

Epicene pronouns in UK national newspapers: A diachronic study

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1 Introduction

The standard English personal pronoun paradigm has been more or less stable since the end of the Early Modern English period, with its last major change being the replacement of *thou* with *you* (Busse 2001: 120). However, the current paradigm does not include a gender-neutral third person singular form, and thus every animate, human antecedent must be referred to in the third person using a gendered pronoun, whether or not the speaker/writer knows the referent's biological sex. The form traditionally prescribed to fill this pronominal gap¹ is generic *he* – the use of the masculine pronoun for generic reference – but it has fallen out of favour (if indeed it ever reflected usage) on the grounds that it is an example of sexist language and promotes the exclusion and invisibility of women (see Stanley 1978; Sigley and Holmes 2002: 138). Conversely, empirical evidence has shown that the other major contender for epicene status, singular *they* – the traditionally plural pronoun used as singular – can be easily processed as a gender-neutral form, despite arguments over its number (dis)concord with singular referents (see Foertsch and Gernsbacher 1997; Sanford and Filik 2006).

In this paper, which is part of an ongoing study of epicene pronouns, I draw on two corpora of UK national newspaper articles to present a diachronic analysis of the quantitative usage patterns of these two epicene candidates. I show that in 1961 (which is the date of the LOB corpus) generic *he* is the favoured epicene pronoun, whilst in 2007/08 written usage has swung towards singular *they*. These results represent a move away from traditional grammatical convention, and the use of *he* to refer to both sexes, towards a singular version of the pronoun *they*.²

Significantly, the dates of the two corpora are important, as the LOB corpus represents written standard English before second-wave feminism and the non-sexist language reforms which it helped to facilitate, whilst the 2007/08 corpus contains data which represents more modern, and arguably current, pronoun

usage. As singular *they* is the pronoun of choice in the later corpus, the results suggest that non-sexist language reform (in the form of campaigns for gender-inclusive language, the rejection of masculine generics, etc.) have impacted in some way on pronoun usage. It thus appears that singular *they*, despite arguments to the contrary, is the (unofficial) English third person epicene pronoun. Before detailing my findings I contextualise this research by presenting a brief overview of the literature on epicene pronouns. I then detail the methods used in this study alongside a description of the data, and the corresponding analysis.

2 *Background on epicenes*

Although pronominal change is not impossible, the closed-class status of the pronoun paradigm means that they are a firmly fixed set, and changes tend to be gradual, met with resistance and “very slow and open to controversy” (Segalowitz and Lane 2000: 376). The failure of epicene neologisms, where alternative pronouns such as *hesh* and *thon* have been proposed by scholars and lay persons alike in an attempt to fill the epicene gap, illustrates that it is simply not possible to force a new entity into this closed-class (see Baron 1986: 194 for a list of proposed forms). However, the paradigm has changed throughout history, losing the dual number and neuter gender of Old English, and the *thy/you* distinction of Middle and Early Modern English (Fennell 2001: 68; 102).

There have also been some additions to the paradigm, including the introduction of the Scandinavian *th-* forms *they* and *them*, which corresponded with Danish invasions in the Middle English period. What is significant about this addition is that it corresponded well with a language external social phenomenon, in this case invasion, and throughout history there are similar occurrences where social change has affected the personal pronoun paradigm. For example, Bodine (1975: 141) argues that “the spread of the ideology of feudalism” had a discernible influence on the development of the *tu/vous* distinction in languages other than English (although Fennell (2001: 164) notes that there were comparable “complex” social factors affecting the use of *thy* and *you* in Early modern English).

