

Research Article

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A corpus-based study of epicene pronouns used by Macedonian learners of English

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Abstract: This article presents the findings of a study of the epicene pronouns used by Macedonian learners of English to refer anaphorically to compound indefinite pronouns and common-gender nouns as antecedents in their essays written in English. This study is based on the Macedonian component of the International Corpus of Learner English and aims to discover the distribution of epicene pronouns (*he*, *he or she*, and singular *they*), and the relationship between the choice of an epicene pronoun and particular antecedent (sub)types. The association between the use of specific epicene pronouns and the students' gender, as well as their year of study at the university, was also investigated. The results point to a more widespread application of singular *they* compared to *he or she* and *he*. The findings also reveal an association between specific epicene pronouns and the degree of individuation of the antecedent. There was virtually no statistically significant difference in the students' use of each pronoun across the academic years. It also appeared that there was no statistically significant difference between male and female participants regarding their use of epicene pronouns. Finally, the limitations of this study are discussed and directions are offered for future research.

Keywords: epicene pronouns, singular *they*, generic *he*, anaphoric reference, learner English, corpus-based studies, gender-neutral language

1 Introduction

This article is concerned with the use of English epicene pronouns in argumentative essays written by Macedonian learners of English. In linguistics, the term *epicene pronoun* is applied to a third-person pronoun that is co-referential with a singular gender-indefinite antecedent (Baron 1981, Newman 1998, Balhorn 2009). A more recent definition implies that the term *epicene pronoun* “does not convey gender or sex information and is coindexed with a singular noun phrase referring to an animate being” (Paterson 2014, 3). Epicene references can also be considered “gender-inclusive, mixed gender and/or unknown gender” (Hekanaho 2020, 19) and are thus differentiated from nongendered ones, i.e. those bearing no gender marking. In this study, the term *epicene pronoun* is used to refer to a third person pronoun that refers back to an indefinite pronoun or a singular noun of indeterminate gender.

Overall, English epicene pronouns that are most commonly mentioned in the literature are generic *he*, *he or she*, and singular *they*. Traditionally, the use of the generic *he* was prescribed for reference to gender-indefinite antecedents (Baron 1981, Baranowski 2002, Balhorn 2009, among others). Since the 1960s, it has been widely criticized for its inherent male bias and its exclusion of individuals of other genders. The term singular *they* refers to the use of the third-person plural pronoun *they*, the semantic load of which has undergone extension to include singularity as well. The term ‘generic *they*’ is also applied to the same concept (Curzan 2003, 60). Singular *they* is a more inclusive alternative, but has faced resistance from those who perceive it as

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grammatically incorrect due to the lack of number agreement with its antecedent. In recent decades, however, the use of singular *they* has steadily been gaining ground in line with the trend for gender-neutral discourse (Curzan 2003, Paterson 2014, Baron 2020). The only alternative that does not violate any concord principles is *he or she*, which has oftentimes been criticized for being “cumbersome, pedantic and unnecessary” (Baranowski 2002, 378), as well as for categorizing individuals strictly into two genders (Baron 2020, Speyer and Schleef 2018).

Which one of these epicene pronouns should be embraced as the norm has been a subject of fierce polemics through the centuries. At the heart of the epicene debate lies the tension between linguistic tradition and the evolving understanding of gender. Adapting to the changes in the pronominal system is challenging and oftentimes meets with resistance since the ideological nature of these changes requires confronting biases, questioning the prevailing binary gender framework and embracing a more inclusive understanding of gender (Hekanaho 2020). Thus, the epicene debate underscores the dynamic relationship between language and society, highlighting the on-going evolution of both linguistic norms and attitudes towards gender (Bodine 1975). As awareness grows, language may continue to adapt to better reflect the diverse spectrum of gender identities (Baron 2020). After all, a combination of language-internal and language-external factors has led to changes to the pronoun paradigm before as well (Paterson 2014).

This is the first study into the distribution of English epicene pronouns in the essays written by Macedonian learners of English and is based on the Macedonian subcorpus of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) version 3. It has previously been shown that non-native speakers of English tend to use singular *they* considerably less than native speakers, partly as a result of their greater adherence to prescriptive norms (Hekanaho 2020, Stormbom 2018) or as a result of the socially and culturally androcentric native environments (Abudalbuh 2012, Zhang and Yang 2021). This study is trying to challenge these findings, especially as it explores essays written in the mid-2010s by students whose L1 exhibits masculine generics.

2 Literature review

2.1 Research on epicene pronouns use in native English-speaking contexts

The use of singular *they* can be traced back to the Middle Ages (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, Baranowski 2002), when it was used alongside *he or she* and *he* (Baranowski 2002). As a matter of fact, there exist written materials originating as early as the fourteenth century that document the use of the singular *they* (Paterson 2014).

