

A PROGRESSIVE PRESCRIPTION: EPICENE PRONOUNS AND FEMINISM IN  
*THE CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE*

By Sandra L Schaefer

Prior to the standardization movement in grammar, singular *they* was commonly used as an epicene pronoun, only to be replaced by the male pronoun *he* as a generic in the eighteenth century. While usage rates for generic *he* would maintain a majority until the twentieth century, contemporary linguistic research shows that the use of the generic *he* has greatly declined and that singular *they* has become the most popular choice, in spite of the fact that many professionals continue to deny its appropriateness. This manuscript will argue that the scholarship of feminist linguists and rhetoricians signals a movement both in society and language that contributed to this change. Using theories of content analysis and intertextuality, data from editions of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, from 1906 to 2010, were searched for evidence of feminist theories, concepts, and terms introduced by major feminist scholars. The data demonstrate a marked change in the *Manual's* attempts to increase the presence of women in the *Manual* and to guide authors and editors in avoiding sexist language. Continued change is necessary as gender-neutrality continues to affect policies in education, gender politics, and domestic law.

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by

Sandra L Schaefer

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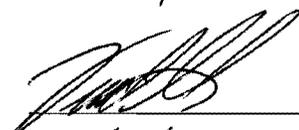
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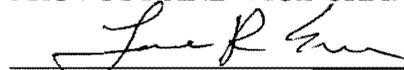
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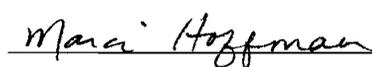
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To my husband, for the endless hours of watching me on my laptop, the dinners made, and the living rooms cleaned. In short, for patience.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Feminism and Prescriptivism

*“Language uses us as much as we use language.” – Robin Lakoff*

Language is not only the means by which we express our ideas but rather one of the many means by which our ideas are created. We commonly consider language to be a road that carries the ideas that we wish to share, a means to an end. However, language is essential to our understanding of the world around us because it is the system by which we understand that world. Essentially, language is at the center of our understanding and therefore the systematic study of it and how it creates meaning is an important vein of study.

Dennis Baron suggested that no “semantic gap in any language has ever received the attention that reformers over the years have lavished on our lack of a common-gender pronoun in English” (8). When feminist reformers took on the subject in the second half of the twentieth century, they brought epicene, or gender-neutral, pronouns to the attention of the average writer. While reformers had always been unhappy with the imbalance of singular pronouns, most of the arguments for the creation of an epicene pronoun came from language scholars who regretted the inelegance of ignoring the rule of gender agreement in favor of the rule of number agreement (Baron 12). When feminist reformers took on the discussion of epicene pronouns it was from the perspective that the

use of generic *he* is sexist in nature, limits understanding, and was established as a means of reducing or eliminating the presence of women.

Pronouns have a nearly unchanged history within the English language. This millennium has only seen three major changes in the usage of pronouns: the creation of *she*, the creation of *its*, and the displacement of *thou* for *you*. With most of these changes taking two to three centuries to carry out, a picture begins to develop of the difficulty involved in changing the usage of pronouns.

Prior to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, *he* and *heo* served as personal pronouns for male and female, respectively (*OED*). Due to the constantly changing ethnic structure of England, however, different dialects eventually “rendered the pronouns ... almost or wholly indistinguishable in pronunciation” and led to the movement of *she*, a demonstrative pronoun from Old Norse, into the role of personal pronoun for females during the 13<sup>th</sup> century (*OED*). This usage was not universal, nor instant, however, and did not standardize into the pronunciation and spelling we recognize today until the early 1500s.

*Its* came into popular usage in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, after centuries of using *his* as the neuter possessive pronoun. Eventually, opinion began to move away from using the masculine generic when referring to “inferior beings or things without life” (*OED*) and the possessive form of *its* became commonly favored, spelled with or without the apostrophe. As with many new words and usages, *its* was popularly accepted in literary work long before it was recognized as standard, appearing in Shakespeare’s folio of 1623.

Similarly, *you* underwent a major usage transformation that began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Usage of *you* as a plural pronoun for the subjective second person was well established, both in England and on the continent, with *ye* functioning as the objective form. Singular pronouns, however, had a class distinction: with *thou* being more commonly used to refer to someone of like status, *you* became commonly used to refer to a person of higher status, such as a lord or king. Gradually, *you* and its forms were used in most general circumstances, with *thou* and its forms being reserved for intimates or children. By the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, the use of *thou* became more and more infrequent, leading to its current obsolete usage (*OED*). These usage shifts, occurring rarely and over several centuries in each case, demonstrate a specific nature of pronouns and other function words<sup>1</sup>. Because they are so commonly used, function words become almost unconscious in our usage and often require accompanying societal or cultural change in order to shift.

Before the standardization movement known as prescriptivism, occurring in the seventeenth century in England, writers had commonly chosen how to use pronouns by what “sounded best,” as many students and authors do today, and during this time *they* was often used as a singular epicene pronoun, particularly with indefinite antecedents like *everybody* or *somebody*. Literary examples of usage show that before the eighteenth century *they* was used often as a singular pronoun, such as Chaucer did in “The Doctor’s Tale”: “And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame, They wol come up and offer on

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<sup>1</sup> The term “function word” refers to a linguistic category of words that includes determiners, prepositions, conjunctions, and pronouns. These are often described in contrast to “lexical” or “content” parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs. See den Dikken and Tortora for more discussion of function words.

Goddes name,” (Chaucer 146). Alongside Chaucer, Shakespeare is often quoted in his usage of *they* as a singular, including this example from *Much Ado About Nothing*: “God send everyone their heart’s desire” (qtd. in Miller and Swift 43).

In eighty-seven examples from the eighteenth century, writers used *they* as a pronoun for *every*-antecedents thirty-eight percent of the time (Balhorn, “Rise”). The rise of prescriptivism in the eighteenth century could account for the lower percentage, twenty-nine, demonstrated in the nineteenth century (Balhorn, “Rise”). With the increased accessibility to books and increased literacy of Europe in the eighteenth century, scholarship began to focus on the goal of standardizing the language. The outward purpose of standardization was to increase readability by creating systems of spelling and grammar that readers could recognize from one text to another. This is the time that saw the first dictionaries, including Samuel Johnson who published his in 1755, and the first grammar manuals or textbooks.

Due to the lack of a genderless, singular pronoun in English, grammarians were forced to prescribe a usage for antecedents of unknown or irrelevant gender. “There is a tradition among some grammarians to lament the fact that English has no sex-indefinite pronoun for third person singular and to state categorically that the only course open is to use ‘he’ in sex-indefinite contexts” (Bodine 130). Rather than prescribe the use of *they* as a singular pronoun, as was commonly practiced in speech and writing of the time, grammarians favored agreement in number over that of gender and prescribed the usage of *he* and its forms for sex-indefinite antecedents. This is based on practices of other languages, mostly Latin and Greek, in which the masculine is often used as the generic

for groups of mixed genders. It is also based in earlier scholarship which defined the masculine gender as the “more worthy” and therefore the more appropriate for gender-neutral contexts (Bodine 134). In the end, the result of the prescriptivist movement was that the opinions of a few, through the luxury of their gender and their position, are established as the “reality” and expectation for an entire language, establishing the rules by which future writers, over the next two centuries, would be guided and judged.

While some grammarians were establishing the generic *he*, others were speaking out against its usage on the basis that it failed to agree with its antecedent in the matter of gender, just as *they* failed to agree in the matter of number. These critics of the generic *he* argued not from a desire to see both genders represented equally and fairly, but rather for simplicity and eloquence in the language and “stylistic accuracy” (Baron 8). This would not be the case when the question of prescriptivism evolved along with the feminist movement of the late twentieth century. As feminist scholarship began to investigate fields of psychology, sociology, writing studies, and linguistics, questions about the adoption and prescription of the generic *he* and the elimination of other gender-neutral pronoun choices, particularly singular *they*, became central. Bodine’s article, published in 1975, began a discussion that would eventually lead to the near elimination of generic *he* as the prescribed pronoun for sex-indefinite antecedents.

Essential to the decline of generic *he* was the establishment that it was not in fact a generic, but rather a sex-specific, pronoun. Feminist scholars conducted research that demonstrated a clear connection between masculine pronouns and male images. Individual studies showed that children, college students, and adults reported male

images associated with masculine pronouns in instances such as “Man needs food” and “Political Man” (Spender 151). The implication of these findings is that generic pronouns, rather than making gender irrelevant to the sentence, make gender the focus by forcing readers to discern whether the instance refers to the specific or the generic. Research found that female students did not think of themselves or women in general when given examples of generic masculine usages and that they were reluctant to use *he* and *man* as generics in their own writings (Spender 152).

At the time of her publication, Anne Bodine proposed that change in the usage of *he* as a gender-neutral pronoun was desirable, and argued that “pronominal systems are particularly susceptible to alteration in response to social change” because language as a whole changes constantly and often due to changing societal expectations and values (141). Historical perspective since Bodine’s publication shows that she was essentially correct about the effect of social change on pronoun usage, at least in the late twentieth century. Only five years after Bodine, Miller and Swift’s *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing* notes the “explosive increase in alternatives to ‘generic’ *he* in all media” (46). Other areas of language saw direct and measurable influence of feminist scholarship, as well, particularly the growth of content words to refer to women in roles previously held only by men (Lakoff 19).

Throughout this manuscript, I will discuss the methodologies of content analysis and intertextuality as I’ve employed them, feminist scholarship within the realm of sex and language, contemporary scholarship on epicene pronoun usage, and the data derived from *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Finally, in conclusion, I’ll discuss the importance of

gender-neutrality on a large scale, in the academy and in the outside world. My purpose is to examine this change from generic *he* to the current prescriptions that allow for many options when solving the riddle of gender-neutrality. This change is reflective of major changes within our society as well as our language. As the presence of women increases in our language, in powerful and central ways, the presence of women in the world increases. While pronouns are small words, they carry so much weight in our language system that they cannot be overlooked or pushed to the side. The work that they have done, in their own liberation movement, is essential to understanding the work that we have all done.

### **Methods of textual analysis**

Knowing that I was interested in the intersections between feminism and the prescriptions of pronouns, I needed to find a methodology that would guide me to answer questions about how one relied on and yet affected the other. Because this was both a linguistic and a rhetorical question, the methodology required some cobbling of strategies that were appropriate to both areas. Content analysis, the investigation of what texts mean and how they say it, and intertextuality, how texts affect each other, were brought together to make a methodology to investigate the interrelationships between feminism and style manuals.

Content analysis is the investigation of the meaning of texts. It can consist of qualitative or quantitative study, or a mixture of both, that looks to “uncover some underlying thematic or rhetorical pattern” (Huckin 14). This is a systematic review of

language patterns (words, phrases, usage patterns) that may demonstrate or explain a purpose or a position on the part of the author. The scholar who engages in content analysis determines a research question, creates one or more constructs of interest to investigate, chooses a corpus from which to work, looks for text features within that corpus, and finally analyzes what the data reveal (Huckin 16).

In many ways, content analysis is a part of what we do as discerning readers, though its application as a methodology is more systematic and analytical. The methodology is built around two different ways in which we evaluate the content of text for meaning: conceptual and relational analysis. Conceptual analysis is the coding of particular concepts or elements as they appear throughout the given text or corpus, lending itself to quantitative analysis, to look for patterns or rates of usage to demonstrate the presence of a given concept in the author's message (Huckin 14). Relational analysis looks at how a number of concepts work together within the text, investigating not only their presence within the text but also their connections to one another, which lends itself to qualitative analysis (Huckin 14).

Content analysis is not without fault, as Huckin discusses, because it can be objective if done on a completely quantitative basis but may leave the research with only surface level observations. Or, if the research is entirely qualitative in nature, it becomes subjective and dependent upon the biases of the researcher. Due to these difficulties, content analysis is often used in conjunction with another methodology, allowing for greater objectivity on the part of the researcher but more in-depth analysis of the data collected. Additionally, the two methods of conceptual and relational analysis can be

employed simultaneously to broaden the scope of the methodology, using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Intertextuality, like conceptual content analysis, looks for patterns of textual elements within a given text or corpus and is often a method of quantitative analysis. This difference is that intertextuality looks specifically for elements of text, such as words, phrases, or forms, which “echo certain ways of communicating” (Bazerman 89). This is the way in which texts are interrelated, depending on each other to create and further meaning and understanding, which Charles Bazerman described as “the sea of former texts that surround us, the sea of language we live in” (83). These connections may be direct, as in the use of direct and indirect quotation, or they may be subtle, making reference to a person or document related to an issue. Texts may be related to each other in ways that are unconscious or unintended by the author, by portraying “beliefs, issues, ideas, statements generally circulated and likely familiar to the readers” (Bazerman 87) that become part of the lexicon in a given discussion.

