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Gendering in Open Access Research Articles: The Role of Epicene Pronouns

Research articles in English are read and composed by individuals from many lingua-cultural backgrounds; this diversity in the users of English as an academic lingua franca is likely to increase further with the rise of open access (OA) publishing. In the light of this, a pertinent question is how gender is constructed in international research articles. This study examines OA articles ($N = 1003$) with respect to the use of epicene pronouns, third-person singular pronouns of indeterminate gender. The analysis of pronominal reference shows that the non-gendered singular *they* was the most common pronoun overall, closely followed by gendered *he or she* forms. The use of generic *he* also occurred with some frequency. Further, the study investigates what kinds of author guidelines OA journals have for the use of gender-fair language. The analysis reveals that specific guidelines were generally uncommon, and that there was no immediate correspondence between policy and practice in cases where journals provided guidelines. Taken together, the findings disclose a state of flux in the use of epicene pronouns in OA articles. A key issue in international publishing and journal editing is thus to raise awareness about gendered language through guidelines and submission checklists.

Keywords: ELF, gender-fair language, academic writing, open access

1 Introduction

International research publications in English are consumed and produced by individuals from a wide range of linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds. In addition, journal editors and reviewers – the gatekeepers of scholarly publishing – also represent different backgrounds. This diversity in the users of English as an academic lingua franca raises important questions about how gender is treated and constructed in research articles. The topic of language and gender has been discussed extensively in English language communities over the past fifty years, as a result of feminist linguistic activism (see e.g. Curzan 2003, 2014). The fruits of linguistic activism are visible in the context of academic writing in the sense that publishing manuals now generally include sections on how to avoid gender-bias in English (see e.g. *Chicago Manual of Style* 2017 and *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* 2019). Efforts to eradicate gender-biased language have also been seen in many other language communities – in some, for several decades, and in others, the process has started only recently. The recommended strategies for avoiding gender-bias depend heavily on the structural make-up of

a given language, but they are also formed by the prevailing gendered discourses in a society (for a review, see Bußmann & Hellinger 2001, 2002, 2003). Thus, as Pauwels (2011: 21) concludes, the global use of English presents major challenges in “finding a balance between the universal/global desire for linguistic equality of the sexes and the linguistic conditions of local/regional socio-cultural contexts”.

Against this background, the present paper explores in what ways gender is constructed in published research articles in English. A form of publishing that is currently on the upswing is open access (henceforth OA). The OA initiative was first formalised in Budapest in 2001, and its main goal is to make research publications accessible online for free. This is an important step in increasing equality in access to research – not least in developing countries, where journal subscriptions are often unaffordable (for an overview, see Suber 2012). Studies have confirmed that OA publishing leads to an increase in downloads and citations of articles compared to traditional subscription-based publishing (see e.g. Davis et al. 2008; Davis 2011; Piwowar 2018). As far as gender is concerned, there are, to the best of the author’s knowledge, no previous studies of OA articles. Yet, given the increasing popularity of OA as well its potential to further expand the use of English as an academic lingua franca, it is highly relevant to examine what models of gender construction the readership is met with, as well as what author instructions (if any) OA journals provide for the use of gender-fair language.

The expression of gender can take many different forms in language. A central structural resource for constructing gender in English is third-person pronominal reference. The focus of the present study is on the use of epicene pronouns, that is, third-person singular pronouns co-occurring with generic antecedents, such as *person* or *somebody*. Using a corpus-based approach, the study addresses the following questions:

- (1) How is the generic individual constructed in OA journal articles, for instance as male, female, or gender-neutral?

- (2) What differences, if any, are there between adjacent academic disciplines in terms of how authors construct generic individuals in OA articles?
- (3) What kinds of guidelines, if any, do OA journals provide for the use of gender-fair language?

2 English as an academic lingua franca

Over the last couple of decades, the notion of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has been discussed extensively, not least in relation to academia (see e.g. Ingvarsdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir 2013; Mauranen 2012; Mauranen, Hynninen & Ranta 2010; Tardy 2004). Following Firth's (1996: 240) well-known definition, ELF can be understood as a means of communication for speakers from different lingua-cultural backgrounds; the prototypical ELF situation is thus one in which communication is co-constructed by two or more individuals. For many researchers, such a definition includes the presence of L1 speakers, as they do not, in fact, share an L1 with L2 speakers of English (see e.g. Mauranen 2012: 9; see also Phillipson 2008: 263 for opposing views). The use of English in academic journal publishing is also a type of ELF situation, with writers and audience alike representing a diverse range of linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds (see e.g. Ingvarsdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir 2013, Mauranen 2012). Nonetheless, published articles – whether online or in printed format – generally go through rounds of editing and proofing, making them the product of more than one person's linguistic resources (see Lillis & Curry 2006). The language background of journal editors and reviewers is, of course, also subject to variation.