It was the prescriptive grammarians from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century that insisted on the use of the generic *he* instead, labelling as grammatically incorrect the correspondence between the plural pronoun *they* and a singular antecedent (Bodine 1975, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, Baranowski 2002, Paterson 2014, Stormbom 2021). This view stemmed from the androcentric position of the grammarians in the eighteenth century since the choice of *he* also constituted a violation, only this time it was a violation of the principle for gender agreement between a pronoun and its antecedent (Bodine 1975, Baranowski 2002), and there is no reason to presume that the lack of number concord indicates greater inaccuracy than the lack of gender agreement (Bodine 1975).

Since this policy was primarily enforced in the written language, it had little influence on the spoken language, where singular *they* continued to exist (Bodine 1975, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, Baranowski 2002) despite all attempts to eradicate its use. To this end, since the middle of the nineteenth century, there have been multiple attempts to coin a new pronoun that would potentially fill the gap for a third-person singular common-gender pronoun. These pronouns were formed through various word-formation processes, such as: “borrowings (French *on*, *le*, and *en*), blends (*thon*, *he’er*, *shem*), clippings (*e*, *per*), and root creations (*na*, *ae*, *ip*)” (Baron 1981, 86), but none of these attempts have succeeded (Baranowski 2002).

With the rise of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and the 1970s, attention was directed to gender inequality in society. An important part of feminist initiatives was the movement against sexist language,

which opposed the prevalent use of generic *he*, alongside other instances of masculine generics (e.g. nouns overtly marked for gender, such as *chairman*, *spokesman*, etc.), on the grounds of their being gender-biased (Hekanaho 2020, Bodine 1975). Understanding that language had the power not only to describe but also to shape people's reality, feminists recognized that women's subordination to men was partly achieved through language. Therefore, they fought for greater visibility and inclusivity for women, proposing alternative strategies that would suppress the once widely accepted use of *he* in generic contexts and that would thus contribute to greater gender fairness in language.

One such strategy was the pronoun *he or she*, which has been referred to as a *combined pronoun* (Paterson 2014), *disjunctive pronoun* (Balhorn 2009, Newman 1998), or '*dual*' *pronoun* (Pauwels 2001). Even though it was an improvement in the linguistic representation of women compared to the generic *he*, it was oftentimes criticized for being intolerable in longer stretches of text, as well as for being 'clunky', 'long-winded and clumsy', 'tedious', and 'cumbersome' (Paterson 2014, 123). Despite its being somewhat gender-inclusive, in that it includes both the masculine and the feminine form, this pronoun is rooted in the conceptualization of gender as a binary construct and is not entirely gender-inclusive. This became particularly evident with the increased visibility of gender diversity in recent decades. Other feminists endorsed singular *they*, rather than *he or she*, on the grounds of its being gender-neutral (Balhorn 2009).

Significant advancements occurred in the discussion surrounding epicene pronouns, largely due to feminist language reforms and the implementation of non-sexist guidelines (Paterson 2014) across various publishing platforms, dictionaries, style guides, and grammatical resources. The changing guidelines set by style manuals determined the shifts in the usage of pronouns in academic writing over time, with the frequency of generic *he* decreasing, singular *they* slightly increasing, and *he or she* being widely used in academic writing in the post-debate texts (Adami 2009). However, widespread official recognition and approval of singular *they* did not immediately follow. Various alternative strategies were proposed, such as reformulating sentences or entirely avoiding the use of a pronoun (Baranowski 2002), using a generic *one*, pluralizing the antecedent, and switching to the use of first- or second-person pronouns (Paterson 2014).

A survey of handbooks of usage for college writers between 1998 and 2002 has revealed that proposals have been made to avoid the use of the generic *he*, but there was no mention of using the singular *they* (Balhorn 2004). Huddleston and Pullum (2002) underscore the habitual use of the singular *they* in conversation (regardless of the level of formality), as opposed to its avoidance in formal writing, while Laitinen (2002, 159) found that the singular *they* is 'gradually spreading towards more literate genres'. In a study of British and American daily newspapers, Baranowski (2002) found that three epicene pronouns co-exist in a parallel fashion in his corpora, namely singular *they*, *he or she*, and *he*. Of these, singular *they* was most frequently used in the British newspapers, while in the American dailies, *he or she* was the predominant form, possibly due to the greater grammar-wise conservatism of the American writers.

