Gender-Related Language Trends in Online Written News: Comparative Corpus Analysis of Prescribed vs. Actual Usage

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Honors Thesis

GENDER-RELATED LANGUAGE TRENDS IN ONLINE WRITTEN NEWS: COMPARATIVE CORPUS ANALYSIS OF PRESCRIBED VS. ACTUAL USAGE

by
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

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ABSTRACT

GENDER-RELATED LANGUAGE TRENDS IN ONLINE WRITTEN NEWS: COMPARATIVE CORPUS ANALYSIS OF PRESCRIBED VS. ACTUAL USAGE

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Bachelor of Arts

Contrary to traditional thought in linguistics and editing, recent studies using corpus-based evidence suggest that historical English usage patterns influenced prescriptive usage manuals’ guidelines more than the other way around. To investigate the modern relationship between English language prescriptions and usage, this study focuses on the wide-reaching genre of written online news and the topic of gender-fair language. It compares changes regarding gender-specific language in the Associated Press’s stylebooks to actual usage trends as documented in the News on the Web (NOW) corpus. Results from NOW show -man title variants as the dominant form in the early 2010s, consistent AP style at that time. However, many gender-neutral (including -person) variants saw rapid uptake in usage in the mid-2010s to become the most frequent forms by 2021, contrasting AP guidelines that only started listing -person and other neutral forms as “acceptable” in 2017 and as the prescribed more recently. These results indicate both an increased cultural consciousness for changing gender equity standards as well as a willingness of many news writers, editors, and publishers to defer to culturally significant language trends even when authoritative guides do not endorse them.
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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a push among public and private institutions to promote equitable practices and create safe spaces for people of diverse races, ethnicities, religious beliefs, genders, sexual orientations, and other backgrounds. One of the most pervasive yet subtle ways acceptance and belonging is demonstrated is through language. Words have power, and whether their effect is consciously recognized, using unbiased and inclusive terms has been shown to lead to more openness and acceptance toward marginalized groups in attitudes and actions. However, formal language usage rules have a long tradition of strict prescriptivism, or efforts to define and control exact uses of grammatical forms and words, that can extend to the enforcement of outdated language in progressive social and cultural realms. In the modern world of editing, this practice is increasingly being replaced by descriptivist values, which aim to describe language as it is used and allow for the natural constant change and evolution of the English language.

While words are powerful, their influence is not deterministic, and people have power over words as much as words have power over people. After all, “virtually everything we see in print has been looked over by an editor or proofreader. Editors play a role in standardizing written English by deciding which usage rules to enforce in print.”¹ While editors may have a reputation or stereotype for gatekeeping the English language and judging dissenters, editors’ true purposes center around enabling clear communication. This driving motivation and duty necessitates an understanding that some prescriptions

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are important in ensuring clarity in consistency as well as an appreciation of English’s mutability as a living language and ability to adapt to changing norms and practices.

Editors can also use their influence on published language to promote increased usage of inclusive terms while working to phase out biased or unfair language practices in print. In just the past couple of years, style and usage language authorities have shaped guidance around motivations not necessarily to be grammatically correct so much as culturally sensitive and correct in response to real-time cultural phenomena—for example, capitalizing Black amidst the cultural reckoning in the United States after the death of George Floyd, as implemented by major organization such as the New York Times, the Associated Press (AP), The Chicago Manual of Style, and more.

Another area experiencing scrutiny is that of gender in language. Though its legitimacy is now being challenged, masculine generic pronoun and noun forms have a long history in Modern English prescription and published usage. The default to masculine forms to stand as a catch-all for subjects of unknown gender or groups of mixed genders has been prescribed by grammarians in the earliest grammar books. However, with increasing opposition to this exclusionary grammatical form from feminist and linguistic circles, the 1980s saw gender-fair language (GFL) options gain visibility as a way to balance the linguistic asymmetry. Yet, as Amare states, “sexism affects both genders, and although most occurrences of linguistic sexism are against

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women, stereotypes of both genders are harmful. According to Hayes, ‘the language we use influences the reality we understand and the reality we lead others to understand,’ including our understanding of gender roles and expectations.” Even more recent considerations could also point to Amare’s quote as exemplary of a subtler gap in language usage and research: the linguistic exclusion of nonbinary or gender-nonconforming individuals. The male-female binary implied in phrases like “both genders” tacitly excludes those who do not identify as either. To address these issues, GFL uses either feminine or, ideally, neutral word forms in an effort to reduce gender stereotypes and discrimination and to be inclusive of those of all genders and sexualities.

Due to the deep roots of gender-biased language in English and its subtle ubiquity in everyday life, awareness of its consequences is the first step to addressing it. As many studies have shown that masculine generic word forms correlate with sexist attitudes, a deeper understanding of the forces that guide language change into more inclusive directions—whether such influences be social or authoritative—can enable more productive integration of effective language changes that can help equalize the status of women and nonbinary individuals in public thought and action. If ingrained biased language continues to go unaddressed in everyday life, its influence can hamper even the most progressive efforts to be equal and inclusive in society. Only once potentially consequential trends and relationships are identified can those in editing, publishing, and other related fields figure out the extent to which such phenomena are influenced by official language sources (as opposed to social forces, etc., or vice versa) and hence try to

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5 Amare, “Where Is She?,” 165.
create more fair and accurate portrayals of different terms and topics. With this kind of evidence, editors and others in authoritative positions can make more informed decisions about how and why to make certain language choices to foster more inclusive attitudes and outlooks in readers.

**Searching for Prescriptivism in the News**

News media is a prime subject to start an initial look into prescriptivism-usage relationships. In news production, it is established that “copy editors must watch for problematic content of all kinds—gaps in the story, inaccurate information, confusion, contradictions, potentially libelous material, and”—as Bell puts it—“the various kinds of nonsense which a reporter may commit to paper.”\(^6\) In the modern, primarily online medium of news today, I would add that such “problematic” content that an editor should monitor includes usage considerations for topics such as race, gender, and similar items to ensure inclusive and unbiased writing. And in addition to the enormous amount of published online news content and its accessibility to people of any backgrounds online, it is conducive to research as there exists equally accessible and comprehensive research tools to comb through the language of thousands of news sources at once: online language corpora.

Corpus research enables the processing of large amounts of text data. There have been numerous studies using different corpora aiming to quantify adherence to prominent and age-old usage debates and prescriptions.\(^7\) While such studies are interesting and

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\(^7\) See, for example, Lieselotte Anderwald, “Measuring the Success of Prescriptivism: Quantitative Grammaticography, Corpus Linguistics and the Progressive Passive,” *English Language and Linguistics* 18, no. 1 (March 2014): 1–21, [https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674313000257](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674313000257), and Nuria Yanez-Bouza, “Preposition Stranding
illustrative of changing usage standards and attitudes, there is a disconnect from a wider audience. By choosing a broader topic type than linguists’ and editors’ pet problems, I hope to examine real-world and real-time reactions in the language to cultural phenomena that affect all language users. In using corpora to compare a stylebook’s gender-related language rules with the actual way writers and editors use gender-neutral and related terms, I aim to clarify how the guidelines have changed over the years, how actual usage in news sources has changed over the years, and how these two trends align or diverge.

**Research Questions**

Based on this context, this research endeavor aims to examine the following questions: How closely does gender-based usage align with the prescriptions for gender-based usage, specifically in online, written news media? Do guides adapt their guidance to follow popular usage, or do published sources stick to prescribed forms and change primarily when directed? In a narrow slice of these questions, this project also asks and attempts to answer the following addition: Specifically, how has the actual usage of common gender-specific title variants in online written news content changed over recent years, and is any change correlated with AP’s evolving stances on such terms?

By pursuing these questions, I aim to contribute further insight into the extent to which English language news writers—trusted establishers of language—are adhering to language authorities in topics such as non-biased gender-related language that are more subject to rapid cultural change and that hold such influence over general readership.

Further, this topic of study can help illuminate how different genders are represented in

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popular media and trends that influence that representation. While it is not realistic to expect a clear and direct relation in any direction between prescription and usage, the results of such investigation, if not definitive, can be telling and hint at some of the nuances of the complex relationships involved in the question. In a study similarly looking at different facets of prescriptivism and usage, Smith has noted that “it is important to point out that it is difficult—if not impossible—to state that prescriptive rules cause some change in the language. Curzan rightly stated that ‘the interaction of prescriptivism and usage defies straightforward cause–effect relationships.’” However, when considered as a whole, research that observes the interaction of prescriptive rules and changes in actual usage, Curzan argued, ‘make it clear that prescriptivism should not be dismissed as a factor in the development of formal written English.’”\(^8\) By investigating whether writers and editors tend to defer to higher authorities or to current social forces in fraught usage cases, this study can also provide a foundational knowledge of patterns in journalistic fields of written language that can open research into further study, such as why such correlations do or do not exist and what effects such usage may have on readers.

**Review of Relevant Literature and Context**

This research examines the intersection of the genre of news media, the theoretical lens of prescriptivism, and the topic of gender in language. As a number of different subfields play into this project, it is important to represent the position of this research

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\(^8\) Tyler Jordan Smith, “A Comparison of Prescriptive Usage Problems in Formal and Informal Written English” (PhD diss., Iowa State University, 2019): 34, [https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8573&context=etd; emphasis mine.](https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8573&context=etd; emphasis mine.)
within the existing academic framework of each. The following information is presented to validate my combination of topics and methods and establish the context that points to the exigency of this work. In this section I will briefly review the literature and trends of prescriptivism and of corpus-based research on prescriptive rules and usage; the effects of gender-fair language (GFL) versus gender-biased language on language users; and the genre of news media and the role of prescriptivism in its processes and publications.

The Problems and Power of Prescriptivism

Prescriptivism is a concept that is brought to the awareness of students in the editing program at Brigham Young University as early as possible and referenced throughout ongoing editing training and philosophies, but it is, according to Smith, a topic that is severely understudied in the realm of linguistics and English language specifically. According to Peters, prescriptivism defined as the reaction to language change wherein one “may declare one particular form to be the right one to use.” This concept is often inseparable from the contrasting idea of descriptivism, or when one “may simply remark on it without passing judgement.” Not only this distinction but the dominant attitudes toward each side are deeply rooted in all who undertake modern language studies: “One of the first lessons every new linguistics student learns is that linguists study, describe, and celebrate actual usage; they do not dictate how a language should be used. Descriptivism is the term often used to contrast the work of linguists—documenting and

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9 Smith, “Comparison of Prescriptive Usage Problems.”

