Who is *they*? Pronoun use across time and social structure

by

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Abstract

Who uses *they*, and who can *they* be (or not be) used for? Singular *they* has been proscribed in formal grammars since the mid-18th century, yet it dates to at least the 14th century (Balhorn 2004; Curzan 2003), persevering in both writing and speech (e.g., Baranowski 2002; Balhorn 2009; Lagunoff 1997; Matossian 1997; Newman 1992; Strahan 2008). This thesis investigates the envelope of variation (e.g., LaScotte 2016; Maryna 1978; Meyers 1990) in which speakers make choices of third-person singular pronouns based on a multiplicity of both linguistic (e.g., gender stereotypicality, antecedent type) and social (e.g., gender, age, LGBTQ2S+ identity) factors. The analysis is based on data from 620 participants from across Canada and the US between the ages 13 and 79.

An online survey sought responses related to three occupations: LaScotte's (2016) open-ended *ideal student* question was replicated, and Martyna's (1978) fill-in-the-blank style was modelled for *mechanic* and *secretary*—nouns with observed and unambiguous gender stereotypes (masculine and feminine respectively; Deaux & Lewis 1986; Haines, Deaux, & Lofaro 2016). Participants self-identified their gender and were categorized into a ternary grouping: men (e.g., cis, trans, transmasculine), women (e.g., fem, cis, trans, female-ish), and non-binary (e.g., genderqueer, genderfluid). LGBTQ2S+ identity was also collected, as well as personal pronouns. Use of third-person pronouns in the survey responses is quantified by consistency (i.e., maintaining use of the same pronoun throughout a participant's response) and by proportional frequency of use—the latter explored in-depth.

The most important quantitative finding is that singular *they* is the most consistently and frequently used third-person pronoun overall. But, its patterns of use are not parallel across test occupations or participant social groups. The results indicate that *student* is gender-neutral,

whereas *mechanic* and *secretary* remain gendered (*he:they*; *she:they*), results that are reflected by perceptual ratings: *student* remains neutral (*they*), *mechanic* skews masculine (*he*), and *secretary* skews feminine (*she*). The impact of social characteristics adds layers of complexity about the groups leading sociolinguistic change at societal levels and/or within their own communities and networks: Non-binary, LGBTQ2S+, users of gender-neutral personal pronouns, and/or younger. Collectively, these findings suggest that gender stereotypical roles are not unilaterally weighted and biases can manifest through pronominal choice. There are multiple dimensions of influence, such as the referent, one's identity, and the communities to which individuals are connected. Thus, this thesis both uncovers persistent gender biases and creates a dynamic display of pronominal variation across speakers.

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Acknowledgments

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Dedication

a queen, Raleen,
reigns graciously and supreme,
soaking up sunlight,
breathing ocean breeze,
in another life living life

Raleen, my sister, the eldest daughter of our new generation. With laughter, you brought vibrancy into your surroundings, and also shielded me from the harshness that you experienced, so that I could blossom. There is a strange, yet beautiful, realization that this existence is unphased by the grand mechanisms of the universe. Time? It should be spent making memories with loved ones while healing the worlds we inhabit.

In Hinduism, souls with good karma are reincarnated into a better life. There's no doubt that we'll see each other again (put on some beats! We'll dance our cares away while light glistens through waterfalls). "Can I call you doctor yet?". Haha, technically, no, but for you, yes, please do! Miss you, sis. Love you, always.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"[W]hen we choose our pronouns we are inevitably making political statements."
(Sklar 1988:411)

When Sklar (1988:411) remarks that pronoun choice is a political statement, she is discussing the choice among generic *he*, conjunctive pronouns (*he or she, he/she, s/he*), and singular *they*, what she frames, after Nilsen (1984), as the "Great he/she battle." She notes that the battle is far from over, a statement that retains relevance in light of the public attention focused on the use of *they* for singular reference. Speakers continue to make choices, and thus statements, about pronouns.

Third-person singular pronominal reference has long been a subject of discussion in English, and grammar handbooks and texts continue to espouse subjective statements regarding pronoun choice across antecedent types (e.g., generic versus non-generic, singular versus plural) and registers (e.g., formal writing versus colloquial speech). Many grammars propose avoidance tactics such as pluralizing the antecedent and reforming the sentence or promoting the use of conjunctive pronouns rather than advocate for an "epicene" pronoun—that is, one that is the same regardless of the gender of the referent. As an example, in a survey of early 21st century grammars, Paterson (2014:140-142) notes that while generic *he* was rejected in the majority of texts (11 out of 13), singular *they* was rejected in more than half (7 out of 13) and only once explicitly endorsed for generic reference in formal contexts.[1] Thus, generic *he* is largely rejected and singular *they* is rarely presented as an option. In these grammars, examples of singular *they* contain neutral antecedents of all generic types—indefinite pronouns, quantifiers, indefinite nouns, and definite

[1] Singular *they* is endorsed with limitations in 9 out of 13 grammars, where it is restricted to colloquial contexts and/or indefinite pronouns (Paterson 2014:121). Some both rejected and endorsed singular *they*.

nouns (e.g., *anyone*, *each passenger*, *a friend*, *your employee*). Two problems arise: First, these grammars avoid mentioning gender-stereotyped antecedents (Paterson 2014:114), such as *secretary*, *nurse*, *firefighter*, or *mechanic*. Second, such advice does not acknowledge that individuals make choices about pronominal usage for known referents as well as themselves.

Pronouns are considered a closed-class and are thus regarded to be more resistant to change than open-classes like nouns and verbs (Rijkhoff 2007). Nonetheless, there are social reasons why people have been exploring singular *they* and other gender-neutral pronouns like *hir*, *sie*, *ze* (e.g., Bornstein 2013; Coyote & Spoon 2014; Devor & Dominic 2015:183; Parker 2017; Stotko & Troyer 2007; Zimman 2017a) in English: these forms oppose notions of the gender binary and are more inclusive of those who do not identify within this oppositional system—as non-binary, genderqueer, agender and so on. Essentially, innovations and changes in usage are both possible and attested. In this context, singular *they* is topical.

What sets singular *they* apart from other gender-neutral pronouns is that it has a long history of use in English, dating back at least to the 14th century (Balhorn 2004; but see Curzan 2003). Although its epicene function has been proscribed in formal grammars since the mid-18th century (see Bodine 1975; Paterson 2014; Zuber & Reed 1993), its use in both writing and speech has not waned (e.g., Balhorn 2004; Balhorn 2009; Baranowski 2002; LaScotte 2016; Lagunoff 1997; Martyna 1978; Matossian 1997; Meyers 1990; Meyers 1993; Newman 1992; Paterson 2014; Strahan 2008). In Present Day English, singular *they* can be used to reference indefinite and definite gender-neutral antecedents, and it may also be expanding to gender-stereotyped antecedents, such as *politician* (masculine) and *teacher* (feminine) (Paterson 2014:71-72). In the following quote, Ivan Coyote summarizes their sentiment about the purpose of singular *they*, particularly in ways that do not sprinkle gender biases into conversations:

> "The other day, I was talking to my dad about my friend Carrie, the carpenter. I referred to Carrie as they, which allowed me to tell my father what a good carpenter they were (which they definitely are) without him stopping me to ask what? Carrie is a lady carpenter? My friend Carrie is anything but a lady, but she is a fine carpenter, however, in order to keep the conversation being about Carrie the carpenter, instead of whether or not Carrie is a lady, I used the "they" pronoun for her. In my dreams, I imagine a world where we use "they" to refer to everyone, unless for some reason their gender is important or relevant to understanding the conversation, which it almost never is." (Coyote 2014:222)

Referencing proper names (and thus, specific individuals) with singular *they* is not the focus of this thesis. Rather, this work is concerned with a slightly broader semantic lens: the third-person pronominal choices first-language English speakers make for singular and generic gender-stereotyped occupations like *carpenter*, *nurse*, *mechanic*, *firefighter*, *librarian*, and so on, as well as for those that are gender-neutral, such as *student*, *friend*, and *server* (cf. Deaux & Lewis 1983; Haines, Deaux, & Lofaro 2016). My research questions are thus: Who uses *they*, and who can *they* be (or not be) used for?

My personal motivations are also relevant for this research: As a queer identified person of mixed heritage who has experienced discrimination on multiple fronts, I strive to use any of my privileges and opportunities for social activism. This motivates me to pay homage to my LGBTQ2S+ family via this research. LGBTQ2S+ people are impacted by research that explores third-person pronouns and gender stereotypical roles because we often explore and navigate constructs of gender and sexuality within society and within ourselves (e.g., Merrill, Steif, & Savin-Williams 2016). Contextualizing and deconstructing the gender binary adds academic reflection to queer lives and contributes to our understanding of humans. In other words, this type of research is integral to the queer community and, depending on how it is discussed, it can have ripple effects from academia to the media, politics, workplaces, and so on. The goal of

investigating pronominal usage is to establish which demographics are at the forefront of using singular *they*, which I suspect are non-binary and the queer community.

The following chapter, Chapter 2, reviews the literature examining pronominal changes in English and other languages, with a largely diachronic lens. Starting with a historical perspective allows me to establish that *he* was used generically, and prescribed as such, for a long time, whereas singular *they*, which has been longitudinally available for generic reference as well, came to be proscribed for this function. Chapter 3 outlines my methods and data, drawing on a survey of 620 participants across Canada and the US. In Chapter 4, I analyze quantitatively the third-person pronominal responses, focusing on three target occupations (*mechanic*, *secretary*, and *student*) and participant demographics (age, gender, age and gender, LGBTQ2S+ identity, and personal pronouns). In the final chapter, Chapter 5, I discuss the implications, limitations of this work, as well as avenues for future research, before offering some brief concluding remarks.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Pronouns over time and space

Personal pronouns are considered a closed-class because they are function words used to express grammatical relations (i.e., subject, direct object, indirect object, etc.). As a closed-class, pronouns are more resistant to change, including the addition of new members, as opposed to open-class categories like nouns and verbs, which are numerous and constantly changing (e.g., Rizzi 2004). Nonetheless, over its history, the English pronominal system has experienced paradigmatic shifts as a result of both language internal and language external factors.

The Old English (OE) pronominal paradigm had a three-way distinction for first and second-person: singular, dual, and plural. Before Middle English (ME), however, this was reduced to the binary distinction that remains in Present Day English (PDE), as duality was lost (Paterson 2014:17). The OE gender system was also more complex than that of PDE because the third-person paradigm contained three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. When English transitioned from grammatical to "natural" (i.e., socially constructed) gender during Early Middle English (Curzan 2003:86), the neuter distinction was lost (Paterson 2014:17).

The third-person pronouns were affected by phonological changes during the OE period, which made them more difficult to distinguish from one another (i.e., *he* 'he', *heo* 'she', and *hi* 'they'; Crystal 2004:76). Language contact with the Norse introduced the Scandinavian *th-* phonological form for *they*, while the *sh-* form (for *she*) developed during ME, making these forms more salient for speakers (Paterson 2014:18).[2] During ME and Early Modern English (EModE), the second-person pronoun forms *thou* (singular) and *you* (plural) underwent change

[2] The Anglo-Saxon forms either underwent phonological changes or were completely replaced by the Scandinavian forms. It is unclear as to which case is true.

(Crystal 2004:307-310; Paterson 2014:20-21). Specifically, in the 13th century, *you* began to be used as a singular form; by the 16th century, class and style distinctions were established. At this time, *you* and *thou* functioned like T/V forms (*tu/vos* from Latin, cf. Brown & Gilman 1960; Freedman 2007), where the V form (English *you*) was polite, addressed to superiors or those of high standing, and the T form (English *thou*) was informal and familiar, and was used to address those of lower standing. By the mid-17th century, however, *thou* had largely disappeared (it persists today in some regional and religious lects, e.g., Terry 2014); in PDE, *you* marks both singular and plural second-person reference, generic as well as specific usage. Another change within this second-person pronominal system was the loss of a nominative/accusative distinction in the plural *ye/you* forms (resulting in the effective obsolescence of *ye*, which remains only in a handful of regionally and/or religiously-defined varieties (e.g., Newfoundland and Labrador, Clarke 1997; Irish English, Hickey 1983)) during EModE (Paterson 2014:21).[3]

Pronominal shifts have also occurred in other languages, such as Middle Dutch (e.g., *ghi* expanding from second-person plural to singular and plural; Howe 1996:220-223), Brazilian Portuguese (e.g., grammaticalization of *a gente*; Zilles 2005) and various others (e.g., colloquial Turkish (Turkic), French, English, Tamil, Ilocano; Helmbrecht 2015). Helmbrecht (2015) illustrates that non-prototypical pronominal uses have led to historical changes in person and/or number across many languages, hypothesizing the directionality of plural (or dual) to singular and/or increasing in person hierarchy (i.e., third-person to second person, and so on). Contextually constructed meanings can also be imparted, such as the "royal" *we* instead of *I* (Baron 1986:193).

[3] This may have been influenced by Henry VIII because he used *you* as the nominative second-person form in personal written documents (Nevalainen 2006:80, as cited in Paterson 2014:21). Some of the forms prescribed into traditional grammar were based upon what the upper classes were using. Thus, Henry VIII could have had some influence on this paradigm, although direct impact cannot be assessed (Paterson 2014:21).

Cross-linguistically, such patterns illustrate that pronominal systems can undergo regular kinds of change and be pragmatically fluid.

Another driver for language change, social motivations—what Pauwels (2001) labels 'language reform'—also have effects on closed-classes. For instance, the use of generic *he* on national radio stations in Australia decreased between the 1960s/70s and the 1990s while singular *they* drastically increased (rather than *he/she*) (Pauwels 2001:110-113), arguably as a result of the social rejection of generic *he* as an inclusive pronoun (Paterson 2014:15). Conjunctive pronouns were rarely used in written British and American English during the 20th century, then spiked post-1960, coinciding with second-wave feminism and non-sexist language reform (Paterson 2020).

Gender-neutral third-person pronouns in varieties of both English and other languages have received recent attention. For example, *yo* is used and recognized by some speakers of African American English as a third-person personal pronoun (e.g., *Yo singing a rap song*; Stotko & Troyer 2007), and *hen* was introduced by Swedish LGBTQ2S+ groups at the beginning of the 21st century (e.g., *ska hen få en hund* 'will give them [Kivi] a dog' (from *Kivi och Monsterhund*, Lundqvist & Johansson 2012); Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck & Lindqvist 2015).[4] Although *hen* did not initially receive much public attention, its use to refer to the main character in a children's book, published in 2012, brought it to the mainstream. In 2015 it was added to the Swedish Academy Glossary. Over that period, 2012 to 2015, attitudes about *hen* shifted rapidly from negative to positive (Gustafsson Sendén et al. 2015:6), demonstrating that attitudes toward gender-neutral pronouns are positively correlated with awareness (and hence, acceptance). Relatedly, a recent attitudinal

[4] *Hon* and *han* are the feminine and masculine pronouns in Swedish respectively. *Hen* is adapted from the gender-neutral Finnish word *hän*.

study found that the majority of American participants approved of using singular *they* in generic contexts (Hernandez 2020). Singular *they* has also generally been accepted across antecedent types in recent grammaticality judgement tests (Bradley 2020; Conrod 2019). Crucially, these cases illustrate that the speakers of "natural" gender languages (such as English) can comprehend, and acquiesce to, gender-neutral singular pronouns.

Some of the changes outlined in this section result from various kinds of contact phenomena, such as migration (including conflict and colonialization), or for sociopolitical reasons (e.g., language reform). Others reflected system-internal evolutive change (e.g., loss of grammatical categories, phonological changes). Overall, pronouns, despite being a grammatical category, have been subject to substantial change as a reflex of language internal factors as well as language external ones. What follows in §2.2 and §2.3 are overviews of the historical trajectories of generic *he* and singular *they*, respectively, from Old English to the present.

2.2 Is *he* generic?

Third-person singular pronouns in English typically have a gender-specific meaning, where the pronominal refers either to a female antecedent (e.g., *She [fem.] has a meeting today*) or a male one (e.g., *He [masc.] drank the wine*). A gender-neutral usage, also known as the generic masculine pronoun, is also possible (e.g., *Every student should study before he [neut.] writes an exam*). Noted in §2.1, the OE pronominal system was based on grammatical gender as opposed to natural gender (see, e.g., Paterson 2014:16). Yet, generic *he* is attested in OE (Curzan 2003).

A historical and cultural perspective is important in understanding why the generic masculine appears so early in these written texts: The audience was perceived to be male, while the themes were historical events, religious figures and stories, and religious instructional material,

all of which centered around men (Curzan 2003:61, 65). Curzan (2003:66) reports that just over 80% of antecedent nouns in the Old English texts in the Helsinki Corpus (a structured, multi-genre corpus that covers the period 730–1710; see Rissanen & Kytö 1991) are masculine (N = 9,549). She also reports that the grammatical gender on nouns usually corresponds with the natural gender of the referent (Curzan 2003:62). That is, most nouns referring to men are grammatically masculine (e.g., *wer* 'man', *munuc* 'monk') and most nouns referring to women are grammatically feminine (e.g., *fæmne* 'woman,' *wuduwe* 'widow'). In the case of nouns that were grammatically masculine but could be perceived as neutral (e.g., *lareow* 'teacher'), the historical context in the Anglo-Saxon texts illustrates that the referents were men. Curzan argues that such contexts are critical to the historical continuity of generic *he*: "[…] it is undoubtedly explanatory in how the masculine continues on as the "generic" pronoun in reference to such nouns after grammatical gender becomes obsolete" (2003:62). It is also relevant that anaphoric pronouns almost always followed natural gender in OE, even in cases in which natural gender and grammatical gender did not align (e.g., 116 out of 118 tokens of the neuter noun *wif* 'woman' occurred with feminine pronouns; for full details, see Curzan 2003:62). Pronominal usage often matched the natural gender of the referents: the masculine pronoun was found more frequently because the frequency of men who were actors in the stories, or audience members reading the stories, was greater than was the frequency of women in these (assumed) roles.