In corpora of British English compiled from texts dating from the post-2000 period, it has been demonstrated that the singular *they* is the predominant epicene form, followed by the occasional use of *he* and comparably rare use of the combined epicene pronouns (Paterson 2014). The findings from these studies on British English epicene pronouns seem to be corroborated in studies of American and Australian English (Stringer and Hopper 1998, Pauwels 2001), which also point to extensive use of singular *they*. Unlike these studies, which mainly focus on inner-circle English varieties, a study including outer-circle English varieties underscores that *he or she* and *he* are the predominant epicene pronouns among speakers from Singapore and the Philippines (Pauwels 2010, as cited by Hekanaho 2020).

Recent decades have seen unprecedented support for the use of the English epicene singular *they* in most of the English-speaking world. The extent of this shift from generic *he* to singular *they* becomes clear from the fact that nowadays, in line with the policies for non-discrimination with regard to gender, it is actually the use of the generic *he* that is discouraged (Hekanaho 2020, Paterson 2014). The explicit preference for avoidance strategies, albeit with acceptance of the use of singular *they* under certain circumstances (Chicago Manual of Style 2017, Associated Press Stylebook 2020), has even been substituted with overt acceptance of and recommendation for the use of singular *they* in some manuals of style (American Psychological Association 2020).

In this day and age, when the awareness of gender diversity has grown, pronouns have also become increasingly important for the validation of personal identities (Baron 2020). *They* has been favoured as a

personal pronoun of reference by many non-binary individuals (Bjorkman 2017, Hekanaho 2020). In addition, the singular *they* is also preferred as an epicene pronoun, and binary pronouns, such as *he or she*, are found inappropriate since they are not fully gender-inclusive (Hekanaho 2020). This is why singular *they*, as a gender-neutral epicene pronoun acknowledging the validity even of non-binary identities, is increasingly endorsed by linguists (Hekanaho 2020, Baron 2020) and even adopted by prescriptive institutions.

Keeping in mind all these developments, it may well be the case that the pronominal system has eventually yielded to the social pressure and recognized singular *they* for the legitimate form that it is, as predicted (Bodine 1975, Curzan 2003), particularly as changes to the pronominal system are not unprecedented and can be exemplified with the extension of *you* to include singularity. Thus, *they* can be conceived as either a plural or a singular pronoun (where the singular sense is a result of extension of the primary plural sense) and this is not reflected in the subject–verb agreement, just as “the historical extension of *you* from plural to singular (replacing *thou*) did not have any effect on the form of the verb” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 494).

2.2 Research on epicene pronouns use in learner English

Research focusing on the actual production of epicene pronouns by learners of English is scarce (Speyer and Schleef 2018) and the findings from studies of learners from diverse L1 backgrounds are quite heterogeneous. In Abudalbh's study (2012) of Arabic learners of English and native English speakers, it was demonstrated that generic *he* was the most common choice among Arabic learners, as opposed to the English native speakers who predominantly used singular *they*. A major reason for the prevalence of generic *he* was located in the Arab linguistic and social androcentricity. Likewise, in a study based on the Written English Corpus of Chinese Learners, Zhang and Yang (2021) examined the use of epicene pronouns among Chinese learners of English, and it was revealed that the generic *he* was most commonly used, followed by *he or she*, while the prevalence of singular *they* was fairly small. These results were partly attributed to the fact that the Chinese society still seems to be dominated by androcentric social norms, despite attempts to improve the status of women. In a similar vein, Kim's investigation (2011) into Korean EFL learners' use and perceptions of epicene pronouns indicated a higher acceptance of generic *he* in comparison to singular *they*, while the findings of a study based on the ICLE (version 2) and the LOCNESS corpora indicate that learners of English tend to use generic *he* more often than native speakers, whereas L1 writers show a greater propensity for employing singular *they* (Stormbom 2018). The combined pronoun *he or she* appears to be equally prevalent among L1 and L2 writers. Additionally, this study suggests that learners from some L1 backgrounds featuring traditional masculine generics (Russian, Italian, French, German, Dutch, and Czech) exhibit the strongest preference for the generic *he*.

Conversely, a diachronic study of epicene pronouns used by L1 Swedish learners of English (based on the Finland-Swedish BATMAT corpus) indicated that the prevalence of generic *he* diminished from the 1970s to the 2010s from 97 to 14%, while the prevalence of singular *they* increased from 0% in the 1970s to 57% in the 2010s (Stormbom 2019). This was explained by the impact of feminist language planning, as well as the transfer of gender-fair practices from the students' L1. An exploration of contemporary epicene pronoun usage based on two non-native English corpora (VESPA-SE and BATMAT) from the 2010s presented within the same article revealed considerable use of both the coordinated forms and singular *they*, which is interpreted as indicative of an on-going linguistic evolution. Some recent studies even reveal that non-native speakers' knowledge and use of singular *they* come close to those of native speakers. Thus, in a study conducted at an Austrian university, Speyer and Schleef (2018) investigated the online processing of singular *he*, *she*, and singular *they* by learners of English and native speakers and found that the results of the advanced non-native speakers corresponded to those of native speakers in virtually all parameters. In addition, Hekanaho's survey study (2020) involving native English speakers, as well as native speakers of Swedish and Finnish who are also fluent in English demonstrated that singular *they* has overwhelmingly become the predominant choice in generic contexts, with older and more educated participants, as well as non-native speakers being more accepting of gendered pronouns.

