Non-sexist language policy and the rise (and fall?) of combined pronouns in British and American written English.

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Non-sexist language policy and the rise (and fall?) of combined pronouns in British and American written English.

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the use of combined pronouns (s/he, his or her, him/her, etc.) as an example of late-twentieth century non-sexist language reform which had an overt democratising aim. Within the scope of second-wave feminism, the use of combined pronouns increased the visibility of women in discourse by encouraging the use of feminine pronouns (she, her, hers) alongside masculine pronouns (he, him, his). Despite their promotion, however, the use of combined pronouns is relatively rare. This paper uses the LOB and Brown families of corpora to diachronically and synchronically study patterns in the use of combined pronouns in written American and British English from the 1930s to the early 2000s. The analysis determines not only what forms these patterns take, but questions whether combined pronouns are influenced by (a combination of) syntax and/or semantics, and questions whether combined pronouns are really democratic at all.

Keywords: Epicene pronouns, combined pronouns, corpus linguistics, diachronic, synchronic

1. Introduction

It is widely reported that the English pronoun paradigm ‘lacks’ an animate third-person singular epicene (gender-neutral) pronoun. This position can be disputed, given the extensive research showing singular THEY to perform this function (e.g. Newman 1992; Pauwels & Winter 2006; Paterson 2014). However, there is potential for confusion over what pronoun to use for a generic referent, such as someone, or every teacher, or for a referent of unknown sex. This paper focuses on the use of combined pronouns (s/he, his or her, him/her, etc.,
henceforth HE OR SHE) as a potential candidate to fill this apparent gap in the pronoun paradigm. The promotion of and advocacy for combined pronouns is an example of late-twentieth century non-sexist language reform which had an overt democratising aim: to increase the visibility of women in discourse. To investigate the impact of reforms promoting the use of combined pronouns, this paper draws on the LOB and Brown families of corpora, held in CQPweb (Hardie 2012). It thus interrogates written British and American English from the 1930s to the early 2000s to provide an overview of combined pronoun use over time and between the two varieties.

Section 2 provides an overview of the epicene pronoun issue. Section 3 contextualises debates about the use of combined pronouns as a solution to the apparent privilege of masculine forms, which contribute to the erasure of women in discourse. Consideration is given to non-sexist language reform, democratisation, and the role of combined pronouns in reinforcing a gender binary. Section 4 introduces the source materials and notes the benefits of using corpora for analysing pronouns (especially pronouns which are relatively rare). It documents how the corpora were mined for all instances of combined pronouns and how the analysis proceeded. Section 5 is divided into sections on diachronic change (section 5.1), men-first language (section 5.2), and antecedent types and stereotypes (section 5.3). Section 6 draws the analyses together to discuss the future potential for combined pronouns to act as a democratising linguistic feature.

2. The context of combined pronouns

Historically, it has been argued that English does not have a (formally-endorsed) gender-neutral third-person animate singular pronoun. Based on the established third-person pronoun paradigm (Figure 1), as printed in grammar guides and taught in schools (in both L1 and L2 contexts), speakers of English must decide between HE and SHE when referring to any
animate third-person singular referent. In most cases this choice is unproblematic; if you know the sex of the intended referent then you can choose the pronoun that matches that referent’s sex. To give a simple example, if you own a cat and know that your cat is female, you will likely refer to the cat as she. The same process holds for most humans; if you know someone’s sex or gender identity (discussed in more detail below), you will select the pronoun which matches their identity.

A problem arises, however, for more general references, like someone or anyone, or when you have to refer to an individual but do not know their sex and/or gender, as in example (1).

(1) The driver behind me kept flashing _______ headlights.

It is unlikely that the person making such a statement (written or spoken) knew the sex of the driver in the car behind. Nevertheless, they need to choose a pronoun to fill the gap in (1). Traditionally, as prescribed from the eighteenth-century onwards (see Bodine 1975; Baron 1986; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2006; Paterson 2014), the pronoun of choice to fill this gap would be generic he, as in The driver behind me kept flashing his headlights. Arguments for using he revolve around the notion that it can be used both as a masculine pronoun (i.e. to refer to men) and as a generic pronoun (i.e. to refer to both men and women). However, extensive research has shown that he is almost always perceived as masculine and thus cannot be a true generic form (Martyna 1980; Gastil 1990; Carreiras et al. 1996; Foertsch & Gernsbacher 1997; Kennison & Trofe 2003; Balhorn 2009; Noll et al. 2018).

One of the implications of using generic he – given that it is perceived as masculine – is that it serves to erase women from discourse. Discourse is taken here in two senses, both to mean a “stretch of language longer than a single sentence or utterance” and “a way of representing, understanding and being in the world” (Swann et al. 2004). Thus, in the first
sense of discourse, the use of generic *he* means masculine pronouns have more potential sites of use; if *he* is used for both masculine and generic reference, feminine pronouns can only occur in contexts where a pronoun refers specifically to a woman. In the ideological interpretation of discourse – that it is “socially constituted as well as socially constituting” (Breit 2010:621) – the use of generic *he* makes it more difficult (if not impossible) to conceptualise women in particular roles, scenarios, and situations. That is, using *his* in example (1) eliminates the possibility that the driver of the vehicle behind was a woman.

Whilst the wider ramifications of pronoun choice are not perhaps that evident in the first example, close analysis of example (2) can help to bring the implications of pronoun choice to the fore. In (2a) which is taken from the British English 2006 corpus (Baker 2009; see section 3) the use of *his or her* makes it clear that both male and female politicians are within the scope of potential referents for *a politician*. By contrast, the use of generic *he* in (2b) reduces the possibility that *a politician* can refer to a woman (or women more generally).

