commonly used about male persons and sometimes male animals), *hun* (commonly used about female persons and sometimes female animals), *den* (common grammatical gender; commonly used about objects and animals) and *det* (neuter grammatical gender; commonly used about objects and some animals). In other words, the Danish language does not have a conventionally recognized gender-neutral pronoun to be used about persons– to my knowledge, no grammar describes options for referring to persons of unknown or non-male and non-female gender (cf. Hansen and Heltoft 2011:555; Jensen 2016). Individuals who wish to be referred to with something other than the

traditional pronouns *hun* 'she' or *han* 'he', must therefore be linguistically innovative, such as by borrowing or repurposing pronouns (see section 3). In the present article, a pilot study investigating gender neutral and nonbinary/genderqueer pronouns in Danish is presented.

Persons who wish to be referred to with ('have chosen'; see 2.1) other pronouns than *hun/han* may have different reasons for this. Individuals who identify as being a gender other than exclusively male or exclusively female (nonbinary/genderqueer individuals; see 2.2) may wish their (chosen) pronouns to reflect their gender identity, or to be gender neutral. On the other hand, individuals who do identify as either female or male (whether they are cisgender or transgender), may for political or personal reasons wish to be referred to with gender neutral pronouns.[1] This pilot study therefore examines the pronoun choice of two different groups: 1) Nonbinary/genderqueer individuals, regardless of which pronouns they have chosen, and 2) Women and men who wish to be referred to with other pronouns than *hun* or *han*. The study seeks to investigate which pronouns exist and are used in Danish, and whether there are correlations between pronoun choice and 1) place of residency and/or 2) being in contact with a LGBT+ or queer community.

Section 2 of the present article will clarify the terminology used. Section 3 is an overview of the relevant Danish gender-neutral pronouns. The study was conducted using a survey, the details of which is described in section 4, and whose results is presented in section 5, summarized in section 6, and discussed as topics for further study in section 7.

Terminology

Chosen pronouns

The survey asked the respondents to report which pronouns they prefer others to use when referring to them. This is referred to as 'a person's [i.e the respondent's] pronouns', and the respondent is said to have 'chosen' those pronouns. Another common term for chosen pronouns is 'preferred pronouns'. However, a point of discussion in some transgender communities is whether the word 'preferred' suggests that the pronouns are less 'default' and more optional for others to use about the person than it would be e.g. to use *she* about a cisgender woman. In respect of this view, I have decided to avoid the term and use 'chosen pronouns' instead.

Nonbinary and genderqueer

The terms nonbinary and genderqueer both can be used as a descriptor for individuals who do not identify their own gender as exclusively male or exclusively female. In practice and for the individuals who identify with the terms, the two words do not necessarily mean the exact same thing and they can carry different connotations both semantically and regarding social grouping. However, these connotations vary from person to person. Some see genderqueer as a broader term than nonbinary, but nonbinary can also be seen as an umbrella term (that may or may not encompass genderqueer). Some consider genderqueer a more political term, and nonbinary in contrast more focused on the individual's personal gender identity. In all these senses, it is entirely

possible for an individual to be both genderqueer and nonbinary at once. Narrowing down the definitions, while still maintaining an accurate depiction of the experiences of the users of the terms would be massively challenging, if not impossible. For the purposes of the present article, nonbinary and genderqueer will therefore be used synonymously to describe someone who does not identify exclusively as a woman or exclusively as a man.[2]

Gender-neutral or nonbinary/genderqueer pronouns

The pronouns addressed in the article, except for *hun* 'she' and *han* 'he', will be referred to as 'gender-neutral pronouns', although by this is meant both gender-neutral and nonbinary/genderqueer. This is because some individuals use the pronouns to achieve gender neutrality, i.e. to avoid their pronouns being an indicator of a particular gender, while other individuals use them to explicitly signal that person's nonbinary or genderqueer identity. Since these two uses cannot always be distinguished in practice, both will, for the purposes of this article, be encompassed by 'gender-neutral'.