Theorizing—from the judgments of prescriptivists.”¹¹ Because of the negative way prescriptivism is often taught and looked upon in this ongoing debate between the two camps, Smith argues, researchers have historically neglected it as a topic of value to study.¹² The arbitrary roots of most prescriptivist rules and guides, “after all, are not arguments; that is, they do not seek to gain their authority through evidence or systematic inquiry”¹³ but “are inherited and received, rather than questioned and proved.”¹⁴ However, this very systemic dislike of prescriptivism is what qualifies it as meriting further research; by understanding changing attitudes toward prescriptivism, its history, and contemporary implementation, linguists and editors alike will be better able to understand emerging language trends and mediate the role of prescriptivist authorities in language.

**Prescriptivism for the People**

Though prescriptivism is a concept known and debated primarily by linguists, editors, and others who study and work closely with language, its presence in everyday life is pervasive and affects English language users’ view of and approach to language “correctness” in written as well as spoken word. Published language is generally seen by default as carrying a level of prestige and correctness, and even unconscious consumption of the values implied in the words used in print can affect broader mental processes and social judgments: “When institutionalized, [linguistic] attitudes have considerable force,


¹² Smith, “Comparison of Prescriptive Usage Problems.”


and they fundamentally affect the lives of members of the speech community.”¹⁵ Even if they do not know it, many users of English have a prescriptivist tendency, as “it is the ideology they are taught in school” and, when not offered a descriptivist alternative, “the primary way they think about and interact with their own language.”¹⁶ Mackiewicz’s 1999 study examining general writing handbooks found high prevalence of prescriptivism in the genre, even if the levels of such varied from one publication to another.¹⁷ As such a default lens of language learning in English, prescriptivism has a bearing on English users’ approaches to both the language and other users of the language.

Early and persistent English language education with a prescriptivist base comes to bear on the ways people communicate and how they view and use language as a cultural and social tool and as part of personal identity. McWhorter has described that “prescriptive grammar has spread linguistic insecurity like a plague among English speakers for centuries,” and this insecurity leads users to a divide that marginalizes those who use language that is seen as incorrect (as well as “numbs us to the aesthetic richness of non-standard speech”).¹⁸ Smith backs up the idea that “the desire to speak and write correctly remains a concern for a large number of people . . . . This is likely fueled by the continued feelings of personal linguistic insecurity that still abound even in speakers who


feel that their regional variety is correct.”19 As language is only what its users make it—
words not carrying any inherent correctness or otherwise—these language attitudes are
likewise a social construction. At its core, the issue of language prescription has evolved
past academic arguments and now holds social stake.

As language is so tightly intertwined with personal identity, perpetuation of ideas of
correctness or incorrectness extends past grammar-based arguments and influences how
people see and think about those who use “incorrect” language on a personal level. As
Smith states, “Many speakers today believe when a speaker has violated a rule contained
in a usage guide, it is the speaker who is wrong . . . and not some problem with the
language itself,”20 as was more believed to be the case in the advent of English language
prescription in the seventeenth century. Since certain prescriptive tenets have become so
codified in the English learned in schools, words’ inherent authority is not questioned so
much as the speakers themselves. Ebner agrees with usage conflicts being “socially
constructed,” stating that they “serve the divisive function of differentiating between
correct/educated language use from incorrect/uneducated language use.”21 Beyond rote
grammatical forms that are seen as correct or incorrect, educated or uneducated, the sides
taken and practiced in more contemporary and socially motivated language debates (such
as those surrounding gender-based terms) can further indicate levels of respect for and
acceptance of others. In an already and increasingly polarized world, this linguistic

20 Smith, “Comparison of Prescriptive Usage Problems,” 31; emphasis mine.
contention—so embedded that it occurs often below the level of consciousness—is needless, and it is not inevitable going forward.

While prescriptivism may not be considered a topic worthy of serious study to many linguists and other researchers, its influence on everyday language use and attitudes continues to have effects on broader aspects of life and culture. As such, researchers in the fields of linguistics, English language, and editorial studies should not neglect this powerful and subtle factor of language usage, no matter how distasteful it may be on personal level. In recent years, more research has started to emerge and set a precedent on how to measure and study prescriptivism, mainly using corpora. Such studies have investigated things like adherence to specific prescriptive rules, actual usage, and differences in adherence within different genres or registers.

**Studies on Prescriptivism**

Studies done in the realm of prescriptivism range from evaluating historical effects of early grammarians to examining modern examples of language usage for adherence to prescriptive guidelines in specific usage guides or genres. Such studies show effective methodologies using large corpora to draw data on actual usage to compare to different prescriptive criteria, and their conclusions establish a small but insightful pattern from which to base my corpus-based prescriptivism research.

Research done using documents from the early advent of prescriptive grammarians and grammars in American English show that, for all the grammarians’ strong language and the blame current editing and linguistics circles tend to put on them for creating prescriptive currents in the language, such forces may not have had so huge or immediate an impact on the direction of English language trends as would have been anticipated. In
2005, Auer and González-Díaz examined eighteenth-century English writing looking for the effect of two prescribed usages: grammarians argued for increased use of the inflectional subjunctive and wrote against the use of double comparative structures. Based on other writings contemporary with these injunctions, the researchers got mixed results: one item that was on the decline, the inflectional subjunctive, saw a slight uptick in use after its use was recommended; the decline of another form, the double comparative, is less attributable to grammarians’ proscription against it since the downward trend was already in motion.22

In a similar vein, Anderwald found not only that early grammars did not have a large impact on usage trends but rather that grammars changed to mirror naturally occurring usage trends. She studied over two hundred grammar books from the nineteenth century—which books were predominantly prescriptive—alongside corpus data from the same time period to see if actual usage correlated with the grammars’ prescriptions. Between the corpus findings and comparisons of what grammars said about certain word forms in the beginning of the century to what they said about the same item in the end of the century, Anderwald found that many of the later grammars had changed their stance on what the “acceptable” term was after actual usage trends that way flowed.23 This conclusion of Auer and González-Díaz sums up a main takeaway from both of these studies: regardless of any presence of strong emergent patterns, the studies “can be interpreted as a warning against the danger of overestimating the explanatory potential of


23 Lieselotte Anderwald, qtd. in Smith, “Comparison of Prescriptive Usage Problems,” 34.
prescriptivism and a call for a more careful reanalysis of its impact in processes of language change in the history of English.”

Despite these showings for centuries past, however, data collected on usage and guides from the past few decades shows a steadier adherence to prescribed forms. In 2003, Mackiewicz did a study looking at various prescribed writing conventions within the emerging format of online communications. Based on examining eleven guidebooks for common rules’ frequency, consistency, and justifications, she concluded that there was not yet a strong consensus on many conventions for this new form of writing but that a select few with practical justifications, such as about subject headings and capitalization, were unanimously included and consistently referred to, suggesting a core standard of adherence. If, as has been mentioned, much of the current aggression against prescriptive rules is due to their arbitrariness, emerging guidelines rooted in practical reasons—avoiding confusing or upsetting the intended reader, for example—show promise of more acceptance by users and less domineering by language authorities.

Dant’s 2012 investigation analyzing usage as documented in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) for adherence to the guidelines laid out in the widely used and highly respected *Chicago Manual of Style* shows more deference to authority. She found that over half of the studied usage prescriptions were reflected in COCA results, especially in the newspaper register. However, the flow of influence is

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not definite based on her evaluation of select rules in one guidebook. Dant describes that the high levels of general adherence across registers “demonstrate that at least half of Chicago’s prescriptions are not arbitrary but are reflections of actual educated usage.”

This measured analysis, not looking specifically for change over time, does not make any direct claims about one party—the language authority or the language users—being the leader and the other the follower. However, the high degree of concurrence suggest that the two sides have an intertwined relationship worthy of further investigation.

Though individual usage items receive different levels of overall adherence or attention, there has also been the suggestion that formality registers or genres do not bear strong discrepancies from each other. While Dant found a range of adherence percentages that varied between registers in COCA, the overall trends between these concurred with each other, whether in adherence to or disregard for different usage items. The idea that items that are looked upon with respect by one set of writers is also likely to be seen as legitimate by another is supported by corpus-based research by Smith in 2019, which expressly looked to compared formal and informal registers, as represented by news writers and blog writers respectively. His like comparison of a number popular usage divides ended up showing a trend similar to Dant’s results, that not all rules were strictly adhered to but that both groups agreed on which rules fell into which level of regard. If it turns out that usage guides are more like to follow actual trends of educated usage than vice versa, this could signal certain rules being dropped from the pages of such guides,

27 Dant, “Using COCA to Evaluate The Chicago Manual,” 38; emphasis mine.
28 Dant, “Using COCA to Evaluate The Chicago Manual.”
29 Smith, “Comparison of Prescriptive Usage Problems.”
either because the traditionally prescribed rules are so unanimously used that they warrant no comment or because they have fallen so much out of favor as to make usage guides overly pedantic by recommending it.

By looking at the foundational and growing body of literature on evaluating prescriptive traditions via large online corpora, it becomes clear that the relationship between English language authorities and English language users is more complex than has been historically assumed. As the inherent nature of language is to change and grow, it makes sense that both language usage patterns and language guidelines would change and grow alongside it. However, it is hard to discern a definitive answer from such studies as to the exact relationship or correlation between these two sides of a language relationship. Even as telling patterns have emerged illuminating the power and influence of the everyday language user, “the interaction of prescriptivism and usage defies straightforward cause–effect relationships.”30 As Smith similarly concluded after his extensive background research and original studies, one would be hard-pressed to prove that prescriptive rules cause changes in language, though the research on such rules and changes in usage makes it clear that prescriptivism is at the very least a factor of language change. Further, while helpful in discerning patterns and correlations, corpus analyses alone cannot reveal the exact amount that prescriptive rules factor into language change. Indeed, Auer and González-Díaz also recognized the complexity of such an endeavor, as their results still “challenge the overall importance that prescriptivism has been traditionally granted as a key factor in language change.”31 This tempering of the

30 Anne Curzan, qtd. in Smith, “Comparison of Prescriptive Usage Problems,” 34.
idea of prescription driving the course of language to prescription being merely a factor caught up in a complicated war of words helps free linguistic thought from historical assumptions and allows room for more nuanced investigation into the ways the English language evolves and reacts in response to various outside forces.

One final takeaway from the sum of these studies is that researchers must not dismiss corpus-based methodologies. While Auer and González-Díaz did not make too bold claims on the specific items they chose to study, they acknowledged their corpus-based direction as an important step in the linguistic world, stating that “on a methodological level, the results point to precept and data corpora combinations as reliable indicators of language use in any given period.”32 Smith echoes the hedged sentiment that, even as a clear-cut leader-follow relationship cannot be drawn, “studies that investigate the relationship between prescriptivism and actual language use can still offer potentially useful probable explanations for some of the influences that cause changes in language to take place.”33 These resources, while not perfect or comprehensive, offer thorough and effective tools for researchers trying to gather data on a level that exceeds small-scale case studies of specific works.