(2) a. The BBC and much of the media now take the position that what a politician does in *his or her* private life is not the business of the rest of us, so long as it is legal

(BE06_B01)

b. The BBC and much of the media now take the position that what a politician does in *his* private life is not the business of the rest of us, so long as it is legal

In the same vein, Vainapel et al. (2015:1514) argue that masculine generics – of which generic *he* is just one example – are “incompatible and excluding for women, and thus might influence them negatively”. They cite research by Briere and Lanktree (1983) which showed that women reading a text about psychology that contained generic *he* were less likely to see psychology as a profession for women. Similarly, Crawford and English (1984, cited in Paterson 2014:31) found that women were less likely to recall elements of a text about the law profession if generic *he* was used.
One way to make explicitly clear that the sex of a politician in (2a) or the driver in example (1) is unknown is to use a combined pronoun: The driver behind me kept flashing his or her headlights.1 The use of his or her makes it explicitly clear that the antecedent – in this case the noun phrases the driver (behind me) and a politician – can refer to both men and women. Thus, no one is excluded from the potential referents of these sentences.2

3. Pronouns as political

The active promotion of combined pronouns is one example of non-sexist language reform associated, initially, with second-wave feminism in the 1960s-1990s. The use of generic HE was deemed an example of sexist language and, while some feminists including Miller and Swift (1976; see Jochnowitz 1982) endorsed alternative pronouns, such as generic SHE3, or pronouns that were not marked for gender, such as singular THEY (see below), others promoted the use of combined pronouns to insert women into texts. Ultimately then, the promotion of combined pronouns had an overt democratising aim: to increase the visibility of women in discourse by ensuring that she was as frequent as HE when referring to generic referents and/or people of unknown sex.

The argument that combined pronouns represent a form of linguistic democratisation, sits alongside other examples of language change. For example, Baker (2010:69) argues that diachronic changes in English, such as the relative increase in feminine pronouns in the LOB family of British English corpora (see section 4), could suggest moves towards “reductions in gender-based bias”. He argues similarly for American English that the apparent decrease of terms like men in the Brown family corpora (see section 4) could be an indication of “a decline of male-focused discourse” (Baker 2017:101). Indeed, Farrelly and Seoane (2012:394) note that one key example of democratisation in English has been the “identification and progressive elimination” of sexist language “reflecting a desire to avoid
sexual and social distinctions”. Combined pronoun use, then, is one linguistic feature which relates to wider trends in language change across varieties of English and which, in this case at least, was prompted by campaigns against non-sexist language.

The impact of such campaigns can be seen in the continued endorsement of combined pronouns in grammar books and official style guides, such as those produced by Microsoft (2018) and the United Nations (2018). In my analysis of grammar books published in the twenty-first century (Paterson 2014:123), I found that the majority of grammars that discussed gender-neutral pronouns endorsed the use of combined pronouns. Furthermore, the United Nation’s (2018) guidelines relate specifically to the visibility of women in discourse as they note that HE OR SHE may be used “when the author/speaker wants to explicitly make both women and men visible”. However, as the analysis below demonstrates, despite the endorsement of combined pronouns as a viable option for referring to men and women, the attested use of combined pronouns is relatively rare (Paterson 2014:55). This rarity can be linked to arguments that forms like s/he are difficult to pronounce or that (repeated uses of) combined pronouns make texts clunky, ugly, or cumbersome (LaScotte 2016:70). For example, Guardian journalist Lucy Mangan (2010) complained that using combined pronouns means “your writing ends up looking like an explosion in a pedants’ factory”.

Nevertheless, the promotion, institutional endorsement, and use of combined pronouns is important to debates about wider democratisation in English. One of the key components of democratisation is “the phasing out of overt markers of power asymmetry with the aim of expressing greater equality and solidarity” (Farrelly & Seoane 2012:393). Opposition to male-as-default forms of language, such as generic HE, is a clear example of this. Furthermore, Farrelly and Seoane (2012:392) note that there is a duality to democratisation where “people alter their use of language in response to social change and people influence social change through their use of language” (2012:392). To extrapolate this to combined
pronouns, if references to a politician (a stereotypically male-dominated profession) explicitly include women because more women are being elected to office, this, in turn, can influence the wider understandings of who can fill the role of politician and more female candidates may stand for election (and win). Thus, in terms of democratisation, the promotion and use of combined pronouns can be seen as a positive example of changes in language (policy) to visually (in the case of written language) and orally insert women into the equation. From a feminist perspective, this would be seen as a positive thing; it is one way by which gender inequality, stereotypes, and power asymmetry can be directly challenged.

However, it is possible to take a more critical view of combined pronouns. This is not a question of the fact that some people (and institutions) are reluctant to use them due to their apparently ugly aesthetic. Rather, considering combined pronouns within more modern (post-structuralist) approaches to language and gender, the use of he or she can be recast in a somewhat more negative light. Because, after all combined pronouns do not actually include everyone. They reinforce the concept of a gender binary and systematically eliminate those people who do not identify as either he or she. As Motschenbacher (2010:13) notes:

The concept of two – and only two – sexes is so deeply entrenched in Western societies that it has gained the status of a natural fact in public opinion. Insights from the biosciences, however, suggest that a continuum would be a much more adequate characterisation of gender diversity. Yet, everyday discourses of gender sketch it as a strictly binary category (female/male), neglecting inter-gender overlap and intra-gender diversity.

