

ENGLISH EPICENE PRONOUN USE AMONG MACEDONIAN STUDENTS: INSIGHTS FROM A FORM-FOCUSED ELICITED PRODUCTION TASK

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Abstract. This study investigates Macedonian university students' use of English epicene pronouns with different antecedent types based on a form-focused elicited production task. In the academic years 2021/22 and 2024/25, the same discrete-point test was administered among second-year and fourth-year English majors, aiming to discover patterns in the students' choice of pronouns when they refer back to diverse indefinite pronouns, the noun *person*, and nouns denoting male- and female-stereotyped occupations. The quantitative analysis revealed high overall usage of singular *they* in both groups, with fourth-year students demonstrating consistently higher rates of singular *they* use compared to second-year students across all antecedent types in 2021/22, while in 2024/25 second-year students converged towards and even surpassed the scores of the fourth-year students with some types of antecedents. These findings indicate stabilisation of singular *they* as an epicene pronoun of choice among Macedonian learners, possibly as a result of the increasing extra-curricular exposure to English, evolving gender ideologies and academic progression.

Keywords: epicene pronouns; singular *they*; learner English; gender-inclusive language

1. Introduction

Debates focusing on inclusive language practices do not reflect only grammatical tradition but also shifting social ideologies (Curzan, 2003; Baron, 2020; Hekanaho, 2020). One of the central issues in these debates concerns the choice of epicene pronouns, i.e. pronominal forms used to refer back to a grammatically singular antecedent whose gender is unspecified or unknown. Historically, the most commonly used epicene pronouns in English were the generic *he*, the combined pronoun *he or she*, and singular *they*. From the eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, generic *he* remained the grammatically prescribed epicene pronoun (Bodine, 1975; Baranowski, 2002). With the rise of the second-wave feminist movement, as part of the struggle for gender equality, the use of the combined pronoun *he or she* became more widespread (ADAMI, 2009), as it gave women greater visibility in language.

However, the growing awareness of gender diversity and the increasing importance of gender-inclusive language in recent decades has underscored the role of singular *they* as an epicene pronoun in English (Hekanaho, 2020; Foertsch; Gernsbacher, 1997). While its use is currently officially endorsed in English manuals of style (American psychological association, 2020; University of Chicago Press, 2024), the situation in L2 English remains variable and is shaped by L1 linguistic structure, the extent of exposure to gender-inclusive language models, as well as the broader socio-cultural context (Stormbom, 2018).

The use of epicene pronouns by Macedonian learners has already been examined in a corpus-based study of argumentative essays by university students of English (Stojanovska-Ilievska, 2024). However, a gap remains in understanding how students' preferred epicene pronouns shift over time in response to rapidly evolving gender ideologies. To address this gap, the present study employs a form-focused elicited production task to investigate the use of epicene pronouns among second- and fourth-year students in the academic years 2021/22 and 2024/25, focusing on three antecedent categories: indefinite pronouns, the noun *person*, and occupational nouns typically associated with gender stereotypes. By comparing results across years of study at the university and academic years, this paper explores how academic maturation is reflected in pronoun choice, while also discussing the possible influence of increased exposure to English, and shifting social attitudes.

This study is expected to raise awareness among EFL practitioners about the current state of affairs regarding the use of epicene pronouns in L2 English, and the findings could also contribute to the broader discussions concerning inclusive language practices.

2. Literature Review

The use of singular *they* as a gender-inclusive pronoun is not a novel phenomenon in the English language, as its use dates back to the Middle Ages (as early as the Old English period), when it functioned alongside the generic *he* and the combined pronoun *he or she* (Baranowski, 2002; Curzan, 2003). Yet, from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century the prescriptive grammarians insisted on the use of generic *he* as the norm (Bodine, 1975; Baranowski, 2002; Curzan, 2003), thus reflecting and perpetuating the androcentric views of society. Attempts at inclusivity through *he or she* ultimately fell out of favour due to its stylistic clumsiness (Bodine, 1975) and reinforcement of the binary gender distinction (Speyer; Schleef, 2019). As contemporary linguistic practice increasingly acknowledges singular *they* as both grammatically acceptable and socially inclusive, it has recently been formally recommended by major style guides, such as the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (American psychological association, 2020) and the Chicago Manual of Style (University of Chicago Press, 2024).

