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Epicene Pronoun Use in Modern American English

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ABSTRACT

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Traditional prescriptive grammar for English states that the epicene or gender neutral pronoun for third person singular use is *he*. Research into speaker perceptions has clearly demonstrated that *he* is not perceived as neutral. Research has also shown traditionally proscribed epicene pronouns such as *he or she* and singular *they* to be commonly used, despite the long-standing proscriptions against them. The author examines the endurance of such proscribed options through the lens of markedness theory, considering the impact of cultural values on speakers' epicene pronoun choices. Gender in language is also considered, as well as Kuryłowicz's 4th Law of Analogy as a means for understanding patterns of language change. Second person pronoun change is considered as a model for understanding third person pronoun changes currently underway in Modern American English. The author conducts and reports on a corpus study designed to assess the current usage of three epicene pronouns in Modern American English, namely *he or she* and its variant *she or he*; *one*; and singular *they*. The results of the study are considered in terms of medium, spoken or written, and register, colloquial, standard, or formal. The study suggests that *they* is generally the preferred epicene pronoun, particularly in spoken language, but that *one* is the preferred epicene pronoun for formal writing

Keywords: [Epicene Pronoun, Corpus Study, COCA, Markedness, Language Change]

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1. Introduction

1.1. Third Person Pronoun Choices in Modern American English.

On December 1, 2009, President Barack Obama gave a speech announcing his new strategy for the war in Afghanistan. The following sentence occurred in the sixteenth paragraph of the transcript of the speech:

> As President, I have signed a letter of condolence to the family of each American who gives *their* life in these wars. (italics added)

A speech such as this must be reviewed numerous times by numerous people before it is finally given by the president. With such extensive review, it is certain that the word choice for such a speech is planned, deliberate, with not even the smallest word left to chance. The question then for this author is, why did the president choose the pronoun *their* (grammatically plural) to refer to the grammatically singular subject *each American*?

The question is not politically motivated, nor is it the result of overzealous editorial tendencies on the part of the author. There is simply the possibility that the president could have used another pronoun, or restructured the sentence altogether, and still left the basic meaning of the sentence intact. For example, he might have said, "each American who gives *his* life" or "each American who gives *his or her* life." Or, he could have pluralized everything and said he sent letters to "the families of the Americans who give *their* lives." There is no official consensus as to which option, if any, is correct in Modern American English, although prescriptive grammarians have spent at least two centuries trying to convince English speakers that the option President Obama chose is grammatically "wrong," because of the singular/plural conflict between the referent (*each American*) and the chosen pronoun (*their*).

Nevertheless, Modern American English speakers, including President Obama, continue to use the third person pronoun *they* "ungrammatically." Given the extensive review required for the president's speech, it seems unlikely that such use is universally the result of grammatical ignorance. Let us consider the intent of the president's remark. The point was to illustrate the importance of each American life. Such focus on the individual requires grammatically singular words. However, as the American military includes both men and women, any pronoun referring back to *each American* must somehow convey that persons of all genders are included in the remark. Such a pronoun is referred to in the literature as an *epicene* pronoun, a term taken from early in the history of prescription of grammar. Ben Jonson, speaking of six grammatical genders of English, presented this description for the term: "Fourth, the *Promiscuous*, or *Epicene*, which understands both kinds, especially when we cannot make the difference." (Curzan 2003, 28) An additional facet of the term *epicene* as it is used today is its implied singularity. In summary then, an epicene pronoun is a gender-neutral singular 3rd person pronoun. Therefore, we can say that the president's speech required an epicene pronoun to refer to the phrase *each American*.

1.2. EPICENE PRONOUNS IN MODERN AMERICAN ENGLISH. Having established first, that more than one pronoun option could have been used to refer to *each American* in President Obama's speech and second, that the sort of pronoun required to refer to *each American* may be called an epicene pronoun, it seems evident that more than one epicene pronoun exists in Modern American English. On the surface, the third person pronouns of Modern American English are fairly simple: *they* for plural use; and *he, she,* and *it* for singular use, to be used according to natural gender or the lack thereof (as in the case of objects). A seemingly simple system,

especially compared to other Indo European languages such as Spanish, German, and Polish, which contain grammatical gender in addition to natural gender. So many things that require a particular gendered pronoun in other languages can simply be called *it* in English.

As for epicene pronouns, by strict definition, *it* is such a pronoun, however its gender neutrality is undermined by its association with non-human entities. We must therefore add to our definition of *epicene* that an epicene pronoun must be suitable for reference to humans. As illustrated in the pronoun descriptions above, there is no such pronoun, and yet the choices available for editing the president's speech clearly show that such pronouns must exist. At present, the best known epicene pronoun choices are as follows: *he* or *she* separately, either alone or alternated throughout a text to imply reference to both genders; *he or she* or its variant *she or he*, again intended to include both genders; *one*, an inherently gender neutral pronoun; and *they*, another gender neutral pronoun, albeit a traditionally plural one. As there is no official consensus as to which option is correct, another solution to choosing an epicene pronoun is simply to restructure a sentence to enable the use of plural *they*.

Why does such variation exist? How can there be so many epicene pronouns and yet no epicene pronoun at all? According to Newman (1992), the source of the problem may be traditional, or *prescriptive*, grammar; he suggests that it was the prescriptive advice to use *he* as an epicene pronoun that planted in the minds of English speakers that such a thing as an epicene pronoun existed, despite its absence in other Indo European languages. Other scholars such as Bodine (1975), Schweikart (1998), Curzan (2003), and Balhorn (2004, 2009) argue that *they* was widely used as an epicene pronoun before the advent of traditional grammar. It seems, then, that whether or not the idea of, or the perceived need for, an epicene pronoun originated with

prescriptive grammar, such grammar certainly played a role in furthering the idea of an epicene pronoun. Assuming that *they* was an acceptable epicene pronoun before prescriptive grammar and that *he* was not necessarily universally accepted before then (if indeed it ever was universally accepted), it becomes easy to see how conflict arose. Prescriptive grammars such as Fowler (1855) not only recommended *he* for epicene use, but also condemned other epicene pronoun choices, specifically *he or she* (condemned as inelegant) and *they* (condemned as ungrammatical by number contradiction). Based on the current range of epicene pronouns, it seems that the condemnations of prescriptive grammar must have helped to remind speakers of other options more than they convinced speakers that those other options were "wrong."

The epicene pronoun issue gained greater publicity with the advent of feminism. Feminists soundly condemned the use of epicene *he* on the grounds that it was sexist and by no means gender neutral or gender inclusive. It should be noted here in defense of prescriptive grammar that the prescription to use *he* was based on analogy with classical Greek and Latin as well as on analogy with contemporary languages following the same practice. Bodine (1975), Baron (1986), and Schweikart (1998), however, suggest that even the historical use of epicene *he* was the result of scholars seeking to impose an androcentric world view on the general populace. Whatever the source of the use of *he* or whatever the motivation, the questions raised by feminism sparked a torrent of language change designed to promote gender equality. *Mailmen* became *letter carriers*, *stewardesses* became *flight attendants*, and so on throughout Modern American English, to the delight of some and the annoyance of others. However, despite this general trend and the support of psychological research concluding that *he* was indeed not perceived as neutral (e.g. Martyna 1980, Khosroshahi 1989), it seems that no one managed to

come up with a universal epicene pronoun to go along with the rest of the language reforms. The research and observations of Baron (1981, 1986) and Stoko & Troyer (2007) demonstrate that this is not from a lack of trying to find or create epicene pronouns.

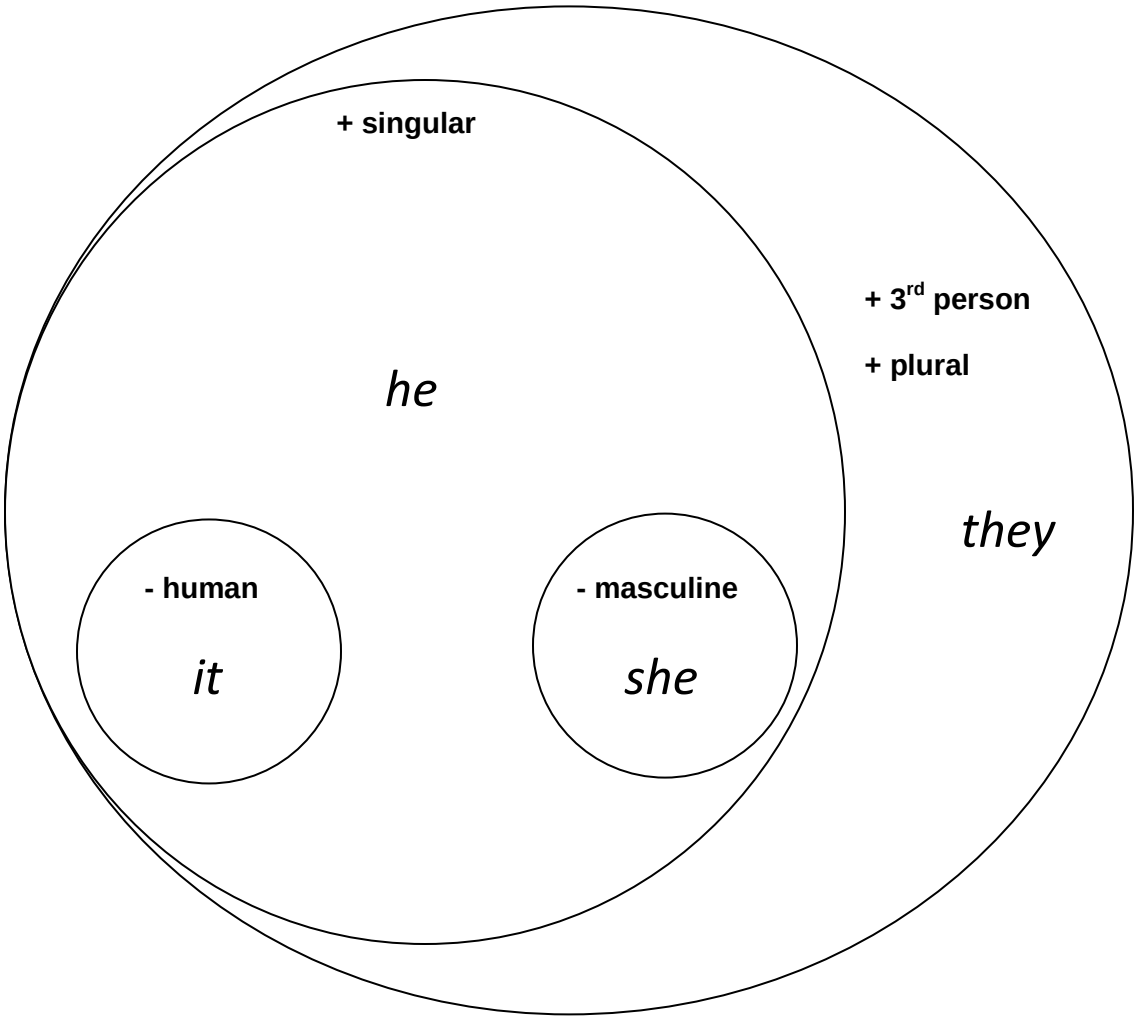
1.3 OTHER CONCEPTS TO CONSIDER. Something to keep in mind as we continue is the notion of pronouns as a closed word class. A closed word class, as opposed to an open word class, is a class of words which does not readily admit new members. For example, in discussing the language reforms precipitated by feminism, it was noted that *letter carrier* and *flight attendant* became incorporated into Modern American English. Such words are nouns, and the open word class of nouns readily admits new members; consider for example the vocabulary that accompanies the development of new technology; no one knew what an iPod was as before its invention, but today the term has become almost as generic as Kleenex. For pronouns, things are different. Despite the best efforts of epicene pronoun inventors, the closest English has come to adopting a new epicene pronoun is the form *he or she*, a compound of existing pronouns. The last confirmed instance of English adopting a new pronoun occurred nearly 800 years ago when *they* and its case-inflected forms were borrowed into Middle English from Scandinavian languages (Baugh & Cable 1993; Bryson 1990; Howe 1996).

Another concept to keep in mind is Kuryłowicz's 4th Law of Analogy (Kuryłowicz 1973:79; French), which Robertson (1975) renders thus: "When as a result of a morphological transformation a form undergoes differentiation, the new form corresponds to its primary function . . . and the old form is restricted to its secondary function." (140) Extending this to include non-morphological changes, this pattern of change was verified in English second person

pronouns as *you* shifted to fill the general second person singular meaning previously filled by *thou*. The marked nature of *thou* relegated it to only limited use, and now *you* has acquired the singular mark previously associated with *thou*. As *you* is now more marked, it is therefore logical according to Kuryłowicz's 4th Law that other forms such as *you all* should be entering in to fill the general plural meaning once expressed by *you*.