Arguably, the most democratic use of pronouns would be to eliminate gender entirely by using something like singular they. Indeed, existing research has shown singular they to have a long history (Nevalainen 2006) and to be the epicene pronoun of choice in many varieties of English (see Paterson 2014:25).⁴ (The eagle-eyed reader will have spotted that
singular THEY is the epicene pronoun used throughout this paper.) Singular THEY removes the issue of gender identity entirely because it is more than gender-neutral; it is a “gender not relevant” pronoun (Strahan 2008:27). Using singular THEY removes the binary choice and stops us having to guess someone’s sex or gender identity. Furthermore, there is evidence of increasing endorsement for using singular THEY as a non-binary pronoun. The American Dialect Society (2017), for example, made singular THEY its word of the year in 2015, defining it as a “gender-neutral singular pronoun for a known person, particularly as a nonbinary identifier”. Significantly, however, the definition explicitly states that singular THEY refers to “a known person” (i.e. someone who is non-binary) and says very little about the type of generic reference discussed in this paper. Similarly, Noll et al. (2018:1059) note that the Chicago Manual of Style now endorses singular THEY “when referring specifically to a person who does not identify with a gender-specific pronoun” but is less enthusiastic for singular THEY for “referring to a person of unspecified gender”. And since 2017 singular THEY has been included in the AP Stylebook where it is deemed “acceptable in limited cases as a singular and-or gender-neutral pronoun” but avoiding the need for a pronoun by rewriting is always “preferable” (Hare 2017). Thus, while there is some institutional acceptance for THEY as a non-binary pronoun for individuals, singular THEY as an epicene pronoun for generic reference is still dispreferred. By contrast, combined pronouns – despite being labelled as clunky, cumbersome, or ugly – have been promoted as gender-neutral.

Of course, there are additional factors to consider. For example, research has shown that gender-stereotyping on nouns can influence the pronouns that people choose for unknown referents. That is, someone referring to a generic doctor, soldier, or footballer may be more likely to use generic HE due to the masculine-stereotypes associated with such professions. Furthermore, a mismatch between pronoun choice and gender stereotyping (a doctor with she for example) can take longer to process. Kennison and Trofe (2003) tested
sentences with gender-stereotyped nouns and mismatched pronouns and found that they took longer to read than when the pronoun matched the gender stereotyping of the noun. Similarly, Foertsch and Gernsbacher (1997:107) showed that it takes people longer to process sentences like “A truck driver should never drive when sleepy, even if [she] may be struggling to make a delivery on time” than it does to process sentences where the gender stereotyping matches. In such cases, one could fully support the use of combined pronouns to demonstrate that not only are masculine-stereotyped jobs done by women (and vice versa) but that such jobs are open to women as a career path (c.f. the discussion of Briere and Lanktree’s (1983) work on psychology, discussed above). Using singular THEY in such examples would not serve to challenge the gender stereotyping on the antecedent noun phrase.

Tracing combined pronoun use through history can shine a light on the uptake of such forms, as well as providing further information about the type of antecedents likely to be used with combined pronouns. The paper thus addresses the following research questions:

1. Is there evidence of diachronic and/or synchronic variation in combined pronoun use?
2. Is there evidence that the use of combined pronouns has been influenced by democratising language reforms?
3. What factors (syntactic and/or semantic) appear to influence combined pronoun use?

4. Methodology

To investigate the use of combined pronouns and their potential relationship to non-sexist language reforms, this paper draws on tools from corpus linguistics. Corpus linguists have a range of tools at their disposal, such as frequency counts, keyword lists, and tools which calculate collocation (how likely words are to occur in close proximity to one another). In the present case, the analysis draws on two particular tools: corpus queries are used to extract all tokens of combined pronouns from the corpora under analysis (see below), and concordance
lines – where the results of a query are presented within their immediate co-text (see Figure 2) – are used to facilitate antecedent resolution. That is, the concordance lines were manually analysed to determine the antecedents of the combined pronouns. For example, Figure 2, line 1 shows that Everyone is coindexed with his or her.

This paper follows in a long line of research using corpora to investigate epicene pronoun use (Pauwels 2001; Laitinen 2007; Paterson 2011; Paterson 2014; Stormbom 2018; Paper 4 this issue). It uses two sets of corpora – the Brown family of American English and the LOB family of British English (Figure 3) – which are well established reference corpora suitable for analysing “ongoing grammatical change in the twentieth century” (Hundt & Leech 2012:187). The sampling frames for all the corpora are consistent (see Baker 2009 for more details), making them useful resources for comparing features of language across time and across varieties. They correspond to four time periods (the 1930s, 1960s, 1990s, and the 2000s) and the texts within them cover a range of different genres, from press reportage and religious texts to multiple sub-genres of fiction (romance, science fiction, detective fiction, etc.). As such, they represent a snap-shot of written language at each collection point.

The corpora were searched for all forms of HE OR SHE including s/he, he or she, her or him, his/hers, him or herself, her/himself, etc. Non-standard forms like hisself or herself, etc. were not considered, but the chance of such forms occurring was rare, given that non-standard pronouns are infrequent in written British English (c.f. Paterson’s (2018) analysis of reflexive pronouns in the early access dataset of the spoken BNC2014). What must be noted, however, is that searching the corpora for tokens of combined pronouns in this way cannot address the principle of accountability (see McEnery & Hardie (2012:15) for a discussion of this principle as it relates to corpus linguistics). That is, this method of corpus
analysis can only provide positive evidence for the presence of combined pronouns, it cannot account for those occasions where a combined pronoun could have been used but was not (either because an alternative epicene such as singular THEY or generic HE was selected or because a different grammatical structure was used). This is one of the limitations of using corpora for analysing epicene pronouns (especially when such pronouns are not tagged for their epicene function). As such, future research on epicene use should incorporate alternative methodological approaches, such as close analysis of (a subset of) texts to identify potential sites for linguistic variation. Once identified, these potential sites of variation can be interrogated using different datasets and more complex corpus queries. While such a project has the potential to shine new light on epicene choice, it would be an extensive undertaking and, as such, sits beyond the boundaries of the present analysis.