In some of the instances where *he* is used as a generic pronoun in OE, it occasionally co-occurs with conjunctive *he or she*, a construction that explicitly refers to both men and women (Curzan 2003:70). Curzan observes that "authors sometimes seem to find themselves going to more awkward lengths to indicate clearly a reference to a person of either sex" (2003:68). In reality, the label "generic masculine" is most likely a misnomer during this period, reflecting

instead an androcentric (i.e., male-centric, male-dominated) culture; there are other parallels of androcentrism throughout the history of English, such as masculine generic nouns (e.g., *man* for 'human', *mankind* for 'humankind'; Spender 1980) and reproductive terms (Laqueur 1990).[5]

As, discussed above, during the ME period, grammatical gender was lost along with the neuter third-person pronouns; gender marking came to reflect natural gender (Paterson 2014:17). Although *he or she* continued to be used to refer to male and female antecedents simultaneously, generic *he* persevered as well (Curzan 2003:71). For instance, *The Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer, 1387–1400) contains *he* co-referencing with *every* and *each* (Balhorn 2004:90). Similarly, *he* is attested in the online Oxford English Dictionary (OED) with singular, gender-indefinite *every*-compounds from the 15th century onward (Balhorn 2004:81). Balhorn argues that because neither the social pressures of prescriptivism nor the establishment of a London standard had yet developed, "the extensive use of *he* to co-refer with quantifier phrases […] should be seen as a reflection of unselfconscious use of the language at the times" (2004:90). Notably, Chaucer uses *he* with stereotypically nonspecific masculine nouns, such as *man* and *knight* (Balhorn 2004:93). In the Helsinki Corpus, 70% of antecedent nouns in Early Middle English were found to be masculine (Curzan 2003:66). The use of a singular masculine pronoun may not have presented a semantic conflict for writers in ME because the discourse itself was centered on males (Balhorn 2004:98), paralleling the discourse in OE.

[5] Laqueur (1990) theorized that Western culture was predominated by the one-sex model until approximately the 18th century. Men and women were represented as one sex, men as the "default" and women regarded as a variation of that – genitalia were explained by anatomists as "inside" the body (female) compared to "outside" (male) genitalia (e.g., *female penis*, the uterus as scrotum; Laqueur 1990:63-113). The cultural paradigm then shifted into a two-sex model, in which men and women were viewed as two distinct sexes opposite to each other (i.e., a sex binary). As an example, the OED attests male reproductive terms in writing earlier than female ones (Loughlin 2018): 1386–1638 (e.g., *sperm* appears in 1386, *testicle* in 1425, *prostate* in 1638), while those for the female system range 1615–1741 (e.g., *clitoris* appears in 1615, *cervix* in 1741). Notably, the marking of reproductive terms, then appearance of female ones, emphasizes an androcentric history and coincides, in large, with the shift to a two-sex model.

By EModE, masculine nouns were beginning to be prescribed as generics (i.e., *man* for 'human'), and this eventually extended into the third-person pronoun paradigm with generic *he* (Sklar 1983:353-354). The shift began with William Lily and John Colet's *A Short Introduction of Grammar*, published in 1549 (Sklar 1983:354), which advocated for a hierarchical view of gender in which masculinity was given precedence: "The masculine gender is more worthy than the Feminine, and the Feminine than the Neuter" (Shirley 1651, as cited in Sklar 1983:354). Due to Edward VI's proclamation in 1548, Lily and Colet's grammar was mandated as the pedagogical Latin text, and became the standard reference for English schools from the mid-16th century to the end of the 19th century (Sklar 1983:354). As such, educators, students, and grammarians (e.g., Goold Brown's *The Institutes of English Grammar*, 1828), were familiar with the "most worthy gender" hierarchy rule, and masculine forms persisted as the prescribed generic form (Curzan 2003:74; Sklar 1983:354-355).

During the mid-18th century, grammarians such as Joseph Priestly, Hugh Blair, and Lindley Murray prescribed that singular *he* would be used to refer to both men and women because English lacked a singular "common-gender" (gender-neutral) pronoun (Baron 1986:191). But what was the real motivation for prescribing generic *he*? Bodine argues that generic *he* was selected on social grounds: grammarians were "dictated by an androcentric world-view; linguistically, human beings were to be considered male unless proven otherwise" (1975:133). As discussed above, this androcentric worldview is not limited to pronouns but applies to other categories as well (e.g., generic nominal *man*; Silveira 1980:167; Spender 1980) and has done so since at least the mid-16th century (Bodine 1975:134). Between 1750 and 1800, more than two hundred grammar handbooks were published in England (Sklar 1983:351). Lindley Murray's 1795 *English Grammar* contains the first known instance of explicit pronoun correction. He argues that a pronoun has to agree with

its antecedent in gender and number (Baron 1986:191; Curzan 2003) then provides an example, reproduced in (1), with the overt "correction" of *they* to generic *he*. Goold Brown holds similar ideas and declares that when antecedents have different genders, the masculine one is "preferred" over the feminine one (echoing Lily & Colet 1549, and Shirley 1651, as cited in Sklar 1983:354): masculine *he* can include the feminine (Curzan 2003:74).

(1) '"Can any one, on their entrance into the world, be fully secure that they shall not be deceived?" "on his entrance," and "that he shall"' (Murray 1981[1824]:135 as cited in Curzan 2003:73).

In general, throughout most of the Modern English period, prescriptive grammarians have suggested, variably, that using conjunctive pronouns (e.g., *he or she*, *s/he*) in lieu of *he* was: cumbersome, to please women, sexist because it made women a special category, and/or part of a radical feminist movement (see Curzan 2003; Baron 1986; Bodine 1975; Meyers 1993; Zuber & Reed 1993). Thus, *he* was chosen as the "best candidate" by prescriptivists because it does not violate number agreement (being singular) and it is thought by some to encompass men and women, therefore not violating (binary, "natural") gender agreement (Baron 1986; Bodine 1975; Curzan 2003). This prescription was so strong that in 1850, generic *he* (and all masculine nouns) was established legally through an Act of Parliament in the United Kingdom, replacing *he or she* with *he* and stating that the masculine gender in legal documents would include females (Bodine 1975:136; Greenberg 2008:63).[6]

[6] Also known as an 'Act for shortening the language used in Acts of Parliament' (Bodine 1975:136) and the 'Interpretation Act' (Greenberg 2008:64). This notion was replicated with parliament acts in 1889 and 1978. The policy was finally changed in 2007, but explicit suggestions for pronoun usage were not discussed (Greenberg 2008:65-66).

However, not all grammarians agreed with the prescription of generic *he*. For example, although it is difficult to determine Bain's precise position (because contradictory statements appear within his grammar), in (2) he nonetheless states (1879:310):

(2) "[…] when both genders are implied, it is allowable to use the plural […] Grammarians frequently call this construction an error: not reflecting that that it is equally an error to apply 'his' to feminine subjects. The best writers furnish examples of use of the plural as a mode of getting out of the difficulty."

His argument is that generic *he* is incorrect with feminine subjects because it violates agreement with natural gender. Grammarians such as Henry Sweet (*A New English Grammar*, 1891) and, more recently, Randolph Quirk (*A Grammar of Contemporary English*, 1972) allowed for a stylistic distinction, arguing that *he* was more appropriate in formal English but that informal or spoken English could have other forms (i.e., *they*) (Baron 1986:193-194).

The late 20th century finally witnessed a shift. Some grammars published between the 1950s and the 1970s have continued to present generic *he* as the form to use for indefinite antecedents (Zuber & Reed 1993:522-523). Beginning in the late 1970s, however, grammars began to grow somewhat critical of earlier prescriptions to generic *he*; some would advise writers to avoid it through various means, such as the use of *he or she* and occasionally *they*, though these suggestions remained tentative (Zuber and Reed 1993:523-526). Beginning in the 21st century, explicit rejections of generic *he* began to appear (Paterson 2014:154).

Perceptions and practice in the 20th and 21st centuries (i.e., usage by speakers) do not mirror prescriptions. Generic *he*, as well as masculine nouns, continue to be perceived as having a male-image bias (e.g., Hamilton 1988; Hamilton 1991; Harrison 1975; Martyna 1978; Merritt &

Kok 1995; Miller & James 2009; Ng 1990; Silveira 1980; Schneider & Hacker 1973).[7] Focusing on generic *he* in practice, use appears to be dependent on the gender of the participant. Matossian (1997:40-41) reviews a large list of previous empirical work and finds that men favour masculine generics, such as *man* and *he*, for masculine and gender-neutral referents, whereas women use a wider variety of forms.

One of the earliest usage studies, Martyna (1978:132), seeks to answer "is generic *he* always used when referring to a sex-unspecified person", or if alternatives are sometimes chosen. College-aged students were asked to complete sentence fragments with gender-stereotyped occupations (e.g., *an engineer* for male, *a nurse* for female) and non-gender-stereotyped occupations (e.g., *a teenager*). To assess stylistic register effects, half of the participants carried out the task in written format, while the other half carried it out orally (1978:133). If *he* is exclusionary to generic reference in this experiment, then Martyna expected that it would be used for all types of occupations. In her results, however, *he* was typically used for masculine-stereotyped and neutral occupations, *she* was typically used for feminine-stereotyped occupations. Martyna thus concludes that the presumed sex of the referent has a marked influence on which pronoun is used and argues that *he* is not used generically; it is functioning as a gender-specific term (1978:135).

Martyna's experimental findings seem to reflect actual usage data. Earp illustrates that, between 1970 and 2000, generic *he* declined in both academic literature and in *The New York Times*, most likely due to the emergence of advocacy against generic *he* as non-inclusive and sexist (2012:12). Although generic *he* continues to be used in PDE, it is losing favour to other pronominal

[7] Gender-neutral nouns, such as *person*, also elicit a male bias (see Gastil 1990; Hamilton 1991; Hyde 1984; Martyna 1978), though to a lesser degree than masculine nouns and pronouns do.

choices, mostly the conjunctive *he or she* or epicene *they* (e.g., Balhorn 2009; Baranowski 2002; Earp 2012; LaScotte 2016; Paterson 2014; Strahan 2008). Nonetheless, generic *he* is retained in written (British) English with definite antecedents (e.g., *your doctor*, *the person*, *the police officer*, etc.), a usage that is argued to derive from either masculine-stereotyped antecedents or stylistic mandate (e.g., for legal documents) (Paterson 2014:59-64).

This brings us full circle: is *he* in fact generic? In PDE, there is little evidence that *he* is used generically. It refers to stereotypical male referents and is used more frequently by men. Indeed, the literature reviewed here strongly suggests that *he* has not been used in a strictly generic sense in any period in the history of English—Old, Middle, or Modern. Concurrently, other pronominal choices are becoming more frequent, and the drive behind this shift is argued to reflect the sexist and non-inclusive nature of *he* while acknowledging that singular *they* is inclusive of all genders. In the next section, I discuss the historical trajectory of singular *they*, focusing on its suggested origins, proscriptions, and usage, from OE to the present.

2.3 Singular *they* is in the building

According to Curzan (2003:70-71), generic *they* may be attested as early as OE, during the reign of King Alfred from 871-899, as illustrated in (3).

(3) "Gif oxa ofhnite wer oððe wif, þæt hie dead sien, sie he mid stanum ofworpod . . . (Alfred's Introduction to Laws 32)

'If an ox gores a man or a woman, so that they be dead, may he [the ox] be killed with stones'"

Whether *hie* 'they' in (3) is interpreted as plural and referential (*a man or a woman*) or singular and generic (*a man* or *a woman*), Curzan notes that "*they* is being used in at least quasi-singular

generic constructions in Old English, and the evidence becomes more prominent in Middle English" (2003:71). However, Paterson (2004:21) stresses that OE had the third-person neuter form *hit*, which meant that generic *they* was not strictly needed prior to the switch from a grammatical gender system to a natural gender system (though having multiple forms to express the same grammatical meaning is a well-known feature of linguistic systems). Curzan provided only one example of singular *they* in OE, that in (3), so it is unclear whether or not it was productive during that period; it is also unclear if interpreting *they* as singular (and generic) in this context is how the scribe intended it to function.

The transition from OE to ME saw other changes within the third-person pronominal paradigm. Language-internally, third-person pronouns were beginning to lose phonological contrasts in southern England, while language-externally, there were social influences on the system as a consequence of increased language contact. For example, discussed in §2.1, the Scandinavian *th-* forms affected the third-person plural pronouns (Paterson 2014:18) because they either competed with the OE forms, or the OE forms underwent phonological changes due to contact with Old Norse, the language of the Vikings. Crystal (2004:76-77) argues that *they, them,* and *their* were introduced as a new set of plural third-person pronouns that competed with the OE forms (*hi/hie* 'they/them', *hira/heora* 'their, of them', *him/heom* 'to them, for them'). The changes to the third-person pronouns took approximately 300 years to reach completion, moving through England from north to south because of the conquering and settling of northern England by the Norse (i.e., language contact). As such, the *th-* forms were not available to all speakers of OE at the same time: initially the forms "[…] did not infiltrate the language on a wide geographical scale […]" (Paterson 2014:22) but instead diffused slowly across geographic space. In the south, *they* became more socially salient and phonologically distinct to speakers because the other

third-person pronouns were phonologically similar at the time: *he* 'he', *heo* 'she', and *hi* 'they' in OE were beginning to sound alike (Crystal 2004:76). Around 1200, the author Orrm uses both the historical English and the innovative Scandinavian sets of third-person plural forms (*they* for subjects rather than *hi* 'they', and *they hemm self* 'they themselves' are used together). *They* coexisted with *hi* until around 1400, after which *hi* disappeared (Crystal 2004:77). Many Scandinavian loanwords also began to appear in writing during the ME period (Crystal 2004). This may be indicative of the *they* paradigm replacing the OE paradigm (in which case OE *hi/hie* 'they' disappeared and did not develop into ME *they*), but the evidence is not conclusive.

The documentation from the OED is consistent with this account. Unambiguous uses of singular *they* are attested from approximately 1375 in *William of Parlence* (Hernandez 2020:41). Balhorn (2004) reports its use in *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400), where, in addition to generic *he*, *they* co-occurs with the antecedents *every* and *each.* Indeed, *they* accounts for 18% of such contexts ((generic) *he* accounts for the remainder). Balhorn argues that this distributional imbalance is likely reflective of singular *they* being a relatively new structure at the time. Another probable factor is the ongoing androcentric worldview (as argued in §2.2), hence the use of "generic" *he* proliferating in these contexts. Newman (1997:21, as cited in Curzan 2003:71) compared different manuscripts from Chaucer and likewise found that generic *he* and generic *they* alternated. Curzan finds examples in the ME texts of the Helsinki Corpus, where *they* was used with the disjunctive nouns *a man or a woman* (2003:71-72). Such evidence establishes that singular *they* was a feature of ME, as it is attested in written documents from at least the late 14th century, if not before.

Starting in the mid-18th century, use of singular *they* began to be explicitly proscribed by grammarians such as Lindley Murray, Ellin Devis, Goold Brown, and Peter Bullions (Curzan

2003:73-74). As discussed in §2.2, this coincided with the prescription of generic *he*. Some grammarians, however, such as Bain, Sweet, and Curme, argued that singular *they* could be used in colloquial speech (that is, the proscription was stylistic rather than absolute). Nonetheless, others critiqued singular *they* for violating number agreement (see, for example, summaries by Baron 1986 and Bodine 1975). *They* was argued to be plural; the singular usage was either ignored or rejected from the mid-1700s up to the 1990s. Grammar handbooks between 1940 and 1992 either avoided mentioning singular *they* as a viable option for singular gender-neutral antecedents or they explicitly "corrected" it with alternatives (Zuber & Reed 1993:524-526). As discussed in Chapter 1, singular *they* is endorsed with restrictions (speech and/or indefinite pronouns) and/or dismissed in formal written contexts in some grammar handbooks published between 2000 and 2010 (Paterson 2014:121-122). Nevertheless, singular *they* has most likely been on the rise since the late 14th century, as shown by the increasing usage in written material with *every*-compounds between the 17th and 20th century (see Table 1 in Balhorn 2004:81). Many Early Modern and Modern English writers used singular *they* as well, such as Austen, Dickens, Fielding, Shakespeare, Shaw, Shelly, Swift, Thackeray, Trollope, Wells, and others (Bain 1879:310; Baron 1986:193; Lundberg 1988:174).

In one of the earliest usage studies of singular *they*, Marckwardt and Walcott (1938, as cited in Curzan 2003:76) report that while participants had mixed opinions about *they* referring to *everyone* (e.g., *Everyone was here, but they all went home*), most recognized the usage as colloquial and established. More recent work has explored the use of singular *they* both qualitatively and quantitatively in speech (e.g., Martyna 1978, Matossian 1997; Meyers 1993; Newman 1992) and in writing (e.g., Lagunoff 1997; Martyna 1978; Meyers 1990; Meyers 1993). All conclude that *they* is used in singular antecedent contexts to varying degrees. Paterson

(2014:38-41 & 59-61) reports that *they* co-references anaphorically in written British English with indefinite pronouns (e.g., *everyone, somebody*), singular noun phrases modified by a quantifier (e.g., *any child, no woman*), imagined indefinite referents (e.g., *a good girl*, *a performer*), and definite noun phrases (e.g., *the driver*). In short, singular *they* has been used in both writing and speech to co-refer to a wide range of singular antecedent types and has been established for such uses for quite some time. In fact, more recent studies show that singular *they* is prevalent in writing (e.g., Balhorn 2009; Baranowski 2002; LaScotte 2016; Paterson 2014; Strahan 2008), in educational contexts (e.g., Pauwels & Winter 2006), linguistically grammatical across antecedents (e.g., Bradley 2020; Conrod 2019), and with generally positive attitudes towards it (e.g., Hernandez 2020)—a sign of increasing acceptance.

Some studies have investigated the responses of participants regarding pronoun co-reference with singular, animate antecedents. In navigating these choices, participants generally use generic and singular *they, he,* or *he or she,* and sometimes avoid pronoun usage altogether. Martyna found that when referencing gender-neutral occupations, *they* was sometimes used in speech, and *he or she* was sometimes used in writing (1978:135). Neither choice was used very often for gender-stereotyped occupations. Finally, the gender of the participants had an effect on pronoun choice: women were more likely to use *they* or *he or she* than men.