The Effects of Gender-Fair Language

While it is worthy to strive for correctness for correctness’s sake, the most important and yet overlooked stake in language choices is how they affect users’ worldviews, assumptions, and other cognitive processes. The previously mentioned studies on


prescriptivism have largely focused on usage matters with historic correct/incorrect dichotomies, but my selection of gender-focused words centers in the concept that identity-related words are the ones whose presence or absence will make the biggest long-term impact on readers. While gender in language is a much more broad and less well-defined topic to study, even general glimpses of trends and associations can open doors for further research and raise awareness in editing situations. In justifying this choice of topic, many studies over the past decades have provided evidence that the language used to denote gender can affect readers’ automatic mental imagery, attitudes and biases, and text comprehension.

**Effects on Mental Imagery**

One body of study that aims to measure gender bias as connected to usage of language forms examines the spontaneous mental imagery that occurs when encountering language. This topic is based in the assertion that mental imagery often underpins unconscious reactions and associations. While there is no dependable way to see into a person’s mind in this regard, imagery evaluation is a relatively reliable way to measure male salience in thought patterns, especially as compared to methods asking about or observing sexist tendencies. The concept of mental imagery in relation to gender bias refers to whether an image that comes to mind while reading a text is wholly or mostly of male subjects, female subjects, or an even mix of both or other genders. For example, if a term is said to cause male bias in spontaneous mental imagery, it means that the use of that term makes people unconsciously think of images that have only or mostly male figures. Methods testing the effects of masculine generic language versus the efficacy of gender-fair language (GFL) in mental imagery include asking participants to read texts
with different pronouns options and then to verbally describe the image that comes to mind, select an image from a given set, or to draw a picture. All these strategies connect back to how the mind interprets supposedly gender-neutral words.

When looking at the effect of one type of gendered language, pronouns, the form of *he/she* has had mixed results over the years in its effects on bias as expressed by produced imagery. An early landmark study by Gastil in 1990 had students read aloud sentences that differed only in pronoun type and verbally describe any mental images evoked; later, they were asked to recall which genders they visualized. Gastil found that *he* and related forms did not have the intended neutral meaning, as they elicited disproportionate amounts of male imagery in participants—and males interpreted the *he/she* constructions similarly to the generic *he* constructions.34 However, a more recent 2019 study illustrates positive change in line with the theoretical underpinnings of the visibility emphasized in feminization strategies. In a study where participants read summaries of job candidates in gender-balanced fields and were asked to select a photo that they thought represented the candidate, Lindqvist et al. found that descriptions using *he/she* constructions rather than the generic *he* largely limited male bias as expressed via image selection.35 While the opposite results of these two studies make the case for *he/she* seem inconclusive, they bear testament to the changing nature of language reception and outline a trend in favor of feminization strategies when paired with awareness of related social issues in recent years.


GFL strategies that focus on true neutrality rather than increasing the visibility of feminine forms have not painted a completely clear picture over the years but do overwhelmingly show positive effects in some terms. For instance, the time-separated polar results of Gastil and Lindqvist et al. in feminization strategies show opposite results for the neutralized singular they: Gastil found that the singular they produced more balanced imagery for all participants compared to he and he/she forms, while—contrary to previous studies and popular thought—Lindqvist et al.’s image-selection tests revealed that the increasingly popular singular they had acquired a male association. This pattern of preexisting “neutral” words acquiring male bias over time is borne out by Lindqvist et al.’s results for the strategy of neutral noun repetition: replacing pronouns with terms such as “the applicant” did not eliminate male bias. However, their results on the use of neologisms created expressly for neutrality show signs of eliciting truly neutral imagery. Though the coined pronoun ze is not widely known and is mainly used specifically to signal nonbinary identity, Lindqvist et al. found that the “actively created gender-neutral pronoun” ze eliminated male bias completely in image selection results. When it comes to neutralization strategies, then, the coinage and usage of new terms may be the best way to use language unburdened by acquired biases. This sampling on the body of knowledge about GFL and mental imagery represents a consensus on the biased mental patterns connected to gender-specific language in terms of spontaneous mental imagery. This

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36 Gastil, “Generic Pronouns and Sexist Language.”

37 Lindqvist, Renström, and Gustafsson Sendén, “Reducing a Male Bias in Language?”

research is widely used as the basis of other studies on GFL, such as those that try to connect language use and exposure more directly to attitudes and bias.

**Effects on Gender Attitudes and Bias**

The crux of most research on gendered language is to deduce how the different language options influence users’ actual attitudes and biases about gender. While bias itself can be tricky to measure quantitatively, responsible researchers have taken steps to try to be objective in data collection and analysis and eliminate observer’s paradox influencing results. In evaluating how new language forms can combat gender-biased mental activation, research has used methods such as priming tasks and surveys to find connections between exposure to GFL and gender bias.

Recent studies in gendered language have found evidence of language use affecting attitudes toward different genders. Matheson and Kristiansen’s evaluation of students’ stereotypical gender beliefs compared to their use of gender-biased language showed a connection of social forces and attitudes with gender-biased language use. In a 2019 study that more clearly delineates a flow of influence from language to thought, Tavits and Pérez investigated if there was a relationship between using different pronouns and male-centered mental salience, and from there if male-centered mental salience had a relation to social attitudes. In a positive sign for the efficacy of GFL on gender-based attitudes, the participants given neutral and feminine pronouns in text later expressed less stereotypical attitudes about gender roles and more positive feelings about the place of

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women and LGBTQ+ individuals in society.40 Through these studies, not only is there an established connection between masculine language and sexist attitudes but a new discovery confirming the relationship between GFL and nonsexist attitudes.

**Effects on Readability**

One obstacle from critics of GFL is the suggestion that GFL impedes the comprehensibility, or readability, of texts. However, studies of GFL in various Germanic languages (of which English is one) evince otherwise. Friedrich and Heise’s German study showed that there was no significant impact on comprehensibility ratings for readers presented with GFL.41 In a similar vein, MacKay’s English study showed first a decreased comprehensibility brought on by masculine generics: those who read a generic “he” to describe a neutral antecedent (e.g., “person”) wrongly assumed the antecedent to be male 40% more often than those who read texts with other pronoun options. On the other side of the scale, MacKay also found that encountering GFL neologisms slightly slowed reading time but did not impact accuracy in answering comprehension questions.42 Since other context and linguistic cues help readers understand the meaning of pronouns, GFL is not a major obstacle to understanding.

In fact, the only study with results where the use of feminine pronouns hindered comprehensibility supports the need for GFL. U.S. voters were polled over the pre-

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election period for the 2016 presidential election, and researchers measured correlations between who a voter expected to win and the pronouns they used to describe the role of president. The U.S. presidency is a historically male role, and the rare use of she pronouns to describe the role of president majorly disrupted participants’ comprehension even when the participant’s favored candidate was female.\(^4\) Rather than acting as a comprehensibility argument against GFL, the miscomprehension emphasizes the pervasiveness of male bias in real-world expectations, furthering the need for a more neutral language to become more natural. While the evidence is adamant that GFL will not obscure texts’ meaning, struggles to implement it will continue to be presented by those with attitudes opposed to change and male speakers loathe to give up their implicit linguistic power.

**Room for Improvement**

Linguistic evidence points to language having at least some impact on how language users perceive and unconsciously treat people in real life based on gender, and given the reach and scope of news media, it is a category of usage not to be neglected and carefully evaluated. This gender disparity in language does exist at a prescribed level; Amare’s 2007 examination of online grammar guides sponsored by universities found that many exhibited gender stereotypes in their language, all of which, she found, contributed negatively to males’ and females’ perceptions of both themselves each other. For example, “users see women (when they do see them) as occupying *only* low-status

professional positions or occupying none at all. Users also see men as the ‘favored gender, the heirs apparent to society’s rewards,’ but also dichotomized as either highly successful or as delinquents.”⁴⁴ The “gender miseducation” conveyed by common use of gender-biased and stereotypical behavior, then, is harmful to all parties involved, regardless of gender.

One gap in the earlier gender-based language research is also a large absence of acknowledgement and surveying of nonbinary individuals, almost all studies operating under the male-female binary and not considering the effects on those outside of that dichotomy. This gap in studies on the effects of usage affects again not only how people think of nonbinary individuals but can affect how such individuals think of themselves. The connection between identity is elucidated by Ebner: “The intrinsic connection between language and identity becomes noticeable in how language is used by its speakers. . . . What is important here is the understanding that language defines a speaker both directly and indirectly, in that speakers use language to express identities, and concurrently it is argued that language is also who the speakers are.”⁴⁵

Through these studies on the effects of gender-based and gender-fair language, it is clear that the use of non-neutral or non-inclusive terms has serious negative consequences on patterns of gender bias and sexism in society at large. On a hopeful note, however, the reverse is also true in that a use of conscious and inclusive language can help reverse some of the automatic assumptions about genders imparted by gender-specific terms. As different institutions, including the news media, prescribe gender-fair language—or at


least not proscribe it—and normalize such usage, there is possibility for more wide-ranging linguistic and cultural patterns to emerge that can positively impact a society’s collective attitudes toward different genders.

The Language of News Media

Of all the genres of writing to investigate for gender-based language, online written news media features many qualities that make it a productive area to start an investigation of real-world, widely distributed writing that is often held to prescriptive editing standards. Smith also identified news writing as a representative candidate for his study comparing prescriptivism in different genres, with his criterion that news as a genre “could reasonably be considered formal while still having widespread readership.”46 Being a fact-based, informational style of writing with a general audience in mind also sets it apart from edited genres with more leniency in the language, such as fiction, as well as genres that are unusually strict and technical about language usage, such as academia. In news features that are less objective, “even if a story is primarily interpretive it should be fair. Snide, belittling comments should be removed.”47 And while there are constant deadlines and time-related pressures to publish news text, prescriptivism is still present as “authors are able to draft and revise their original work before publishing it to their audiences. . . . News writing is often carefully edited before publication with trained copy editors ensuring the articles meet language standards.”48 This middle-ground position makes this genre representative of a group of writers and

editors that are careful about their language and keeping to consistent rules without having necessarily the training, time, or stakes to ensure perfectly polished text.

In addition to these defining points of news writing, the public view of the writing found on online news sites also sets it up as worthy of study for those interested in getting a glimpse at the bigger picture of prescriptivism and the public. According to Smith, news writing is “timely and intended to be considered important and authoritative.”

Honing that concept in on the individuals behind the words, “the editor who puts out a paper which intelligently fulfills all these varied functions [to inform, alert, interpret, educate, lead, persuade, provide a forum, inspire, and entertain] is a major figure in the community and in society” due to their influence exerted on the information published and the language used to do so. Ebner, looking specifically at the official language guidelines of popular British news outlet BBC, likewise found that the news network is known widely for its high language and content standards but notes that “it is important to bear in mind that the authority of the BBC as a language guardian has been assigned by society.”