Similarly then, in terms of epicenes, Cameron (1995: 18) argues that “[g]eneric and non-specific reference in English” is changing due to the “pressure exerted by feminists”. Cameron’s comments refer to the backlash against generic *he* which occurred as an aspect of non-sexist language reform, and the implementation of gender-neutral language guidelines, associated with second-wave feminist movements. Furthermore, Laitinen (2004: 66) notes that discussion of epicene pronouns in English textbooks “often takes place under heavily

stigmatised labels such as ‘sexist usage’”. Thus, there is clearly a case for social change influencing epicene pronominal choice, which could explain the differences between the results from the two corpora analysed here.³

The key characteristic of the rejection of generic *he*, and the reason why it cannot truly be an epicene form, is that people perceive it “as referring to men rather than women” (Soto *et al.*, 1975 summarised in Pauwels 1998: 72) and if a generic term excludes women, then by definition it is not generic (Gibbon 1999: 43). This pseudo-generic nature of generic *he* has been well documented (Graham 1973; Bodine 1975; Martyna 1978; Gastil 1990), and there are many empirical studies showing that generic *he* has a default masculine interpretation. On the other hand, research on singular *they* has shown that it is (probably) the most common alternative to generic *he*, although “[t]raditional grammarians will complain that this is incorrect usage” (Doyle 1995: 81) because it does not agree in number with its antecedent. Despite this, it has been used throughout history (see Curzan 2003: 70–73) and represents “the way most of us speak now” (Doyle 1995: 81). According to Bodine (1975), it is still in use after two hundred years of criticism, and empirical research seems to support its position in the pronoun paradigm. The *OED* sanctions the use of singular *they* in some circumstances because the lack of an accepted epicene form makes this “violation of grammatical concord sometimes necessary” (Baron 1986: 193).

However, there are many who oppose singular *they* on the grounds that it is ambiguous. For example, MacKay (1980: 352) is concerned about the difficulties of distinguishing between the singular and plural forms of *they*, an argument that is dismissed by Hellinger (1990: 81, translated in Pauwels 1998: 129), who notes that this is not a problem for the second-person *you*. Likewise, Madson and Hessling (1999: 571) argue that singular *they* does not confuse people on quantity “in the same way generic masculines cause readers to misunderstand the gender of the referent”. Empirical support for this view comes from Sanford and Filik (2006) who argue that “a gender-neutral singular [they] is perfectly acceptable from a processing point of view”, as their eye tracking experiment showed that, for their 36 participants, “there was no difference” in processing between sentences containing singular or plural pronouns with a singular antecedent (2006: 174). Additionally, Foertsch and Gernsbacher argue that singular *they* is “overwhelmingly comprehended” as referring to one person (1997: 109) and that it is “not problematic for the majority” (1997: 110). Thus, despite claims that using singular *they* is considered “an unforgivable sin” by some (see Frank and Anshen 1983: 88) it is clearly a viable epicene pronoun. It is widely used “despite the stigma of ungrammaticality that has become attached to it”

(Baron 1986: 193), and the results I present here suggest its use looks set to continue.

It is widely accepted that singular *they* occurs frequently in speech, and Newman's (1998: 361) study of the epicene pronouns used on TV chat shows found singular *they* to be "the most common pronoun used in epicene contexts", whilst comparable spoken results were also found by Stringer and Hopper (1998). Also, in written English, Cooper (1984) investigated the use of 'masculine generics' in American magazines and newspapers between 1971 and 1979, and found a 'dramatic decline' in their use in women's magazines (which was probably to be expected due to the impact and prominence of second-wave feminism during this time period) but also in more neutral publications such as *National Geographic* (see Pauwels 1998: 200). Similarly, Laitinen (2002) looked at epicene pronouns in the BNC (which includes British English from the mid-1990s) and showed that overall singular *they* was more popular than generic *he*, and Baranowski (2002) used a corpus of newspaper articles to document the dominance of singular *they*, although he did not perform a diachronic analysis as I have done here.

When undertaking this research, I aimed to ascertain whether there had been an increase in the use of singular *they* between the two time periods – 1961 and the LOB corpus, and the modern corpus spanning 2007/08 – as an increase in singular *they*, perhaps corresponding to a decrease in the use of generic *he*, would provide strong evidence that not only is singular *they* the epicene pronoun of choice in speech, but also the epicene pronoun-elect of standard English. Significantly, in parallel with the Danish invasions and the development of feudalism discussed above, such trends in usage could be attributed to social forces, including the rise of second-wave feminism and related campaigns for gender-inclusive language, meaning that a swing towards singular *they* would follow a pattern of pronominal change well established throughout history.