Another usage study, Meyers (1990), investigated pronominal written responses to *the educated person* (n=392). Meyers was curious about whether participants used a "third-person generic singular approach", and if gender of the writer had an effect (1990:231). The analysis centred on consistency, which they defined as follows: the repeated use of the same third-person pronoun without use of other variants (see (4)). Overall, among participants who used pronouns

consistently, there was a relatively equal usage of *they* and *he* by men and women, though women used a wider variety of pronouns.

> (4) '"My idea of an educated person [is] ... a self-initiating lifelong learner. This is a person who has learned the skills to educate himself in unknown areas. He has gone through the learning process many times.... This educated person is prepared to face any challenge that he encounters."' (Meyers 1990:230)

Finally, LaScotte (2016) models Meyers (1990) to investigate "which pronouns native English speakers use when writing about a genderless person", focusing on "the ideal student" (2016:63). The overall frequency results indicate singular *they* was the majority at 55% (n=75 tokens out of 136), followed by indefinite *one* (18%). Among respondents with consistent pronoun usage (n=27 participants out of 38), *they* was the most common pronoun at 63% (i.e., 17 participants consistently used *they* among these 27). Additionally, more women than men used singular *they* for consistency (12 women, 5 men), and women also used a wider range of pronoun choices. When asked to explain their pronoun choice(s), some respondents stated they opted for *they* because it "encompasses whatever sex/gender that particular late [sic] student might identify as" and "it acknowledges that some people fall outside of the gender binary" (LaScotte 2016:71). Such responses emphasize that not only do people recognize that *they* is gender-neutral but that the general public, or at least, students, are becoming aware of this and might be applying it to generic contexts as well.

LaScotte (2016:63) observes that "few studies have researched the use of these [third-person] pronouns in free response to questions including a singular, genderless referent." To this I would add two further observations. First, knowledge concerning the effect of antecedent type remains limited. Martyna's (1978) study is the only one of which I am aware that investigates how pronominal choice interacts with gender stereotypes, raising questions about more recent

usage patterns. Second, the demographic background of participants remains constrained in the literature, focused primarily on university students and local sampling (Meyers 1990; Martyna 1978) and/or a small sample size (LaScotte 2016, n=38; Martyna 1978, n=40). This limits generalizations based on age, among other aspects of identity, such as gender (and notably, where gender is reported, it is reported as a binary contrast between men and women).

2.4 Summary

Despite prescriptive arguments regarding generic *he*, it is clear that *he* has not been used in a strictly "generic" sense and that even when deployed in such a way, use has declined over time, especially over the past 50 years. Meanwhile, singular generic *they* has been established since at least the 14th century, has increased continuously since the 17th century, and has been overtly proscribed since the 18th century. It appears to be more common in colloquial and informal styles and genres.

In usage studies (Martyna 1978; Meyers 1990; LaScotte 2016), singular *they* is used for gender-neutral antecedents (e.g., *student*). Moreover, its use has increased chronologically across these synchronic studies, with women consistently more likely to use *they* and/or a variety of pronouns compared to men. The biggest competitor, *he*, seems to be falling out of practice (LaScotte 2016), and has been used for masculine-stereotyped referents (Martyna 1978). What remains unclear is how third-person singular pronouns are presently being used for gender-stereotyped antecedents, and by whom. These studies did not analyze the effects of age on usage, even if the information was collected. Meyers and LaScotte both note that gathering data from a wider range of ages would expand exploration, which could be used for establishing a synchronic apparent-time baseline for pronominal practices.

This brings me to the two main questions of this study: Who is using singular *they*, and to what degree is this dependent on the perceived gender of the antecedent? A related issue concerns the extent to which users deploy third-person pronouns and whether such uses reflect stereotypical roles (e.g., using *he* for *mechanic* more often than for *student* and *secretary*). There remains a gap in the literature regarding the demographic makeup of who uses singular *they* (e.g., gender, age). A key goal of this study is to fill this gap across (apparent) time and social structure. With this in mind, I now turn to the methodology adopted here to explore these issues.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This thesis asks who uses singular *they* and to what degree is this dependent on the perceived gender of the antecedent? From these research questions follows a methodological one: How to best seek out implicit responses to explore pronominal use and its intersection with gender? I used a mixed methods design (cf. Creswell 2014) that complements quantitative data (which pronouns are used for each antecedent and by whom?) with qualitative data (who uses *they* and why?), via the creation and administration of an anonymous online survey. My goals are to expand on previous studies, replicating and/or modelling key aspects of their methodology, and to target a larger sample population with greater demographic diversity. How these goals are achieved is detailed in this chapter. The following sections outline the details of the survey, such as aims, design, and distribution (§3.1), the demographic makeup of the sample (§3.1.2), and the methods used to analyze the dataset (§3.2).

3.1 The Pronoun Survey

To maximize my ability to sample as wide and as diverse a population as possible, I used an online survey platform within a large geographical region: Canada and the US. The US was chosen for the purpose of using a population that would be comparable with that of previous studies (e.g., LaScotte 2016; Meyer 1990). I included Canada because this is where my networks primarily reside, yet it also shares a similar social context with the US. As noted at the end of §2.3, previous studies had a small sample size (LaScotte 2016; Martyna 1978) and/or a reliance on local sampling in university classes (Martyna 1978; Meyers 1990) that placed limits on sample constituency. As outlined in greater detail in §3.1.2, online distribution of the survey enabled me to circumvent both potential challenges. The platform used for this study was eSurveyCreator (renamed SurveyHero

in 2020), based out of Zurich, Switzerland. There are three benefits to this platform. First, it is free for students. Second, it allows for unlimited questions and participants. And third, the servers are located in Ireland, making their contents subject to European data protection laws. This meant that the data could not be used by anyone other than the investigator and the investigator could not disclose personal data about participants.

Once ethics approval was secured (UVic HREB protocol 17-469), the survey was launched in two phases. The first was a pilot study in early June 2018. It took participants 30 to 60 minutes to complete. Based on feedback received from that test phase, the survey was reduced such that completion required just 10 to 15 minutes. Participant recruitment was conducted via personal networks (email, in person) and a range of social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Instagram, Craigslist).[8] Data collection was administered in two waves—June 29 to July 23, 2018 and September 2 to October 27, 2018. The survey can be found in the Appendix; the details of the survey are discussed in the next subsection.

3.1.1 The Structure of the Survey

The survey consisted of three sections. The first contained the response questionnaire, the second contained the demographic questions, and the third contained a short exercise to test participants' assumptions about gender regarding the performance of specific occupations. This sequential order was essential for two reasons. First, the response questionnaire needed to proceed the demographic section. This is because the demographic section included questions designed to probe whether or

[8] Craigslist was used in an attempt to expand participation beyond my networks, but I was able to collect data only in Toronto (Canada) and Houston (US), which were the first cities I targeted in each country via this platform. The servers allow uploads within one city per account holder. Each advertisement needs a physical address, has to be advertised as a local survey, and the text must be unique and/or different from that used on previous ones. The automated program deleted several of my advertisements even when I adhered to these stipulations.

not participants had an inkling about the survey's purpose (i.e., pronominal choice based on gender stereotypes). The demographic section also asked participants for their personal pronouns and the pronouns they would use to refer to a gender-unidentified student. Encountering such questions before completing the response questionnaire would have biased responses. Second, the final exercise intentionally contained the target gender stereotypes (via specific occupations) used in the questionnaire: *mechanic*, *secretary*, and *student*. As such, it was essential that the questionnaire and demographics precede this section of the task, otherwise this section would have skewed the questionnaire results away from spontaneous, unreflective responses, because participants would have been primed to think about the gender roles and stereotypes associated with these occupations.

At the outset of the response questionnaire, participants were told that there was a total of nine questions, each on a separate page, and that they would not be able to go back to earlier questions to change their answers. Participants were also told not to think too hard about their responses or to worry about their grammar, as I was interested in their "off-the-cuff" answers. They were instructed to draw from personal experiences too, if relevant. The questionnaire contained three target stimuli dispersed between six filler questions: two filler, *mechanic*, two filler, *secretary*, two filler, *student*. The fillers functioned as distractors. The aim was to produce natural, spontaneous responses from participants when they answered the occupation questions (i.e., mitigating against conscious pronominal choices).

There were two types of styles for the question format: fill-in-the-blank, as in (5), and open-ended, as in (6) (these examples are filler questions). These formats, which alternated throughout the survey, allowed for free responses from participants while avoiding repetition in the way answers were sought.

(5) You're stranded on an island! The three things you would want to have with you are (finish the sentence)

(6) If you could add anything to your wardrobe, what would it be and why?

The first two targets, *mechanic* and *secretary*, were fill-in-the-blank (modelled from Martyna 1978). These are shown in (7) and (8). The third target, *student*, was open-ended (replicated from LaScotte (2006), who had modelled it from Meyers's (1990) *the educated person*). This is shown in (9). Participant responses to these probes included a range of strategies in addition to the intended third-person pronouns, such as avoidance, pluralization, and indefinite *one*. These are detailed in §3.3, where I discuss how I analyzed the data.

(7) When a mechanic checks under the hood, _____ (finish the sentence)

(8) When a secretary books a meeting, _____ (finish the sentence)

(9) What does it mean to be an ideal student? What does an ideal student need to do? If the student doesn't do this, what are the consequences?

The stereotypical gendered roles of *mechanic* and *secretary* were selected because they were the most heavily skewed in the psychological assessments by Deaux and Lewis (1983). These roles were re-tested by Haines et al. (2016), which upheld the original findings. Participants in both studies "were asked to estimate the likelihood that a man, a woman, or a person with gender unspecified had a set of male-typed and female-typed characteristics"; the studies both tested occupations as a set of gendered components among various others (Haines et al. 2016:356). Even though there is roughly a 30-year interval between studies, overall perceptions (i.e., implicit biases) were not found to have changed: the occupations continued to be consistently gender-stereotyped with "virtually no difference in the degree to which beliefs about typical men and women were

differentiated" (Haines et al. 2016:359). The neutral role *student* was not tested in these assessments because the researchers were targeting roles which were thought to be gendered. *Student* was chosen as the gender-neutral role to use as a baseline, so I replicated LaScotte's (2016) question.[9]

The demographic questionnaire asked participants about factors such as their year of birth, gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, the state or province in which they live, their LGBTQ2S+ networks, and their personal pronoun(s). They were free to skip any question they did not feel comfortable answering. The emergent gaps that arose in the review of previous studies (§2.4) highlight that a wider range of ages and identity factors are required to more fully assess the ways in which macro- and micro- level demographic factors impact pronoun choice. Of particular importance for this thesis are the effects of age, gender, LGBTQ2S+ identity, and personal pronouns, which are discussed in §3.1.2.

This demographic section of the survey included eighteen questions. Some were fill-in-the-blank, such as year of birth and gender, as in (10) and (11).

(10) What year were you born? _____

(11) What is your gender? _____

Others were multiple choice, such as nationality, LGBTQ2S+ identity, and personal pronouns, as in (12), (13), and (14). This format was used because the range of possible responses was either pre-determined and fixed (e.g., nationality) or a high degree of diversity was expected and I felt

[9] A greater number of roles were included in the pilot: *mechanic*, *truck driver*, *construction worker* and *firefighter* (masculine); and *secretary*, *nurse*, *librarian* and *hair dresser* (feminine). These stereotypes progress along a continuum (i.e., *secretary* was perceived to be more stereotypically feminine than *nurse* was). The neutral roles selected for the pilot were *student*, *singer*, *server*, *accountant,* and *friend*.

that a control capturing this diversity was justifiable (e.g., LGBTQ2S+ identity, personal pronoun). This approach, which resulted in a forced choice decision-task, also shortened response times for participants.

(12) What is your nationality?
- Canadian
- American

(13) Do you identify as LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, and others – two-spirit, intersex, etc.)?
- I identify as an LGBTQ+ person
- I do not identify as an LGBTQ+ person, but have friends or family that do
- I do not identify as an LGBTQ+ person

(14) When someone else is talking about you, what pronouns do you prefer them to use to refer to you? Select any and all that apply. Please fill in the "other" option if needed.
- He/his/him
- She/her/hers
- They/them/theirs
- Other: _____

In addition to demographic questions, participants were asked if they were aware of any strategies they used when they responded to the questionnaire (15); the response format was necessarily open-ended. This question was used to assess whether or not participants had any awareness that the survey was prompting them to use pronouns based upon gender stereotypes.

(15) When you were answering the survey questions, were you aware of any strategies that you used as you responded to the prompts?

Following LaScotte (2016), participants were also asked which pronoun they would use to refer to an unknown referent, with *student* given as an example; see (16). This question enabled assessment of self-perception (what participants think they would use) versus use (which strategy participants

actually used). It also enabled me to tap into the ideologies driving conscious pronominal choice regarding a gender-neutral referent.

(16) When talking about a single social category that has no clear gender category (e.g., "student"), which pronoun do you think you are most likely to use? (pick the answer closest to what you think you would say)
- He/his/him
- She/her/hers
- They/them/theirs
- Why? (please elaborate)

In the third and final section of the survey, I asked participants to rate six occupations on a sliding scale, assessing which gender they thought was more likely to perform that role. The occupations chosen were the same ones that appeared in the first part of the survey (*mechanic*, *secretary*, *student*) with three additional ones: *accountant*, *nurse*, *firefighter*. The scale was binary, with male at one end and female at the other; the rest of the scale was unmarked, allowing for interpretive space and mitigation of fixed gender roles.[10] This exercise was included with the assumption that these categories are stereotyped (masculine, feminine, gender-neutral); it allowed me to assess covert pronominal choices in the questionnaire alongside overt gendered ideology on the scales.

This combination of methods and information from the response questionnaire, the demographic survey, and the occupational rating scales was designed to enable me to investigate (i) the extent to which singular *they* is used; (ii) which pronouns compete with it for each occupation; and (iii) the social characteristics of participants who use singular *they*. It also made it

[10] The categories should have been labelled "man" and "woman" because this was about tapping into perceived gender. I also note that the wording of the question assumed binary gender. If I were to conduct the study again, I would use "man" and "woman" and reframe the question. I note that even though participants had the opportunity to ask questions about the survey or provide feedback to me via email after having completed the survey, no one raised the labels or framing used in this exercise, which, notably, was the last part of the survey they completed.

possible to compare practice (via the response questionnaire) with belief (via the occupational rating scale), to get a more nuanced insight into mechanisms driving pronominal choices. In the following subsection I discuss the demographic makeup of the study sample, with particular focus on participant age and the social factors of gender, LGBTQ2S+ identity, and personal pronouns.

3.1.2 Participant Demographics

A total of 620 people completed the survey who were eligible participants.[11] At the time of participation, these individuals lived in Canada or the US, were 13 years of age or older, and spoke English as a first language. As noted in §3.1.1, the demographic survey collected information pertaining to a vast array of social factors, though only a subset is explored here.[12] There are several reasons for this. For example, some social groups are over-represented (e.g., ethnicity)[13] while others are highly variegated and are challenging to distill into meaningful subsets (e.g., language background). As such, I leave a more fulsome exploration of these factors to future work and concentrate here on those that are most germane to discussions regarding pronouns (i.e., age, gender, LGBTQ2S+ identity, and personal pronouns). In other words, I focus here on those that allow me to probe the intersection between pronominal choice and personal circumstance.

[11] The initial goal was 400 to 600 participants. There were originally 639 participants. Of these, only 620 provided their nationality (Canadian or American); among these participants, all but 13 answered what state/province they live in primarily.

[12] Information also collected: ethnicity, nationality, geographic context (i.e., urban vs. rural), LGBTQ2S+ networks, participation in social activism, education, occupation, and fluency in languages other than English.

[13] Of the 620 participants whose data was retained for analysis, the vast majority are White (80.6%). The next largest groups are mixed (i.e., more than one ethnic group; 5.6%), Chinese (2.6%), Black (2.2%), and Hispanic/Latinx (1.9%). A handful of ethnicities accounted for the remainder (e.g., South Asian, Jewish, Taiwanese, Indigenous). Because the sample heavily skews White, I do not focus on ethnicity here; the mixed group is internally heterogeneous and all other groups are too small to allow for meaningful statistical testing using either distributional or inferential methods.

Gustafsson Sendén et al. (2015:7) observed that those most likely to use a gender-neutral pronoun in their data were individuals who identified as women ("feminine gender"), were younger (age range not provided), had a left-wing political orientation, and/or were interested in gender issues. Taking these findings into account alongside the social factors considered here, I hypothesize that people who are younger, are a gender other than masculine, and/or identify as LGBTQ2S+ are more likely to use gender-neutral pronouns in their responses—specifically *they*. I further motivate these expectations in the discussion that follows.

Participants lived across Canada and the US; Figure 1 shows their geographic distribution. Although the regional coverage is quite extensive, the densest participant populations were from British Columbia and Alberta, reflecting, I believe, my own social networks, which are heavily located in these two provinces. My professional networks are more diffuse, which may account for some of the geographic spread, alongside the use of social media to recruit participants. The result is wide geographic coverage in the target regions.