Research articles are, however, generally expected to adhere to L1 English norms (see e.g. Turner 2018), with both editors and reviewers acting as linguistic gatekeepers. Many journals state in their author guidelines that L2 speakers should have their manuscripts proofread by an L1 speaker prior to submission (see e.g. McKinley & Rose 2018), and studies have indicated that issues with fulfilling L1 norms can lead to L2 speakers of English being

disadvantaged in international publishing (see e.g. Canagarajah 1996, Flowerdew 2008). Nonetheless, it is very difficult to assess to what extent L2 speakers' manuscripts are disregarded by editors or reviewers on the basis of 'poor' language alone (Flowerdew 2008). Hyland (2016) argues that the distinction between L1 and L2 speakers is not necessarily a fruitful starting point in the context of academic publishing, and that non-nativeness in itself is generally not the issue; rather, difficulties in getting articles published tend to be associated with lack of access to resources as well as to sufficient models in terms of structuring and presentation of arguments. Arguably, these are issues that can just as well affect L1 speakers, given that academic writing is a learned process for L1 and L2 speakers alike (see e.g. Turner 2018). Research has also shown that many L2 English users do not, in fact, feel that they are disadvantaged as L2 users in international publishing (see e.g. Kuteeva 2015, Kuteeva & McGrath 2014); in a study by Kuteeva & McGrath (2014: 8) one L2 English informant described publishing in English as a "nobody's land" that is shared by all members of an academic research community (but see e.g. Olsson & Sheridan 2012 for counter-evidence).

3 Gender-related discourses in English

3.1 Approaches to the study of language and gender

The study of language and gender has moved in different directions over the years (for a review, see e.g. Bucholtz 2014; Pauwels 1998). Early research on gender in English was firmly rooted in second-wave feminism and focused largely on structural linguistic gender. The locus of second-wave feminism was markedly western, starting in the 1960s in North America and then spreading to Western Europe. An immediate goal of linguistic studies within this tradition was to uncover male gender-bias in language use, and, as a consequence thereof, female linguistic invisibility. Many feminist linguists at the time argued that women's position in society could only change if language use changed, although not everyone shared such a deterministic outlook

(see e.g. Pauwels 1998). In the early 1990s, third-wave feminism emerged in English-language communities as a continuation as well as a reaction to second-wave feminism (see e.g. Litosseliti & Sunderland 2002; Mills 2003). A significant development within this movement was a change in how gender is understood: instead of viewing gender as something individuals possess, third-wave feminism conceptualises gender as a performative, something people ‘do’. Thus, third-wave feminist linguistics primarily focuses on gender and sexism as discursive practices that are constructed and performed locally. Another more recent avenue in language and gender research is the examination and questioning of heteronormativity and gender binarism (see e.g. Bradley et al. 2019).

The English language with its global reach presents a unique object of study in research on language and gender. In the context of academia, research articles in English are read and produced by individuals who have different views and experiences relating to gender, both in society at large and in relation to language use specifically. In language communities where investigations of gender-bias in language are in their early days, second-wave approaches tend to be dominant, and, thus, the focus of research lies primarily on how structural features of language express inequality, such as lexicon and grammar (for an overview, see Bußmann & Hellinger 2001, 2002, 2003). In other language communities, like English, there has been a shift from research on specific linguistic structures to investigations that focus more on discursive constructions of sexism (see e.g. Pauwels 2011). Against this background, the study of gender in global uses of English warrants an approach that combines both structurally-oriented strategies and context-sensitive discursive strategies (see e.g. Mills 2003, Motschenbacher 2016; Pauwels 2011).

3.2 The case of epicene pronouns

One highly-debated, structural issue of gender in English is the choice of ‘epicene pronouns’, i.e. third-person singular pronouns that co-occur with gender-indefinite antecedents. The three most prevalent types of epicene pronouns are generic *he*, coordinations and composites like *he or she* and *he/she*, and singular *they* (see e.g. Baranowski 2002; Curzan 2014; Newman 1998). The antecedents these pronouns co-occur with include noun phrases (NPs) headed by common nouns denoting individuals, such as *person* and *student*, as well as singular indefinite pronouns, such as *someone* and *anybody* (see e.g. Baranowski 2002; Gerner 2000; Newman 1992; Paterson 2014). The NP antecedents can be categorised further into three types: definite NPs, like *the person*; indefinite NPs, like *a person*; and quantificational NPs, like *any person*.

As a result of second-wave feminist linguistic activism, there has been a change in the use of epicene pronouns in English-speaking communities since the 1970s: whereas generic *he* was the most frequently used epicene for a very long time, this is no longer the case. Instead, the use of *he or she* forms, and, in particular, singular *they*, have increased considerably (see e.g. Balhorn 2009; Laitinen 2007; Paterson 2014). As far as prescription is concerned, research has concluded that grammar books and style guides now tend to reject the use of generic *he*, and suggest various options in its place. In general, grammars seem to recommend using some kind of avoidance strategy, like pluralisation, or using *he or she* forms; until very recently, the use of singular *they* was rarely endorsed in prescriptive manuals (Paterson 2014), but it appears that this situation is currently changing (see e.g. *Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary* 2020 and *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* 2019). Research has also shown that L1 speakers of English perceive *he or she* forms as more correct than singular *they* in formal language (Bradley et al. 2019; LaScotte 2016), and that L2 users may hesitate to use singular *they* out of fear that it will be seen as a language error rather than as a premeditated choice (Pauwels 2011).

One factor that has proved to be relevant to the pronoun choice across styles and registers is the antecedent and its degree of individuation (see Paterson 2014; Stormbom 2018, 2019). The concept of individuation describes the ease with which an antecedent can be construed as a specific individual; thus, definite NPs (e.g. *this person*) are higher in individuation than indefinite NPs (e.g. *a person*), and indefinite NPs are higher in individuation than antecedents including quantifiers, i.e. quantificational NPs (*any person*) and indefinite pronouns (*anyone*). Studies have revealed that singular *they* is more likely to co-occur with antecedents that are low in individuation than with highly individuated antecedents, whereas the opposite is true in the case of gendered pronouns, like *he or she* forms and generic *he* (see e.g. Newman 1998; Paterson 2014; Stormbom 2018, 2019).

