

THE USE OF EPICENE ‘THEY’ BY AMERICAN NEWSPAPER AND MAGAZINE COLUMNISTS IN 1990S AND 2010S: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY

Данная статья посвящена проблеме гендерно нейтрального местоимения «they» в дискурсе СМИ в американском варианте английского языка. Путем корпусного анализа, рассматривается гипотеза о более частом употреблении местоимения «they» американскими писателями-колоннистами в гендерно нейтральном значении за период с 1990 по 2015 гг. Выявлена и обоснована на конкретных примерах и семантическом анализе тенденция к более частому употреблению «they» именно в отношении лиц в единственном числе, чей гендер остается неопределённым в контексте каждого высказывания.

***Ключевые слова:** epicene pronoun, gender neutral, American English, corpus, language change, language norm, indefinite pronoun*

Goals and proposed approach

The goal of the present study is to explore the usage of epicene ‘they’ in the written discourse of American English and determine if epicene ‘they’ is now used more often.

To achieve this goal, I used a corpus-based approach, studying the usage of epicene ‘they’ in NEWS (Newspapers) and MAG (Magazines) subgenres of COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) dating 1990-1994 and 2010-2015. My research is relevant for the field of corpus linguistics and the studies of gender and language since it deals with tracking and prediction of language change.

Literature review

The review of literature led me to the following conclusions on the present status of gender neutral pronouns.

Firstly, singular ‘they’ has been historically used in standard British English by writers such as Shakespeare and Jane Austen, and is presently being revived. The difficulties with its revival arise because ‘they’ is plural and does not agree grammatically with words like “somebody”, “person”, “child”, etc.

Secondly, singular ‘they’ has been used in informal speech and writing for a long time; to substitute for ‘he’ and ‘he or she’. Research based on social media corpora confirms that singular ‘they’ is becoming acceptable in social networks. Thus, while grammar books are unsure if it should be made official, the change in collective perception has already occurred.

Data collection

I collected the data from the NEWS (Newspapers) and MAG (Magazines) sub-corpora of COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English). The corpora queries

had to locate an indefinite pronoun within 4 or less words from gender neutral ‘they’, aiming at constructions like ‘**Someone** once told me **they** were planning to...’ or ‘**Somebody** was yelling **they** had been hit’ or ‘**Nobody** gets everything **they** want.’ In constructions like ‘**everybody** agrees **they** should be done’ and ‘should **anyone** find out **they** were crazy enough to...’ it may or may not be neutral; which called for semantic analysis to determine the cases where ‘they’ was epicene.

Findings

The 1990-1994 query returned the total of 500 concordance lines with ‘they’. The raw numerical data range can be presented in Figure 2.

	SOME-ONE	SOME-BODY	ANY-ONE	ANY-BODY	EVERY-ONE	EVERY-BODY	NOB-ODY	TOTALS
MAG	64	13	33	17	34	20	16	197
NEWS	75	24	52	21	65	47	19	303
BOTH	139	37	85	38	99	67	35	500

Figure 2. Occurrences of “they” anteceded by singular indefinite pronouns in NEWS and MAG sub-corpora (1990-4) **before** semantic analysis and condensation.

They were compiled into word lists by pronoun, analyzed semantically and removed duplicates. The findings after the semantic analysis and condensation are presented in Figure 3.

	SOME-ONE	SOME-BODY	ANY-ONE	ANY-BODY	EVERY-ONE	EVERY-BODY	NOB-ODY	TOTALS
MAG	22	7	11	5	16	11	4	76
NEWS	25	11	16	5	29	30	13	129
BOTH	47	18	27	10	45	41	17	205

Figure 3. Occurrences of epicene “they” in NEWS and MAG sub-corpora (1990-4) **after** semantic analysis and condensation.

Some example of concordance lines where ‘they’ is epicene are presented in Figure 4:

“‘You can’t rule **somebody** out because **they** come to you with a label of mental illness,’ Dr. Nicholson said” (COCA:1994:NEWS NYTimes).

“I never asked **anyone** to do what **they** weren't capable of doing” (COCA:1991:NEWS SanFranChron).

“**Everyone** said **they** thought it was a great idea, but no one was willing to invest” (COCA:1994:NEWS WashPost).

“**Everybody** likes to think **they're** better than everybody else” (COCA:1993:NEWS Atlanta).

“**Nobody** reveals what **they're** working on for the Pillsbury Bake-Off, which boasts that it is shrouded in...” (COCA:1991:NEWS Atlanta).

Figure 4.

