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Gender-neutral pronoun usage: how and why singular *they* is used

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Abstract

This study focused on the usage of pronoun *they* in third-person singular context. The aim was to answer the question of how singular *they* is used by native speakers of English in different contexts, and what the reasoning behind pronoun choice might be. This thesis attempted to elaborate and improve on methods used in previous research by means of collecting qualitative and quantitative data on singular *they* usage. Participants took part in an online questionnaire containing a description task and gap-fill task. This gap-fill task contained sentences with genderless antecedents that were either specific or non-specific, and some of which were expected to evoke social gender associations. Additionally, this questionnaire contained an evaluation section used to study the motivation behind participants' pronoun choices made in the earlier task. The results indicate that singular *they* is the ultimate pronoun choice when referring to genderless antecedents for most participants, regardless of age or gender, in both free-response and forced-choice situations. Especially in the case of non-specific antecedents, singular *they* is used extensively. The results also venture to suggest a link between ongoing social changes and an explicit awareness that leads participants to use singular *they* as a gender-neutral singular pronoun. This study signifies the pertinent position of gender-neutral language usage among native speakers of English.

Keywords: singular *they*; pronoun usage; English; gender-neutral language; genderless antecedents; social change; motivation; awareness.

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1. Introduction

In the English language, there is no official third-person singular personal pronoun that is unmarked for gender. In other words, there is no epicene (i.e., gender-neutral) third-person singular pronoun. Prescriptivist grammar guides from previous centuries suggest that if the gender of a singular antecedent (i.e., a word which a pronoun refers back to) is unknown, the correct pronoun to use is generic *he*, even when this antecedent can be of any gender (Bodine, 1975; Gernsbacher, 1997). *He* can then be used “to refer to an animate being of unknown biological sex” (Paterson, 2014, p. 2). However, people do not always just follow guidelines that are promoted by grammar books. The traditionally plural pronoun *they* has also been used as a generic singular pronoun, despite a disagreement in number. This is how the two generic pronouns work:

- (1) A *musician* should take care of *his* instrument if *he* intends to play professionally.
- (2) A *musician* should take care of *their* instrument if *they* intend to play professionally.

(Paterson, 2014, p. 4)

It is important to keep in mind that when talking about and reporting the usage of pronouns such as *they* or *he*, this thesis only uses nominative case, for the sake of clarity. However, other grammatical forms such as reflexives (e.g., *himself*) and accusative case (e.g., *them*) are also taken into consideration. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that usage of singular *they* is generally divided into three distinct contexts. Firstly, there is the context of indefinite pronouns (i.e., words such as *everyone*). An example of such context can be seen in (3) where it is unclear who this *someone* is. Another context in which singular *they* is sometimes used is with non-specific antecedents, demonstrated earlier in (2). This antecedent

refers to an undefined hypothetical person. In this context, pronouns sometimes even refer to an entire class through a singular antecedent. Finally, singular *they* is used with specific antecedents, as is the case in (4). In this context, the antecedent is a clear-cut individual.

(3) *Someone* asked you to sign this form for ____.

(4) *The child* should listen to ____ teacher.

(Paterson, 2014, p. 1)

This thesis presents an overview of previous research on singular *they*. It is demonstrated that singular *they* has been increasingly used since Middle English (Balhorn, 2004). Despite this, native speakers have not always readily accepted singular *they* (Bate, 1978; Hairston, 1981). Research on singular *they* usage in naturalistic discourse has indicated that usage is especially common for indefinite pronouns and non-specific contexts, and that guidelines on non-sexist language seem to have had an impact on singular *they* usage in public speech (Holmes; 1998, Pauwels, 2001). It has also been indicated that singular *they* in written English is mostly used for indefinite pronouns and non-specific contexts, although not exclusively. It was further demonstrated that there is variability between British and American English as to how frequently singular *they* is used, and that men and women also differ in pronoun usage (Baranowski, 2002; Meyers, 1990; Strahan, 2008). Finally, more recent experimental studies have found that generally singular *they* is used in elicited responses, though people may not always report on using it, and that men and women behave differently concerning pronoun usage (LaScotte, 2016; Pauwels & Winter, 2006). Moreover, it has been suggested that singular *they* is truly interpreted as gender-neutral, although it is rated as less grammatical in specific contexts than in non-specific contexts (Bradley, Salkind, Moore & Teitsort, 2019; Bradley, Schmid & Lombardo, 2019).

Following the literature review, this thesis reports on an empirical project wherein

participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to answer the following research questions:

To what extent do native speakers of English use singular they when referring to genderless singular antecedents in elicited natural response and in forced choice?

What may be the reasoning behind pronoun choice?

Native speakers of English were asked to fill in a questionnaire that consisted of three different tasks. The first task was a description task in which participants were asked to write a response to a prompt. The second task was a gap-fill task where participants chose a pronoun from several options to refer to an antecedent in a particular situation. The third task was an evaluation task directly related to the answers provided by participants in the second task. Here, participants were asked to attempt explaining why they chose a particular pronoun. The methodology was designed to replicate previous studies (LaScotte, 2016; Pauwels & Winter, 2006) but in a way that was expected to yield more reliable results, i.e., by means of using gap-fill sentences with verbs that were unmarked for number, using participants of a more general population of English speakers, and reflection on pronoun choices after actual pronoun use. By adding a part that collected qualitative data, this study not only considered usage of singular *they*, but also attempted to find an explanation for its extensive use in the metalinguistic awareness of participants on their lexical behaviour, and whether or not social change may have an influence.

Based on previous findings, participants were expected to use singular *they* more frequently than other pronoun strategies in both free written response and gap-fill sentences (Baranowski, 2002; LaScotte, 2016; Pauwels & Winter, 2006). As both LaScotte (2016) and Meyers (1990) have found differences in pronoun use in writing between men and women, it was predicted that there would be a difference between *they* usage of men and women in the

description task. Pauwels and Winter (2006) have also found that, in their gap-fill task, female teachers use generic singular *they* more often than male teachers do, and thus a difference between men and women was predicted for the second task of this study as well. Although other studies have not found significant differences in pronoun usage between participants from different age groups (LaScotte, 2016), it has been suggested that younger language users may be more progressive in their use of singular *they*, perhaps even in contexts of specific antecedents (Bradley, Salkind et al., 2019). Therefore, it was expected that younger participants make more use of singular *they* than older participants. For responses of the gap-fill task, there was also expected to be a difference between *they* usage for specific antecedents and non-specific antecedents. Non-specific antecedents were expected to evoke more singular *they* usage, because it has been found that sentences with singular *they* for non-specific antecedents are judged to be more grammatical than with specific antecedents (Bradley, Schmid, & Lombardo, 2019). Finally, the antecedents that were expected to evoke social gender associations were predicted to induce less singular *they* usage than neutral antecedents (Pauwels, 2001). For the final part of the questionnaire, the evaluation task, it was less clear-cut what was to be expected. During interviews conducted by Bate (1978) most participants had indicated that they were not comfortable using singular *they*. On the other hand, data from interviews conducted by Pauwels and Winter (2006) has hinted at awareness among teachers on gender-inclusive and non-sexist language usage. However, Pauwels and Winter (2006) have not established any patterns in or general explanations for this data. As the qualitative data of the current study is more controlled, it was expected to provide insight into different reasons and the underlying motivation behind the linguistic behaviour of the participants, concerning their pronoun choice.

The results indicate that the participants in this study favour singular *they* over other pronoun strategies. In both the description task and the gap-fill task, singular *they* was chosen

significantly more often than other pronoun strategies such as *he or she* or generic *he*. As was predicted, contexts with non-specific antecedents evoked more *they* usage than contexts with specific antecedents. However, the results did not demonstrate any significant differences between the usage of older and younger participants, and between men and women. The type of noun used, either expected to evoke social gender associations or not, also seemed to have no influence on singular *they* usage. The motivations that participants gave for their pronoun choices, implied that most participants find it important to use gender-neutral language, which may be in line with ongoing socio-cultural changes.

2. Background

2.1 Historic use

Over the past centuries, there has been a shift in the frequency of use of singular *they*. The pronoun strategy has a long history and its usage has increased considerably. Balhorn (2004) studied corpora and historic texts from the past centuries and found that *they* has been used as a generic pronoun, alongside generic *he*, since the Middle English period. He created an overview of this usage and found an increased use of generic *they*, mainly with *every*-compounds. Whereas in the 17th century, 77% of the *every*-compounds occurred with *he*, and 23% with *they*, in the 18th century, this had already shifted to 38% with *they*, and in the 19th century to 29% with *they*. Finally, in the 20th century, 45% of all *every*-compounds occurred with *they*.

Balhorn (2004) suggests that speakers use *they* with indefinite pronouns, because, even though indefinite pronouns are formally singular, they are intended as a plural. The pronoun *they* can prevent a conflict of gender features that generic *he* causes. When generic *he* is used, the gender feature becomes salient, whereas by using *they* this feature remains unmarked. The findings imply that speakers might accept a number conflict as this does not influence the interpretation of an antecedent's gender, whereas gender marking does. The study further speculates that grammatical gender marking has lost its prominence in the English language over the past centuries and that semantic gender has become more important. It also suggests that the reason why generic *he* used to be more common may have to do with men being the prime focus of discourse throughout history, and that usage of generic *they* might be related to women having become more prominent in society over the past centuries (Balhorn, 2004).