Indeed, this reputation of authority and officiality likely influences the continued presence and importance of sticking to prescribed forms in writing news. This could be a self-perpetuating cycle of news upholding language standards to appease readers’ expectations and readers holding news language to a high standard based on their consistent output of such. However, it is also worth noting that this should be balanced

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50 Gilmore and Root, Modern Newspaper Editing, 9.
with the need for editors and writers to be alert “to change and to ideas. News almost by
definition concerns itself with changes and ideas, and an editor unfamiliar with or
uninterested in them becomes ineffective.’’

In any case, new writing is ideal for corpus-based prescriptivism-vs.-usage research
for its wide accessibility to readers and researchers; its adherence to moderately strict
prescriptive precedents and guidelines and incorporation of editors into the publishing
process; and its authoritative image in the view of the general public.

The Editor’s Role in News Media

While there is no universal process by which news media passes through the hands of
editors before being published, most if not all news text is in some way edited—either by
the author, another journalist, or a copy editor—to meet set standards. In laying out the
general relationship between editors and language, Owen has stated that “editors reduce
variation and codify certain forms, based mostly on traditional usage prescriptions,”
and news writing is no exception. “The editor’s aim is to improve copy—to turn out
concise, clear, newsworthy stories from writing which may be far from that”; four
identified actions taken by copy editors in the news is “to cut, to clarify, to maximize
news value, and to standardize language.” Journalism and with it news editing practices
have nevertheless changed over time and through technological advances.

Bell details some common conventions of editing print news, describing that “media
language is the product of multiple hands, and the process by which it is moulded and

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52 Gilmore and Root, Modern Newspaper Editing, 20.
53 Owen, “Practicing Prescriptivism, 302.
54 Bell, Language of News Media, 76.
modified are both crucial and enlightening for an understanding of the eventual news
text, its form and its content.”55 Still, Bell concedes that such moderation and oversight is
no guarantee. “Even at points where heavy editing is common,” he qualifies, “many
stories pass scarcely touched, possibly on grounds of excellence but more probably
through lack of time.”56 In many cases, however, the text that gets published is not
slapdash or unexamined by more than one person. When looking specifically at online
news sources—which may or may not have print counterparts—it is safe to assume that
processes have continued to change, though news journalism’s print precedent has left it
to inherit standards and standardizations even within tight timelines.

As my research looks specifically at online news texts, it is necessary to acknowledge
some of the ways the register of news writing has adapted in recent years to changing
consumer preferences, job markets, and demand for different media forms that have come
with increased digital technology. In 2017, the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ)
conducted a large-scale survey to gauge how news agencies are using new types of and
tools for technology. Their results showed a marked decrease in traditional newsroom
staff—possibly including copy editors—that follows a decade-long trend. At the same
time, hybrid and digital-only newsrooms have grown in share of the job market.57 At a
measurement taken two years later, however, the growth of digital-only news sources had
plateaued while only the hybrid office continued an upward trend,58 likely finding

55 Bell, Language of News Media, 8.
56 Bell, Language of News Media, 66.
57 The State of Technology in Global Newsrooms, International Center for Journalists (2017): 3,
58 The State of Technology in Global Newsrooms, International Center for Journalists (2019),
success by appealing to a wide range of reader demographics. As the main modes of communication shift, so too must jobs in editing the text. The 2017 survey reported that “digital content producers/editors are present in 8% of digital newsrooms; 7% of hybrid newsrooms; [and] 3% of traditional newsrooms.”\textsuperscript{59} And while an updated survey from 2019 defines the “news editor” as one of a handful of “established roles that have long been the backbone of the news industry,” they also note that even as jobs shrink there is some effort put into introducing technology-centered roles.

Despite fluctuations over the years as the industry continues to adapt to technological advances and other factors within the job market, it is clear that written news media holds a large bearing on many people’s daily lives and will continue to do so. One of my main motivations in prescriptivism-based research is to find, in addition to clues for best practices and guidelines for other editors, the bigger impact of prescriptive traditions and forms on everyday language users. This end also affects editors by giving awareness of larger ramifications of editing decisions, for example, and reflects the ultimate goal of an editor to foster communication more than to steadfastly keep language in check. To this end, edited online news media’s immense reach and accessibility—as well as the availability of large, existing corpora in this genre—makes it an ideal candidate for initial investigations of prescriptivism and gender-based usage interacting in context.

\textbf{Prescriptivism and Language Change in News Media}

Through the hand of editors is language brought to a set standard in news media, but though such text editors make changes, they are often not the ones who create the styles

\textsuperscript{59} State of Technology 2017, 21.
or guides they follow in making those decisions. When it comes to deciding which prescriptive rules to enforce and how to address other usage quandaries that arise, Bell noted three kinds of language standards that bear on a news writing: “the wider speech community’s rules of the language’s syntax, lexicon, spelling, and pronunciation; general guidelines on writing news; and the ‘house style’ of the particular news outlet. These standards may be overtly prescribed, unwritten or unconscious.”60 Essentially, it’s a balance of common actual usage, widespread (usually prescriptive) tenets from guides, and styles that deviate from widespread guidelines but used specifically by a certain company. As ideal as it sounds from a linguist’s perspective to adhere primarily to the first, descriptivist standard, the boon of easy access to news media now becomes a burden—by appealing to one audience’s speech patterns, they may well be isolating another audience with different local standards and preferences.

The stakes of ensuring correct language matter not only to consumers of news media but to the outlets themselves. “The reason why media is concerned with language usage is fundamentally tied to journalistic credibility,”61 which today can stem from both correct and careful language grammatically as well as culturally—in many cases, it is likely that a major typo in an article could lose a news source as much faith as can a custom of using language that is exclusionary or biased. In writing news for a general audience, however, “beliefs and stereotypes about recipients and their speech patterns are the sole practical input to mass communicators’ linguistic output. Mass communicators

60 Bell, *Language of News Media*, 82.

can cater only to a stereotype of the audience’s own language.”62 In many cases, the common denominator is usually the established, even prescriptive, usage guidelines. This can be a dangerous blanket strategy, however, especially when applied to marginalized groups with common negative stereotype associations.63 Due to this combination of factors—the need for wide, socially grouped audiences plus a perhaps outdated, biased set of stereotypes to draw on to cater to such—that sends writers to rely on usage guidelines, it is imperative that the authoritative guides that are looked to as a standard encourage use of language that can adapt with changing cultural norms and most fully reflect and include the whole spectrum of a diverse readership.

While relying solely on official guidelines in writing may seem like a safe bet for writers wary of making mistakes, the complex relationship between published language and the average language user necessitates adaptability. Ebner notes, “While some readers, viewers and listeners of news reports consider the language use of journalists as flawed, others assign news providers the role of a language guardian, who preserves and promotes the standard variety.”64 When pulled between two extremes in accusations of holding to outdated language conventions and expectations to uphold and champion “correct English,” simply sticking to prescriptive rules is not a clear best option. Even as “journalists tend to exhibit conservative and prescriptive attitudes, which are expected from a language guardian, they also follow mainstream attitudes, breaking prescriptive


63 “In a world in which the media increasingly provide the ‘common ground’ of information, symbols and ideas for most social groups, women’s representation in the media helps to keep them in a place of relative powerlessness. . . . This mediated invisibility is achieved not simply through the non-representation of women’s points of view or perspectives on the world. When women are ‘visible’ in media content, the manner of their representation reflects the biases and assumptions of those who define the public—and therefore the media—agenda.” Margaret Gallagher, *Gender Setting: New Agendas for Media Monitoring and Advocacy* (London: Zed Books, 2001), 1.

64 Ebner, “Language Guardian BBC?,” 308.
rules for the sake of clear communication.”\textsuperscript{65} In the end, writing should aim to be both correct and clear, not sacrificing readability for the sake of technical precision, political correctness, and the like, even if that requires following popular rather than prescribed usage.

The wide distribution and readership of online news and the public’s attitude toward the language used in that medium mean that the language of news media not only informs of facts but subtly influences readers’ attitudes toward and acceptance of usage items and what they represent. The key role that news and similar media in language standardization—and conversely, liberalization—has been long acknowledged. In 1967, Noss wrote that such media, commonplace and culturally influential and authoritative as they are, could even have a bigger impact than other prescriptive or formal language initiatives: “The propagation of the national language within the country will depend more and more on the educational system and the communications media, less and less on the academy. The radio, newspapers and television, whether publicly or privately controlled, will exert a decisive influence not only on the spread of the national language, but also on the form in which it is ultimately accepted by the public. It is here that new coinages and usages will stand or fall and not in the academy-approved grammars and dictionaries issued by scholars.”\textsuperscript{66} Notice that Noss does not necessarily state that this medium can be manipulated solely for descriptive or prescriptive purposes, merely that its nature makes it a powerful tool in facilitating the natural change of language. Whether or not a person makes conscious language judgments or decisions when reading news

\textsuperscript{65} Ebner, “Language Guardian BBC?,” 308.

writing, the words used nevertheless influence their own language through exposure. The more people are exposed to and become familiar with certain terms or conventions, the more likely they are to use it themselves.

While the concept of spreading usage through mere exposure is commonly recognized in linguistic situations such as picking up slang words from friends, such patterns of repeated exposure combined with the influence of news media’s reputation has shown similar effects in changing general language use. In a unique opportunity, Gustafsson Sendén and other researchers were able to administer surveys over the span of four years to gauge real-world impacts of official gender-fair language implementation when, in 2012, the Swedish government sanctioned *hen* (as opposed to feminine *hon* and masculine *han*) as a generic and transgender/nonbinary pronoun. Through random sampling surveys in universities and public spaces in Stockholm and Lund, they concluded that “new words challenging the binary gender system evoke hostile and negative reactions, but also that *attitudes can normalize rather quickly,*” with time being an influential factor in positive attitude change. Further, the word’s early adoption by popular magazines and then newspapers likely improved its standing more than arguments from linguistic and feminist sources did, the researchers state.

As seen in this case study, usage can go beyond being clear and correct in writing, and new media sources should be aware of the power they can unknowingly exert by dint of their language choices. More than influencing increased usage of certain language, this

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68 Smith, “Botheration and Recognition of Prescriptive Rules,” 1; emphasis mine.
matters because, as was noted, the words people are exposed to can have subtle effects on unconscious thought and attitudes in matters of gender and beyond.

**Methodology**

Having established the intersections of prescriptivism and news media as well as the existence of problems in of certain gender-specific language based on its cognitive effects, the following sections detail my research into finding more specific connections and trends between these areas. In order to gain more insight into the relationship between prescription and usage of gender-related terms in an online news genre, it is important to have evidence of both changing prescriptive guidelines and actual published usage that can be evaluated en masse. To do this, I have chosen to extract data from specialized corpora, or online collections of published works that allow users to search for words or phrases within the entire collection and that display results as organized by sections such as source type, year, frequency, and other criteria.