Overview of pronouns

de

The form *de* is the third person plural pronoun in Danish. It is not recognized by grammars, dictionaries, or public institutions as a gender neutral third person singular pronoun, but like English *they* it is used as such in casual conversation.

den

The form *den* is the uter (common gender) third person singular pronoun in Danish. Compare the neuter form, *det*. *Den* is conventionally used about animals where *hun/han* is not, while both *den* and *det* are used about objects depending on the grammatical gender of the object.

hen

Hen is a loanword from Swedish, originally proposed in Sweden in 1966 and in 2015 added to the Swedish dictionary *Svenska Akademiens ordlista*.[3] It was proposed as a gender neutral pronoun and an alternative to writing *han/hon* ('he/she'). In Denmark it has less widespread usage.

hun and han

Hun is the feminine third person singular personal pronoun, while *han* is the masculine third person singular personal pronoun, corresponding in use and meaning to *she* and *he* in English. *Hun* and *han* are used only as personal pronouns in Danish, referring to humans and sometimes animals (usually pets) and other person-like entities (e.g. toys) (Hansen and Heltoft 2011:554). As for English *he*, *han* is said to have a gender neutral use, although this is rarely if ever used in practice (cf. Hansen and Heltoft 2011:555). Danish has only the grammatical genders utrum and neutrum,

and the feminine/masculine distinction does not exist grammatically outside third person personal pronouns.

Method

Data for this study was collected through an online survey, the link for which was shared on social media platforms. The link was posted on the author's own Facebook wall, as well as in five different Facebook groups: One for nonbinary people, one for transgender people, one for LGBT+ people, and one for feminists, and one activist group. It was also shared on the blogging platform tumblr.com. These places were chosen because I suspected that the people most likely to choose gender neutral pronouns are nonbinary people, genderqueer people, and other transgender people for reasons of gender identity, as well as some feminists for political reasons. The survey was shared on social media because this made it easy to quickly spread the link to as many people as possible, as members of the groups could share it on their own pages/blogs. The link was shared alongside a brief description of the study as an examination of Danish gender neutral and nonbinary/genderqueer pronouns, specifying that respondents should be either nonbinary/genderqueer individuals, or women/men who have chosen other pronouns than *hun*/*han*. Readers were encouraged to share the survey with anyone it may be relevant for.

The survey was anonymous, and the respondents were informed that they were not obligated to finish filling out the survey once they had started. The survey consisted of 7 questions in Danish, shown in Table 1 along with English translations.

Table 1: Survey questions

Danish	English	Q. type
Hvilket pronomen ønsker du at blive omtalt med? (skriv gerne alle dine pronomener, hvis du bruger flere – hvis du fx både omtales med 'de' og 'hen', så skriv både 'de' og 'hen')	Which pronoun do you wish to be referred to with? (please write all your pronouns if you use several – if for instance you're referred to with both 'they' and 'hen', write both 'they' and 'hen')	Input field
Hvorfor har du valgt netop de(t) pronomen(er)?	Why have you chosen that/those particular pronoun(s)?	Input field
Hvilke(t) køn identificerer du som?	Which gender(s) do you identify as?	Input field
Hvilket postnummer bor du i?	In which postal code do you reside?	Input field (#)
Deltager du eller har du tidligere deltaget i et LGBT+- og/eller queer-miljø? (Afkryds alle der er sande for dig. Med 'deltage i' menes der hvorvidt du har haft kontakt til miljøet, fx ved at komme til arrangementer såsom foredrag, hyggeaftener, debatoplæg, eller via Facebookgrupper eller lignende. Du behøver ikke have deltaget aktivt, det er nok fx at læse opslag i en Facebookgruppe.)	Do you participate in or have you formerly participated in a LGBT+ and/or queer community? (Check all that are true for you. 'Participate in' means whether you have been in contact with the community, e.g. by attending events like talks, get-togethers, debates, or through Facebook groups or similar. You need not have participated actively, it is enough to e.g. read posts in a Facebook group.)	Multiple choice
Hvis du svarede ja til at have deltaget i et offline miljø, foregik dette så hvor du nu er bosat?	If you answered yes to having participated in an offline community, did this take place where you currently live?	Yes/no
Er der noget du ønsker at tilføje?	Do you have anything you would like to add?	Input field

