

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 democratizing 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 (AmE) and British English (BrE) from the 1930s to the early 2000s. The analysis not only determines 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

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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 gender. 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. Of course, the forms these combined pronouns take sustain the wider notion that gender is binary (a topic which is discussed further below). The promotion of and advocacy for combined pronouns is an example of late twentieth-century non-sexist language reform which had an overt democratizing 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 BrE and AmE 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 contextualizes debates about the use of combined pronouns as a solution to the apparent privilege of masculine forms. Consideration is given to non-sexist language reform, democratization, 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 analyzing 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 democratizing 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 (binary) gender of the intended referent then you can choose the matching pronoun.

		Nominative	Accusative	Genitive	Reflexive
Third person	Singular	<i>he, she, it</i>	<i>him, her, it</i>	<i>his, her(s), its</i>	<i>himself, herself, itself</i>
	Plural	<i>they</i>	<i>them</i>	<i>their(s)</i>	<i>themselves</i>

Figure 1. Standard English Third-person Pronoun Paradigm

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 gender, as in (1).

- (1) The driver behind me kept flashing _____ headlights.

It is unlikely that the person making such a statement (written or spoken) knew the gender 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, Garnham, Oakhill & Cain 1996; Foertsch & Gernsbacher 1997; Kennison & Trofe 2003; Balhorn 2009; Noll, Lowry & Bryant 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, Deumert, Lillis & Mesthrie 2004:83). 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 conceptualize women in particular roles, scenarios, and situations (see also Konnelly, this issue, on the conceptualization of women and men in particular scenarios, as manifested in the use of gendered nouns). That is, using *his* in (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 (2) can help to bring the implications of pronoun choice to the fore. In (2), 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 the reformulation in (3) reduces the possibility that *a politician* can refer to a woman (or women more generally).

- (2) 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)

- (3) 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, Shamir, Tenenbaum, and Gilam (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 (2) or the driver in (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, viewed through the lens that gender is binary, no one is excluded from the potential referents of these sentences. However, these examples make explicit that *the driver* or *a politician* can refer to anyone whose pronouns include *his* or *her*. This does not, therefore, include everybody, an issue discussed in section 3.

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 SHE,² 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 democratizing 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 gender.

The argument that combined pronouns represent a form of linguistic democratization 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 BrE corpora (see section 4), could suggest moves towards “reductions in gender-based bias.” He argues similarly for AmE 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 democratization in English has been the “identification and progressive elimination” of sexist language “reflecting a desire to avoid sexual and social distinctions” (see also Loureiro-Porto & Hiltunen, this issue). 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 Nations' (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 democratization in English. One of the key components of democratization 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 democratization 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 democratization, 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 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).³ (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 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, Lowry, and Bryant (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 labeled as clunky, cumbersome, or ugly—have been promoted.

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 *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 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 (cf. the discussion of Briere & Lanktree's 1983 work on psychology above). Using singular *THEY* in such examples would not automatically serve to challenge the gender stereotyping on the antecedent noun phrase. *A truck driver* + *THEY* does not draw direct attention to the mismatch between the pronoun and the masculine stereotyping of the noun phrase in the same way that *A truck driver* + *SHE* makes explicit that the driver was/is a woman. While the use of singular *THEY* is more inclusive than *SHE*, *HE*, or their combined use, we must acknowledge that, historically, one of the drivers influencing the promotion of combined pronouns was to increase the visibility of women (in particular) in discourse. The aim of combined pronouns was not to directly challenge the gender binary but rather to oppose gender stereotypes and wider male-as-norm worldviews.

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

- i. Is there evidence of diachronic and/or synchronic variation in combined pronoun use (from the 1930s to the early 2000s)?
- ii. Is there evidence that the use of combined pronouns has been influenced by democratizing language reforms?
- iii. What factors (syntactic and/or semantic) appear to influence combined pronoun use?

4. Materials and 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, and concordance lines—where the results of a query are presented within their immediate co-text—are used to facilitate antecedent resolution. That is, the concordance lines were manually analyzed to determine the antecedents of the combined pronouns.