Intertextual analysis is structured similarly to content analysis, allowing for the two methodologies to work well together. The scholar who engages in this method develops a research question, looking specifically at what they hope to find and why they believe it will be there; chooses the texts with which to work, focusing on the interactions between these texts requires more than one text or corpus; searches the texts for language elements, key phrases, concepts or words; and finally analyzes the data found. The additional layer of intertextuality takes the conceptual and relational analysis of content analysis to another level, adding complexity to the research.

### **Developing a research question**

After reading about the historical evolution of our modern pronominal system, I knew that I was interested in looking at how this continued to grow and expand. The major changes in our pronoun usage had taken hundreds of years to take root, including the shift of *you*, the inclusion of *she*, and the prescription of generic *he*, yet the fall of generic *he* had only taken a matter of decades, a generation. What could have brought about such a rapid change in both the rules that govern usage and the usage itself? I suspected from the reading I had done that feminist theory was partially responsible for this shift, but was unsure that it could have done so in such a short amount of time. If education is the key to changing perspectives and ideas, then language manuals are the key to changing perspectives on language. These manuals are intended to both reflect the usage of the language and to guide the writer as to how to use the language, a delicate balance between showing how language is used and how it should be used. These manuals then are among the instruments that have implemented the changing perspectives on the appropriateness of generic *he*, since it was their predecessors that created the prescription.

From this, I developed a research question: In what ways did feminist theory, particularly the foundational texts on sex and language from the 1970s and '80s, affect the changing guidelines on gender-neutral pronouns in texts that define the rules of language use? If feminist theory was, as I suspected, the cause of this change, then I should be able to find evidence of that theory in the text of usage manuals.

**Textual data: *The Chicago Manual of Style***

Language use is guided by a number of different types of manuals throughout the English speaking world. American style is not the same as British style, which is not the same as Australian style, leading to different manuals guiding usage in different populations. Academic writing is guided by different organizations, depending on discipline, and these organizations are different than those that guide language within the fields of communications, newspapers, and publishing. Some of these guides have a limited publishing history, having only been published at the tail end of the change I was looking at. Others had reputations for being overly progressive, lending them to accept changes more quickly than others.

I landed upon *The Chicago Manual of Style* for a number of reasons. My familiarity, from both my educational experience and nationality, led me toward American style over the various other manifestations of English, though future research comparing the attitudes of American, British, and Australian guides towards ungrammatical forms, like split infinitives, singular *they*, and terminal prepositions is something I look forward to investigating on my own or reading from someone else. The *Manual* is also an acceptable industry standard as it provides guidelines for the book publishing industry, which crosses disciplines and genres. Finally, the publishing history of the *Manual* is more than 100 years, allowing for an extensive corpus from which to work, with data from before and after the feminist theory I would also be investigating.

*The Chicago Manual of Style* addresses epicene pronoun usage but also address the appropriateness of pronouns in other, more subtle ways. To be considered truly “generic,” a pronoun must refer to an indefinite antecedent of some kind, either an indefinite pronoun or a generic lexical noun phrase, with the antecedent being of unimportant or unknown gender. In modern language, especially given the increasing understanding of the fallibility of the traditional binary understanding of gender, these indefinite pronouns may refer to an antecedent whose gender is known but undisclosed, either by request of the person or by decision of the author. The concept of indefinite antecedents is explained further in Chapter 3. These complexities led me to also look for expressions of sexism in relation to pronouns. I looked for instances of sexist language related to unnamed female referents or hypothetical generic women, as well as named female referents. The specific text elements discussed throughout the *Manual* are explained further in Chapter 4.

### **Data collection and analysis**

I reviewed each of the sixteen editions of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, the first fifteen in print and the current edition through *The Chicago Manual of Style Online*. The *Manual* has changed dramatically across its history, with additions, retractions, and expansions; many sections that existed in the first edition are not present in the later editions, such as the “Hints” to authors and editors, while others were not added until later editions, such as the “Grammar” section included in the fifteenth and sixteenth

editions. One of the few sections present in all editions is the “Punctuation” section, and I drew much of the data from that section.

A remarkable feature of the *Manual* is the use of prose-style writing for the majority of the text, when most usage manuals are written in a dictionary style using entries for different concepts that are written in imperative form. Consider the *Associated Press Stylebook* or the *MLA Handbook*. Both are written using entries to explain specific concepts or topics or terms, with any additional prose written in imperative form, e.g., “Use the same standards for men and women in deciding whether to include specific mention of personal appearance or marital and family situation” (Associated Press 1977, 240). The *Manual*’s prose, however, is written in the third person using hypothetical authors and editors as subjects and objects, e.g., “An author who needs to make further changes after submitting files must alert the publisher immediately, before editing has begun” (15<sup>th</sup> edition, 60). This different prose style requires the use of pronouns, in the early editions the generic *he* in most cases and in the modern *Manual* a variety of methods. These instances were also used as data.

Additionally, I found archival evidence of the process by which the *Manual* was written and edited in the 1980s, including multiple articles written about the *Manual* and one written by one of the editors. This evidence was used in conjunction with the data collected from the text itself to create an understanding of the process of the editors in dealing with the growing feminist movement.

Using the methods of content analysis, the text of the editions was reviewed and coded for instances of epicene pronouns, for explanations of epicene pronouns, and for

evidence of sexism or attempts to avoid or reverse sexism. This data was then analyzed from an intertextual perspective for connections between the textual elements found in *The Chicago Manual of Style* and the ideas and beliefs portrayed in the feminist theory. From the data collected, a few themes emerged from the different sections portrayed: the early editions' use of the generic *he* and generic *she* and its effect on the surrounding text; the increasing presence of women's names and feminine pronouns in the "Punctuation" section; and the inclusion and expansion of advice on how to avoid sexist writing, beginning with the thirteenth edition. These themes are explained and expanded in Chapter 4.

#### **A note on the feminist researcher**

Finally, a researcher must acknowledge bias when entering into a project, realizing that their<sup>2</sup> intellectual and emotional connections to the research subject will affect the research process, the analysis, and the presentation of the data. Dale Spender discusses bias in research at great lengths in her book *Man Made Language*, advocating for the acknowledgement of bias in research to further the discussion. She brings up the argument that feminist research is politically geared towards women but, she says, "the difference is that feminism acknowledges its politics" (8). Since Spender wrote in the late '70s, the recognition of the positionality of the researcher has become a greater part of what is necessary in quality research.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this document, I will use singular *they* with indefinite antecedents. See Baron, Miller and Swift, and Merriam-Webster for discussion of the appropriateness of singular *they*.

There are two ways in which my positionality directly connects to this research project. First, I considered myself, for a long time, to be what Lynne Truss called a “stickler.” While I was unaware of any prescription for the generic *he* until higher education, I would never have allowed a sentence that used singular *they* to pass by unnoticed in writing. The research I conducted on the history of pronouns changed this perspective, I’m a little ashamed to admit, and I now advocate for the use of singular *they*, with proper citation, to anyone who is interested. My commitment to this discussion is what drew me to this research but, because of this awareness, I have attempted to separate the argument of this manuscript from the revival of singular *they* as much as possible. Instead, I have evaluated various epicene pronouns and tried to keep my opinion of the appropriateness of singular *they* to the discussions conducted in the introduction and conclusion, while participating in the usage throughout this text.

Second, I consider myself a feminist and consider this research to be feminist scholarship. This means I believed that I would find different attitudes toward men and women in this research and I believe the data support this expectation. I have attempted, as with my belief in the appropriateness of singular *they*, to keep this at a distance from my analysis of the data but am aware of the impossibility of such a premise. Instead, as Deborah Cameron suggests in the introduction to her book *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, “the word *I* appears frequently, and at many points I indicate exactly what argument I am trying to put forward” (viii). I hope for and encourage discussion, even disagreement with this manuscript and hope to simply stimulate thought and further communication on an issue that has been little discussed in the last 30 years.

## Chapter 2

### Feminist Criticism of Language: A Review of Relevant Literature

This manuscript, in fact any contemporary analysis of epicene pronouns, owes its conception to the foundational work of scholars of gender and language from the 1970s and '80s. Many of these texts respond to each other as a way of starting the dialogue on how language affects or is affected by gender and the relationships of the oppressed and their oppressors. The works of Robin Lakoff, Dale Spender, and Anne Bodine, among many others, are instrumental in beginning a discussion of how language and sex studies have affected how and what we write today.

For the purposes of this manuscript, I have included six texts, published between 1973 and 1986, which deal directly with epicene pronouns and the forces involved in their prescription and usage. I have arranged the review of these texts according to how the author addresses the subject: from a historical perspective, from a cultural perspective, or with a purpose of achieving progress or change. While all of the texts handle issues of history, culture, and change, the different purposes of the author become evident as we look at why they have written and the desired effect of that writing. Dennis Baron's *Grammar and Gender* is heavily influenced by a desire to describe the progression of language rather than to suggest future change while Casey Miller and Kate Swift are attempting to bring about change with their *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*.

## Historical perspectives

The etymological roots of sex-specific and sex-indefinite words and their historical usage are instructive not only on where words come from and how they have been used, but also how we think about them and the weight we give them in cultural situations. The folk linguistic understanding of *woman* as “woe to man,” or even derivative of *man*, has no basis in the etymological analysis of the word but can be described as having an effect on our cultural understanding of women (Baron 5). Examples like this abound in sex and language research and the question of how words were used and where they came from are relevant to how gendered language has changed and continues to change.

Anne Bodine’s “Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: Singular ‘They,’ Sex-Indefinite ‘He,’ and ‘He or She’” was originally published in 1975 in *Language in Society* and is one of the earliest well-known texts on sex and language. Bodine’s article focuses “on one small segment of the content of prescriptive grammar and explores the social factors behind the particular prescriptions and proscriptions that have been offered” (130). She investigates the changes in third person singular pronoun prescriptions through “two phases of attention,” looking at standardization at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and feminism beginning in 1970 (130).

Bodine’s argument is that the proscription of singular *they* and *he or she* by grammarians in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is rooted in androcentrism because there is no logical linguistic support for the use of *he* in the sex-indefinite (133). Prescriptivists of that era suggested that generic *he* was the only appropriate choice: *they* cannot function as a

singular and therefore disagrees with indefinite antecedents on basis of number and *he or she* is undesirable, described as “‘clumsy,’ ‘pedantic,’ or ‘unnecessary’” (133). Generic *he*, however, also disagrees with indefinite antecedents on basis of sex and other compound pronouns, such as *one or more*, are not discouraged, though they pose the same problems as *he or she*. Bodine suggests that singular *they* is actually more logical than generic *he* because “the plural logically includes the singular more than the masculine includes the feminine” (133) and that the decision on the part of prescriptivists to favor generic *he* demonstrates androcentrism because the social importance of gender, which elevates the male over the female, is more important than the logical value of number, which has no social significance.

Bodine’s article continues to address the prescriptivist movement as it moved through the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, finally achieving an Act of Parliament in 1850 “which legally replaced ‘he or she’ with ‘he’” (136) and standardized the usage of generic *he*. She then addresses the dissemination of this prescription through education, reviewing twenty-eight grammars for their suggested uses of epicene pronouns. She found that of these only three gave “adequate explanation of the use of ‘they’” while most simply stated the rule as it was accepted, labeling *they* as wrong and *he or she* as cumbersome (139). Even these three exceptions did not suggest any usage other than generic *he*, even though they discussed the difficulty of the accepted prescription, and only offered the revision suggestion of rewriting the sentence with a clearly plural antecedent. This revision suggestion will be seen again in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, examined in Chapter 4.

Dennis Baron's *Grammar and Gender* also examines the history of prescriptivism and how sex-specific and sex-indefinite terms have aided in the subjugation of women. Baron addresses the purpose of *Grammar and Gender* at the end of the first chapter, making it clear that he does not mean to exalt or defame the language of women or men: "rather we will examine how attitudes toward men and women have become attitudes toward language, attempting to place in historical perspective the current debate over sex and language" (10). Throughout the book, Baron evaluates multiple linguistic forms throughout English and looks at their historic and etymological origins and uses to construct his framework on the effects of language on gender, and gender on language. Beginning with biblical "origins" of gendered language, the stories of Adam's rib and the tower of Babel, Baron looks at the ways in which English speakers construct the concepts of *man* and *woman*.

After the introduction, the book covers a number of topics common in feminist linguistics, including the concepts of women's language, linguistic markers for words referring to both men and women, and the introduction of new words, discussing each from a historical perspective. "Women's Words," the chapter dealing with the language of female English speakers, discusses the long standing belief that women's language is "flawed" and filled with "defects," focusing on historical evidence of this belief, citing early dictionaries that "classed women with illiterates and foreigners" (71).

The penultimate chapter of *Grammar and Gender*, "The Word That Failed," deals specifically with the question of third person singular pronouns, detailing the historic applications of singular *they* and generic *he*, as well as the many attempts by speakers and

writers to create a new pronoun to fill the gap. Baron states “pronouns serve as the major linguistic expression of gender in Modern English” (190) and are both problematic and at the center of the debate over sex and language for this reason. Reformers have made multiple attempts, Baron cites more than eighty, to create a new epicene pronoun to solve the pronoun problem but little change has actually been accomplished.