3 *The data*

In order to perform a diachronic analysis of epicene pronouns in written British English I collected a corpus of newspaper texts sampled from three national newspapers in 2007/08, which I compared with sections A–C of the 1961 LOB corpus. The 2007/08 corpus was created by accessing *The Daily Express*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Guardian* online archives, and a systematic sample was taken from each archive based on the criterion that each article in the corpus must contain at least one token of *they*. The corpus consists of the first ten relevant articles for the first day of each month between June 2007 and May 2008

(except July 2007, where the second of the month was used for *The Guardian* as it is not published on a Sunday). *The Daily Express* search produced less than ten articles so all of the available texts were included in the corpus. Also, a duplicate article in *The Guardian* sample from May 2008 was omitted.⁴

For each article all tokens of the nominative and accusative forms of *they* and *he* were analysed, and their distribution across the corpus is shown in Table 1. Thus, there were a total of 1,306 occurrences of the tested forms of the lemma *they* and a relatively comparable 1,604 occurrences of the corresponding forms of *he*. Each of these tokens was analysed and the antecedents were recorded.

Table 1: Number of tokens for analysis in the 2007/08 corpus

	2007/08 corpus number of tokens				
	The Daily Express	The Daily Mail	The Guardian	Total	
<i>They</i>	173	481	367	1,021	1,306 (44.88%)
<i>Them</i>	40	139	106	285	
<i>He</i>	153	668	524	1,345	1,604 (55.12%)
<i>Him</i>	20	154	85	259	

When analysing both corpora, a pronominal token was classed as an example of singular *they* if it coindexed with a singular NP (optionally containing an article or quantifier), or an indefinite pronoun. When analysing the tokens of *he*, a token was classified as generic if the masculine pronoun coindexed with an indefinite pronoun or a singular NP which was not morphologically marked for gender, for example ‘the patient’ or ‘the author’, and there was no other discernible specific referent in the context. The distribution of the two epicenes in both corpora is discussed in detail below.

Finding a corpus of older articles to facilitate comparative analysis with the 2007/08 corpus proved difficult, as none of the archives used to compile the modern corpus went back further than the 1980s and there were no preassembled corpora of older, twentieth-century texts available online. The only accessible and suitable corpus was the Lancaster/Oslo-Bergen (LOB) corpus (Hofland and Johansson 1986), which was created in the 1970s and contains 500 text extracts of circa 2,000 words from publications printed in 1961. The first three sections (sections A–C) of the LOB corpus are made up of newspaper extracts, but to increase the comparability of the two corpora I only sampled articles from national newspapers in this study; these were texts A1–A26, editorials B1–B16

and reviews C1–C14. Each LOB text was made up of one or more articles from the same publication, from a single or multiple editions of the newspaper. Although the structure of the two corpora are not identical, they both serve as snapshots of written standard English in their relative time periods, and thus they are suitable for comparison here.⁵

At the time of this research however, the LOB corpus was only available on microfiche organised into KWIC concordance lines, and it was thus impossible to view entire texts. Initially there were 196 tokens of *they* and 1,037 tokens of *he* in the corpus sample, but due to the concordance format, the target words were only given in a context of (up to) ten words each side. In many cases this was insufficient to determine the antecedent of the pronoun so those tokens were omitted. This unavoidably gave a much smaller sample, as detailed in Table 2.⁶

Table 2: Number of usable tokens in LOB corpus

LOB corpus usable number of tokens					
	Section A	Section B	Section C	Total	
<i>They</i>	64	42	25	131	172 (49%)
<i>Them</i>	20	9	12	41	
<i>He</i>	98	29	28	155	179 (51%)
<i>Him</i>	12	6	6	24	