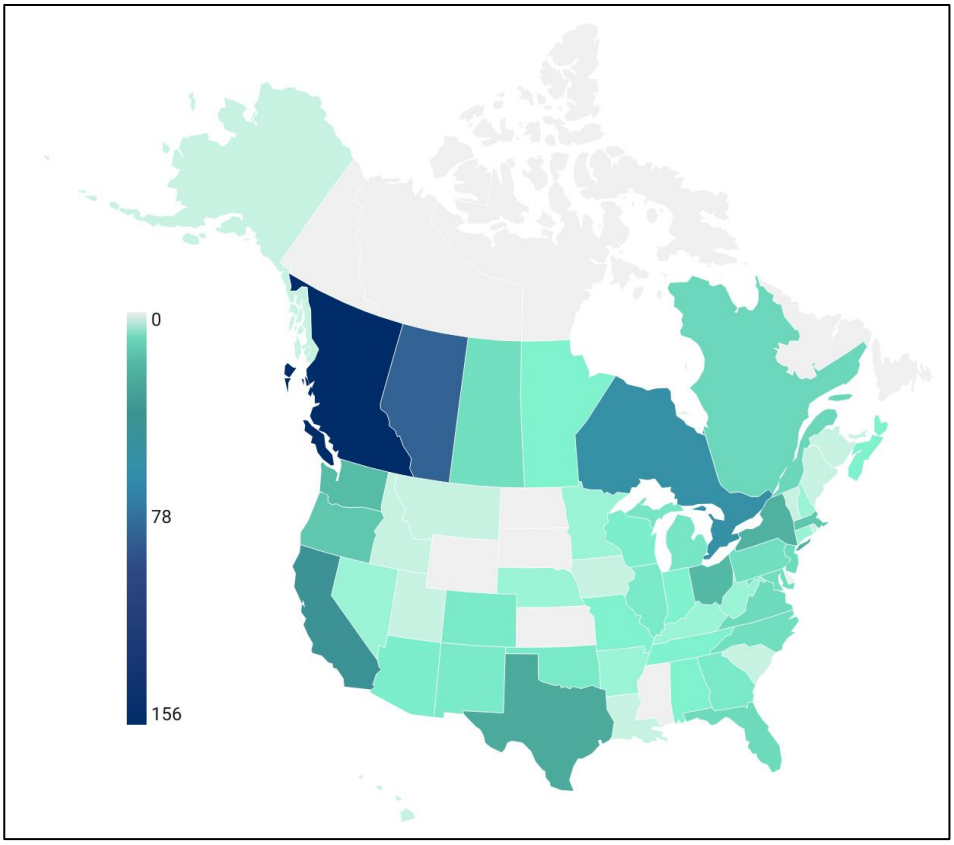

Figure 1. Distribution of participants across Canada and the US, raw Ns

By opening the survey to participants aged 13 years and up, I was able to sample pronominal use among a broad swath of ages, as outlined in Table 1.[14] This enables a synchronic, apparent-time view of the data. Participant years of birth range from 1939 to 2005 (i.e., at the time of the survey, they were between the ages of 13 and 79 years), with the average year of birth being 1986 (32 years of age). Based on the sample-internal distribution of participant years of birth and the cross-section of this predictor with gender, participants were binned into four different groups: 1939-1964, 1965-1984, 1985-1994, and 1995-2005. Within the oldest cohort, born 1939-1964, the

[14] A minority of participants did not provide their year of birth and/or gender (n=24); these speakers are retained in the analysis but are set aside for any discussions of the effects of age and gender.

earliest 15 years are not well represented: 1939-1954, n=15 versus 1955-1964, n=46. This should be considered when assessing the results.

Table 1. Participant distribution (n) by year of birth and gender

Gender	1939-64	1965-84	1985-94	1995-05	no age response
men	20	39	62	57	2
women	40	75	147	98	9
non-binary	-	8	31	19	1
N (611)	60	122	240	174	12

Another consideration to bear in mind is that non-binary participants are not represented by the full age span. The oldest non-binary participant in the sample was born in 1971 and this age cohort (1965-1984) is not well represented overall (n=8). Moreover, just a handful of non-binary participants were born after 1999 (n=4). Nonetheless, the non-binary group accounts for a non-trivial proportion of participants—nearly 10% of the sample overall. The importance of this cannot be overstated, given the binary focus of the majority of sociolinguistic research in general to date (but see, e.g., Baron 2020; Conrod 2019; Hekanaho 2020; Konnelly & Cowper 2020; Parker 2017; Zimman 2017b).

The apparent-time hypothesis assumes that vernacular practice is relatively stable after adolescence (see Cukor-Avila & Bailey 2013:239-254). Although lexical innovations (i.e., forms that do not require grammatical adjustments) can be acquired at any age, older generations more or less "preserve" how they speak throughout their entire adult lives. Using this theoretical viewpoint, adult performance is like a window into the past, providing a temporal analogue of language change. In general, I hypothesize that younger speakers are more likely to use *they* than older speakers. Even though metalinguistic discussion of singular *they* is not a recent phenomenon (as reviewed in §2.3, and see for e.g., Baron 1986), widespread adoption of *they* for gender-neutral

purposes is. Thus, apparent-time predicts an association with younger speakers, a correlation already reported by Gustafsson Sendén et. al (2015) for Swedish gender-neutral *hen*.

Gender is a well-established correlate of linguistic practice: women are typically the drivers of language change, both from below (i.e., system-internal) and from above (i.e., community-external) (e.g., Labov 2001). As such, it is standard practice to consider its effect(s) within a dataset, especially when there are good reasons to expect that social constructs are meaningfully implicated in the use of specific linguistic features. Sociolinguistic studies often categorize gender within a binary classification system: men and women, based on assumed sex. This is one of the traditional foundations of this academic discipline, but it is problematic. Sex and gender are sometimes conflated for research purposes, yet both are complex, social constructs, which are culturally contextual and not synonymous (see, for e.g., Ackerman 2019; Butler 1999; Eckert 1989; Fausto-Sterling 2000, 2019; Motschenbacher 2010:13; Zimman 2014).[15] Research within the sex and gender binary excludes those who identify otherwise—as non-binary, genderqueer, agender, and so on—while also erasing intersex individuals. I hypothesize that gender has a direct impact on pronominal choice, such that non-binary participants will be more likely than men and women to use *they* across all three occupations.

[15] Sex generally relates to biological factors, yet medical personnel have also been unable to strictly define sex categories; determination depends on various primary and secondary sexual characteristics (e.g., chromosomal (karyotype: XX, XY, etc.), hormones, internal and external anatomy (phenotype)) which typically, but not categorically, align individuals within the assumption of a binary as either male or female (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 2019). Gender typically embodies a person's self-identification, which may or may not align with stereotypical roles and/or expressions within their culture that derive their meaning from associations with sex (Eckert 1989; Butler 1999). Some determinations of sex within the binary are prevalent throughout society, such as "gender reveal parties", doctors deciding the "sex" of an unborn child based on either their phenotype and/or other sexual characteristics, and images of what men and women should look like via media advertisements, among various other properties (e.g., hair length, vocal pitch range, clothing style) (see Ackerman 2019 for a detailed review of the cognition of gender and how this impacts languages).

Given the variegated nature of gender, the survey question about gender in the demographic section was fill-in-the-black (i.e., free response), allowing participants to express their identity without resorting to pre-determined categories. As expected, responses were quite diverse, necessitating some post-hoc categorization in order to allow for a meaningful analysis. I made the decision to categorize gender based on alignment to one of three categories: non-binary, man, woman. Although this ternary classification system is imposed on the data, the categories were contextualized within the range of responses in the sample population, with the aim of respecting diversity of gender expression. For example, the category *woman* includes not only participants who self-selected the label *woman* but also those who identified themselves as *fem*, *trans woman*, and *femaleish*, among others. The category *man* includes identities such as *m*, *male*, *man* (cis and trans), and *transmasculine*. And the non-binary group includes gender identities *genderqueer*, *non-binary*, *X*, *agender*, and so on. Only four participants did not complete the question about gender; they are retained in the overall analysis but excluded from considerations of the effects of gender. As Table 1 shows, the majority of participants were categorized as women; men account for just under one-third of the sample; and non-binary are the least well represented in the sample population but are better represented here than in the general population.[16]

Although gender is a standard consideration in sociolinguistic analyses, other aspects of self that relate to gender are rarely considered. One aspect that intersects with gender is queerness: members of the LGBTQ2S+ community are more likely to have explored their sexuality, gender identity, gender expression, and/or societal norms for gender stereotypes than are non-members.

[16] In California, 5% of LGBTQ2S+ respondents chose genderqueer and 5% chose transgender (transgender, transman, or transwoman) as best describing themselves from the available options (Mikalson, Pardo, & Green 2012:149). An estimated 0.6% of the United States population are transgender (including "gender non-conforming") (Flores et al. 2016). Thus, at approximately 10%, non-binary participants are better represented in my sample population than they seem to be in the general population.

This is because the community comprises a range of gender and non-heteronormative identities (e.g., Merrill, Steif, & Savin-Williams 2016). The defining characteristic that sets the LGBTQ2S+ community apart is that no one's identity is simultaneously heterosexual and cisgender. I therefore hypothesize that LGBTQ2S+ participants will be more likely to use gender-neutral pronouns for others because of this exploration and because of their awareness of the complexities of gender expression. Table 2 displays the distribution of participants according to their experience with LGBTQ2S+ issues and individuals. LGBTQ2S+ participants account for nearly half of those who completed the survey, while individuals who I considered queer-adjacent (i.e., participants who are not LGBTQ2S+, but have family/friends who are) comprise nearly a third of participants.[17] The sample is thus skewed toward individuals who are either themselves LGBTQ2S+ or have friends and/or family who are.

Table 2. Distribution of participants by LGBTQ2S+ identity

identity	**N**	**%**
Non-LGBTQ2S+	131	21.1%
Queer-adjacent	193	31.1%
LGBTQ2S+	289	46.6%
no response	7	1.1%
Total participants	620	

Individuals of all genders make choices about their own personal pronouns. As seen in (10), the demographic question about personal pronouns allowed for three pre-determined choices and/or

[17] In 2014, the Canadian Community Health Survey reported that 3 percent of Canadians aged 18-59 are homosexual or bisexual (https://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/dai/smr08/2015/smr08_203_2015#a3). This excluded those who may qualify their sexual/queer orientation with different terminology, especially in regard to their own gender (e.g., non-binary people). GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) estimates that 12 percent of the population within the US identify as LGBTQ2S+ (Accelerating Acceptance 2017:3). GLAAD also reports that younger people are more likely to identify as LGBTQ2S+ than are older generations (i.e., those aged 18-34 compared to those aged 52 and older). These statistics highlight that existing data about the population of LGBTQ2S+ people is varied but they do suggest that the ratio of LGBTQ2S+ people to non-LGBTQ2S+ people in my sample is higher than what might be expected in the general population.

an option where participants could fill-in their answer. On the basis of the sample-internal responses to this question, the data were re-categorized as follows: *he* (*he/him/his*), *she* (*she/her/hers*), combination of gendered and gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., *she* and *they*; *he* and *they*), and gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., *they/them/theirs*, *ze/zir/zirs*, *e(y)/em/eirs*).[18] A very small minority of participants did not respond to this question (n=6); there were also a number of responses that I excluded for this question. This exclusion set consists of answers that could not be categorized straightforwardly within the quaternary system adopted here (e.g., *all of the above*, *he* and *she*, *context dependent*, *by name or title*, *don't care/no preference*). Because this group was both small (n=30) and linguistically diverse (comprising both pronominal and non-pronominal options), I have opted to set these responses aside; no meaningful patterns could be discerned at this level of granularity. They remain, however, empirically informative in that they highlight the complexity of self-reference.

The distribution of participants according to the quaternary classificatory system is presented in Table 3. Consistent with the results for gender, where women comprise the largest category, the largest self-identified personal pronoun category is *she*, yet the two categories do not overlap in full. It is also the case that not all men use only masculine pronouns. That is, gender identity and personal pronoun are (at least partially) orthogonal categories. For that reason, and because personal pronouns are more varied than gender, I consider the two factors separately in the analyses that follow.

[18] The majority of participants who use a combination of gendered and gender-neutral pronouns are LGBTQ2S+, but there are some who use both and are non-LGBTQ2S+ or queer-adjacent (i.e., some cisgender heterosexual participants also use *they*). In other words, personal pronouns span across gender and LGBTQ2S+ identities, resulting in overlapping but not collinear categories.

Table 3. Distribution of participants by personal pronouns

Personal pronoun	N	%
he-users (*he/him/his*)	155	25.0%
she-users (*she/her/hers*)	321	51.8%
gendered and gender-neutral-users (e.g., *she* and *they*)	78	12.5%
only gender-neutral-users (e.g., *they/them/theirs*, *ze/zir/zirs*, *e(y)/em/eirs*)	33	5.3%
excluded or no response	33	5.3%
Total participants	620	

I expect that participants who self-identify with at least one gender-neutral pronoun to use singular *they* more frequently in their responses compared to participants who self-identify with gendered pronouns only. I hypothesize this because I assume that participants whose pronouns are gender-neutral are more cognizant of the harms involved in misgendering and/or aware of the politics surrounding gender-neutral pronouns.

The combination of broad sampling and online, digital methods has resulted in a number of characteristics that set my participant population apart from that of previous studies (e.g., LaScotte 2016, Martyna 1978, Meyers 1990). First, there are more participants in my study—compare my 620 to the 392 of Meyers (1990), the next largest number of participants. Second, the current sample represents a slightly wider range of ages—compare 13 to 79 (my sample, with a mean of 32) to 22 to 64 (Meyers 1990, with a mean of 34). Third, rather than capturing a single demographic, students, the participants here span various occupations (e.g., students, interior designers, pastry chefs, social workers) and educational levels (e.g., high school diplomas, vocational/technical diplomas, undergraduate degrees, graduate and advanced graduate degrees). Fourth, the current study explicitly and transparently expands the sample beyond binary gender. This diversity in the sample population allows me (i) to probe the effects of multiple factors affecting pronoun use across both apparent-time and social structure and (ii) to explore in greater

detail who uses gender-neutral singular *they*, who it is used for (i.e., which referents: *mechanic*, *secretary*, and *student*), and under what circumstances. In other words, who uses *they*, and who is *they*? The next section outlines how third-person pronouns were extracted and coded for analysis.

3.2 Data analysis

The full set of responses from the response questionnaire, the demographic questionnaire, and the occupational rating scales was exported from the online server to Microsoft Excel. In addition to the definite third-person pronouns that the response questionnaire was designed to elicit, exemplified in (17), participants made use of a variety of indefinite and/or non-pronominal referential strategies. These strategies, which were excluded from analysis, included avoidance (i.e., answers that did not contain either subject nouns or pronouns), as in (18), noun repetition (19), indefinite *one* (20), second-person generic *you* (21), and shifting the focus through use of first person singular *I* (22). Notably, these strategies were not applied equally across the target occupational referents. Indefinite *one* occurred uniquely with *student*, while the shifted focus responses were specific to *mechanic* and *secretary*.

(17) a) … **he** sees the engine (w/b.1980)
b) … **she** marks it in the calendar (nb/b.1979)
c) … **they** often find trouble (w/b.1963)

(18) a) **Ø** Come to class on time, be engaged and respect deadlines. (w/b.1973)
b) When a mechanic looks under the hood, **Ø** “sorry ma’am we couldn’t find anything, that’ll be $200.” (nb/b.1992)

(19) a) … A decent **mechanic** will find only the problem, a crook finds dollar signs. (m/b.1985)
b) If **students** don’t do this they should have it reflected in teacher comments or grades. (nb/b.2000)

(20) trying to the best of **one's** ability... if not, cheating **one self**. (m/b.1960)

(21) **You've** got to be present, physically and intellectually… (w/b.1962)

(22) … **I** hope the oil is topped up. (w/b.1972)

Other responses were excluded from the analysis because they did not provide an answer to the question. These included meta-commentary (23a), including explicit refusal to respond (23b), as well as non-lexicalized content (23c).

(23) a) I don't know! I'm gay, I don't drive (w/b.1992)
b) Blah blah blah... I'm skipping this one. I am not an ideal student. (w/b.1979)
c) $$$$ (w/b.1986)

Following Meyers (1990) and LaScotte (2016), I focus the analysis and discussion on definite third-person pronouns: *he, she, they*, and conjunctive pronouns, which are based strictly on the gendered forms, both in formal grammars and in the data set (*he or she, she or he, he/she, s/he*). I also include subject, object, and reflexive pronouns, and possessive determiners (e.g., *he, she, they*; *him, her, them*; *himself, herself, themself/themselves*; and *his, hers, theirs*). I present two quantitative analyses of these forms: consistency and frequency.

The consistency analysis replicates Meyers (1990) and LaScotte (2016), enabling direct comparison with these studies. Meyers, the first to assess consistency, was curious about "to what extent [adult student writers] exercise control over their chosen approach," which she operationalized as each participant's ability to sustain pronominal choice throughout a passage (1990:229-230). LaScotte (2016) then used this same approach, in which consistent responses are those which minimally contain two identical third-person pronouns and no other third-person forms, as shown in (24). Responses such as (25), where multiple non-identical third-person forms appear, are considered inconsistent. Thus, for consistency, it is not the number of pronominal

forms that appear within responses that is quantified; rather, it is (non)repetition that is quantified, either as consistent or as inconsistent. Responses containing just a single third-person pronoun (as in (26)) were neither consistent nor inconsistent, and thus do not figure in this part of the analysis. This approach to the data resulted in a total of 422 sets of consistent responses.[19]

(24) An ideal student is committed to achieving the best of **their** abilities by hard work and effort. By not doing so **their** chances of success in **their** world is significantly deminished [sic]. (w/b.1948)

(25) An ideal student is one who understands the process of learning and how learning is in and of itself a valuable end. If **(s)he** doesn't understand this, that person will forever be looking for shortcuts to the process and shorting **him/herself** of important knowledge that could prove very useful in **their** future (if not absolutely necessary to be able to perform **their** future job requirements successfully). (m/b.1955)

(26) a) … **they** send out a reminder to all attendees. (w/b.1983)
b) An ideal student is attentive and absorbs the subject matter quickly and efficiently. An ideal student needs to study hard but also think critically about the subject matter and connect it to other subjects. If a student doesn't do this, **they** might excel in the subject, but would struggle with out-of-the-box thinking. (m/b.1996)

The frequency analysis operationalizes variationist methods, enabling consideration of the individual variants and their patterning across social (individual-level) and linguistic (occupational targets) contexts. Thus, frequency was obtained by quantifying every instance of a singular third-person pronoun used in the response questionnaires (with one exception, to be discussed shortly). For example, the response in (27) includes two tokens: one of conjunctive pronouns (*he or she*) and one of *they*. In the response in (28), a total of five tokens occurs: one of conjunctive pronouns (*he or she*) and four of *they* (*their*).

[19] Some participants may have had consistent responses for multiple occupations, hence "sets" of responses because there was a potential for 1,860 (620 participants multiplied by 3 occupations).