Research on the production of epicene pronouns in learner English remains fairly limited, and findings vary across L1 backgrounds. Studies of Arabic and Chinese learners (Abudalbuh, 2012; Zhang; Yang, 2021) consistently show a preference for the generic *he*, with only a limited use of singular *they*, reflecting the androcentric norms of their societies. Corpus-based research (Stormbom, 2018) confirms that L2 English learners generally use the generic *he* more than native writers, though both groups use *he or she* similarly. Learners from languages with traditional masculine generics (e.g. Russian, Italian, German, Czech, etc.) also display strong bias towards the generic *he*. By contrast, diachronic data on Swedish learners (Stormbom, 2019) demonstrate a sharp decline in *he* and increased use of singular *they*, influenced by feminist language reforms. With the growing awareness of gender bias in language and the massive support for gender-inclusive language in recent years, the timing of data collection for epicene pronoun research is paramount, as more recent data capture learner language at a time when singular *they* has already gained broad acceptance in various contexts. Thus, a study of argumentative essays written by advanced Macedonian learners of English in the mid-2010s from the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) – version 3, indicated that these students used singular *they* considerably more frequently than their peers from diverse other L1 backgrounds, whose essays were collected between 1991 and 2004 and were included in ICLE – version 2 (Stojanovska-Ilievska, 2024). Other recent studies show that advanced learners seem to be approaching native-like use of singular *they* (Speyer; Schleef, 2019), or that learners demonstrate at least an evident rise in the use of singular *they* compared to studies based on essays written a decade earlier, even in situations where generic *he* is still predominant, as is the case with Chinese learners (SUN, 2026).

Empirical studies of epicene pronouns used by L2 English speakers have shown that the use of singular *they* is sensitive to the antecedent type (Newman, 1998; Paterson, 2014; Stormbom, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020; Stojanovska-Ilievska, 2024). Indefinite pronouns more readily elicit singular *they* than noun phrases (NPs) with quantifiers, indefinite NPs and definite NPs, which has to do with the degree of individuation of the NP. The more individuated an NP is, the less likely it is to elicit singular *they* as an epicene pronoun.

There is ample evidence that occupational nouns automatically activate gender stereotypes even among native English speakers, whether through gender-marked terms like *chairman* (McConnell; Fazio, 1996) or through stereotypically male/female roles such as *doctor* or *nurse* (Banaji, & Hardin, 1996; Carreiras et al., 1996). Prior studies using word pairs, sentence recall and eye-movement demonstrated that readers process information more easily when it aligns with gender stereotypes (Oakhill et al., 2005; Dunning; Sherman, 1997; Duffy; Keir, 2004). All these findings suggest that language reforms alone may not eliminate entrenched occupational stereotypes since they stem from actual experiences, such as socialization or

observation (Lassonde; O'Brien, 2013). In a similar vein, Stormbom (2022) found that EFL learners tended to use singular *they* considerably less in circumstances where the antecedent was a gender-stereotyped noun (*prisoner, nurse*) compared to situations where the antecedent was a notionally plural pronoun (*everyone*) or a gender-neutral noun (*person, student*), a possible rationale being that gender-stereotyped antecedents trigger male- or female-specific mental images, leading respondents to perceive them as individualized referents and thus to favour gendered pronouns in such cases.

Building on prior research into epicene pronoun use, the present study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent has the use of singular *they* changed in the academic year 2024/25 compared to 2021/22?
2. How does antecedent type influence the use of singular *they*?
3. To what extent do second- and fourth-year university students differ in their use of singular *they* across all antecedent types?
4. Are occupational nouns traditionally associated with a specific gender more likely to elicit gendered pronouns than the other antecedents?