This study has predominantly focused on the context of indefinite pronouns. It lacks focus on non-specific and specific contexts. Nevertheless, it has become clear that usage of

singular *they* already occurred in the distant past, and that changes in the dynamic between men and women may also play a role. However, while singular *they* overcomes the problem of specifying gender when this is unintended, it has not always been readily accepted by speakers of English.

2.2 Language evaluation

Other studies have considered how language users perceive singular *they*. These studies focus on how comfortable speakers of English feel about using singular *they* compared to other 'grammatical errors' as well as in relation to non-sexist language. Hairston (1981) conducted a study in which non-academic but educated professionals responded to conventions of grammar. She investigated what grammatical errors bother people the most.

Hairston (1981) indicates that there was no unified acceptance of singular *they*, and that a third of the participants were bothered a lot, a third were bothered a little and a third not at all. But the study concludes that in most situations (and as long as there is no grammatical number disagreement between the pronoun and the verb phrase) people do not consider the use of singular *they* as terribly problematic. It is therefore important for this present study to take into consideration the effect that obvious number disagreement can have.

Using a more qualitative approach, Bate (1978) interviewed people on non-sexist language and experiences with social changes with regards to feminism. She also asked participants what they thought of several pronoun strategies that could refer to singular genderless antecedent *a person*. Pronoun strategy *he or she* received most positive responses, whereas singular *they* received mostly negative responses. Among seven participants who were most concerned with feminism, only one responded positively to using singular *they*. Strikingly, it was also the case that six of the 11 people who indicated that they were not comfortable using singular *they* to refer to *a person*, did use singular *they* during their interviews.

In general, the study concludes that if people are educated about women's movements and non-sexist language, "speakers can make conscious changes in their language habits" (Bate, 1978, p. 148). With regards to singular *they*, the study suggests that people were not accepting singular *they* even though it offers a natural way of preventing gender marking in speech (Bate, 1978). Both Hairston (1981) and Bate (1978) indicate that people were not readily embracing use of singular *they*. However, these studies are rather dated, and a lot has changed since. Gender equality and inclusiveness have become more important, and indeed seem to affect linguistic habits. Usage of singular *they* has increased, as the sections below demonstrate. Thus, it would be useful to investigate whether people's views have changed in the recent past. That is why this thesis also focuses on the evaluation of present-day singular *they* usage.

2.3 Frequency and naturalistic discourse

Various studies have been exploring the frequency of singular *they* usage in naturalistic discourse by means of considering singular *they* usage in both speech and writing. These studies have indicated that singular *they* has become more prominent than generic *he* in different varieties of both spoken and written English. Holmes (1998) looked at pronoun usage in a corpus on spoken New Zealand English. She mainly focussed on indefinite pronouns, similar to Balhorn (2004), and found that a vast majority of 80% of the indefinite pronoun antecedents occurred with singular *they*. In only 10% of the occurrences, generic *he* was used. However, register also seemed to be of influence, as formal spoken language contained less singular *they* usage than informal speech. For example, in judges' summations singular *they* had been used in only 18% of the instances, and generic *he* in 55% of the instances.

Holmes (1998) implies that in spontaneous speech, speakers of New Zealand English

prefer a strategy that does not specify gender. Even though in formal language, there is a tendency towards more conservative forms, in informal spoken language, singular *they* seems to be the most prominent choice in the New Zealand variety of English (Holmes, 1998). The study, however, only considers New Zealand spoken English and no other varieties of English. It also focuses solely on singular *they* usage in the context of indefinite pronouns.

Pauwels (2001) also looked at singular *they* usage in spoken language but focused on a different English variety and singular *they* context. She studied use of singular *they* in Australian English public, non-scripted speech. She analysed the development in usage of singular *they* in non-specific context by comparing public speech from the 1960s and late 1970s to that of the 1990s. Pauwels explained that between these periods, there was a reform during which, among others, Australian authorities in broadcasting had set out guidelines on non-sexist language use. In such guidelines, it was mostly usage of dual pronoun strategy *he or she* that was being promoted. Data was collected from various media sources such as radio and television. Data from the earlier period indicated that gender-neutral or inclusive pronouns were not regularly used for antecedents such as *person* and *citizen* in public speech. Generic *he* was used in 95% of the cases, whereas singular *they* was virtually absent. Data from the later period, on the other hand, showed that gender-neutral language usage had increased. In the 1990s, only 18% of the non-specific antecedents occurred with generic *he*, whereas singular *they* was used 75% of the time. Usage of dual pronoun strategy *he or she* also grew somewhat from 2.3% in the earlier period to 4.5% in the later period. Furthermore, the results indicated differences in pronoun use between occupational nouns (e.g., *politician* and *nurse*) which are often associated with a specific gender, and agent nouns (e.g., *child* and *person*) which evoke less gender associations. Singular *they* was found to occur with 80% of the agent nouns, whereas only with about 60% of the occupational nouns.

Investigating data from different periods demonstrates that singular *they* has become

much more prevalent in Australian English public speech. It is not the *he or she* strategy that has considerably increased, “despite its promotion through non-sexist language guidelines” (Pauwels, 2001, p. 112). Instead, the shift away from generic *he* has made room for singular *they* to become the most obvious choice when referring to a non-specific singular person.

Both Holmes (1998) and Pauwels (2001) indicate that usage of singular *they* in speech has increased for New Zealand and Australian English. However, these studies focus on just one antecedent context: either indefinite pronouns or non-specific context, respectively. Also, they solely focus on either the Australian or New Zealand variety of English. In order to find out how speakers of English in general use singular *they* it is important to consider a more various participant population as well as singular *they* usage in a specific antecedent context. These studies also do not indicate as to why singular *they* usage has increased, although Pauwels (2001) suggests that language guidelines on non-sexist language in public speech may have influenced this.

Other studies have focused on frequency singular *they* usage in naturalistic written discourse. For example, Meyers (1990) investigated the pronoun strategies used by American students when describing genderless non-specific antecedent (i.e., a hypothetical *educated person*). The results indicated that many participants were inconsistent in their pronoun choice or avoided generic *he* and singular *they* altogether. Among those who did use pronouns consistently, 34% used generic *he*, 32% singular *they*, and 22% *he or she*.

Meyers’ (1990) findings also suggest a relation between the gender of the writer and the pronoun strategy used. It appears that female students are more likely to use strategies avoiding third-person singular pronouns than male students. The male students also appear to choose generic *he* more often than female students. The study concludes that singular *they* is fairly well-established in writing of students, and that men and women differ in their use of singular *they* (Meyers, 1990). Although this study looks at rather formal texts, and only the

non-specific antecedent context in American English writing, it is still important for this thesis that there may be differences between how men and women use singular *they*.

Baranowski (2002) considered the frequency of singular *they* in different antecedent contexts. He compared British English and American English newspaper texts and considered singular *they* usage with indefinite pronoun and nouns, and definite nouns. He found that in British English texts, singular *they* occurred much more frequently than generic *he*. Furthermore, he found that the type of antecedent seemed to have an influence. With indefinite pronouns, singular *they* was used 88% of the time. For non-specific antecedents and specific antecedents this was 50% and 40%, respectively (although still higher than generic *he*). For the American English newspapers, the results were somewhat dissimilar. Generic pronouns were found to be used far less often as compared to the British data. Also, the pronoun strategy *he or she* was used twice as much. When singular *they* was used, it was mostly for indefinite pronouns and rarely for either definite or indefinite nouns.

Baranowski's (2002) findings suggest that singular *they* is used across different varieties of English, but that this exact distribution varies. It also indicates that antecedent contexts influence singular *they* usage. Specific antecedents seem to invoke less singular *they* usage than non-specific antecedents, although this can only be concluded for (British) newspaper texts. These patterns may be different in the language usage of non-professional writers. Therefore, it is relevant for this thesis to find out how a more general population of English speakers use singular *they* and other pronouns when encountering a non-specific antecedent versus a specific antecedent.

Strahan (2008) found that specific-antecedent contexts may also evoke singular *they* usage when gender is semantically unimportant. She analysed essays Australian students wrote on child language acquisition. It was found that singular *they* was used just as often as gendered pronouns (*he* or *she*) in the introduction of the essays, even though the writers were

familiar with the gender of the child they were describing. When the name of a child or a gendered noun, such as *girl*, was used, writers opted for a gendered pronoun. But when *a/the child* was used, writers used singular *they* twice as often as *he* or *she* to refer to this antecedent.

Strahan's (2008) findings suggest that even when an antecedent's gender is known, writers may not feel the need to use a gendered pronoun if the noun itself is unspecified for gender, and gender is not considered relevant. Although this study only looks at singular *they* usage in specific antecedent contexts, these findings are relevant for this thesis as it indicates that associations with the semantic gender of nouns may influence singular *they* usage.

Research into naturalistic written and spoken discourse indicates that usage of singular *they* is extensive, although not the same throughout different antecedent contexts. There also seem to be differences in pronoun usage between men and women and between different varieties of English. Finally, the semantic meaning of a noun (more specifically, the social gender associated with nouns) appears to have an influence on singular *they* usage. Nouns that evoke social gender associations are less prone to attract singular *they* than neutral nouns.