Baron’s final recommendation on the topic is that of a multiple choice option, allowing writers and speakers to use singular *they* and forms of *he or she*, and if these options are “stylistically inappropriate, . . . rephrasing of sentences to eliminate the need for a sex-indefinite pronoun” (216). While this suggestion appears similar to that of the grammars studied by Bodine and contemporary style manuals, the difference is that Baron is suggesting revision only after attempting to use an epicene first. In fact, Baron warns that over-revising these sentences may “have the additional effect of reducing the frequency of English indefinites, which happen to be some of the most sex-neutral words in our language” (9).

The perspectives of Baron and Bodine provide a thorough historical backing for the discussion of sex and language and both works were influential on contemporary usage. Both suggest that there was a change approaching in the prescription and usage of epicene pronouns, though for different reasons, and the usage evidence of Chapters 3 and the prescription evidence of Chapter 4 of this manuscript would suggest that they were not only right but influential in making their predictions a reality.

### **Cultural perspectives**

Many of the feminist discussions of language focus on the cultural practice of language as it existed at their times of publication. Written by linguists in the '70s, these texts focus on how speakers were using the language at that time and how it related to the oppression and subjugation of women that they were experiencing or witnessing. Unlike Bodine and Baron, these authors only discuss historical perspectives on the issue as the groundwork for what they were observing in their contemporary culture. For the purposes of this manuscript, I have included the influential works of Robin Lakoff, Dale Spender, and Deborah Cameron in this section as each focuses on the practice of social linguistics in their contemporary culture.

Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* is often credited with being one of the first texts on sex and language that sparked the explosion of interest in the '70s and '80s. Published initially in 1973 as an article in *Language in Society*, the essay was so popular that Lakoff rewrote it, extending the discussion to book length, and republished it in 1975. In the preface to this edition, Lakoff suggests that "by looking at the way we customarily talk if we are women, or talk about women whoever we are, we can gain insight into the way we feel – about ourselves, about women" (1), suggesting that the solution to the disparity between men and women can be found in language.

Lakoff's text is divided into two sections. The first is based on her original essay and focuses on women's language and terms used for women; the second is original to the 1975 edition and focuses on issues of politeness as they relate to women's ability to break out of their linguistic roles. Common themes in sex and language research, women's language and terms used for women, are discussed at great length. Lakoff

handles them as linguistic evidence of oppression, looking for “what language use can tell us about the nature and extent of any inequity” (4) and offers a review of parallelism as evidence of this inequity.

A major argument within this text is based in Lakoff’s study of parallel linguistic terms, as she attempts to show that connotative differences between denotatively parallel terms is evidence of a cultural suppression of one gender by the other. One such parallelism she investigates is the term *lady* as a euphemism for *woman*, as it compares to the relationship between *gentleman* and *man*. Through numerous linguistic examples, she demonstrates “that if, in a particular sentence, both *woman* and *lady* might be used, the use of the latter tends to trivialize the subject... often subtly ridiculing the woman involved,” though no parallel relationship exists with *gentleman* and *man*, with *gentleman* often substituted for *man* in elevated situations (23). This a particularly effective example because *lady* is often considered to be a complimentary form, unlike the parallelism between *bachelor* and *spinster*, but Lakoff demonstrates that this appearance is contradictory to actual usage.

The second section of the text, “Why Women are Ladies,” deals specifically with the politeness aspect of women’s language, both the belief that women’s speech is more polite and the belief that this is natural. Lakoff takes issue with the position that “women are the preservers of morality and civility” (51) and argues that women are trained to be polite, while men are accepted as impolite and taught to expect politeness from women. This discrepancy adds to the inequality between men and women, in Lakoff’s opinion, rather than being a distinction that deserves accolades.

Since its publication, *Language and Woman's Place* has often come under fire, both from feminists and anti-feminists, on the grounds that Lakoff's research is sexist in construction and overstates the implications of her findings. Dale Spender discusses Lakoff in the opening chapter of her own book *Man Made Language* and argues that Lakoff's research is established under the "male-as-norm" doctrine that would make it "unlikely that [she] could have arrived at positive findings for women" (8). (This research premise is discussed further in the review of Spender's book that follows.) While many have found fault in Lakoff's methodology and her initial assumptions as an investigator, it is important to note, as Spender does, that *Language and Woman's Place* effectively opened the discussion of sex and language. Additionally, Lakoff extensively describes an essential concept within feminist linguistics, one that Spender would expand on greatly in her 1980 book: the idea that what we say affects what we think.

Much of Lakoff's book is rooted in the premise that "as much as our choice of forms of expression is guided by the thoughts we want to express, to the same extent the way we feel about the things in the real world governs the way we express ourselves about these things" (3). If what we say affects what we think, and vice versa, then the linguistic non-parallelism that exists between such terms as *lady/gentleman* and *bachelor/spinster* is both a cause and a result of the sexual disparity that exists in our culture. This connects to the concept of linguistic determinism that the words with which we express ourselves create the reality in which we live. This concept is essential to a

cultural perspective of sex and language because it is the foundation of the argument that language and culture are linked<sup>3</sup>.

Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* was published in 1980 and became a popular and scholastic favorite within the field. Both Dennis Baron and Deborah Cameron describe Spender's book as groundbreaking and extremely popular and credit it with bringing attention to the discussion. Spender, in turn, credits Lakoff and Bodine with opening the discussion of sex and language, and describes her own work as an extension of theirs (9). In fact, Spender's book, as an element of this cultural perspective on the issues of sex and language, is extensively grounded in the work of her contemporary scholars, lending her book a snapshot effect, as it presents a clear picture of the field at that time.

*Man Made Language* takes the historical discussion of Bodine and the contemporary discussion of Lakoff and combines them to look not only at the representations of cultural assumptions but also the effects of those assumptions on methodology in research. This focus on research is essential to the message of *Man Made Language*, which Spender describes in her preface to the second edition: "that men controlled the language and that it worked in their favour" (x). Spender evaluates the impact of this control on many aspects of linguistics, from the generation of new words to the connotative meaning of paired terms, but especially with how it relates to the formulation of research, both within linguistics and other fields.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that this is a linkage rather than a unidirectional causation. Strict linguistic determinism is no longer considered to be a valid theory within the field of linguistics. See Seetha Jayaraman for discussion on the theory as it is applied to modern linguistics.

Feminist researchers are often charged with giving an inappropriate priority to women, leading the research findings to favor them and their causes, and Spender acknowledges this. She argues, though, that all researchers allow their political decisions to color their findings; “The difference is that feminism acknowledges its politics” (8). Language researchers who work from the separation of language and women’s language are already applying the assumption that women’s language is deficient and secondary to the language of men, a political decision that the researchers are either aware of, and promoting, or unaware of, and still promoting. Spender explains that most sex and language research is written from this assumption and calls it the “male-as-norm syndrome” (2).

Spender discusses tag questions as an example. Though tag questions were originally thought to be a sign of women’s hesitance and uncertainty (see, e.g., Lakoff) in conversation, corpus studies of the 1970s suggested a greater occurrence of tag questions in the language of men (Spender 9). The interesting thing about this example, according to Spender, is that when these findings were introduced, researchers began looking for reasons for this deviation from the expectation. They suggested errors in the research, including mislabeling the tag questions as “something else,” disregarded information, or other lapses on the part of the researcher (9). Never was it suggested that men’s language be investigated further to find other examples of hesitance or uncertainty, or that the language of men, or even just these men in this study, might be deviant or deficient compared to the norm. This is, for Spender, an example of the “distortions in the research process” (9) that come from male-as-norm syndrome.

The concept of “minus male” (Spender 19) is a part of this theory and is central to the arguments of the prescriptivist movement of the eighteenth century. The argument for generic *he* is rooted in the idea that the male gender can be the generic gender, subsuming the female into itself. Spender describes the work of Julia Stanley, a feminist linguist who found that this theoretical framework organizes language not just into language and women’s language but rather into plus and minus male (19). Male incorporates the norm, with the male as the standard, and minus male incorporates the abnormal, with women or girls as substandard, creating the understanding that male is the unmarked form, with minus male as the marked form. “The assumption is that the world is male unless proven otherwise” (Spender 20).

Essential to the argument of this manuscript, and the central argument of many feminists, is that language is not a passive vessel that carries communication from one person to another but rather an active factor in how and why ideas are developed. This is discussed at length in Spender’s chapter, “Language and Reality,” where she argues, “language is not neutral” and “is itself a shaper of ideas, ... the programme for mental activity” (139). If this version of linguistic determinism that gives language the power to create and control thought and culture is accepted, then the argument that *he* can function as a generic is impossible and the use and prescription of it perpetuates sexism within our culture just as much as within our language. Just as we have to learn to interpret what it is that we see and hear through the networks connecting our eyes, ears, and brain, we learn to interpret what it is that we know through the network of our language. A great example of this concept from feminist reform of the ‘70s can be seen in the creation of the term

*sexual harassment*. Lin Farley, a researcher from Cornell University in 1978, found that women were commonly describing troubles with being uncomfortable with “the behavior of men” and realized that the term was essentially nameless (qtd in Spender 184). The creation of the term allowed women a name for a problem that had existed for as long as anyone could describe, giving them a powerful position to work from. Rather than describing what had happened, leaving them open for ridicule and questioning, women were able to label the problem, “[shifting] the locus of responsibility and blame ... with women’s naming of this phenomenon” (Spender 185).

Deborah Cameron’s book, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, warns feminists and linguists about jumping to conclusions about sex and language based on these arguments, saying “language itself does not guarantee communication, and many feel actually inhibited by the inadequacy of words” (5). Cameron takes issue with linguists like Spender, who blur the lines between “sexist attributes of *language* [and] the sexism projected on to language in the analytic responses of linguists” (71), arguing instead that both have an equal effect on the cultural practice of language. The concept of minus male is a fault of the researcher, according to Cameron, and a valuable and rich vein of research for feminists—but as a social act of language, rather than an innate quality of the language itself (60). *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* covers many of the same concepts within sex and language as other works, including sex difference in language, grammar and gender, and the alienation of language, but each is covered through the somewhat skeptical eye of Cameron, who looks to make the distinction between the sexism in language and the sexism in language practice.

Cameron specifically deals with variations of gender in her chapter “False Dichotomies,” where she directly addresses the semantic model of componential analysis, or plus and minus male, as well as the “natural” case for gender assignments. Cameron discusses the prevailing linguistic model that language either exists in binary opposition (*young* and *old*) or “that making binary classifications of this type is an important element in human cognition,” but argues that these terms exist not in opposition but instead on a continuum and warns that the linguist who accepts such a premise “has been fooled by the language” (59). Additionally, Cameron discusses gender in three different aspects: grammatical gender, natural gender, and common gender. Many anti-feminist and prescriptive arguments for grammatical gender, and the root of the promotion of generic *he*, are based on the idea that grammatical gender is an extension of natural gender. Cameron provides examples from linguists and philologists from Greece to modern Germany that the grammatical gender of nouns and adjectives is reflective of qualities inherent in what the word represented, suggesting that natural gender is the force behind grammatical gender. However, this connection is based on the same sexist assumptions that prevented sex and language researchers from appreciating their own biases in their research, and feminists “have pointed out that English gender is natural only if you are a man” (Cameron 63).

### **Progressive perspectives**

Each of these texts relies on the argument that there are inadequacies both within the language structure and lexicon as well as the practice of language. Due to their

scholarly nature, however, each is essentially built around the idea of describing how the language exists and is used, either contemporarily or historically, with progress and change being secondary considerations. Each focuses on evidence of sexism, with the understanding that opening the discussion will promote change through the act of increasing awareness. Many of the authors' feminist contemporaries used a practice called consciousness-raising, "where women uncover the roots and the precise nature of their oppression by talking to each other about their experience" (Cameron 5), and these texts are essentially rooted in this idea. Lakoff and Spender both specifically state that their research is done with the purpose of opening the discussion, rather than ending it. For this reason, all of the theorists examined thus far, though willing to assert the need or inevitability of change, avoid prescribing usage.

An exception to this is *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing: For Writers, Editors and Speakers* by Casey Miller and Kate Swift. Based on previous work that Miller and Swift had published on sexism in language, this handbook was originally published in 1980 with the intention of providing simple and easily implemented guidelines for avoiding sexism in language (ix). The book is not laid out exactly like other style manuals; it is organized thematically, rather than alphabetically, and deals with many of the same concepts as other sex and language texts, including epicene pronouns, false generic forms of *-man*, and parallelism. The key difference in Miller and Swift is that it is written as a guide, intending that what is discussed will be implemented immediately. This leads to a brevity of language and tone that marks *The Handbook* as a popular reference work, rather than a scholarly discussion.