In the context of these research questions, the following hypotheses were investigated:

1. The 2024/25 dataset is expected to demonstrate a higher frequency of singular *they* than the 2021/22 dataset.
2. Occupational nouns are expected to elicit a lower frequency of singular *they* than the antecedent *person* or indefinite pronouns.
3. Fourth-year students are expected to use inclusive pronouns more frequently than second-year students across all antecedent types.
4. Gender-stereotyped occupational noun antecedents are expected to elicit greater use of gendered epicene pronouns (*he, she*) than other antecedent types.

3. Methodological approach

The study participants comprised a total of 117 undergraduate students (mean age: 21.62 years) enrolled in the Department of English language and literature at the Faculty of Philology of Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. The same test was administered among second-year and fourth-year students in the academic years 2021/22 and 2024/25. The study included a total of 62 students in their second year and 55 students in their fourth year of university studies. In terms of their gender, there were 95 female and 22 male participants. The students' level of English was not specifically determined for the purposes of this study, but based on the curricula, participants in the second year are expected to be at an upper-intermediate to advanced level of English (B2 – C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference – CEFR), while fourth-year students are expected to be on the spectrum between advanced and proficiency level of

English (C1 – C2 according to CEFR). Participation in the study was voluntary and students gave their consent for their replies to be analysed for research purposes.

A discrete-point grammatical test was compiled, consisting of 26 items designed to elicit epicene pronouns in a range of contexts. The test included four items for each of the following antecedent types: the indefinite pronouns *someone*, *everyone*, *anyone*, *no one* and the noun *person*, as well as six test items featuring occupational nouns traditionally associated with gender stereotypes (three male-stereotyped, three female-stereotyped). This form-focused test targeted the use of epicene pronouns in their subject, object, possessive determiner, and reflexive forms.

Each item consisted of a sentence with a gap, which the participants were instructed to fill in with whichever pronoun they deemed appropriate. Their responses were subsequently classified into four categories: singular *they* forms (*they*, *them*, *their*, *themselves*), generic *he* forms (*he*, *him*, *his*, *himself*), combined pronoun forms (*he/she*, *his/her*, *him/her*, *himself/herself*), and other (mainly articles, demonstrative pronouns, punctuation marks). The combined pronoun itself occurred in different forms, such as: *he or she*, *he/she*, *she/he*, etc. The testing sessions were conducted online. Students were allotted a maximum of 30 seconds per item, totalling 13 minutes for the completion of the entire task. No examples were provided prior to the task so as not to influence the students' choices.

Following the data collection, all responses were analysed using descriptive statistics to examine the differences in pronoun distribution between groups, as well as in the use of singular *they* across students' years of study at the university, academic years, different antecedent types and the students' gender. Tables and bar charts were employed to visually illustrate the key findings.

4. Results and Discussion

A total of 2,707 epicene pronouns (singular *they*, generic *he* and the combined pronoun *he/she*) were analysed in this study, while additional 335 responses were categorised as *other*, as they did not correspond to the categories under investigation.

4.1 Trends across academic years and years of study

When comparing the academic years 2021/22 and 2024/25 overall, it becomes apparent that the use of singular *they* increased considerably after the three-year gap, while the use of both the generic *he* and the combined pronoun declined to less than 1% (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of epicene pronouns in percentages by academic year

Academic Year	Singular <i>they</i>	Generic <i>he</i>	Combined pronoun <i>he/she</i>	Other
2021/22	76.16%	7.10%	2.65%	14.08%
2024/25	92.81%	0.92%	0.00%	6.27%

Fourth-year students show an overall higher use of singular *they* and the combined pronoun *he/she* compared to the second-year students, while their reliance on generic *he* is slightly lower (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of epicene pronouns in percentages by study year