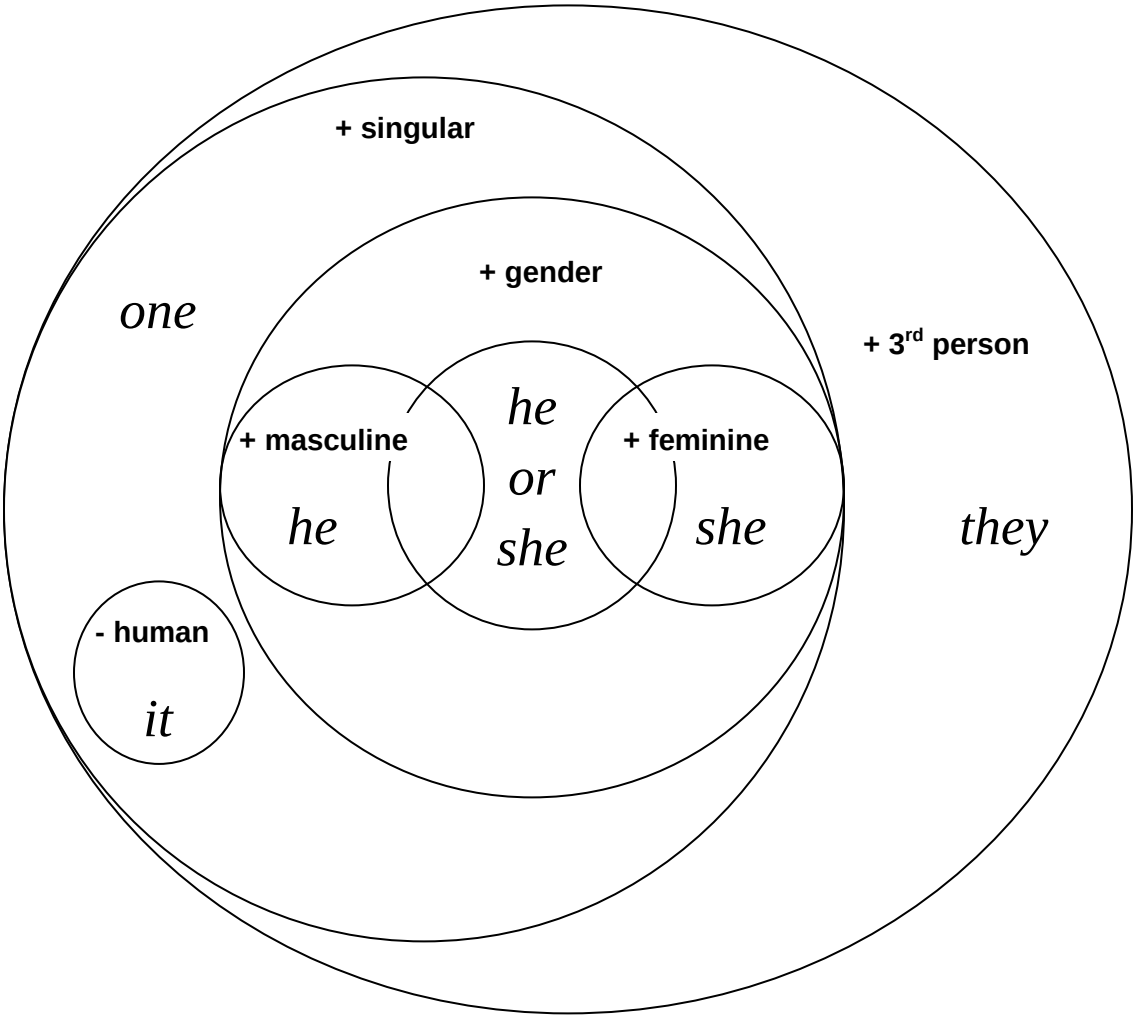
1.4 THIRD PERSON PRONOUNS THROUGH THE LENS OF MARKEDNESS. Let us now consider the prescriptive paradigm for third person pronouns through the lens of markedness theory, as illustrated in Figure 1.1. Prescriptive grammar asserted that *he* implied neutrality, that it was right and logical to refer to all persons as *he* unless they were proven to be otherwise. We will not go into the variety of reasons for this assertion here, but rather will focus on its implications for the paradigm. In effect, then, if *he* signified third person singular by neutrality, then *she* was marked for lacking masculinity (or for possessing femininity) and *it* was marked for lacking humanity.

FIGURE 1.1 PRESCRIPTIVE THIRD PERSON PARADIGM



Considering that the plural can logically include the singular (Waugh 1982), it seems logical that *they* could potentially be used in place of *he*. If such a shift were to occur in the third person pronoun system, it could theoretically be the result of a rebellion against perceived gender inequality in the existing third person singular pronouns. Before considering the impact of such a third person pronoun shift, however, let us first consider an expanded paradigm, one including more of the common epicene pronouns outlined earlier, as shown in Figure 1.2. In this figure, we consider the pronoun *one*, as well as the pronoun *he or she*.

FIGURE 1.2 CURRENT THIRD PERSON PARADIGM



note: [+plural] is deliberately omitted for *they* to indicate its potential for singular use

According to Figure 1.2, *one* is a logical universal epicene pronoun choice. It can be used in expressions ranging from "I want that *one*" to Marian the librarian's advice in *The Music Man* to Prof. Hill that "*One* can do anything if *one* puts *one's* mind to it." This is significant in light of the fact that traditional prescriptive paradigms for third person pronouns often do not even mention *one* as a possible personal pronoun (as shown in Figure 1.1), although Fowler (1855) does list *one* as a possible indeterminate pronoun, in company with *it* and *man*. However, there is

no evidence that *one* has or will gain universal acceptance as an epicene pronoun, at least in casual use, given that speakers still employ other options, regardless of its logical epicene use. The inclusion of *he or she* in Figure 1.2 illustrates an interesting facet of the debate over gender in language. As the figure suggests, rather than excluding gender from consideration, *he or she* is designed to include both males and females. This seems a reasonable solution to the epicene pronoun problem, although it should be noted that some of the epicene pronoun options listed by Baron (1981, 1986) were created not so much to resolve traditional male/female differences but rather to define individuals who consider themselves outside of the traditional male/female paradigm. Additionally, Khosroshahi (1989) found that *he or she* tended to elicit masculine images, regardless of the supposed neutrality of the construction. With these facts in mind, it seems prudent to consider an epicene pronoun that disregards gender entirely.

1.5. Examining Epicene Pronoun Use.

The biggest question for the author is whether Modern American English has a preferred epicene pronoun, and if so, what it is and why. I expect that there is a preferred pronoun, perhaps *they*, and that it is possible to discover whether that is the case and if so, to evaluate why. To that end, I propose a corpus study of Modern American English. I shall first review the literature on topics relative to this thesis, including prescriptive and descriptive grammar, the impact of Anglo cultural values on the English personal pronoun system, markedness theory, the gender debate in language both present and past, and historical changes in the 2nd person pronoun system. I shall then outline the methodology for my study, and follow with a review of my findings. I will then

discuss the significance of my results, and conclude with commentary about how the results of this study are pertinent to the larger modern American English speaking community.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview. As the issue of grammatical correctness cannot exist without the notion of traditional or prescriptive grammar, it seems fitting to discuss notions of grammar first in this review of literature. A discussion of the impact of Anglo[1] cultural values on the English language comes next, followed by discussions of language change, markedness theory, gender in language, and changes in the second person pronoun system. The final section will discuss usage studies, especially studies which have been conducted regarding the epicene pronoun issue.

2.2. Grammar and the Epicene Pronoun Debate. A grammar "is a set of principles governing a body of knowledge" (Ellis 1999, 29). As it pertains to language, grammars are generally referred to as being either prescriptive or descriptive. Prescriptive grammar seeks to regulate language by prescribing grammatical norms. Prescriptive grammar, particularly in reference to Modern American English, is often referred to as traditional grammar. Descriptive grammar, however, is concerned with discovering grammatical norms through studying actual language use. Both schools of thought have much to contribute to the world of language use, but unfortunately contention exists among some of the scholars espousing them.

2.2.1. Prescriptive Grammar. Prescriptive grammar as applied to Modern American English has its roots among scholars of classical Greek and Latin. At a time when English was not considered particularly respectable or scholarly, they took their understanding of Greek and

[1] *Anglo* as used in this work is a term taken from Wierzbicka (2006) to refer to the culture underlying the English language in general.

Latin grammar and applied it to English in order to render English more acceptable for literary and scholarly use (Allerton 1979; Hock & Joseph 1996). Their efforts succeeded, and Modern American English speakers are greatly indebted to them for the linguistic respectability they enjoy, as the larger European culture at the time of pre-prescriptive English did not consider immutable enough for any sort of respectable formal use (Barber 1997). However, Greek and Latin are not English, and their grammatical rules do not necessarily agree with the natural grammar of English (Allerton 1979; Ellis 1999; Hock & Joseph 1996; Schweikart 1998). The work of descriptive grammar (along with speaker intuition) has clearly demonstrated this, and so prescriptive grammar is often condemned as being artificial and out of touch with the true nature of English. Nevertheless, prescriptive grammars are invaluable for teaching standard dialects to non-standard and non-native speakers (Allerton 1979). Also, it is not imperative for prescriptions to remain static; they can, at least theoretically, be updated to reflect language change and new insights into grammar. Additionally, it is a mistake to dismiss all prescriptive era grammars as equal; indeed, Fisher's grammar examined English as interesting for its own sake, to the point of developing native terminology for its description rather than simply adopting Latin grammar terms (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2006). In defense of the idea of prescriptivism in general, one scholar argued, "If language be primarily a tool, why should we not have a right to fashion it . . . ?" (Oertel 1901:90)

2.2.2. DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR. Descriptive grammar, as presented by its adherents, seems quite sensible:

> The goal of the descriptivist is to simply state how language actually works. . . . there is no assumption of correctness or appropriateness. (Ellis 1999:29–30)

Allerton (1979) shares a similar view of descriptive grammar, and such descriptions may readily be found in nearly any introductory linguistics text (e.g. Aronoff & Rees-Miller 2003; Fromkin 2000). The basic principle of striving to discover the natural grammar underlying a language is admirable and useful, but the "condemnation without reserve of all judicial attitude toward grammar" (Oertel 1901, 88) is problematic on a number of levels. Firstly, as language is a social tool, judgment is inherent in its use, just as, for better or for worse, judgment is inherent in all social situations. Consider a situation in which speakers routinely exercise their own judgment, regardless of any official prescriptions, namely the case of profanity. From a purely descriptive sense, profanity is nothing more than provocative or exclamatory language. However, many speakers, such as conservative parents, take a much different view of the situation and regard profanity as a moral issue, regardless of any other opinions they may have on grammar. It seems unlikely that speakers will stop judging each other based on their language use any time in the near future. Therefore, it seems desirable that speakers be able to learn those norms that will enable them to be more socially acceptable, as prescriptive grammar has allowed speakers to do. Additionally, descriptive grammar is not always as non-judgmental as it claims to be; indeed, it is very common for descriptive grammarians to take their observations and offer them as new prescriptions, thus rendering themselves prescriptivists by any other name.

2.2.3. THE VALUE OF COMPROMISE. Perhaps the biggest stumbling block in the adoption of a universal epicene pronoun is the conflict between prescriptive and descriptive grammatical

theories. Prescriptive grammar is slow to change and refers to its directive for number concord to condemn the potential use of *they* as an epicene pronoun (Balhorn 2004, 2009). Nevertheless, descriptive grammarians and lay observers (in company with troubled prescriptivists) observe such use and recognize the clear possibility (or even reality) that *they* could indeed become the epicene pronoun of choice. Meanwhile, as prescriptive grammars continue to proscribe the singular use of *they*, average Modern American English speakers nevertheless continues to make their own decisions regarding epicene pronouns, thus proliferating epicene pronoun diversity and slowing the process of settling on a universal epicene pronoun.

It seems that grammar scholars could best serve English speakers by combining their wisdom. The work of descriptive grammarians could be utilized by prescriptive grammarians to create better guides for language use (Allerton1979). In the case of the epicene pronoun debate, perhaps descriptive grammarians could study actual Modern American English use to determine the best course of action and then forward their work to prescriptive grammarians for distribution through teachers of English. However, even a simple study of which pronouns are used and how frequently may not be enough to satisfactorily solve the epicene pronoun problem (or any other language problem). It is also important to consider why speakers make the choices they do, to consider what motivates them to choose or not choose a particular epicene pronoun.

2.3. FACTORS FOR UNDERSTANDING SPEAKER MOTIVATION. Several concepts and theories are relevant for consideration in our endeavor to understand third person pronoun change. First is the idea of cultural values. Next is the idea of language change, a stark reality of language which can nevertheless be controversial. We will then consider markedness theory as a means for making

sense of the relationships between language change and speaker motivation. Finally, we will employ the concepts we have discussed to examine gender in language and changes in the second person pronoun system.

2.3.1. CULTURAL VALUES. Anna Wierzbicka analyzes English extensively through the lens of cultural values in her work *English: Meaning and Culture* (2006). In particular, she examines the plethora of English words pertaining to truth, justice, and equality, words such as *right*, *wrong*, *fair*, *just*, *reasonable*, *true*, and *truth*. She suggests that the cultural values underlying these concepts behind these words stemmed from the writings of John Locke, illustrating the proliferation of the words to express such concepts following the publication of his work and other works written in agreement with his works. (In support for the claim of Locke's widespread influence, the current author notes with interest that in the preface to his 1855 *English Grammar*, Fowler quotes Locke relative to the value of grammar study.) Wierzbicka utilizes both others' and her own experiences as a non-native English speaker to illustrate that such values are indeed a part of Anglo culture (the culture underlying English), and she demonstrates that Anglo cultural values do indeed shape English. The notion of Anglo culture is particularly important in a world where the globalization of English has led some to dismiss English as having any cultural basis at all. As Wierzbicka (2006) observes: "It has been fashionable in linguistics in the last few decades to speak of 'universals of politeness' and of universal 'principles of conversation' . . . usually stated in a technical English . . . ." (11) The underlying problem is that English norms are often mistakenly assumed to be universals. Sometimes in the process of overcompensating for such mistaken assumptions, it becomes

assumed that English has no underlying culture influencing it at all. Wierzbicka, however, demonstrates otherwise. No matter how widespread the use of English may be, it nevertheless originated in a small corner of the world among a relatively small group of people and must necessarily have been influenced by the thoughts and beliefs of that group of people, just like any other language. For the purposes of this study, we will freely consider the underlying culture of Modern American English speakers and the influence of modern American cultural values on the development of Modern American English pronoun use.

2.3.2. LANGUAGE CHANGE. Hudson (2000) describes three characteristics of language change: constancy, pervasiveness, and systematicness (Hudson's term). The most interesting of these characteristics for our purposes is the constancy of language change. Whether slowly or quickly, language change is always happening. And, it seems, whenever people begin to notice it happening, especially where meaning is involved, inevitably there will be someone to argue against the change(s) in progress. Goddard & Patterson (2000) suggest that language change may be feared "by the more powerful groups in society" because they fear "that the status quo might have to change, and not in their favour" as a result of the change in progress. (72) In other words, they suggest that fear of language change may be directly connected to a fear of losing power. Cameron (1995) suggests a slightly less dramatic reason for people to dislike language change: "What many people dislike, specifically, is the politicizing of their words against their will. By calling traditional usage into question, reformers have in effect forced everyone who uses English to declare a position in respect of gender, race or whatever. . . . Choice [alters] the value of the terms and [removes] the option of political neutrality." (119) Curzan (2003) observes that

"there is an almost irresistible tendency in historical linguistics to slip into discussing the language as if it were changing on its own, as if it had an existence apart from speakers. In fact, a pronoun does not 'shift to avoid ambiguity' but rather a speaker uses a different pronoun in order to avoid ambiguity; a word does not 'become more pejorative' until speakers start using it in more negative context." (56) Considering that language change is the result of speaker behavior or speaker choice, the reasons for disliking language change shared above seem quite reasonable; those speakers not in favor of a particular change may understandably feel that their right of free expression been compromised. Nevertheless, language change continues, and although change may temporarily cause ambiguity and confusion, in the end as Hudson (2000) observes, "no language has ever been known to break down or to become at all dysfunctional as the result of change."