2.4 Controlled usage and language perception

Research on naturalistic data has indicated that singular *they* is used extensively in spoken and written discourse. On the contrary, there have also been studies that sought to elicit singular *they* usage and focussed on how the pronoun strategy is nowadays perceived. LaScotte (2016) investigated how singular *they* was used in elicited written response, and whether participants would opt for different pronouns in formal versus informal contexts. He conducted an online survey in which participants were asked to describe an *ideal student* and, additionally, to answer several questions about which pronoun strategy they would prefer to use in different situations. A subtle form of deception was employed wherein participants were told that their fluency in written discourse was of interest, to keep participants unaware of the actual interest

in pronoun usage. Singular *they* was used in 55% of all pronoun instances, whereas *he or she* variations were used 9%, and generic *he* only 8%. Subsequently, participants were asked to decide which pronoun was most suitable in formal versus informal contexts. Those results demonstrated that, whereas the majority of the participants opted for singular *they* in informal contexts, *he or she* was chosen most frequently in formal contexts. In many cases, pronoun usage in the description task did not correspond to the answers chosen in the gap-fill exercise.

LaScotte's (2016) results suggest that a large majority of the participants use a gender-inclusive strategy, and most often singular *they* rather than *he or she*. Although there also appear to be gender differences, as female participants choose generic *he* more often than male participants, this contradicts previous findings by Meyers (1990), who found that men use generic *he* more often than women do. Noteworthy, LaScotte (2016) employed the same gap-fill sentence for asking participants what pronoun they would use in a formal situation versus an informal situation. It would possibly be more useful to present actual distinct situations to participants, where they are asked to imagine an informal and formal context (e.g., among friends as informal context and at a business meeting as formal context). This way there would be no need to explicitly acknowledge a difference in context, which may give participants the sensation that a certain response is only suitable in either informal or formal context. Also, LaScotte (2016) provided participants with the option to explain their pronoun choice before having answered both gap-fill sentences. This may have made participants particularly aware of pronoun usage whilst filling in the rest of the survey. This thesis takes these aspects into account for its methodology, and separates the evaluation section from the sections that elicit pronoun usage.

Another study that investigated pronoun usage with a rather experimental approach was conducted by Pauwels and Winter (2006). This study investigated Australian teachers' usage of singular *they* and possible tension they might experience between teaching what is

grammatically correct (generic *he*) and what seems socially right (gender-inclusive pronoun strategies). They conducted a survey as well as interviews with a subset of the participants. Their survey included a gap-fill exercise in which participants filled in missing pronouns. The antecedents were non-specific nouns that were expected to provoke social gender associations (e.g., *prisoner*). The results of the gap-fill task indicated that with the nouns *real estate agent* and *teacher*, the majority chose *he or she*, and less than 40% chose singular *they*. On the other hand, with the nouns *lawyer* and *prisoner*, a majority chose singular *they*. The results indicated a substantial preference for gender-inclusive language, with most teachers using either *he or she* or singular *they*. Women almost always chose singular *they* more than men. Through the interviews, it became apparent that younger teachers opt for singular *they* because it is convenient and because they are used to it. Younger participants were in some cases unaware of the grammaticality issue of a plural pronoun used for a singular antecedent, whereas older participants were more aware of the issue (Pauwels & Winter, 2006).

The results of this study suggest that teachers try to be explicitly gender-inclusive in their pronoun use, and that there are differences in pronoun usage of men and women. However, the linguistic behaviour of teachers may not be fully representative of the general English-speaking population. It is, therefore, useful to consider a broader participant population. Additionally, this thesis tries to improve on the methodology used in Pauwels and Winter's (2006) gap-fill task, because it seems probable that there has been an external influence on the pronoun choices made by the participants. The sentences with antecedents *real-estate agent* and *teacher* contained the auxiliary *has* and verb *seems*, respectively. It is possible that participants may not have chosen singular *they* in those cases since there would have been an obvious number disagreement (i.e., *they has* and *they seems*). Indeed, less than 40% of the participants chose singular *they* for these gap-fill structures. The sentence with a noticeable number disagreement for third-person singular pronouns (e.g., *he don't*), has led to

63% of the participants choosing singular *they*. The only gap-fill sentence with a non-specific antecedent and modal verb (i.e., not marked for number) had 55% of the participants selecting singular *they* (Pauwels & Winter, 2006). Hairston (1981) had demonstrated that an obvious number mismatch leads to lower grammaticality ratings. Therefore, it seems crucial to use stimuli containing verb phrases that are unmarked for number, to avoid bias.

A study conducted by Bradley, Salkind, Moore and Teitsort (2019) took an interest in the interpretation of gender-neutral pronouns. They noted how important pronoun usage is for the LGBTQ+ community, and that the third-person singular pronouns *he* and *she* do not match the identity of non-binary people. Hence, they studied the interpretation of gender-neutral pronouns conducting an experiment in which participants were asked to match a description to a photo. These descriptions contained one pronoun strategy (either singular *they*, *he*, *she* or *ze*) or a repetition of the noun phrase *the student*. In the binary condition, participants saw photos of masculine and feminine-appearing students. In the non-binary condition, participants could also opt for photos of students who did not appear to be male or female.

Bradley, Salkind et al. (2019) suggest that when singular *they* is used for a specific person, it is perceived as the most natural gender-neutral pronoun, and fitting as a non-binary pronoun. However, the study remarks that the results may have been brought about by their “younger and perhaps more progressive sample of participants” (Bradley, Salkind et al., 2019, p. 4). If younger people are actually more progressive in interpreting singular *they* as gender-neutral, then their usage of singular *they* may also differ as compared to older people. Therefore, the present study takes into account possible differences between English speakers of various ages.

Finally, there has been experimental research on present-day attitudes towards gender-neutral pronouns. As Bate (1978) and Hairston (1981) had indicated several decades ago,

people were rather reserved about using singular *they*. However, Bradley, Schmid and Lombardo (2019) demonstrated that these attitudes have changed. They conducted an online survey with an acceptability judgement task, in which participants were asked to rate sentences on grammaticality and offensiveness. These sentences included singular *they* as referring to specific and non-specific antecedents. The results showed that, when used for a specific antecedent, singular *they* is rated as significantly less grammatical than grammatical control sentences and sentences using *he or she*. However, singular *they* in the context of non-specific antecedents was judged significantly more acceptable. In terms of offensiveness, singular *they* was considered significantly less offensive than generic pronouns *he or she*. Singular *they* in a non-specific context is rated on par with grammatically correct control sentences and the *he or she* strategy.

These findings by Bradley, Schmid and Lombardo (2019) indicate that, although singular *they* is nowadays generally accepted, it is less so in contexts where the antecedent is specific. The study also shows that there is a correlation between participants who accept singular *they* in the context of specific antecedents and participants who accept sentences in which pronouns do not match the expected gender. It implies that some people have a more flexible view on gender. They conclude singular *they* is generally accepted, especially in non-specific contexts and that acceptability is also influenced by the personality of language users and attitudes towards gender (Bradley, Schmid & Lombardo, 2019). Again, this suggests that there is a difference between how people deal with singular *they* for specific and non-specific antecedents. This thesis tries to establish whether this difference also occurs in elicited use. Additionally, it is important for the present study that attitudes toward gender may influence acceptability judgements, because this could also affect people's justifications as to why singular *they* is used.

Research has indicated that singular *they* is widely used, that it has become more

accepted, and that it is also used and interpreted as gender-inclusive and gender-neutral pronoun (Bradley, Salkind et al., 2019; Bradley, Schmid & Lombardo, 2019; LaScotte, 2016; Pauwels & Winter, 2006). Findings from naturalistic discourses that the specificity of an antecedent is of influence on singular *they* usage (Baranowski, 2002), is supported by people's acceptability judgements on singular *they* in contexts differing in specificity (Bradley, Schmid & Lombardo, 2019). Earlier findings on differences between how men and women use singular *they* (Meyers, 1990) are also found in experimental settings, although not fully corresponding (LaScotte, 2016; Pauwels & Winter, 2006). Finally, the exact influence of social gender associations, for example on occupational nouns, on singular *they* usage that is suggested by Pauwels (2001) and Strahan (2008), has not yet become clear (Pauwels & Winter, 2006). Nevertheless, singular *they* seems to have become a common choice for referring to genderless antecedents, despite past evaluations (Bate, 1978; Hairston, 1981).

3. Methodology

This thesis looked at the distribution of singular *they* of native speakers of English in contexts where a reference was made to a genderless singular antecedent. It focused on the use of singular *they* in an elicited free response and in a context where people were asked to make a direct choice. The study additionally attempted to find out what is motivating people to use the pronouns that they chose under these particular circumstances. An online questionnaire consisting of three parts was designed to find out about this. The pronoun choices and motivations were subsequently analysed in order to determine how and why singular *they* is used as it is.

3.1 Participants

A total number of 87 participants filled in the questionnaire. Unfortunately, 18 of those people were non-native speakers of English and therefore excluded from this study. The other 69 participants had English as their native language, or one of their native languages. The participants were between the age of 15 to 70 ($M = 31.68$, $SD = 14.37$). A slight majority of the participants (38 of 69) identified as female, and a slight minority (31 of 69) as male. In order to compare younger language users to older language users, the participants were split into two groups. The younger group ($N = 48$) consisted of participants aged up to and including 32 ($M = 23.31$, $SD = 4.12$). The group of older participants ($N = 21$) consisted of participants aged 35 and higher ($M = 50.81$, $SD = 10.49$). The participants in this study live all around the world, in English speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, as well as countries where English is not the main language spoken, such as Sweden and the Netherlands.