Results and analysis

The survey received 96 responses. A summary of the responses to the survey (minus the ones that were excluded; see 5.1) can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Results

	de	*hen*	*den*	*han/hun*	none/name	Other pronouns	Total responses
Area of residence:							
City (CPH + Aarhus)	41	18	17	17	3	1	61
Towns + countryside	10	7	0	9	0	1	14
Gender:							
nonbinary	44	20	13	28	3	2	70
excl. female	3	1	0	3	0	0	4
excl. male	1	0	0	1	0	0	1
Community:							
Danish, offline	47	20	14	29	3	1	67
Danish, online	41	18	10	27	4	1	63
English, offline	29	11	9	19	2	1	42
English, online	40	18	12	22	2	1	58
Other language	7	1	5	3	0	0	10
No participation	0	1	0	0	0	1	2

Excluded responses

Some responses were excluded from the analysis. If a respondent reported using *hun* exclusively while also identifying exclusively as a woman, the response was excluded from the data. The same is the case for a respondent using *han* exclusively and identifying exclusively as a man. This was the case for 19 responses. Some respondents identified as a woman or a man while also identifying as nonbinary or genderqueer. Their responses were not excluded.

One further response was excluded due to being written in English and reporting English pronouns rather than Danish. One respondent accidentally submitted their answers twice, so one of these was also excluded.

After the exclusions, 75 responses were left for analysis.

Gender

The survey used a blank input field for respondents to indicate their gender. This means respondents had total freedom as to how much or little detail they wanted to provide and as to how to define their gender. The input field method of asking the question was chosen in order to capture as representative a range of the respondents' genders as possible, as well as not to discourage anyone from filling out the survey by forcing them into pre-defined categories they may not identify with,

or making them feel like they were not properly represented in the options provided. The downside of this method is that it makes statistical analysis difficult. With a sample size of 75, it is not too time-consuming to categorize the answers manually, but the diversity of the responses makes it hard to categorize the answers, especially while still respecting the integrity of each individual answer. Respondents used many different words to describe what this article refers to as nonbinary or genderqueer genders. '*Nonbinær', 'genderqueer', 'androgyn', 'akønnet', 'autismekønnet', 'slapsvans'* ('Nonbinary', 'genderqueer', 'androgynous', 'agender', 'autismgender', and 'sissy') are all examples of words respondents used to designate their gender. Further, as alluded to above, some described themselves as 'nonbinary woman' or 'nonbinary man' or similar, and some respondents described themselves as genderfluid, listing both 'man' and 'woman' (and/or other genders) as their gender. Some described themselves as e.g. 'woman and genderqueer', which can both be taken to mean being a genderqueer woman or a 'woman' and 'genderqueer' as two separate genders, possibly depending on their interlocutor.

In order to avoid, as much as possible, categorizing respondents in ways they themselves may not feel is accurate, all responses that were not either unmodified 'woman' or unmodified 'man' are categorized as nonbinary.[4] Accordingly, 70 respondents are nonbinary, 4 are binary women, and 1 is a binary man.

Pronouns

Respondents were encouraged to list all the pronouns they wish for others to refer to them with, and so the same respondent may be counted more than once in Table 2 and the analysis. 42 of the respondents reported choosing more than one pronoun set ('set' being the pronoun and its inflections, e.g. *de* (nominative), *dem* (oblique), *deres* (genitive)). 47 respondents reported choosing *de*, 22 chose *hen*, 13 chose *den*, 30 chose *han* or *hun* (or both), 3 preferred no pronoun or being referred to only by name, 2 respondents chose a different pronoun. 37 respondents chose one or more gender-neutral pronoun, 6 respondents chose *han* or *hun* exclusively, while 39 respondents used both *hun* or *han* as well as one or more gender-neutral pronoun.