Another relevant factor related to the antecedent is gender stereotyping: Studies have revealed that generic *he* is more likely to occur with antecedents that are stereotypically associated with male individuals, than with antecedents that are considered gender-neutral in terms of gender expectations (Newman 1998; Paterson 2014). Stereotyping relates to individuation in the sense that antecedents that are stereotypically associated with one gender are cognitively more salient than gender-neutral ones. While stereotyping can make language users opt for gendered pronouns, the use of gendered pronouns may in itself serve to sustain certain stereotypes.

3.3 Previous research on gendered language in academic writing

Much research has been devoted to the use of gendered language in English (see e.g. Curzan 2003; Holmes & Meyerhoff 2003), but research focusing specifically on academic writing remains fairly limited. A number of studies have investigated how and to what extent men and women are represented in academic writing (see e.g. Amare 2007; Macaulay & Brice 1997; Pabst et al. 2018). These studies have shown that men are included more often than women in

examples in syntax textbooks (Macaulay & Brice 1997; Pabst et al. 2018) as well as in online grammars (Amare 2007). They have also disclosed that men are more often described as taking part in ‘intellectual activities’ than women in these types of texts. Another aspect of gendered language that has been studied in academic writing is the ordering of terms in coordinated constructions, such as *he or she* and *men and women* (Amare 2007, Willis & Jozkowski 2017). Male words have been shown to precede female words in coordinated constructions in online grammars (Amare 2007), as well as in academic journal articles (Willis & Jozkowski 2017). As these studies show, situated discourse practices involving performances of ‘male firstness’ contribute to the way in which gender is constructed and conceptualised in academic contexts (see Enkvist 1981 on experiential iconicism).

A few studies have also focused specifically on the use of epicene pronouns in academic writing. Hegarty & Buechel (2006) investigated the prevalence of generic *he* in articles published in *American Psychological Association* (APA) journals between 1965 and 2004. The results showed that a total of 30 out of 388 articles (7.7%) contained an instance of generic *he*, and all of these instances were found in articles published before 1985. Based on these findings, Hegarty & Buechel argue that “[p]sychologists no longer use androcentric pronouns in their research publications” (2006: 381f). A more frequent use of generic *he* was found by Parini (2012), who examined social sciences textbooks published between 1995 and 2005. In these textbooks, generic *he* accounted for as much as 37% of all pronouns ($N = 996$), compared to 33% for *he or she* and 30% for singular *they*. The study also showed that the antecedent was relevant to the choice of epicene pronouns, with singular *they* being used primarily with antecedents including quantifiers, such as *everyone* or *any student*. Pauwels and Winter (2004) investigated academic texts in the Singapore and Philippine components of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE). In both components, generic *he* accounted for almost all instances of epicene pronouns in the academic texts.

A couple of studies have examined epicene pronouns in student academic writing. Pauwels and Winter (2004) also included student texts in their study of the Singapore and Philippine components of ICE. In the texts from Singapore, generic *he* was used almost exclusively, whereas the Philippine English texts also had a relatively high proportion of *he or she* forms (36%) in addition to generic *he*. These findings suggest that the Philippine students were actually ahead of the professional writers in terms of adopting use of gender-fair language. In turn, Stormbom (2019) studied the use of epicene pronouns in term papers and theses written by L1 Swedish speakers who major in English at university. The texts were produced from the 1970s until the 2010s. The study showed a clear decrease in the students' use of generic *he* since the 1970s, while their use of singular *they* increased notably. However, there was still considerable variation in the texts from the 2010s, with *he or she* forms being commonly used (39.2%, $N = 222$) alongside singular *they* (50.9%). Again, the antecedent type proved to be relevant to the pronoun choice, with singular *they* co-occurring particularly frequently with antecedents that are low in individuation.

4 Materials and methods

4.1 The Corpus of Open Access Journal Articles (COAJA)

To examine the use of epicene pronouns in OA journals, the *Corpus of Open Access Journal Articles* (COAJA) was compiled by the author in late 2018 and early 2019. The corpus includes OA articles published in 2017 and 2018, and comprises a total of 1,003 texts. The articles were published in journals of two academic disciplines: (1) languages and linguistics (henceforth LING), and (2) library and information science (henceforth LIS). Given the nature of these two disciplines, it was expected that epicene referents would be common in the article texts and that the set of referents would be fairly similar in the two disciplines (e.g. *student, participant, user*), making comparisons between them suitable. It was also assumed that selecting different

disciplines would facilitate the identification of gendering patterns that might be particular to each discipline.

The articles were collected from 40 completely OA journals, that is, journals that represent the so-called ‘golden road to OA’. There are various types of OA, which can be categorised according to two main approaches: the golden road to OA and the green road to OA. The golden road refers to online publishing in journals that have all their articles available for free on their websites. The green road, in turn, allows researchers to self-archive articles online that have been published in non-OA journals (see e.g. Piwowar et al. 2018).

The journals were selected using the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), which lists OA journals that have some kind of system of peer or editorial reviewing in place. A total of 40 journals were randomly chosen from the directory: 20 LING journals and 20 LIS journals. The selection was restricted to journals that use either single or double-blind reviewing and that are indexed in multiple databases. Only journals with English as their full-text language were included in the selection. From each journal, all articles of original research published in 2017 and 2018 were included in the corpus. Table 1 shows the specifics of the corpus, including the number of journals, articles and words, as well as the countries of publication.