Year of study	Singular <i>they</i>	Generic <i>he</i>	Combined pronoun <i>he/she</i>	Other
Second-year students	80.46%	4.90%	0.37%	14.27%
Fourth-year students	85.24%	4.41%	3.01%	7.34%

When distributions are cross-classified by academic year and by year of study, a clear dominance of singular *they* is revealed across the two academic years, both for second- and fourth-year students (Figure 1). In 2021/22, *they* was already the choice preferred by the majority of the students, but other options were also clearly measurable, such as generic *he* among second-year students (8%) and the combined pronoun *he/she* among fourth-year students (nearly 5%). By 2024/25, however, these alternative forms nearly disappeared, with singular *they* accounting for over 92% of responses in both study years. The reduction in *other* forms is particularly dramatic among second-year students, falling from nearly 20% to under 7%. The 2024/25 convergence between second- and fourth-year students, who clearly differed in their use of *they* and the alternative forms in 2021/22, might be pointing to a sociolinguistic shift towards *they* as the epicene pronoun of choice among Macedonian students.

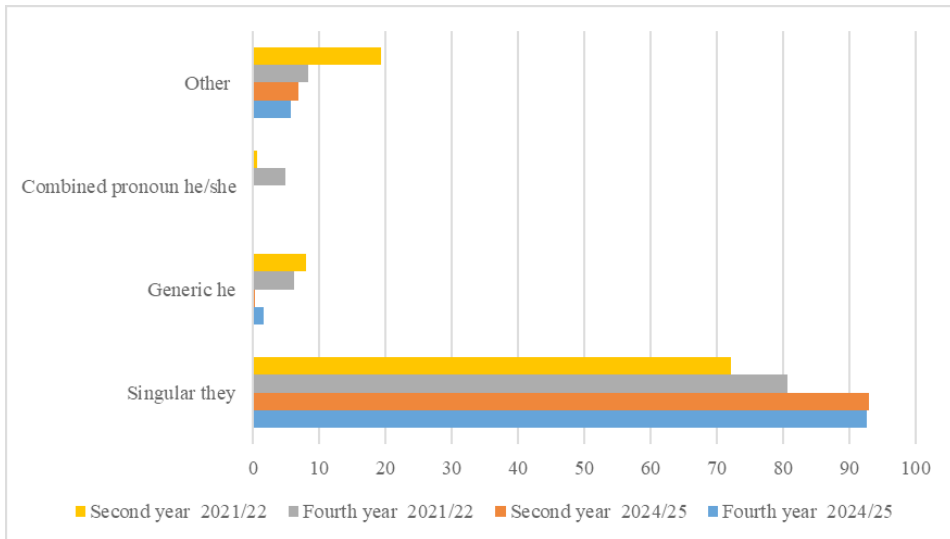


Figure 1. Distribution of epicene pronouns in percentages by study year and academic year

The almost complete disappearance of generic *he* in 2024/25 could suggest that students have become increasingly sensitive to the negative associations related to this form in contemporary society. On the other hand, the occurrence of *he/she* mainly among fourth-year students in 2021/22, seems to reflect the more traditional, binary-gender attempt at inclusivity that was more prevalent at that point in time. The fact that the combined pronoun had vanished by 2024/25 suggests that students now prefer the structurally simpler and socially more acceptable singular *they*. Overall, the findings confirm the first hypothesis, as singular *they* is more prevalent in the 2024/25 dataset than the 2021/22 dataset.

4.2. Gender-based trends

As is shown in Table 3, male students consistently showed higher averages in the use of singular *they* than female students, both across academic years and across years of study, the performance gap being most notable among the fourth-year students in 2021/22 (91.54% vs 78.78%). An earlier study of essays written by Macedonian learners of English in the mid-2010s (Stojanovska-Ilievska, 2024) found the opposite pattern, with male students using singular *they* less and generic *he* more frequently than female students. Thus, a comparison between these two studies seems to reveal some progress among male students over the past decade in their acceptance of singular *they*.