2.3.3. MARKEDNESS THEORY AND KURYŁOWICZ'S 4TH LAW OF ANALOGY. Markedness theory is useful for understanding the impact of cultural values on speaker motivation. Battistella (1996) and Waugh (1982) trace markedness theory back to correspondence between Nikolaj Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson in the 1930s. Waugh (1982) particularly makes mention of the following excerpt on markedness from Jakobsen to Trubetzkoy:

> It seems to me that it has a significance not only for linguistics but also for enthnology and the history of culture, and that such historico-cultural correlations as life~death, liberty~non-liberty, sin~virtue, holidays~working days, etc., are always confined to relations *a*~non-*a*, and that it is important to find out for any epoch, group, nation, etc., what the marked element is. (300)

Battistella (1996) draws from this one of the two chief interpretations of markedness theory, namely that relationships among items can be considered in terms of a/non-a. The other interpretation Battistella (1996) describes is has its roots in this Jakobsen excerpt shared by Waugh (1982):

> " . . . that interpretation that is the most general, widest, or most broad; that interpretation where the presence or absence of the unit of information is for the most part irrelevant." (303)

This observation by Jakobsen describes what Waugh (1982) calls the "zero-interpretation" or what Battistella (1996) describes as a scaled interpretation of markedness, i.e. an interpretation that allows for relationships outside of the strict a/non-a paradigm. Battistella (1996) examines applications of markedness theory in detail, ranging from the work of Jakobsen and his followers in topics such as child language and universals of language (to name but a few) to the work of Chomsky and his followers who employed markedness theory in the service of generative grammar, studying topics from phonology to core grammar (again naming but a few). The range of use to which markedness theory has already been put seems sufficient reason to employ it in the present study to understand the impact of cultural values and speaker perceptions on pronoun use. The kinds of marks discussed in this context, being semantic marks, might also be called connotations; however, I shall employ the terms marked and unmarked in order take full advantage of the insights afforded by the markedness framework.

In her discussion of the zero-interpretation of markedness theory, Waugh (1982) used Venn diagrams to illustrate her point. Her diagrams showed first, a circle within a circle, the inner circle signifying the marked term and the outer circle signifying the unmarked term. The

area outside the outer circle signified the world outside of the particular a/non-a relationship illustrated by the nested circles. The pronoun relationship Venn diagrams employed by the current author are modeled after Waugh's diagrams illustrating the zero-interpretation.

A classic example used to illustrate markedness theory as pertaining to meaning is the word pair of *lion* and *lioness* (e.g. Waugh 1982). A casual observer on safari might see a group of large felines and exclaim: "Look at all those *lions*!" However, even if the felines in question were all female, the observer would be unlikely to use the term *lioness* unless he or she was absolutely certain of the gender of all the animals. Why? Traditionally this is explained by pointing out that *lion* is the unmarked term, while *lioness* is marked [+female]. However, depending on one's opinions on gender and equality, one might argue that *lioness* is actually marked as [-male]. Either interpretation is consistent with the basic a/non-a paradigm. One could also argue that the term *lion* is marked [+large] and [+feline], regardless of any gender markings. By extending the interpretation to include [+large] and [+feline], one extends the a/non-a paradigm to allow for the further relationship studies permitted by zero-interpretation. For example, one can now consider lions not only in terms of male or female, but also as they relate to felines in general. Three particular ideas taken from Waugh (1982) for use in this study are: 1) the idea that markedness relationships need not be relegated only to either/or choices, 2) the use of Venn diagrams to illustrate markedness relationships, and 3) the assumption that singularity is more marked than plurality, and that the plural logically includes the singular.

Even outside of discussions formally espousing markedness theory, it is not unprecedented to hear of "marks" in discussions of pronoun use. Balhorn (2009), for example, discusses markings for gender and animacy in his discussion of third person pronouns,

particularly noting the functionality allowed the pronoun *they* because of its suitability in situations where the pronoun antecedent is animate. When female students at Harvard protested the use of generic *he*, Livia (2001) reports that Watkins responded to their concerns that the issue was not about pronoun envy, but rather about markedness. Additionally, Livia (2001) specifically mentions that Old English third person pronouns carried markings both for gender and for high animacy, just as Balhorn (2009) described modern English third person pronouns possessing the same markings. Outside of strict markedness terminology, Livia (2001) also refers to the pronoun *one* as "stuffy," but perhaps a form encouraged for formal use. To this author, such a statement easily translates to saying that *one* is marked for formality.

A crucial question for anyone employing markedness theory is what constitutes markedness, or rather, what makes something "marked" or "unmarked," outside of someone simply saying the marking is so. Murphy (1993:6) points out that the terms marked and unmarked "merely label the symptoms of semantic asymmetry—not the causes. While labeling symptoms may be a convenient means for abbreviating the causes behind the symptoms, if we don't know what those causes are . . . the terms . . . have no theoretical import." In general where markedness is applied to semantic issues, a key factor for determining the marked or unmarked status of two related terms, or two forms which serve a similar function, is to determine which form is the most prototypical (Battistella 1990). The form that can be used the most widely to represent the function at hand is the least marked form and therefore the unmarked form. All other related forms are marked by whatever it is that makes them different from the unmarked form, or in other words by whatever makes it less generally usable than the unmarked form.

To return to our previous example of *lion* versus *lioness*, we can determine which of the two terms for a member of the species *Panthera leo* is more marked by examining which form can be more generally used to represent that function. As discussed previously, *lion* is less marked and therefore considered the unmarked term within that set. The next question is to determine what makes the other term marked, or to say what it is marked for. The answer for this set is that *lioness* is clearly marked for gender, specifically female gender. In order to prove the assertion that *lion* is the unmarked term of this set, we could design a corpus study to examine which term, *lion* or *lioness*, was used more frequently in texts referring generally to the species *Panthera leo*. Determining what exactly makes the less used term more marked can be done in a number of ways, from consulting a dictionary to asking speakers which of the two terms they would use and why.

For this study, we are concerned with finding which epicene pronoun option, out of the choices of *he or she*, *one*, or *they*, is the most prototypical. Which pronoun can be used most generally? To answer this question, the author will conduct a corpus study to see which pronoun is used most, or which one is the least marked. After finding that answer, the author will consider what factor or factors make the other choices marked relative to the unmarked choice. For example, if the study were to reveal that *one* was the most frequently used epicene pronoun (and therefore the unmarked pronoun of the set), the next question would be to determine what made the other choices, *he or she* and *they*, marked relative to *one*. More on the design of the study can be found in Chapter 3; the actual results are related and discussed in Chapter 4.

Let us now consider the potential for using markedness theory to explain language change. McMahon (1994) states that one of the factors that allows semantic change in language

is the fact that words typically either have a variety of meaning or cover a range if meaning. She then explains that such flexible words may become used more for one of their peripheral meaning than for their central meaning. Or, a loan word may begin to be used in place of the central meaning for a given word. Either way, the original word becomes relegated to a more limited meaning (that is still in some way related to its root meaning), and a new word expresses the meaning once expressed by the previous form. This sounds to the author very much like Kuryłowicz's 4th Law of Analogy in practice, as expressed by Robertson (1975) and as applied to semantic change. Indeed, in correspondence with the present author, Robertson (2009) graciously supplied the following example of how markedness can be used to illustrate such changes in meaning, such changes among form and function. Specifically, the form *queen*, in an earlier incarnation, once signified 'woman.' It then became more specialized, signifying 'wife' or 'married woman.' At that point, an earlier incarnation of the form *wife* took over the function of 'woman,' which brings us to the present, when the form *woman* signifies 'woman,' the form *wife* signifies 'wife,' and the form *queen* signifies 'king's wife' or 'female monarch.' Robertson (2009) notes that although it is not necessarily possible to predict the new form that might fill a particular function, it is nevertheless possible to predict that the older forms will shift towards a more limited function within their present function, just as described by McMahon (1994) and just as predicted by Kuryłowicz's 4th Law of Analogy.

At this point it is imperative that the predictive power of Kuryłowicz's 4th Law of Analogy be clarified. First and foremost, let us consider some things it does not predict. It does not predict which forms (words) may be subject to change. It does not predict which new forms will take over existing functions when language change does occur. It also does not account for

situations in which a single form is used simultaneously for a variety of (usually) unrelated functions. Consider the word *cool*, for example, which functions both as a word to describe temperature and as a slang term to express approval (e.g. "That's so cool!"). What, then, is the value of Kuryłowicz's 4th Law of Analogy? Quite simply, it describes a general tendency in language change, a tendency which Joseph (1998) renders thus: "an innovative form takes on the primary function and . . . the older form it replaces, if it remains at all, does so only in a secondary function." (365) For the purposes of this study, it 1) explains the general direction of language change (i.e. older forms are not typically reinstated to their former functions), and 2) describes the tendency of forms to shift from more general to more specific functions.

Changes in the function of the form *gay* (McMahon 1994) provide an opportunity to discover what motivates K4 shifts (i.e. shifts following the pattern outlined by Kuryłowicz's 4th Law of Analogy), particularly when *gay* is compared with words such as *hot* and *cool*, both of which currently exist with multiple meanings in Modern American English. Murphy (1993) notes the tendency of language users to favor positive or polite terms over terms with potentially negative connotations (e.g. "How *tall* are you?" is okay but "How *short* are you?" is not). Allan and Burridge (2006) in their discussion of taboo words and language change note that polite words for impolite topics often become contaminated by their taboo meaning and therefore restricted to their taboo meaning. (For our purposes, we will consider *taboo* to mean anything currently frowned upon by polite society.) One factor, then for determining whether a word may be subject to a shift of the sort described by Kuryłowicz's 4th Law of Analogy is whether the word in question has any taboo meanings associated with it. If so, another factor is whether the taboo meanings are context dependent or whether the taboo meaning is always a possible

interpretation, regardless of context. I propose that in order for a K4 shift to occur, the outgoing form must be associated with some sort of stigma or taboo independent of context.

Let us consider the words *gay*, *hot*, and *cool* in light of this proposal. The word *gay* is a euphemism for *homosexual*, homosexual being a taboo concept in polite society (as evidenced by the use of a euphemism in the first place). The word has become contaminated by its taboo association to the point that the taboo meaning is brought to mind whenever a contemporary Modern American English speaker utters the word *gay*.

The word *hot* also has potential sexual meaning, specifically the notion of being sexually attractive. However, it is still possible to use context to distinguish that sense of the word from the temperature sense of the word. *Hot* can also be used as a slang term without sexual meaning, such as a "*hot* sale item" at a store. Even when *hot* is used sexually, the sexual connotations do not appear to be as socially taboo as those associated with *gay*, suggesting that in current Modern American society, sexual attractiveness in general is not necessarily a bad thing. The word *cool*, like the word *hot*, carries a variety of slang and traditional meanings, but none of taboo in any way (except perhaps to people who disapprove of slang in general).

So, why did *gay* undergo a K4 shift, but not *hot*, *cool*, or any other number of words that exist with multiple meanings? Simply because the strong taboo meaning of *gay* became inseparable with the form, regardless of context; such has not been the case with *hot*, *cool*, and other words. This could be either because any taboo meanings are context dependent (and/or perhaps not so taboo after all) or because none of the meanings associated with the word in question are taboo. Again, keep in mind that for this discussion, "taboo" refers to something that

is somehow "wrong" in polite society within a particular culture; the nature of the taboos is entirely dependent on the culture under discussion.

2.3.4. GENDER AND LANGUAGE. Regarding grammatical gender, Baron (1986) observed that "the history of gender has never been satisfactorily explained." (91). Curzan (2003) cites Protagoras as the source of the gendered labels for Greek nouns in the fifth century B.C. However, this does not answer why such labels were perceived to be necessary in the first place. Scholars following the androcentric tradition noted by Bodine (1975), Baron (1986), and others often used grammatical gender to argue in support of their views regarding biological gender and the roles of the sexes relative to each other, seeking to illustrate the superiority of males by appealing to grammatical examples from "nature." Ironically for such scholars, even when English did have grammatical gender (nearly a millennium ago now, during the Old English period), there were clear examples of grammatical gender in conflict with biological gender; Baugh and Cable (1993) point out that the Old English word for *woman* was grammatically masculine. Similar disparities can be found in other languages employing grammatical gender, such as Spanish *el vestido*, 'the dress,' a grammatically masculine word signifying a decidedly feminine piece of clothing.

As English has carried on without grammatical gender for many centuries now, English speaking scholars wishing to impose an androcentric world view via language had to do so either by appealing to grammatical gender in other languages, e.g. Greek, Latin, or French, or simply appealing to the "logic" of androcentrism as expressed in such works as the Bible (particularly the story of Adam and Eve). Such scholars erroneously argued that *he,* for example, had truly

been neutral at one point but had later acquired a masculine meaning. In actuality, even in Old English, the pronouns signifying *he, she,* and *it* already carried markings associated with gender, animacy, or the lack thereof, just as they do today (Livia 2001). Let us now consider semantic gender as it pertains to English language change.