Table 1. The Corpus of Open Access Journal Articles (COAJA)

	Number of journals	Number of articles	Number of words	Countries of publication
LING	20	517	ca. 3 million	Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Poland, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, UK, USA
LIS	20	486	ca. 3 million	Canada, India, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea,

Sweden, Turkey, UK,
USA

Total	40	1003	ca. 6 million
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4.2 Extracting epicene pronouns

The corpus searches were conducted using *WordSmith Tools 5.0* (Scott 2008). Instances of epicene pronouns of three kinds were extracted: (a) generic *he*, as exemplified in (1), (b) *he or she* forms, as in example (2), and (c) singular *they*, as seen in (3). The category referred to as ‘*he or she* forms’ comprises all kinds of combinations of the pronouns *he* and *she*, as in: *he or she*, *she or he*, *he/she*, *she/he*, *s/he* and *(s)he*. All forms of the relevant pronouns were included in the final data set. A preliminary search was conducted for the use of generic *she*, but as no instances were found of this pronoun, *she* in a generic sense was not further examined in the present study.

- (1) This type of meaning may be grasped by generalized and particularized conversational implicatures, which are beliefs that the hearer attributes to the speaker in order to preserve the assumption that *the speaker* was obeying at least the CP in saying what *he* said. (LING)
- (2) It helps *the author* to guide the reader through the course of *his/her* argumentation. (LING)
- (3) For instance, within a sphere *someone* may speak with full authority, but in other spheres *they* may be attributed no authority at all. (LIS)

The search queries in WordSmith were defined as combinations of specific search terms followed within 25 words by the three types of epicene pronouns (see Gerner 2000; Laitinen 2007, Stormbom 2018, 2019). The restriction of 25 words was applied because the first instance of a pronoun can be expected to occur within this distance from the antecedent in the vast majority of cases (Gerner 2000; Laitinen 2007). The search terms were of four kinds: (a) the articles *a*, *an*, *the*, (b) the determiners *this* and *that*, (c) the quantifiers *any*, *each*, *every*, *no*, and

some, and (d) the indefinite pronouns *anyone/anybody*, *everyone/everybody*, *no one/nobody*, and *someone/somebody*. By searching for articles, determiners and quantifiers in combination with epicene pronouns, a higher number of relevant instances could be extracted than if the search terms had been restricted to a specific, limited set of gender-indefinite nouns. All instances of pronouns were examined manually, to make sure that only non-referential uses of the pronouns were included in the final data set.

In the analysis of the data, condensed tokens were used, meaning that only the first instance of an epicene pronoun was counted if a pronoun was used multiple times with one and the same antecedent. An example of this is given in (4). In cases where more than one type of pronoun was used with one and the same antecedent, as in (5), the pronouns were counted as one instance of each type of pronoun.

- (4) *The person* also evaluates the attributions made to and the construals of others and *his/her* own self (evaluation), which may then result in changes to *his/her* identity, that is, how *he/she* construes *himself/herself*. (LING)
- (5) Gerris et al. (2010) found that conscientiousness emerged as the most important predictors of dyadic trust, or mutual trust between two people, and *an individual's* perception of *his/her* partner's conscientiousness in an established marriage is a salient predictor of *their* own trustworthiness. (LIS)

Where appropriate in the analysis, differences in the use of epicene pronouns between the two subcorpora are tested for statistical significance using the Mann-Whitney U test, with the alpha level for significance set at $p < .05$.

4.3 Journal guidelines

To examine the correspondence between policy and practice, the author guidelines for each journal in the corpus were studied. The guidelines were checked manually for any instructions relating to gendered language, as well as for any references to publication manuals that might

include sections on gendered language use. If specific publication manuals were mentioned, these were also examined. For comparison, a similar analysis was undertaken for the guidelines of 40 non-OA journals that are listed in the Scimago Journal Index (Scimago Lab 2018). The top 20 non-OA journals from each discipline (LING and LIS) were selected for this purpose.

5 Results

5.1 Pronoun use

A total of 1,173 pronoun tokens were found in the corpus. In the LING subcorpus, 259 of the 517 articles (50%, see Table 1) included at least one instance of epicene pronouns, whereas the corresponding number in the LIS subcorpus was 203 out of 486 articles (42%). Table 2 shows the distribution of epicene pronouns in the two subcorpora, as well as in the whole corpus. The figures in brackets represent percentage of use within one subcorpus.

Table 2. Distribution of epicene pronouns in the COAJA

	LING	LIS	Total
<i>he</i>	113 (17.7)	60 (11.2)	173 (14.7)
<i>he or she</i>	259 (40.5)	192 (36.0)	451 (38.5)
<i>they</i>	267 (41.8)	282 (52.8)	549 (46.8)
Total	639	534	1,173

As can be seen, singular *they* was the most common pronoun type overall (46.8%), followed by *he or she* forms (38.5%) and generic *he* (14.7%). Statistically significant differences between the two disciplines were found with respect to the frequency of generic *he* ($U = 22882.0$, $z = -3.329$, $p = .001$, $r = .16$), as well as the frequency of singular *they* ($U = 24985.5$, $z = 2.915$, $p = .004$, $r = .14$). However, given the small effect sizes, these findings need to be interpreted with caution (see e.g. Plonsky & Oswald 2014). In the LING subcorpus, generic *he* accounted for 17.7% of all pronouns ($N = 639$), compared to 11.2% in the LIS subcorpus ($N = 534$). Conversely, singular *they* was more common in the LIS articles (52.8%) than in the LING articles (41.8%). The use of *he or she* forms was relatively frequent in both subcorpora: 40.5%

in the LING subcorpus and 36.0% in the LIS subcorpus. No statistically significant differences were observed between the two disciplines as regards the frequency of *he or she* variants ($U = 24978.50$, $z = -.914$, $p = .361$, $r = .04$).