This paper follows in a long line of research using corpora to investigate epicene pronoun use (e.g., Pauwels 2001; Laitinen 2007; Paterson 2011, 2014; Stormbom 2018; Loureiro-Porto, this issue; see also Curzan 2014 for corpus data on generic/gender-specific job titles in AmE). It uses two sets of corpora—the Brown family of AmE and the LOB family of BrE (Table 1)—which are well established reference corpora suitable for analyzing “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 snapshot of written language at each collection point.

Table 1. The Brown and LOB Families of Corpora

American English		Word count	British English		Word count
1930s	B-Brown	1,152,310	1930s	Lancaster 1931	1,162,739
1960s	Brown	1,148,454	1960s	LOB	1,141,986
1990s	Frown	1,154,283	1990s	FLOB	1,142,958
2000s	AmE06	1,175,965	2000s	BE06	1,147,097

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.⁴ Non-standard forms like *hissself or herself*, etc. were not considered, but the chance of such forms occurring was rare, given that non-standard pronouns are infrequent in written BrE (cf. Paterson’s [2018] analysis of reflexive pronouns in the early access dataset of the spoken BNC2014). They are likewise very rare in World Englishes (see also Loureiro-Porto, this issue).⁵ 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 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 analyzing 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 hundred-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 4).

- (4) 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*) construction 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 2 shows the number of combined pronouns in each corpus. The results have been normalized 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. 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 parentheses. 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.

Table 2. Frequencies of Combined Pronouns ($N = 252$)

	AmE	Normalized pmw (raw tokens)	BrE	Normalized pmw (raw tokens)
1930s	B-Brown	5.21 (6)	Lancaster 1931	9.46 (11)
1960s	Brown	7.84 (9)	LOB	9.63 (11)
1990s	Frown	59.78 (69)	FLOB	49.00 (56)
2000s	AmE06	54.42 (64)	BE06	12.67 (26)
Total		31.96 (148)		22.85 (104)

Another finding was that combined pronouns were rarely used in the press sections of the corpora. Press texts accounted for sixteen tokens in AmE and twelve tokens in BrE (a full breakdown of combined pronouns by genre is given in the Appendix). 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 2 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 gender (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 2). The occurrence of combined pronouns is extremely rare in the 1930s (5.21 pmw and 9.46 pmw for AmE and BrE 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 a seven-fold increase in AmE and a five-fold increase in BrE. Finally, and perhaps a little unexpectedly, there is a drop off at the final time point; AmE drops 5.36 hits pmw between the 1990s and early 2000s and BrE 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.

Figure 2 clearly shows that something has changed post-1960s. There is also evidence of slight varietal difference—although both AmE and BrE follow the same pattern, the American corpora, which start with lower normalized 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 2 is that combined pronoun use merely followed wider trends in the rise and fall of third-person pronoun use.