As mentioned before, prescriptivists advocated the term *he* as an unmarked, epicene pronoun. Some even argued erroneously that *he* had begun as a neutral term and had later acquired its masculine meaning. Kuryłowicz's 4th Law of Analogy predicts that once a form becomes more specialized somehow, it will drift towards further specialization rather than away from it. So, even if *he* was neutral once upon a time, the fact that *he* now carries a marking for [+masculine] means that *he* will never be truly neutral again. Using a gendered pronoun of any sort as an epicene pronoun is problematic, in that so long as gender is present, it is still a possible factor for consideration, or, more negatively, discrimination. Ideally, the optimal epicene pronoun would be one which omitted the issue of gender entirely, while still being suitable for use with animate antecedents. A handy gender neutral option, *they*, is already in existence, and, as Jochonowitz (1982) says it is "already good English; it simply has not been recognized as such." (201)

Lakoff (1973) suggested that it was impractical to hope for pronoun change in support of the feminist cause, and she herself was prone to use generic *he*. Her sentiments are understandable in light of the closed word class nature of pronouns, but as mentioned earlier, pronoun change, though rare and infrequent, is not unheard of. As Baron (1986) observed, "It is to be expected, then that if enough people become sensitized to sex-related language questions, such forms as generic *he* and *man* will give way no matter what arguments are advanced in their

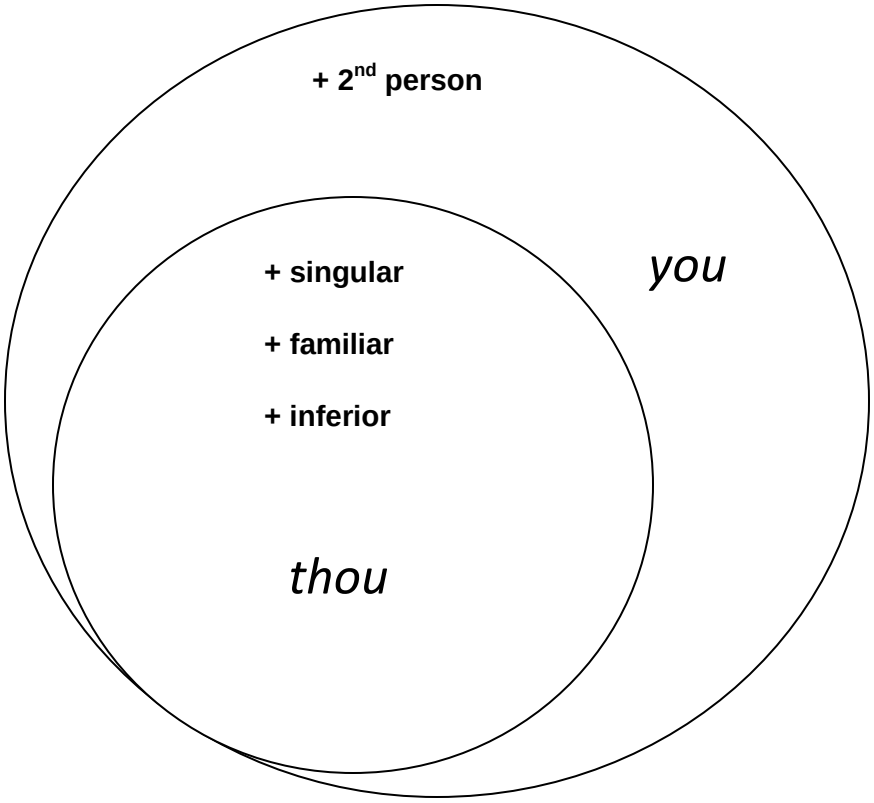
defense." (219) We will discuss later some studies which have been conducted to determine the extent of third person pronoun usage change in Modern American English.

2.3.5. SECOND PERSON PRONOUN CHANGE IN ENGLISH. Just as *I* and *we* distinguish number in first person, *thou* and *you* once distinguished number in second person. However, singular/plural was not the only distinction associated with the forms. Plural *you* carried a mark of superiority, meaning that upper class speakers expected to be called *you* by lower class speakers.[2] This practice originated in fourth century A.D. Latin as a means for addressing the emperor (Brown & Gilman 1960; Johnson 1966). By the thirteenth century A.D., it had become sufficiently adopted in Middle English to appear in contemporary literature (Kennedy 1915), despite the lack of such a custom in English prior to that time (Howe 1996). Upper class speakers addressed reverentially as *you* would then use *thou* forms to lower class speakers to emphasize their inferiority. The Anglo culture's love of equality would not tolerate this sort of verbal inequality forever. Two schools of thought emerged for dealing with the issue. The Quakers decided to use *thou* and *you* strictly by which term was appropriate for number, just as did the translators of the King James Version of the Bible. In other words, they tried to ignore the potentially pejorative marks which had become associated with *thou*. Howe (1996) observes that the Quakers' behavior may have rendered *thou* even more marked; people not wishing to be associated with the Quakers, a minority religion, may have avoided *thou* for just that reason even if they would not have bothered otherwise. During the seventeenth century A. D., the majority of English speakers

[2] The singular/plural distinction in second person pronouns could also represent familiarity or the lack thereof.

began using *you* for both singular and plural, thus avoiding any possible insult which might be incurred from using *thou* forms outside of prayer or with intimate friends or family (Barber 1997, Johnson 1966). In other words, *thou* became marked and relegated to a narrower function; and, as predicted by Kuryłowicz's 4th Law of Analogy, a new form, *you*, assumed *thou*'s former function. Figure 2.1 illustrates the relationship between *thou* and *you*, considering markedness, and Figure 2.2 illustrates the state of second person pronouns following the virtual loss of *thou*.

FIGURE 2.1 PREVIOUS SECOND PERSON PARADIGM



As illustrated in Figure 2.2, shifting *you* into general second person use not only eliminated the social markers associated with *thou*, but also eliminated the singular marker. Or so it seems. In fact, *you* has come to be associated with singularity, and other forms, such as *you all* or *y'all*, are sometimes used to emphasize plurality. The author offers Figure 2.3 to illustrate a

potentially-evolving state of Modern American English second person pronouns. In the figure, *you all* signifies any form with that meaning, such as *y'all*, *you guys*, etc. It should also be noted that although *thou* has fallen out of most regular use, it is nevertheless still employed for religious purposes among some groups; however, such use has been omitted from Figures 2.2 and 2.3.

FIGURE 2.2 CURRENT SECOND PERSON PARADIGM

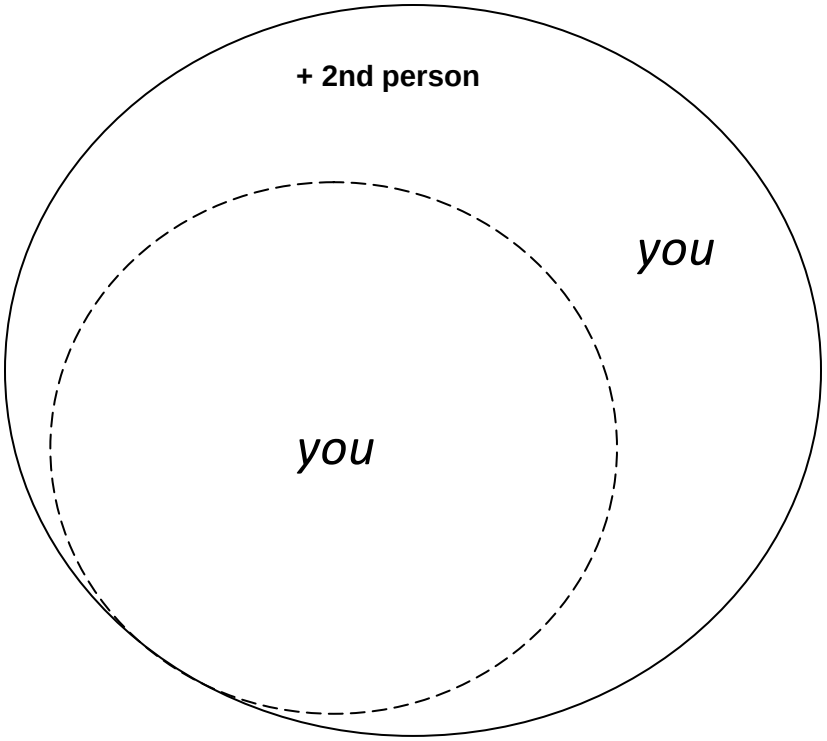
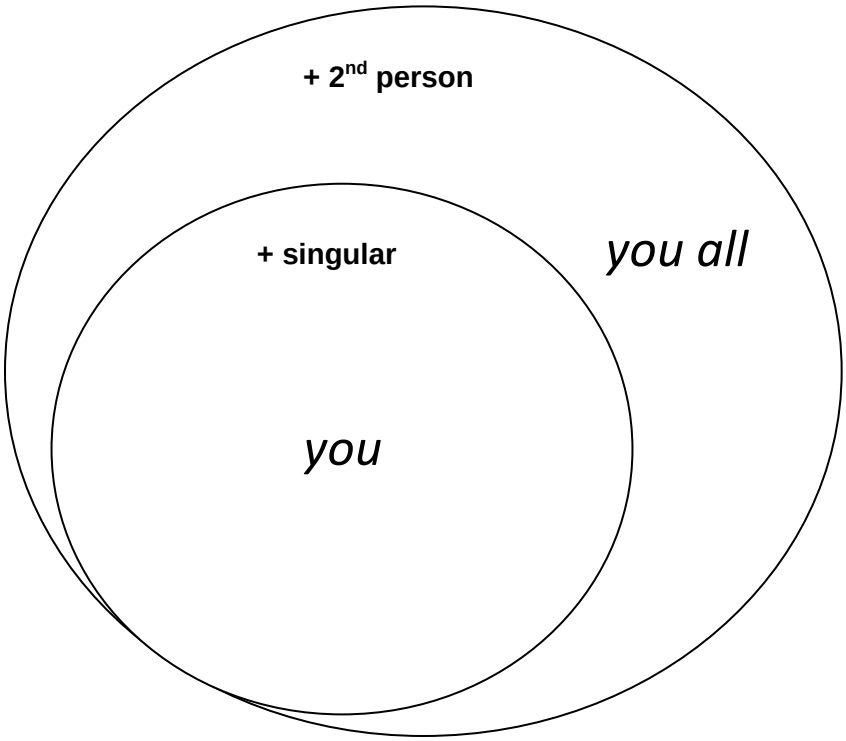


FIGURE 2.3 EVOLVING SECOND PERSON PARADIGM



The overall point is that English has obviously survived (and prospered) in the centuries since the *you* shift, despite the incursion of a once plural form into a singular position, and in a way that virtually eliminated the previous singular form at that.

2.4. STUDIES ON THIRD PERSON PRONOUN USAGE. A variety of studies relative to third person pronoun use have been conducted since feminism drew attention to the neutrality (or markedness) of *he*. Some studies explored the issue of how speakers perceived *he* and other epicene pronoun options in terms of neutrality, like those by Khosoroshahi (1989) and Martyna (1980). Both of the aforementioned researchers found considerable evidence that *he* is indeed not neutral. Meyers (1990) conducted a study similar to those above, studying the writings of college students to examine not only their pronoun choice, but their consistency in pronoun choice. Also,

like Khosoroshahi (1989) and Martyna (1980), she considered whether the gender of the author seemed to influence the author's pronoun choices. All three researchers found that it did; Khosoroshahi (1989) and Martyna (1980) specifically found that, except in the case of females using non–gender-reformed language (who tended to select opposite gender pronouns for neutral use), speakers were more likely to choose their own gender for neutral representation. Another psychological study by Foertsch & Gernsbacher (1997) explored whether singular *they* was a cognitively efficient substitute for generic *he*; they found that it was.

Not all third person pronoun studies have been strictly psychological or limited to studying data elicited solely for the study at hand. Snyder (2007) recommends the use of corpora for investigating usage questions, and although Newmeyer (2003) argues against the use of corpora for writing grammars, he nevertheless concurs that corpus studies are quite valuable for studying usage. Not surprisingly, then, there have been many corpus studies regarding the issue of third person pronoun use.

MacKay (1980) focused on what might happen were singular *they* to be prescribed for use in place of neutral *he*. Texts were gathered from a variety of publications (mean publication date of 1971), following which traditionally singular epicene pronouns were identified (variations of *it* and *he, she, she or he,* and *he or she*) and then replaced with corresponding forms of *they*, singular. Afterwards, four judges, two male and two female, independently examined the revised corpus in order to assess the benefits and drawbacks of the general use of epicene *they*. In summary, the judges found a couple of potential advantages, but many more disadvantages, mainly dealing with clarity of reference. Mackay noted that the original texts contained no instances of singular *they*, corroborating other authors from 1962 and 1978 who

also failed to find singular *they* within a large representative sample of formal articles. Mackay stated that the data conflicted with Miller and Swift's (1976) assertion that singular *they* is in widespread common use. However, given the formal (and written) nature of Mackay's data, his findings are not necessarily unexpected.

Newman (1992) examined transcripts from several talk shows aired on June 20, 1990, ranging from what the current study would term "spoken formal" to "spoken colloquial;" in other words, a good sampling of all three registers of speech considered in this study. After tallying the instances of various epicene pronouns (*they, he, she, it, he or she*), Newman then analyzed the findings in depth to explore the motivations behind the pronouns chosen and ultimately theorize about how the notion of a "gap" in the language came to be. Newman concluded that the dominant use of singular *they* corroborated the assertions of Bodine (1975) and others relative to the frequency of its use. However, he seemed more concerned with explaining the error of the notion of a gap (calling it an unfortunate artifact of traditional prescription) than with "proving" that singular *they* is widely used.

Balhorn (2009), utilizing the benefits offered by electronic corpora, studied epicene pronoun use in newspaper prose. In addition to examining the data for usage by sheer numbers, he also considered factors such as whether the author's gender influenced pronoun choice; like the researchers previously cited, he found that it did. Balhorn's study is particularly significant because of its wider ranging data set, and because of its use of newspaper prose, a writing form much more similar to casual speech than the data studied by MacKay (1980).

One interesting commonality among the studies above is the inclusion of the epicene pronouns highlighted by prescriptivism, namely *he, he or she*, and *they*. The pronoun *one* was

much less frequently examined. This suggests to the current author that studies such as the ones described above have been conducted largely for the purposes of proving or disproving the value of traditional presciptivism relative to third person pronoun choice, rather than out of sheer academic curiosity or for the purpose of composing an original guide to usage. There is nothing wrong with this, but it does present the possibility that were something to happen in the pronoun paradigm outside of the prescriptive set, researchers might not notice it. Livia (2001) suggested that *one* was a suitable pronoun for formal epicene use. Meyers (1990) significantly examined not only *one*, in addition to the prescriptive trio, but also writing that avoided the need for a singular pronoun all together.

3. Methodology

3.1 General Overview. In order to determine whether markedness relationships can be used to accurately predict and describe changes in the Modern American English third person pronoun system, I will conduct a corpus study to determine the frequency of use of three epicene pronoun choices, namely *they*, *he or she*, and *one*. I will now discuss in further detail my choice of corpus, the Corpus of Contemporary American English, followed by a discussion of my choice of pronouns. I will then explain the measures I will take to obtain meaningful results, specifically the establishment of registers for consideration and the selection of written and spoken material to represent each register.