(27) I hope **he or she** find what **they're** looking for. (w/b.1956)

(28) An ideal student actually understands what's going on […]. That is, **he or she** should be able to perform well on tests. […] If the student doesn't do **their** homework or perform well on tests, **their** grades will reflect it. If a student doesn't participate or help others, **their** relationships with teachers and fellow students will reflect it. If a student isn't intellectually curious, **their** whole life will reflect it. (w/b.1994)

The principle of accountability (Labov 1972:72) dictates that all the data be collected and considered in order to best understand the nature of variation within a grammatical system. This principle was observed in full for *secretary* and *mechanic*, resulting in 483 and 524 tokens respectively. The token numbers for *student*, however, greatly outnumber those for *mechanic* and *secretary*, which likely derives from the different question formats used for these occupations. Responses for *student* contained an average of 42.2 words, roughly six times longer than those for the other two occupations: *secretary*: 7.6; *mechanic*: 7.3. Moreover, the number of third-person pronominal tokens used for *student* ranged widely across participants, from 1 to 13. To avoid any potential skewing effects both in the overall results and at the level of the individual for *student* with respect to the frequency analysis, the average number of tokens per participant was calculated: 2.97. The standard of deviation from this average was 2.11. Adding these figures together gives a total of 5.08, suggesting that setting the upper limit at 5 tokens per participant would reflect the data well while also avoiding any perturbations caused by outliers. I therefore coded only the first 5 tokens for inclusion in the frequency analysis (all relevant tokens were however retained and included in the consistency analysis).[20] In the end, this method resulted in a total of 1138 tokens

[20] The first five were selected instead of a randomized set of five because, generally, participants would shift from gendered pronouns to singular *they*.

from *student*, in addition to the 483 tokens for *secretary* and the 524 tokens for *mechanic* (total N = 2145).

3.3 Summary

The survey garnered a relatively large response rate, with 620 eligible surveys from across Canada and the US. This provided a large and varied participant pool. A total of 422 third-person pronouns were coded for the consistency analysis, and 2145 tokens were coded for the frequency analysis. This latter frequency model will be assessed distributionally and inferentially against the independent variables of participant age (as a reflection of year of birth), gender, LGBTQ2S+ identity, and personal pronouns. The next chapter reports the results. Taking previous findings into account, I hypothesize that people who are younger, are a gender other than masculine, identify as LGBTQ2S+, and/or use gender-neutral personal pronouns, are more likely to use gender-neutral pronouns in their responses, specifically *they*.

Chapter 4: Results

To answer the research questions, I pursue two main lines of inquiry regarding third-person pronoun use: consistency (§4.1.1) and frequency (§4.1.2). I then consider the frequency results for each of the three occupations: *student* (§4.2), *mechanic* (§4.3), and *secretary* (§4.4). Responses are expected to vary depending on the occupation, either as a gendered pronoun (i.e., *he* or *she*) or a gender-neutral one (i.e., *they*) because each is intended to capture a stereotypical gender role (i.e., neutral, masculine, and feminine). The amount of data differs: *student* resulted in over six times the amount of data than *mechanic*, and nearly four times as much as *secretary*. This is most likely due to the format of the question participants were asked to respond to. The fill-in-the-blank format (*mechanic*, *secretary*) garnered shorter responses, resulting in fewer opportunities for pronominal reference. Most participants responded with only one pronoun, which, as outlined below, excluded these answers from the consistency analysis. Finally, §4.5 summarizes the findings from this chapter.

4.1 Overall results

There are at least two different ways to quantify the results from my dataset. The first is response-internal consistency, which involves analyzing how subsequent pronominal choices are impacted after a participant initially uses a third-person pronoun. This approach to the data replicates existing quantitative analyses in the literature: LaScotte (2016) and Meyers (1990). The second is distributional frequency, which is how individual third-person pronouns are distributed across and within the sample. I consider each in turn.

4.1.1 Consistency

As discussed in §3.1.1, the question for *student* was open-ended, resulting in longer responses from participants. As a result, slightly over two-thirds of the responses for consistency are from this single occupation. It is worth noting, however, that the majority of participants who responded with more than one pronoun for an individual occupation were consistent in their use. Only 18 out of 620 participants responded using multiple pronouns inconsistently. From this I infer that people are more likely to retain pronominal usage (i.e., consistency) and/or these participants were less attentive to their pronominal choices. Setting those participants aside, there were 422 sets of consistent responses from participants across the occupations.

Beginning with the results for *student*, in Table 4, the vast majority of participants used singular *they* consistently instead of other pronominal choices, which appeared infrequently. Indeed, others are exceedingly rare: conjunctive pronouns (represented as *he/she*), *she, he,* and *one* together account for just 5% of the consistent responses when quantified in this way. These results span participants with an age range of 13 to 79 years. When viewed in the aggregate, as in Table 4, the results suggest that *they* is uniformly selected consistently at near categorical rates across the sample. This is not, however, the case. When consistency of pronoun is cross-tabulated with age, only the cohorts born after 1984 maintain rates of *they* above 95%, though at no point does consistent use of *they* drop below 81% overall (years of birth: 1939-1964, n=26), and indeed, for all other groups, the rate ranges from 91% (years of birth 1965-1984, n=58) to 100% (years of birth 1995-2005; n=84). In other words, when the referent is generic and gender-neutral, participants from across age cohorts are very likely to choose singular *they* when using the same pronoun more than once, and this is particularly the case for participants under the age of 35.

Table 4. Consistency responses of third-person pronouns within STUDENT

Pronoun	**N**	**%**
they	284	95.0%
he/she	7	2.3%
she	4	1.3%
he	2	0.7%
one	2	0.7%
Total	299	

In Meyers' (1990) analysis of consistency for *the educated person*, singular *they* competed robustly with *he* (34% *he* versus 32% *they*). This is clearly not the case here (i.e., there are no third-person pronouns that compete with singular *they* for *student*). This marked distinction between the two sets of results is strongly suggestive that *he* has fallen out of preference in gender-neutral contexts (or, at least, for *student*), and that *they* has become the norm for generic third-person pronominal reference. A direct comparison of the same age cohorts from Meyers (1990) and my own data set—22-64 years at time of participation—illustrates this quite dramatically: Meyers, 32% consistent *they* (total N = 138); here, 94% consistent *they* (total N = 241).

Meyers (1990) did not explore gender-stereotypical contexts, but my results for *mechanic* and *secretary* are in Table 5 and Table 6. Examples (29) to (32) demonstrate how participants constructed their responses. Singular *they* is again the pronoun used most often in consistent responses, but, unlike *student*, consistent responses of *they* does not reach rates of near categoricity. There is markedly more competition from other pronominal choices (*he* and *she*, respectively).

Table 5. Consistency responses of third-person pronouns within MECHANIC

Pronoun	N	%
they	27	57.4%
he	18	38.3%
she	1	2.1%
he/she	1	2.1%
one	0	-
Total	47	

(29) "When a mechanic checks under the hood, **they** better know what **they** are doing." (w/b.1960)

(30) "When a mechanic checks under the hood, I check **him** out in **his** overalls, think of Blanche from the Golden Girls and tune out to whatever **he** is telling me, because I don't understand." (m/b.1990)

Table 6. Consistency responses of third-person pronouns within SECRETARY

Pronoun	N	%
they	47	61.8%
she	27	35.5%
he	2	2.6%
he/she	0	-
one	0	-
Total	76	

(31) "When a secretary books a meeting, **they** are doing **their** job." (nb/b.1993)

(32) "When a secretary books a meeting, **she's** helping **her** boss." (m/b.1960)

Such findings suggest that while *student* is perceived as gender-neutral, *mechanic* and *secretary* retain shades of gendered stereotyping. At the same time, it is notable that fewer pronominal choices are attested for these forms: *one* is not used consistently and, for *secretary*, conjunctive

pronouns are never consistently selected either. Thus, the range of pronominal choices is more narrow, while competition between *they* and a single gendered form is robust.

In summary, the consistency results by occupation provide the following view: *singular they* is nearly categorical for *student*, and while it is the most consistently used across participants for *mechanic* and *secretary*, it does so in strong competition with gendered pronouns.

There are also insights to be gained from lack of consistency within single responses from participants, however. Notably, in such cases, inconsistent use of pronouns typically proceeded from an initial gendered form to a gender-neutral one, as in (33) and (34), with just a few exceptions. Although only a small number of participants provided responses with more than one pronoun in which their choices were inconsistent (n=18; 2 for *secretary*, 3 for *mechanic*, 13 for *student*), it remains striking how structurally parallel the responses are: *they* is used as the subsequent choice in 13 out of 15 inconsistent responses in which it appears. In others words, the pattern of shift is largely unidirectional, from gendered pronouns to neutral ones, suggesting perhaps a process of online 'self-correction'.

(33) "When a mechanic checks under the hood, I hope **he or she** find what **they're** looking for." (w/b.1956)

(34) "an ideal student is one who understands the process of learning and how learning is in and of itself a valuable end. If **(s)he** doesn't understand this, that person will forever be looking for shortcuts to the process and shorting **him/herself** of important knowledge that could prove very useful in **their** future (if not absolutely necessary to be able to perform **their** future job requirements successfully)." (m/b.1955)

To obtain a richer description of pronominal choices, we can analyze the distributions of third-person pronoun responses holistically, as they are used, rather than through the narrow lens

of consistency. As discussed in §3.2, variationist methodology enables this view. I turn to that next.

4.1.2 Frequency within the aggregate data

The approach by consistency constrains the data to a specific subset of the data. A frequency-based analysis allows for all of the pronominal data to be considered, creating the possibility of partitioning the data according to a range of demographic predictors. In other words, the data can be explored with a depth of greater scope.

The consistency analysis revealed that, among participants who responded with two or more pronouns within an occupation, *they* was the most likely choice. That analysis also revealed that inconsistency was infrequent. It follows then that across all three occupations, the most frequent third-person pronoun in the dataset as a whole is singular *they*; as shown in Table 7, it accounts for a full three-quarters of the data. All other pronouns are markedly less frequent. The conjunctive pronouns, endorsed for writing (Paterson 2014) and appearing relatively robustly in previous studies (LaScotte 2016; Martyna 1978; Meyers 1990), are rare in these materials: *he/she* variants account for less than 4% of third-person pronouns overall. *One*, accounting for less than 0.5% of the dataset, is set aside for remainder of the analysis due to its low frequency.

Table 7. Overall frequency of third-person pronouns from all occupations

Pronoun	**N**	**%**
they	1615	74.9%
he	262	12.2%
she	190	8.8%
he/she	78	3.6%
one	10	<0.5%
Total	2155	

This view of the data suggests that the gendered pronouns *he* and *she* are not in competition with singular *they* but instead with each other, as low frequency variables: *he* 12% versus *she* 9%. However, the consistency analysis inferred that the gendered pronouns are in competition with singular *they* for *mechanic* and *secretary*. Thus, it would be illuminating to explore pronominal patterns of variation relative to each occupation, rather than in the aggregate. I start with *student*, then follow with *mechanic* and *secretary*.

4.2 Student

The distributional results for *student* are shown in Table 8. Singular *they* is nearly categorical (93.4%). This rate is higher than reported by LaScotte (2016), where *they* accounted for the majority of responses but at a substantially lower overall frequency than seen here (76%; total n=98).[21] All other third-person pronouns are exceptionally rare (*he/she*: 3.9%; *she*: 1.5%; *he*: 1.2%) in my data, whereas in LaScotte (2016) *he/she* and *he* were viable competitors with *they*. In short, participants in this study overwhelmingly choose a gender-neutral pronoun for *student* (*they*, or marginally *he/she*).

Table 8. Frequency of third-person pronouns for STUDENT

	Current data		**LaScotte (2016)**	
Pronoun	**N**	**(%)**	**N**	**(%)**
they	1063	93.4%	75	76%
he/she	44	3.9%	12	12%
she	17	1.5%	0	0%
he	14	1.2%	11	12%
Total	1138		98	

[21] I recalculated LaScotte's results because they included *one/someone* and *you* into the pronominal responses (2016:67).

The high rate of *they* raises the question of whether social predictors contribute to pronominal choice at all, and if so in which ways. Beginning with gender, the results are shown in Table 9. As outlined in §3.1.2, gender was categorized into three groups: men, women, and non-binary. All groups drastically favour singular *they* more so than any other pronoun. A hierarchy, however, exists: men (90.7%), followed by women (93.9%), then by non-binary who categorically used *they* in reference to *student*. At low frequencies (i.e., less than 10% cumulatively), men and women use *he/she*, *he*, and *she*. The results between men and women were not significant regarding *they* versus all other pronominal choices (X^2 (1, N = 938) = 2.24, p = .13 (*they*)); because of the null values, statistical testing was not possible for non-binary participants.

Table 9. Frequency of third-person pronouns for STUDENT distributed by gender

Pronoun	**men**	**women**	**non-binary**
they	90.7%	93.9%	100.0%
he/she	5.9%	3.7%	-
she	1.4%	1.8%	-
he	2.1%	1.1%	-
N (1135)	289	725	121

Table 10 reports the frequency results by each age group; *they* is the most frequently used pronoun, and it rises steadily across apparent time. In short, there is evidence that suggests generational change. Within the oldest age cohort (born 1939-1964), the competing forms (*he/she*, *she*, and *he*) account for nearly a quarter of the data. These pronouns then decrease regularly over apparent time, to the point of obsolescence within the youngest cohort (born 1995-2005). For this group, *they* is effectively categorical, at nearly 99% of the data.

Table 10. Frequency of third-person pronouns for STUDENT distributed by year of birth

Pronoun	**1939-64**	**1965-84**	**1985-94**	**1995-05**
they	77.6%	87.7%	94.8%	98.8%
he/she	10.2%	6.4%	3.9%	0.6%
she	7.1%	2.1%	1.0%	0.3%
he	5.1%	3.7%	0.2%	0.3%
N (1110)	98	187	484	341

Notably, other than *they*, the next most frequent pronoun across all age cohorts is *he/she*, which can be perceived as gender-neutral (albeit non-inclusive). For additional context about why some participants use *he/she*, *he*, or *she*, I asked participants in the demographic section of the survey (outlined in §3.1.1) which pronoun they thought they were most likely to use for a single social category that has no clear gender category (e.g., "student"). Responses could be *he, she, he or she,* or *they*, with an option to explain their answer. The general consensus is one or more of these four reasons: self-reference (35-36), what was taught in school (37), prescriptive grammarian rules (38-39), and/or recognizing gender only as a binary (i.e., *he or she*) (39-40).[22] These qualitative results add depth to the quantitative data, providing some reasons as to why there were some variable pronominal choices, albeit variation that is fairly exceptional in its distribution as these explanations are primarily from older participants – the same age cohorts who had variation.

(35) ***she***: "Because I am one." (w/b.1940)

(36) ***he***: "Because I am a male and spent a very long time as a student; my mental image of a student is a mental image of myself." (m/b.1978)

[22] This is not necessarily reflective of what participants actually did. Some participants have a perception of what they would and do use (e.g., *he or she*), but this did not align with what they actually used when responding to *the ideal student* question earlier in the survey (e.g., *they*). The main point remains: this provides some reasoning for why participants may make pronominal choices other than singular *they*.

(37) ***he***: “I was taught in school in the 1960s that **he** was all of us, both male and female and I understood it was not a single, specific individual but a pronoun, not necessarily a **he**.” (w/b.1959)

(38) ***he***: “I think I was raised believing that if you don’t know a person’s gender then use **he**. I think **he/she** is wordy. **They** is probably the more correct pronoun to use, but I have a hard time overcoming decades of prior “rules”.” (w/b.1962)

(39) ***he/she***: “This is a tough one. "**He or she**" is technically correct, but is awkwardly long. "**They**" avoids having to choose a gender and is short, but only works in the plural. Ideally, we would like to pluralize the sentence to make "**they**" available and correct, but it is not always possible. I confess to sometimes just choosing "**he**" or "**she**" out in order to avoid the awkward "**he or she**" expression. This does not necessarily mean that I am unaware that the subject could be either male or female.” (m/b.1968)

(40) ***he/she***: “I use both as say student cane [sic] be both genders.” (w/b.1947)

Moving on to the intersection of gender and age, Figure 2 displays the results for singular *they*. For all genders and age cohorts, *they* prevails. *They* steadily rises among men and women across apparent time, with men lagging after the oldest cohort (born 1936-1964), and becomes categorical for all of the youngest cohorts (born 1995-2005). Moreover, the shift is largely *they* and *he/she* to *they*. This trend is typical, as it is usually women who lead language change (Labov 2001). Yet, *they* is categorical for all non-binary age cohorts. In other words, this captures pronominal change in progress where non-binary participants were always ahead of men and women.