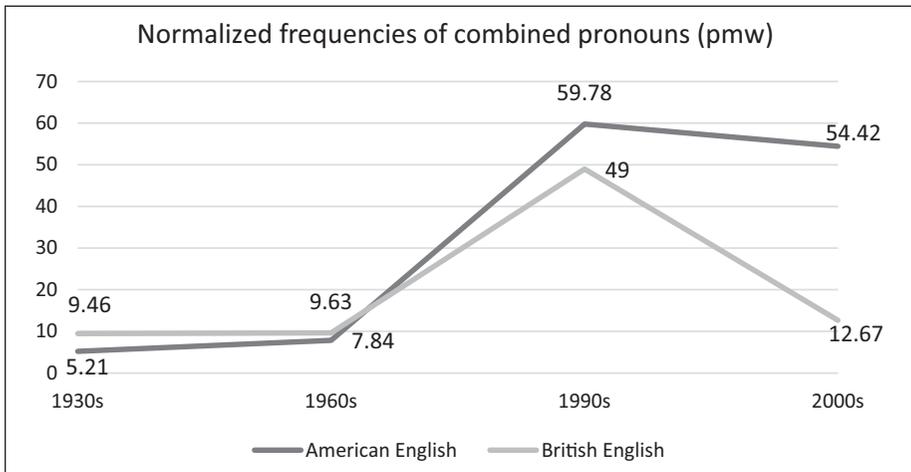


Figure 2. Trends in Combined Pronoun Use over Time

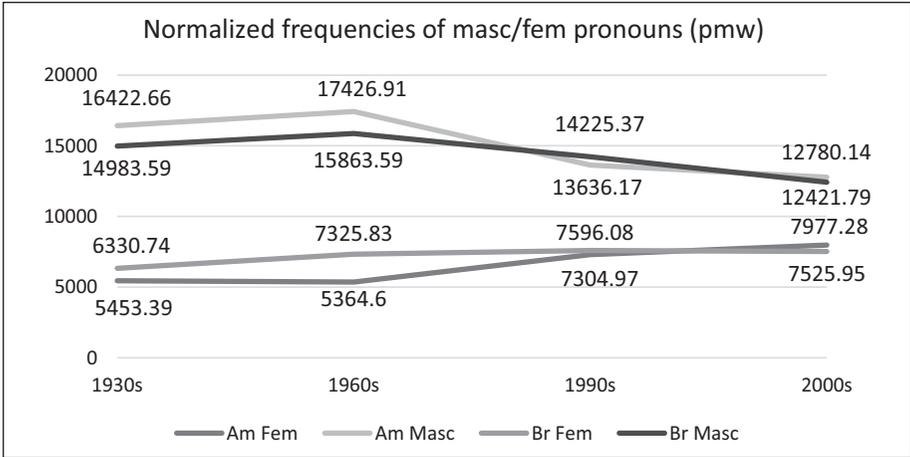


Figure 3. Masculine and Feminine Pronouns in the Corpora

To this end, Figure 3 shows the normalized 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 (see also Konnelly, this issue, for a detailed analysis of *man* and *woman* in a recent American corpus). 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 BrE and 4802.86 hits pmw in AmE.

Overall, however, general pronoun use does not follow the pattern of combined pronoun use shown in Figure 2. There is, therefore, some evidence that the increased use of combined pronouns post-1960s suggests at least some democratization of BrE and AmE. 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.⁶ 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 2 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, characterized 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 2. 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 hypothesize 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 social 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 democratization as noted by Farrelly and Seoane (2012:394): the process of colloquialization, 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 colloquialization 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 in an earlier study 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 BrE, at least, showed a preference for singular *THEY* in the 2000s. Taking the corpora diachronically, the spike in combined pronoun use in Figure 2 and the fact that combined pronouns are independent of more general trends in third-person pronoun use (Figure 3), it is possible to argue for the increased visibility of women in discourse. But is the occurrence of combined pronouns enough to claim democratization?

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 3, 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 AmE tokens and 14 (13.50 percent) of the BrE tokens; the latter is inflated by what appears to be a slight BrE 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, potentially reinforcing (or reflecting) 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.⁷

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 analyzed. 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 BrE in the 1990s. Other antecedents included *the first-person narrator* (as shown in 5), *the television viewer*, *the craftsperson*, *each person*, and *each student*.

- (5) It then moves to a situation where the first-person narrator describes how *she or he* tells a story to Christopher Robin [. . .] (FLOBJ60)
- (6) 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 (6) 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 emphasizes 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 (7), is from AmE 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.

- (7) 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 highly 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.