3.2. The Corpus. I have chosen the Corpus of Contemporary American English (henceforth referred to as COCA) both because my focus is on Modern, or Contemporary, American English, and because the corpus contains over 400 million words taken from both spoken and written mediums ranging from talk show transcripts to scholarly publications, providing a wide range of language use for study. Its earliest content is from 1990, and it is updated periodically, so that as of this study, it is current as of the middle of 2009. This will allow me to study a wider range of language use over a larger period of time than was studied by any of the studies discussed in the literature review.

COCA makes it simple to search for specific words and phrases, and it also has options for limiting searches by time period or by genre. The five major genres of COCA are Spoken, Fiction, Magazine, Newspaper, and Academic. Each of the five major genres is subdivided as follows (abbreviations are presented as they appear on COCA):

SPOKEN

ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, FOX, MSNBC, PBS, NPR, Indep

FICTION

Gen (Book), Gen (Jrnl), SciFi/Fant, Juvenile, Movies

MAGAZINE

News/Opin, Financial, Sci/Tech, Soc/Arts, Religion, Sports, Entertain,

Home/Health, Women/Men, Afric-Amer, Children

NEWSPAPER

Misc, News_Intl, News_Natl, News_Local, Money, Life, Sports, Editorial

ACADEMIC

Education, History, Geog/SocSci, Law/PolSci, Humanities, Phil/Rel, Sci/Tech,

Medicine, Misc

According to the information on COCA, one of the goals for the corpus was for it to include roughly equal amounts of data for each genre, meaning that each of the genres, Spoken, Fiction, Newspaper, and Academic, comprises about one fifth of the corpus.

3.3. THE PRONOUNS. In the introduction, a variety of epicene pronouns was presented, including the use of *he* or *she* separately, either alone or alternated; the compound pronoun *he or she* and its variant *she or he*; the pronoun *one*; and the pronoun *they*. Of these pronouns, searches will be conducted for *he or she* (and *she or he*), *one*, and *they*.

3.3.1. REASONS FOR OMITTING PRONOUNS. *He* and *she* separately have been omitted both because such gender-marked pronouns have already been established to lack true neutrality and also because of the amount of time involved in sorting through hits for either pronoun to determine whether the pronouns were being used in an epicene fashion. For example, at the time of this study a search for *he* by itself in COCA, searching the entire database, would have yielded 2,9000,000 tokens for *he*, only a small percentage which would actually be for *he* in epicene use. COCA has no search tag for limiting the hits in a search to gender neutral third person pronouns (the only such tag is tied to the pronoun *it*), and so a single researcher, the author, would have needed to sort through each example one by one to find the few examples of actual epicene pronoun use. The effort seemed wasted on pronouns that lack neutrality. Additionally, as the current researcher has no prescriptive axe to grind, so to speak, it seemed unnecessary to limit study to the prescriptive trio of *he*, *he or she*, and *they*, and the researcher being content to accept the findings of other researchers regarding the neutrality (or not) of *he* and extend them by analogy to *she*.

3.3.2. METHODS FOR RENDERING THE CHOSEN PRONOUNS MANAGEABLE. As discussed above, this study has but one researcher, and despite the search capabilities of COCA, there is no way to let the computer sort out epicene pronoun examples from non-epicene examples. This is an issue in particular for the pronoun *they*, which of course enjoys extensive use as a plural pronoun, aside from any epicene use. Preliminary COCA searches revealed that *they* is quite commonly used (1,900,000 tokens for *they* in COCA at the time of this study), and so it seemed prudent to

develop a method for limiting the number of hits to sort through, while still ensuring a sufficient data set.

In order to solve this problem, the author decided to search only for the possessive form of *they*, namely *their*. This was decided based on the assumption that a speaker selecting an epicene pronoun would be just as likely to choose a given pronoun in the possessive case as in any other case. Also, it facilitated a further limitation helpful for dealing with the pronoun *one*. Like *they*, *one* also has a wide range of non-epicene use. However, the possessive form of *one* is logically generally used with animate beings capable of possession. Even more relevant is the phrase *one's own*, which suggests possession by an animate being even more strongly. The author consequently decided to search for each of the selected pronouns, *he or she* (and its reverse, *she or he*), *one*, and *they*, inflected for possessive case and paired with the word *own*, yielding the official search terms *his or her own* and *her or his own* (both representing *he or she*), *one's own* (representing *one*), and *their own*, representing epicene *they*. Naturally a larger sample set would have been desirable for deeper research, but as it was, the researcher still had over 7000 hits for *their own* to sort through, only about two percent of which illustrated epicene use.

3.4. METHODS FOR RENDERING MEANINGFUL SEARCH RESULTS. As noted above, COCA is broken into five genres, with each genre containing several subdivisions. Although the original five genres are well conceived and highly useful for finding data relevant to one's study, together they yielded a data set composed of only about 20% spoken material, with the remaining 80% being written material. The present author being particularly interested in comparing spoken use

to written use in third person pronoun usage, it became necessary to find a meaningful way to obtain a data set that would contain roughly equal parts of spoken and written material. The solution for this problem led to development of registers for classifying the data obtained in this study.

3.4.1. SPOKEN AND WRITTEN USE COMPARED. The underlying goal of usage studies of any sort is to determine which forms speakers actually use. To that end, it seems the best way to understand speaker practice would be to analyze spontaneously produced spoken language samples. As discussed in COCA's introductory information, it is difficult to obtain spontaneous utterances when people know they are being recorded. However, talk shows provide a setting somewhat more conducive to spontaneous speech; Newman (1992), for instance, used talk show transcripts as part of his study. The interesting thing about spontaneous speech is the idea that it is relatively unedited, and therefore more reflective of speakers' true usage habits. But, is unedited language the only language worth considering? Would it not be worthwhile to consider how such unedited use compares to more edited use, such as the language used in more official or more professional settings? And why not compare unedited spoken language to its logical opposite, namely highly edited writing designed for prestigious or academic purposes? Consideration on these questions this problem led to the idea of establishing registers for evaluating both spoken and written language samples.

3.4.2. ESTABLISHING REGISTERS FOR EVALUATING DATA. Biber (1994) states that "typical register studies [give] three components: description of the situational characteristics of a

register, description of the linguistic characteristics, and analysis of the functional or conventional associations between the situational and linguistic features." (33) This study is not intended as a register study, so much as a pronoun usage study which happens to employ registers in order to interpret data, but the characteristics Biber (1994) lists are helpful for explaining the registers I ultimately chose. Considering the various levels of editing or planning that go into language, three general levels seemed logical.

The first, or least edited level, I call COLLOQUIAL. This is the sort of language used in informal settings, settings in which for whatever reason it is either unimportant or undesirable to adopt more formal usage. In speech, this means casual, unscripted conversation. In writing, this means the sort of writing one might use to communicate in a more speech-like manner, such as one might find in a magazine designed primarily for entertainment (rather than education), or perhaps in an editorial or a humor column in a newspaper. Recall that Balhorn (2009) analyzed newspaper prose for his study because of its closer resemblance to speech than other forms of writing. The author expects that the COLLOQUIAL register would contain the language least likely to be influenced by any prescriptive directives.

The second level, a little more edited, I call STANDARD. This is the sort of language which in both speech and writing generally entail more careful choices of words or grammatical forms. The goal of speakers and writers employing what the author calls STANDARD use (not to be confused with Standard English, which is a much more complicated topic outside the realm of this study) is to appear or sound educated but not overly "stuffy" or formal. This is the sort of language newscasters use, or perhaps educators giving routine lectures. In writing, the style associated with the STANDARD register might appear in magazines aimed at non-professionals but

which are designed for education or self-improvement. Another way of describing the language associated with STANDARD use would be to say it is the language people employ when they wish to sound competent, but not unsociable.

The third and final, and therefore the most edited register that I consider is that which I call the FORMAL register. This is the language is associated with people who wish to sound extremely serious and knowledgeable, whether in speech or in writing. This sort of language is the most likely to employ highly specialized terminology or to use complicated words in place of simpler constructions which could convey the same basic meaning. This sort of language might be found in a broadcast designed to be highly educational or highly prestigious. It is also the sort of language which is most likely to appear in scholarly journals. This is also the sort of language most likely to be concerned with or affected by the prescriptive tradition, which in practical terms means that it is the register in which one would expect the lowest use of a prescriptively condemned form such as *they*.

In all three of the registers I have chosen, COLLOQUIAL, STANDARD, and FORMAL, there exists the potential that there may be overlap with other registers, depending on the individual speaker. For example, a highly educated person might be more likely to employ language that could be considered STANDARD in situations which logically might otherwise be considered COLLOQUIAL. Likewise, a less educated speaker's best attempt at FORMAL use may have trouble reaching the level of editing normal associated with STANDARD use. Fortunately, COCA includes a wide variety of speakers and authors, which should help reduce the statistical impact of such register overlap.

3.4.3. REGISTER PAIRED WITH SPOKEN AND WRITTEN DATA. I have proposed three registers, COLLOQUIAL, STANDARD, and FORMAL, which I wish to use in studying spoken and written media. Two mediums multiplied by three registers yield six smaller divisions, consisting of a register paired with a medium, which I will refer to as subcategories. The six subcategories are 1) SPOKEN COLLOQUIAL; 2) WRITTEN COLLOQUIAL; 3) SPOKEN STANDARD; 4) WRITTEN STANDARD; 5) SPOKEN FORMAL; and 6) WRITTEN FORMAL.

Recall that COCA consists of five genres subdivided into further categories. I decided to select one of these categories-within-a-genre for each of my six subcategories. To represent SPOKEN COLLOQUIAL, I selected SPOKEN: INDEPENDENT. This category-within-a-genre contains transcripts from a variety of talk programs, such as *Rush Limbaugh, Oprah,* and *Geraldo*. Like Newman (1992), I felt that such talk shows represented my best chance for data on relatively unedited spoken language. To represent WRITTEN COLLOQUIAL, I selected MAGAZINE: ENTERTAINMENT. This includes publications such as *Rolling Stone, Entertainment*, and *People*. These magazines are designed to provide quick entertaining information. These kinds of magazines tend to appear weekly, which means that in addition to being designed to "sound" conversational, they also are probably edited more quickly than other magazines simply for the sake of publication deadlines.

To represent SPOKEN STANDARD, I selected SPOKEN: NPR. Although it might contain some formal language use, it is largely composed of a variety of programs designed to be educational and yet accessible and entertaining to viewers; language use more carefully chosen than that used for talk shows, but also carefully chosen to avoid "stuffiness" and audience loss. To represent WRITTEN STANDARD, I selected MAGAZINE: HOME/HEALTH. This data set included

material from publications such as *Total Health*, *Town & Country*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Based on the article snippets obtained in searches in this data set, it became apparent that these publications are designed to be informative, and consequently they are written using more edited language in order to "sound" educated, but again without distancing readers.

To represent SPOKEN FORMAL, I selected SPOKEN: PBS. PBS regularly presents programs designed to sound highly authoritative. Additionally, the PBS section of COCA at the time of this study consisted exclusively of material from the program *Newshour*, a highly formal program. Finally, to represent WRITTEN FORMAL, I selected ACADEMIC: MISCELLANEOUS. COCA offered a wide variety of specialties to choose from in its Academic genre, but Miscellaneous seemed to be the best way to ensure a balanced sample of formal writing. It seemed likely that choosing a specific specialty might have slanted the data in favor of whatever use was preferred in that particular specialty.

3.5. SUMMARY AND LIMITATIONS. My search method will be to search the dataset selected for each of my six register/medium combination subcategories, as outlined above, for each of the following phrases: *his or her own* and *her or his own*, to represent *he or she*; *one's own*, to represent *one*; and *their own*, to represent epicene *they*. I will then analyze the results according to pronoun, register, medium, reserving the right to consider other criteria which may be suggested by the results. One limitation of this study already mentioned is that COCA was not designed with epicene pronouns in mind. Although COCA searches may utilize a wide variety of grammatical markers, such as person and number, there is no tag currently available to search for epicene or gender neutral singular third person pronouns other than *it*. This fact leads to a second

limitation, which applies to the quality of the results obtained for the search term *their own*, representing the pronoun epicene *they*. These results, which will likely be numerous, will need to be sorted individually by the author in order to determine whether they constitute examples of epicene pronoun use, which presents the possibility of human error in determining the number of epicene hits.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 General Overview. The source of the results discussed here is the Corpus of Contemporary American English, which is henceforth referred to as COCA. Three epicene pronoun candidates were studied, *they* (searched as *their own*), *he or she* (searched as *his or her* own and *her or his own*), and *one* (searched as *one's own*. In order to better explore the range of use of each of these pronouns, the author established three registers, COLLOQUIAL, STANDARD, and FORMAL, to be examined across both spoken and written media. This yielded six register/medium combinations, which the author calls subcategories. The author then selected a subset of COCA, a subdivision of one of the five genres, to represent each of her six subcategories. The six sections of COCA searched were SPOKEN: INDEPENDENT (or SPOK: Indep) to represent SPOKEN COLLOQUIAL; MAGAZINE: ENTERTAINMENT (or MAG: Entertain) to represent WRITTEN COLLOQUIAL, and so on as described in the preceding methodology section. The combined results for each of the data sets search yielded 102 total hits for *his or her own,* 5 total hits for *her or his own,* 193 total hits for *one's own,* and 159 epicene hits for *their own* (out of 7012 total hits for *their own*). This yielded a set of 459 epicene pronouns for consideration. Throughout this section, results for *he or she* will refer to combined the results of *his or her own* and *her or his own*. Similarly, *one* will refer to results for *one's own* and *they* will refer to epicene results for *their own*. However, the nominative pronoun form and the actual search term(s) used for that pronoun may be employed interchangeably.

Results for *he or she* and for *one* were obtained by searching for the exact phrases *his or her own, her or his own* and *one's own* in the six COCA subcategories listed in the methodology section. The results for *they* were obtained first by searching COCA for *their own* in the manner

described above, and then by manually examining the results to eliminate grammatically and semantically plural hits. The 159 results used were all 1) clearly intended to imply gender neutrality and 2) placed in proximity to a grammatically singular antecedent in a manner to create a number disagreement.

The impetus for this study was perceived confusion relative to the use of third person singular pronouns in cases of gender neutrality. Following the lead of countless advocates of usage-based grammars, the author hoped that this study would provide potential answers to the third person singular gender problem, or, if you will, a solution to fill "the gap." However, the results turned out to be as complex as the problem itself. Table 4.1 presents the results of the study. We will first discuss the results by register, medium, and pronoun, examining the results relative to themselves. We will then expand our range of comparison to examine the results relative to other studies, relative to traditional prescription, as an indication of current cultural values, and as a reference for new prescriptions. .