Corpus-based research is an emerging linguistic methodology with a precedence in prescriptivism research. My process of corpus comparison draws in part from that of Auer and González-Díaz’s 2005 study of the effects of prescriptivism over time. Their comparative corpora were separated into “a precept corpus and a usage corpus,” the former being made of metalinguistic commentary on usage features in their key period and the latter consisting of samples of actual language usage in that same time period.\(^{69}\) Regarding this general concept in using comparative corpus data, Auer and González-Díaz concluded that “the results point to precept and data corpora combinations as

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reliable indicators of language use in any given period.” While this study looked at historical sources, my focus is more on ongoing language change and takes measurement from various time periods to identify trends in gender-specific word variants.

**Choice and Justification of Comparative Corpora**

In my research, the “precept corpus” from which I measured changing standards and prescriptions in news writing was my own compilation of relevant entries from five recent editions of the *Associated Press Stylebook*. This specific series of language and usage guidance is the most relevant source for any study based in news media. From the Associated Press’s origins in 1846 as a collective effort to by five New York City newspapers to quickly disseminate war news and its first pamphlet-like publication in 1900, AP’s reach has grown to establish itself today as the golden standard in its discipline in the United States. Widely as the standard style guide for American news organizations, AP “provides guidelines accepted for news writing. Many newspapers, magazines and public relations offices across the United States use AP style. Although some publications such as the New York Times have developed their own style guidelines, a basic knowledge of AP style is considered essential to those who want to work in print journalism.” Even organizations with specific in-house guides often base such off AP style—NPR, for example, states in their online style guide that “the *Associated Press Stylebook* is the basis for many of the guidelines that appear here”; Buzzfeed’s online style guide likewise states that “the preferred style manual is the *AP*.

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While the most current standings of AP style can be found on their website via subscription, preceding recent editions are not freely accessible online or in other comprehensive, searchable, electronic forms. To have record of how measures meted by AP have changed in recent years, then, I selected (in addition to the current online entries) a representative spread of four paperback copies from 2010 onward (as the news corpus I used goes back only as far as that year) of the *Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law* and searched, hand-selected, and transcribed relevant gender-focused entries for comparison. The selected editions include those published in 2011, 2013, 2017, and 2019. Also included was the online version of the stylebook as of March 2022. Relevant sections that I searched include the following general headings, though exact wording can vary by edition: “chairman, chairwoman”; “congressman, congresswoman”; “council, councilor, councilman, councilwoman”; and “spokesman, spokeswoman.” (See Figure 8 in the “Data and Discussion” section of this thesis for the exact texts of the entries used in my analysis.) In addition to these term-specific entries, I additionally documented more general entries listed as “woman, women” and “-person” in order to establish AP’s general guidance on and attitudes toward gender-fair and neutral language options. With this record of over a decade’s worth of changing AP guidelines on gender-related topics, I created a reliable mini-corpus from which to compare actual usage of the items pre- and proscribed by AP.

To draw on evidence of actual adherence to or deviation from AP guidelines over the years, my “usage corpus” was Mark Davies’s News on the Web (NOW) corpus, which is
part of the world’s most widely used collection of online corpora. With over 14.6 billion words (as of March 5, 2022) and millions more added daily, it stands out in its ability to show language change not only historically but in recent, ongoing time frames. Its records include the text of online news sources from 2010 to the present in twenty different countries.\(^{71}\) To narrow the focus of this massive source, NOW has options to search with lemmatized word forms, part-of-speech tagging, and wildcards, with results able to be shown in lists with context, frequency charts filtered by sections based on time ranges and country, in conjunction with collocates within set bounds, and more. The accessibility and reach of this corpus made NOW an ideal fit to illustrate recent changes in news-based usage of culturally influenced titles concerning gender.

**Choice and Justification of Selected Search Terms**

One other consideration of using corpora for research is the acknowledgement that this type of research looks at the big picture, more as a matter of acquiring a large quantity of data points to examine as a whole rather than thoroughly studying a small number of individual examples and making conjectures from a limited representative set. As such, the terms I chose to focus on in searches necessarily are of a nature that can be evaluated based on normalized frequency counts. While many corpora—NOW included—feature options to see the context of each individual result in a search, in order to evaluate the nuanced context of searchers on the scale on which I am working, it would require more sophisticated search, filter, and tagging systems (or countless hours of manually looking at each of hundreds of example sentences, evaluating the usage and

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context, and making sometimes arbitrary judgments) than currently within my means.

This consideration is reflected in my choice of a few types of traditionally gender-specific titles without ambiguous or versatile meanings and whose simple presence or absence is telling.\(^7\)

My research is not meant to be a comprehensive investigation nor to draw definitive conclusions on the relationship of prescriptive guides and actual usage or the state of gender-fair, inclusive language as a whole. Rather, through a small-scale study looking at a specific set of terms over a couple of decades, this research should add insight to this ongoing conversation in linguistic, literary, and editorial spheres and suggest avenues of future complementary research. As such, I looked to previous literature in closely related subfields as well as my own preliminary corpus findings and observations of changing language trends to pick five titular root terms (with their gender-influenced variations) that may illustrate general trends in this area: spokes[man, -woman, -person], chair[man, -woman, -person], [member of] congress[man, -woman, -person], business[man, -woman, -person, owner], and council[man, -woman, -person, member].

**Extending Current Literature Based on Corpus Trends**

I selected these five word families to act as an evaluation on the state of prescriptivism versus usage in the subtopic of gender based off previously identified gaps

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\(^7\) This means that, though a popular topic, this study refrains from evaluating the trends of gendered pronouns in inclusive ways, such as a growing disapproval of masculine generic pronouns and acceptance of singular they forms. Pronouns such as he can be acceptably used in contexts about male individuals, and they is often used in its traditional plural sense; this dependence of context and the impracticality of ascertaining such for such a large sample set eliminates such a class of still very valuable language aspects to research. For examples of singular they research, see Maciej Baranowski, “Current Usage of the Epicene Pronoun in Written English,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 6, no. 3 (2007): 378–397, [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1467-9481.00193](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1467-9481.00193) and Laura Louise Paterson, “The Use and Prescription of Epicene Pronouns: A Corpus-Based Approach to Generic He and Singular They in British English” (doctoral thesis, Loughborough University, 2019). For an example of masculine generic research, see Amare, “Where Is She?”
in AP’s coverage of gender, which specific issues were supported by preliminary findings from the NOW corpus showing that the terms are still relevant and the subject of ongoing change. In his 1994 BYU honors thesis proposing “to evaluate the AP stylebook on questions of gender-related usage,” McClellan combed the then-current 1994 edition for entries relating to gender and evaluated AP’s stance on each as acceptable, unacceptable, or questionable.³³ These judgements were made based on “three areas of gender-related usage that should receive attention in journalism style manuals: equality, fairness, and inclusion.”³⁴ One topic where AP’s guidance was deemed unacceptable on grounds of both fairness and inclusion was that of words with unequal or unnecessary gender-specific endings. Such rules included words with -man and -woman endings where only the -man entries were listed as acceptable for general references, as well as listed neutral endings such as -person as clearly proscribed.³⁵

I chose to extend from this subtopic of gendered language as the category of -woman, -man, and like terms was identified then as an issue in need of change decades ago and has since had plenty of time to have improved, especially because such language categorization is still in debate today. Beyond fighting the masculine generic default by making the feminine visible, the ideal goal when it comes to inclusion goes beyond the traditional binary of male-female and seeks to include those who identify with any gender, including those outside of that dichotomy, through the use of true neutrals.

The purpose of my current research differs from McClellan’s as it does not seek to evaluate the choices of endorsed terms in the stylebooks but rather to observe how such guidance is applied or flouted in actual use. The present study focuses on one key identified shortcoming of AP’s approach to gender-fair language as noted in 1994 and extends the reach from one edition to look at change over time both in AP’s treatment of gender-specific titles and the actual usage (or non-usage) of such.

As for the specific choice of business-, chair-, congress-, council-, and spokes-based title variants, I decided to further pursue these specific terms based on the findings in McClellan’s analysis and current ongoing conversation about AP style as well as concurring preliminary data in the NOW corpus. By doing a general search in NOW for nouns with the form “*WOMAN_nn” (with the * representing a wildcard for text attached to the front of “women,” the “_nn” filtering for nouns, and the capitalization including all lemmas of the word) returned results that affirmed the ongoing relevance of these specific words. Besides the base word of “WOMAN,” the most frequent results for words in this form included “SPOKESWOMAN,” “CHAIRWOMAN,” “CONGRESSWOMAN,” “BUSINESSWOMAN,” and “COUNCILWOMAN” (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Frequency List Results in NOW for “*WOMAN_nn”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANK</th>
<th>ALLFORMS (SAMPLE):</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>FREQUENCIES</th>
<th>UNIQUNESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>WOMAN</td>
<td>2543297</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>SPOKESWOMAN</td>
<td>271352</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>CHAIRWOMAN</td>
<td>59882</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>CONGRESSWOMAN</td>
<td>25021</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>BUSINESSWOMAN</td>
<td>23925</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>COUNCILWOMAN</td>
<td>8453</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The specific variant versions chosen for my research are based on those mentioned in at least one edition of the *AP Stylebook* (with one major exclusion in my research being the neutral for chairwoman of simply chair due to search logistics and the various
interpretations and uses of that word outside of as a title). Based on the combination of
the presence of AP guidelines on these specific words and the words’ relevancy in the
available data, the selection of my key terms is justified as a subject of further research.

**Search Criteria and Methods in NOW**

First, out of the search types, I chose for my searches to display in “Chart”
formatting, which shows the normalized frequency of the results per million words as
divided by defined sections. In the Sections settings, I filtered results to “United States”
sources and included the years 2010–21 to display as separate bars to show change over
time. I additionally bounded the results to start at 01/01/2010 and end at 12/31/21 in the
“Search by Date” option (excluding 2022 as the data for the present year would be
incomplete and changing daily). Finally, in the search box, each term was typed in all
caps to include lemmas of each word; while this feature is most helpful when searching
for all forms and tenses of verbs, this feature includes plural forms of recognized nouns.
My search terms were as follows, with word families divided by bullet points and
individual search terms separated by semicolons:

- BUSINESSMAN; BUSINESSWOMAN; BUSINESSPERSON; BUSINESS OWNER
- CHAIRMAN; CHAIRWOMAN; CHAIRPERSON
- CONGRESSMAN; CONGRESSWOMAN; CONGRESSPERSON; MEMBER OF
  CONGRESS
- COUNCILMAN; COUNCILWOMAN; COUNCILPERSON; COUNCIL MEMBER;
  COUNCILOR
- SPOKESMAN; SPOKESWOMAN; SPOKESPERSON

The raw chart results from the NOW interface can be found in the appendix.
Data and Discussion

After collecting data from both AP and NOW and compiling relevant information in different charts and tables for easy analysis, I was able to look at each word family’s variants compared to each other and compared to AP’s guidelines on such over time, as well as to draw out general patterns and trends from looking at the overall spread of AP and NOW data. The following sections are divided by word family (business-, chair-, congress-, council-, and spokes-based title variants) and will detail the AP entries and NOW results for the variants in that family alongside a comparative analysis or discussion of a word family’s results as a whole.