Although the number of tokens in the LOB corpus is smaller than in the 2007/08 corpus, the percentage differences between the occurrence of *they* and *he* as shown in Tables 1 and 2 are relatively similar, suggesting that percentage comparisons of the two corpora are justifiable. Also, as the pattern of nominative and accusative forms was consistent across the corpora, with accusatives occurring consistently less than nominative forms, the two case forms are conflated in the results. Table 3 details the distribution of epicene pronouns in both corpora, showing both the number of occurrences of singular *they* and generic *he*. The percentage values were calculated by dividing the number of epicene tokens by the total number of tokens in the different newspapers/sections, and the total values were calculated based on the number of tokens in each corpus.

Table 3: Occurrences of epicenes across corpora

		Singular <i>They</i>		Generic <i>He</i>	
		Tokens	Percentage	Tokens	Percentage
LOB	Section A	1	1.19	2	1.83
	Section B	0	0.00	4	11.42
	Section C	0	0.00	2	5.88
	TOTAL	1	0.58	8	4.47

		Tokens	Percentage	Tokens	Percentage
		2007/08	The Daily Express	3	1.41
The Daily Mail	12		1.94	6	0.72
The Guardian	15		2.02	1	0.16
TOTAL	30		2.29	7	0.44

The totals for the 2007/08 corpus show that singular *they* represents 2.29 per cent of the total tokens of *they*, as there were 30 occurrences in 1,306 tokens, whilst generic *he* accounts for only 0.44 per cent with seven epicenes in 1,604 tokens. On the contrary, in the LOB corpus the one occurrence of singular *they* only accounts for 0.58 per cent of the total 172 tokens, but the eight epicene uses of *he* represent 4.47 per cent of the 179 total tokens of *he* in the corpus.

These results are depicted graphically in Figure 1, where it can be seen that in the 2007/08 corpus *The Daily Express* has a much lower tally of singular *they* than the other two publications. This could be because the number of articles collected from this newspaper is smaller than the other two, but the percentage value compensates for this and shows that the occurrences of singular *they* are below average for the whole corpus. In the LOB corpus however, the use of generic *he* over singular *they* is consistent throughout all sections, even though the percentage values in section A are similar for both pronouns.