3.2 Materials

For the purpose of this study, an online questionnaire was set up using Qualtrics XM

software. The questionnaire consisted of four sections (see Appendix I for an overview).

The first section of the questionnaire established basic demographic information about the gender, age, and native language of the participants. This information was gathered in order to exclude non-native speakers of English, and to allow for analyses between pronoun usage across age and gender.

The second section of the questionnaire consisted of the first task. This was a description task based on LaScotte (2016). Participants were asked to describe a hypothetical ideal student. The task included several questions, serving as prompts, about the characteristics and qualities an ideal student needs to have, and what actions should be undertaken to graduate successfully. Unlike LaScotte (2016), who informed his participants on an interest in English grammar (though not specifically pronoun usage), this study employed a subtle form of deception wherein no attention was drawn to participants' language use, other than the request to write complete sentences. To keep participants unaware of the aim of the study, the description task was also the first part of the questionnaire. The description task was intended to elicit a free and natural response including the use of pronouns.

The third section of the questionnaire was a gap-fill task. This task was based on the gap-fill task designed by Pauwels and Winter (2006). Six situations were constructed in which the participants were asked to imagine themselves saying something to a peer about a genderless antecedent. The situations and sentences were reviewed by two native speakers of English on how natural it felt to use a pronoun at the place of the gap. The six antecedents used in the gap-fill task were either specific or non-specific (condition 1). In the gap-fill sentences with specific antecedents, the participants were asked to choose a pronoun to refer to a clear-cut individual. An example of an antecedent as such is *a pedestrian* the participant was imagining running a red light. The other sentences contained a non-specific antecedent.

Those antecedents referred to an undefined hypothetical person or a person representative of a class. An example of such antecedent in this condition was *a politician*, when participants imagined themselves talking about politics and politicians in general. As Bradley, Schmid and Lombardo (2019) indicated, people rate sentences with singular *they* for specific antecedents as less grammatical than sentences with singular *they* for non-specific antecedents. However, Pauwels and Winter (2006) had not included this condition in their gap-fill task. Therefore, this condition was added to the gap-fill task of the current study to investigate whether specificity had indeed also an influence on the pronoun usage of participants. Similar to Pauwels and Winter's (2006) methodology, some of the antecedents used in this task were expected to evoke social gender associations (condition 2). Pauwels (2001) showed that, in public speech, singular *they* is indeed used less frequently when used to refer to occupational nouns than when it is used to refer to agent nouns (referring to general human agents). Therefore, four occupational nouns were selected, of which two were expected to evoke associations with female gender (*teacher* and *social worker*) and two were expected to evoke associations with male gender (*technician* and *politician*). The remaining antecedents that were selected were not expected to evoke gender-specific associations (*pedestrian* and *child*). As was discussed earlier, Pauwels and Winter (2006) used several verb phrases marked for number, which may have influenced linguistic decisions made by their participants. Therefore, all lexical verbs used in the sentences of this gap-fill task were either in the past tense or accompanied by a modal verb to avoid number marking. For an overview of the antecedents used in the gap-fill task, see table 1. below.

The fourth section of the questionnaire consisted of questions that reflected on answers given in the gap-fill task. The answers provided by the participants for each sentence in the gap-fill appeared again accompanied by an additional question. Participants were simply asked why they chose this personal pronoun. It was also stated that there are no right or wrong

answers. Participants were asked to be specific. This section of the questionnaire sought to elicit commentary about motivations for pronoun selection. Even though this experimental setting did not reflect usage of singular *they* in the real world, it did provide participants with a chance to reflect on their pronoun usage.

Table 1.

Antecedents used in the gap-fill task

Condition 1	Condition 2	Antecedent
Specific	Female association	<i>Teacher</i>
	Male association	<i>Technician</i>
	Neutral	<i>Pedestrian</i>
Non-specific	Female association	<i>Social worker</i>
	Male association	<i>Politician</i>
	Neutral	<i>Child</i>

3.3 Procedure

Participants received a letter through social media or email with instructions about the questionnaire (see Appendix II). This letter included a hyperlink that sent participants to the questionnaire on Qualtrics. Participants could fill in the questionnaire on a computer or other online devices. This online design allowed for people all over the world to fill in the questionnaire.

Participants filled in all of the sections. Apart from the questions on participants' gender, age and native language (first section), participants had to click through to the next page after each response. They were not able to go back and alter any of the responses given once they got to the next question. The participants were not informed about this, in order to keep the responses as authentic as possible. The gap-fill used a forced-choice paradigm for the pronouns that participants could choose. The participants could choose between *he*, *she*, *he or she*, *they*, or *other*. If participants opted for *other*, they were asked to specify what strategy they would use. By using such pre-set responses in Qualtrics, it was possible to subsequently link direct questions about their choices in the next section. Unlike LaScotte (2016), who also used two gap-fill sentences but who gave participants the option to respond right away as to why they used this strategy, this study separated the gap-fill task (section three) from the evaluation part (section four). This way participants were not taking into account that they had to justify their answers, which might otherwise have affected their choices. For both the description task and the evaluation part, the responses required a minimum amount of characters to proceed to the next part (100 characters for the description task and 15 characters for each question in the evaluation part).

3.4 Design and Analysis

The present study collected both quantitative data and qualitative data. Qualitative data was gathered through the questions on why participants chose the particular pronouns they used.

This data consisted of motivations behind participants' pronoun choices. Quantitative data was gathered through the description and gap-fill task. Independent variables that were taken into account were age and gender. For the gap-fill task, there were two additional independent variables: specificity (i.e., a non-specific or specific antecedent) and social gender associations (i.e., neutral antecedent, female association, or male association). The dependent variable was pronoun usage (i.e., singular *they* versus other pronouns).

After collecting the data from the description task and the gap-fill task, the pronoun usage was quantified. For each participant, a percentage was calculated based on the number of occurrences of singular *they* in their responses. For example, if a particular response to the description task included six pronouns of which four were singular *they*, then singular *they* usage for this participant was 66.67% and non-*they* usage was 33.33%. Such percentages were calculated for *they* and non-*they* usage for the description task as well as for the gap-fill task. These percentages were used for analyses made using IBM SPSS. For the description task, singular *they* usage was compared to the use of other pronouns (non-*they* usage) by means of a paired-samples t-test. The pronoun usage across both age and gender was compared by means of independent-samples t-tests. For the gap-fill task, the exact same analyses were made, with an additional two analyses. First, usage of *they* for specific antecedents was compared to usage of *they* for non-specific antecedents by means of a paired-samples t-test. Second, usage of *they* for antecedents that were expected to evoke social gender associations were compared to the usage of *they* with neutral antecedents by means of a paired-samples t-test. Finally, a paired-samples t-test was used to find a correlation between *they* usage across the description and the gap-fill task, and to find a correlation between *they* usage across the description task and the non-specific sentences of the gap-fill task.

To analyse and present the qualitative data, grounded theory was used (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This framework offered a way to taxonomize and order different types of

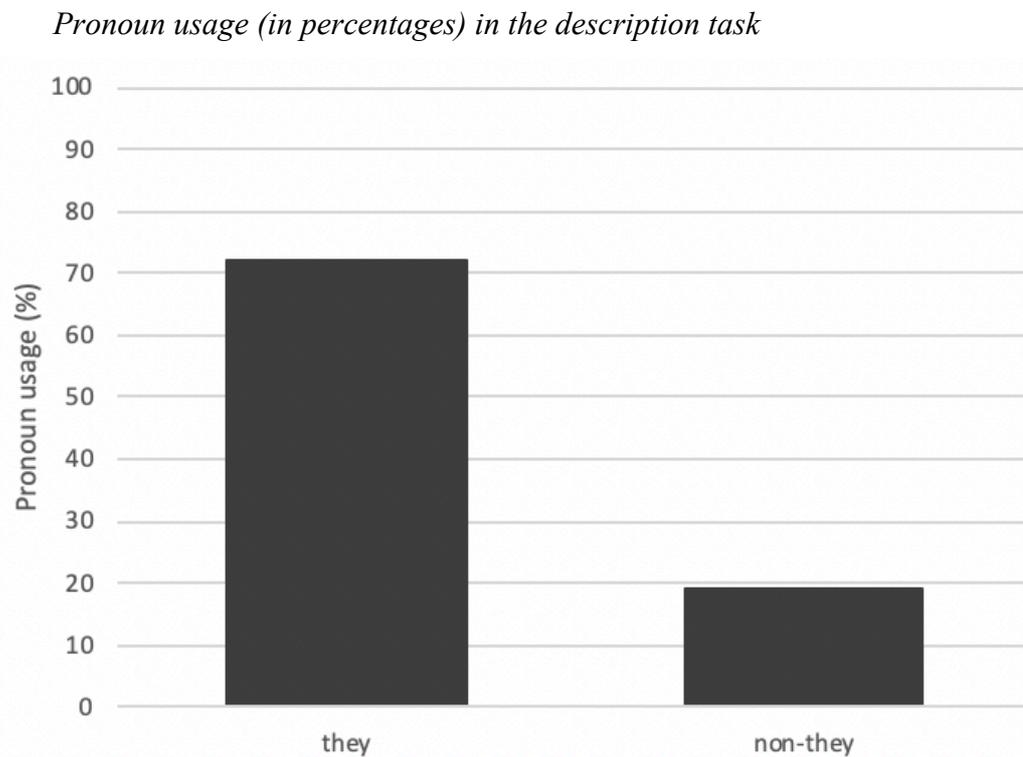
responses. This way, responses that provided concrete justifications as to why participants chose the pronoun used in the gap-fill task could be considered. Answers that resembled one another were given similar labels. This led to the formation of different concepts, and, subsequently, concepts that were related to each other formed categories. For each category, the pronoun environment was considered. The general categories, as well as the concepts and individual responses, were used to provide insight into the motivation and reasoning behind the linguistic behaviour of the participants, with respect to their pronoun choice.