A possible connection was found between the distribution of the different epicene pronouns and the four types of antecedents: indefinite pronouns, quantificational NPs, indefinite NPs, and definite NPs. Table 3 shows the frequency of epicene pronouns in reference to the antecedent types in each subcorpus. The figures in brackets represent the percentage of use a pronoun type accounts for with each type of antecedent in a given subcorpus.

Table 3. Distribution of epicene pronouns according to type of antecedent

	LING	LIS	Total
Indefinite pronouns			
<i>he</i>	4 (10.8)	1 (2.7)	5 (6.7)
<i>he or she</i>	7 (18.9)	4 (10.8)	11 (14.9)
<i>they</i>	26 (70.3)	32 (86.5)	58 (78.4)
Total	37	37	74
Quant. NPs			
<i>he</i>	3 (5.0)	8 (12.1)	11 (8.7)
<i>he or she</i>	12 (20.0)	19 (28.8)	31 (24.6)
<i>they</i>	45 (75.0)	39 (59.1)	84 (66.7)
Total	60	66	126
Indefinite NPs			
<i>he</i>	28 (15.1)	21 (9.8)	49 (12.3)
<i>he or she</i>	78 (42.2)	91 (42.5)	169 (42.4)
<i>they</i>	79 (42.7)	102 (47.7)	181 (45.3)
Total	185	214	399
Definite NPs			
<i>he</i>	78 (21.8)	30 (13.8)	108 (18.8)
<i>he or she</i>	162 (45.4)	78 (36.0)	240 (41.8)
<i>they</i>	117 (32.8)	109 (50.2)	226 (39.4)
Total	357	217	574

Overall, the most common epicene with indefinite pronouns was singular *they*, accounting for 78.4% of all instances. Singular *they* was also used over 50% of the time with quantificational NPs (66.7%), but not with indefinite NPs (45.3%) or with definite NPs (39.4%). The frequency

of generic *he* showed the opposite pattern to this, that is, the highest frequency of *he* was seen with definite NPs (18.8%) and the lowest with indefinite pronouns (6.7%). The use of *he or she* forms was, much like the use of *he*, less common with indefinite pronouns (14.9%) and quantificational NPs (24.6%), than with indefinite NPs (42.4%) and definite NPs (41.8%). These findings corroborate previous research on the influence of the antecedent type on the choice of epicene pronouns (see e.g. Newman 1998; Paterson 2014, Stormbom 2018, 2019). With respect to the subcorpora, generalisations are difficult to make because of the small number of instances with indefinite pronouns and quantificational NPs. However, it appears that the overall pattern remained relatively similar in both LING and LIS, that is, singular *they* was particularly likely to occur with antecedents including quantifiers (i.e. indefinite pronouns and quantificational NPs), whereas *he* and *he or she* forms were more likely to reference definite and indefinite NPs. As suggested in previous research (see e.g. Newman 1998; Stormbom 2018), a probable reason for these tendencies in the distribution of pronouns is that definite and indefinite NPs are more individuated than antecedents including quantifiers, which increases the likelihood that the language user chooses a gendered pronoun rather than the gender-neutral singular *they*. For example, the definite NP *the person* is more likely to be conceptualised as a specific, gendered individual than the indefinite pronoun *anyone*.

Table 4 shows the most common antecedent heads in the two subcorpora. The figures in parentheses represent the number of times a given word was used in pronominal reference. The words in bold are heads that are shared between the subcorpora.

Table 4. Most common ($N \geq 5$) antecedent heads in the two subcorpora

LING	LIS
<i>learner</i> (67)	<i>individual</i> (83)
<i>student</i> (63)	<i>user</i> (69)
<i>speaker</i> (55)	<i>person</i> (58)
<i>individual</i> (50)	<i>student</i> (43)
<i>person</i> (47)	<i>researcher</i> (31)
<i>teacher</i> (46)	<i>author</i> (20)
<i>reader</i> (27)	<i>librarian</i> (20)

participant (23)	participant (20)
someone (21)	someone (19)
<i>child (18)</i>	<i>member (15)</i>
<i>writer (18)</i>	<i>respondent (9)</i>
author (14)	<i>employee (8)</i>
<i>hearer (12)</i>	everyone (7)
everyone (7)	<i>answerer (6)</i>
user (7)	<i>consumer (5)</i>
<i>agent (6)</i>	
<i>bilingual (6)</i>	
<i>defendant (6)</i>	
researcher (5)	
<i>subject (5)</i>	
<i>viewer (5)</i>	

The two subcorpora were fairly similar in terms of the most common antecedent heads; 9 out of the 15 most frequent heads in the LIS subcorpus were also among the most common ones in the LING articles: *author*, *everyone*, *individual*, *participant*, *person*, *researcher*, *someone*, *student*, and *user*. These words can be described as either general human referents (e.g. *everyone*, *person*), or as referents that are typical in academic writing (e.g. *researcher*, *student*). The most common heads also included nouns that are specific to the given research field, e.g. *speaker* in the LING subcorpus and *librarian* in the LIS subcorpus.