2.3 Research gaps

Several studies have discussed the relatedness of particular epicene pronouns with the (sub)type of their antecedent among learners of English from different L1 backgrounds (Zhang and Yang 2021, Zhang et al. 2020, Stormbom 2019, 2018). This is the first study of epicene pronouns used by Macedonian learners of English and it attempts to discover if similar results will be obtained in a Macedonian setting. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no study of epicene pronouns in learner English thus far that has traced the use of epicene pronouns in different years of study at the university to see if there is any development in this regard. Likewise, the association between the students' gender and their choice of epicene pronouns in a corpus of essays has hitherto not been studied. The relationship between the participants' gender and their use of English epicene pronouns has been investigated in tasks specifically designed for the purposes of epicene pronouns research (Abudaljuh 2012, Lee 2007), but this study addresses the issue through an analysis of a corpus that was compiled beforehand, regardless of the aims of this particular study, which could offer a more realistic glimpse into the preferred choice of epicene pronouns by the students since the aim of the study was not evident.

The students' native language, Macedonian, has pronounced masculine generics, as is the case with many other languages from the Indo-European language family (Curzan 2003, Newman 1992), and the third-person singular masculine personal pronoun can be used either to refer back to a male individual or generically, to an antecedent of indeterminate gender. Even in the case of nouns that have both a masculine and a feminine form, e.g. those indicating occupations, the masculine noun can be used generically, to refer to a class of individuals (Minova-Ćurkova 1994). Only rarely do there occur combined pronouns in Macedonian (*toj/taa* 'he/she', the possessives *negov,-a,-o,-i/nejzin,-a,-o,-i* 'his/her', the dative forms *nemu/nejze* 'to him/to her', as well as the accusative forms *nego/nea* 'him/her'), even in the written language. These combined pronouns are not listed as such in Macedonian language textbooks and their use tends to reflect the gender awareness of the author at an individual level. In Macedonian, there is no equivalent to the English singular *they*. Despite the existence of a national strategy for gender equality, Macedonian society is still characterized by significant gender inequality and the country is lagging behind the EU average in almost all the domains covered by the gender equality index (work, money, knowledge, time, power, health, intersecting inequalities, and violence), the greatest discrepancy between men and women being in the domains of money and time, with men having greater income and more time to devote to leisure activities (Baševska 2019).

Given the masculine generics of Macedonian, against the backdrop of lingering gender inequality in the society and gender insensitivity in language, the aim of this article was to report on the distribution of epicene *he*, *he or she*, and singular *they* in the argumentative essays by Macedonian advanced learners of English and to address the following research questions:

- i. Is the choice of an epicene pronoun associated with a particular (sub)type of antecedent and to what extent do these findings match the ones from previous research?
- ii. Is there any association between the use of specific epicene pronouns and the students' year of study at the university?
- iii. Is there any association between the use of specific epicene pronouns and the students' gender?

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses were examined:

1. The choice of an epicene pronoun is associated with a particular (sub)type of antecedent. In line with previous research, *he* is expected to occur more frequently with antecedents featuring a higher degree of individuation, while *they* is expected to occur more frequently with antecedents placed towards the lower end of the individuation cline.
2. There is an association between the use of specific epicene pronouns and the students' year of study at the university, such that participants who have progressed to a higher year of study are expected to use *he or she* and *they* more often than the other participants.

3. There is an association between the use of specific epicene pronouns and the students' gender, such that male participants are expected to use *he* more often than female ones, while female participants are expected to use *he or she* and *they* more often than male ones.

3 Methodological approach

This study is based on the Macedonian subcorpus of the International Corpus of Learner English, version 3 (ICLE-MK), which consists of 335 argumentative essays collected in the period from 2015 to 2017 and comprises 218,789 words. The third version of ICLE became publicly available in 2020,¹ meaning that the latest additions to ICLE (including the Macedonian subcorpus) include essays written years (and sometimes even decades) later than the ones included in the second version of ICLE released in 2009.

The essays were written by Macedonian learners of English from the Department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Philology, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. The application of the filtering criterion for Macedonian as a native language yielded 317 argumentative essays comprising 206,010 words in total. Of these, 165 essays were written by second-year students, 79 by third-year students, and 73 by fourth-year students. Of the total number of essays, 266 were written by female students, while 51 were written by male students. This is due to the fact that the Department of English Language and Literature has, in general, a considerably higher number of female students relative to male ones. As a result, the male and the female samples substantially differed in size: the texts written by male students comprised 30,993 words, while the texts written by female students totalled 175,017 words. Information about age was accessible about 296 out of 317 students (mean, 21.79 years; median, 21 years).