4. Results

4.1 Description Task

Participants were asked to do a description task to determine how singular *they* is used in free response. Participants applied various pronoun strategies in this task, namely: singular *they*, *he* or *she* variants (i.e., also other forms such as *s/he*), *he*, *she*, *one*, and *you*. Many participants also employed a repetition strategy, re-using the word *student* or other nouns, such as *person*. A total number of 329 pronouns were used, of which 249 were singular *they* (75.68%). On average participants used 4.84 pronouns ($SD = 4.75$). Because participants differed in the total number of pronouns utilised in this task, percentual *they* and non-*they* usage scores were employed to compare pronoun usage.

To find out how frequently singular *they* was used compared to other pronouns, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. This test indicated a significant difference between *they* usage and non-*they* usage ($t(68) = 6.05, p < .001$). Usage of singular *they* ($M = 72.29\%$, $SD = 42.12\%$) was significantly higher than usage of other pronouns ($M = 19.01\%$, $SD = 36.11\%$), (see figure 1. below). An independent-samples t-test was conducted in order to compare *they* usage of men and women. This test showed no significant difference between *they* usage of the groups ($t(67) = 1.07, p = .287$). Men ($M = 78.31\%$, $SD = 39.32\%$) did not use singular *they* significantly more often than women ($M = 67.39\%$, $SD = 44.19\%$) in the description task. Likewise, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to test differences in *they* usage between older and younger language users. This test did not show a significant difference between *they* usage of these groups ($t(67) = -.706, p = .483$). The younger participants ($M = 74.67\%$, $SD = 41.48\%$) did not use singular *they* significantly more often than the older participants ($M = 66.86\%$, $SD = 44.11\%$) in the description task.

Figure 1.

4.2 Gap-fill task

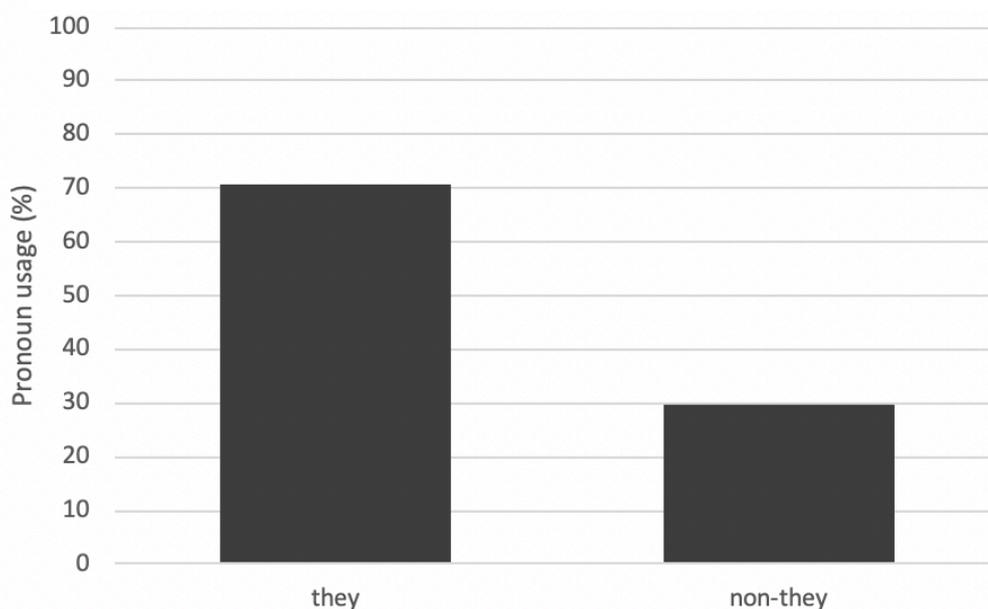
The gap-fill task sought to determine how singular *they* is used with specific and non-specific antecedents, and with occupational and agent nouns. Participants were asked to choose between *he*, *she*, *he or she*, *they*, *other*. In order to directly compare the description and gap-fill task, the number of *they* and non-*they* responses in the gap-fill task were also converted to percentages.

In order to establish the frequency of singular *they* usage, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. This test indicated that there was a significant difference between *they* responses and non-*they* responses ($t(68) = 4.612, p < .001$) (see figure 2. below). Singular *they* ($M = 70.53\%$, $SD = 36.73\%$) was chosen significantly more often than the other pronouns ($M = 29.71\%$, $SD = 36.81\%$). An independent-samples t-test was used to investigate differences between *they* usage of men and women. Although there seemed to be a pattern where men

chose *they* more often than women, the test demonstrated that the difference of *they* usage between men and women was not significant ($t(67) = 1.880, p = .064$). Men ($M = 79.57\%$, $SD = 31.24\%$) did not choose *they* significantly more often than women ($M = 63.16\%$, $SD = 39.55\%$). An independent-samples t-test was also conducted in order to compare *they* usage of older and younger language users. This did not demonstrate a significant difference between *they* usage of these groups ($t(67) = -.725, p = .471$). The older group ($M = 75.39\%$, $SD = 29.16\%$) did not opt for singular *they* significantly more often than the younger group ($M = 68.40\%$, $SD = 39.69\%$) in the gap-fill task. In order to find out whether there was a difference between *they* usage for specific antecedents and non-specific antecedents, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. This test indicated that there was indeed a significant difference between *they* usage for specific and non-specific antecedents ($t(68) = 3.053, p = .003$). In sentences containing a non-specific antecedent ($M = 75.84\%$, $SD = 37.00\%$) singular *they* was chosen significantly more often than in sentences containing a specific-antecedent ($M = 65.70\%$, $SD = 41.21\%$). Finally, in order to find out whether there was a difference in *they* usage for

Figure 2.

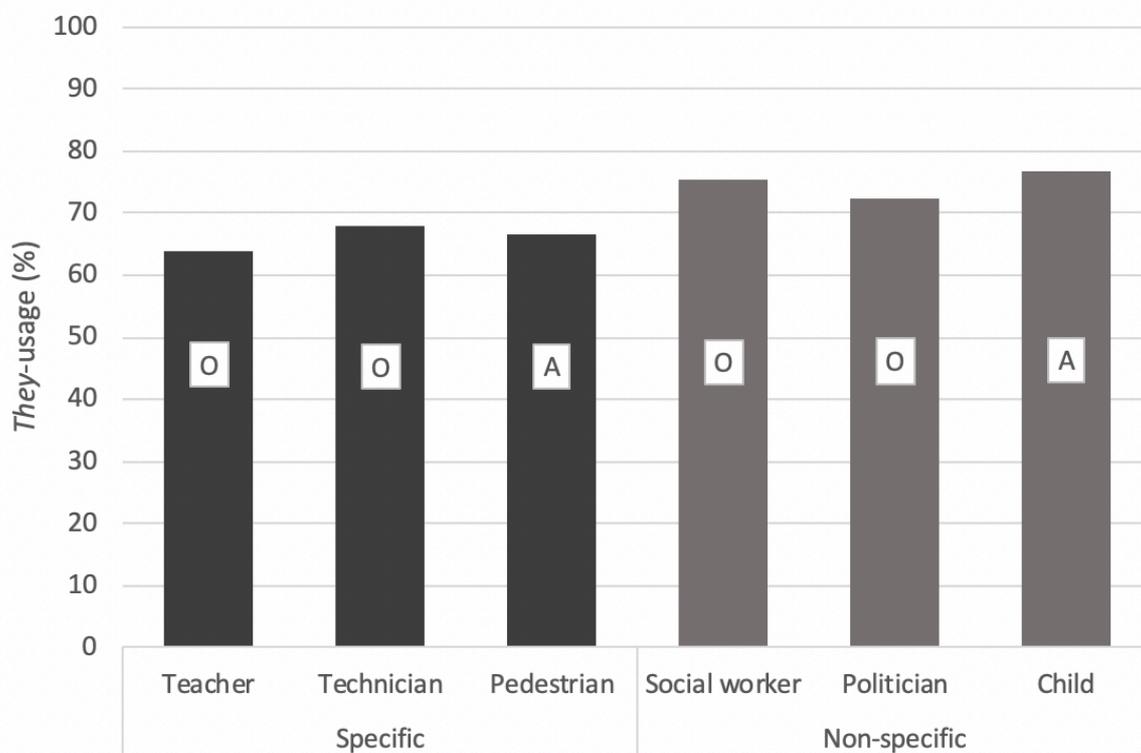
Pronoun usage (in percentages) in the gap-fill task



antecedents that were expected to evoke gender associations and antecedents that were not expected to evoke gender associations, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. This test compared *they* usage for occupational antecedents (i.e., *teacher*, *technician*, *social worker*, and *politician*) and agent antecedents (i.e., *pedestrian* and *child*). This test indicated that there was no significant difference between *they* usage for gendered occupational antecedents and neutral agent antecedents ($t(68) = .867, p = .389$). *They* usage for agent antecedents ($M = 72.46\%$, $SD = 39.79\%$) was not significantly higher than *they* usage for occupational antecedents ($M = 69.93\%$, $SD = 38.01\%$). In fact, there was a significant correlation between *they* usage for occupational and agent nouns ($r(68) = .806, p < .001$). The distribution of *they* usage across the gap-fill sentences can be seen in figure 3.