Table 3. Pronoun Types

	Men-first												Women-first															
	he or she		he/ she		him or her		him/ her		his or her		himself or herself		himself/ herself		him or herself		she or he		her or her		s/he or him		her or her		his or his			
	4	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
AmE																												
B-Brown	4	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Brown	4	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Frown	16	2	16	2	3	0	30	10	30	10	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0
AmE06	18	2	18	2	4	0	32	4	32	4	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Total	42	4	42	4	7	0	69	14	69	14	2	2	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	3	0	0	0
BrE																												
Lancaster 1931	4	0	4	0	0	0	3	0	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
LOB	5	0	5	0	4	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
FLOB	14	2	14	2	5	3	15	4	15	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	8	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0
BE06	7	3	7	3	0	3	11	0	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Total	30	5	30	5	9	6	31	4	31	4	0	0	3	1	1	1	2	9	0	2	2	9	0	0	2	1	0	0

5.3. Antecedent Distribution

The analysis of the antecedents in all eight corpora began with the manual coding of antecedent category and plurality. Following Paterson (2014), as also done by Loureiro-Porto (this issue), the categories I used were definite noun phrases, or 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 (as in 8) is not confused by plural antecedents in the same way that singular *THEY* (9) or generic *HE* (10) could be.

- (8) Landowners with specific objectives can be directed to the agency that best serves *his or her* needs. (FROWNJ70)
- (9) Landowners with specific objectives can be directed to the agency that best serves *their* needs.
- (10) Landowners with specific objectives can be directed to the agency that best serves *his* needs.

Both AmE and BrE follow the same basic pattern (Table 4), 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 the Appendix; the vast majority of texts (78.45 percent) included only one combined pronoun.

Table 4. Distribution by Antecedent Type

		Definite NP	Indefinite NP	Quantified NP	Indefinite pronoun	Bare NP
AmE	B-Brown	3	1	0	2	0
	Brown	4	2	1	2	0
	Frown	24	25	14	2	3
	AmE06	26	15	16	4	3
	Total	57 (38.52%)	43 (29.05%)	31 (20.94%)	10 (6.76%)	6 (4.05%)
BrE	Lancaster 1931	2	1	8	0	0
	LOB	5	2	2	2	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%)

To start with AmE, there were fifty-seven definite NPs, all of which were singular. They occurred in all four corpora across thirty-nine texts, but the total number of tokens is inflated by twelve occurrences of *the skeptic* in one text (see 11) and there were also four occurrences of *the student*.

- (11) 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 forty-three indefinite NPs occurred across all four corpora in thirty-two texts and they were all singular; most antecedents did not repeat but there are three tokens of *a student*. Quantified NPs showed a clear preference for *each* (sixteen tokens). Indefinite pronouns occurred in all four corpora. The bare NPs were accounted for by three tokens from Frown and three from AmE06, including (8).

For BrE, the fifty-one definite NPs spanned all corpora, were singular, and occurred in thirty texts. One text (FLOB_J33) accounted for ten 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 BrE 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 earlier 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 12) 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.

- (12) 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 democratization 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 twenty-four of the antecedents in the present data appeared in Kennison and Trofe's (2003) list of tested nouns. These are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Antecedents Cross-checked with Kennison and Trofe (2003)

	Feminine	Neutral	Masculine
AmE	dancer, victim	artist, author, child, client, leader, person, poet, student	chief, painter, thief
BrE		child, informant, judge, person, student, supervisor, writer	politician

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 is that the two families of corpora were comparable in their tokens and relative frequencies of combined pronouns. Both BrE and AmE 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; BrE showed a larger drop in combined pronouns than AmE, 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 such forms 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 BrE might be more inclined towards singular *THEY* (as shown in Paterson 2014) but no comparable study has been done for AmE. This would be a huge undertaking, as just the subsections of BE06 that I analyzed in 2014 contained thousands of tokens of *THEY* each of which had to be manually coded to determine whether or not *THEY* 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 democratization; 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 3). 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 summarize, while it is not possible to apply language policy to people's spontaneous utterances, it is at least possible to mandate the use of written 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 (cf. Farrelly & Seoane 2012 on the duality of democratization, 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 democratization 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 (with the caveat that this implicitly reflects a gender binary).

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 Loureiro-Porto (this issue) breaking new ground in their investigation of outer-circle varieties in the ICE corpora. Loureiro-Porto (this issue) 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 conceptualization of gender, they are more democratic than generic *HE*. 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.