Two non-parametric tests were used to verify if the study results were statistically significant. First, the Kruskal–Wallis test was used to examine whether there was a statistically significant difference in the prevalence of each English epicene pronoun across the academic years. Second, the Mann–Whitney *U*-test was applied to investigate if the differences in the prevalence of epicene pronouns across genders (male and female) were statistically significant. As is generally acknowledged, a *p*-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant in both tests.

The ICLE-MK subcorpus was searched online for the following pronoun types: (i) *he* (including *his*, *him*, and *himself*), (ii) *they* (including *their*, *them*, and *themselves/themself*), (iii) the combined pronouns *he or she* (including *his or her*, *him or her*, *himself or herself*) and *he/she* (including *his/her*, *him/her*, and *himself/herself*) as well as these same combinations with a reversed order of the pronominal forms. All instances of these pronouns generated through the online concordancer were manually checked to verify if a specific pronoun referred back to either an indefinite pronoun or a singular noun of indeterminate gender. If one of these two criteria was met, the pronoun was regarded as an epicene pronoun and was included in the study data. Epicene pronouns occurred in 45% of all essays or more precisely in 144 essays.

The first type of antecedent, an indefinite pronoun, included the following pronouns: *everyone/everybody*, *someone/somebody*, *anyone/anybody*, and *no one/nobody*. Practically, these antecedents included noun phrases (NPs) the head of which is an indefinite pronoun, as in (1).

- (1) *Everyone* should be accepted just the way *they* are. [ICLE v3, MDCM2084]

The second type of antecedent, a singular noun of indeterminate gender, included three distinct cases depending on whether the noun was preceded by an indefinite article (*a/an*), a definite article (*the*)/a demonstrative pronoun (*this*, *that*), or a quantifier (*every*, *each*, *some*, *any*, *no*). Examples (2), (3), and (4) illustrate antecedents constituted by indefinite NPs, definite NPs, and NPs with quantifiers, respectively, to use the terminology of Paterson (2014). Cases where the pronoun *they* referred back to a plural antecedent were excluded, along with instances of *he* that refer back to a singular noun denoting a male person.

¹ The ICLE corpus version 3 can be accessed online at <https://corpora.uclouvain.be/cecl/icle/home>.

- (2) And if *a student* is required to find any kind of information in any given time *he* can just google it [...] [ICLE v3, MDCM1095]
- (3) The parent would serve as a role model to *the child* throughout *his* process of growing. [ICLE v3, MDCM1096]
- (4) [...] *every human being* has the right to decide how to live *his or her* life. [ICLE v3, MDCM1110]

Following the principles implemented in previous studies (Newman 1992, Paterson 2014, Stormbom 2018), in this study, too, all instances of pronouns referring back to the same antecedent in a single text were condensed into a single token. This contributed to different results before and after the condensation of duplicate pronouns under the same token. The rationale behind this principle is that without it, the figures may not reflect realistically the frequency of coindexing of a given antecedent with the pronominal forms referring back to it.

Occasionally generic *one* was used as an antecedent to epicene pronouns, as in (5), but since the number of these examples was insignificant overall, they were excluded from the analysis.

- (5) A single person is considered competent if he is socially and financially secured. If *one* is, then although single, *he or she* will be able to provide for the child to grow in normal social conditions. [ICLE v3, MDCM1097]

There were even fewer examples of *one* used as a determiner, which can be considered as a stressed form of the indefinite article (Quirk et al. 1985, 261), as in (6).

- (6) This means that *one person* would have to cook, clean and worry about the children's education and all their other needs while at the same time *they* have a steady job and regular income so *they* can also take care of them financially. [ICLE v3, MDCM1022]

Rare examples of nouns preceded by possessive determiners as antecedents of epicene pronouns, as in (7), were also discarded from further analysis due to the scarcity of such examples.

- (7) Is it better to vaccinate *your child* and improve *his/her* health or to pay fines imposed by society? [ICLE v3, MDCM2073]

Likewise, the rare occurrences of forms of the pronoun *she* in epicene use, as in (8), were not analysed, as their number was insignificant. Most often they were related to nouns of indeterminate gender that indicate professions generally performed by women in our local society, such as *a teacher*.