In spite of its casual language, Miller and Swift's text is still extremely insightful and directly addresses the problems with prescription within style manuals. The opening chapter, "Man as a False Generic" devotes a section to the use of *-man* as a suffix, particularly in nouns describing roles such as *chairman*, *salesman*, or *spokesman*. In this section, Miller and Swift take issue with *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*, which in 1982 proscribed the usage of *spokeswoman* and *spokesperson*, as well as *chairwoman* and *chairperson*. *The Associated Press Stylebook* also dislikes *-person* terms and in the 2013 edition still suggests the use of terms ending in *-woman* or *-man*, or opting for gender-neutral terms such as *representative* and *chair* as appropriate. Just as the prescriptions for epicene pronouns are often ignored (see Chapter 3), Miller and Swift point that *chairwoman* was used in *The Times* despite its prohibition, saying that "everyone knows that style manuals are no sooner published than that they tend to become embarrassingly passé" (31).

Each of these texts provides an integral part in the feminist discussion of sex and language, though each comes from a different perspective, and each is working toward a more thorough understanding of sexism in English, hoping for progress towards a language with fewer instances of institutionalized sexism. Chapter 4 of this manuscript will further develop the ways in which these texts and their ideas changed the language of style manuals and the prescription of epicene pronoun use.

## Chapter 3

### Reviving Singular *They*: Contemporary Epicene Pronoun Usage Studies

To best appreciate the need for a solution to the pronoun problem, and to appreciate the growing acceptance of alternatives to generic *he*, it is important to examine how pronouns are being used in English today. The majority of usage studies conducted on epicene pronouns have been with limited corpuses, usually consisting of a sampling of writings within a given genre and within a given data range. Examples include newspapers (e.g., Balhorn, “Epicene Pronoun”; Baranowski), student writing (e.g., Meyers), and teaching decisions (e.g., Pauwels and Winter). Each of these studies evaluates usage of gender-neutral pronouns within a specific data set to determine patterns that may shed light on how writers and speakers make usage decisions concerning epicene pronouns.

A synthesis of these studies shows several factors in choice of pronoun: indefinite vs. generic antecedents; sex-neutral vs. sex-stereotyped antecedents; and the sex of the writer. One of the unifying factors between these areas, as is demonstrated by the data, is the awareness on the part of the author: the more aware an author is of their pronoun usage and its appearance as biased or unbiased, the more likely they are to use a gender-neutral option.

#### **Indefinite pronouns vs. generic noun phrase antecedents**

The author's need to use an epicene pronoun is preceded by an antecedent that is genderless, for which gender is either unspecified or irrelevant. These antecedents fall into two major categories: indefinite pronouns and generic noun phrases (also termed lexical noun phrases). Indefinite pronouns (IPs) are nominative phrases, meaning they function as nouns in their own right by referring to indefinite subjects. These are best typified as the *-body*, *-one*, and *-thing* words and include the derivative forms of *every-*, *any-*, and *some-*. Indefinite pronouns are typically used in statements that are meant to generalize responses, behaviors, or beliefs of all people or those within a given group. Generic noun phrases (NPs) function in the same way but consist of nouns rather than pronouns. They are meant to stand for a class or group of people with a singular form, examples being *a person*, *a client*, *a patient*, or *an employee*. These are often used to refer to a hypothetical member of a given group, again generalizing responses, behaviors, or beliefs.

While both of these nominatives are used to represent a single individual within a group, the usage studies surveyed found that they were treated differently by writers. Balhorn's study examined the different antecedent pronoun pairs used in five American newspapers between 2004 and 2006, comparing how often IPs (specifically, *somebody/one* and *anybody/one*) and NPs (sixteen specific NPs) were paired with the epicene pronoun options of *he*, *they*, *she*, and *he or she* (405). Balhorn found that singular *they* was the most common choice of pronoun with an IP antecedent, occurring in 54% of pairings (see fig 1). Generic *he* was the second most common choice for IPs, occurring in 32% of pairings, generic *she* occurring in 7% of pairings and *he or she* was

chosen the least often, occurring in only 6% of pairings. Comparatively, pronoun choices for NPs were more varied, and the preferences were different. Generic *he* was the most common choice, occurring in 38% of pairings, with *he or she* nearly as common, occurring in 34% of pairings. Singular *they* occurred in 23% of pairings.

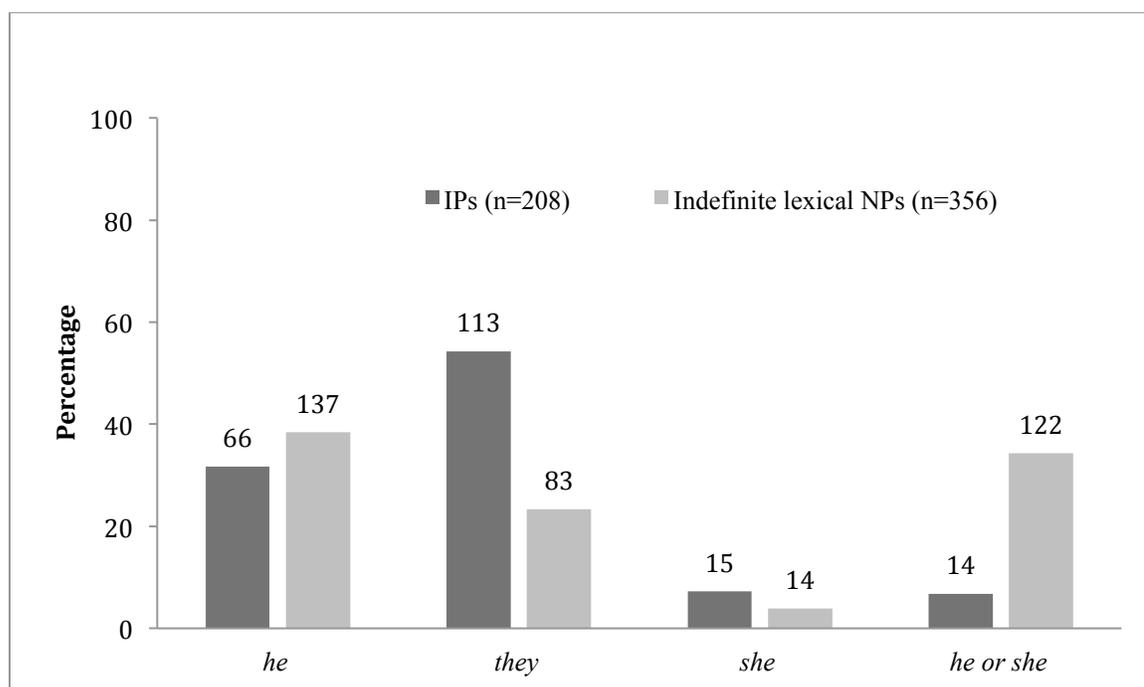


Fig. 1. Antecedent type and pronoun choice. Source: Balhorn, Mark, “The Epicene Pronoun in Contemporary Newspaper Prose,” *American Speech* 84.4 (2009); 399; Print.

These data clearly indicate that writers are more comfortable using both generic *he* and singular *they* with IPs than they are with generic *she* or *he or she*. It is also clear

that writers prefer the single epicene options, either generic *he* or *he or she*, when using generic NPs.

The writer's understanding of the plurality or singularity of an antecedent, its notional number, was also a factor in determining these pronoun pairings. Notional number differs from grammatical number because it refers to how the writer or speaker perceives the word. *Jane* is grammatically singular because she is only one person. When a writer or speaker uses *Jane*, they understand that *Jane* is singular, which makes her notionally singular as well. *Police force* is grammatically singular, since it is a collective noun, and takes a singular verb. However, *police force* is notionally plural because the writer or speaker understands that comprises a number of different individuals (see Balhorn "Epicene"). This same distinction can be seen in IPs. All IPs are grammatically singular; all forms of *-body*, *-one*, and *-thing* words take a singular verb but their notional number varies. IPs using *every-* are notionally plural, meaning the writer or speaker understands them to refer to more than one person despite their grammatical number. *Some-* words are notionally singular and *any-* words are notionally neutral, (see Balhorn "Epicene"). Balhorn found that the variations of notional number among IPs was one of the factors to the increased use of singular *they*, which is grammatically plural, as compared to generic NPs, which are notionally and grammatically singular (397).

The antecedent-pronoun pairings among IPs further demonstrates the effects of notional number on writers' decisions (see table 1). Writers in Balhorn's study paired *someone/body* with singular *they* 61.5% of the time, while *anyone/body* and

*everyone/body* were paired with singular *they* 78.4% and 89.1% of the time, respectively. This suggests that the notional plurality of *everyone/body* is strongly connected to the use of singular *they*. The neutrality of *anyone/body* allowed for a high rate of pairings with singular *they*, as well. Since even *someone/body*, which is both grammatically and notionally singular, was paired with singular *they* more than 50% of the time, there may also be a general desire on the part of writers to avoid gendering IPs.

Table 1: Antecedent Type and Percentage of *They*

	Uses of Singular <i>They</i>	Total Number of Incidents	Percentage
<i>Someone/body</i>	152	247	61.5
<i>Anyone/body</i>	87	111	78.4
<i>Everyone/body</i>	180	202	89.1
TOTAL		560	

Source: Balhorn, Mark, "The Epicene Pronoun in Contemporary Newspaper Prose;"

*American Speech* 84.4 (2009); 397; Print.

Writers' desire to avoid gendering an IP that is notionally singular is made even clearer when examining instances where the gender of the referent is known. Balhorn found that writers chose singular *they* 20.4% of the time with *someone/body* in specific instances (402). This means that writers were choosing to use a gender-neutral epicene in

instances where the gender of the referent was known, both to the writer and the reader<sup>4</sup>. This awareness of the appearance of sexism or the importance of avoiding gendering is also a factor in pronoun pairing with generic noun phrases antecedents when NPs are separated into categories of sex-neutral and sex-stereotyped.

### **Sex-neutral vs. sex-stereotyped noun phrase antecedents**

Generic noun phrases often denote positions or titles within society or organizations. Due to this denotation, they often carry connotations related to the understood power of these positions, which is translated into sex-stereotyping. Examples include *a doctor* and *a nurse*, which have traditionally been associated with men and women, respectively. These sex-stereotyped NPs were studied in opposition to sex-neutral NPs in Balhorn's study, as well as the study conducted by Pauwels and Winter.

Balhorn reviewed his corpus for pronoun pairings with sex-neutral and sex-stereotyped NPs and found that usage of singular *they* dropped greatly (407). In 68 instances of sex-stereotyped NPs, writers chose singular *they* in only 4 cases, less than 6% (see fig 2). Comparatively, the study found that writers chose *he or she* more often than any other pronoun, 51% of pairings, with generic *he* coming in second at 39%. With sex-neutral NPs, however, Balhorn found in 288 instances, writers chose singular *they*, *he or she*, and generic *he* at very similar rates, 27%, 30%, and 38%, respectively.

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<sup>4</sup> Balhorn gives the example of "A PERSON like that ... needs time to serve THEIR sentence in jail" in a newspaper article about a criminal suspect, where the gender of the suspect was known in the article (396).

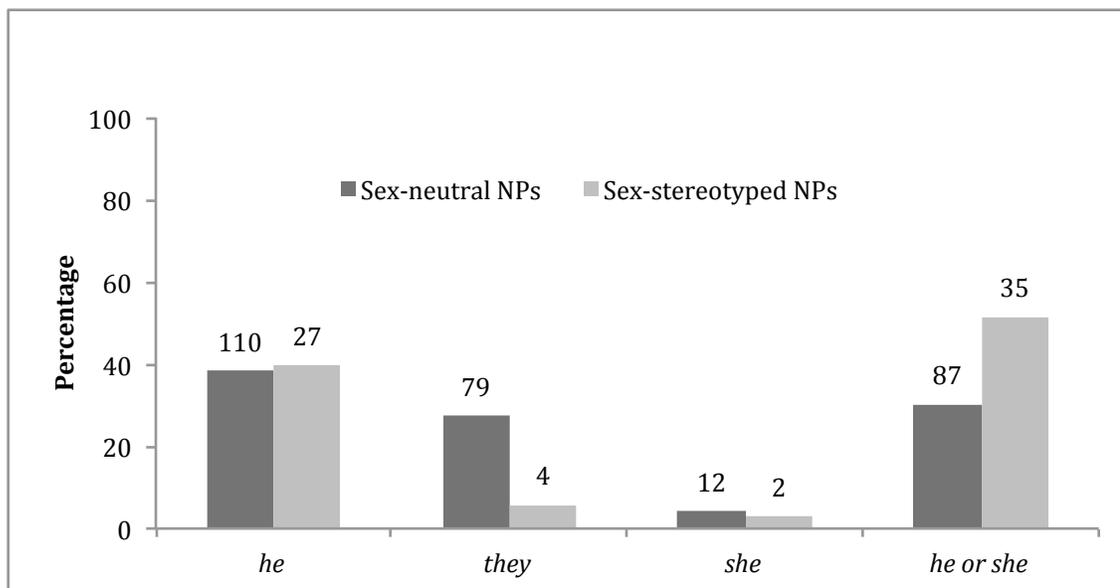


Fig. 2 Sex-neutral versus sex-stereotyped NP antecedents. Source: Balhorn, Mark, “The Epicene Pronoun in Contemporary Newspaper Prose;” *American Speech* 84.4 (2009);407; Print.