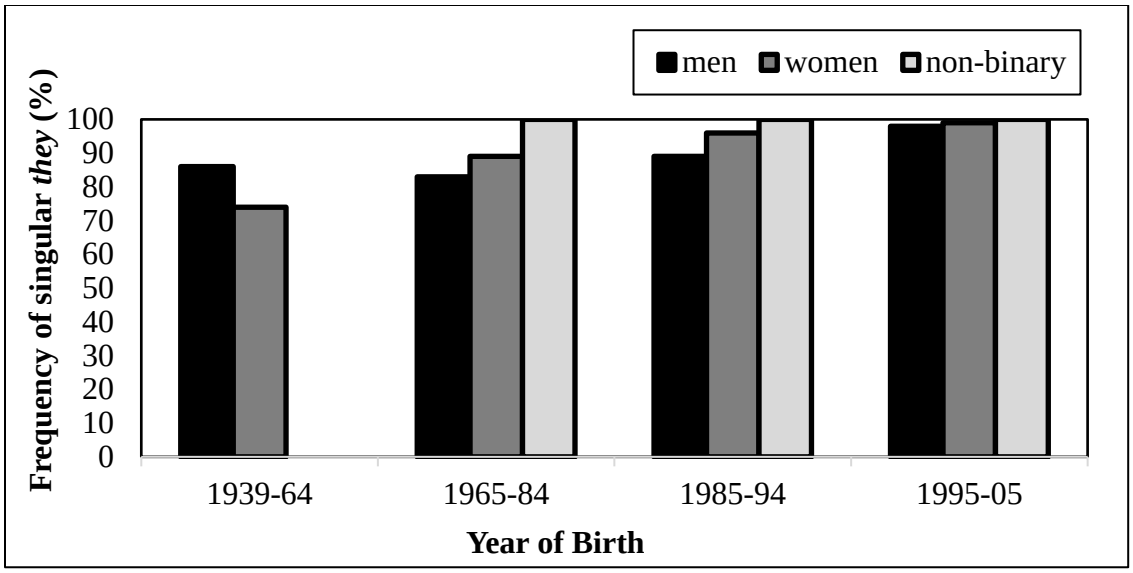

Figure 2. Frequency distribution of singular *they* by year of birth and gender for STUDENT (n *they* = 1036)

Since non-binary participants are more prone to using gender-neutral *they* for *student*, then it is likely that the larger LGBTQ2S+ community will exhibit similar behaviour. Table 11 shows the distribution of *they* and the other third-person pronouns across the three categories operationalized here: those who are not LGBTQ2S+ and do not have any LGBTQ2S+ friends/family; LGBTQ2S+ friends/family (queer-adjacent); LGBTQ2S+. Singular *they* is prominent, maintaining a rate of above 85% across all three groups. As predicted, there is a linear relationship between LGBTQ2S+ identity and use of *they* such that LGBTQ2S+ participants used *they* the most and are nearly categorical (97.4%), queer-adjacent participants used it at the next highest frequency (91.1%), and Non-LGBTQ2S+ used singular *they* the least (86.3%). In fact, the difference in the use of *they* is significant between LGBTQ2S+ participants versus all others (X^2 (1, N = 1002) = 20.06, p < .5 (*they*)). The remaining pronominal choices, *he/she*, *he*, and *she*, are all used minimally.

Table 11. Frequency distribution of third-person pronouns by LGBTQ2S+ identity for STUDENT

Pronoun	Not LGBTQ2S+	Queer-adjacent	LGBTQ2S+
they	86.3%	91.1%	97.4%
he/she	7.1%	5.7%	1.6%
she	4.3%	0.6%	1.0%
he	2.4%	2.7%	-
N (1121)	211	336	574

The results for the last social category, participants' personal pronouns, are shown in Table 12. Singular *they* is maintained at a rate of at least 89% across all four personal pronoun categories. Use of *they* increases hierarchically as follows: *he*-users, *she*-users, gendered and gender-neutral-users, then to only gender-neutral-users. Within the last two groups, *they* is categorical. All other pronominal choices are once again exceptionally infrequent, though *he/she* is markedly more frequent among *she*-users and *he*-users.

Table 12. Frequency distribution of third-person pronouns by self-identified personal pronouns for STUDENT

Pronoun	***he*-users** (*he/him/his*)	***she*-users** (*she/her/hers*)	**gendered and gender-neutral-users** (e.g., *she* and *they*)	**only gender-neutral-users** (e.g., *they*, *ze*)
they	89.0%	92.9%	99.3%	100%
he/she	6.9%	3.8%	0.7%	-
she	1.6%	2.1%	-	-
he	2.4%	1.3%	-	-
N (1106)	246	632	152	76

In summary, all of the results for *student* show a strong preference for *they*, which is distantly followed by *he/she*. From this I infer that *student* is gender-neutral across demographic groups and over apparent time, though the apparent time trajectory of *they* suggests that this has increased among speakers born across the twentieth century (its lowest frequency here was 74%). It is individuals whose own pronouns are gender-neutral (whether in combination with gendered

forms or not) who are on the vanguard of *they* usage for single, non-specific referents. The next section transitions to one of the gendered occupations, *mechanic*.

4.3 Mechanic

Table 13 reports the distributional results for *mechanic*. Although *they* is the most frequent pronoun overall, at 51% within this context, there is clear competition with *he*, which accounts for nearly 44% of the data. These two pronouns together account for nearly 95% of the data. This starkly contrasts with *student* (*they* prevailing). The remaining forms, *he/she* and *she*, are marginal, at 3% and 2% respectively. Overall, then, participants either opt for a gender-neutral pronoun (*they*) or the stereotypically gendered form for mechanic (*he*).

Table 13. Frequency of third-person pronouns for MECHANIC

Pronoun	N	(%)
they	269	51.3%
he	228	43.5%
he/she	16	3.1%
she	11	2.1%
Total	524	

Martyna (1978) reported that participants used gendered *he* for stereotypically masculine occupations (e.g., *police officer*, *judge*), and *mechanic* was the heaviest masculine-skewed occupation in perception studies (Deaux & Lewis 1983; Haines et al. 2013). Thus, the frequent use of *he* in the survey responses is consistent with previous research. What is striking, however, is the rate of *they*, which exceeds what we might expect on the basis of earlier studies.

Men and women effectively pattern in parallel, as shown in Table 14 for the results for participant gender. There is no significant association between men and women and pronominal choice for *he* or *they* (X^2 (1, N = 470) = 0.57, p = .45 (*he*); = 0.09, p = .77 (*they*), and both only

exceptionally use *she* and *he/she* to refer to *mechanic*. For non-binary participants, however, there is a clear and unmitigated preference for *they*, which accounts for almost 80% of third-person pronoun responses (significantly more frequent than among men and women: X^2 (1, N = 520) = 15.51, p < 5 (*he*); = 10.55, p < .5 (*they*)). The remainder is comprised entirely of *he*; *she* and *he/she* are unattested in the responses from this group. These results suggest, therefore, that despite the high frequency of *they* within this social group, *mechanic* remains stereotypically gendered, just less so than among men and women.

Table 14. Frequency of third-person pronouns for MECHANIC distributed by gender

Pronoun	**men**	**women**	**non-binary**
they	47.8%	49.2%	78.0%
he/she	1.9%	4.2%	-
she	1.9%	1.9%	-
he	48.7%	44.7%	22.0%
N (520)	157	313	50

I next examine how these frequencies are impacted by age in Table 15 and whether pronominal choices change over apparent time like they did for *student*. If a change were in progress, whereby *they* was becoming more frequent over time, we would predict a pattern of monotonic increase across the age cohorts, with complementary decreases in other forms. This is not what appears in Table 15, however. Instead, what we see, on the whole, is a split between participants born before 1965 on the one hand and those born in 1965 and later on the other. Before 1965, *he* is the majority form. After 1965, it consistently accounts for less than half of the data. What sets the participants born after 1984 apart is that *she* and *he/she* drop to virtual obsolescence, though their use was already infrequent among older participants. Such results suggest not ongoing generational change, like with *student*, but an imposed change on practice, akin to other intentional

efforts to avoid unnecessarily gendered forms (e.g., *chairman* to *chair*; see, e.g., Sczesny, Formanowicz & Moser 2016).

Table 15. Frequency of third-person pronouns for MECHANIC distributed by year of birth

Pronoun	**1939-64**	**1965-84**	**1985-94**	**1995-05**
they	38.5%	54.1%	54.0%	50.0%
he/she	3.8%	9.2%	1.4%	1.4%
she	3.8%	3.1%	1.4%	1.4%
he	53.8%	33.7%	43.1%	47.2%
N (503)	52	98	211	142

Figure 3 shows the results for singular *they* according to participant gender and age. In the oldest cohort (1939-1964), men use singular *they* much more frequently than women do (same as with *student*; there are no non-binary participants in this cohort). After this point, use of *they* by women increases regularly before stabilizing among participants born 1965 and later. Men also stabilize in their use of *they* at this point, but their trajectory is one of decrease, not increase (the results are not shown here but men retreat to increased use of *he* to refer to *a mechanic*). Non-binary participants, on the other hand, are relatively stable in their use of *they*, consistently using it at rates of 71% and above.

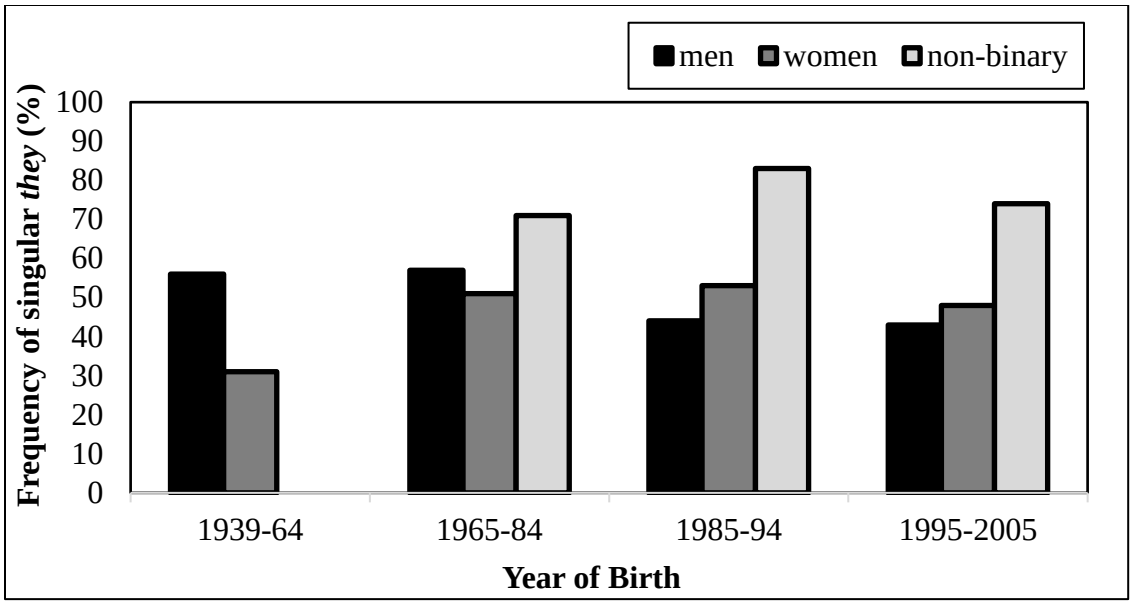

Figure 3. Frequency distribution of singular *they* by year of birth and gender for MECHANIC (n *they* = 258)

These results reveal two key findings. First, rates of singular *they* are not particularly dynamic across apparent time. Gender groups are characterized by relative stability more so than by active change (with the exception of women in the two oldest cohorts—1939-1964 vs. 1965-1984). Fluctuations in frequency are evident across age cohorts, but on the whole, the gender groups exhibit stable patterns relative to each other. The only perturbation contrasts women born before 1965 and those born that year and later. Second, it is clear that the aggregated results in Table 15 skew the frequency of *they* in a non-trivial way: it is not that a change occurred that sets apart speakers born in 1965 and later. The oldest cohort is the only one that does not include non-binary participants. It is clear from Figure 3 that it is these participants who are responsible for high rates of *they* in the results for *mechanic*. Among men and women, use of this pronoun is consistently less frequent. In other words, whereas *they* is the pronoun of choice among non-binary participants, among men and women, *mechanic* is characterized by consistently robust competition between *they* and *he*.

Moving on to the results for LGBTQ2S+ identity, shown in Table 16, the linear relationship seen in *student* persists. *They* is used most by LGBTQ2S+ participants (62.7%), followed by queer-adjacent participants (43.9%), and then least by those who are not LGBTQ2S+ (38.2%). The reverse obtains for use of *he*; queer-adjacent and non-LGBTQ2S+ participant groups both used *he* more than *they*.[23] A chi-square of LGBTQ2S+ participants versus all other participants reveals that these results are significant (X^2 (1, N = 518), 20.41, p < .05 (*he*), 23.01, p < .05 (*they*)).

Table 16. Frequency distribution of third-person pronouns by LGBTQ2S+ identity for MECHANIC

Pronoun	**Not LGBTQ2S+**	**Queer-adjacent**	**LGBTQ2S+**
they	38.2%	43.9%	62.7%
he/she	0.9%	5.5%	2.0%
she	4.5%	-	2.0%
he	56.4%	50.6%	33.2%
N (518)	110	164	244

The results in Table 17 address the possible effect of personal pronouns on pronominal choice. As with other results, *they* and *he* are the two predominate pronominal responses across all groups. The choice set is notable. Participants with at least one gendered personal pronoun exhibit the least restricted set: *they*, *he*, *she*, and *he/she* are attested. But, *she* and *he/she* are minimal, at less than 5% for either. The participants with only gender-neutral personal pronouns were restricted to *they* and *he* in their responses. Finally, *he*-users (i.e., *he/him/his* as personal pronouns) are the only participants with a higher frequency of *he*, setting them apart from the other three groups who all exhibited higher frequencies of *they* than *he*.

[23] A cross-tabulation of LGBTQ2S+ identity and gender (not shown here) reveals similar patterns.

Table 17. Frequency distribution of third-person pronouns by self-identified personal pronouns for MECHANIC

Pronoun	***he*-users** (*he/him/his*)	***she*-users** (*she/her/hers*)	**gendered and gender-neutral-users** (e.g., *she* and *they*)	**only gender-neutral-users** (e.g., *they, ze*)
they	42.2%	49.5%	66.7%	74.1%
he/she	1.6%	4.7%	1.4%	-
she	1.6%	2.5%	1.4%	-
he	54.7%	43.4%	30.4%	25.9%
N (503)	128	279	69	27

To summarize the findings for *mechanic*, the overall results have indicated that this occupation is treated as gender-neutral (*they*) or as masculine (*he*). It is rarely regarded as feminine; no matter how the data are cut, *she* responses never exceed 4.5% and most are below 2.5%. Results from social predictors help extrapolate intricacies within the dataset: Non-binary, LGBTQ2S+, and gender-neutral pronoun users use *they* at markedly higher frequencies than other groups. There is also remarkable consistency in pronominal use across the age groups after 1965, suggesting that change has occurred, but not in the usual pattern of incremental, generational change but as a general society pivot toward more gender-inclusive language. With these points in mind, I next explore *secretary*.

4.4 Secretary

The overall frequency results are shown in Table 18. Large-scale similarities with Table 13 (*mechanic*) are apparent: singular *they* is used the most frequently, and the expected gender pronoun (in this case, *she*) is the next most frequent; *he* and *he/she* are used infrequently (less than 5% each, overall).

Table 18. Frequency of third-person pronouns for SECRETARY

Pronoun	**N**	**(%)**
they	283	58.6%
she	162	33.5%
he	20	4.1%
he/she	18	3.7%
Total	483	

At the same time, there is a notable difference from the general patterns observed from *mechanic*. For example, the ratio of *they*:*she* is approximately 1.75:1, wider than that for *they*:*he* for *mechanic*, which was nearly 1.2:1. Thus, whereas third-person pronominal choices for both *mechanic* and *secretary* reflect their known gender stereotypes (cf. Deaux & Lewis 1983; Haines et al. 2013) alongside more general moves toward gender-neutral pronouns, where *mechanic* shows evidence for vigorous competition between *they* and *he*, *secretary* appears to have shifted further toward gender-neutral pronoun selection.

To inquire further, Table 19 shows the frequency results according to self-identified participant gender. All three gender groups use singular *they* at a higher rate than *she*: men and women at rates that hover around 56% and non-binary at around 84%. As with *mechanic*, other choices are restricted to men and women; there are no significant differences between these two groups (e.g., X^2 (1, N = 425) = 0.09, p = .76 (*she*); = 0.003, p = .95 (*they*)). The non-binary group is again set apart (X^2 (1, N = 425) = 15.63, p = .95 (*she*); = 0.09, p = .76 (*they*)).

Table 19. Frequency of third-person pronouns for SECRETARY distributed by gender

Pronoun	men	women	non-binary
they	56.0%	55.7%	83.6%
he/she	2.2%	4.1%	-
she	36.6%	35.1%	16.4%
he	5.2%	5.2%	-
N (480)	134	291	55

Examining the frequency for each age group, shown in Table 20, reveals that *they* does not increase monotonically over apparent time. There is a split between participants born before 1965 compared to those born 1965 and onwards. *She* is the majority form before 1965. After 1965, *she* consistently accounts for less than one-third of the data whereas *they* stabilizes around 60%. *He* and *he/she* are both used minimally and trend downwards throughout apparent time, each accounting for less than 5% of the data amongst the youngest speakers (born 1995-2005). This differs from the results for *mechanic*, where *he/she* triples in frequency for the 1965-1984 age cohort compared to the previous one, 1939-1965. Notably, non-binary participants do not use either *he/she* or *he* for *secretary* (i.e., they use only *they* and *she*), paralleling similarities for a constrained pronominal paradigm with *mechanic* and *student* (these findings are discussed in the next chapter). As with *mechanic*, however, these results add weight to the suggestion that these differences in pronominal use across the age cohorts are not generational, but may instead be indicative of intentional efforts to mitigate gendered forms in language.

Table 20. Frequency of third-person pronouns for SECRETARY distributed by year of birth

Pronoun	**1939-64**	**1965-84**	**1985-94**	**1995-05**
they	32.3%	58.2%	60.7%	62.2%
he/she	9.7%	5.1%	4.2%	1.8%
she	51.6%	30.4%	32.5%	32.3%
he	6.5%	6.3%	2.6%	3.7%
N (465)	31	79	191	164

The results of singular *they* for the intersection of gender and age shown in Figure 4. In the oldest cohort (1939-1964), men use singular *they* more frequently than women do (there are no non-binary participants in this cohort). More importantly, men are stable throughout all age groups. Women increase their usage of *they* from those born 1965 onwards and are consistent across the younger cohorts. Non-binary participants remain stable throughout their age cohorts, at above 80%, exceeding men and women.