The analysis also pointed out that both male and female students have shown considerable increase in the use of the gender-inclusive pronoun in 2024/25. This is

particularly evident in the second year, where male students made the highest leap of almost 26 percentage points, from 73.08% to 99.04%. The use of the generic *he* among the second-year male participants plummeted from 9.62% in 2021/22 to 0% in 2024/25, while the combined pronoun *he/she* was the least popular choice, with no occurrences in 2024/25 in any gender. Interestingly, the scores for the generic *he* were lower among the second-year participants of both genders in 2024/25, though academic progression suggests that it would actually be the fourth-year students who would display lower use of the male-biased generic *he*. This might indicate that the use of this pronoun is more deeply ingrained in the senior students and it would take more time and conscious effort on their part to eliminate it from their vocabulary, while younger generations might find it easier to discard the use of this pronoun due to their having become aware of inclusive language practices earlier in their adolescence.

Table 3. Distribution of epicene pronouns in percentages by students' gender, academic year and year of study

Year of study	Gender	Academic Year	Singular <i>they</i>	Generic <i>he</i>	Combined pronoun <i>he/she</i>	Other
Fourth Year	Female	2021/22	78.78	6.76	5.57	8.89
Fourth Year	Female	2024/25	91.83	1.68	0.00	6.49
Fourth Year	Male	2021/22	91.54	2.31	0.77	5.38
Fourth Year	Male	2024/25	95.38	1.54	0.00	3.08
Second Year	Female	2021/22	71.75	7.56	0.80	19.89
Second Year	Female	2024/25	91.76	0.37	0.00	7.88
Second Year	Male	2021/22	73.08	9.62	0.00	17.31
Second Year	Male	2024/25	99.04	0.00	0.00	0.96

4.3. Antecedent Type

Pronoun choice varied markedly by antecedent type. Viewed in their totality, the data indicate that students used singular *they* most frequently with indefinite pronouns (*everyone, no one, anyone, someone*) as antecedents (85.84%), somewhat less often with the noun *person* as an antecedent (83.33%), while occupational nouns as antecedents elicit the use of singular *they* in 73.93% of the cases (Table 4). The widespread use of singular *they* with indefinite pronouns has commonly been attested in the literature, the rationale being that indefinite pronouns demonstrate a low degree of individuation and are sometimes even notionally plural, which makes them more amenable for the use of singular *they* than for the use of generic *he* (Newman, 1998; Paterson, 2014; Stormbom, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020; Quirk

et al., 1985). In contrast, when a person encounters a sentence containing a gender-stereotyped occupational noun (such as *a nurse* or *an engineer*), it evokes a mental image shaped by prior experiences and cultural expectations, in which certain jobs are typically associated with a particular gender (Stormbom, 2022). These findings collectively confirm the second hypothesis.

Response Type	Indefinite Pronoun	Occupational Noun	The noun <i>person</i>
Singular <i>they</i>	85.84%	73.93%	83.33%
Generic <i>he</i>	2.24%	10.83%	5.13%
Combined pronoun <i>he/she</i>	0.64%	3.70%	2.35%
Other	11.27%	11.54%	9.19%

Table 4. Distribution of epicene pronouns in percentages by antecedent type

As is evident from Figure 2 and Figure 3, the use of singular *they* considerably increased in 2024/25 across all types of antecedents, both in the second and the fourth year, the differences being more striking among the second-year students. Surprisingly, in 2024/25 the second-year students matched the fourth-year students in their use of singular *they* and even slightly outperformed them with the occupational nouns and the noun *person* as antecedents. Hence, the third hypothesis was fully confirmed only in the 2021/22 data, whereas in 2024/25 the effects of academic maturation could have been offset by the growing awareness of inclusive language among second-year students. Unlike singular *they*, generic *he* figures declined dramatically in the more recent academic year, while the combined pronoun is practically non-existent in the data from 2024/25.