Pauwels and Winters surveyed 182 teachers in the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels for their usage of gender-neutral pronouns both inside and outside the classroom. Participants were asked to pair pronouns with four specific sex-stereotyped NPs—a *real estate agent*, a *teacher*, a *lawyer*, and a *prisoner*—and found that in each of these instances, writers were much more likely to choose a gender-neutral option, such as *he or she* or singular *they*, than a generic *he* or *she* (134). *Real estate agent* and *teacher* were most often paired with *he or she*, 45% and 48%, respectively, while *lawyer* and *prisoner* were most often paired with singular *they*, 63% and 55%, respectively (see fig. 3). Generic *she* was only ever paired with *teacher*, a traditionally female occupation, and

then only in 7% of examples. Generic *he* was paired with *real estate agent* more often than any other NP but only then in 17% of examples.

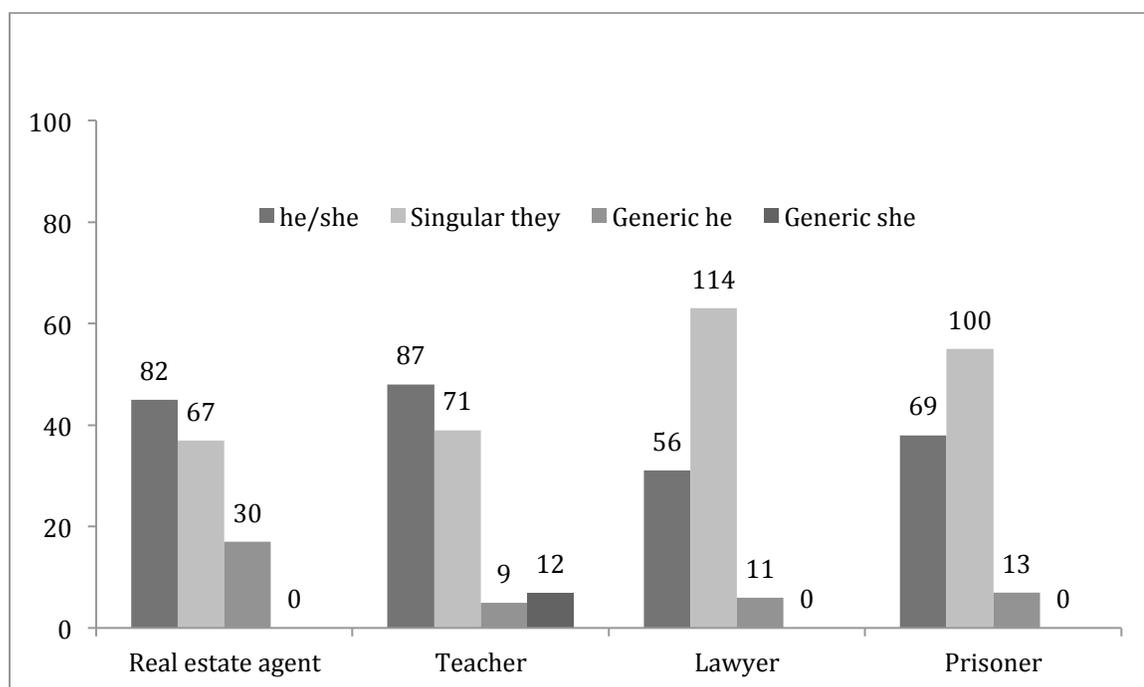


Fig. 3. Pronoun percentages for antecedents. Source: Pauwels, Anne, and Joanne Winter, “Gender Inclusivity or ‘Grammar Rules OK’? Linguistic Prescriptivism vs. Linguistic Discrimination in the Classroom;” *Language and Education* 20.2 (2006);134; Print.

Both studies demonstrate that in the case of sex-stereotyped NPs, authors are more likely to choose *he or she* or singular *they*. This would indicate that writers feel that these options are more gender-neutral than the generic use of *he* or *she*, in spite of the definition of singular *they* as grammatically incorrect. Writers are attempting to construct

their sentences to avoid appearing sexist or to avoid gendering a NP in a way that they may later have to retract or reword.

### **Sex of the writer/speaker**

Balhorn and Pauwels and Winter found additional layers of the question of usage when they examined the different rates for male and female writers, as did an additional study by Miriam Watkins Meyers. Balhorn found that with IPs, men used generic *he* and singular *they* at very similar rates, 41.6% and 46%, respectively (401). Men used generic *she* or *he or she* at very low rates, 5.3% and 7.1% respectively (see fig. 4).

Comparatively, women writers used singular *they* at a rate of 64.3% and generic *he* only 17.1%. They were as likely as men to choose *he or she* (7.1%), but much more likely to choose generic *she* (11.4%).

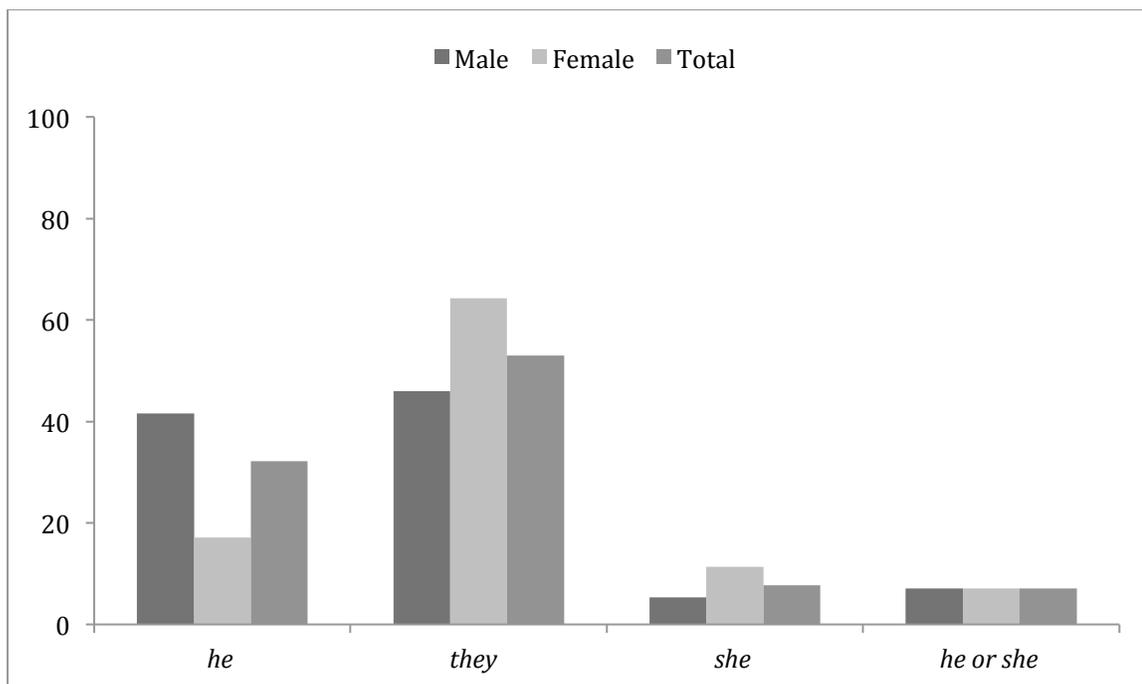


Fig. 4. Comparison of writer sex and pronoun choice for IP pairings. Source: Balhorn, Mark, "The Epicene Pronoun in Contemporary Newspaper Prose;" *American Speech* 84.4 (2009); 402; Print.

While Pauwels and Winter's study also found that women were less likely to use generic *he*, their findings differed from Balhorn's regarding the other epicene pronouns. They found that female teachers were more likely than males to choose *he or she* with IPs, 23% as compared to 11% respectively, but less likely to choose singular *they* or generic *he* (135). Female teachers were also more likely to choose *he or she* with *real estate agent* or *teacher*, 50% and 49% respectively, as compared to male teachers, 38% and 32% respectively (see table 2). Female teachers were also more likely to choose singular *they* than males in every pairing with NPs: 39% compared to 35% with *real*

*estate agent*, 46% compared to 28% with *teacher*, 68% compared to 51% with *lawyer*, and 58% compared to 50% with *prisoner*. Part of this difference appears in the fact that male teachers were more likely than female teachers to choose generic *he* in every instance. An interesting dimension of Pauwels and Winter's study was the usage of generic *she*. Both male and female teachers only paired generic *she* with *teacher* and, despite the fact that these were male teachers, males were far more likely to do so, 15% as compared to 3% of females.

Table 2: Percentage of Pronoun Choices for Antecedents by Sex of Teacher

	<i>He or she</i>		<i>They</i>		Generic <i>he</i>		Generic <i>she</i>	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Someone	23	11	75	85	2	4	0	0
Real estate agent	50	38	39	35	11	27	0	0
Teacher	49	32	46	28	2	10	3	15
Lawyer	30	34	68	51	2	10	0	0
Prisoner	36	42	58	50	6	8	0	0

Source: Pauwels, Anne and Joanne Winter, "Gender Inclusivity or 'Grammar Rules OK'?"

Linguistic Prescriptivism vs Linguistic Discrimination in the Classroom;"

*Language and Education* 20.2 (2006);135; Print.

Meyers conducted a review of pronoun usage by 392 juniors and seniors at a Midwestern university (230). Students were required to write an essay for graduation

addressing the topic of “an educated person,” and Meyers coded the corpus for pronoun pairings with this generic NP. Meyers found that both male and female students were mostly likely to use an approach other than singular, 27.6% and 34.7% respectively (see table 3); most likely the writer chose to pluralize the NP and eliminate the need for a gender-neutral pronoun option, as is suggested by many style manuals.

When writers did choose a singular pronoun, the most common usage was an inconsistent mix of pronouns from both male and female writers, 17.2% and 17.1% respectively. In instances where students chose a singular pronoun and used it consistently throughout their essay, female students most often used singular *they* (10.2%), followed by generic *he* (9.3%) and a compound pronoun construction like *he/she* or *he or she* (7.9%). Female students were the only ones to use generic *she*, 4.2%, or *it*, 0.5%, which is almost never chosen with human antecedents. In consistent singular usage, male students chose generic *he* most often (17.2%), followed by singular *they* (12.6%) and *he or she* (6.3%).

Table 3: Pronoun Approach by Sex of Writer

	Female	Male	Total
Other than singular	34.7	27.6	31.5
Inconsistent	17.1	17.2	17.2
Generic <i>he</i>	12	25.3	17.9
Singular <i>they</i>	14.8	16	15.4
<i>He or she</i>	12.5	10.3	11.5
<i>One</i>	4.1	3.4	3.8
Generic <i>she</i>	4.2	0	2.3
<i>It</i>	0.5	0	0.3

Source: Meyers, Miriam Watkins, "Current Generic Pronoun Usage: An Empirical Study;" *American Speech* 65.3 (1990); 233; *JSTOR*; Web; 14 Feb 2013.

A synthesis of these three studies shows that the writer's sex will affect which pronoun they choose in specific instances. Across all three studies, men were more likely than women to use generic *he*, with both NPs and IPs. Balhorn and Meyers found that women were more likely to use generic *she*; while Pauwels and Winter found that male teachers chose generic *she* more often but this was only when paired with *teacher*, suggesting that in this case the pronoun may have been linked to the NP rather than the sex of the writer. Meyers' study showed that male writers never used generic *she*. This suggests that female writers were using the generic because they were considering themselves as the example of "an educated person." In most instances, each study found that women were more likely than men to choose singular *they*, with the only exception being Pauwels and Winter's teachers with *someone*.

Reviewing all of these studies together shows that women may be more sensitive to the gender-neutrality of pronouns paired with IPs and NPs and consider the single-sex generics of *he* and *she* to be insufficient. This is consistent with psychological research that found women more likely than men to question the generic nature of *he* (see Gastil).

## **Conclusions**

Each of these studies demonstrates an element of how writers use gender-neutral pronouns, and the synthesis of all of them suggests that writers' decisions about gender-

neutral pronouns are complex and intricate. Many different motivations may be at play as a writer chooses a gender-neutral pronoun for a given situation; antecedent, notional number, appearance of sexism, and self-recognition are important factors in the decision process.

Understanding how writers make these decisions underscores the complexity of this issue in writing and the importance of its prescription from style manuals. This is a question that writers struggle with and will look to expert advice for guidance. Style manuals stand in a position to aid writers in making this decision by clearly spelling out the options, allowing writers the choice of “ungrammatical” options, specifically singular *they*, in instances where compound pronouns will not work, and acknowledging the sexism of generic *he* and proscribing its usage.