Contextualizing Background

In addition to the five word families under examination in my research, there were two more generalized entries in the 2011–19 print AP Stylebooks that were telling of AP’s overarching patterns and approaches to gender-specific language: “woman, women” entries and “-person” entries. After a review of these entries, there follows a short explanation on how to approach the NOW results.

“Women” in the AP Stylebook

Although not a specific search term of mine, the “woman, women” entries establish AP’s general principles, attitudes, and policies concerning gender in language. Key parts of the entry for “women” in 2011 is as follows:

Women should receive the same treatment as men in all areas of coverage. Physical descriptions, sexist references, demeaning stereotypes and condescending phrases should not be used. To cite some examples, this means that:
—Copy should not assume maleness when both sexes are involved, as in *Jackson told the newsmen* or in *the taxpayer*. . . *he* when it can be said *Jackson told the reporters* or *taxpayers*. . . *they*. . .

In other words, treatment of the sexes should be evenhanded and free of assumptions and stereotypes. This does not mean that valid and acceptable words such as *mankind* or *humanity* cannot be used. They are proper.

The entry for “women” in 2013 is the same as in 2011. The entry for “woman, women” in 2017 is a shorter version of what is found in 2011 and 2013: “Treatment of the sexes should be evenhanded and free of assumptions and stereotypes. This does not mean that valid and acceptable words such as *mankind* or *humanity* cannot be used. They are proper.” The entry for “woman, women” in 2019 is the same as 2017. The online entry for “woman, women” in 2022 is an even shorter version of what is found in 2017 and 2019, with a link to a more comprehensive “gender-neutral language” entry: “Treatment of the sexes should be evenhanded and free of assumptions and stereotypes.”

What is happening in these entries over the years is not a change of content but a shortening of it. Rather than being evidence of waning interest in gender parity in language, however, this shortening from a paragraph with examples to a simple statement against stereotypes and assumptions could reflect a broader cultural consciousness that has become more gender fair and aware over the last decade and no longer needs explicit reminders of gender-fair principles. Indeed, it seems to go without saying today that female and nonbinary individuals should not be treated any differently in text from their traditionally dominant male counterparts.

The principle that “copy should not assume maleness” in the 2011 entry, however, is shown to be contradicted in the prescribed treatment of some of the studied word families. Their example of that principle replaces the male-specific “newsmen” with
“reporters,” but AP’s 2011 entries for terms like “spokesman, spokeswoman” while being inclusive of individual women and offering “representative” for sex-unknown individuals still implies a masculine generic application for groups or general references.

**“-Persons” in the AP Stylebook**

One of the strategies used to make traditionally gender-specific terms into true neutrals is to replace the -man or -woman ending with -person. AP’s position on this construction has changed over the years to reflect, as with the woman entries, a more nuanced understanding and consciousness of gender dynamics in writing and in life. In the 2011 edition, the entry “-persons” reads as follows:

Do not use coined words such as chairperson or spokesperson in regular text. Instead, use chairman or spokesman if referring to a man or the office in general. Use chairwoman or spokeswoman if referring to a woman. Or, if applicable, use a neutral word such as leader or representative. Use chairperson or similar coinage only in direct quotations or when it is the formal description for an office.

The entry for “-persons” in 2013 is the same as in 2011. In 2017, “-person” is “acceptable for the formal name of a post or person, or if preferred by an individual: chairperson or spokesperson.” The entry for “-person” in 2019 is the same as in 2017. In 2022, a specific “-person” entry has been replaced with a comprehensive “gender-neutral language” entry, which in part states the following:

In general, use terms such as chair or chairperson, councilperson or council member, and spokesperson unless the -man or -woman terms are specified by an organization. . . .

While some -person constructions, such as chairperson and spokesperson, are commonly
used, avoid tortured or unfamiliar constructions such as *snowperson*, *baseperson* or *freshperson*. Similarly, don’t use *siblinghood* in place of *brotherhood* or *sisterhood*.

Here a clear pattern emerges: 2011 and 2013 entries prescribe *-man* generically and *-woman* in appropriate individual situations; accordingly, they proscribe “coined” neutral *-person* forms. (Confusingly, AP says to use *-man* word forms to reference “the office in general” but follows later with “if applicable, use a neutral word such as *leader* or *representative*” without specifying what they consider an “applicable” situation that would take precedence over the general *-man* forms.)

Entries in 2017 and 2019 show a softening of this stance, where *-person* forms are listed as “acceptable” but scarcely listed in other entries as preferred over *-man* and *-woman* forms.

The entry in 2022 presents the full transition to a reversal of the 2011 guidance, now prescribing *-person* and other gender-neutral forms in all situations with an implied proscription on gender-specific terms “unless . . . specified by an organization.” This evolution from being against to being ambivalent to being in favor of *-person* and other neutralized forms reflects a full ideological shift, where it is not only important to give women visibility by doing away with masculine generic forms but imperative to represent all people and even deemphasize subjects’ gender in many cases, even if it is known. In the word families discussed here, a person’s gender is often not important in the context of news writing so much as their position, so the elimination of any gender reference avoids activating any gender biases and functions as a truly neutrally.

In looking at the relationship between the stylebook and actual usage, it is also significant to note that the 2022 entry, which is a significant change from 2011’s explicit
proscription of “chairperson” and “spokesperson,” prescribes these same example terms while stating that they “are commonly used.” This is evidence of the stylebook changing its entries to adapt to general educated usage.

**Understanding NOW Corpus Results**

In approaching the AP and NOW results for the selected word families, it is important to view the frequency charts presented from NOW results in the context of the fluctuating amount of words included in each year’s mini-corpus within NOW. The numbers for each year’s total as shown in Figure 2 were generated from my adding together each month’s word count as listed on NOW’s host website. One obvious area to be aware of is the difference in word volume between 2015 and 2016 in each word family’s results, as the total sources and words included in the corpus from 2016 onward is significantly larger than the amount of words available each year from 2010 through 2015. As such, any significantly higher frequency from 2015 to 2016 in each variant’s should not be interpreted as necessarily as an increase in the use of that word so much as an increase in the total words evaluated to calculate the frequency of occurrences per million words.

Another detail of note is that 2020, though not the most recent year included, has the largest amount of total words, which is not surprising given the extraordinary volume of newsworthy events throughout that year. As a last note to bear on interpretation of the data, the corpus currently scrapes its news sources from Bing News, but until July 2019, the source was Google News, meaning that there may be some variation in the sources included in the corpus between years.

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Business-Based Title Variants

Words included in this set are as follows: *businessman; businesswoman; businessperson; businessowner.*

AP Results

*Business*-based titles and variants are not mentioned by AP until 2022, by which point the gender-neutral terms of *businessperson* and *business owner* are endorsed while the gender-exclusive forms of *businessman* and *businesswoman* are proscribed: “*business owner, businessperson.* Not *businessman/businesswoman.*” Based on the general principles outlined in the “-person(s)” entries throughout the other editions, however, the implied way to approach this scenario in AP style would be to use the male-specific *businessman* “if referring to a man or the [position] in general” in 2011 and 2013. In 2017 and 2019, the stylebook gives its implicit permission to *businessperson* as an “acceptable” construction for either the “post or person” even if not specified as a preferred form by an individual.
NOW Results

As noted in Figure 3, the traditionally prescribed male-exclusive form of *businessman* held dominance over other variants for much of this time frame. However, the main contender, the neutral form of *business owner*, made steady gains in each year from 2015 onward until its frequency jumped as *businessman*’s dropped in 2020, and *business owner* became the most common form of this title continuing through 2021 in a clear trade-off. Regarding the less-popular variants, *businesswoman* and *businessperson* frequency counts each increased with the influx of news content in each year but were never significant enough to see a rise in prevalence.

**Figure 3.** Frequency per Million of *Business*-Based Title Variants in NOW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BUSINESSMAN</th>
<th>BUSINESSWOMAN</th>
<th>BUSINESSPERSON</th>
<th>BUSINESS OWNER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
<td>142.21</td>
<td>10.42</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>55.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2011</strong></td>
<td>179.26</td>
<td>12.41</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>68.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2012</strong></td>
<td>212.56</td>
<td>14.09</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>85.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2013</strong></td>
<td>224.22</td>
<td>19.49</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>83.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2014</strong></td>
<td>217.62</td>
<td>21.04</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>90.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2015</strong></td>
<td>261.19</td>
<td>22.07</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>102.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2016</strong></td>
<td>1,029.23</td>
<td>64.95</td>
<td>9.79</td>
<td>283.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2017</strong></td>
<td>1,044.83</td>
<td>78.52</td>
<td>12.52</td>
<td>401.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Businessperson</td>
<td>Chairwoman</td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>Business Owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>949.57</td>
<td>76.01</td>
<td>18.96</td>
<td>330.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>1,062.95</td>
<td>85.84</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>469.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>884.7</td>
<td>92.75</td>
<td>18.52</td>
<td>1,008.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>552.59</td>
<td>67.62</td>
<td>14.14</td>
<td>636.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**AP vs. NOW Discussion**

Given the lack of specific information on *business*-based titles in the AP editions published in the time period measured in NOW, specific correlations between prescriptions on and usage of this word family are trickier to distinguish. However, some relationships can be discerned based on the general principles elucidated by AP in 2011–19 entries. The low representation of *businessperson* aligns with 2011 and 2013 prescriptions against *-person* forms. But by the time AP started allowing for more gender-neutral language in the 2017 edition, rather than spiking as a preferred term, it remained stagnant. At this same time, however, a different (and perhaps less awkward) two-word neutral variant in the form of *business owner* started to make gains, eventually leading to its standing as the most frequently used variant per million. In this vein, it is also notable that *business owner* entered alongside *businessperson* as the allowable terms in the current 2022 online version of AP.

**Chair-Based Title Variants**

Words included in this set are as follows: *chairman; chairwoman; chairperson*. As a disclaimer on this word family, although a common and eventually AP-endorsed neutralization of *chairman* is *chair*, this term was not included in my NOW searches due to the wide range of semantic functions of *chair* and difficulty in distinguishing the titular uses from other noun forms within the corpus bounds.
AP Results

This word family has specific entries throughout the AP corpus created for this research. The 2011 and 2013 entries are identical; under the heading “chairman, chairwoman,” they state the following: “Do not use chairperson, chair or co-chair unless it is an organization’s formal title for an office.” The 2017 and 2019 entries use the same “chairman, chairwoman” heading but follow with new details: “Use chairperson or co-chair if preferred by an organization.” The 2022 online update includes this term under the entry of “gender-neutral language”: “In general, use terms such as chair or chairperson . . . unless the -man or -woman terms are specified by an organization.”