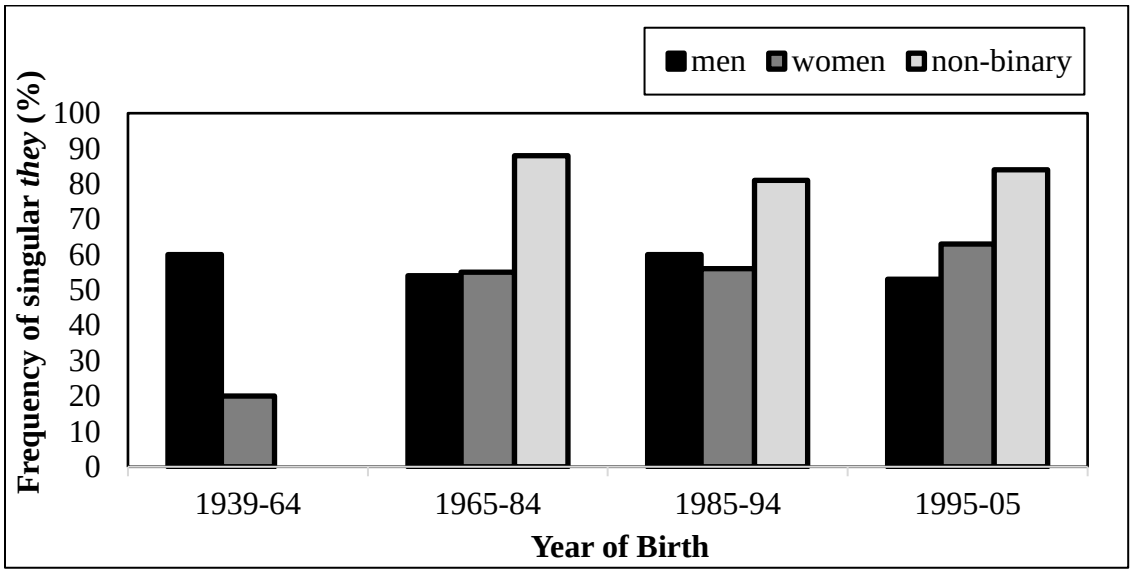

Figure 4. Frequency distribution of singular *they* by year of birth and gender for SECRETARY (n *they* = 274)

In short, what we see resembles the results from *mechanic*: there is relative stability of the rates of singular *they* across apparent time, rather than active change, within gender groups.

Additionally, the aggregate results from Table 18 influence the representation of the frequency of singular *they*, making *they* appear higher than it is across the entirety of the participant sample. For *secretary*, *they* is the predominate choice of pronoun for non-binary, whereas *they* and *she* are competing pronominal choices for men and women.

The frequency results for the next demographic, LGBTQ2S+ identity, are shown in Table 21. As with previous results from *student* and *mechanic*, there is a linear relationship between LGBTQ2S+ identity and use of *they*: LGBTQ2S+ participants used *they* at the highest frequency (at 69.2%), followed by queer-adjacent participants (48.6%), then non-LGBTQ2S+ (45.6%). *She* operates in reverse. There is also a significant association between LGBTQ2S+ participants (versus all other participants) and pronominal choice between *she* and *they* (X^2 (1, N = 478) = 21.02, p < .5 (*she*); = 23.91, p < .5 (*they*)). Finally, *he* and *he/she* are used by all groups and account for less than 10% of the data within each group.

Table 21. Frequency distribution of third-person pronouns by LGBTQ2S+ identity for SECRETARY

Pronoun	**Not LGBTQ2S+**	**Queer-adjacent**	**LGBTQ2S+**
they	45.6%	48.6%	69.2%
he/she	5.6%	5.7%	2.6%
she	44.4%	44.0%	24.3%
he	4.4%	2.1%	4.5%
N (478)	90	141	247

Table 22 shows the results for the last demographic, personal pronoun categories. All groups use *they* more frequently than *she*, and the two forms are inversely correlated in frequency from *he*-users to *she*-users to mixed pronoun users to gender-neutral-users. This trend for *secretary* is similar to that for *mechanic*, with the exception that the competing gendered pronoun is never more frequent than *they*. *He/she* and *he* are minimally used, at approximately less than 5% within most groups, and *he/she* is not used by only gender-neutral users.

Table 22. Frequency distribution of third-person pronouns by self-identified personal pronouns for SECRETARY

Pronoun	***he*-users** (*he/him/his*)	***she*-users** (*she/her/hers*)	**gendered and gender-neutral-users** (e.g., *she* and *they*)	**only gender-neutral-users** (e.g., *they, ze*)
they	51.9%	54.3%	71.4%	82.9%
he/she	1.9%	5.3%	1.4%	-
she	41.3%	36.4%	22.9%	14.3%
he	4.8%	4.0%	4.3%	2.9%
N (456)	104	247	70	35

In summary, overall, *secretary* is regarded as gender-neutral (*they*) and/or feminine (*she*), setting it apart from *student* (*they*). *He* responses never exceed 6.5% regardless of how the data are arranged, and thus, *secretary* is rarely considered masculine. Like *mechanic*, *they* is used most by non-binary, LGBTQ2S+, and gender-neutral personal pronoun users. Additionally, singular *they* competes robustly with *she* and maintains higher frequencies across most social predictors tested. After those born in 1965 and onwards, there is consistency in pronominal use across the age groups, paralleling *mechanic* and further suggesting that the change towards gender-inclusive language is societal rather than generational. The next section wraps-up this chapter.

4.5 Summary

To summarize the quantitative findings from the survey, perhaps the most important observation is that singular *they* is the most consistently and frequently used third-person pronoun overall across all three occupations. Indeed, use of singular *they* is markedly more frequent in these results compared to previous studies (LaScotte 2016; Maryna 1978; Meyers 1990). There was little to no competition with singular *they* here, though *he* and *she* were contenders for *mechanic* and *secretary* respectively. *They* occurs most with *student*, and the gap between gendered and

gender-neutral pronouns is wider for *secretary* than for *mechanic*, yet the patterns are relatively similar. Considered in context with gender stereotyping, the findings suggest that *student* is gender-neutral, while *mechanic* vacillates between gender-neutral and masculine and *secretary* does so between gender-neutral and feminine. The results from the gender assessment sliding scale—the final question on the demographic survey—shown in Figure 5, support this suggestion while also being reflective of the pronominal choices: *student* remains relatively neutral with the lowest standard deviation, *mechanic* skews masculine, and *secretary* skews feminine. Essentially, overt gender ideology (i.e., belief) can be performed covertly via pronominal choice (i.e., practice).

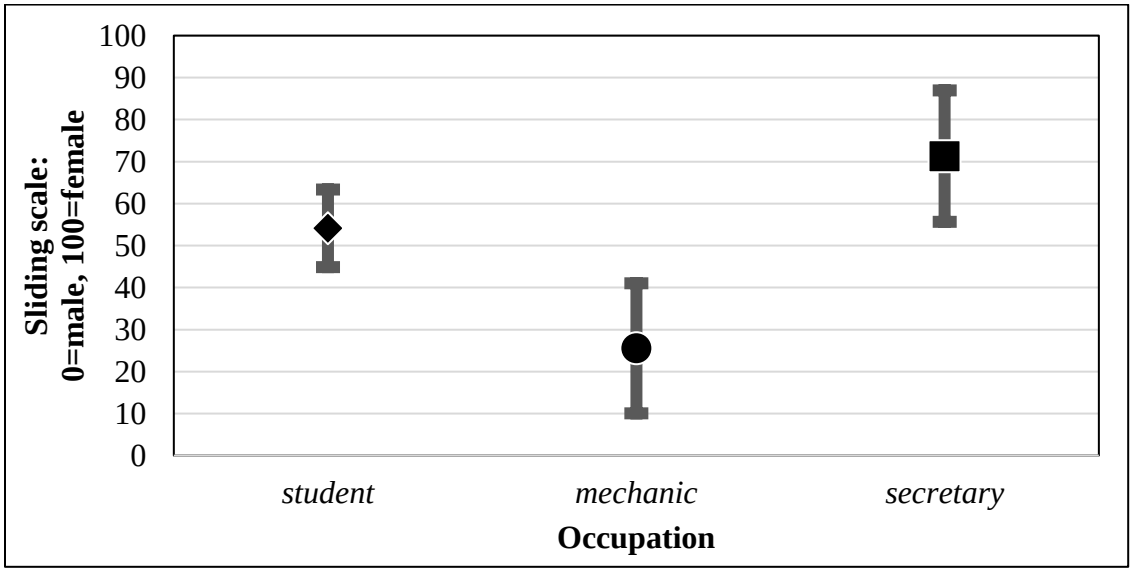

Figure 5. Average overall responses to which gender participants think each occupation is to be performed by

The impact of the social characteristics was also apparent in the data, adding layers of complexity about the groups leading usage of singular *they*, and, thus, sociolinguistic change on either a societal level or, at the very least, within participants' own communities and networks. The distributional frequency analysis revealed these participants to be, generally, non-binary, LGBTQ2S+, users of gender-neutral personal pronouns (each of these predictors is categorical or

nearly categorical for *student*), and/or younger (born after 1984, with the exception of responses to *mechanic* from men and women). Reflecting on the hypotheses presented in §3.3, it is generally the case that those who are more likely to use singular *they* are younger (except when applicable to *mechanic* for men and women) and/or are LGBTQ2S+. Notably, within the genders, non-binary participants oscillate only between singular *they*, *he* (*mechanic*), and *she* (*secretary*); they do not use *he/she*, unlike men and women who, as a group, make use of all third-person pronominal options (i.e., *he*, *she*, *they*, and *he/she*) across all occupations. It is generally not the case, however, that such users are a gender other than masculine. Likewise, *they* does not increase monotonically across apparent time for the gendered occupations. Instead, it remains relatively stable for men and non-binary throughout, and exhibits a sudden increase among women born after 1965 that is then maintained across age cohorts. A prototypical trajectory of generational change is evident only for *student*, which appears to bear little to no gender stereotyping within the current participant sample. Collectively, these findings suggest that gender stereotypical roles are not unilaterally weighted and biases can manifest through pronominal choice. There are multiple dimensions of influence, such as the referent, one's identity, and the communities they are connected to. I discuss the implications of these observations in the next and final chapter, alongside the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion and conclusion

My primary goal with this research was to expand on previous studies by Maryna (1978), Meyers (1990), and LaScotte (2016), and to establish which demographic groups are at the forefront of singular *they* use. In relation to gender stereotypical referents and participant demographics, this thesis aimed to answer the questions: Who uses *they*, and who can *they* be (or not be) used for? Using a quantitative method—operationalized from variationist sociolinguistics—complemented by qualitative data from participants, revealed that, overall, singular *they* prevails for third-person pronominal reference but that it is distributed at varying rates within and across the dataset (i.e., favoured by some groups over others, e.g., non-binary compared to men and women). Singular *they* is used here at higher rates than in previous studies, though the results are not directly comparable, due to differences in methodologies. Nonetheless, Martyna (1978) found that singular *they* was infrequent for gendered occupations, yet in the current study, *they* is frequent and in competition with gendered pronouns for *mechanic* and *secretary*. Meyers (1990) and LaScotte (2016) both found *they* to be predominately in competition with *he* (in relation to the gender-neutral reference *person* and *student*, respectively), whereas my results indicate that *they* predominates the third-person pronominal system, while conjunctive *he/she* forms are low-lying variants chosen as the second option overall. This indicates that singular *they* has made substantial inroads as the gender-neutral pronominal choice.

In undertaking this research, I had also wanted to (1) expand on social factors (i.e., metaphorically, casting a wide-net), to include a range of gender-based and queer demographics; (2) make use of digital technology in the form of social media networks to include participants across a large geographic region (in this case, Canada and the US); (3) provide evidence that people use singular *they* at non-trivial rates for gender unknown referents (for the purpose of countering

proscriptive arguments by grammarians); (4) create a study guided by interdisciplinary elements (i.e., research from the fields of sociolinguistics, anthropology, psychology, gender studies, and so on); and (5) provide a jumping-off point for future studies by approaching this work from an experimental perspective to illustrate its effectiveness. I therefore designed a methodology from various sources in the literature as well as from consulting my committee and other researchers in the field; I then vastly modified the questionnaire after a test-run to improve its efficacy.

As a consequence, the outcomes of this research have filled some gaps in previous studies (LaScotte 2016; Maryna 1978; Meyers 1990), such as expanding the demographic base to include more participants, individuals who also represent a wider range of ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and gender and LGBTQ2S+ diversity (see §2.4). This is also the first study of which I am aware, in about 40 years (since Martyna 1978), to analyze pronominal usage against gender stereotypes.

Several implications arise from the results of this research. Prominently, the continued proscription (i.e., condemnation; advocating against) of singular *they* in grammar handbooks (see Paterson 2014) is failing. Rates of *they* are non-trivial in these results—as is also the case in writing (e.g., Balhorn 2009, Baranowski 2002, Paterson 2014) and in educational contexts (e.g., Pauwels & Winter 2006); attitudes towards it are generally positive (e.g., Hernandez 2020). A synchronic baseline of third-person pronouns has been created for gender stereotypical roles, in general (*mechanic* and *secretary* are the most gendered; Deaux & Lewis 1983, Haines et al. 2016), establishing that singular *they* and gendered pronouns will continue to compete for gender stereotypes. This thesis also provides a methodological template, using social media, which can be modelled. In other words, survey questions presented to participants in this thesis (e.g., *When a mechanic checks under the hood, _____ (finish the sentence)*) can be altered and operationalized

to explore other gender stereotypical roles (e.g., *firefighter*, *nurse*), as well as roles that pattern more neutrally with respect to gender (e.g., *accountant*).

For administrative purposes, as a "call-to-action" (following a transformative worldview, see Creswell 2014), I would advocate that online and offline documents in workplaces and in educational and legal settings, for example, should be updated to reflect gender neutrality. In Canada and the US anyway, this thesis provides evidence that individuals regularly resort to *they*; use of this pronoun in more formal settings thus seems to be entirely unproblematic, in terms of what people tolerate and use. This thesis, and research from various other scholars (e.g., Bodine 1985, Baron 1986, Hekanaho 2020), have provided ample interdisciplinary evidence in support of this action. Next steps include such steps as changing the discourse in grammar handbooks to reflect the history of singular *they* as well as current usage; providing teachers with the knowledge to explain and navigate pronominal usage in the classroom to destigmatize singular *they*; and consulting those who work within the humanities and the social sciences (e.g., sociolinguists, anthropologists, gender studies) to provide workshops and educational sessions about the politics surrounding pronominal usage, gender ideologies, and ways in which to promote positive attitudes towards use of singular *they* and other gender-neutral pronouns.

Intentionally expanding the participant base to queer communities, as was done here but as seldomly achieved in much variationist sociolinguistic research, provided evidence that social factors such as LGBTQ2S+ identity or adjacency, and personal pronouns, can be important factors influencing language practices. This research has served as a reflection of how these groups impact pronominal use in society in general, as well as within their communities and networks. A nuanced analysis of participant gender, which involved free responses from participants that were subsequently categorized into a ternary system (non-binary, man, woman), expanded the scope of

possibility for research methods—non-binary participants were key in determining who predominantly uses singular *they*, as this group exhibits a more constrained third-person pronominal paradigm (*they—student, they:he—mechanic, they:she—secretary*). But, it is also the case that *man* and *woman* did not refer exclusively to cisgender participants in this work (this level of granularity, an intra-group analysis, is a suggestion for future analysis, but limited here due to the vastness of this dataset). If this study had analyzed only cisgender men and women, then it would have glossed over a vital clue in social patterns of *they* use, and in so doing, it would have performed erasure of non-binary people and their influence on language and society. The approach taken here explicitly recognizes homogeneity of gender within a categorical system and also allows for participant representation not solely reliant on the gender binary (i.e., by including non-binary representation). Furthermore, the geographical spread of gender and LGBTQ2S+ diverse participants in this study (i.e., they are not only from the regions with larger proportional representations, like British Columbia and California), which spans across Canada and the US, reinforces that singular *they* as a gender-neutral pronominal choice is not an isolated phenomenon—relevant because non-binary and LGBTQ2S+ users of English are at the vanguard of singular *they*.

This study is not without its limitations, however. The first concerns age. With fewer older participants, it is difficult to establish a fuller picture of usage for those born before 1955. The age range that is largely missing is 60 and over (an approximate year of birth range covering roughly the 1920s to the end of the 1950s at the time the survey was launched), with no participants older than 79. A related challenge is the lack of older non-binary participants (the oldest in this study was born in 1971). However, their representation within this sample is non-trivial (at 10%);

non-binary participants used among the highest rates of singular *they* across all age ranges in which they appeared (1971-2005) and across all occupations.

Another limitation concerns the lack of ethnic and racial diversity in the sample, which is 80% white. Holliday (2017) wonders whether speakers of other dialects of English—specifically African American Language—would be evaluated as prejudiced if their language varieties change at slower rates in regard to contemporary political movements. The data I collected cannot be meaningfully probed for rates of singular *they* in this case; the non-white sample is too variegated and under-represented to consider the role of ethnicity.

At the same time, the survey questionnaire collected more demographic information than was analyzed in this thesis, leaving data to be considered in future work. As previously mentioned, one of my goals was to "cast a wide-net" but to focus here on gender and LGBTQ2S+ diversity among the social factors analyzed. The following list is non-exhaustive yet provides factors that could potentially influence pronominal usage: use of additional languages (e.g., learner, bilingual, trilingual) and whether or not that language has (gendered) third-person pronouns; nationality (i.e., Canada versus the US); the nature of LGBTQ2S+ engagement, such as participation in events like Pride and local queer shows, and/or in the media people consume; the influence of social activism; the level of education of participants as well as that of their parents and their partner(s) (if in a relationship); and living in an urban setting versus a rural one. Another suggestion is to analyze ideology (what people think they would do) versus usage (what they actually do); Hernandez (2020:60) suggests that older age predicts prescriptivism, but such is mitigated by a higher level of education. With my data, for example, it is possible to analyze the age and level of education, and whether or not the pronoun participants said they would use matched against what they did use.

Ultimately, this study has shown that individuals use singular *they* for both gender-neutral and gender-stereotyped antecedents, albeit more often for the former. Thus, *they* is not only a viable option but is already established within communities across Canada and the US, particularly queer ones. So who uses *they*? Everyone uses *they*, as it never dips below 20%, even amongst the oldest cohorts. The prevalent users are non-binary, LGBTQ2S+ participants, and users of gender-neutral personal pronouns. And who is *they* used for? In this study, it was used for all three occupations, though certainly not to the same degree. First and foremost, *they* is used for unambiguously gender-neutral occupations—here, *student*. But it is also used for occupations that continue to exhibit a gendered profile—here, *secretary* and *mechanic*. This work contributes to the existing sociolinguistic literature by expanding the methodological framework to include gender and LGBTQ2S+ participants while demonstrating these groups are at the forefront of gender-neutral language use, represented here by *they*. Singular *they* is embedded in the third-person pronominal system as a gender-neutral pronoun, across both time (speakers born 1939 to 2005) and social structure (gender, LGBTQ2S+ identity, and personal pronouns).