TABLE 1. OVERALL DISTRIBUTION OF EPICENE USAGE, BY REGISTER AND MEDIUM

	Colloquial			Standard			Formal		
	Spoken	Written	Total	Spoken	Written	Total	Spoken	Written	Total
They	51/58 88%	13/23 57%	64/81 79%	61/108 56%	11/89 12%	72/197 37%	19/39 49%	4/142 3%	23/181 13%
his or her	4/58 7%	6/23 26%	10/81 12%	13/108 12%	43/89 48%	56/197 28%	9/39 23%	27/142 19%	36/181 20%
her or his	1/58 2%	0/23 0%	1/81 1%	2/108 2%	0/89 0%	2/197 1%	0/39 0%	2/142 1%	2/181 1%
One	2/58 3%	4/23 17%	6/81 7%	32/108 30%	35/89 39%	67/197 34%	11/39 28%	109/142 77%	120/181 66%
Total	58/58 100%	23/23 100%	81/81 100%	108/108 100%	89/89 100%	197/197 100%	39/39 100%	142/142 100%	181/181 100%

4.2. RESULTS BY REGISTER. The raw search results obtained from this study were examined according to three registers, COLLOQUIAL, STANDARD, and FORMAL. In the COLLOQUIAL register, singular *they* was the preferred epicene pronoun, comprising 79% of the total COLLOQUIAL examples, followed distantly by *he or she* forms at 13% and *one* at 7%. COLLOQUIAL examples comprised 18% of the total results (81:459). In the STANDARD register, singular *they* at 37% held a slim lead over *one* at 34% and *he or she* at 29%. STANDARD examples comprised 43% of the total results (197:459). In the FORMAL register, *one* was the clear winner at 66%, followed by *he or she* with a reasonable showing of 21% and singular *they* with a small showing of 13%. FORMAL examples comprised 39% of the total results (181:459).

Examination of the results strictly by register suggests that confusion over third person gender neutral pronoun use exists primarily in the STANDARD register, where all three pronoun forms studied were used with surprisingly similar frequency. However, it is clear that other confusion may exist, given that the clear pronoun of choice for the FORMAL register is different from the pronoun of choice for the COLLOQUIAL register. If future prescriptions were to be determined based on the results by register, it is probable that such prescriptions would be no more helpful than the existing prescriptions on the subject seem to be. Furthermore, the under representation of the COLLOQUIAL register relative to the STANDARD and FORMAL registers invites further study.

4.3. RESULTS BY MEDIUM. The two mediums examined were spoken and written. Spoken examples comprised 45% of the total results (205:459), and written examples comprised 55% (254:459). The two mediums were far more evenly represented than were the three registers.

Singular *they* was the most popular pronoun in spoken use at 64% (131:205). *One* followed somewhat distantly at 22% (45:205) and *he or she* finished last at 14% (29:205). In written examples, *one* was used most frequently at 58% (148:254), followed by *he or she* at 31% (78:254) and *they* at 11% (28:254). According to these results, the answer to question of which pronoun to use seems to depend on the medium, *one* being the pronoun of choice for written use and *they* being the pronoun of choice for spoken use.

4.4. RESULTS BY PRONOUN. In review, the pronouns studied were *he or she* (searched as both *his or her* own and *her or his* own), one (searched *as one 's own*), and singular *they* (searched as *their own*, then sorted to eliminate instances of plural use). *He or she* forms comprised 23% of the total (107:459) (102 *his or her* [22%], 5 *her or his* [1%]). Use of *one* comprised 42% of the total (193:459), and singular *they* comprised the remaining 35% (159:459).

4.4.1. HE OR SHE. On the surface, considering the results strictly by pronoun, it appears that *he or she* is the least popular epicene pronoun choice. However, we have already seen that this is not necessarily the case when *he or she* is considered within the context of a particular register or medium. Indeed, although *he or she* comprises only 9% of SPOKEN COLLOQUIAL use, it comprises a full 48% of WRITTEN STANDARD use. It is clear, though, that *he or she* never enjoys the absolute popularity of either singular *they* or *one* under any of the classifications considered within this study.

4.4.2. ONE. Considering the results strictly by pronoun, *one* is the dominant pronoun, which, as will be discussed further below, is something of a surprise given the lack of attention paid to *one* in discussions about "the gap" in the third person singular pronoun system. Indeed, considering *one* within the context of register or medium, it becomes even more popular, comprising 77% of WRITTEN FORMAL use. However, *one*'s popularity declines severely in other areas, comprising a mere 3% of SPOKEN COLLOQUIAL use.

4.4.3. SINGULAR THEY. Overall, use of singular *they* comprised 35% of the total results (159:459), or about a third of the total use. Such a statistic seems to indicate that singular *they* is a valid epicene pronoun option, but it does not seem to argue compellingly for the official adoption of singular *they* as a standard form. However, in SPOKEN COLLOQUIAL use, singular *they* accounted for 88% of the search results (51:58). Singular *they* also accounted for 56% of SPOKEN STANDARD use (61:108) and 49% of SPOKEN FORMAL use (19:39), not to mention 57% of WRITTEN COLLOQUIAL use (13:23). The only two categories in which singular *they* made a poor showing were WRITTEN STANDARD (11:89, 12%) and WRITTEN FORMAL (4:142, 3%). Indeed, based on the subcategory results, it seems that singular *they* is the clear choice for epicene use. However, the relative absence of *they* in STANDARD and FORMAL written use seem to suggest that singular *they* is not a good choice for any sort of official use. The four examples of singular *they* for WRITTEN FORMAL use included two examples which were placed in quotation marks as part of a lamentation on such use of *they* in publication. In other words, the statistics for singular *they* suggest that singular *they* is fine for everything except FORMAL and STANDARD writing; quite an

interesting gap, as it seems unlikely that such a difference between spoken use can long remain, especially with the abundant opportunities for unedited publication via the internet.

4.4.4. PLURAL THEY. Here I discuss a pronoun form not explicitly researched, exercising author's prerogative to investigate a possibility suggested by the data. In order for an instance of *their own* to be counted as an instance of singular *they*, it was necessary for the use to occur both 1) within sufficient proximity of a grammatically singular antecedent in order to create a potential number disagreement and 2) be part of a phrase clearly intended to be gender neutral. Out of the 7012 hits that came up for *their own* in the six subcategories searched, only 459 qualified. What of the other 6533 hits? Many were clearly used in conjunction with a plural subject, often a plural subject in which the gender of the referents was known. Others referred to non-human entities, such as animals, plants, etc., and some referred to collective nouns, such as nations or corporations. References to semantic collectives were discarded on the grounds that had a speaker chosen to render the collective grammatically singular (via verb forms, etc.), the pronoun *it* could have been used, meaning that the subject represented by the collective could not be considered a candidate for human gender discrimination. Still others appeared to be general plurals, such as "Doctors have *their own* opinions" (hypothetical example) versus "A doctor has (insert epicene or gendered pronoun) own opinions." In fact, although the author did not formally categorize the non-epicene occurrences of *they*, it seemed that very many of them indeed were of the latter variety. It seems quite possible then that speakers may be deliberately pluralizing where possible in order to avoid the "need" for an epicene pronoun altogether, just as Meyers (1990) observed in her study.

4.5. RESULTS RELATIVE TO TRADITIONAL PRESCRIPTION. In review, the traditional prescription and proscriptions relative to the use of singular pronouns in order to refer to "people regardless of gender" are as follows: 1) use *he* for neutrality; 2) avoid *he or she* because it is awkward; and 3) avoid *they* because it infringes on number concord. Again in review, Bodine (1975), Curzan (2003), and others argued that these pronoun choices (and lack of choices) were the result of an androcentric world view, which argument appears validated by the omission of *one* from either prescription or proscription.

4.5.1. PRESCRIPTION FOR MASCULINE NEUTRALITY. Newman (1992) considered this prescription as the source of "the gap." In other words, if speakers had not been told that a consistently correct pronoun existed to indicate gender irrelevance in the third person singular, most likely people would not have become concerned with the issue (as he suggests is the case in most other languages). However, the issue was indeed raised, and so the variety of means with which speakers fill "the gap" has become a subject of much debate. This study did not examine the use of *he* neutral for a variety of reasons. Firstly, there is a significant amount of research suggesting that at least in today's usage, *he* is not generally perceived as neutral (e.g. Martyna 1980; Meyers 1990). Secondly, if *he* truly were neutral, or generally perceived as such, there would be no confusion to study in the first place. This study was oriented towards studying logically neutral pronouns. Thirdly, Newman's 1992 study shows that at least one researcher has already examined the use of *he*. This study makes no official statement about the use of *he* neutral in

contemporary American English, but the author suspects that its use is less frequent than traditional prescription would "want" it to be.

4.5.2. PROSCRIPTION AGAINST HE OR SHE. The awkwardness or not of *he or she* is a subjective argument. Although it is less complicated to use a one-word pronoun than a compound pronoun, to many speakers today it seems far less complicated to use a compound pronoun than to deal with the aftermath of using a pronoun carrying potentially negative gender connotations. Indeed, importance of gender etiquette clearly exceeds any importance attached to relative awkwardness, as indicated by the occurrence of *she or he* (or rather "*her or his own*") within the results of this study. Indeed, although *he or she* has a nearly idiomatic quality (ironically in part because of its frequent repetition in proscription), such is not the case with *she or he*. This study indicates that the proscription against *he or she* seems largely to have failed.

4.5.3. PROSCRIPTION AGAINST SINGULAR THEY. This study, in conjunction with Newman's study, clearly indicates that at least in spoken use, proscription against singular *they* has certainly failed. Indeed, singular *they* now seems not only acceptable, but also somewhat preferable even in COLLOQUIAL writing. It even has some (albeit very little) occurrence in STANDARD and FORMAL writing, which was not the case at the time of Mackay's 1980 study of published works. In all fairness towards the cause of the omission of singular *they* from FORMAL writing, it should be noted that two of the four examples of *they* singular counted for the formal register occurred in quotation marks as part of an article lamenting the publication of such use of *they* in otherwise "respectable" publications. However, aside from the editorial forces working against the

inclusion of *they* in STANDARD and FORMAL publication, it is clear that singular *they* has become widely accepted in general spoken use as well as in COLLOQUIAL writing, which tends to reflect actual majority speech patterns more than do STANDARD or FORMAL register works.

4.6. INDIVIDUAL EXAMPLES OF INTEREST. Of the many examples examined during the task of locating instances of singular *they*, two were particularly striking because of their co occurrence with instances of *he* or *she*. Within just a few words of each other, completely different pronouns were used to refer to the same referent. Both examples occurred in spoken use, within the SPOKEN FORMAL subcategory (i.e. the COCA subcategory SPOK: PBS). Additionally, both examples occurred on the Tavis Smiley show, within a year of each other. Each of the two examples will be presented first in its complete "expanded context" form as displayed within the COCA search results. The examples will then be analyzed in detail, considering the pronoun transitions, the discussion context, and the speakers' backgrounds.

4.6.1. TAVIS AND JOHN MELLENCAMP. The following excerpt is from the Tavis Smiley show featuring an interview with John Mellencamp. It aired on September 22, 2005. The italicized speaker tags indicate the identity of the speaker for the utterance preceding the tag. The bold, underlined words indicate the search terms located by the COCA search engine.

> pictures in, and it's like, " well, that's not really what I intended. " And music was, when music was really great is when the viewer, I mean the viewer, the, you know, the listener puts his own self into the song, and he becomes part of the song. That's when you know you've written a great song, when the guy listening

> to it, or the gal listening to it, think, " hey, man, that song's about me. "
>
> *Mellencamp* They create **their own** vision. *Tavis* That's right, that's right.
>
> *Mellencamp* As opposed to you telling them what... *Tavis* Yeah, so sometimes,
>
> you know, you make videos in a hurry, and you really get far away from what,
>
> you know, what you intended. *Mellencamp* Yeah, yeah, all right. That said, there's
>
> got ta be one video, though, that even though you didn't want to do these things,
>
> since you came of age, your hits came of

The specific overlap here is Mellencamp's use of *his own* to represent "the listener" versus Tavis's later reference to Mellencamp's singular "listener" using *they* and *their own*, grammatically correct within their own phrase, but clearly intended to 1) refer to the same grammatically singular referent introduced by Mellencamp and 2) to convey the gender neutrality Mellencamp clearly desired to be associated with his utterance.

Although only *their own* registered using the search criteria for this study, the expanded context reveals an interesting path from the original referent of "the listener" (or "the viewer"), introduced by Mellencamp, to the *they* used by Tavis. First comes the phrase:

> the listener puts his own self into the song, and he becomes part of the song

The listener is represented by *his* and *he*; it is clear that this use of *he* is intended to be neutral given the gender neutrality of the term listener. The neutral intention is clarified in the next part of the utterance:

> That's when you know you've written a great song, when the guy listening to it, or
>
> the gal listening to it, think, " hey, man, that song's about me. "

The listener here is expanded to the guy listening to it, or the gal listening to it, clearly indicating that listener is intended to be neutral, or rather representative of a listener of either gender. It is also clear that Mellencamp is still speaking singly as shown by the hypothetical listener's thought that "that song's about me." It is interesting then that Tavis summarizes Mellencamp's utterance using *they*:

"They create their own vision."

Tavis's utterance was counted as an instance of singular *they* because it was clear from Mellencamp's utterance that the original referent for *they* was singular, the listener. Standing alone, Tavis's remark exhibits no disagreement, but the number disagreement is possible thanks to Mellencamp's initial word choice and the number associated with the pronoun his used immediately preceding Tavis's remark. Indeed, Mellencamp may have been able to communicate more efficiently had he begun with a plural subject, rendering an utterance such as, "You know you've written a great song when listeners hear it and feel like it's written just for them." A statement like that may have eliminated the need for Tavis's clarifying summary.

As stated earlier, the text related above is from a transcript of Tavis Smiley interviewing John Mellencamp. As of the interview, Tavis had been in broadcasting for many years. Broadcasting generally requires standard to formal language, which means that Tavis's speech provides a good representation of formal use. John Mellencamp has many years of experience in the music industry, but presumably his job does not depend so much on his language register as does Tavis. Mellencamp's speech seems distinctly more colloquial. Therefore, it is especially interesting that Tavis, the formal speaker, is the one who employs singular *they*.