No immediate connection was found between the frequency of specific heads and the choice of epicene pronouns. Table 5 illustrates the most common heads co-occurring with each of the pronoun types in the overall data. The words in bold represent heads that occur with all three types of epicene pronouns.

Table 5. Most common antecedent heads ($N \geq 5$) with each pronoun type in the overall data

<i>he</i>	<i>he or she</i>	<i>they</i>
individual (18)	individual (56)	student (66)
learner (14)	person (45)	individual (59)
person (13)	student (33)	person (47)
speaker (13)	user (31)	user (33)
user (12)	learner (29)	<i>participant (30)</i>
<i>hearer (8)</i>	teacher (28)	learner (28)
<i>librarian (8)</i>	speaker (23)	<i>someone (28)</i>
student (7)	<i>reader (14)</i>	<i>researcher (24)</i>
teacher (6)	author (13)	speaker (19)

author (5)	<i>writer</i> (12) <i>researcher</i> (11) <i>child</i> (10) <i>participant</i> (10) <i>someone</i> (9) <i>consumer</i> (5) <i>member</i> (5)	author (16) teacher (15) <i>member</i> (13) <i>reader</i> (13) <i>everyone</i> (10) <i>librarian</i> (9) <i>anyone</i> (7) <i>answerer</i> (6) <i>child</i> (6) <i>respondent</i> (6) <i>writer</i> (6) <i>human being</i> (5) <i>bilingual</i> (5)
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As seen in the table, singular *they* co-occurred with the widest range of heads, followed by *he* or *she* forms, and *he*. This distribution relates to the fact that *they* was the most commonly used epicene pronoun overall. All three pronoun types co-occurred both with words that refer to human beings in general (*person*, *someone*), and with referents that are typical in academic writing (*participant*, *student*). There were also examples of field-specific words (*librarian*, *bilingual*) occurring with each pronoun type. Based on these findings, it seems that genericness and contextual salience were not relevant factors in the choice of epicene pronouns. Furthermore, it does not appear that gender stereotyping of individual words affected the distribution of the three types of pronouns to any large extent. For instance, most heads co-occurring with generic *he* also co-occur with the other types of pronouns, and these heads can be categorised as gender-neutral, rather than socially stereotypically male (see e.g. Kennison & Trofe 2003).

Variation in the distribution of epicene pronouns was not only found within the two subcorpora, but also within individual texts. A total of 251 articles ($N = 462$) included more than one instance of an epicene pronoun; in 121 of these texts, two or all three of the pronoun types were used by the authors. Examples (6) to (8) illustrate this kind of mixed use of pronouns in individual articles.

- (6) *The teacher* fulfils the role of a companion who does not present everything on a plate but accompanies *their* pupils in the process of language learning, remaining in the background but ready to support if a problem occurs. [...] Unlike the examination-oriented repertoire, this repertoire is not sponsored-like (Leung, 2009) but generated by *the teacher himself or herself*, who is now convinced of the purposefulness of *his or her* apprenticeship. (LING)
- (7) For instance, within a sphere *someone* may speak with full authority, but in other spheres *they* may be attributed no authority at all. [...] On the one hand, if someone provides information that may ‘ring true’ (Wilson, 1983, p. 24), people start listening to *that person* as a source who provides trustworthy information and *he or she* becomes a new cognitive authority to whom they turn for credible information. (LIS)
- (8) Authenticity is another quality of *an effective teacher* preventing *him/her* from hiding behind a persona to communicate with *their* class, which is a barrier to the learning. (LIS)

In example (6), the NP *the teacher* co-occurs with singular *they* in one sentence, whereas it is pronominalized by *he or she* forms later on in the text. This variation affects the way in which *the teacher* is conceptualised: in the second sentence, the teacher is construed as a specific individual, who is either a man or a woman, whereas the teacher is a much less salient antecedent in the first sentence. Example (7) is similar to (6) in that both *they* and *he or she* forms are used, but in the first case the antecedent is an indefinite pronoun, *someone*, and in the second one it is a definite NP, *that person*. In this example, the second antecedent (*that person*) is in itself much more individuated than the first one (*someone*), which may have prompted the use of gendered *he or she* forms in the first place. In example (8), finally, one and the same antecedent, *an effective teacher*, co-occurs with the composite *he/she* as well as singular *they* in the same non-finite relative clause. Similar examples were given in <Stormbom 2019>, where it was suggested that the switch from *he or she* forms to *they* could be a method of avoiding cumbersome repetition of *he/she*. It is also possible that the antecedent becomes cognitively less salient in the mind of the language user the more information that is added in between the antecedent and the pronoun, thus making the user switch from the gendered *he/she* (more salient) to the non-gendered *they* (less salient) instead.

5.2 Journal guidelines

5.2.1 OA journals

In general, the author guidelines are very concise, focusing primarily on issues relating to formatting and citation. Out of the 40 OA journals, 24 refer either to the *Chicago Manual of Style* (CMOS) or the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA), which both include sections on avoiding gender-bias in language. However, these publication manuals are exclusively mentioned in the context of citation and referencing. The recommendations in CMOS and APA are fairly similar: both manuals advise against using generic *he*, and the promoted solution is to use some kind of avoidance strategy, such as omitting the pronoun or pluralising the antecedent. The use of composites like *he/she* and *s/he* is discouraged in both manuals, and it is recommended that coordinations like *he or she* are to be used sparingly. The most recent edition of APA (7th edition, 2019) promotes the use of singular *they* with generic referents, but this edition would not yet have been in use when the articles were published. Neither CMOS nor the 6th edition of APA endorses singular *they*, but they do allow for its use when referring to specific individuals who do not identify as either male or female.