## Chapter 4

### *The Chicago Manual of Style* and the Evolution of Generic *He*

When the University of Chicago was founded in 1891, President William Rainey Harper “believ[ed] that the university should spread knowledge abroad in print as well as through lecturing to its students on campus” and thus the University of Chicago Press was created (Seybold 163). From the beginning, the proofroom circulated a sheet with necessary rules, creating a standard under which all employees could carry out their jobs. Eventually, that sheet became the *Manual of Style*, originally published in 1906, and was circulated throughout the offices of the Press and its subsidiary journals. It spread quickly to other printing houses and a second edition was published in 1911, when the Press realized that its manual could be used commercially. More than one hundred years later, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, commonly referred to as the *Manual* by its devotees, is in its sixteenth edition and has changed dramatically from the small book published in 1906.

*The Chicago Manual of Style* has gone through many changes in its sixteen editions, in ways that make it almost a different book at points. Even the title has changed, from the original *Manual of Style* to *A Manual of Style* and then finally, with the thirteenth edition (1982), it adopted its popular title of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Additionally, the sections of the manual have been added, cut, moved, renamed, or completely rewritten across the many editions. These changes have made working with *The Manual* as a data set a difficult task and for this reason I have isolated specific sections and specific editions to compare for the purpose of this research. With the

purpose of investigating the treatment of epicene pronouns and generic antecedents, I have most closely worked with the following aspects: the “Punctuation” section, which has been present in every edition; the “Hints” sections, which were eliminated in the twelfth edition (1969) in favor of the “Bookmaking” section; the making of the twelfth (1969) and thirteenth (1982) editions; and advice on avoiding sexist writing, which began appearing in the thirteenth edition (1993).

Each of these areas offers insight into a particular aspect of how *The Chicago Manual of Style* has handled the questions of gender-neutrality and common-gender pronouns. The evolution of the example sentences in the “Punctuation” section demonstrates a growing awareness of a female readership. The “Hints” sections, which used *he*, with one exception, to refer to the hypothetical members of the publishing organization, show either an acceptance of *he* as a generic or the absence of women in most publishing positions prior to 1982. The transitional periods in which the *Manual* underwent substantial revisions, such as between the editions mentioned above, also reveal an evolving awareness of the growing need for gender-neutrality.

### **“Punctuation”**

The “Punctuation” section has been present in each edition of the *Manual* and is one of the most unchanged sections, alongside the sections on capitalization, spelling, and how to use italics and quotations. Originally, these made up the main portion of the *Manual* prose, called “Rules for Composition,” but they have been moved to different sections, and in the most recent edition (16<sup>th</sup> edition 2010) they make up the majority of

“Part Two: Style and Usage.” Many of the rules of punctuation outlined have not changed, so this section offers a chance to look at changing perspectives at the Press by analyzing the examples that are offered after each rule.

In the first edition (1906) the “Punctuation” section outlines the usage of most punctuation marks, including periods, exclamation points, interrogation points (question marks), colons, semicolons, and commas. Each portion of the chapter is made up of points, which are numbered throughout the *Manual*; the “Punctuation” section covers points 108 to 197. Each point is accompanied by at least one example to illustrate the rule that is being explained. Over the twenty-eight-page section, only six examples reference women in any way, with only one using an unnamed female subject.

Point 128, the first explanation for the use of commas, includes a paragraph of examples, one of which is: “‘Behind, her ‘stage mother’ stood fluttering with extra wraps” (46). Because there is no context for this example, there is no way of knowing the referent for *her*, and the statement in no way requires the use of a female pronoun. This is the only example of what could be considered a generic feminine pronoun in the first edition. Such usages will become more common in later editions and will be referred to hereafter as “unnamed referents.”

The additional pronominal references to women throughout the “Punctuation” section are much more sexist in their construction, including examples such as “‘Gossiping, women are happy;’ and: ‘Gossiping women are happy’” (46), and “About [the year] 1840, daughters of self-respecting Americans worked in cotton-mills” (46). There is also a reference that uses feminine pronouns for countries: “Neither France for

her art, nor Germany for her army, nor England for her democracy, etc.” (47), a usage generally considered to be sexist by today’s standards, which remains in the *Manual* through the eleventh edition (1949).

The “Punctuation” section in the first edition (1906) does also include many examples of sentences that use male pronouns when it is not indicated that the antecedent must be male. Just as in the case of the “stage mother” example, this is not technically a generic use of *he* since there is no noun phrase or indefinite pronoun functioning as the antecedent, but an instance of an unnamed male, where the name of the antecedent may exist but is unknown in the sentence. However, since the examples exist only in their isolation, it must be considered that there are an overwhelming number of examples that use *he* when either pronoun could function within the sentence. An example of *man* as a generic comes in a point regarding the use of semicolons: “Are we giving our lives to perpetuate the things that the past has created for its needs ... or are we thinking of living men?” (44). Point 194 offers the only noun phrase example of generic *he*: “If the student thinks to find ... he must not look...” (67), while point 114, illustrating exclamation point usage, pairs generic *he* with an indefinite pronoun, then expresses shock at the use of singular *they*: “The speaker went on: ‘Nobody should leave his home tomorrow without a marked ballot in their (!) pocket.’” (41).

The “Punctuation” section remained largely unchanged through the first eleven editions. Each of the examples discussed from the first edition (1906) is present in the next ten editions with a few exceptions: the mention of the “daughters of self-respecting Americans” is dropped after the first edition, “woman-like” as an example of

hyphenation is dropped after the fourth edition (1914), and “if the student thinks... he must...” is also missing after the fourth edition. With the twelfth edition (1969), though, major changes can be seen in the example sentences that are used<sup>5</sup>. Each edition, from the twelfth to the sixteenth (2010), would increase the presence of women as named and unnamed referents, as well as their connection to professional titles, in the “Punctuation” section examples.

Unnamed referents using the feminine pronoun are not common in the eleventh edition (1949), which contains only the example using “stage mother” retained from the first edition (1906); most of the unnamed referents are still male. Additionally, no feminine pronouns are used in connection with professions, which are connected only to male pronouns as in “The delegates had hoped that the mayor himself, not his assistant, would be present” (113), with one exception: “The elderly woman sitting beside McFetridge was his nurse” (110). Since nursing is a profession associated with women nearly exclusively, even today, the exception is not given much weight. The twelfth edition (1969) demonstrates a marked difference in the presence of women in the examples of the “Punctuation” section. There is a great increase in named referents that are female, e.g., “Shelly had proved a faithful, sincere friend” (112), but all of the referents that are named by only surnames are male, e.g., “Bardston – he is to be remembered for his outspokenness in the Wainscott affair – had asked for permission to address the assembly” (111).

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<sup>5</sup> This is not the only major change in the twelfth edition, as this edition marks one of the biggest revisions in the history of the *Manual*, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

The revision that occurred between the twelfth (1969) and the thirteenth editions (1982) was substantial in many ways, many of which are direct reactions to feminism and “the women’s movement” (DeBacher 38), and there is a virtual explosion of women in the “Punctuation” section. The section itself is slightly bigger, growing from 23 to 26 pages, and the examples are written with a clear interest in making women visible. The number of unnamed referents, both male and female, is reduced and most examples are constructed with first or second person pronouns, plural *they*, or named subjects and objects. The number of named referents increases greatly and many of these new examples use women’s names, e.g., “From then on, Gloria became increasingly annoyed by what she later referred to as Sidney’s ‘excessive discretion’” (134). Connections between women and professions are increased, e.g., “Elizabeth was out of the office when I called, so I left a message” (147), but no generic professions are referred to with a female pronoun, e.g., “The chancellor—he had been awake half the night waiting in vain for a reply—came down to breakfast in an angry mood” (150).

The presence of women in the examples continued to grow through the editions. Table 4 shows a selection of examples and how they changed between the twelfth (1969) and the sixteenth (2010) editions. One example, “How can the two women be reconciled? was the question on everyone’s mind” (136) is particularly interesting because of the change from the twelfth edition, which used “two men” in the example sentence. There is no explanation for this change, beyond the desire on the part of the editors to increase the presence of women in the *Manual* (see “Making the Thirteenth Edition” below). As Table 4 indicates, the example continued to use “two women” until the fifteenth edition (2003)

when it became “The question, how can the two be reconciled? was on everyone’s mind” (259), and then in the sixteenth (2010) the example was dropped from the point entirely. The elimination of the word “women” in the fifteenth edition (2003) may also indicate awareness that while it makes the gender more visible, the rest of the sentence makes that visibility somewhat stereotypical.

Table 4: Comparison of Selected Examples from the “Punctuation” Section of *The Chicago Manual of Style* from 1969-2010

12 <sup>th</sup> Edition (1969)	13 <sup>th</sup> Edition (1982)	14 <sup>th</sup> Edition (1993)	15 <sup>th</sup> Edition (2003)	16 <sup>th</sup> Edition Online (2010)
“How can <i>the two men</i> <sup>a</sup> be reconciled? was on everyone’s mind” (107).	“How can <i>the two women</i> be reconciled? was the question on everyone’s mind” (136).	“How can <i>the two women</i> be reconciled? was the question on everyone’s mind” (163).	“The question, how can <i>the two</i> be reconciled? was on everyone’s mind” (259).	Eliminated.
“On Thursday morning Kelleher tried to see <i>the mayor</i> but was told <i>the mayor</i> was out of town” (109).	“On Thursday morning Kelleher tried to see <i>the mayor</i> but was told <i>the mayor</i> was out of town” (138).	“On Thursday morning Kelleher tried to see <i>the mayor</i> but was told <i>the mayor</i> was out of town” (166).	“Kelleher tried to see <i>the mayor</i> but was told <i>he</i> was out of town” (269).	“Kelleher tried to contact <i>the mayor</i> but was informed that <i>she</i> had stopped accepting unsolicited calls.”
“If that was the case, why did <i>she</i> delay answering <i>the governor</i> until the morning of <i>his</i> departure (18 March)?” (108).	“If that was the case, why did <i>she</i> delay answering <i>the governor</i> until the morning of <i>his</i> departure (18 March)?” (137).	“If that was the case, why did <i>she</i> delay answering <i>the governor</i> until the morning of <i>his</i> departure (18 March)?” (165).	“Why did <i>she</i> tell <i>him</i> only on the morning of <i>his</i> departure (March 18)?” (260).	“Why did <i>she</i> tell <i>him</i> only on the morning of <i>his</i> departure (March 18)?”
“The snow ( <i>I</i> caught a glimpse of it as <i>I</i> passed	“The snow ( <i>I</i> caught a glimpse of it as <i>I</i> passed	“The snow ( <i>she</i> caught a glimpse of it as	Eliminated.	Eliminated.

the window) was now falling heavily” (105).	the window) was now falling heavily” (133).	<i>she</i> passed the window) was now falling heavily” (159).		
Not present.	“The delegates had hoped that <i>the mayor himself</i> , not <i>his assistant</i> , would be present” (172).	“The delegates had hoped that <i>the mayor himself</i> , not <i>his assistant</i> , would be present” (172).	“We hoped <i>the mayor herself</i> , not <i>her assistant</i> , would attend the meeting” (251).	“We hoped <i>the mayor herself</i> , not <i>her assistant</i> , would attend the meeting.”

<sup>a</sup> All emphasis is mine.

The fourteenth edition (1993) continues in the same direction, increasing the unnamed referents with feminine pronouns by more than four times and maintaining many of the named referents that were added to the thirteenth (1982), and provides further examples of the increased visibility of women in the text (see table 4). To demonstrate the proper placement of a period in a sentence with a parenthetical complete sentence, the pronoun in “I caught a glimpse of it as I passed the window” is changed from “I” to “she” in the fourteenth edition. Like the “two women” example in the thirteenth edition (1982), it seems that this is another attempt to make women more visible in the text.

The fifteenth edition (2003) doubled the number of unnamed female referents over the fourteenth and included some remarkable examples that use female pronouns or feminine names. Example sentences that include women’s names or unnamed female referents are finally connected with professions and professional positions, e.g., “She ought to be promoted, if you want my opinion” (249), “The committee chair, Gloria Ruffolo, called for a resolution” (251), and “Sheila Fitzpatrick, PhD, introduced the

speaker” (251). There is also an example sentence in which a surname antecedent is used with a female pronoun—“The more I read about Winterbottom, the more I like her” (251)—the first in the history of the section.

The examples listed in Table 4 include two further examples of revisions in the fifteenth edition (2003). “On Thursday morning Kelleher tried to see the mayor but was told the mayor was out of town” (166) in the twelfth (1969), thirteenth (1982), and fourteenth editions (1993) repeats the noun “mayor” to avoid using a gendered pronoun, one of the common suggestions for avoiding sexist language. In the fifteenth edition, the example is changed to replace the second “mayor” with “he” (269), and then is revised dramatically in the sixteenth edition (2010), where the mayor is referred to with “she.” This is in line with other examples that begin connecting women’s names and professional positions. The example of “If that was the case, why did she delay answering the governor until the morning of his departure (18 March)?” (14<sup>th</sup> edition, 165) becomes “Why did she tell him only on the morning of his departure (March 18)?” (15<sup>th</sup> edition, 260) removing the noun “governor” and leaving “him” without a specified antecedent. The example of “The delegates had hoped that the mayor himself, not his assistant, would be present” (14<sup>th</sup> edition, 172) becomes “We hoped the mayor herself, not her assistant, would attend the meeting” (15<sup>th</sup> edition, 251).