Figure 3.

They usage (in percentages) across the different sentences in the gap-fill task



Note. O is referring to occupational nouns and A is referring to agent nouns.

4.3 Overlap Between Description and Gap-fill Task

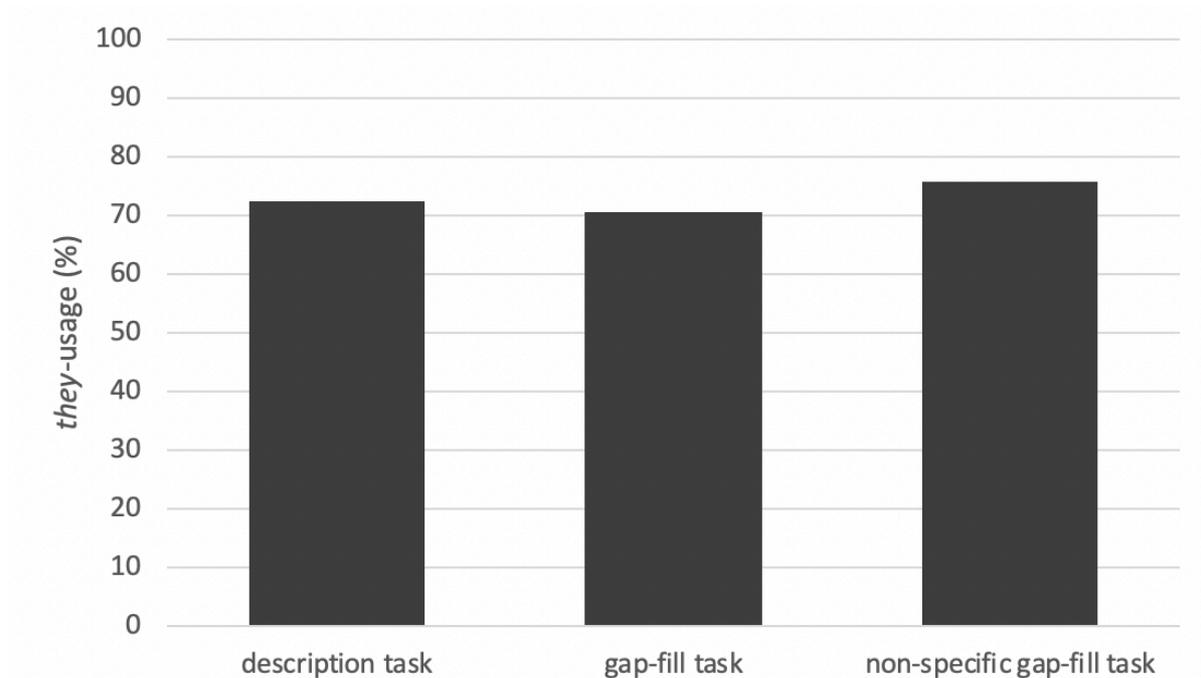
In order to determine whether pronoun usage of the gap-fill task and the description task were similar, the correlation between *they* usage of both tasks was calculated by means of a paired-samples t-test. This indicated that there was a correlation between usage of *they* in the description task and the gap-fill task ($r(68) = .366, p = .002$). *They* usage in the description task ($M = 72.29\%$, $SD = 42.12\%$) correlated with *they* usage in the gap-fill task ($M = 70.53\%$, $SD = 36.73\%$). However, the gap-fill consisted of sentences containing specific antecedents as well as non-specific antecedents, whereas the antecedent used for description task was only non-specific. Therefore, another paired-samples t-test was used to measure the correlation between *they* usage of the description task with *they* usage of only sentences with non-specific antecedents of the gap-fill task. This test also demonstrated a correlation between *they* usage in the description task and the non-specific part of the gap-fill task ($r(68) = .426, p < .001$). *They* usage in the description task ($M = 72.29\%$, $SD = 42.12\%$) correlated with *they* usage in non-specific context of the gap-fill task ($M = 75.84\%$, $SD = 37.00\%$). For an overview of how singular *they* was used across the two tasks and the non-specific context of the gap-fill task, see figure 4. below.

4.4 Justification for Pronoun Choice

The fourth section of the questionnaire resulted in qualitative responses in which participants attempted to explain why they used the pronoun they opted for in the gap-fill task. As these results were qualitative, they were in need of a different approach for its analysis. To deal with these results, an approach based on grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was used to attempt to establish patterns. By means of categorising and coding the data, possible explanations were found for why people use singular *they*. A total of 368 informative

Figure 4.

Distribution of they-usage (in percentages) across the description task, the gap-fill task and the sentences containing non-specific antecedents in the gap-fill task



responses were coded. Responses that provided no concrete justifications were left out.

Responses that occurred regularly (more than six times) throughout the dataset were categorised. Each of those categories and the conditions in which those answers were most likely to occur were addressed.

4.4.1 Gender Unknown

The most prevalent justification given among the participants was choosing this particular strategy because the gender of the antecedent was unknown. More than half of the responses (51%) included this explanation, for example (5). This response was given exclusively in the cases where the answer to the gap fills were *they* or *he* or *she*. Of all these responses about unknown gender, about a third (29%) included an additional remark. Those additional

remarks were almost always along the lines of how this pronoun strategy sounded suitable or neutral, see for example (6) and (7). Additional remarks were most common when the pronoun choice was *they* (49 out of 52), rather than *he or she* (3 out of 52).

- (5) There is no information about the potential gender of the individual.
- (6) The gender wasn't specified, so I chose the neutral option.
- (7) Because gender is unknown, so they felt best.

4.4.2 Gender-Neutral language usage

A second recurring motivation for pronoun choice dealt with gender-neutral language. This justification was similar to *gender unknown* but focused more specifically on neutrality of the language use itself, rather than the antecedents' gender being unspecified. About 15% of all participants' motivations for pronoun choice was along the lines of preferring a gender-neutral approach. Explanations in this category also exclusively occurred in combination with *they* or *he or she* choices on the gap-fill task. Less than half (43%) of responses under this category preferred a non-gendered or neutral pronoun in combination with the antecedents, for example (8). The other 57% either hinted or explicitly indicated that language needs to be inclusive, for example (9-11). The notion of inclusiveness was much more frequent in participants who used *they* (75%) but also occurred when the pronoun choice was *he or she* (25%).

- (8) I like to keep my language gender neutral.
- (9) There was no indication of how the person identifies, they is more inclusive.
- (10) If I don't know the subject's gender I try to say *they* or *their* as to not misgender them.
- (11) I wouldn't want to label this colleague he/she without knowing specifically their preferred pronoun

4.4.3 *Sounds natural*

Although this justification was less prominent, some participants also stated that they used a particular pronoun because it sounded natural. This type of reasoning was often not accompanied by further explanations, other than that it sounded natural or ‘right’, for example (12) and (13). This category was used in 30 cases (8%) and almost exclusively for singular *they*. It was used for *he or she* in only two instances, and once for *he* (14).

- (12) It sounded the most natural. When I read the sentence without looking at the options I said “they”.
- (13) I am not sure why I chose it. It just sounded the most natural to me.
- (14) This was a natural response. The male reference was automatic and sounds best.

4.4.4 *Noticing non-specificity*

Several responses indicated that participants noticed the difference between sentences that contained a specific antecedent and sentences with non-specific antecedents. There were 37 justifications (10%) given as response to non-specific antecedents, that noticed and responded to this feature. All of these responses occurred solely with the pronoun choice *they*.

Participants pointed out how the antecedent was general, for example (15), or that it referred to a position rather than a specific person, for example (16) and (17).

- (15) I'm not taking about a specific politician here, but generalizing politicians as a whole. So I'd use a gender neutral term, since politicians can have any possible gender identity.
- (16) Since I am speaking of a particular position, social worker, rather than a specific person, I would use the gender-inspecific pronoun "their."
- (17) Referencing a position/subgroup of people comprised of different genders.

4.4.5 Correctness

Another recurring response included the idea that the pronoun choice was correct. This was the case in 9% of the responses. In this category, there were several related types of responses. For example, 18% of the responses within this category drew upon the notion of political correctness, for example (18). This explanation was used for five occurrences of singular *they* and once for *he or she*. In another 18% of these responses, it was mentioned that the participants were taught to use this strategy (19). This motivation was exclusively used for singular *they*. Nonetheless, the majority of the answers in this category used a phrasing that included being ‘correct’ on its own, for example (20). A majority of the answers in this category (64%) was used in response to using *he or she* in the gap-fill. For both *he* and for *she* this explanation was used twice (9% each). For the remaining cases (18%), this explanation was used when participants had chosen *they*.

- (18) Ambiguous, not clear the gender. More politically correct as well
- (19) I was taught to use they/their/them when gender was not specified.
- (20) I choose this strategy as it sounded the most correct.

4.4.6 Associations

A final pattern that was found in the responses had to do with previous experiences that participants had with the occupations used for the nouns in the gap-fill and their associations with this. Only 13 of such explanations were given (4%). Nine of those had to do with associations people had with the nouns used, for example (21). The other responses related to previous experiences people had with the occupations of the antecedents, such as (22). The responses in this category were exclusively used in combination with gendered pronoun choices *he or she*.