Only two of the OA journals have guidelines in which gendered language is explicitly mentioned, as shown in examples (9) and (10).

(9) Racist, sexist, homophobic, or other derogatory language will not be tolerated. (LING guidelines)

(10) ...the journal adopts a simple solution to the problem of representing the sexes equally in a text, without using more words than is necessary. It has adopted the composite word: 's/he'. Unfortunately, no such simple solution exists for 'his or her'; although the plural 'their' is now commonly used in speech, it is not of an adequate standard of accuracy for a scholarly paper. The solution, therefore, is to convert a sentence to the plural form so that 'their' may be used properly. For example, instead of, 'A student may spend 30% of his or her study time in the university library' one can

say, ‘Students may spend 30% of their study time in the university library’. (LIS guidelines)

The first of these guidelines merely includes one line about biased language not being tolerated, and offers no suggestions for how best to avoid language of this kind; it can be hypothesised that more specific information is left implicit because the audience consisting of professional writers is expected to recognise gender-biased language. The correspondence between policy and practice could not be examined in depth for this journal, as only two occurrences of epicene pronouns were found in the articles: one instance of *he* and one instance of *they*. In the second journal’s guidelines, the prescribed solution to the problem of epicene pronouns is to use *s/he*, or to avoid the issue altogether by pluralising the antecedent. The guidelines follow traditional prescriptive grammar in that the use of singular *they* is described as not being of ‘an adequate standard of accuracy for a scholarly paper’. Policy and practice did not seem to concur in this particular journal: a total of 161 pronoun tokens were extracted from the journal articles, of which 9 were instances of *he*, 60 were instances of *he or she* forms, and 92 were instances of singular *they*. Example (11) shows extracts from one journal article in which all three types of pronouns are used.

- (11) The zone of intervention is that area in which *an information user* needs advice and assistance regarding what *he or she* cannot do alone, or can do only with difficulty. [...] Wilson contends that information behaviour encompasses activities *a person* may engage in when identifying *their own* needs for information, searching for such information in any way, and using or transferring that information. [...] It can only be revealed by the potential user after the information provider has given *the user* a chance to voice *his* difficulties. (LIS)

The author of (11) uses *he or she* forms with the antecedent *an information user*, singular *they* with the antecedent *a person*, and generic *he* with the antecedent *the user*. This variation in pronoun use may be related to the salience of the antecedent: the gender-neutral pronoun *they* is used with the generic human noun *person*, whereas *he* and *he or she*, gendered pronouns, are used with the more specific noun (*information*) *user*. Moreover, the second occurrence of *user*

has the function of head in a definite NP, making the antecedent even more salient than indefinite NPs.

5.2.2 Subscription journals

As with the OA journals, the guidelines for the subscription journals are generally short and concise. A majority of the journals do not have any specific guidelines as concerns language and gender. However, nine of the journals are published by Elsevier, who include the same guidelines for inclusive language on all of their journal webpages, as quoted in (12).

- (12) Inclusive language acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities. [...] Authors should ensure that writing is free from bias, for instance by using ‘he or she’, ‘his/her’ instead of ‘he’ or ‘his’, and by making use of job titles that are free of stereotyping (e.g. ‘chairperson’ instead of ‘chairman’ and ‘flight attendant’ instead of ‘stewardess’).

As can be seen, authors are advised to avoid gender-bias in their writing, and a suggested solution for doing so is to use *he or she* forms. There is no mention of the use of singular *they* in the Elsevier guidelines.

Ten of the journals refer to APA or CMOS, but they only do so in the context of citation and referencing. In one of the journal guidelines it is noted that manuscripts should be consistent with what the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) prescribe in their statement on language and gender. An extract from the statement is given in (13).

- (13) Avoid using *he* as a universal pronoun; likewise, avoid using binary alternatives such as *he/she*, *he or she*, or *(s)he*. [...] Unless the gender of a singular personal antecedent is otherwise specified, use the gender-neutral singular pronouns *they*, *them*, *their*, and *theirs*. (NCTE 2018)

Unlike the Elsevier guidelines, this statement specifically advises against using *he or she* forms, as these are said to perpetuate gender binarism; instead, the use of singular *they* is the prescribed solution here.

6 Discussion

The results of the corpus study suggest that the use of epicene pronouns is very much in a state of flux in present-day OA international publishing in English: overall, singular *they* was the most commonly used pronoun (46.8%), followed by *he or she* forms (38.5%) and generic *he* (14.7%). These findings corroborate Parini's (2012) study of social sciences textbooks, which showed that the three pronoun types were used with roughly the same frequencies. Returning to the research questions, it can thus be concluded that the generic individual in OA articles is, in many cases, distinctly gendered: either as male or female – by using binary *he or she* forms, or as predominantly male – by using generic *he*. The gendering process appears to be partially related to the individuation of the antecedent, as *he or she* forms and generic *he* proved to be particularly common with highly individuated antecedents (definite and indefinite NPs), whereas singular *they* was more likely to be used with antecedents that are low in individuation (antecedents including quantifiers); for similar findings, see e.g. Newman (1998); Paterson (2014).