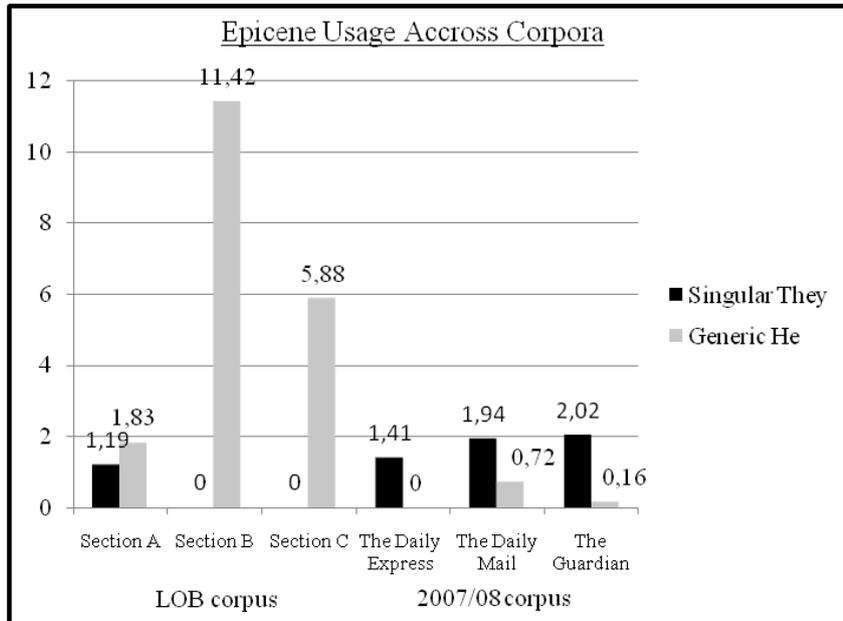


Figure 1: Raw figures and percentages for epicene usage across corpora

When the different sections in the two corpora are combined, as in Figure 2, it becomes immediately clear that generic *he* is the favoured epicene in the LOB sample, whilst singular *they* is the epicene of choice in the 2007/08 corpus. Singular *they* accounts for 80 per cent of the epicenes used in the 2007/08 data, making it four times more popular than generic *he*. Yet, in the LOB sample the opposite occurs, as there was only one token of singular *they* but generic *he* occurs eight times. In the LOB data singular *they* represents less than one per cent of the tokens of *they* but generic *he* represents 4.47 per cent of the tokens of *he* analysed, and thus in the earlier corpus the dominance of generic *he* cannot be disputed; it accounts for 89 per cent of the total epicenes in the LOB sample.

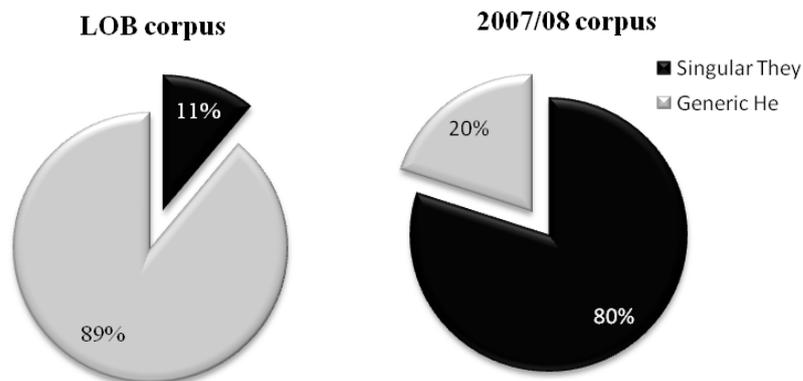


Figure 2: Distribution of epicene pronouns between corpora

The differences in pronoun usage can also be seen in raw figures with a 4.27:1 ratio for singular *they* to generic *he* in the 2007/08 corpus corresponding to a 1:8 ratio in the LOB corpus. There are 30 occurrences of singular *they* in the 2007/08 corpus and just one in the LOB corpus, showing a steep increase in the use of singular *they* in standard English texts between the two corpora, and indicating that singular *they* is the current epicene pronoun of choice in newspaper texts.

Finally, as a brief aside, although qualitative analysis is not the primary focus here, there were three very interesting antecedents in the corpora that deserve comment. In the 2007/08 corpus both *any girlfriend* and *any woman* occurred with singular *they*, whilst in the LOB corpus, the only occurrence of singular *they* was with the antecedent *a man*. Significantly, all three of these antecedents are morphologically marked for gender, and although they are made indefinite by the use of quantifiers and the indefinite article, they are still syntactically singular. Therefore, in these limited examples, singular *they* is used as an epicene even when the biological sex of a hypothetical, indefinite referent is known. Such usage provides even more support for the argument that singular *they* is already the British English epicene pronoun.

4 Conclusions

I am aware that the solely quantitative analysis of pronouns does have its disadvantages, as multiple pronominal references to a single repeated antecedent

could distort the figures slightly. Then again, there is no reason to believe that antecedents of *they* would be referred to by pronouns more often than antecedents of *he*, and so multiple references are not necessarily problematic in this case. Nevertheless, these results show that, between the two corpora, there has been a decrease in the use of generic *he* corresponding with a sharp increase in the use of singular *they* in standard English UK national newspaper articles. In the LOB corpus sample singular *they* represented less than one per cent of the tokens of *they* (0.58 per cent); only one token occurred in the whole corpus and it had only an eleven per cent share of the total number of epicenes. Conversely, the 2007/08 corpus included 30 tokens of singular *they* which represented the overwhelming majority of the total epicenes in the corpus (81 per cent).