Geographical distribution

Denmark consists of the peninsula Jutland (*Jylland)* and several islands, of which the two largest are Zealand (*Sjælland*) and Funen (*Fyn*). The main cities of the country are distributed on these three areas: Copenhagen, the capital and largest city, on Zealand; Aarhus, the second largest city, on Jutland, Odense, the third largest, on Funen, and Aalborg, the fourth largest, on Jutland. As is often the case, there is a larger concentration of self-identified LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other gender and sexual minorities) or queer individuals in larger cities as opposed to smaller cities or the countryside. In Denmark, 45-52% of self-identified LGBT+ and queer individuals reside in Copenhagen (Gransell and Hansen 2009:25). In contrast, approximately 30.6% of the total population in the same age range (16+ years) reside in Copenhagen (*Danmarks Statistik*).[5]

Since there is a larger concentration of LGBT+ and queer communities in larger cities, and since community participation could potentially influence how individuals perform and negotiate their gender (see section 5.5), there might be a relation between area of residence and pronoun choice. Further, since the pronoun *hen* is a loan from Swedish, it can be hypothesised that users on Zealand, which is closer to Sweden, are more likely to use *hen* because of exposure to Swedish. On the other hand, they may be less likely to use *hen*, in order to distance themselves from Sweden and the Swedish language.

The majority of the respondents (55) resided on Zealand. Of these, 54 lived in Copenhagen and the surrounding area, 1 in Roskilde. The distribution of the remaining respondents is 4 in Odense (Funen), 7 in Aarhus and the surrounding area, 3 in Aalborg and the surrounding area, and 6 in smaller towns in Jutland.

The dataset is evidently skewed towards Copenhagen (even after accounting for the larger percentage of LGBT+ and queer individuals living there), which increases the chance that a statistical analysis of the role of geographical distribution for pronoun choice is unreliable. Further, due to the Copenhagen municipality being fairly large, some respondents registered as living in Copenhagen may live as much as one hour of public transport time from the city centre, blurring the line between what might be called a 'larger city' as opposed to smaller cities. Keeping this in mind, the data may still suggest some tendencies. *Den* was only chosen by respondents from a large city, i.e. Copenhagen and Aarhus, and the pronoun was slightly more popular in Aarhus, where 4 out of 7, or 57% chose it, opposed to 13 out of 54, or 24% in Copenhagen. Respondents from Aarhus were slightly more likely to choose *hen* (3 out of 7, or 43%) than respondents from any other place except Odense, where 4 out of 4 respondents used *hen* (in addition to other pronouns).. Given the small number of responses from Aarhus, however, more investigation would be necessary to determine if there really is a statistical correlation between living in Aarhus and choosing either *den* or *hen*. Only respondents from Jutland chose other pronouns entirely – but given that only two respondents overall did so, this does not necessarily indicate anything.

Respondents from Copenhagen and Aarhus were less likely to choose *han* or *hun* than respondents from other parts of the country. 17 out of 54, or 31% in Copenhagen chose *han* or *hun,* none in Aarhus, as opposed to 3 out of 4 in Odense (75%), 3 out of 3 in Aalborg (100%), and 3 out of 6 in other parts of Jutland (50%). 3 out of the 5 respondents identifying exclusively as women or men resided in Copenhagen or Aarhus, a fourth living in Aalborg, so the explanation is not that these individuals, who all used *hun/han* in addition to gender neutral pronouns, make up a disproportionally large part of the responses from towns and countryside. If there truly is a higher preference for using *han/hun* in smaller towns and the countryside, this might be an indication of differing attitudes towards gender neutral pronouns or genderqueer identities in urban vs. non-urban areas. Section 7 discusses some of the respondents' reasons for choosing their particular pronouns, and it may be that some would avoid gender neutral pronouns and instead opt for *han/hun* if there is a high chance of meeting backlash in their local community.