4.6.2. TAVIS AND KAREN ARMSTRONG. Below is the expanded context text for another example from the Tavis Smiley show, this one from an interview with Karen Armstrong. The interview aired on May 29, 2006.

> inspired by the almighty? *Tavis* Oh, well, the traditions vary about this. In the east, in Buddhism or Confucianism, Daoism, indeed, you ’re expected to make your religion. That human beings, by their hard work, by their compassionate lifestyle, by their constant attempts to meditate or concentrate, can bring about **their own** enlightenment. *Armstrong* So you chart your own path to righteousness. *Tavis* It is manmade. They would say that, the Buddha would say that any human being can craft **his or her own** enlightenment by **their own** efforts. They don’ t have the idea of a revelatory god, revealing itself to the world. In the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, God is seen as the initiator. But even so, even there, during this period and afterwards, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians have often developed theological notions that are very close to the Buddhist or to the Hindus, and have experienced the divine absolutely within themselves. And the emphasis, too, is on you have

Let us consider this passage and the pronoun changes therein. At the beginning, Karen Armstrong employs exemplary *you*:

> indeed, you’re expected to make your own religion.

Tavis summarizes, also using exemplary *you*:

> So you chart your own path to righteousness.

Armstrong responds initially with plural *they*, referring to adherents of eastern religions, but later employs both *his or her* and *their* (singular) to refer to "any human being," in the manner of the exemplary *you* used before:

> They would say that, the Buddha would say that any human being can craft his or her own enlightenment by their own efforts

Given Armstong's position as a prominent scholar of religion, it is probable that her works employ at least standard, and most likely formal, language. It seems reasonable to group her with Tavis as a formal speaker, given her professional background and the interview setting. Like Tavis in the previous example, she uses singular *they* to refer to a previously established singular subject ("any human being"). Even more interesting, however, is the fact that she first uses *his or her* to point to the very same referent. In the Mellencamp interview, John Mellencamp appeared to be struggling to find the proper pronoun to use to express gender neutral third person singular. In this case, however, Armstrong does not appear to be struggling at all, but rather simply choosing to switch pronouns for her own reasons. Additionally, Armstong's British background may influence her pronoun choices.

4.7. RESULTS AS AN INDICATION OF CURRENT CULTURAL VALUES. To paraphrase Bodine (1975) in terms of Wierzbicka (2006), the cultural values pervasive at the establishment of traditional prescriptivism, at least among those issuing the prescriptions, emphasized social order (male dominance) and "elegance of expression" in describing that social order (*he* neutral). Also, to incorporate the essence of prescriptivism in general, there was a sense that in order for English to be respectable, there needed to be rules comparable to those associated with classical languages.

Today, “correctness” is still valued, as evidenced by the indecision exhibited by speakers such as Mellencamp as they strive to find the proper pronoun to fill the gap. However, the motivation for the correctness is no longer prestige relative to classical languages, but rather the avoidance of insult via gender. Different registers and mediums, not to mention different contexts, require different methods for filling the gap. However, the first priority is to maintain the new social order: equality across gender. The secondary priority, outside of staunch prescriptive circles, in which it may still be the first priority, is grammatical correctness (consider the prevalence of *they* singular in COLLOQUIAL use with the dominance of *one* in FORMAL writing). Let us consider further a typical example for the dominant pronoun in spoken and written use in each of our three registers, COLLOQUIAL, STANDARD, and FORMAL, and how the dominant choice within each section reflects the cultural values discussed above.

4.7.1. SPOKEN COLLOQUIAL: THEY. The dominant epicene pronoun in colloquial use was epicene *they*. The example below, shown with expanded context, comes from the Rush Limbaugh show on May 24, 1995. The speaker labels are not accurate relative to the speakers’ true identities, but they are still accurately placed to illustrate speakers’ turns, and they are the labels which appear in COCA as of December 2009.

> trainers, community colleges and others -- in getting people skills and placing them in good jobs. You were basically on your own... JIM MORET (voice-over) Oh. Mr. SHAMARR ALLEN... here in the wilderness. These one-stop centers are designed to... JIM MORET (voice-over) Hold it a minute again. (End of excerpt) JIM MORET Hold it a minute. Hold it a minute. So if you lose your job, you're

> on your own, you're in the wilderness. Every time I've been without work, I was on my own; everybody who is out of work is on **their own**. And it's not -- I mean, it's just the way it is. It's not a crime. All right. Roll it again. (Excerpt from 1994 footage) Mr. SHAMARR ALLEN... comprehensively deal with the problems that people face. At a one-stop center -- one-stop career center... JIM MORET (voice-over) Oh. Mr. SHAMARR ALLEN... you can get not only unemployment insurance but you can get counseling, you can get information -- computerized information about where the jobs are, what the jobs are, what kind of skills are in demand

Let us consider in particular the pronoun chain leading to the highlighted instance of *their own*. The speaker first employs exemplary *you*:

> So if you lose your job, you're on your own, you're in the wilderness.

The speaker then shifts to first person:

> Every time I've been without work, I was on my own,

Finally, the speaker shifts to third person singular:

> everybody who is out of work is on their own.

The use of exemplary *you* shown above, ultimately followed by singular *they*, is similar to pronoun use illustrated in the Tavis/Armstrong discussed previously, a SPOKEN FORMAL example. Exemplary *you* carries a bit of number ambiguity, thanks to the general use of *you* for both singular and plural. Perhaps this ambiguity carries over into the selection of a third person singular pronoun, should the speaker switch pronouns, as happened in this example and in the Tavis/Armstrong example. Probably, however, the dominant force leading to the choice of *they*

is its simplicity; it meets fulfills the cultural requirement for gender neutrality with a single word, and without requiring a particular referent, such as the pronoun *one* requires. Perhaps this is indicative of another value at work, economy. As for correctness, although *they* may not be prescriptively approved, it is unlikely that most speakers (outside of language enthusiasts) are overly concerned with "proofing" their spontaneous utterances. Additionally, the results of this study suggest that *they* is used widely enough to render it normal, whatever prescriptive tradition may say otherwise.

4.7.2. WRITTEN COLLOQUIAL: THEY. The following example comes from the magazine Rolling Stone, and it is representative of other examples of singular *they*, the most frequently used epicene pronoun option in the WRITTEN COLLOQUIAL material studied. The author of the article is Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., and this except is from his five page article which was published in June 2007, issue 1029.

> polluters for bad behavior, allowing them to dispose of their wastes into the publicly owned air for free. But new technologies and materials and the mounting anxiety over global warming give more cause for hope than ever before. With a little tinkering we can reconfigure and rationalize the market so that it punishes bad behavior (releasing carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere) and rewards good behavior (reducing pollution and conserving energy). Such a move would unleash the extraordinary entrepreneurial energies of our nation so that every American could profit by devising and implementing **their own** solutions to global warming. With a rational marketplace, new

> materials and technologies would allow us to rapidly rerun the playbook strategies that nearly liberated us from oil in the 1980s. Within two decades we could get off imported oil completely- this time for good. If we really want free markets in America, all direct subsidies to the fossil-fuel industry should be eliminated. In addition, indirect subsidies or " externalities " - the hidden costs of global warming should be accounted for through a carbon tax. By taxing
>
> The key phrase for our purposes is:
>
> every American could profit by devising and implementing their own solutions

Every American is clearly grammatically singular, although the word every conveys semantic plurality. *Their own*, therefore, agrees semantically with every American, but not grammatically. This is the same sort of problem encountered with words such as everybody or everyone: should the speaker select a pronoun which agrees grammatically with its referent, or should the speaker match the semantic number of the referent instead? In the current linguistic climate, selecting semantic agreement has the added bonus of bypassing the gender issues for such “general” examples.

Let us consider this example in light of the author, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. As indicated on his personal website, www.robertfkennedyjr.com (accessed 28 December 2009), Mr. Kennedy is actively involved in both spoken and written media in his quest to protect the environment. His goal is to reach average Americans and persuade them to join his cause. He is a Harvard graduate and a lawyer, and as such it is reasonable to assume that he is a skilled language user capable of producing highly formal speeches and writings (consider the overall educated quality of his article excerpt above). However, for this publication in Rolling Stone, he

chose the colloquial favorite of singular *they* to fill his epicene pronoun needs. Consider the implications: it is clear from the rest of his article that his word choice is deliberate. Therefore, it is also clear that his choice must be intended to reach as many people as possible. He does not cater to grammar snobs, but rather appeals to all Americans. Another pronoun choice would not have conveyed the comfortable conversational tone allowed by singular *they*.

4.7.3. SPOKEN STANDARD: THEY. As in the other two registers, singular *they* was the pronoun of choice in spoken use. The following example comes from the NPR program All Things Considered, the February 11, 1996, episode entitled "Campaigning by Caucus Contenders Heats up in Iowa." This excerpt contains utterances from three speakers, but the speaker whose utterance is most interesting in the context of the present study is Alan Schoenveld, an ordinary Iowa citizen.

> 30 second spots to be had on some Iowa TV stations. What does a multi-millionaire do? Steve Forbes bought at least a dozen half-hour blocks of time to run a campaign infomercial starting today. Alan Schoenveld sp of Iowa Falls is a Forbes supporter. ALAN SCHOENVELD I like his ideas that government is out of control. HOST But he wanted to see the candidate in person to ask him a question. So Schoenveld came to the Forbes rally in Iowa Falls yesterday. ALAN SCHOENVELD What sane person would be willing to spend $20 million, I guess, of **their own** money on a campaign? They either have to be a little bit crazy or they got to be the next George Washington that is going to want to live and serve and die if necessary for their country. HOST Forbes answered the man's

question, in a fashion. STEVE FORBES I entered the race late. I'm not taking any money from political action committees or special interests. I'm not taking any taxpayers' money. JIM HICKEY And Forbes got in the theme that he's been hammering in

The phrase of interest for us is shown below:

What sane person would be willing to spend $20 million, I guess, of their own money on a campaign?

In many of the spoken examples across all three registers, the epicene pronouns come after words such as *everybody* or everyone, which are semantically if not grammatically plural. In this case, however, the referent for *their own, person,* is clearly grammatically singular. The use of *they* in this context is also interesting given that the actual referent for the word *person* is almost certainly Steve Forbes, a person of known gender. Given the likelihood of known gender and the certainty of singular number, both grammatically and semantically, it is clear that *they* serves to provide the gender neutrality desired in a singular generality statement. Not much is known about Alan Schoenveld, but given that he followed the 1996 campaign closely enough to be aware of Steve Forbes's candidacy, it is likely that he is a reasonably educated person, capable of producing speech suitable to more than just one register. It is interesting that the choice of singular *they* is so seemingly natural in situations like the one shown above given the history of prescriptive grammar condemning such use.

4.7.4. WRITTEN STANDARD: HE OR SHE. Although all three of the epicene pronoun choices examined in this study occurred with nearly equal frequency in WRITTEN STANDARD use, *he or*

she had a slight edge over the other two options. This example of *he or she* in use comes from *Sunset* magazine, from the article “Dual-family retreat,” which appeared in the August 2007 edition:

> up with a simple shingle-and-plywood shed on a concrete slab, with five major spaces facing the water and lofts at the rear facing the forest. The house is organized as a single row of rooms facing the water, with a master suite at either end. Between them are the rooms shared by both families: a main kitchen/dining and living space, the kids' bunk room, and a screened porch used as a flexible space for table tennis and overflow sleeping. " Each master bedroom is exclusive to one couple, and each child has **his or her own** bunk in the bunk room, " Lisa explains. " The kids " friends get air mattresses. " An entry porch faces the trees and is sheltered from the weather by the house and the roof overhang. A patio off the kitchen/dining space and screened porch overlooks the water. There's an outdoor shower and a fish-cleaning station near the bunk room. Lisa sums up what both families like about the house: " It's all about being outside-the design just draws you out. Even when a lot

One of the most interesting things about the choice between *he or she* or *they* is the interchangeability of the two options. Consider the phrase of interest to us from the above excerpt:

> each child has his or her own bunk

The phrase would have worked just as well had *their* been used in place of *his or her*. It is interesting to examine the quotation marks around the utterance; did Lisa herself, the quoted

speaker, actually say *his or her*, or was that something the magazine edited in? If the utterance was truly Lisa's, then her usage is a little different from the majority of speakers across all registers (at least according to this study), and so the appearance of *his or her* in the above phrase is the result of her personal pronoun preferences. Whether the utterance comes from Lisa or from an editor, what advantages could be associated with using *his or her* rather than *their*? Presumably, some speakers (and editors) might consider *his or her* to be more grammatically correct than *their* because it does not incur the number disagreement inherent to singular *they*. Also, it might be the preferred option for speakers accustomed to following the previous prescription for *he*; it would likely be easier to add *or she* onto the preprogrammed option than to train themselves to use another option all together. It might also be preferred because of its explicit mention of both genders, should a speaker be concerned with overt inclusion. Additionally, it could be a preferred option because it carries connotations of humanity; animals or inanimate objects could have *their* own things, but generally only a person would have *his or her* own things.

4.7.5. SPOKEN FORMAL: THEY. As in the colloquial and standard registers, *they* was the most frequently used epicene pronoun in SPOKEN FORMAL use. The example below comes from the PBS program *NewsHour* on July 8, 1999. The speaker, Clark Freshman, is a professor of law at the University of Miami. The subject is the jury verdict on a tobacco case in Florida.