To determine the antecedents of the combined pronouns, all of the hits returned by the query were downloaded as concordance lines with a span of fifty words either side. Manual analysis of the fifty word co-text was enough to match each combined pronoun to its antecedent. In all of the corpora, there were only two erroneous hits where the query results were not combined pronouns but were actually two different pronouns referring to separate entities (as in example 3).

(3) The thought of being left behind without him or her sister (BE06_P28)

This suggests that the co-occurrence of two pronouns in a contrastive (him or her) or binomial (him and her) are very likely to be combined pronouns. The alternative, where each pronoun corresponds to a different referent is rare. Additionally, it is worth noting that there are no instances where combined pronouns were used as part of a meta discussion about pronoun reference. Finally, two further queries – (she|her|hers|herself) and (he|him|his|himself) – extracted all case forms of SHE and HE to facilitate comparison between the combined pronouns and third-person singular pronouns more generally (see section 5.1).
5. Results

Table 1 shows the number of combined pronouns in each corpus. The results have been normalised to number of occurrences per million words (pmw) to account for the fact that the corpora were very slightly different in their overall word count (Figure 2). For example, B-Brown comprises 1,152,310 words, while BE06 comprises 1,147,097 words. The raw number of combined pronouns in each corpus is provided in brackets. The table shows that combined pronouns are relatively rare in the corpora overall. In the earlier corpora, there was also a slight tendency for multiple tokens to occur in the same text. F06 in B-Brown, for example, accounts for three of the six tokens in the corpus, which suggests that combined pronouns were even rarer at the earlier time points as they clustered in a small number of texts.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Another finding was that combined pronouns were rarely used in the press sections of the corpora. Press texts accounted for 16 tokens in American English and 12 tokens in British English (a full breakdown of combined pronouns by genre is given in Appendix A). The initial intention for this paper was to focus on the use of combined pronouns in the press-sections of the corpora with a view to comparing them with newspaper style sheets. However, as Table 1 shows, there is not enough data for a fruitful analysis. It is possible that the absence of combined pronouns in the press texts could be a result of the proscription of combined pronouns in newspaper style sheets. Another explanation for the small number of tokens may be that newspaper reports tend to be about actual people rather than humans of unknown sex (although Balhorn (2009) did find some combined pronouns in newspaper texts). Most likely, given that press texts comprise only a small section of each of the LOB and Brown families of corpora, the corpora are too small for the specific study of newspaper texts. Thus, rather than focusing predominantly on the small number of tokens in the press
sections, the following analysis takes all the combined pronouns together to determine overarching patterns in their use.

5.1 Diachronic change

In terms of frequency, both sets of corpora (the Brown family and the LOB family) follow the same pattern of combined pronoun use (Figure 4). The occurrence of combined pronouns is extremely rare in the 1930s (5.21 pmw and 9.46 pwm for American English and British English respectively) and the 1960s (7.84 pmw and 9.63 pmw). There is a large increase between the 1960s and the 1990s (59.78 pmw and 49 pmw) which corresponds to a five-fold increase in American English and a seven-fold increase in British English. Finally, and perhaps a little unexpectedly, there is a drop off at the final time point; American English drops 5.36 hits pmw between the 1990s and early 2000s and British English drops, more drastically, 36.33 hits pmw. The drop off is even more interesting when we take into account the fact that the gap between the 1990s corpora and the 2000s corpora is smaller than the gaps between the other time points.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

Figure 4 clearly shows that something has changed post-1960s. There is also evidence of slight varietal difference – although both American English and British English follow the same pattern, the American corpora, which start with lower normalised frequencies, overtake their British counterparts and are more consistent from the 1990s to the 2000s, although there is still a small drop off.

One potential explanation for the trends shown in Figure 4 is that combined pronoun use merely followed wider trends in the rise and fall of third-person pronoun use. To this end, Figure 5 shows the normalised frequencies of all masculine and feminine pronouns in the corpora. The data shows that masculine pronouns were always more frequent than feminine
pronouns. Thus, in line with Baker’s (2010) findings about pronoun use in the LOB family (noted in section 3), it seems that men are referred to more than women in all of these corpora. There is convergence post-1960s, but the gap between male and female pronouns is still large; for the 2000s there is a difference of 4895.84 hits pmw in British English and 4802.86 hits pmw in American English.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

Overall, however, general pronoun use does not follow the pattern of combined pronoun use shown in Figure 3. There is, therefore, some evidence that the increased use of combined pronouns post-1960s suggests at least some democratisation of British and American English. To fully test this claim, however, one would have to determine whether occurrences of generic HE decreased as combined pronouns increased. As there are a total of 135,753 hits for HE across the eight corpora, such an analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. However, this would be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Ultimately then, there is evidence that after remaining fairly static between the 1930s and 1960s, combined pronouns underwent some form of shift between the 1960s and the 1990s. Given the limitations of the data, there is no way to tell how the use of combined pronouns developed between 1961 (the date of texts in the 1960s corpora) and 1991 (the date of texts in the 1990s corpora), so it is not possible to determine the exact time point when the use of combined pronouns began to spike. It may be, for example, that combined pronouns grew in use at a steady rate, or perhaps more likely, there were peaks and troughs in their use between the two time points represented by the corpora. Nevertheless, the data does show that there was an increase in combined pronoun use between the 1960s and the 1990s. There is no obvious language-internal (i.e. syntactic) reason for this increase and so the spike in Figure 4 must be attributable to a language-external (i.e. social) factor. It is also important to remember that combined pronouns are not part of the established pronoun paradigm (Figure
1), rather they are somewhat artificial constructs, characterised as cumbersome (see section 3), which are specifically linked to language policy and politics. Indeed, non-sexist language reform, set against the wider social context of second-wave feminism, is the most likely language-external factor to account for the patterns in Figure 4. The coining of the term ‘sexist language’ in the late 1960s/early 1970s and the promotion of combined pronouns to combat sexist language and practices drew people’s attention to pronouns, thus bringing them above the level of public consciousness.