- (8) [...] if the student gets caught doing all these mentioned stuff in the disadvantages of the mobile phones, may get in a conflict with *the teacher*, which is totally right, because *she* needs to have the respect and also needs to be heard of what *she* is explaining to the students, since *she* is doing it for their purposes. [ICLE v3, MDCM1063]

4 Results

The data from the ICLE-MK subcorpus included a total of 294 epicene pronoun tokens or more precisely 143 tokens per 100,000 words. The figures in the tables in this section subsume all forms of a particular epicene pronoun that were mentioned in Section 3. As shown in Table 1, the distribution of the epicene pronouns in the Macedonian subcorpus was such that singular *they* was the predominant pronoun, comprising 62.59% of all instances of epicene pronouns. Of the other two epicene pronouns, *he* was more widely used than *he or she* (26.53 vs 10.88%, respectively).

Table 1: Distribution of epicene pronouns in ICLE-MK

	<i>N</i> (frequency normalized per 100,000 words)	%
he	78 (37.86)	26.53
he or she	32 (15.53)	10.88
they	184 (89.32)	62.59
Total	294 (142.71)	

Table 2 shows the distribution of epicene pronouns according to antecedent (sub)types, which are placed consecutively along the individuation cline, starting with the antecedent characterized by the lowest degree of individuation (indefinite pronouns) and ending with the antecedent demonstrating the highest degree of individuation (definite NPs). The findings reveal that the prevalence of *he* is the lowest with indefinite pronouns (16.18%) and it steadily increases until it reaches its peak with definite NPs (36.56%). The same trend is also evident with *he or she*. Conversely, singular *they* exhibits a reverse tendency, its prevalence steadily declining from the indefinite pronouns (77.94%) to the definite NPs (49.46%).

What is shown in Table 3 is the distribution of epicene pronouns per year of study at the university. The results indicate that the singular *they* was the most prevalent choice across all years of study (its prevalence ranging from 57.32% in the second year to 73.91% in the third year), followed by epicene *he* and the combined pronoun *he or she*. There is a clear tendency for *he or she* to gradually fall out of favour with each consecutive year, while the situation with *he* and *they* is not as straightforward. The use of *he* declined in the third year and it increased again in the fourth year, while the prevalence of *they* increased in the third year and then decreased in the fourth year. The Kruskal–Wallis test was performed to verify if the differences across the years of study were statistically significant for each of the pronouns, and the results show that there was no statistical significance. When the Kruskal–Wallis test was applied to test the use of epicene pronouns with different types of antecedents (indefinite pronouns, NPs with quantifiers, indefinite NPs, definite NPs) across the years, it was found that there was statistical significance only for the use of *they* with NPs with quantifiers across the three years of study ($p = 0.032$), or more specifically between the second and the fourth year of study ($p = 0.028$).

Table 2: Distribution of epicene pronouns based on the degree of individuation of the antecedents in ICLE-MK

	Indefinite pronouns		NPs with quantifiers		Indefinite NPs		Definite NPs	
	<i>N</i> (frequency normalized per 100,000 words)	%	<i>N</i> (frequency normalized per 100,000 words)	%	<i>N</i> (frequency normalized per 100,000 words)	%	<i>N</i> (frequency normalized per 100,000 words)	%
he	11 (5.34)	16.18	10 (4.85)	22.73	23 (11.16)	25.84	34 (16.50)	36.56
he or she	4 (1.94)	5.88	3 (1.46)	6.82	12 (5.82)	13.48	13 (6.31)	13.98
they	53 (25.73)	77.94	31 (15.05)	70.45	54 (26.21)	60.68	46 (22.33)	49.46
Total	68 (33.01)		44 (21.36)		89 (43.20)		93 (45.14)	

Table 3: Distribution of epicene pronouns according to the year of study in ICLE-MK

	Second year			Third year			Fourth year		
	<i>N</i>	Per 10,000 words	%	<i>N</i>	Per 10,000 words	%	<i>N</i>	Per 10,000 words	%
he	45	10.28	27.44	7	3.75	15.22	26	8.34	30.95
he or she	25	5.71	15.24	5	2.68	10.87	2	0.64	2.38
they	94	21.48	57.32	34	18.21	73.91	56	17.96	66.67
Total	164	37.47		46	24.64		84	26.94	

Table 4: Distribution of epicene pronouns according to the students' gender in ICLE-MK

	Male			Female		
	<i>N</i>	Frequency normalized per 10,000 words	%	<i>N</i>	Frequency normalized per 10,000 words	%
he	19	6.13	32.76	59	3.37	25.21
he or she	5	1.61	8.62	25	1.43	10.69
they	34	10.97	58.62	150	8.57	64.10
Total	58	18.71		234	13.37	

Table 4 shows the distribution of epicene pronouns according to the students' gender. Faced with a disparity in the size between the male and the female samples, in order to facilitate gender-wise comparison, the absolute counts for the epicene pronouns were normalized per 10,000 words, and their distribution was shown in terms of percentages as well. In general, female students tended to use less epicene pronouns than males. In both groups of students, *they* was the preferred pronoun, amounting to 58.62% in the male sample and 64.10% in the female sample. It was followed by *he* in terms of frequency of occurrence and *he or she* was the least popular choice in both groups. The results demonstrate that male students opted for *he* more frequently (32.76%) than the female students (25.21%), while *he or she* occurred slightly more frequently among the female (10.69%) than among the male students (8.62%). Mann–Whitney *U*-test was performed to check for statistical significance and the findings indicate that the differences between the male and the female students are not statistically significant for any of the three epicene pronouns.