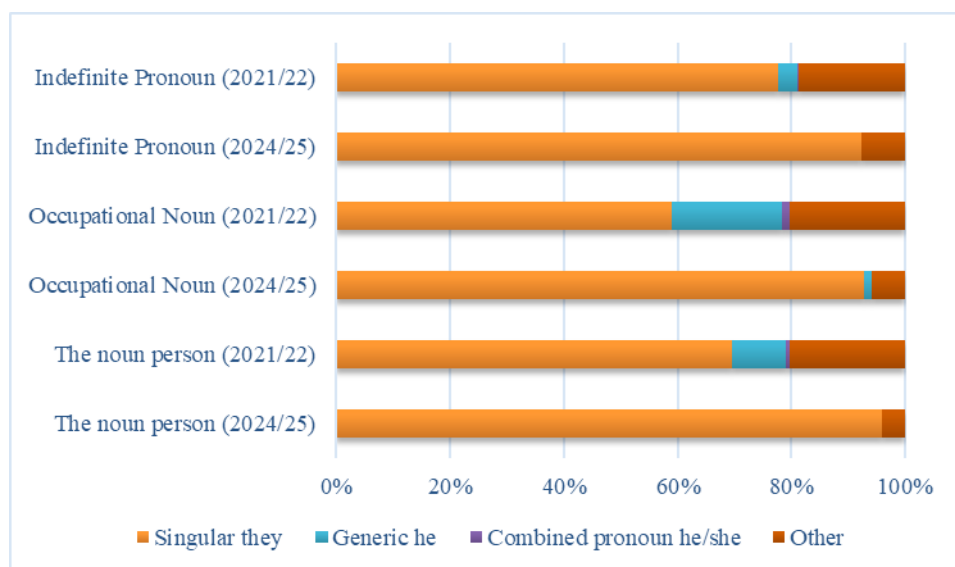


Figure 2. Distribution of epicene pronouns by antecedent type and academic year among second-year students

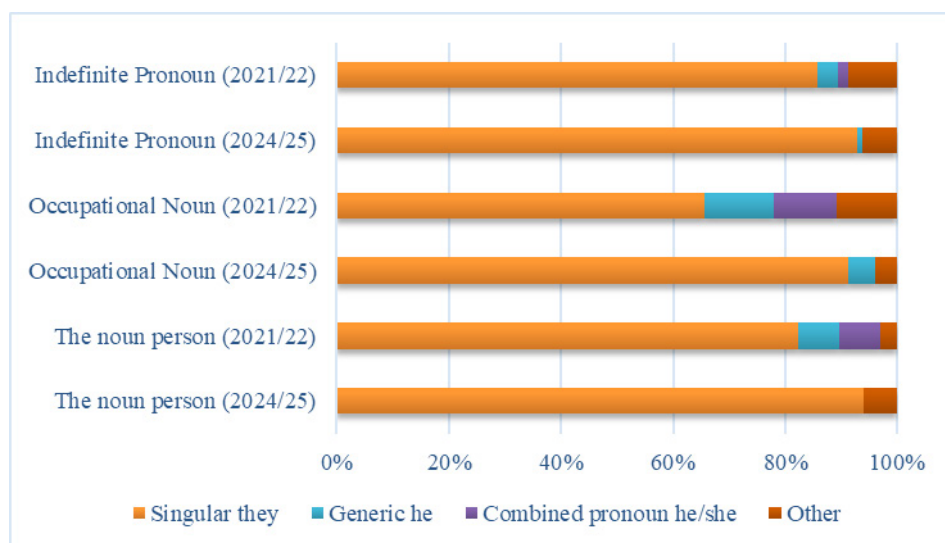


Figure 3. Distribution of epicene pronouns by antecedent type and academic year among fourth-year students