Reviewed over the many editions, the “Punctuation” section gives a clear picture of the increased awareness of women as readers on the part of the Press and the *Manual*. While the purpose behind these changes is not discussed specifically by the editors, it is clear that there is a connection between the increasing influence of feminism and this

awareness on the part of the *Manual*. Evidence demonstrates that both men and women connect male pronouns with male images (see, e.g., Spender, Barron, and Gastil). The increased number of example sentences that use female subjects and objects, both named and unnamed, is indicative of a decision on the part of the editors to make women a part of the *Manual* prose. This conclusion is strengthened when considered in conjunction with the fact that those examples become increasingly connected to professional positions and positions of power throughout the most recent editions.

### **“Hints”**

After the main section, the first edition (1906) contained an appendix that consisted of three sections called “Hints.” These were “Hints to Authors and Editors,” “Hints to Proofreaders,” and “Hints to Copyholders.” Each of these sections outlines the expectation of the Press for each of these employees in order to ensure the efficient production of the material. What is fascinating about these sections, which are present in the first eleven editions and eliminated in the twelfth (1969), is that they are written in imperative prose that uses generic pronouns.

Copyholders were traditionally employees at a press who read the typeset or manuscript aloud to the proofreader, as the proofreader scanned the copy to ensure that it was correct for proofing, according to the *OED Online*, described in 1888 as “an assistant, the copy-holder or reading boy.” From the first edition (1906) through the seventh (1920), the “Hints for Proofreaders” section uses a generic *she* to refer to the copyholder: “Do not read to your copyholder. She is supposed to read to you” (101). This

is the only section of the *Manual* that does this; authors, editors, and proofreaders (and copyreaders in the later editions) are referred to using the generic *he*.

In 1983, the chief manuscript editor of the twelfth (1969) and thirteenth (1982) editions, Catharine Seybold, published an article on the history of the *Manual*. In it she remarks on a change between the seventh (1920) and eighth (1925) editions: “At least, in [the eighth] edition the poor copy holder is referred to with the generic pronoun ‘he’ like the rest of the staff, instead of ‘she’” (169). Two of the tips to the copyholder are also changed, indicating that the position is elevated somewhat when it is considered to be held by men, or at least not only by women. The fourth tip in the first edition (1906) warns the copyholder: “Do not get offended when your reader asks you to repeat, or to look at the copy for himself. He intends no aspersion on your personal integrity” (103), and the final tip reminds her: “Remember that you are the housekeeper of the proofroom, and take pride in its neat and orderly appearance.... The more of that kind of work you do without being asked, and the better you do it, the more you will be appreciated” (105). When the copyholder is granted the same “generic” pronoun as the rest of the staff, it is no longer necessary to remind him not to get overly emotional and the word “housekeeper” is not used again.

The “Hints” sections, with generic *he* used for all employees, remain in the text through the eleventh edition (1949) and the “still-relevant instructions from them” (Seybold 171) are present in the “Bookmaking” section of the twelfth edition (1969). All employees of the press are referred to with the generic *he* in this edition, e.g., “the author’s name should be printed in the form he specifies,” (6) when referred to at all. The

elimination of the generic *he* and the continued awareness of the appearance of sexism in language would be major parts of future revisions, with the transitions from the twelfth (1969) to the thirteenth (1982), the thirteenth to the fourteenth (1993), and the fourteenth to the fifteenth (2003), each marking an important phase of this progress.

### **Making the thirteenth edition (1982)**

Most of the early editions were published quickly; the ninth edition (1927) was published just twenty years after the first (1906) and this is due to the greatly expanding appendix with specimens of type. Since the *Manual* was started as a guide with the specific purpose of aligning the many members of the Press, from authors to typesetters, these specimens were essential, especially when a modern audience considers the limited exposure that authors might have had to defined typestyles in the era before word processors. After the ninth edition, the revision process began to slow greatly, with the tenth (1937) and the eleventh (1949) coming out a decade after their predecessors, and with this, the *Manual* saw greater changes to the actual text in these revisions. Nearly twenty years passed before work began on the twelfth edition in 1968.

Catharine Seybold, senior manuscript editor, and Bruce Young, managing editor, were given the task of revising and updating the *Manual* for a modern audience in a way that reflected the rapidly changing publishing industry (DeBacher 37). They were given three months off of their regular duties at the Press to complete the twelfth edition; it took eight months to produce a manuscript, as well as additional time to prepare that manuscript for publication (Seybold 172). Major changes were incorporated into the

twelfth edition, including the abolishment of the “Hints” sections, the revision of the example sentences throughout, and increased information about copyright laws as they existed at that time. Additionally, the organization of the Press had changed dramatically since 1949, the University of Chicago Press being only the publishing department and the University of Chicago Printing Department an entirely separate department (Seybold 171), and these organizational differences were incorporated into the *Manual* itself, separating the skills of new “manuscript editors” from those of proofreaders and printing managers. All of the considerations that arose from this separation are included in the twelfth edition, including the elimination of the specimens of type, which by the eleventh edition made up nearly half the book (Seybold 171).

The twelfth edition proved the most popular edition of the *Manual* in its history to that point, with the first printing selling out before the publication date and the total sales for the edition topping 150,000 before the publication of the thirteenth edition in 1983 (DeBacher 37). This was the first commercially successful edition of the *Manual* and was considered a fantastic triumph throughout the Press, though there was much that the staff immediately saw as “dated” or “inadequate” and talk of the thirteenth edition did not take long to start (Seybold 174). Seybold and Young officially began work on the thirteenth edition in 1975, when they sent questionnaires to publishing houses, asking editors and publishers what they wished to see changed in the new edition, promising a free copy to each respondent. Seybold recalls, “I think we sent out some 75 questionnaires; 129 came back. We did not send multiple free copies to those offices that sent us multiple replies” (Seybold 174).

Despite incredible interest in the possibility of a thirteenth edition, Seybold and Young were tied up on other projects and unable to devote the time needed to revise the *Manual* yet again. They considered the suggestions from the questionnaires and discussed the revisions but did not begin to work in earnest until the end of the 1970s.

In May of 1980, the *Chicago Tribune Book World* published a story on the upcoming release of the thirteenth edition of the *Manual*, which was at that time scheduled for 1981. In this short piece, Seybold and Young were interviewed about what readers could expect from the upcoming edition, and most of the major changes were attributed to the rewriting of federal copyright laws in 1978. As editors of “the indispensable guide for ... scholarly publishers” (DeBacher 31), Seybold and Young both stated that they were not excited about the revision but felt it was part of their responsibility to their readers, who needed updated information on the changing industry (Harty). When asked about “the continuing controversy over sexist language,” Seybold replied it would be dealt with in the thirteenth edition with a footnote, which would explain that the pronoun *he* would be used as a generic throughout the text (Harty). Seybold further explained this had two purposes: the first reflected her opinion that “the way the English language is structured, ‘he’ refers to both – in context,” (qtd. in Harty) and the second was that the *Manual* is not “a usage guide, a role [Seybold and Young] feel other reference books serve quite adequately” (Harty).

Seybold’s opinion that *he* functions as a generic within the English language is likely based on popular usage manuals of the time, including Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* and H.W. Fowler’s *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, both of

which are listed as references in the bibliography of the *Manual*. These usage manuals argue that generic *he* is both appropriate and traditional<sup>6</sup>. By the time of the *Manual*'s revision in 1980, the historic evidence of the prescriptive movement to institute *he* as a generic was well established within linguistic and feminist scholarship.

The argument that the *Manual* is not a usage guide is also questionable. By 1980, as evidenced by the response to Seybold and Young's questionnaire, the *Manual* was considered "the most useful editorial tool available" (DeBacher 31) and was used to determine questions of usage. In comparison, *Elements of Style* contains many of the same guidelines and rules and is undeniably a usage guide; the same can be said of Fowler's *Dictionary*. No matter how Seybold and Young defined it, by 1980, the *Manual* was considered a usage guide by its readers and had functioned in that manner for some time.

Also in the Harty article, Young disagrees with changing the name of Peking to Beijing, but says they authorized the change "because that's what scholars are going to use," and they "reflect usage to a much greater degree than [they] establish it." If this is true, then consider the usage that was discussed in Chapter 3, indicating that the majority of writers of both sexes chose to avoid constructions using *he* as a generic in contemporary writing, and Balhorn's "Rise of Epicene *They*," which indicates that singular *they* maintained at least a 45% usage throughout the twentieth century (81). Both reasons given by Seybold for the continued use of generic *he* are faulty in construction,

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<sup>6</sup> This argument is incompatible with the history of the English language, and completely antithetical to the historical information presented by Bodine in 1975 and Lakoff in 1973.

not only with historic hindsight but with the contemporary evidence that was available to her at the time.

When the thirteenth edition was published, in 1982 rather than the predicted 1981, it was free of the generic *he*, despite what Seybold and Young had announced in 1980, and as exemplified by the “Punctuation” section, actually increased the presence of women exponentially over the twelfth edition (1969). The reasons for this are unclear. “History of *The Chicago Manual of Style*” on *The Chicago Manual of Style Online* doesn’t discuss the change; it marks the thirteenth edition as including the new copyright laws and changes in printing and production that had occurred by that point, and as the first edition to deal with the use of personal computers and word processors. In February of 1983, Catharine Seybold published “A Brief History of *The Chicago Manual of Style*” in the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*. In this piece she acknowledges the elimination of the generic *he* quietly, without much discussion, saying simply: “[we] tried to get rid of the generic ‘he’ so as not to offend at least half our readers” (176).

What could have caused such a change of the editors’ position? From the tone of the Harty piece in 1980, the thirteenth edition was nearing completion and the subject of gender-neutrality had been discussed and dismissed. Then, the publication of the *Manual* is delayed by a year and when finally published, the thirteenth edition is dramatically changed from what had been announced. The answer appears to be connected to the reaction to the Harty piece. In his 1992 article on the history of the *Manual*, Richard D. DeBacher suggests that “the women’s movement” is responsible for the change: “Once

word of their decision [to use generic *he*] spread, the outcry convinced Seybold to make a more radical change” (38).

DeBacher quotes from an unpublished speech of Seybold’s written in 1984:

The traditional single generic pronoun in the English language could no longer safely be used to refer to an author or an editor of either sex. And the twelfth edition of the *Manual* suddenly was perceived to be filled with this pronoun. I persuaded my male colleague that we must “desex” our new text altogether or risk the dire consequences of offending more than half our readers. How? Well, we used a lot of plurals. (38)

It is clear from this quote that, in spite of her statement in the *Scholarly Publishing* article, Seybold still considered generic *he* to be appropriate for both sexes but felt pressured to change the text of the *Manual*. When the popularity of the *Manual*, evidenced by the response to the questionnaires in 1975 and the increasing commercial success of the book, is considered alongside the growing appeal and force of feminism at this key point, the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, one begins to get an impression of the kind of “outcry” that may have followed the Harty article in 1980<sup>7</sup>. It is quite likely that, as Seybold suggests, the editors felt that it was not possible to continue writing the *Manual* with the generic *he*, but as evidenced from the final line of her quote, they were unsure just how to change the *Manual*.

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that Young does not discuss epicene pronouns or sexist language in the Harty article. Seybold refers to a disagreement between herself and Young over the need to “desex” (qtd. in DeBacher 38) the prose of the *Manual*, but there is no other evidence that Young either agreed or disagreed with the decision.

### Advice for avoiding sexist writing

In “Manuscript Preparation and Copyediting,” a section in Part 1 of the revised format, beginning in the twelfth (1969) and continuing through the most recent edition (2010), there is a direction to copyeditors to “watch for lapses” in the author’s writing, describing this as an essential part of the editor’s duties (see table 5). In the twelfth edition, the suggested lapses include common writing errors such as “faulty attempts at parallel construction” and “dangling modifiers,” and even the controversy over split infinitives comes into the discussion (45). Just as the *Manual* prose uses the generic *he* throughout the twelfth edition (1969), there is no mention here or anywhere else of the dangers of biased writing.

Table 5: *Watch for Lapses* Advice from Selected Editions of *The Chicago Manual of Style* 1969-2010

Twelfth (1969)	Pg. 45	“Such matters include dangling modifiers, unclear antecedents, redundancies, split infinitives (a debatable ‘error’), lack of agreement of verb with subject, faulty attempts at parallel construction, misplaced modifiers, overuse of an author’s pet word or phrase, unintentional repetition of words, and so on.”
Thirteenth (1982)	Pg. 61	“Such matters include dangling or misplaced modifiers, unclear antecedents, redundancies, split infinitives (a debatable ‘error’), lack of agreement of verb with subject, faulty attempts at parallel construction, overuse of an author’s pet word or phrase, unintentional repetition of words, <i>racial or sexist connotations</i> <sup>a</sup> , and so on.”
Fourteenth (1993)	Pg. 76	“Such matters include dangling or misplaced modifiers, unclear antecedents, redundancies, lack of agreement of verb with subject, faulty attempts at parallel construction, overuse of an author’s pet word or phrase, unintentional repetition of words, <i>race or gender bias</i> , and so on.”
Fifteenth (2003)	Pg. 74	“All manuscript editors should know whether the publishers or journals they work for have strict policies on terms relating to

		<i>race or ethnicity, sex, age, and other areas of potential bias or whether individual discretion is allowed (see 5.203-6)."</i>
Sixteenth (2010)	n.p.	"All manuscript editors should be aware of any requirements of house style that are essential to the publisher – for example, those covering <i>bias-free language</i> (see 5.221-30)."