Appendix. Distribution by Genre (Parentheses Denote Number of Individual Texts)

	AmE	BrE	B-Brown	Brown	Frown	AmE 06	Lanc 1931	LOB	FLOB	BE06
A: Press (reportage)	7 (5)	5 (5)	0	0	4 (2)	3 (3)	1 (1)	1 (1)	2 (2)	1 (1)
B: Press (editorial)	6 (5)	5 (5)	0	0	4 (3)	2 (2)	0	0	1 (1)	4 (4)
C: Press (reviews)	10 (8)	2 (2)	0	1 (1)	7 (5)	2 (2)	1 (1)	0	0	1 (1)
D: Religion	1 (1)	7 (5)	0	0	0	1 (1)	0	0	2 (2)	5 (3)
E: Skills and hobbies	10 (8)	8 (8)	2 (2)	1 (1)	3 (3)	4 (2)	2 (2)	2 (2)	3 (3)	1 (1)
F: Popular lore	31 (23)	7 (5)	4 (2)	4 (4)	14 (10)	9 (7)	1 (1)	3 (1)	1 (1)	2 (2)
G: Belles-Lettres	24 (15)	16 (11)	0	0	10 (6)	14 (9)	5 (4)	1 (1)	8 (4)	2 (2)
H: Misc.	18 (8)	20 (8)	0	0	16 (6)	2 (2)	0	3 (2)	14 (4)	3 (2)
J: Academic	37 (17)	26 (12)	0	1 (1)	11 (8)	25 (8)	0	1 (1)	21 (7)	4 (4)
K: Fiction (general)	0	2 (2)	0	0	0	0	1 (1)	0	0	1 (1)
L: Fiction (mystery and detectives)	0	1 (1)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (1)
M: Fiction (science)	1 (1)	1 (1)	0	0	0	1 (1)	0	0	1 (1)	0
N: Fiction (adventure, western)	1 (1)	0	0	0	0	1 (1)	0	0	0	0
P: Fiction (romance)	2 (1)	1 (1)	0	2 (1)	0	0	0	0	0	1 (1)
R: Humor	0	3 (1)	0	0	0	0	0	0	3 (1)	0

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Notes

1. Alternatives would include using singular *THEY* or recasting the sentences.
2. 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.
3. 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 (Loureiro-Porto, this issue) and the L2 experience (Stormbom 2018).
4. 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|his/hers| his or her|his/her|her or his|her/his|his or hers|herself/himself|herself or himself|himself/herself|himself or 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.
5. Given their rarity, it is unlikely that such forms occurred in the corpora. Even if they did, their analysis would not lead to generalizable 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.
6. 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).
7. A potential avenue for further research, then, would be to analyze 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.

Corpora

All corpora used in this paper were the versions held in CQPweb (Hardie 2012).

British English

The BLOB-1931 Corpus (previously called the Lancaster-1931 or B-LOB Corpus). 2006.

Compiled by Geoffrey Leech, Paul Rayson & Nick Smith, Lancaster University.

The LOB Corpus (original version). 1976. Compiled by Geoffrey Leech, Lancaster University, Stig Johansson, University of Oslo & Knut Hofland, University of Bergen.

The Freiburg-LOB Corpus (FLOB) (original version). 1999. Compiled by Christian Mair, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg.

British English 2006 Corpus (BE06). 2008. Compiled by Paul Baker, Lancaster University.

American English

- The B-Brown-1931 Corpus. 2013. Compiled by Marianne Hundt, University of Zürich.
- A Standard Corpus of Present-Day Edited American English, for use with Digital Computers (Brown). 1964, 1971, 1979. Compiled by W. N. Francis & H. Kučera, Brown University.
- The Freiburg-Brown Corpus (Frown) (original version). 1999. Compiled by Christian Mair, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg.
- American English 2006 (AmE06). 2009. Compiled by Amanda Potts & Paul Baker, Lancaster University.

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