To hypothesise about the cause of the decrease in the use of combined pronouns between the 1990s and the 2000s, again, there is no evidence to suggest a language-internal factor is at play. There are two main language-external factors which could potentially explain the drop off. The first relates to complaints, noted above, that combined pronouns are cumbersome and their repeated use across a text is not aesthetically pleasing; thus people may be inclined to avoid pronouns altogether when making generic references. The second factor is that people may have become more comfortable using singular THEY between the 1990s and the 2000s. This relates to a second aspect of democratisation as noted by Farrelly and Seoane (2012:394); the process of colloquialisation, which relates to a “tendency for written language to incorporate features of the spoken language”. Given that singular THEY is well documented as the epicene of choice in speech (Newman 1992; Pauwels 2001) the colloquialisation of English could predict that it would become more prevalent in writing.

While it is not possible to extract all the tokens of singular THEY in the corpora – as doing so would require manual analysis of all tokens of THEY – it is significant to note that I found 180 tokens of singular THEY in a subset of the BE06 corpus (Paterson 2014:51) – almost seven times the number of combined pronouns (n = 26) found here in the whole corpus. Thus, there is clear evidence that writers of British English, at least, showed a preference for singular THEY in the 2000s. Taking the corpora diachronically, the spike in
combined pronoun use in Figure 4 and the fact that combined pronouns are independent of more general trends in third-person pronoun use (Figure 5), it is possible to argue for the increased visibility of women in discourse. But is the occurrence of combined pronouns enough to claim democratisation?

5.2 The form of combined pronouns

One can question whether all combined pronouns are created equal. Looking at the distribution of case forms of combined pronouns in Table 2, it is clear that most begin with references to men. Only five forms put women first – she or he, s/he, her or him, her or his, and her/his – and they account for only 6 (4.05 percent) of the American English tokens and 13 (12.50 percent) of the British English tokens; the latter inflated by what appears to be a slight British English preference for s/he. Thus, there is an apparent linguistic asymmetry in combined pronouns; men and women are not treated equally as masculine forms tend to occur first, thus potentially reinforcing the male-as-default position that underpins the use of generic HE. Yes, women are inserted into discourse via combined pronouns, but in most cases, they are positioned as secondary.  

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

To investigate this further, and as a precursor to the full analysis of antecedents in the section below, the concordance lines for the women-first combined pronouns were analysed. There were no strongly gender-stereotyped antecedents for any of the woman-first combined pronouns; s/he coindexed with the post-modern reader (BE06_G27) and one text in FLOB – which referred to the new player and the claimant (in terms of the rules of chess) – accounted for all eight occurrences of s/he in British English in the 1990s. Other antecedents included the first-person narrator (as shown in (4)), the television viewer, the craftsperson, each person, and each student.
(4) It then moves to a situation where the first-person narrator describes how she or he
tells a story to Christopher Robin (FLOBJ60)

(5) Utilitarianism asks the individual to aggregate the consequences of his or her actions
for the promotion of pleasure and avoidance of pain, and demands that she or he should
morally only follow that course which causes more pleasure than it does pain
(FLOBJ27)

Example (5) shows that one occurrence of she or he, which coindexed with the individual,
actually alternated with his or her. While alternating combined pronouns in this way is,
arguably, democratic, insofar as both masculine and feminine pronouns occur first an equal
amount of time, Madson and Hessling (1999:565) found readers overestimated the use of
feminine pronouns when reading texts where pronoun alternation (he one paragraph and she
the next) was used. This result emphasises the salience of feminine pronouns (perhaps due to
their relative rarity) and reinforces the male-as-default ideology of a patriarchal society.

One final example also worth mentioning, given in (6), is from American English in the
2000s. It refers to an individual Justin Bond as s/he and is an example of combined pronouns
being used to refer to someone whose identity is outside the gender binary.

(6) Even Shortbus’ snippy host/ess Justin Bond takes a shot at making Sofia happy. S/he’s
played by, well, Justin Bond, who’s apparently a big name in New York’s trans-
entertainment scene (AmE06_C03)

There is a layer of complexity here as the pronoun actually refers to a character in the film
Shortbus named Justin Bond, not the real-life Justin Bond who portrays said character,
nevertheless the pronoun is used for an individual as opposed to a generic referent. However,
the acceptability of using s/he to refer to someone who is transgender is questionable, and
further investigation indicates that v is Bond’s preferred pronoun (Steel 2011). Overall then,
close analysis of the antecedents of woman-first combined pronouns has shown no strong
preference for (feminine) gender-stereotyped antecedents. The following section takes a closer look at the rest of the antecedents in all eight corpora.

5.3 Antecedent distribution

The analysis of the antecedents began with a manual coding for antecedent category and plurality. Following Paterson (2014), the categories I used were definite NPs (the skeptic, the embryo, your laptop users), indefinite NPs (a student, a young person), quantified NPs (no citizen, any one native speaker), and indefinite pronouns (someone, anyone). To cover the range of antecedent types in these corpora, it was necessary to add a bare NPs category, most of which were plural (Shamans, Club DJs). Thus, different to other epicene pronouns, combined pronouns can take plural antecedents without necessarily referring to more than one person. These antecedents although rare (n = 5) were included in the analysis because the function of a combined pronoun as a generic reference (7a) is not confused by plural antecedents in the same way that singular THEY (7b) or generic HE (7c) could be.