> decision? CLARK FRESHMAN Well, it is going to cost potentially, billions and billions of dollars. In most cases, you would have one or two plaintiffs, perhaps a group of plaintiffs bringing the case and then if there was a loss, it was what their

> particular medical damages were, their loss of income. What this has done is to say if this is upheld on appeal or if this settles, which I think is quite likely, that everyone in the state of Florida up until now who has been damaged will not have to hire **their own** expert witnesses, will not have to go mano-a-mano against the tobacco companies and prove that smoking causes cancer. All they'll have to do is show what their particular medical expenses and out- of-pocket losses are for wages. So it really opens the floodgates here in Miami. Number two, the significance is, does this mean something about trials in other states? Potentially, it does. There are two bad facts that have come up in this case; one, documents that were made available due to

Before the marked instance of the phrase *their own* in the example above, there is another instance of the word *their*, referring to "one or two plaintiffs, perhaps a group of plaintiffs." Perhaps this use of *they* influences the later instance of *their own*:

> everyone in the state of Florida up until now who has been damaged will not have to hire **their own** expert witnesses

As in many other instances featuring the use of singular *they*, this occurrence is part of an "everyone" statement, which includes the typical predicament of figuring out which pronoun to use with a grammatically singular yet semantically plural referent. As mentioned above, the use of *their own* in the example may have been influenced by the earlier use of *their*. It may also simply be the result of conversational norms calling for *their* rather than one of the other options. Additionally, as both the word everyone and the singularly conjugated verb has are both separated from *their own* by several words, it is possible that the speaker "forgot" the

grammatical number of his referent in the midst of his utterance. Spontaneous speech lends itself to such "slips." Or, in the case of this particular speaker, a law professor, it is possible that the speaker prefers to use *their* because the law profession in general prefers singular *they* for epicene pronoun use. One piece of literature encountered in preparation for this study was an argument from a lawyer for the general adoption of epicene *they* for legal use (Schweikart 1998).

4.7.6. WRITTEN FORMAL: ONE. The following excerpt comes from the Fall 1999 issue of *Academic Questions* from the article "Education as Metier: Finding the Fabulous in the Universal" by William B. Allen. While looking over the hits for *one*, and while considering how to construct "everyone" statements using *one*, it became apparent that *one* requires a rather different sort of construction, as illustrated below.

> , to be a university professor. I thought about the question for a moment and reflected that, having gone off to school at age four and never having left school in one capacity or another for the rest of my life, I did not have the foggiest idea. I did not know anything else but education. Of course, that statement is only half true. For one of the great victories that one acquires with education is the capacity to see beyond the ground upon which one stands, and even to comprehend within one's vision **one 's own** ground, **one 's own** prejudices, **one 's own** point of view. In fact, you might go so far as to say that your education doesn't amount to a hill of beans unless it gives you the power to look at yourself with a penetrating, critical eye, to understand why you stand where you stand and why you do what

you do. # Having spent my life in this enterprise and in a new dimension of it (as director of the State Council of Higher Education for

Consider the progression of pronouns in this excerpt. First comes some first person pronoun use:

I did not have the foggiest idea. I did not know anything else but education.

The next set of pronoun use features *one* for epicene use, and is specially constructed to accommodate such use:

For one of the great victories that one acquires with education is the capacity to see beyond the ground upon which one stands, and even to comprehend within one's vision one's own ground, one's own prejudices, one's own point of view.

The sentence above would not work as well were *one* to be substituted with another epicene option, as in "one of the great victories that *he or she* acquires . . ." or "the capacity to see beyond the ground upon which *they* stand." Part of the reason is that such alternatives imply an outside referent, while the author actually intends to speak "generally, but especially pertaining to me (the speaker)." Consider the next sentence:

In fact, you might go so far as to say that your education doesn't amount to a hill of beans unless it gives you the power to look at yourself with a penetrating, critical eye, to understand why you stand where you stand and why you do what you do.

This use of exemplary *you* is followed by a return to first person pronoun use, as in "Having spent my life . . ." It is interesting to note the switch from *one* to *you*; the shift seems to be a shift in tone as well as in pronoun, a shift from more formal to more casual or more direct.

When considering the insertion of other epicene pronoun options in place of *one* in the sentence featuring *one*, it was pointed out that the external referents implied by those options clashed with the speakers intended meaning. Ironically, changing the *one* sentence to use plural referents does not seem to create such conflict, as in "one of the great victories that people acquire with education . . ." etc. Some might argue that this is because the strict use of grammatically plural words in generalities seems to be a more formal construction, just like the constructions required to use *one*. This is interesting to consider in light of the general epicene pronoun problem. Most cases calling for an epicene pronoun occur because of the use of semantic plurals that are grammatically singular. Either constructing for the use of *one* or constructing for the use of plurals requires a degree of forethought not often encountered in spontaneous speech, the sort of forethought demanded by editors of formal publication. Interestingly, the sentence featuring *one* could also accommodate the use of exemplary *you* with relative ease, as in "one of the great victories that you acquire;" perhaps this is because of the historically plural nature of *you*.

4.8. RESULTS AS A REFERENCE FOR NEW PRESCRIPTIONS. Were a set of prescriptions regarding gender neutral language to be adopted based on the results of this study, they might read thus:

To express gender neutrality in speaking, *they* is acceptable for both singular and plural use; *he or she* and *one* may also be used, but are not as common.

To express gender neutrality in writing, the best option is to pluralize where possible. However, if a singular gender neutral third person pronoun is required, *they* is acceptable for colloquial use. Other forms should be considered for higher registers, such as *he or she* or *one*; *one* is the preferred pronoun for formal writing.

When dealing with notionally plural antecedants such as *everybody* or *everyone* or with indefinite antecedents, this study and the works of other scholars (e.g. Newman 1992, Balhorn 2009, Jochnowitz 1982) suggest that epicene *they* is a highly suitable choice. Indeed, the aforementioned scholars even suggest that such use of epicene *they* might even be considered a different form of *they* all together, distinct from the kind of epicene *they* employed by President Obama in the quote at the beginning of this work.

In all cases, pronoun choice is subject to the speaker's discretion, and in written use to whatever editors supervise the writing. The general goal is to avoid sexist language while maintaining clear communication.

Unlike the prescriptions traditionally offered, the above recommendations offer no pat solution to the problem of the gap. Rather, the goal is to let the pronoun fit the situation. Pronoun choice is real, and it seems that a gap exists only insofar as a speaker or writer is undecided about which pronoun to choose.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Epicene Pronouns Revisited

Despite the assessment that "the gap" exists only insofar as speakers of Modern American English are uncertain or undecided as to which pronoun to use, the perceived need for a universal epicene pronoun, from a variety of sources, has produced change in the third person pronoun system of Modern American English. In four of the six subcategories considered in this study, including all of the spoken subcategories and one of the written subcategories, *they* was the most frequently used epicene pronoun of those studied. Although the WRITTEN STANDARD subcategory results essentially represented the indecision of speakers puzzled by "the gap," the WRITTEN FORMAL results illustrated a clear choice for formal use, the pronoun *one*. Although *he or she* (and even *she or he*) did occur in the results, it was far from enjoying universal popularity in any of the subcategories.

What of other epicene pronouns, such as *he* or *she* or words coined especially to fill "the gap"? As language is the product of its speakers, and as Modern American English speakers do not share any kind of mind link to unify their speech, it is quite possible and even likely that some speakers will forever employ less-common epicene pronouns for their own reasons. However, it seems inevitable that if the majority of speakers agree upon an epicene pronoun, as seems to be the case with *they*, that such a pronoun will eventually become accepted even by prescriptive grammar and thereby officially considered standard.

5.2. Cultural Values and Markedness: Shaping Modern American English

Whatever the causes of gender biased language and whatever the arguments against it, what is certain is that Modern American English speakers have, by their actions, effectively issued a mandate

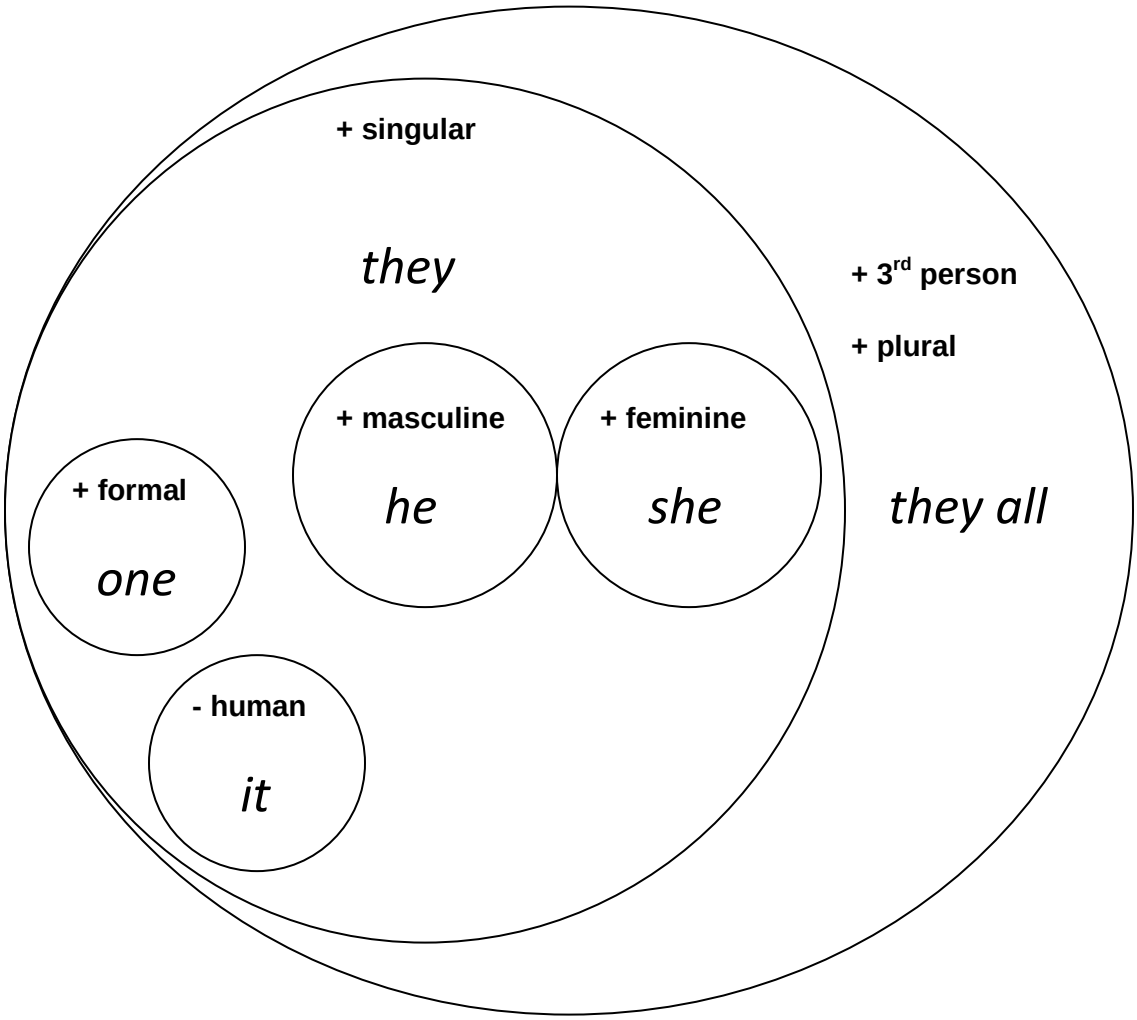
against such bias. From nouns to personal pronouns, Modern American English has become altered to focus on avoiding gender bias. The fact that a simple mark for biological gender could prompt such language change even within a closed word class is evidence for the power of cultural values in dealing with language marked in a manner that conflicts with those values. And, as illustrated in the case of second person pronouns, it is not the first time that cultural values have prompted speakers to discard a marked term in favor of a term more in keeping with their values. Based on the accuracy with which markedness theory, combined with an understanding of cultural values, was used to predict changes in progress in the third person pronouns of Modern American English, it seems reasonable to assume that a similar approach could be used to examine other language changes of interest. At the very least, the approach helps to make clearer why change happens, even if there is insufficient data to predict all of the pending changes. Language is the product of its speakers and therefore it is best understood when one tries to understand the speakers' motivations.

5.3 FUTURE POSSIBILITIES. The short range implications of the results of this study suggest that *they* is the most likely candidate for the role of a universally accepted epicene pronoun in Modern American English. It is interesting to consider what might happen in the distant future were they, currently officially a plural pronoun, were to be truly accepted for singular use, just as you, once plural, is now not only acceptable but mandatory for singular use. Firstly, I suggest that *they* will indeed become the epicene pronoun of choice, despite the possibility for *one* (and other pronouns to fill the role). I expect that this is already so for some speakers, but I anticipate that it will become popular among the majority of speakers within the next hundred to two

hundred years, to the point that any complaints about "singular *they*" will occur only in discussions of language history, rather than as current issues. Secondly, I suggest that during that same hundred to two hundred years, other epicene pronoun options will either become more marked or disappear from general use; I expect that gendered pronouns will be marked for their respective genders and that *he or she* will gradually fall out of use by replacement with other options. I expect that *one* may still be used for epicene use, but that it will carry a formal marking, or formal connotation, if you will, that renders it less useful in everyday language use. For example, if a scholarly publication were determined to adhere to the prescriptions of traditional grammar while still avoiding gender-biased language, the only pronoun options allowed would be to pluralize everything to allow for "proper" use of *they*, which loses emphasis on the individual, or to use *one*. Thirdly, I expect that just as the shift of *you* into general singular use has motivated the use of forms such as *you all*, the shift of *they* into general singular use will eventually result in the use of phrases conveying the meaning "they all" in order to restore a non-singular element to the third person paradigm. This last change I expect will take a bit longer than the others; indeed, it may not happen noticeably for a good four to five hundred years. In all cases, my time estimates are based on analogy with changes in the 2nd person pronoun system. The shift away from *thee/thou* towards the general use of *you* occurred across the seventeenth century, beginning from a time when the shift was in progress and finishing when it had essentially become universally accepted (Howe 1996; Johnson 1966). Third person pronouns seem to be at a similar shifting point at this time. As for the perceived need for new plurals, while it seems clear that such a need exists for the second person, it is currently around four

hundred years after the analogous second person shift. These projected third person pronoun relationships are illustrated in Figure 5.1.

FIGURE 5.1 POSSIBLE FUTURE THIRD PERSON PARADIGM



The preceding speculations of course must be taken for what they are, mere speculation. This study focused solely on Modern American English, but it did so in lump fashion, disregarding smaller regional dialects. It might be profitable to study specific Modern American English dialects, and definitely profitable to study non-American dialects in order to gain greater

understanding of the status of epicene pronouns in English as a whole. Additionally, this study was necessarily limited to a very small sample size due to time constraints incumbent on a single researcher. It would be profitable for further studies of epicene pronouns to study a wider range of data, preferably with the help of more than one researcher. Perhaps expanded studies could include epicene *he* and *she* separately, or even consider non-standard epicene pronouns such as those cited by Baron (1981, 1986) or perhaps other emerging epicene pronouns, such as that discovered by Stoko & Troyer (2007). The author is curious to see whether additional, expanded research will continue to support the markedness-based expectations set forth in this paper.

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