- (21) When I read politicians keeping promises, I would imagine a politician as a

middle class man that doesn't keep his promise

- (22) Experience with a similar technician who was male and therefore I chose it.

5. Discussion

The overall results suggest that singular *they* is the pronoun of choice for a large majority of the participants in both elicited free response and forced choice. Explanations on why singular *they* is used vary, but suggest widespread awareness of language use and possibly even linguistic accommodation to social change.

5.1 Description Task

The results of the description task suggest that singular *they* is the most prominent pronoun choice when native speakers of English are asked to describe a genderless hypothetical antecedent. In total, 76% of all pronouns used comprised of singular *they*. When individual participants receive a percentage score, the mean usage of *they* is 72%. This suggests that usage of singular *they* when describing a genderless hypothetical antecedent is even more widespread than what has previously been found (LaScotte, 2016; Meyers, 1990). In Meyers' (1990) study on pronoun usage among students, singular *they* was fairly-well established but used on par with generic *he*, whereas in the current study, singular *they* usage considerably outweighs generic *he*. That said, Meyers (1990) looked at students' academic writing (i.e., a more formal context) which is likely to have an effect on pronoun usage (Holmes, 1998). The setup of the description task of this thesis is similar to that of LaScotte (2016), who also found a preference for singular *they* over generic *he* in describing *an ideal student*. However, of the total number of pronouns used in his study, 55% was singular *they*, as opposed to the 76% in the current study (LaScotte, 2016). The results of the present study support earlier findings which suggest usage of singular *they* as epicene pronoun in free response may still be increasing (Pauwels, 2001; Balhorn, 2004).

5.2 Gap-fill Task

The results of the gap-fill task indicate that singular *they* is the principal choice when native speakers of English are asked to choose a pronoun for antecedents whose gender is unknown. In 71% of the cases, singular *they* was chosen rather than the other pronoun options (*he*, *she*, *he or she*, or *other*). Especially in contexts where the antecedent of the sentence is non-specific, use of singular *they* is widespread.

Pauwels and Winter (2006) employed a similar gap-fill task using only non-specific antecedents. Contrary to the results of the present study, they found a much lower distribution of singular *they* usage with indefinite nouns, with an overall mean of 49%. There are several, potentially interconnected, explanations for this divergence between the results. First of all, it may be the case that usage of singular *they* has substantially increased, and that this development is also reflected by the answers provided in the gap-fill task. However, the higher and more consistent usage of singular *they* found in the current study may be explained by the number markings on the verbs in Pauwels and Winter's (2006) gap-fill task. Number marking on most of the verb phrases used, resulted in sentences where either *they*, or strategies such as *he or she*, would sound unnatural (e.g., *he or she don't* or *they has*). In structures with obvious number disagreement, singular *they* was chosen by less than 40% of the participants, while it was chosen by a majority when there was no such noticeable number disagreement. The results of this part of the study, therefore, suggest that by keeping verb phrases ambiguous in terms of number marking, pronoun choices made in the gap-fill task are more consistent, and that choosing singular *they* in a gap-fill task is more common than previously indicated (Pauwels & Winter, 2006).

5.3 Age and Gender

Unlike other studies, the results of this study did not demonstrate any significant differences between men and women, and older and younger language users throughout the description

and gap-fill task (LaScotte, 2016; Meyers, 1990; Pauwels & Winter, 2006). A possible explanation for this is the number of people that participated in this study. Especially in terms of age, there was a lack of equal distribution. There were 69 participants of whom 48 were younger than 33 and only 21 older than 34. Perhaps a more evenly distributed age range would have indicated differences between younger and older participants.

5.4 Non-specific Antecedents

Similar to what has previously been found, the results of the current study demonstrate significant differences for usage of singular *they* in the context of specific and non-specific antecedents (Baranowski, 2002; Bradley, Schmid & Lombardo, 2019). Baranowski (2002) demonstrated that in newspapers there is a higher usage of singular *they* with indefinite (non-specific) antecedents than with definite (specific) antecedents. Similarly, Bradley, Schmid and Lombardo (2019) indicated that singular *they* in non-specific context is rated as more grammatical than in specific context. The results of this study, therefore, support these findings. Singular *they* is also opted for significantly more often in non-specific contexts than in specific contexts, which reflects naturally occurring language usage and grammatical intuitions of speakers of English.

5.5 Gendered and Neutral Antecedents

In contrast to what has been found in earlier studies, the results of the present study suggest that social gender associations of nouns do not influence usage of singular *they* (Pauwels, 2001). Pauwels (2001) discovered that in public speech, singular *they* is used more commonly with agent nouns that are not associated with a particular social gender, than with occupational nouns that are associated with social gender. Additionally, Pauwels and Winter (2006) found that generic *he* and generic *she* are chosen relatively more frequently in a gap-fill task with some nouns that evoke social gender associations, which then comes at the

expense of singular *they* usage. However, as was discussed earlier (section 5.2), the verbs in their gap-fill task were marked for number. The present study suggests, therefore, that the differences found by Pauwels and Winter (2006) are more likely to have been caused by obvious number disagreement, than by social gender associations related to the nouns used in their gap-fill task. The current results seem to indicate that occupational nouns that tend to be associated with social genders, do not lead to more use of generic *he* or *she*. Singular *they* is still the most prominent choice, even for antecedents such as *technician* or *social worker* that were expected to evoke social gender associations.

5.6 Justifications for singular *they* usage

The results indicate that there is a correlation between answers given in the gap-fill task and the description task, contrary to what was found by LaScotte (2016). This implies that answers given in the gap-fill task are representative of those given in free written responses (which may more naturally reflect actual language use). Additionally, this could mean that justifications for pronoun use in the gap-fill task may possibly also account for pronoun use in free written responses. Although the motivations provided by the participants cannot entirely explain why singular *they* is used as frequently as it is being used, it does shed light on a certain awareness people have with regards to their linguistic behaviour. The justifications made apparent that participants choose singular *they* because antecedents are genderless. Singular *they* allows participants to avoid having to assign any gender. Singular *they* is also used because some participants want to use gender-neutral language that is inclusive for all people, not just people using traditionally masculine and feminine pronouns (i.e., genderqueer or non-binary people may prefer pronouns other than *he* or *she*). Other justifications included the notion that singular *they* sounds natural, suggesting it does not take much effort to incorporate this strategy. Finally, some people use singular *they* because of (political) correctness. Collectively, the justifications provided by the participants contribute to an

emerging picture of why singular *they* is used as extensively. It seems likely that the concepts and categories found in the qualitative data are interrelated, meaning components such as neutrality, (political) correctness and awareness concurrently lead to a preference for singular *they* among the participants.

This participant population seems to be aware of singular *they* as a gender-neutral and inclusive strategy. The qualitative data indicate that participants seem to be hesitant to make gender assumptions, thereby providing gender-neutral response in the gap-fill task. Even though this study made use of occupational nouns that were expected to evoke gendered pronoun usage, participants mainly opted for gender-neutral singular *they*. The justifications overwhelmingly express that everyone can, for example, be a social worker or politician, and that operatives in these fields are neither just men nor just women. The participants in this study seem to be sensitive about gender polarities and assumptions in presupposing the gender of a particular person or professional. When selecting a suitable pronoun, participants seem to be aware that old-fashioned cultural stereotypes no longer hold. There appears to be a cultural sensitivity that is growing within this populous about the appropriateness of specifying someone's gender. To accommodate for this sensitivity, people may be opting for a gender-neutral approach, which they appear to take on rather consciously. Singular *they* allows for people to avoid having to assign a gender to an antecedent. The participant population of this study seems to have a preference for this strategy, which may have been influenced by acculturation due to exposure to discourse about gender and gender sensitivity.

In the past decades, there has been social change: for example, things have positively changed with respect to gender-equality as well as acceptance for LGBT+ people. In Japan it is the case that “[as] people’s attitudes toward gender roles have changed, women have become a sizable part of the workforce in various arenas” (Kenato, 2011, p. 252). This can also be seen in other parts of the world. For example, in the United States, it has also become

more common for women to work in ‘non-traditional’ areas. Xu (2011) considered the situation in the male-dominated academic area of science and engineering. Although there are still major gender gaps, for example in the distribution of men and women and their academic rank, the proportion of women working in these fields has substantially increased since 1993 (Xu, 2011). Similarly, there have been social changes for LGBT+ people. Sobel (2015) has described how social changes impacting LGBT lives can be seen through changes in the law, public opinion, and media. Public sentiment is changing as a result of more people coming out as LGBT, and this has led to a growing acceptance of, as well as favourable attention to, the LGBT community (Sobel, 2015). Bradley, Salkind et al. (2019) emphasised the importance of pronouns in relation to the LGBTQ+ movement. Their study pointed out that “even those who don’t know someone who goes by ‘they’ interpret it as gender-neutral, suggesting it may be a ‘naturally occurring’ option for gender-neutrality and nonbinariness” (Bradley, Salkind et al., 2019, p. 4). As there has been more positive attention for the LGBT+ community, there has also been more positive attention for gender-neutral language, and gender-neutral pronouns. Bradley, Schmid and Lombardo (2019) suggested that it could be that people who use singular *they*, especially for specific antecedents, have a more flexible view on social gender. Pauwels (2001) demonstrated that despite endeavours by Australian media to promote usage of dual pronoun strategy *he or she* in public speech, it was singular *they* usage that increased most evidently. Therefore, this study suggests that socio-cultural processes and linguistic behaviour may be interrelated. Acculturation and changing attitudes towards equality and gender diversity seem to have resulted in an increased awareness of gender-neutral language, which in its turn may have influenced linguistic behaviour. Thus, singular *they* usage may, therefore, reflect awareness and changing attitudes about the appropriateness of gender polarity in the English lexicon.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how and why native speakers of English use singular *they* in contexts where the gender of an antecedent is unspecified. More specifically, it attempted to compare usage of singular *they* in free writing with usage of singular *they* in an experimental forced-choice setup, by means of a description task and a gap-fill task, respectively. The gap-fill context subsequently allowed for the collection of qualitative data to explore participants' motivation behind pronoun choices.