Figures 2 and 3 also reveal that gender-stereotyped occupational nouns elicited noticeably higher rates of gendered pronouns than other antecedents. For instance, in 2021/22 second-year students used *he* almost one-fifth of the time with occupational nouns (19.37%), compared to just 3.38% with indefinite pronouns and 9.46% with the noun *person*, while fourth-year students showed a similar pattern with 12.25% of generic *he* and 11.27% of *he/she* for occupational nouns versus only 3.49% of generic *he* and 1.84% of *he/she* for indefinite pronouns. In 2024/25, however, despite the dominance of singular *they* across all categories (over 90%), occupational nouns still elicited a higher use of *he* (4.76% in the fourth year; 1.33% in the second year) than the other antecedents, while the use of the combined pronoun *he/she* was practically eradicated. This trend might indicate that occupational nouns continue to trigger gendered associations more strongly than other antecedents, even as the inclusive singular *they* gains prominence. Accordingly, the fourth hypothesis is confirmed, particularly in the data from 2021/22, while in 2024/25 the association is somewhat weakened due to the broader decline in the use of gendered epicene pronouns across all antecedents.

Table 5 shows that the use of singular *they* with both male- and female-associated nouns as antecedents increased substantially in the academic year 2024/25 in both years of study. No student used the combined pronoun *he/she* with any occupational noun in 2024/25. The consistent downward trend in the use of the generic *he* from 2021/22 to 2024/25 across both years of study is most apparent in the decline of 22 percentage points for male-associated occupational nouns among second-year students. Interestingly, while in 2021/22 the fourth-year students relied less on the use of the generic *he*, this trend shifted in 2024/25 when it was actually the second-year students who tended to use less generic *he* both with male- and female-associated nouns, suggesting that younger generations seem to be more sensitive to inclusive language, regardless of the advantage for the fourth-year students brought about by academic maturation. As for the combined pronoun *he/she*, in 2021/22 it was used mainly by fourth-year students who were probably aware of the gender bias in the generic *he*, but were not familiar enough or brave enough to use singular *they* instead.

That generic *he* (including the possessive *his*) would sometimes be used with male-stereotyped occupational nouns (e.g. *engineer*, *police officer*) as antecedents is hardly surprising. In our datasets there were 42 instances of *he* with these nouns, the majority of which occurred in 2021/22, when they appeared six times more frequently than in 2024/25 (36 vs 6 occurrences respectively). The pronoun *she* was never used with these nouns, while *he/she* occurred 17 times. Focusing on female-stereotyped occupational nouns (e.g. *primary school teacher*, *ballet dancer*) as antecedents, it was found that the gendered pronoun *she* (including the possessive *her*) occurred only in the 2021/22 dataset, eight times altogether. Generic *he* was used three times more frequently with these same nouns, which shows a clear

preference for *he* over *she* even when referring back to stereotypically female occupations. The combined pronoun was used 14 times, all of which in 2021/22. These patterns could point to a male bias in the students who chose to use gendered pronouns, with *he* being strongly favoured over *she* for both male- and female-stereotyped occupations.

Table 5. Distribution of epicene pronouns in percentages by occupational noun subtype, academic year and year of study

Year of Study	Academic Year	Occupational Noun Subtype	Singular <i>they</i> %	Generic <i>he</i> %	Combined <i>he/she</i> %	Other %
Second Year	2021/22	Male-associated	50.45	25.23	0.90	23.42
Second Year	2024/25	Male-associated	93.33	2.67	0.00	4.00
Second Year	2021/22	Female-associated	67.57	13.51	1.80	17.12
Second Year	2024/25	Female-associated	92.00	0.00	0.00	8.00
Fourth Year	2021/22	Male-associated	62.75	17.65	11.76	7.84
Fourth Year	2024/25	Male-associated	92.06	6.35	0.00	1.59
Fourth Year	2021/22	Female-associated	68.63	6.86	10.78	13.73
Fourth Year	2024/25	Female-associated	90.48	3.17	0.00	6.35