5 Discussion

5.1 Distribution of epicene pronouns in ICLE-MK

5.1.1 Singular *they*

The most noteworthy finding from this study concerns the high prevalence of singular *they* in ICLE-MK (62.59%). Not only are these figures higher than those in every other hitherto analysed L2 English ICLE corpus (figures ranging from 6.1% in the Russian to 37.7% in the Norwegian subcorpus), but they are also higher than the figures from the L1 English LOCNESS corpus (48.4%) (Stormbom 2018). This might seem counterintuitive, knowing that it is the native speakers that are immersed in a sociocultural environment where gender fairness in language is encouraged and routinely practiced (Speyer and Schleef 2018). Macedonian learners of English are unlikely to outperform the native speakers in terms of their use of gender-neutral epicene *they*, since the Macedonian language uses masculine generics and the students' exposure to gender-sensitivity in their native language is more limited. This is evident, for example, in the fact that the textbooks for primary school pupils favour the masculine gender and use gender-insensitive language, thus perpetuating patriarchal norms in our cultural environment (Simonovska 2020).

The discrepancies in the distribution of singular *they* in diverse corpora can be attributed mainly to the timing of data collection. The British and American subcorpora within LOCNESS were collected more than two decades prior to ICLE-MK (in 1991 and 1995, respectively), while the subcorpora within ICLE version 2 were compiled in various time intervals between 1991 and 2004. During this time gap, there has been an evident trend towards greater acceptance of the singular *they* in most of the English-speaking world (Hekanaho 2020, Paterson 2014, Stormbom 2019, Balhorn 2009, Baranowski 2002), which has in turn resulted in greater exposure to singular *they* for learners of English through various L1 English sources, and this is particularly valid for advanced learners (Speyer and Schleef 2018, Stormbom 2019, 2022). Hence, contemporary corpora of native and non-native English student writing could yield substantially different results regarding the prevalence of singular *they*, further emphasizing the dynamic nature of language evolution.

5.1.2 Epicene *he*

Although masculine generics is typical of Macedonian, Macedonian learners of English used epicene *he* considerably less than singular *they*. The influence from the mother tongue background seems to have been attenuated by several factors. In addition to the students' greater exposure to gender-fair language in the English-language media in recent decades, another factor has been brought to the fore, and that is the influence of L2 classroom input on the students' choice of epicene pronouns (Speyer and Schleeef 2018). Unfortunately, this is a variable that cannot be assessed because there are no data about the educational experience of the students regarding the use of English epicene pronouns at the time of ICLE-MK compilation. In the context of the Faculty of Philology, to the best of my knowledge, singular *they* is currently not systematically taught until the last semester of the four-year studies, even though the issue is sporadically raised and discussed in classes even prior to that. Thus, it seems very unlikely that the students acquired the singular *they* from English language textbooks, especially since surveys of such textbooks for non-native speakers suggest that the singular *they* is not regularly used in them (Speyer and Schleeef 2018, Abudalbuh 2012, Stormbom 2022). That said, the teaching staff could have modelled gender-fair language practices themselves, thus facilitating the acquisition of this epicene pronoun by the students, as has previously been demonstrated in other settings (Cronin and Jreisat 1995, Hekanaho 2020).

5.1.3 *He or she*

The combined pronoun *he or she* was the least prevalent epicene pronoun in Macedonian student writing overall, although it bears some resemblance to a model vaguely familiar from the students' native language. The low prevalence of *he or she* to the advantage of the singular *they* in the essays by Macedonian learners of English can possibly be explained by the clumsiness of the combined pronoun (Bodine 1975, Huddleston and Pullum, 2002) and its insistence on a binary gender distinction (Baron 2020, Speyer and Schleeef 2018).

Even though the order of pronouns in the combined pronoun was generally such that the masculine came first, there also occurred variations in which the feminine pronoun was placed initially, as in (9). The latter appeared exclusively in essays authored by female students, who might have seen this as an opportunity to assert their gender identity.