Participation in LGBT+ and/or queer communities

Individuals can negotiate their own and others' linguistic behaviour, including pronoun choice, in order to express, construct, negotiate, and present their identities (Miltersen 2016:39). Since these acts are necessarily done in social situations, it can be hypothesised that participation in communities affects pronoun choice. Given the similarity between the pronoun *de* and the English *they* as a singular gender-neutral pronoun, the survey sought to examine whether participation in English speaking communities has an effect on whether respondents choose the pronoun *de*. It could also be that participating in an online-based community affects pronoun choice differently than solely offline participation: Online communities may be more likely to have participants living further apart from each other, and in some online communities it is common practice to have one's chosen pronouns written on one's profile page or similar, perhaps increasing the chance of participants being exposed to different pronouns. The fact that one is more likely to encounter only the written forms of the pronouns online versus the spoken forms offline, could also potentially have an effect on how people approach the pronouns and which ones they choose. However, the results from the present survey do not indicate any particular correlations. Respondents were roughly equally likely to choose any particular pronoun whether they participated in an online versus offline community, or a Danish versus English community (between 0 to 4 percentage points in difference). This does not mean that there is nothing in this parameter that might be interesting to investigate in the future; see section 7.2. for some thoughts on this.

Summary

The results of the survey have indicated some possible tendencies as to who chooses gender neutral and genderqueer/nonbinary pronouns and why, providing basis for future, more in-depth studies. The respondents were overwhelmingly nonbinary/genderqueer people, suggesting that this group is more likely to choose gender-neutral pronouns than are people identifying exclusively as men/women. The most popular pronoun is *de,* chosen by more than twice as many respondents than is *hen* and nearly four times as many respondents than is *den*. Second-most popular was *hun* and *han*, though only when chosen in combination with a gender-neutral pronoun; only 6 respondents chose *hun/han* exclusively. The results of the survey suggested that people living in towns or in the countryside as opposed to a large city (i.e. Copenhagen or Aarhus) are more likely to choose *hun* or *han* in addition to any gender-neutral pronoun. Further, it may be that people living in Aarhus are more likely to choose the pronouns *hen* and *den* than are people living in Copenhagen, but this would need to be investigated further. The results of the survey found no particular correlations between community participation and pronoun choice. Most importantly, the results have shown that the pronouns *de*, *hen*, and *den* are actively used as gender-neutral and genderqueer/nonbinary pronouns. This finding challenges the established description of Danish pronouns. No Danish grammar describe *de* or *den* as gender-neutral options for referring to either specific persons, hypothetical persons, or persons of unknown gender, and no Danish grammar describes the pronoun *hen* at all. Thus, this is an area of the Danish language in need of formal grammatical description.

Topics for further study

Geography

The present study has examined place of residence and participation in communities as relevant factors for pronoun choice, and it would be highly relevant to do further work to investigate whether there are statistically significant relationships between these variables. As mentioned above, the survey received most of its responses from people living in Copenhagen. Considering that around half of all LGBT+ individuals in Denmark live in Copenhagen, this is not too surprising in itself, but it is also a possibility that people living in Copenhagen are disproportionally active in the online communities targeted by this study, giving them a higher degree of access to the survey used here. However, it makes any potential statistical analysis of the survey data susceptible to type II error due to the small sample size from the rest of the country. Whether communities are online or offline may also interact with the effect of the geographical distribution of the participants in ways that are not captured by the present study. If a respondent living in a rural area mainly interacts online with people from an urban area, and there is some sort of effect on pronoun choice (or more broadly pronoun usage) from living in an urban area, this may affect the rural dwelling respondent also. Similarly, one respondent from the present survey commented that the offline community they interact with is not situated in the town they live in, but rather in the nearest large city. Individuals may also be influenced simultaneously by those they interact with locally and online. A follow-up study might benefit from looking further into these factors, perhaps using a more focused survey and/or qualitative analysis.