(7) a. Landowners with specific objectives can be directed to the agency that best serves his or her needs (FROWNJ70)

    b. Landowners with specific objectives can be directed to the agency that best serves their needs

    c. Landowners with specific objectives can be directed to the agency that best serves his needs

Both American and British English follow the same basic pattern (Table 3), with a preference for definite NPs. The antecedent analysis flagged up those cases where multiple tokens of combined pronouns occurred in one text. Details about the number of individual texts are provided in Appendix A; the vast majority of texts (78.45 percent) included only one combined pronoun.
To start with American English, there were 57 definite NPs, all of which were singular. They occurred in all four corpora across 39 texts, but the total number of tokens is inflated by 12 occurrences of the skeptic in one text (see 8) and there were also 4 occurrences of the student.

(8) the skeptic withholds his or her response to the other; he or she refuses to acknowledge, for example, pain behavior as expressive (AmE06_J61)

The 43 indefinite NPs occurred across all four corpora in 32 texts and they were all singular; most antecedents did not repeat but there are 3 tokens of a student. Quantified NPs showed a clear preference for each (16 tokens). Indefinite pronouns occurred in all four corpora and were all singular. The bare NPs were accounted for by 3 tokens from Frown and 3 from AmE06, including (7a).

For British English, the 51 definite NPs spanned all corpora, were singular, and occurred in 30 texts. One text (FLOB_J33) accounted for 10 tokens, but they did not all refer to the same antecedent (antecedents included the claimant, the new player, and the native speaker). Indefinite NPs referred to a range of antecedents including a child, a student and a young person. Quantified NPs also occurred with student and spanned all corpora. The negative NPs did not occur in BLOB, but included no child and no student. As such, the initial analysis of antecedents highlighted that a number of combined pronouns referred to children and youth (child, adolescent, student) across a range of texts and corpora. There were very few indefinite pronouns in British English and they only occurred in two corpora (LOB and BE06). The small number of indefinite pronouns is somewhat surprising, given that they are a common way of signifying generic reference. One explanation comes from my analysis of singular THEY and generic HE in subsets of the BE06 corpus, which found that indefinite pronouns showed a clear preference for singular they (Paterson 2014:59).
Finally, there is one example in particular (see 9) where the choice of pronoun changes across a text. In the first instance, when reference is made to plural *club DJs* a plural pronoun (*they*) is used. In the fourth sentence, the pronoun changes to *him/her* as the conceptual definiteness of the referent increases. However, when the singular *DJ* is used, the pronoun switches to generic *HE*.

(9) For a start, club DJs do not speak. Ever. They don't even have microphones. And you go and ask *him/her* to play your favourite Top 20 tune at your peril. In fact you go and ask *him/her* to play anything at your peril. It's just not done. You actually leave your DJ absolutely alone because *he* has *his* headphones clamped to *his* ear and *he*’s working out the next seamless mix (FLOB_R04)

Although this idiosyncratic usage is not representative of the rest of the corpora, it is notable that a singular DJ is perceived as default masculine, while the fact that women can be DJs is only explicitly referred to within the scope of the plural *DJs*. Thus, the democratisation of language that the use of a combined pronoun would suggest is not reflected across the whole text. The reason for this change from *him/her* to *HE* does not have a language-internal explanation. The presumed real-world referent does not change, so there is no (syntactic) need for the pronoun to change. In terms of language-external factors, this particular example brings up the question of whether gender-stereotyping has played a role in pronoun choice.

To establish whether gender stereotyping of an antecedent correlated with particular combined pronouns, each of the bare noun forms of the antecedents were tested against Kennison and Trofe’s (2003) gender-stereotyped nouns (discussed in section 3). As part of their paper, Kennison and Trofe (2003) provide a list of the nouns they tested and details about whether they were masculine- or feminine-stereotyped. Despite there being several antecedents that were (introspectively) potentially gender-stereotyped, such as *scientist,*
candidate, public figure, newscaster, only 24 of the antecedents in the present data appeared in Kennison and Trofe’s list of tested nouns. These are shown in Figure 6.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]

Those antecedents for which stereotyping information was available tended not to be heavily stereotyped either way. Only two of the tested antecedents were feminine-stereotyped and four were masculine-stereotyped. Combined with the fact that stereotyping information was available for so few antecedents, there is not enough data to make any firm conclusions here.

6. Discussion and conclusions

What can be concluded, however, is that the two families of corpora were comparable in their tokens and relative frequencies of combined pronouns. Both British and American English used combined pronouns at a low but stable rate between the 1930s and the 1960s, followed by a relatively large increase in their use by the 1990s. The two varieties diverge slightly in the 2000s; British English showed a larger drop in combined pronouns than American English, with the latter remaining fairly stable. As discussed above, one explanation for the stability across the earliest time points could be due to the fact that combined pronouns (and indeed gender-neutral language more broadly) were not above the level of public consciousness. That is, there was no (politically motivated) campaign for their use and so their salience (and potential social and/or political power) was low. Clearly, something happened to the prescription and/or wider awareness of combined pronouns between the 1960s and the 1990s. This most likely relates to the form being promoted as a gender-inclusive alternative to generic HE within the wider scope of non-sexist language reform.

The difference between the two 2000s corpora is perhaps more puzzling. There is evidence that British English might be more inclined towards singular THEY (as shown in Paterson 2014) but no comparable study has been done for American English. This would be
a huge undertaking, as just the subsections of BE06 that I analysed in 2014 contained thousands of tokens of THEY each of which had to be manually analysed to determine whether or not it was singular or plural. Perhaps future work in corpus linguistics, and the development of antecedent taggers could speed up the process of finding tokens of epicene pronouns in large bodies of text.

To address the research questions directly, there is clearly evidence for diachronic variation in combined pronoun use, with synchronic variation occurring only in the 2000s corpora. The pattern of combined pronoun use provides evidence that non-sexist language reforms had an impact on British and American written English. Less can be said about what factors (syntax and/or semantic) may influence combined pronoun use due to the small number of tokens in the eight corpora. However, while combined pronouns are rare and alternative epicene pronouns – especially singular THEY – are more widely used, they are, nevertheless, a tool that one can use to highlight inequalities in discourse.