The lines excluded from the epicene list also contained a singular indefinite pronoun within the word length of 4 from the node word ‘they’. But in these cases, ‘they’ was not neutral. Some examples of the excluded concordances are presented in Figure 5. To illustrate why ‘they’ cannot be regarded as epicene, the antecedents are italicized.

“*They* don't traditionally share that with **someone** with whom **they're** negotiating” (COCA:1993:NEWS WashPost).

“When *the Beatles* came to America for the first time, they told **everyone** that **they** wanted to see Muddy Waters” (COCA:1993:NEWS CSMonitor).

“...told us, ‘You can't make money off *cherimoyas*, **nobody** knows what **they** are.’” (COCA:1990:NEWS CSMonitor).

Figure 5.

The same analysis was conducted with NEWS and MAG sub-corpora results ranging from 2010 to 2015. The initial search returned 636 total occurrences of ‘they’, as shown in Figure 6.

	SOME-ONE	SOME-BODY	ANY-ONE	ANY-BODY	EVERY-ONE	EVERY-BODY	NOB-ODY	TOTALS
MAG	91	22	44	13	74	44	16	304
NEWS	79	27	60	18	73	49	26	332
BOTH	170	49	104	31	147	93	42	636

Figure 6. Occurrences of “they” anteceded by singular indefinite pronouns in NEWS and MAG sub-corpora (2010-15) **before** semantic analysis and condensation.

The total number of epicene ‘they’ occurrences after semantic analysis and condensation can be seen in Figure 7.

	SOME-ONE	SOME-BODY	ANY-ONE	ANY-BODY	EVERY-ONE	EVERY-BODY	NOB-ODY	TOTALS
MAG	45	11	16	7	38	29	9	155
NEWS	40	16	24	11	39	30	11	171
BOTH	85	27	40	18	77	59	20	326

Figure 7. Occurrences of epicene “they” in NEWS and MAG sub-corpora (2010-15) **after** semantic analysis and condensation.

Some examples of the lines from 2010s where ‘they’ is neutral are presented in Figure 8:

“Remember: the only time you can quickly change **someone** is when **they're** in diapers. For the rest of us, change takes time” (COCA:2014:MAG Prevention).

“**Anyone** who thinks that **they** are the smartest person in a roomful of jocks on the basis of a PhD...” (COCA:2013:NEWS WashPost).

“You do get nervous—**anybody** who says **they** don'tis lying” (COCA:2010:MAG RollingStone).

“Our greatest success has been that **nobody** can openly declare **they** are members of the Taliban now” (COCA:2010:NEWS CSMonitor).

Figure 8.

Those not included in the epicene list are shown in Figure 9.

“When *Joe and his friend* get to their spot, **someone** asks if **they'd** mind swapping for slightly better places about fifteen feet away, so a family...” (COCA:2014:MAG NaturalHist).

“...*enormous changes*, and of course, *they* happened without **anyone** realizing it because **they** came in one by one” (COCA:2012:NEWS USAToday).

“*Weeds* are the bane of most gardeners, but **everybody** has them. **They** can be useful, however” (COCA:2013:MAG Horticulture).

Figure 9.

Out of 500 lines with ‘they’ made in the 90s, only 205 were lines with gender neutral ‘they’. In 2010s, there were 636 lines in total, and 326 lines with gender neutral ‘they’. In 1990s, the percentage of gender neutral ‘they’ was 41%, while in 2010s this percentage was 51%. A simple formula allowed me to calculate the total percentage increase and the annual increase rate.

$$PR = \frac{(V_{present} - V_{past})}{V_{past}} \times 100 \quad \text{calculations}$$

Where PR – percent rate, $V_{present}$ – the present (new) value, and V_{past} – the value in the past. To derive an annual increase rate, we divide the result by N (number or years) = 2015 – 1990 = 25; N = 25.

$$PR = \frac{(V_{present} - V_{past})}{V_{past}} \times 100 = \frac{(51 - 41)}{41} \times 100 \approx 24.4\%$$

$$\frac{PR}{N} = \frac{24.4}{25} \approx 0.96\%$$

Conclusion

The calculations revealed a 0.96% annual increase in using ‘they’ as gender neutral. Over 20 years, the total increase in usage was 24.4%. One can conclude that whenever American newspaper writers now use ‘they’ in a sentence, they are 24.4% more likely to use it in gender neutral sense.

While I realize that my research has some limitations, I consider them more an advantage than a flaw because they leave the space for further research with more confidence and experience. Studies like this are likely to be relevant in the future to help the development of corpus linguistics, sociolinguistics, and gender studies in language.