Community

Another topic to examine is the social and collaborative element in pronoun choice. The survey did not indicate any correlations between choosing particular pronouns and community participation, but community activity may affect the use of pronouns in other ways. Community efforts are made to standardize gender neutral and nonbinary pronouns, such as by circulating lists of gender neutral pronouns in different languages, as well as providing resources for using (i.e. inflecting) particular pronouns.[6] This may have an effect both on which pronouns are in use, as well as the visibility of and attitude towards them. See also Miltersen (2016), a study of a community practice of creating and using nontraditional pronouns.

Respondents were able to provide their reasons for choosing their particular pronouns, as well as add other comments they found relevant. Some indicated that they found nonbinary pronouns 'bothersome' (*besværlige*), opting instead for *han* or *hun*. The gender neutral/nonbinary pronouns were described as bothersome because they had to be explained or corrected, because of the way they sound, or because they 'make daily life political' (*'(…)fordi jeg ikke ønsker at min kønsidentitet skal gøre min hverdag politisk'*). Some respondents that used *han* or *hun* indicated that they did not consider these pronouns to exclusively designate men or women. Some refrained from using *de* because of its status as a plural pronoun, while others liked this aspect of it. Respondents sometimes referenced the English *they* when discussing *de*. *Hen* was sometimes seen as too similar

to *han* and *hun*, especially phonetically, although some felt it fit well into that existing paradigm. Some respondents using *den* stated that it was a way of combatting the pronoun's 'dehumanizing effect', or questioning the distinction between humans, objects, and animals ('*(…)fordi det er en erobring af den dehumanisering som mange tillægger det og som det også aktivt bruges som for at dehumanisere transpersoner, pocs* [persons of colour], *personer med funktionsdiversitet etc.'*; '*(J)eg vil gerne nedbryde "skellet" mellem mennesker, ting og dyr*'). Some respondents using nonbinary pronouns also mentioned issues of dehumanization and hypermasculinization of racialized persons as part of their considerations. All of these topics have great potential for being examined in future qualitative studies.

Attitudes towards gender neutral pronouns

Of the respondents who had chosen several different pronouns, some stated that this was because it was hard to ask everyone in their lives to use certain pronouns in reference to them, or because certain people in their lives were not aware of their gender identity. Most respondents indicated that they felt their chosen pronouns were representative of their gender in some way. Experiencing that one's gender is being incorrectly interpreted and addressed ('misgendering') can be a cause of emotional distress (MacNamara, Glann, and Durlak 2017). Not much research has been done in this area. Examining the experiences of users of gender neutral and nonbinary pronouns could provide knowledge and tools to improve the conditions and wellbeing of transgender and nonbinary/genderqueer people.

Final remarks

In conclusion, hopefully this brief pilot study can serve as groundwork and inspiration for further study of gender neutral and nonbinary/genderqueer pronouns. Relevant for studies of the Danish language specifically, it has presented some topics to examine in more in-depth studies. It is evident that there is both a need for a proper grammatical description of gender neutral personal pronouns in Danish, and additionally there is great potential for sociolinguistic studies on pronouns in relation to gender and community, and likely other sociocultural aspects. More generally, the survey design and theoretical and methodological considerations can serve as a springboard for similar studies for other languages and language communities.

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[1] See e.g. Viborg (2012) for an overview of the different motivations for using the pronoun *hen* as presented in the Danish debate.

[2] This definition does not subsume the identities of intersex individuals, who may or may not identify as or relate their gender identities to nonbinary or genderqueer identities. Since no respondents in the survey indicated being intersex, the potential interaction between these different identities is not considered.

[3] https://svenska.se/tre/?sok=hen&pz=1

[4] Some respondents included comments on their gender in their response, but this is not considered a modifier in this article. For instance, one respondent designated their gender as 'woman', and added that this 'is a big part of [their] identity' ('*Det er en stor del af min identitet*'). They were categorized as a woman in the analysis.

[5] statistikbanken.dk

[6] https://mod-kitkat.tumblr.com/post/168489048515/multilingual-pronouns-list