<sup>a</sup> All emphasis is mine.

In 1969, Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* and Fowler's *Dictionary* were two of the most prestigious usage guides, and, as previously discussed, both encouraged the use of generic *he* and specifically denied the use of singular *they*. The best-selling dictionary of the time, however, had a different opinion on the role of *they* as a singular epicene pronoun. With the third edition, Webster's New International Dictionary defined *they* as: "used with an indefinite singular antecedent (everyone tries to make the person ~ love just like themselves –H.D. Skidmore)" as early as 1966 ("they"); this is one of the many reasons for the controversy surrounding the "permissiveness" of the third edition (Ellis 296). The publishing community of the 1960s was reacting to a growing acceptance of descriptivism within the field of linguistics and much of that reaction was negative. This attitude was changing by the time Seybold and Young began work on the thirteenth edition in the late '70s.

The thirteenth edition (1982) makes a notable addition to this list of errors, warning editors of "racial or sexist connotations" and including a footnote directing them to *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing* (61). This footnote is simple and short, as the *Manual* directs that footnotes should be, and states: "For useful and sensible suggestions on how to avoid sexist connotations see Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*. For more general advice on usage see Fowler, Bernstein, and others

listed at end of this chapter and in the Bibliography” (61). In addition to the elimination of generic *he* and the increased presence of women in the example sentences, this footnote marks the thirteenth edition as the first step in the history of the *Manual* toward the promotion of nonsexist language, though a small, and seemingly grudging, step.

The fourteenth edition (1993) would take a much larger step in this direction when the footnote was extended with further explanation. After the same recommendation of Miller and Swift as a resource, as well as Baron’s *Grammar and Gender*, the footnote continues:

Along with these and other authorities, the University of Chicago Press recommends the “revival” of the singular use of *they* and *their*, citing, as do they, its venerable use by such writers as Addison, Austen, Chesterfield, Fielding, Ruskin, Scott, and Shakespeare. (76-77)

This small footnote is the only example of a major style manual advocating for the use of singular *they*. The most recent editions of style manuals, such as MLA, APA, *AP Stylebook*, and *The New York Times Stylebook*, all warn against the use of sexist language and most of them, with the single exception of the *AP Stylebook*, specifically tell their users not use *he* as a generic pronoun when the referent may be female. None of them, however, allows for the use of singular *they* in formal writing. Most acknowledge the use of singular *they* in informal writing and speech and its growing popularity among proponents of gender-neutral writing, but none of them recommend the usage and none of them acknowledge the historic evidence for this usage (see, e.g., *MLA Handbook*; *Publication Manual of APA*; *AP Stylebook Online*; *The New York Times Manual of Style*

*and Usage*). The *Manual*'s recommendation of singular *they* was a major acknowledgement of the growing importance of gender-neutrality on the part of authors and editors and they were alone among their peers in making such a recommendation.

This is likely to be the reason why the recommendation was eliminated from the fifteenth (2003) and sixteenth (2010) editions. Table 5 shows the dramatic change to the section as it appears in these editions, which suggests that the editor be aware of their requirements and refers to another section for further explanation. This other section is a new addition to the *Manual* that appears in the fifteenth edition for the first time in its history: "Grammar." Written by Brian A. Garner, author of *A Dictionary of Modern Usage*, the chapter discusses "the grammatical structures of English, shows how to put words and phrases together to achieve clarity, warns against pomposity, and identifies common errors" (xii). Included in this new section are several points on how to avoid bias in writing and editing, including issues related to race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender (15<sup>th</sup> edition, 233), and the sixteenth edition handles this section in much the same way. Garner describes the controversy over gender-neutral language, explaining that *he* was "traditionally" used as a generic pronoun but has "long been regarded as sexist" (160), but also warns that some readers are disturbed by the use of "nontraditional gimmicks to avoid the generic masculine (by using *he/she* or *s/he*, for example) or to use *they* as a kind of singular pronoun" (233). He offers suggestions in several places for how to deal with gender-neutrality in specific instances and the sixteenth edition includes "Nine Techniques for Achieving Gender Neutrality," many of these are similar to those suggested by other style manuals. These techniques include

omitting the pronoun, pluralizing the sentence, using *one* or an article; they do allow for the use of *he or she* but warn that it should only be used “sparingly” (16<sup>th</sup> edition).

While both the fifteenth (2003) and the sixteenth (2010) editions expand on the importance of gender-neutrality, there is no discussion in either text about why the fourteenth (1993) recommended the use of singular *they* or why the later editions eliminated it. The Q&A section of *The Chicago Manual of Style Online* there is a short mention of the change in response to a question:

Q. I would swear that I saw a reference in your manual that approved of the use of “their” instead of a gender-biased singular pronoun. For example, “If the user has completed installing the program, they should put the CD-ROM back in the package,” instead of “If the user has completed installing the program, s/he should put the CD-ROM back in the package,” but on your Q&A, you dance around the answer to the question and suggest that you do NOT approve of the singular “their.” Can you tell us what is acceptable?

A. Yes, you saw it at 2.98 (note 9) in the fourteenth edition, but there was some regret at having written it, and we decided to abandon the idea for the fifteenth and sixteenth editions. Though some writers are comfortable with the occasional use of *they* as a singular pronoun, some are not, and it is better to do the necessary work to recast a sentence or, other options having been exhausted, use *he or she*. For a fuller discussion of this issue, see paragraph 5.223 in *CMOS16* and the entry for “he or she”

under the “Glossary of Problematic Words and Phrases” at paragraph 5.220. (“Chicago Style Q&A”)

It would appear that the *Manual* approved the recommendation of the fourteenth edition (1993), thinking that the movement of gender-neutral language would persuade other manuals to follow. In the ten years between the fourteenth and fifteenth editions the other major manuals did not approve the use of singular *they* and the *Manual* regretted its permissiveness, leading to the elimination of this from the future editions. It is also possible that this discussion, along with awareness of other types of bias, was part of the decision to finally bow to popular demand and include the chapter on grammar and usage, acknowledging the *Manual* as a usage guide for the first time after nearly a century. In April of 2012, in a panel presentation at the American Copy Editors Society, Carol Fisher Saller, editor of “Chicago Style Q&A,” indicated that the fourteenth edition was considered too permissive, the fifteenth too restrictive, and that the sixteenth edition sought a middle road between the two, allowing for independence on the part of the author and editor.

## **Conclusions**

*The Chicago Manual of Style* has been considered the eminent authority in book and scholarly publishing for more than a century and its prescriptions on usage are the guidelines for thousands of publications every year. The guidelines within the *Manual* not only affect the way that words are organized, manuscripts prepared and presented, but how ideas are disseminated. If the arguments of Spender and Lakoff are considered, then

the importance of what the *Manual* says about gender neutrality is even greater. When authors and editors look to the *Manual* for guidance on how to share their ideas and how to do so without offense or neglect to any gender, they find suggestions and options, but not answers. Bruce Young said in 1980 that the *Manual* reflected usage, rather than setting it, and if this is still the opinion of the Press, then the *Manual* needs to make allowance for the grammatical use of singular *they* to reflect the overwhelming usage in language today.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions and Further Action

I began this manuscript with a quote from Robin Lakoff: “Language uses us as much as we use language” (3). That short quotation opened Lakoff’s article and has sparked countless areas of research in the forty years since her original publication. For instance, scholars have created a small subfield of “Language and [blank] Woman’s Place,” addressing the missing pieces of race, ethnicity, and class in Lakoff’s discussion.

Discussion of epicene pronouns, however, has been largely left in the past, as feminist scholarship has broken off into different directions to address the intricacies of feminism. True, linguists have continued to study epicene pronoun usage and sociologists have continued to study the effects of masculine generics on readers. However, little of this research has addressed the fact that, thirty years ago, we effectively killed the generic *he* and were left with the “semantic gap” (Baron 8) of its absence. As Meyer’s research with students may indicate, writers still struggle with how to properly construct sentences in gender-neutral ways.

In spite of this, there is little research in the fields of Composition or English Education on how to address the problem with students in the secondary and higher education classroom. In my own experience as a teacher, my students felt comfortable with the use of *they* as a singular pronoun because they were unaware of its proscription and they often struggled with maintaining the use of *he or she* throughout an essay. In line with the usage discussed in Chapter 3, they were particularly against this

construction when using indefinite pronouns. Suggesting “everyone should play WOW if he or she can afford it” seemed incorrect and inappropriate to them, when “everyone should play WOW if they can afford it” made so much more sense. As their teacher, I struggled to explain the meaning behind this rule, though I believed in its correctness, beyond the inadequate “That’s just the rule. Do it.”

In higher education, the confusion is no less great, though the rebellion may be stifled to a greater degree. I continually speak with graduate and undergraduate students who struggle with maintaining gender-neutrality in their writing and often subscribe to the revision prescription, doing all they can to avoid using indefinite pronouns or generic noun phrases. This is the suggested route among style manuals and is likely to be the suggestion of a professor or a writing tutor. However, as Baron warned, this can lead to prose that is unspecific and vague with its lack of singular indefinites. The reader may suffer a disconnect from the subject, considering *writers* or *students* to mean someone other than them as opposed to *a writer* or *a student*. At the mercy of style guides and academic expectations, these students will alter their usage to fit the requirements because they are unable to engage in “ungrammatical” forms.

This same debate exists in publishing, particularly in newspaper writing. Though Balhorn found plenty of examples of singular *they* in newspaper prose and John McIntyre of the Baltimore Sun calls regularly for its allowance, it is still specifically proscribed by the *AP Stylebook*, which still advocates the use of generic *he*. Due to the nature of newspaper writing, limited characters and difficulty in providing context on the part of the author, writers feel that the use of singular *they* will make them look uninformed, and

editors feel that overlooking these uses will make them look inattentive. This leaves writers and editors in a situation where they risk their reputations by allowing this usage. Long form authors of fiction and non-fiction in the popular press also deal with this issue, finding it difficult to avoid constructions with indefinite antecedents but unwilling to stake themselves on singular *they*.

As we move forward in this century and the complexities of gender and culture continue to be studied, the need for an epicene pronoun increases. As I am writing this, the US Supreme Court is hearing arguments on the constitutionality of same-sex marriage, through hearings on California's Prop 8 and the US Defense of Marriage Act, and this case could help shed light on exactly how high the stakes can be. Legal consequences of gendered language already exist in precedence. In 1872, Dr. Susan Dimmock was denied admittance to the Massachusetts Medical Society on the basis that the bylaws used *he* as a pronoun, making them inapplicable to women. Additional women suffered similar issues with college admission and admission to state bar associations. Individual states are currently dealing with gender-neutral language bills in the wake of one passing in the House just a few years ago.

As the illusion of a binary system of gender continues to erode, and more and more citizens begin to identify as transgender, the need for a common-gender pronoun will grow. Unlike in my students' writing, which can be revised to sidestep the issue, legal and public discourse will require singular noun phrase and indefinite pronoun antecedents and will require the use of a singular common-gender pronoun. "The suspect must be read his or her Miranda rights" will no longer suffice and cannot be changed to

*the suspects* in all situations. Specificity is essential in legal composition because this is a situation in which a simple word can make a lot of difference, and we are living in an era where we can no longer deny that that word may be a sex-specific pronoun.

So, where do we go from here? With the concerns of legal discourse, compositional studies, and the imperative to truly reflect usage as it exists, style manuals must allow for the use of singular *they*, particularly with indefinite pronouns. Additionally, those manuals that do not yet do so must acknowledge the sex-specific nature of false generics like *he*. In an era where gender is becoming less and less appropriate to label, style manuals cannot continue to turn a blind eye to this issue, and we, as scholars, must engage in this discussion again. We must revive the interest in common-gender pronouns and address their use in our classrooms and in our writing head-on. Scholarship forty years ago brought about a historic change in language, not just in epicene pronouns, but also throughout our language. We have the ability to continue that work, and we have an imperative to do so.

When *Language and Woman's Place* was published in book form, Robin Lakoff dedicated it: "For Andy, whose generation will, I hope, have transcended these issues by the time it can read this book" (i). While the first line is the one that is remembered most clearly and has opened many discussions as it opened this manuscript, I think this sentence is a better call to action than any other in the book. Lakoff's hope for Andy's generation has only been fulfilled in part; we have tackled many of the issues that she raised in 1975 but we have only just begun to transcend them.

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