NOW Results

When considering chairman, chairwoman, and chairperson in NOW (see Figure 4), chairman is the clearly dominant form, showing up significantly more frequently than the other two options’ frequencies per million combined, even as its percentage dips mildly with subtle gains by chairperson in the latter two years surveyed. The neutral chairperson variant, like in the trends for businessperson, never seems to have caught on as a neutral option but still remains slightly more prevalent than the feminized chairwoman variant. It is, however, not unlikely that, as also in the business-based example, an alternate neutral is being increasingly used in news writing, namely the unmeasured chair in this instance.
Figure 4. Frequency per Million of Chair-Based Title Variants in NOW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CHAIRMAN</th>
<th>CHAIRWOMAN</th>
<th>CHAIRPERSON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>558.32</td>
<td>15.51</td>
<td>29.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>669.07</td>
<td>17.82</td>
<td>49.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>817.87</td>
<td>22.69</td>
<td>68.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>939.2</td>
<td>26.31</td>
<td>90.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>985.65</td>
<td>29.82</td>
<td>94.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>1,198.65</td>
<td>37.69</td>
<td>139.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>5,576.35</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>614.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>6,796.80</td>
<td>121.4</td>
<td>803.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>6,363.54</td>
<td>100.2</td>
<td>783.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>6,863.24</td>
<td>128.77</td>
<td>788.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>5,894.84</td>
<td>184.26</td>
<td>629.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>3,780.59</td>
<td>126.29</td>
<td>441.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

AP vs. NOW Discussion

The AP entries for chair-based title variants reflect the previously seen patterns of a gradual evolution from prescribing gender-specific terms to allowing some neutral forms to recommending neutral forms. Despite this pattern in AP guidance, however, the NOW results do not reflect as dramatic a shift in gender-neutral usage for chair-based variants. This, again, could be due to the omission in my search results for the neutral chair title.
Another consideration in interpreting the dominance of *chairman* in this case is the combination of male-dominated demographics in business and leadership fields and the deep roots of the masculine generic; even as masculine generic trends wane, the high prevalence of *-man* variants then likely comes from specific references to individual men and possibly also a lingering assumption or habit of referring to “chairmen.”

**Congress-Based Title Variants**

Words included in this set are as follows: *congressman; congresswoman; congressperson; member of congress.*

**AP Results**

The rulings for the family of *congress*-based title variants is one of the more stable ones in the stylebooks. The entries in 2011, 2013, 2017, and 2019 merely list *congressman, congresswoman* as the entry name, with any additional text explaining political rather than lexical matters. Not until the 2022 version do these terms receive elaboration: “The terms *U.S. representative, representative, member of Congress* are preferred. *Congressman* and *congresswoman* are acceptable because of their common use. Do not use *congressperson.*”

**NOW Results**

Like in the *business*-based word family, there is a noticeable tradeoff where the once-dominant masculine form, here *congressman*, dips in prominence in the latter two years of this search (see Figure 5). It is just barely overtaken in frequency per million by another steadily gaining multi-word neutral term, *member of congress*. Also mirroring the previous word families’ trends, the relative frequency of *congresswoman* sees increases
over the years but is always behind congress member. The -person variant seems very
erseldom used, barely even registering more than a few counts per million words at its peak
in 2021.

**Figure 5.** Frequency per Million of Congress-Based Title Variants in NOW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CONGRESSMAN</th>
<th>CONGRESSWOMAN</th>
<th>CONGRESSPERSON</th>
<th>MEMBER OF CONGRESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>41.89</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>22.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>46.95</td>
<td>15.64</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>34.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>54.19</td>
<td>6.64</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>22.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>33.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>47.95</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>29.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>60.34</td>
<td>8.18</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>31.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>213.85</td>
<td>28.73</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>67.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>304.87</td>
<td>46.33</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>133.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>244.17</td>
<td>44.95</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>95.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>387.17</td>
<td>119.49</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>169.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>431.69</td>
<td>125.19</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>279.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>371.54</td>
<td>153.88</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>381.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AP vs. NOW Discussion

Given the steady rise of *member of congress* through the decade surveyed, AP did not seem to take common usage into account in the 2011–19 guides. One possible accounting for the stricter hold on the gender-specific *congressman* and *congresswoman* could be due to the legal nature and common context of the words, with legal wording tending to be more careful and precise than other registers of language. It could also be due to the common use of *congresswoman* and *-man* as official, capitalized titles in front of individuals’ names. This can be seen in the 2022 entry’s statement that even with the formal endorsement of a bevy of neutral alternatives, AP still lists *congressman* and *congresswoman* as “acceptable because of their common use.” This is similar logic as was used in the 2022 statement about *chairperson* and *spokesperson* being accepted due to common use but in the opposite direction—where those examples were changed in favor of common usage of neutral forms, this instance with *congresswoman* and *-man* is unchanged due to common usage of the gender-specific terms.

Council-Based Title Variants

Words included in this set are as follows: *councilman; councilwoman; councilperson; council member; councilor.*

AP Results

For the word family with the greatest number of variants eventually evaluated in this research, the 2011, 2013, 2017, and 2019 merely list *councilor, councilman,* and *councilwoman* as accepted usage in the entry name. Any additional text explains definitional rather than lexical matters. In 2022, the online edition addresses this word
family under its new “gender-neutral language” entry: “In general, use terms such as councilperson or council member . . . unless the -man or -woman terms are specified by an organization. Councilmember is acceptable in jurisdictions that have adopted the one-word version.”

NOW Results

The council-based titles in this word family include two gender-specific and three neutral variants to be surveyed in NOW. The results for this grouping, shown in Figure 6, are also unique from the others with the most frequent variant being not the -man form but council member—and the next closest (though by varying margins) for every year but one is councilor, another neutral term (in 2020, councilman’s frequency edged out councilor’s by a small margin). The councilman variant is steady as the next most-frequent variant, but its prevalence dips over time as councilwoman, the next closest (if not close) variant, gains more usage, seemingly at the cost of councilman. Councilperson is largely neglected (its lowest frequency is .05 occurrences for every million words and highest 1.47 occurrences, compared with the next closest councilwoman’s range from 2.13 to 78.81 per million) and makes a negligible showing.
**Figure 6.** Frequency per Million of *Council*-Based Title Variants in NOW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>COUNCILMAN</th>
<th>COUNCIL-WOMAN</th>
<th>COUNCIL-PERSON</th>
<th>COUNCIL MEMBER</th>
<th>COUNCILOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>13.64</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>23.45</td>
<td>9.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>13.03</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>26.11</td>
<td>15.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>11.65</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>28.72</td>
<td>21.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>30.03</td>
<td>26.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>22.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>16.82</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>48.33</td>
<td>40.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>44.80</td>
<td>12.18</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>176.28</td>
<td>155.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>70.61</td>
<td>22.14</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>234.78</td>
<td>175.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>51.29</td>
<td>18.77</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>200.83</td>
<td>149.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>115.09</td>
<td>47.42</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>319.72</td>
<td>185.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>178.33</td>
<td>78.81</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>458.73</td>
<td>166.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>114.33</td>
<td>43.09</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>289.98</td>
<td>155.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**AP vs. NOW Discussion**

Although AP only endorses the terms *councilor, councilman, and councilwoman* through the entirety of the timeframe searched in NOW, it is the unmentioned *council member* that steadily increase its dominance over the other variants year by year. Added by the 2022 online edition, this new guidance seems to be following the lead of popular
educated usage. However, such a reasoning cannot be made for the other neutral term endorsed by AP in 2022—*councilperson* remains dismally underused on its own and is especially unpopular when compared to all the other variants. This seems to perpetuate the pattern found in previous word families that when other neutral options are presented, -*person* variants are the less popular option.

**Spokes-Based Title Variants**

Words included in this set are as follows: *spokesman; spokeswoman; spokesperson.*

**AP Results**

The entry titles for 2011 and the identical 2013 edition list *spokesman* and *spokeswoman* as accepted forms, “but not *spokesperson*. Use a representative if you do not know the sex of the individual.” 2017 and 2019 see the addition of *spokesperson* listed as an accepted terms alongside the original *spokesman* and *spokesperson* in the entry header, with no mention now of *representative*: "Use *spokesperson* if it is the preference of an individual or organization.” By the 2022 entry for “gender-neutral language,” the guidance becomes explicitly in favor of neutral variants: “In general, use terms such as *spokesperson* . . . unless the -*man* or -*woman* terms are specified by an organization.”

**NOW Results**

The results of this search, as detailed in Figure 7, offer a telling picture with a clear pattern similar to the tradeoff observed in the *business*- and *congress*-based title variants though with key differences in the variant types themselves. While *spokesman* remains solidly as the most frequent variant through 2017, the initially lower-frequented neutral
spokesperson makes steady gains in frequency from 2016 on and nearly matches the levels of spokesman in 2018. As early as 2019, this neutral variant has overtaken spokesman and continues to climb as the masculine variant decreases in prominence. The last variant, spokeswoman, never challenges the other two variants’ comparative dominance but does see increased usage as years go by until 2021, when spokesperson takes some of spokeswoman’s stake.