Close analysis of the forms taken by combined pronouns showed that the majority situated the masculine pronoun before the feminine pronoun, and thus male-first combined pronouns are arguably less democratic as they uphold a male-as-norm default. A full analysis of the different case forms of combined pronouns was conducted, but the results are not reported here as they did not contribute significantly to the overarching focus on democratisation; in both varieties combined pronouns were most likely to occur in nominative case followed by possessives, while accusative case and reflexives were extremely rare (see Table 2). Finally, while the analysis of gender stereotyping presented here was limited, more work could be done in this area. In particular, it would be of interest to compare and contrast the antecedents of combined pronouns with antecedents of generic HE to determine whether the former was primarily used with relatively neutral antecedents and the latter was used with more masculine-stereotyped antecedents.
To summarise, while it is not possible to apply language policy to people's spontaneous utterances, it is at least possible to mandate the use of combined pronouns in official documents, thus increasing the visibility of women in discourse. This, in turn, may lead to wider change in spontaneous uses of language (c.f. Farrelly & Seoane (2012) on the duality of democratisation, discussed in section 3). However, despite this paper's focus on combined pronouns, the fact that singular THEY has been shown to be the pronoun of choice in many varieties of English cannot be ignored. Indeed, singular THEY was the least problematic epicene pronoun in Foertsch and Gernsbacher’s (1997) and Kennison and Trofe’s (2003) research on pronoun processing. Singular THEY can contribute to democratisation insofar as choosing to use singular THEY may correspond to choosing not to use generic HE. However, singular THEY does not increase the visibility of women in discourse in the way that combined pronouns do. Furthermore, when used with heavily masculine-stereotyped antecedents, singular THEY does very little (if anything) to counteract such stereotypes. By contrast combined pronouns directly challenge antecedent stereotyping by making it explicit that an antecedent can refer to either a man or a woman.

To date, the vast majority of studies on epicene pronouns (including this one) have focused on L1 English where, despite the promotion of combined pronouns, people’s exposure to singular THEY may lead them to use the latter form. Furthermore, most research has concerned inner-circle varieties of English, with Paper 4 (this issue) breaking new ground in their investigation of outer-circle varieties in the ICE corpora. Paper 4 shows that speakers of Hong Kong English show more of a preference for singular THEY than speakers of Indian English and Singaporean English. The use of combined pronouns in each variety is less prevalent than the use of generic HE or singular THEY. By contrast, recent work on L2 epicene pronouns has shown that many learners of English prefer combined pronouns; Stormbom (2018:11) showed how L2 writers whose first language was Polish, Spanish, or Turkish used
combined pronouns more often than singular THEY or generic HE. Those who had Russian, Italian, French, German, Dutch, Czech, Finnish, Swedish, or Bulgarian as an L1 were more likely to use generic he (Stormbom 2018:11). There is thus further work to be done on epicene choice in L2 varieties of English. For example, there is scope to compare the pronoun use of learners whose L1s have grammatical gender with those whose L1s do not, or one could investigate how epicene reference is taught in different L2 (and indeed different cultural) contexts, considering whether teaching materials endorse generic HE, singular THEY, combined pronouns, etc.

While combined pronouns are not entirely democratic, given the limitations of endorsing a binary conceptualisation of gender, they are more democratic than generic HE or singular THEY. They explicitly insert into discourse the option that a referent does not have to be male. Nevertheless, the use of generic HE in outer circle and/or L2 varieties of English, as evidenced by the studies noted above, suggests that, despite the strong preference for singular THEY in tested L1 varieties, there are still many varieties of English which perpetuate a male-as-default world view through the use of generic masculines. As such, the use, endorsement, and promotion of combined pronouns – particularly in these varieties – is worthy of continued investigation.

Notes
1. Alternatives would include using singular THEY or recasting the sentences.
2. Technically, these examples make explicit the fact that the driver or a politician can refer to anyone who identifies with one of the pronouns his or her. This does not therefore include everybody, an issue discussed in detail below.
3. Generic SHE also had the overt political aim of inserting women into discourse, but it cannot be accepted as a democratic use of pronoun as it purposefully excludes men.
4. However, as is noted in the conclusion, most research on epicene pronouns has focused on L1 English varieties in inner circle countries. Only recently has work begun to cover other varieties of English (Paper 4 this issue) and the L2 experience (Stormbom 2018).

5. The full CQPweb query was (s/he|(s)he|she or he|he/she|he or she|her/him|her or him|him/her|him or her|hers/his|hers or his|h|his|hers] his or her|his/her|her or his|her/his|h or hers|herself/himself|herself or himself|herself|herself[him or herself|him/herself/her/himself/her or himself]. In most corpora, including those used here, combined pronouns are not POS tagged (a type of corpus annotation) in any regular way. The LOB and Brown families are tagged in CQPweb using the CLAWS7 tagset. Individual words are tagged, for example PPHS1 = third-person sing. subjective personal pronoun (he, she), but there is no tag for combined pronoun. Therefore, a long-form query was the best option for ensuring all tokens were extracted.

6. Given their rarity, it is unlikely that such forms occurred in the corpora. Even if they did, their analysis would not lead to generalisable results. Also, as combined pronouns are not systematically tagged, one would have to know exactly which non-standard forms to look for to find them in the corpora.

7. Even taking a random sample would be insufficient given the relative rarity of generic he compared with the total number of tokens of he in the corpora. For context, in a subcorpus of BE06, only 3.22 percent of tokens of he were generic (Paterson 2014:74).

8. A potential avenue for further research, then, would be to analyse whether those style guides which endorse combined pronouns (implicitly) endorse the use of men-first forms by using female-first forms less frequently in any illustrative examples.