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Appendix

The Survey

FRONT PAGE:

You are invited to participate in a survey about language usage which is being conducted by Ayden Loughlin, a graduate student in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Victoria. If you have any questions about the study, you can contact me by e-mail at atloughl@uvic.ca.

The following information is to inform you about this study and what is involved. All survey participants will see this. **It's important that you read this, so that you know what to expect.**

Purpose and Objectives: The purpose of this project is to explore how people use language as a descriptive tool based on their individual perspectives and experiences. This research is important because the results can inform how language is affected by social factors, such as age and social networks.

The data will be used for Ayden's Master's thesis and for possible future projects. The results may be shared in academic publications, academic presentations, the public via media publications, within Ayden's social media circles, and will be posted on UVicSpace, a digital repository for UVic theses: http://dspace.library.uvic.ca.

Participation: Participating in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any point by simply closing the browser window before submission, which will result in all of the answers being deleted. Once you submit the survey, it is logistically impossible to remove your responses (because they are anonymous).

The survey will take approximately **10-15 minutes** to complete. The survey is divided into two main sections: The first section involves writing responses to questions related to various subjects such as personal tastes, occupations, etc. The second section involves answering some background questions about yourself and your opinions.

The survey is completely anonymous and confidential and presents no risks to you. Please **do not** put your name or contact information anywhere on it. Once submitted, you will be unable to withdraw your responses because individuals and individual answers cannot be identified.

Data Storage and Disposal: The survey data will be stored on enuvo's servers (the host survey company, which is subject to European data protection laws) in Ireland, until completion of Ayden's thesis (approximately May 1, 2019). The data will be stored on Ayden's password protected laptop and password protected external hard drive for 5 years, at which time it will be destroyed (approximately January 2023).

Eligibility: To participate in this study, you have to be 13 years of age or older, speak English as a first language, and live in either Canada or the United States.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Ayden or his supervisor before you begin:

Contacts:
Investigator:
Ayden Loughlin
Department of Linguistics
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Supervisor:
Dr. Alexandra D'Arcy
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In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

By completing and submitting the survey, YOUR FREE AND INFORMED CONSENT IS IMPLIED and indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

PAGE:
Questionnaire (each question on a separate page):

Questionnaire Instructions:

This survey includes a total of 9 questions, each on a separate page. You will not be able to go back and change your answer to any question once you have moved on to the next question.

Don't think too hard about your responses. I am interested in your off-the-cuff answers; they don't have to be long.

Also, you don't need to worry about the grammar of your responses—that's not what I'm interested in! Draw on your personal experiences and/or real-life examples as relevant.

Q1: You're stranded on an island! The three things you would want to have with you are: _____ (finish the sentence)

Q2: What is/are your favourite animal(s), and why?

[TEXT BOX]

Q3: When a mechanic checks under the hood, _____ (finish the sentence)

Q4: If you could add anything to your wardrobe, what would it be and why?

Q5: If you could travel anywhere in the world, you would go to: _____ (finish the sentence)

Q6: When a secretary books a meeting, _____

Q7: In a hypothetical future, imagine you are friends with a robot. What sort of interactions would you expect from this robot?

[TEXT BOX]

Q8: Your favourite colour(s) is/are _____ because _____

Q9: What does it mean to be an ideal student? What does an ideal student need to do? If the student doesn't do this, what are the consequences?

[TEXT BOX]

Demographic Questions

PAGE:
This next section asks about your background and experiences. Please only answer questions that you feel comfortable answering.

What year were you born? _____

What is your gender? _____

What is your sexuality (that is, are you attracted to the same sex, the opposite sex, any sex, etc.)? _____

What is your ethnicity? _____ (e.g., African American, Chinese, Hispanic, Indigenous, South Asian, White, etc.)

What is your nationality?
Canadian
American

What state or province do you primarily live in? _____

How would you describe the area that you live in?

Urban (the core of a city)
Semi-urban (suburban)
Rural
Other: _____

What is (or was) your occupation? (e.g., caregiver, doctor, homemaker, student, teacher, welder, etc.) _____

If you have a spouse or common-law partner, what is (or was) their primary occupation? (type "n/a" if not applicable)
_____

If you are 25 or younger and a student, what is/are (or was/were) your parent(s)/guardian(s) primary occupations? (type "n/a" if not applicable) _____

What is the highest level of education you have completed?
Less than high school
High school
Some college
Vocational/technical school
Bachelors degree
Masters degree
Doctoral degree (PhD)
Prefer not to say
Other: _____

Have you participated, or would you participate, in any form of social activism?
Yes
No

Are you fluent in any languages other than English? If so, which ones? _____

When you were answering the survey questions, were you aware of any strategies that you used as you responded to the prompts? If yes, what were they? If no, please just enter n/a or skip this question.

[TEXT BOX]

PAGE:

Do you identify as LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, and others – two-spirit, intersex, etc.)?
I identify as an LGBTQ+ person
I do not identify as an LGBTQ+ person, but have friends or family that do
I do not identify as an LGBTQ+ person

Do you participate in any LGBTQ+ events?
(select any that apply)
I participate in large LGBTQ+ events (such as pride)
I participate in smaller LGBTQ+ events (such as live drag performance shows, queer dances, LGBTQ+ pubs and/or clubs, etc.)
I do not participate in LGBTQ+ events

Do you watch some LGBTQ+ focused TV shows and/or movies?
I watch some LGBTQ+ focused TV shows and/or movies (e.g., Love Simon, Queer Eye, Rupaul's Drag Race, Transparent, Will and Grace, etc.)
I do not watch any LGBTQ+ focused TV shows or movies
In general, I don't want any TV shows or movies (very often or at all)

PAGE:
When referring to a single social category that has no clear gender category (e.g., "student"), which pronoun do you think you are most likely to use? (pick the answer closest to what you think you would say)
He
She
He or she
They

Why? (please elaborate):
[TEXT BOX]

PAGE:
When someone else is talking about you, what pronouns do you prefer them to use to refer to you?
Select any and all that apply. Please fill in the "other" option if needed.
He/his/him
She/her/hers
They/them/theirs
Other: _____

PAGE:
Please rate each of the following occupations according to who you think is more likely to perform the role. There is a sliding scale, with "male" on the left side, and "female" on the right side, and you can place the pointer at any point along the scale.

Mechanic
male [SCALE] female
Secretary
male [SCALE] female
Accountant
male [SCALE] female

Nurse
male [SCALE] female
Firefighter
male [SCALE] female
Student
male [SCALE] female

FINAL PAGE:
This is a reminder that all submissions are anonymous and the data is stored on a secure server and the researcher's password-protected computer. Once you click "submit", the survey will be complete and it will be impossible to remove your answers.

If you would like to know more information about this survey, or if you are interested in the results, please feel free to contact me, Ayden Loughlin (atloughl@uvic.ca). Your data will remain anonymous even if you contact me because it will be impossible to link individuals to any of the responses, and your contact information will be deleted once your questions have been answered and/or I have shared my thesis with you. Contact information will be stored on a password-protected laptop, accessible only by me.

Survey

Page 1

You are invited to participate in a survey about language usage which is being conducted by Ayden Loughlin, a graduate student in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Victoria. If you have any questions about the study, you can contact me by e-mail at atloughl@uvic.ca.

The following information is to inform you about this study and what is involved. All survey participants will see this. **It's important that you read this, so that you know what to expect.**

Purpose and Objectives: The purpose of this project is to explore how people use language as a descriptive tool based on their individual perspectives and experiences. This research is important because the results can inform how language is affected by social factors, such as age and social networks.

The data will be used for Ayden's Master's thesis and for possible future projects. The results may be shared in academic publications, academic presentations, the public via media publications, within Ayden's social media circles, and will be posted on UVicSpace, a digital repository for UVic theses: http://dspace.library.uvic.ca.

Participation: Participating in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any point by simply closing the browser window before submission, which will result in all of the answers being deleted. Once you submit the survey, it is logistically impossible to remove your responses (because they are anonymous).

The survey will take approximately **10-15 minutes** to complete. The survey is divided into two main sections: The first section involves writing responses to questions related to various subjects such as personal tastes, occupations, etc. The second section involves answering some background questions about yourself and your opinions.

The survey is completely anonymous and confidential and presents no risks to you. Please do not put your name or contact information anywhere on it. Once submitted, you will be unable to withdraw your responses because individuals and individual answers cannot be identified.

Data Storage and Disposal: The survey data will be stored on enuvo's servers (the host survey company, which is subject to European data protection laws) in Ireland, until completion of Ayden's thesis (approximately May 1, 2019). The data will be stored on Ayden's password protected laptop and password protected external hard drive for 5 years, at which time it will be destroyed (approximately January 2023).

Eligibility: To participate in this study, you have to be 13 years of age or older, speak English as a first language, and live in either Canada or the United States.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Ayden or his supervisor before you begin:

Contacts:
Investigator:
Ayden Loughlin
Department of Linguistics
University of Victoria
atloughl@uvic.ca

Supervisor:
Dr. Alexandra D'Arcy
Department of Linguistics
University of Victoria
adarcy@uvic.ca

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

By completing and submitting the survey, YOUR FREE AND INFORMED CONSENT IS IMPLIED and indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Questionnaire

Questionnaire Instructions:

This survey includes a total of 9 questions, each on a separate page. You will not be able to go back and change your answer to any question once you have moved on to the next question

Don't think too hard about your responses. I am interested in your off-the-cuff answers; they don't have to be long.

Also, you don't need to worry about the grammar of your responses—that's not what I'm interested in! Draw on your personal experiences and/or real-life examples as relevant.

Page 3

You're stranded on an island! The three things you would want to have with you are: _____ *

(finish the sentence)

Page 4

What is/are your favourite animal(s), and why? *

Page 5

When a mechanic checks under the hood, _____ *

(finish the sentence)

Page 6

If you could add anything to your wardrobe, what would it be and why? *

Page 7

If you could travel anywhere in the world, you would go: _____ *

(finish the sentence)

Page 8

When a secretary books a meeting, _____ *

(finish the sentence)

Page 9

In a hypothetical future, imagine you are friends with a robot. What sort of interactions would you expect from this robot? *

Page 10

Your favourite colour(s) is/are _____ *

because _____ *

(finish the sentences)

Page 11

What does it mean to be an ideal student? What does an ideal student need to do? If the student doesn't do this, what are the consequences? *

Demographic Questions

This next section asks about your background and experiences. Please only answer questions you feel comfortable answering.

What year were you born?

What is your gender?

What is your sexuality (that is, are you attracted to the same sex, the opposite sex, any sex, etc.)?

What is your ethnicity? (e.g., African American, Chinese, Hispanic, Indigenous, South Asian, White, etc.)

What is your nationality?

- ◯ Canadian
- ◯ American

What state/province do you primarily live in?

How would you describe the area that you live in?

- ◯ Urban (the core of a city)
- ◯ Semi-urban (suburban)
- ◯ Rural
- ◯ Other:

What is (or was) your primary occupation?

(e.g., caregiver, doctor, homemaker, student, teacher, welder, etc.)

If you have a spouse or common-law partner, what is (or was) their primary occupation? (type "n/a" if not applicable)

If you are 25 or younger, and a student, what is/are (or was/were) your parent(s)/guardian(s) primary occupations? (type "n/a" if not applicable)

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ◯ Less than high school
- ◯ High School
- ◯ Some College
- ◯ Vocational/technical school
- ◯ Bachelors degree
- ◯ Masters degree
- ◯ Doctoral degree (PhD)
- ◯ Prefer not to say
- ◯ Other:

Have you participated, or would you participate, in any form of social activism?

- ◯ yes
- ◯ no

Are you fluent in any languages other than English? If so, which ones?

When you were answering the survey questions, were you aware of any strategies that you used as you responded to the prompts? If yes, what were they? If no, please just enter n/a or skip this question.

Page 13

Do you identify as LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, and others – two-spirit, intersex, etc.)?

- ◯ I identify as an LGTBQ+ person
- ◯ I do not identify as an LGTBQ+ person, but have friends or family that do
- ◯ I do not identify as an LGBTQ+ person

Do you participate in any LGBTQ+ events?
(select any that apply)

- ☐ I participate in large LGBTQ+ events (such as pride)
- ☐ I participate in smaller LGBTQ+ events (such as live drag performance shows, queer dances, LGBTQ+ pubs and/or clubs, etc.)
- ☐ I do not participate in LGBTQ+ events

Do you watch some LGBTQ+ focused TV shows and/or movies?

- ◯ I watch some LGBTQ+ focused TV shows and/or movies (e.g., Love Simon, Queer Eye, Rupaul's Drag Race, Transparent, Will and Grace, etc.)
- ◯ I do not watch any LGBTQ+ focused TV shows or movies
- ◯ In general, I don't watch any TV shows or movies (very often or at all)

Page 14

When talking about a single social category that has no clear gender category (e.g., "student"), which pronoun do you think you are most likely to use? (pick the answer closest to what you think you would say)

- ◯ He
- ◯ She
- ◯ He or she
- ◯ They

Why? (please elaborate):

Page 15

When someone else is talking about you, what pronouns do you prefer them to use to refer to you?

Select any and all that apply. Please fill in the "other" option if needed.

- [ ] He/his/him
- [ ] She/her/hers
- [ ] They/them/theirs
- [ ] Other:

Page 16

Please rate each of the following occupations according to who you think is more likely to perform the role. There is a sliding scale, with "male" on the left side, and "female" on the right side, and you can place the pointer anywhere along the scale.

Mechanic

male female

Secretary

male female

Accountant

male female

Nurse

male female

Firefighter

male female

Student

male female

Page 17

This is a reminder that all submissions are anonymous and the data is stored on a secure server and the researcher's password-protected computer. Once you click "submit", the survey will be complete and it will be impossible to remove your answers.

If you would like to know more information about this survey, or if you are interested in the results, please feel free to contact me, Ayden Loughlin (atloughl@uvic.ca). Your data will remain anonymous even if you contact me because it will be impossible to link individuals to any of the responses, and your contact information will be deleted once your questions have been answered and/or I have shared my thesis with you. Contact information will be stored on a password-protected laptop, accessible only by me.

» **Redirection to final page of eSurvey Creator** (change)

In person (for recruitment and/or sharing)

If the conversation veers into what I do (for new people I meet) or what I am doing (for people I know):
Currently, I'm working on my Master's thesis. I'm actually looking for participants to do a survey for my MA research project. I'm researching how people use language to describe occupations, animals, personal tastes, and things like that. The survey is anonymous and accessible by computer, tablet, or cell phone. Participation is completely voluntary. People who are interested just need to be 13 or older, speak English as a first language, and live in Canada or the USA. Would you be interested in knowing more? (If yes): Great! I can provide you with the URL if you'd like to write it down or type it in your phone; it has more detailed information. And just so you know, I'll never know if you've participated or not, so your decision either way won't affect our relationship. You can also share this with anyone else that you think would be interested, just make sure to not share the content of the survey.

E-mail (for neutral third parties to share)

Dear/Hello NAME,

I'm contacting you because you are aware of my Master's project and have shown interest in sharing the survey and project information within your personal networks (email lists, social media). Participation in the survey is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential; I will not know who has or has not participated, and so anyone's choice to participate or not will not impact our relationship. I have attached the poster and URL to share, and have included a template that you can share over social media or through e-mail (below). I really appreciate your assistance in helping me out, but please don't feel pressured to do so. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me.

Thank you,
Ayden

Template:

Hello everyone!

A colleague of mine, Ayden Loughlin (an MA in Linguistics graduate student at the University of Victoria), is looking for participants to do an anonymous online survey which will help with his MA research project. He's researching how people describe occupations, animals, personal tastes, and things like that. The survey is easy to access with a computer, tablet, or mobile device. The only requirements are that you are at least 13 or older, speak English as a first language, and live in either Canada or the USA. The poster and survey link are attached; both have additional information.

Please feel free to share this post. (Please DO NOT post on this post, but feel free to contact him privately at atloughl@uvic.ca if you have questions, comments, or are interested in the results). Thank you!

(URL; poster attached)

Facebook

Hello everyone!

I am looking for participants to do an anonymous online survey which will help with my MA research project. I'm researching how people use language to describe occupations, animals, personal tastes, and things like that. The survey is easy to access with a computer, tablet, or mobile device. The only requirements are that you are at least 13 or older, speak English as a first language, and live in either Canada or the USA. The poster and survey link are attached; both have additional information. But, if you are aware of any of the details of my project, please do not do the survey. ☺

Please feel free to share this post. (Please DO NOT post on this post, but feel free to contact me privately on Facebook or by e-mail at @atloughl@uvic.ca if you have questions, comments, or are interested in the results). Thank you!

(URL attached)

Twitter

Hello! I'm researching #language usage as a descriptive tool for my MA in #Linguistics. Looking for #survey participants; 13+, English first language, #Canada or #USA. It's anonymous, confidential, and online. Poster attached. Please retweet. Thanks! #research #uvic

(URL attachment)

Reddit: (\r\samplesize has rules on titles for posting)

Title: [Academic] Survey about language used to describe occupations, animals, etc. (US & Canada; English first language; 13+)

URL embedded in the title, which brought participants directly to the survey front page where they saw the letter of implied consent.

Poster:

Are you an English first language speaker? Would you like to participate in a research survey on language use?

I am conducting research for my MA thesis on the topic of how people use language to describe occupations, animals, personal tastes, and things like that, based on individual perspectives and experiences.

I am looking for people who are 13 years old or older, speak English as a first language, and live in either Canada or the United States.

This research is important because the results can inform how language is affected by social factors, such as age and social networks.

What do you have to do?

The survey will be conducted online; it is easy to access with a computer, tablet, or mobile device. You can do it from the comfort of your home, or on the go. It takes approximately 20-40 minutes, and involves writing (typing) responses to various questions, and then answering some background information about yourself.

It is completely anonymous and confidential!

Curious? Follow the link below to find out more details
(URL)