Figure 7. Frequency per Million of Spokes-Based Title Variants in NOW

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Spokesman</th>
<th>Spokeswoman</th>
<th>Spokesperson</th>
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<tr>
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<td>455.93</td>
<td>153.85</td>
<td>155.85</td>
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<td>2,641.15</td>
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<td>879.33</td>
<td>2,490.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>801.12</td>
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<td>2,881.11</td>
<td>914.91</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1,188.51</td>
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<td>2021</td>
<td>1,735.12</td>
<td>603.54</td>
<td>2,788.07</td>
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</table>
AP vs. NOW Discussion

The initial entry for this word family in 2011 and again in 2013 is already more neutral-friendly than many others, stating to “use a representative if you do not know the sex of the individual” rather than implying a default to the male-specific form. But this addressing of unknown gender is only one aspect of the masculine generic; it does not address what form to use if the word is used for mixed-gender groups, for the general term, or for nonbinary individuals. Similarly in 2017, although the neutral is listed with the other forms, it is implied that spokesperson should be confined to situations when “it is the preference of an individual or organization,” as opposed to general or neutral use. Despite the slow uptake on spokesperson in the stylebooks, however, popular usage is shown to be in favor of the form well before AP formally endorses the term. Also unique in this word family is that the dominant form is of a structure, -person, that is disfavored in terms of neutrals in the other examined word families; this is possibly because, as the only neutral option presented, the neutral “vote” of usage is not split between variants.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to begin investigating the impactful intersections of linguistic prescriptivism, gender-specific language, and the medium of online news media to gain insight into how these different forces have evolved over the past decade in relation to each other. With a focus on five traditionally gender-specific titles, a comparative look at the changing guidelines of the Associated Press Stylebook and the usage of different variants on such titles (as documented by the NOW corpus) has illuminated patterns of progressive change on both fronts.
Trends and Relationships in AP and NOW

The overall trend in the AP guidelines when it comes to gender-specific titles—namely business-, chair-, congress-, council-, and spokes-based variants—in published stylebooks in 2011, 2013, 2017, 2019, and 2022 illustrates a clear progression toward inclusive and neutral language (see Figure 8 for the text of all consulted entries). The relevant entries in 2011 and 2013 were identical and prescribed an overarching guideline to use -man and -woman forms while proscribing -person and other neutral forms. There is then a shift in the 2017 entries, with a more gender-conscious and inclusive approach hinted at in the beginning of the stylebook as the “What’s New” section mentions updated entries for gender identity and sexuality as well as the landmark move to endorse the singular they. In this edition, the previously sanctioned gender-specific forms are still listed as the preferred forms but now include notes stating that -person and other neutral forms are “acceptable”; the entries in 2019 are identical to those in 2017. In the current version of the online stylebook in 2022, AP has completed this progressive switch to now prescribing the use of -person and other neutral forms and proscribing the gender-specific -man and -woman forms in most cases. This new principle is exemplified by their consolidating of the previously individual entries for each title under a single and comprehensive entry for “gender-neutral language.”

As illustrated in the search results from the NOW corpus, actual usage in online written news sources has also progressed steadily to more neutral and inclusive title variants through the years. While the results of the majority of word families surveyed indicate almost exclusive use of -man forms the early years of the time bounds, most end in the latter years of the timeframe with a neutral variant as the most frequently cited per
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Entries on -person</th>
<th>Business-Based Title Variants</th>
<th>Chair-Based Title Variants</th>
<th>Congress-Based Title Variants</th>
<th>Council-Based Title Variants</th>
<th>Spokes-Based Title Variants</th>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>persons. Do not use coined words such as chairperson or spokesperson in regular text. Instead, use chairman or spokeswoman if referring to a man or the office in general. Use chairwoman or spokeswoman if referring to a woman. Or, if applicable, use a neutral word such as leader or representative. Use chairperson or similar coinage only in direct quotations or when it is the formal description for an office.</td>
<td>[No entry]</td>
<td>chairman, chairwoman. Do not use chairperson, chair or co-chair unless it is an organization’s formal title for an office.</td>
<td>congresswoman, congresswoman.</td>
<td>council, councillor, councilman, councilwoman.</td>
<td>spokesman, spokesperson. But not spokesperson. Use a representative if you do not know the sex of the individual.</td>
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<td>[No change from 2011 entry]</td>
<td>[No change from 2011 entry]</td>
<td>[No change from 2011 entry]</td>
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<td>[No change from 2011 entry]</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>-person. Acceptable for the formal name of a post or person, or preferred by an individual chairperson or spokesperson.</td>
<td>[No entry]</td>
<td>chairman, chairwoman. Use chairperson or co-chair if preferred by an organization.</td>
<td>[No change from 2011 entry]</td>
<td>[No change from 2011 entry]</td>
<td>[No change from 2011 entry]</td>
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<td>[No change from 2017 entry]</td>
<td>[No change from 2017 entry]</td>
<td>[No change from 2017 entry]</td>
<td>[No change from 2017 entry]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>gender-neutral language. In general, use terms such as chair or chairperson, councilperson or council member, and spokesperson unless the -man or -woman terms are specified by an organization. . . While some -person constructions, such as chairperson and spokesperson, are commonly used, avoid tortured or unfamiliar constructions such as snowperson, baseperson or brotherson. Similarly, don’t use sibshiphood in place of brotherhood or sisterhood.</td>
<td>gender-neutral language, business owner, businessperson. Not businesswoman/businesswoman.</td>
<td>gender-neutral language. In general, use terms such as chair or chairperson, chair or co-chair unless the -man or -woman terms are specified by an organization.</td>
<td>gender-neutral language. The terms U.S. representative, representative, member of Congress are preferred. Congressman and congresswoman are acceptable because of their common use. Do not use congressperson.</td>
<td>gender-neutral language. In general, use terms such as councilperson or council member, and spokesperson unless the -man or -woman terms are specified by an organization. Congressperson is acceptable in jurisdictions that have adopted the one-word version.</td>
<td>[No change from 2017 entry]</td>
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million words. For specific neutral variants, the *-person* forms were not nearly as frequently used in a word family when other neutral word forms (e.g., *council member* or *business owner*) were options. While *-person* variants did generally increase in usage over time, the alternate neutral title variants were the ones that increased in usage more rapidly and eventually overtook the *-man* forms. Though the *-woman* variant for each word family saw an increasing yearly frequency, in no case was this form dominant.

Taken together, a comparison of the trends in prescriptions in AP and usage as documented by NOW shows that both language authorities and language users are trending toward gender-neutral titles, though perhaps at different rates. Based on the consulted editions, AP did not fully support neutral variants as preferred forms until after 2019, after the timeframe searched in NOW. Despite not having the official sanction, however, usage of neutral forms surges in the mid-2010s. Even though not the preferred forms in AP in 2017 and 2019, it could be that even a mild statement on the acceptability of the neutral forms was enough for more writers and editors to begin using them in place of *-man* forms.

In discerning the relationship between prescriptive guidelines and actual usage, this study is not broad enough to make any definitive claims on leader-follower dynamics either way, but it does appear that writers and editors have adhered to AP increasingly less when it comes to inclusive and gender-neutral terms, rather opting to follow their own judgment based on principles. AP, on the other hand, appears to see and respond to changing adherences and cultural values after shifts take place in the culture as evidenced through written online news media.
One detail from this pattern that would suggest that writers and editors follow the principles more than the exact mandates of AP is in the types of neutrals shown to be in use. In word families where there are multiple neutral options, usually a *-person* form (declared acceptable in 2017) and an open compound form (e.g., *business owner*), the AP-accepted *-person* forms faltered while other neutral variants experienced dramatic gains. When there are many options in common use, as with *congress*-based title variants, it is also sometimes hard for one to take prominence as inclusivity-conscious writers and editors chose different variants, effectively splitting the neutral “vote.” This could make neutral terms appear less used than they are when looked at individually rather than collectively.

**Limitations of Study and Other Considerations**

While the scope of my study was narrow and the resources used to collect my data were not exhaustive, it can still offer a representative view of overall prescriptivist and linguistic trends happening in published writing. Given the volume of information used by NOW, it is likely that the exact counts of frequency per million could have turned up irrelevant contexts or applications of titles as well as missed others. In this vein, one consideration in looking the trends of gender-specific titles is that not all instances of gendered titles are used in a generic way, and so it is not realistic to expect to see all *-man* forms disappear. For example, even as neutral options take hold, references to individuals would still have likely used the appropriate *-man* or *-woman* variant, and so the male-dominated fields of business, government, and so forth would still show signs of higher usage for *-man* variants. Likewise, an increase over time of *-woman* variants could just as likely represent the increasing number of women in traditionally male-dominated fields.
and hence references to specific women just as likely as it could represent a general dying out of masculine generic forms.

Significance and Implications for Editing and Publishing

On an ideological level, this research has exposed the nuances and complexities in the relationship between those who create prescriptive guidelines and the writers and editors who are asked to apply them. Every evidence that proves how usage guides do not have complete authority, that language mandates that once went unquestioned are not usually so settled as to be past questioning, is something editors should bear in mind. While prescriptive guides can be a good place to start to learn the basics, students in communication and publishing fields should realize that they are not in a completely deferential position to one or another language authority. As Owen stated, “Editors . . . do not see themselves as creators of hyperstandard rules whose enforcement ensures their own job security; they simply see themselves as correctors of errors, making texts clear, correct and consistent.”77 This study illustrates patterns of deviating from stated AP guidelines in the name of inclusivity, with writers and editors doing what they must to make texts culturally “clear, correct and consistent,” even if that means using progressive language not currently sanctioned by relevant language authorities. Knowledge of this two-way relationship should empower editors and writers to feel comfortable enough with general principles and guidelines to consciously bend specific rules when it comes to meaningful language choices, as with gender.

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77 Owen, “Practicing Prescriptivism,” 293.
When it comes to consumers of news and English users in general, the trends identified in this study bode well for encouraging the inclusion of individuals regardless of their gender and disassociating titles with gender biases and stereotypes. As this trend continues in both authoritative and actual channels, the power of the media could help turn English users’ mental defaults away from the masculine in more areas than just titles, including in overall language usage and from there attitudes and cognitive patterns. This wide-ranging effect is backed by a study testing the efficacy of language planning regarding the nonsexist guidelines in the Washington Post’s style manual, where researchers found that specific guidance for nonsexist language in one area led writers and editors to use nonsexist language forms in areas not explicitly stated. With this trickle-down effect, even seemingly small details like using neutral forms in titles regardless of the context can lead those creating and editing content to incorporate principles of neutrality and inclusiveness in many other areas.

While this study is not definitive, it does not refute the patterns identified in other studies that usage authorities’ prescriptions follow actual usage trends more than the other way around. This small slice of research supports also Auer and González-Díaz’s evaluation of comparative corpus studies that, “on a theoretical level, they challenge the overall importance that prescriptivism has been traditionally granted as a key factor in language change.” However, the authorities’ sanctions are not to be discounted, as the trends seen here suggest that endorsements of new popular forms made by respected

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stylebooks can help tip the scale in neutrality’s favor for those writers and editors who are stricter in adhering to official guidance. With knowledge of the flexible nature of authoritative usage guides and strong precedents for letting cultural trends influence language change, those involved in writing, editing, and publishing can make more consciously inclusive choices in their published language in ways that positively affect consumers of news and other written media.
Selected Bibliography


https://blog.ap.org/announcements/the-decision-to-capitalize-black.


Mackiewicz, Jo. “Which Rules for Online Writing Are Worth Following?: A Study of Eight Rules in Eleven Handbooks.” *IEEE Transactions on Professional


Appendix

The default NOW charts separated into yearly sections help compare the frequency of usage of one word over different years, but it is not conducive to comparative analyses of multiple terms as they are on different scales depending on the highest frequency of each word. For example, while the bars for BUSINESSMAN in 2019 and BUSINESSPERSON in 2019 appear the same size, the former example actually represents 1,062.95 per mil while the latter is a significantly lesser 24.60. As such, for my analysis I generated clustered bar charts for different variants in each title family to illustrate both how individual terms change in frequency over time as well as accurately scaled comparisons between different variants in the same year. This appendix presents the raw chart results from the NOW interface.
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[Graph showing data progression]