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*Psychological Assessments* 27(4). 1513-1519.
## Appendix A: Distribution by genre (brackets denote number of individual texts)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>AmE</th>
<th>BrE</th>
<th>B- Brown</th>
<th>Brown</th>
<th>Frown</th>
<th>AmE 06</th>
<th>Lanc 1931</th>
<th>LOB</th>
<th>FLOB</th>
<th>BE06</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: Press (reportage)</td>
<td>7 (5)</td>
<td>5 (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 (2)</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Press (editorial)</td>
<td>6 (5)</td>
<td>5 (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 (3)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Press (reviews)</td>
<td>10 (8)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>7 (5)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D: Religion</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>7 (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>5 (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E: Skills and hobbies</td>
<td>10 (8)</td>
<td>8 (8)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>4 (2)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: Popular lore</td>
<td>31 (23)</td>
<td>7 (5)</td>
<td>4 (2)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
<td>14 (10)</td>
<td>9 (7)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G: Belles-Lettres</td>
<td>24 (15)</td>
<td>16 (11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10 (6)</td>
<td>14 (9)</td>
<td>5 (4)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>8 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H: Misc.</td>
<td>18 (8)</td>
<td>20 (8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16 (6)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
<td>14 (4)</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J: Academic</td>
<td>37 (17)</td>
<td>26 (12)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>11 (8)</td>
<td>25 (8)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>21 (7)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>K: Fiction (general)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L: Fiction (mystery and detectives)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M: Fiction (science)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N: Fiction (adventure, western)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P: Fiction (romance)</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R: Humour</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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### TABLE 1:

Frequencies per million words (n=252)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AmE Normalised pmw</th>
<th>BrE Normalised pmw</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(raw tokens)</td>
<td>(raw tokens)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930s B-Brown</td>
<td>5.21 (6)</td>
<td>Lancaster 1931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.46 (11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s Brown</td>
<td>7.84 (9)</td>
<td>LOB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.63 (11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s Frown</td>
<td>59.78 (69)</td>
<td>FLOB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>49.00 (56)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s AmE06</td>
<td>54.42 (64)</td>
<td>BE06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.67 (26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>31.96 (148)</td>
<td>22.85 (104)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### TABLE 2:

Pronoun types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men-first</th>
<th>Women-first</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>he or she</td>
<td>her/his</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he/she</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>him/him</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>her/him</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his/him</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herself</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>him/him</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>her/him</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his/him</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herself</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>him/him</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>her/him</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his/him</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herself</td>
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<td>0</td>
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### TABLE 3:

Distribution by antecedent type (percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Definite NP</th>
<th>Indefinite NP</th>
<th>Quantified NP</th>
<th>Indefinite pro.</th>
<th>Bare NP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AmE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-Brown</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frown</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AmE06</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57 (38.52%)</td>
<td>43 (29.05%)</td>
<td>31 (20.94%)</td>
<td>10 (6.76%)</td>
<td>6 (4.05%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|          |             |               |               |                 |        |
| BrE      |             |               |               |                 |        |
| BLOB     | 2           | 1             | 8             | 0               | 0      |
| LOB      | 5           | 2             | 2             | 0               | 0      |
| FLOB     | 32          | 15            | 7             | 0               | 2      |
| BE06     | 12          | 5             | 5             | 2               | 1      |
| Total    | 51 (49.51%) | 23 (22.33%)   | 22 (21.36%)   | 4 (3.88%)       | 3 (2.91%) |
**Figure 1:** Standard English third-person pronoun paradigm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Third person</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Nominative</th>
<th>Accusative</th>
<th>Genitive</th>
<th>Reflexive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>he, she, it</td>
<td>him, her, it</td>
<td>their(s)</td>
<td>himself, herself, itself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2:** Concordance lines for combined pronouns in B-Brown (American English, 1930s)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Context before</th>
<th>Node</th>
<th>Context after</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>seat couples together. Everyone should stand behind</td>
<td>his or her</td>
<td>chair until the hostess sits - the signal for everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I see no reason why a dancer should be afraid that</td>
<td>he or she</td>
<td>will be accused of being &quot;interpretive&quot; (this now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>citizenship, shall declare on oath in open court that</td>
<td>he or she</td>
<td>will support the Constitution of the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>prince, potentate, state or sovereignty of which</td>
<td>he or she</td>
<td>was before a citizen or subject; that he or she will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>which he or she was before a citizen or subject; that</td>
<td>he or she</td>
<td>will support and defend the Constitution and laws</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3:** The Brown and LOB families of corpora

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American English</th>
<th>Word count</th>
<th>British English</th>
<th>Word count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>B-Brown</td>
<td>1,152,310</td>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Lancaster 1931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>1,148,454</td>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>LOB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>Frown</td>
<td>1,154,283</td>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>FLOB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>AmE06</td>
<td>1,175,965</td>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>BE06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4:** Trends in combined pronoun use over time

![Normalised frequencies of combined pronouns (pmw)](image-url)
**Figure 5:** Masculine and feminine pronouns in the corpora

![Graph showing normalised frequencies of masculine and feminine pronouns](image)

**Figure 6:** Antecedents cross-checked with Kennison and Trofe (2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Feminine</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Masculine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AmE</td>
<td>dancer, victim</td>
<td>artist, author, child, client, leader, person, poet, student</td>
<td>chief, painter, thief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BrE</td>
<td></td>
<td>child, informant, judge, person, student, supervisor, writer</td>
<td>politician</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Author bio: Laura L. Paterson is a Lecturer in Applied Linguistics and English Language at The Open University. Her research covers (corpus approaches to) epicene pronouns, discourses of marriage, media representations of marginalised social groups, and interdisciplinary approaches to UK poverty. She is also editor of the *Journal of Language and Discrimination*. 