For generic *he* almost the polar opposite was found. In the LOB sample tokens of generic *he* account for 4.47 per cent of the total tokens of *he* analysed. There were eight tokens of generic *he*, and they represented an 89 per cent share of the total epicenes in the corpus sample, whilst the 2007/08 corpus had seven tokens of generic *he* which equated to less than one per cent of the total tokens analysed (0.44 per cent) and accounted for only 19 per cent of the total epicenes in the corpus. There is a clear decrease in the use of generic *he* between the corpora. This is made even more striking as there were more tokens of generic *he* in the smaller LOB sample (a total of 179 tokens of *he*) than in the 2007/08 corpus, which had 1,604 tokens of *he*.

From these results it is clear that singular *they* is the epicene of choice for the 2007/08 corpus, suggesting that it does not cause the ambiguity in reference that MacKay (1980) proposes; if readers could not understand *they* in its epicene form, then the newspapers in the corpus would not use it. The results I have presented agree with Jochnowitz's (1982: 200) argument that "[i]ndefinite *he* has ALREADY been abandoned". This is because of the overwhelming evidence that generic *he* has "been shown empirically not to work" (Gibbon 1999: 57). Thus, despite the condemnation of singular *they*, this research supports Meyers' (1990: 234) conclusion that, if one looks at how people actually use singular *they* in written English, it is "well established". Indeed, this is what Kolln (1986: 102) is arguing when she suggests marking singular *they* coindexed with indefinite pronouns as incorrect "does not reflect standard English", and the data analysed here does support this, as generic *he* does not coindex with indefinite pronouns in either corpus. This result contradicts the findings of Laitinen (2002) who did find indefinites with generic *he* in the written section of the BNC, although such references were in the minority compared with the occurrence of singular *they*.

To relate my findings back to the above discussion of social pronominal change and the possible influence of language reforms which have their roots in second-wave feminism, the numerical results look promising. However, this social aspect of epicene pronoun choice needs more research and is beyond the scope of this short article. As such, this work is part of a larger ongoing study on epicene pronouns in which I do consider the effects of language guidelines, and changing handbook prescriptions on indefinite reference in the third person. Nevertheless, based on this data it is clear that singular *they* is currently in use in standard English newspaper articles. It is more common than generic *he*, and its use has increased between the two corpora. Thus, this brief diachronic study supports other corpus-based work on epicenes done by Cooper (1984), Newman (1998), Stringer and Hopper (1998), Baranowski (2002), and Laitinen (2002), and provides evidence in support of the position of singular *they* as the epicene pronoun-elect of Standard English.

Acknowledgements

My many thanks go to Diane Nelson for reading very early drafts of this paper, and to Arianna Maiorani and Chris Christie. Also, thank you to the University of Lancaster for the loan of their copy of the LOB corpus.

Notes

1. I am aware that the notion of a pronominal gap, as argued by Weidmann (1984: 62) has been contested (not least by Newman 1992: 469). However, within this paper I subscribe to the view that the occurrence of epicene pronouns with generic referents is enough evidence to support the idea that there is space in the closed-class paradigm for a gender-neutral third person form.
2. Whilst I discuss the theory behind singular and plural *they* and how they may be acquired as two separate pronouns in other papers, I focus here on how the pronoun is used and what type of antecedents it is coindexed with.
3. For extensive historical, sociolinguistic data on differing epicene usage see Laitinen's (2008) work on gender and register differences in pronominal choice in Early Modern English.
4. The total word count for the 293 articles was 179,382.
5. For research on epicene pronouns in other periods of English history see Laitinen (2004).
6. What is interesting here is that although a high percentage of tokens of *he* (82.74 per cent) had to be omitted from the LOB sample (a decrease from

1037 to 179) the use of generic *he* is still much higher than the use of singular *they*. I can thus only hypothesise that the dominance of generic *he* would have increased exponentially if there was enough contextual data to include all tokens in the final analysis.

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