In both study years, singular *they* was used more often with female-associated occupational nouns than with male-associated ones in 2021/22. This pattern seems to suggest that *they* was more readily accepted as a neutral substitute when the antecedent was a female-stereotyped noun, whereas male-stereotyped nouns continued to elicit alternative forms, particularly *he*. By 2024/25, contrasts between male- and female-associated nouns regarding the use of *they* had virtually disappeared. This is due to the increase of 43 percentage points in the use of *they* with male-stereotyped nouns among second-year students, possibly suggesting a reduction in gender bias and increased awareness of inclusive forms. Actually, both second- and fourth-year students used *they* at very high and nearly identical rates for both occupational noun subtypes (92 – 93% with male-associated roles, 90–92% with female-associated roles) in 2024/25. This narrowing of the gap between the two academic years could be perceived as a reflection of the stabilisation of the use of singular *they* in

the English-language media in recent years. Hence, while gender associations initially shaped pronoun choice, they no longer exerted such influence in 2024/25.

4.4. Individual variation

Considerable individual variation in the use of singular *they* was observed across academic years. Among second-year students, its use in 2021/22 ranged from 19.23% to 100%, while in 2024/25 it ranged from 57.69% to 100%. The use of singular *they* among fourth-year students ranged from 26.92% – 100% in 2021/22 and in 2024/25 it ranged between 69.23% and 100%, which shows that the minimum performance noticeably improved over time, while the maximum scores stayed high. These results might point to a growing awareness of inclusive language, although singular *they* is not uniformly applied in all contexts. Academic progression appears to contribute to its adoption in the students' lexicon, yet internalization remains incomplete even by the final study year. Given the masculine generics of Macedonian, the students' L1 might have influenced some pronoun choices, but there were students who appeared to be less reliant on their L1 as well. Students who used singular *they* in most contexts may have had greater exposure to inclusive English through the media, the Internet, or their social life. In addition to this, pronoun preferences could be reflective of the students' personal beliefs: students who had adopted a more liberal and progressive position on the issue could have consciously chosen inclusive pronouns, while others who had a more conservative outlook, may have resorted to generic *he* or alternated between different options.

4.5. Pedagogical implications

Although the data indicate that singular *they* is already prevalent among students, targeted instruction could further normalize its use across all antecedent types, particularly in gender-stereotyped occupational contexts. This is especially important due to the high individual variation among students. By modelling and practising inclusive language in class, language instructors could positively develop their students' inclusive practices not only in language, but also in other areas of life.

4.6. Limitations and directions for future research

Despite the valuable insights offered by this study, it also has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, since the participant sample consists exclusively of Macedonian students of English language and literature, the findings cannot be used to generalize the degree of singular *they* adoption in broader university student populations. Secondly, although they allow efficient comparability of results, form-focused tests may not fully reflect spontaneous language production. Finally, a longitudinal study tracking the same group of students over time may provide a more precise view of the developmental tendencies in epicene pronoun use among study participants.

5. Conclusion

This study provides further evidence that singular *they* is consolidating its position as the epicene pronoun of choice among English language learners in a Macedonian academic environment. While in 2024/25 there was an increase in the use of singular *they* both among second- and fourth-year students, it was the second-year students that made a more dramatic improvement. Wider sociolinguistic influences, such as exposure to gender-inclusive English, growing disapproval of the male-biased generic *he*, and greater acceptance of diverse gender identities appear to support this trend, along with academic maturation. Pronoun selection also seems to be related to antecedent types. Gendered pronouns are still evident, particularly in the case of gender-associated occupational nouns, but overall there is a shift towards broader acceptance of the singular *they*, at the expense of the generic *he* and the combined pronoun *he/she*, which seem to be falling out of favour. The pedagogical implications underscore the importance of modelling inclusive language practices in higher education and explicitly familiarising students with the latest English epicene pronoun recommendations for formal academic discourse. In an era when particular attention is paid to the acceptance of diversity, encouraging gender-inclusive linguistic practices among students is an essential aspect of education.

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