The results of the different tasks in the questionnaire suggest that singular *they* is the most prevalent pronoun choice. In both free written responses and the gap-fill task, this pronoun strategy is most often chosen among the participants. This supports findings from previous studies that indicate that singular *they* is used extensively as generic singular pronouns, and it additionally suggests that its usage in writing has been increasing compared to earlier decades (Balhorn, 2004; Baranowski, 2002; LaScotte, 2016; Meyers, 1990; Pauwels & Winter, 2006). The results do not suggest any significant differences between usage of singular *they* between men and women, and between older and younger language users within this participant population. Although the participant distribution between men and women was quite balanced, suggesting that within this participant group there indeed are no differences between singular *they* usage of men and women, this distribution with regard to age was rather lopsided. As the majority of the participant population of this study is younger than 30 years old, further research could explore the usage of singular *they* among older generations. Further research may then reveal whether or not younger language users are more progressive in their singular *they* usage as was suggested by Bradley, Salkind et al. (2019). If it is the case that young language users are more progressive in using singular *they*, then the fact that younger language users were rather overrepresented in the participant population in the current study may account for the extensive increase of singular *they* usage.

The qualitative responses from the third task indicate that many participants are aware of the status of singular *they* as a gender-neutral pronoun that can be used in the third-person singular context. The participants use various motivations for pronoun choice, such as inclusivity, neutrality and even political correctness. This study ventures to suggest that there may be a link between ongoing social changes, for example with regards to gender diversity, and changing attitudes about the appropriateness of gender polarity in the pronoun lexicon. However, this study looked at motivations for pronoun usage in this specific environment, the gap-fill task. This experimental setting is not entirely ecologically valid. Thus, further research could focus on the justifications that speakers of English have for using singular *they* in a setting that reflects real-world usage.

Nevertheless, this study indicates the magnitude of singular *they* as a generic third-person singular pronoun. Usage of this gender-neutral pronoun has grown over the past decades and seems to be steadily increasing. Whereas approximately forty years ago, native speakers of English were somewhat uncomfortable using singular *they*, this situation seems to have completely reversed (Bate, 1978; Hairston, 1981). This study, therefore, suggests that most native speakers of English consider singular *they* as a gender-neutral and inclusive pronoun strategy, and therefore apply it when referring to genderless antecedents.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Questionnaire:

You are invited to take part in this questionnaire. It involves filling in several parts which should take approximately 15 minutes.

Your answers are fully anonymous and will only be used for research purposes.

Your participation in this questionnaire is completely voluntary.

It is important that you carefully read the instructions for each part of the questionnaire.

By participating in this study, you confirm that you have read the information regarding this questionnaire and agree to participate in it voluntarily.

Section 1

Background information

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other

What is your age?

What is/are your native language(s)?

Section 2 *Description Task*

Take some time to think about qualities and characteristics that the ideal student would need to have in order to be successful in University.

Please, write a response to the following questions in some detail:

- *What are some characteristics and qualities that an ideal student needs to have?*
- *What does this ideal student need to do, or not do, in order to graduate successfully?*
- *What might be some consequences if the student fails to have the right work ethic?*

Please answer all these questions in one paragraph.
Use **complete** sentences and be as **specific** as possible.

Section 3 *Gap-fill exercise*

The next part is a fill in the gap exercise.
Please select the word you would most likely use in following situations.

1.

You are at school talking to a friend about a teacher whom many classmates don't particularly like. You don't agree, and respond:

It's not _____ fault you find this class boring. It's just because you don't like maths.

- his
 - her
 - his or her
 - their
 - Other, namely: _____
-

2.

Your company has hired a new technician whom you are going to show around tomorrow. You are discussing this with a colleague, and you say:

I hope _____ will enjoy being part of our company.

- he
 - she
 - he or she
 - they
 - Other, namely: _____
-

3.

You and a friend are walking to the train station when suddenly you see a pedestrian running a red light and nearly getting hit by a bus.

You say:

Did you see that? Why did _____ do that?

- he
 - she
 - he or she
 - they
 - Other, namely: _____
-

4.

One of your colleagues used to be a social worker. The two of you are talking about this and you say:

I always thought that a social worker would need to spend all of ____ time at work.

- his
- her
- his or her
- their
- Other, namely: _____

5.

You are talking about politics with a few friends.

You say:

I believe a politician should keep ____ promise.

- his
- her
- his or her
- their
- Other, namely: _____

6.

You are talking with a few friends about what a child should or should not eat.

You say:

If a child eats enough vegetables, it won't harm ____ to have something less nutritious once in a while.

- him
- her
- him or her
- them
- Other, namely: _____

Section 4 Motivation

Depending on the answer given in each of the gap-fill questions, a reflection question will appear.

[There are 30 of such questions in total (6x5) as there are five possible answers for each of the six questions. In this overview, one reflection question for each gap-fill will be demonstrated]

1.

In this situation you filled in:

You are at school talking to a friend about one of the teachers who many classmates don't particularly like. You don't agree and respond:

It's not *her* fault you find this class boring. It's just because you don't like maths.

Why did you choose this personal pronoun?

There are no right or wrong answers. Please be as specific as possible.

2.

In this situation you filled in:

Your company has hired a new technician who you are going to show around tomorrow. You are discussing this with a colleague, and you say:

I hope *he* will enjoy being part of our company.

Why did you choose this personal pronoun?

There are no right or wrong answers. Please be as specific as possible.

3.

In this situation you filled in:

You and a friend are walking to the train station when suddenly you see a pedestrian running a red light and nearly getting hit by a bus.

You say:

Did you see that? Why did *they* do that?

Why did you choose this personal pronoun?

There are no right or wrong answers. Please be as specific as possible.

4.

In this situation you filled in:

One of your colleagues used to be a social worker. The two of you are talking about this and you say:

I always thought that a social worker would need to spend all of *his or her* time at work.

Why did you choose this strategy?

There are no right or wrong answers. Please be as specific as possible.

5.

You used a different strategy in:

You are talking about politics with a few friends.

You say:

I believe a politician should keep ____ promise.

Why did you choose this strategy?

There are no right or wrong answers. Please be as specific as possible.

6.

In this situation you filled in:

You are talking with a few friends about what a child should or should not eat.

You say:

If a child eats enough vegetables, it won't harm *them* to have something less nutritious once in a while.

Why did you choose this personal pronoun?

There are no right or wrong answers. Please be as specific as possible.

Section 5 *Reflection*

The final part is about how you experienced this questionnaire.
There are no right or wrong answers.

1.

Did you feel influenced in any way while taking this questionnaire?
If so, please explain how.

- No
- Yes

2.

You may have noticed that there has been an interest in use of pronouns related to gender.

Perhaps you have an opinion on this matter or something to say about it.

If you do, please elaborate on this.

3.

When referring to a person whose gender is unknown, how do you usually do this?

4.

Do you have a reason for doing it this way?

If so, please explain.

5.

Do you think using the pronoun *they* is appropriate in a singular context where you don't know the gender of a person?

For example, "If a child eats enough vegetables, it won't harm **them** to have something less nutritious once in a while."

- Yes

- No

6.

Please explain why you think it is or is not appropriate.

7.

Do you think using the pronoun *he* is appropriate in a singular context where you don't know the gender of a person?

For example, "If a child eats enough vegetables, it won't harm **him** to have something less nutritious once in a while."

- Yes

- No

8.

Please explain why you think it is or is not appropriate.

Thank you very much for taking part in this questionnaire.
Please, do not forget to save your answers by clicking to the next page.

If you have further questions, please send it to:
f.blankestijn@student.ru.nl

Appendix II

Dear participant,

My name is Femke Blankestijn and I am a student of English in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. For my bachelor's thesis, I am investigating the way native speakers of English write. It would therefore be very helpful if you could fill in this questionnaire.

There will be instructions for each part of the questionnaire, but what is also important when filling in the questions:

- Please write in complete sentences when asked to do this.
- Please provide answers which sound most natural to you. There are no wrong or right answers.
- Please try to be as elaborate and specific as possible in your answers.

The questionnaire is completely anonymous. I will only use your answers for this specific research. You are also allowed to stop at any moment during the questionnaire. However, once you have submitted your answers, they cannot be taken out, as they are anonymous.

You are also more than welcome to share the questionnaire with family or friends. That would help me greatly.

Thank you very much for filling in this questionnaire and if you have any questions before or after doing so, you are more than welcome to contact me.

Best wishes,
Femke Blankestijn

f.blankestijn@student.ru.nl

+31611899973

You can find the questionnaire by clicking on the link or by scanning the QR code.

https://radboudletteren.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0J0mamGETOZleBf