The distribution of epicene pronouns did not appear to be related to the type of words functioning as heads in antecedents. All three pronoun types were used with words referring to human beings in general (e.g. *someone, person*) as well as with more specific referents, such as *researcher* and *librarian*. Moreover, social gender stereotyping of antecedents did not seem to be of relevance: generic *he* was predominantly used with neutral antecedents like *individual* and *learner*, rather than with antecedents that are stereotypically male. In general, highly stereotyped antecedents were infrequent in the data, which is likely to be related to the text genre.

Differences in the frequency of epicene pronouns were found between the two disciplines, LING and LIS: the use of generic *he* proved to be statistically more frequent in the LING articles than in the LIS ones, whereas the opposite was true of singular *they*. This finding is unexpected in the sense that one would assume language professionals to have a particularly high

metalinguistic awareness, given that language itself is their object of research. However, it is also possible that language professionals are more concerned with prescriptive grammar, and for this reason they may be more wary of using singular *they*.

The analysis of the guidelines showed that a majority of the journals do not have specific instructions as regards the use of gendered language; this proved to be true of OA journals and subscription journals alike. In the few cases where the journals have instructions, there seems to be no consensus as to what the appropriate solution is to the pronoun problem. For instance, one journal endorses the use of *he or she* forms, while another rejects their use because they reinforce a binary view of gender. In one of the OA journal guidelines, the prescribed solution to the pronoun issue is to use *s/he* – a use which the popular publishing manuals APA and CMOS advise against. Also, the analysis of pronoun use in this specific journal showed that all three pronoun types occurred with some frequency in the articles, and that singular *they* was, in fact, more commonly used than the prescribed gender-fair alternative. Although generalisations cannot be made based on one journal only, these findings show that policy and practice do not necessarily converge in the case of gendered language. This may be so because linguistic gatekeepers, such as editors and reviewers, prioritize other issues of language use when reviewing manuscripts. There is, of course, no way of knowing what the editing process has looked like for each of the articles in the corpus, or whether the writers had their manuscripts proofread by a language professional prior to submission. However, as the study only included journals with peer reviewing, all articles in the corpus will have been read by several people prior to publication.

7 Conclusion

The present study expands upon previous research by examining how gender is constructed in open access research articles. The focus is on the use of epicene pronouns, that is, third-person singular pronouns that co-occur with generic antecedents, like *a student* and *anyone*. The

findings show that the non-gendered singular *they* was the most frequently used epicene pronoun (46.8%, $N = 1,173$), closely followed by gendered *he or she* forms (38.5%). In addition, the use of generic *he*, which has been on the feminist linguistic agenda since the 1970s, also occurred with some frequency (14.7%).

In terms of linguistic prescription, most journals in the study do not have specific author guidelines for the use of gendered language; in the few cases that they do, there seems to be a consensus that male generics, like generic *he*, are to be avoided, but no agreement as to what the preferred alternative is. Moreover, the use of pronouns in individual articles did not necessarily converge with the recommendations of the journal in question, suggesting that policy alone is not enough.

The findings of the study have implications for the use of English as an academic lingua franca. As OA publishing is associated with an increase in readership compared with subscription articles, it makes it all the more important what kinds of constructions of gender are presented to readers; in addition, research articles also serve as models of academic writing for students in higher education. In this light, it is problematic if readers of published articles are met with conceptualisations of *a student* or *the researcher* as ‘he’, given that research across language communities has shown that male generics exclude women as referents. Thus, as proposed by Willis & Jozkowski (2017), submission checklists for journal editors and reviewers could include instructions for the use of gender-fair language. However, while linguistic gender equality is a widely shared goal, it cannot be ignored that users of English as an academic lingua franca come from an extensive range of linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds. For instance, gender-neutralisation is often easy to achieve in English, but this is not the case in many languages that have a grammatical masculine-feminine contrast because of structural constraints. A key issue in international publishing and journal editing will therefore be to raise

awareness about gendered language in English through clear guidelines and submission checklists.

The results of the present study also have implications for the teaching of English for academic purposes. In particular, it would be important in teaching to discuss gendering in language and how it can affect our conceptualisations of the world. Although gendering practices are not restricted to pronominalization, the use of personal pronouns is a fundamental discursive device in the construction of gender in English. Thus, it would be crucial to stress the problems of using generic *he* in writing and discuss what alternatives there are to this use in English. Such a discussion could also include comparing strategies for achieving gender-fair language in English and in the students' L1s. As English has very little formal marking of gender, the primary strategy for achieving gender-fair language has tended to be neutralisation of gender (see e.g. Bußmann & Hellinger 2001). In terms of pronoun use, one commonly suggested approach is to pluralise the antecedent, thus circumventing the issue of choosing a suitable gendered pronoun. However, pluralisation is not always possible; for instance, it does not work as a strategy when the antecedent is an indefinite pronoun, like *someone* or *anybody*. Another highly relevant neutralisation strategy is therefore the use of singular *they*, which, until very recently, tended to be acknowledged but not recommended in style guides and writing manuals (see Paterson 2014). This lack of formal endorsement may have made teachers wary of encouraging their students to use singular *they*, particularly in the context of academic writing. Nonetheless, as the use of singular *they* is now being endorsed more widely (see e.g. *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary* 2020 and *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* 2019), students would benefit considerably from learning about singular *they* in the context of teaching English for academic purposes. One advantage of singular *they* that could be promoted in teaching is that the use of this pronoun avoids unnecessary emphasis on the binary division between male and female individuals.

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