- (9) For every *child*, to become a good and self-confident person it is very important to grow up in conditions that *she/he* will know *her/his* values. [ICLE v3: MDCM2051]

Sometimes students alternated the order of the pronouns in the combined pronoun even within the same sentence, as in (10). Some possible explanations are that they were considering the order irrelevant or were struggling to find a balance between the two variations.

- (10) The *parent* may change *his/hers* own life on a better way because of *her/his* child. Maybe the child somehow helps *the parent* to fix *his/hers* emotional life. The negative effect is that *the parent* will not have enough time to spend with *her/his* friends. [ICLE v3: MDCM1089]

5.1.4 Optionality

Even among students who employ singular *they* in their productive language, epicene *he* still occasionally crops up, so that there are essays in which a student uses both *he* and *they* with reference to the same antecedent, sometimes even in the same sentence. Such residual optionality is evident in (11), where the student has opted for *they* twice and has resorted to the use of *he* only once in their choice of an epicene pronoun.

- (11) [...] let 's face it, rarely it can be found *some teenager* who knows what *he* wants to do with *their* life after *they* graduate high school. [ICLE v3: MDCM3011]

Not only does optionality occur with *he* and *they*, but it can sometimes also involve the epicene *he* and the combined pronoun *he or she*. This is illustrated in (12), where the student swings back and forth between *he* and *he or she* with reference to the same antecedent (*someone*). It seems that they occasionally turned to forms of epicene *he* for reasons including the transfer from their L1, the prescriptive grammar of the L2, or even the language economy principle.

- (12) If *someone* is curious about something and cannot find *his* answer fast, *he or she* can check the internet which may give *him* a nice answer or solution. [ICLE v3: MDCM1050]

5.2 Epicene pronouns and antecedent (sub)types

Epicene pronoun choice seems to be determined to a considerable extent by the degree of antecedent individuation (Newman 1998), where individuation is understood as “the ability to see a referent as a distinct entity” (Paterson 2014, 61). Indefinite pronouns are ranked at the lowest position on the individuation hierarchy, followed by NPs with quantifiers, indefinite NPs, and definite NPs, which are characterized by the highest degree of individuation (Newman 1998, Paterson 2014, Stormbom 2018).

The findings from this study point to the prevalent use of singular *they* with indefinite pronouns compared to the other two epicene pronouns, thus confirming the results from previous studies (Newman 1998, Lee 2007, Adami 2009, Paterson 2014, Stormbom 2018, Hekanaho 2020, Zhang et al. 2020). The most frequently encountered antecedent to singular *they* in this category was *everyone/everybody*. This is hardly surprising knowing that, while being grammatically singular, this indefinite pronoun still indicates notional plurality (Quirk et al. 1985) and is therefore more naturally combined with the epicene pronoun *they*, which itself evokes the concept of plurality. In such cases, the use of the notionally singular *he* as an epicene pronoun, though being traditionally the only grammatically correct option, is semantically in collision with the notional plurality of the antecedent. *They* itself occurred in all its forms: *they*, *their*, *them*, and *themselves*, most of which are illustrated in (13).

- (13) So imagine what would happen, if higher education were free. *Everybody*, and I mean everybody, would want to at least experience it, and once *they* do, chaos is what will follow. *Everybody* would have a chance to continue *their* process of academic enlightenment, regardless of *their* social background and *their* financial state... *Everybody* would be given an opportunity to create a better social position for *themselves*. [ICLE v3: MDCM3013]

Singular *they* referred back to all instances of *everyone* in ICLE-MK when it was preceded with the negative particle *not*, as in (14).

- (14) For that reason, I believe that anti-bully programs should be introduced in schools because *not everyone* can cope on *their* own with the damage inflicted on *them*. [ICLE v3: MDCM2082]

Besides *everyone/everybody*, *they* also occurred with other indefinite pronouns, such as *anyone*, *someone*, and *nobody*, confirming the statement by Quirk et al. (1985) that *they* is frequently co-referential with all indefinite pronouns. This means that even with indefinite pronouns that are not notionally plural, *they* was the preferred epicene pronoun due to their low degree of individuation. As a matter of fact, in ICLE-MK, *anyone* occurred only with singular *they* as an epicene pronoun, as in (15).

- (15) The most important reason why higher education should be free is giving opportunity to *anyone* eager to study regardless of *their* financial status. [ICLE v3: MDCM3078]

Laitinen (2002, 151) found that ‘neither *he* nor *they* is clearly preferred with *someone*’, while in ICLE-MK, *someone* occurred with all three analysed epicene pronouns. There were several instances of an indefinite pronoun anaphorized by *he*, one of which is exemplified in (16).

- (16) *Everyone* who goes to university has many benefits from it. *He* spreads *his* knowledge, organizes *his* work much easily and is more open-minded to some things. [ICLE v3: MDCM3010]

From Table 2, it is apparent that with the increase in the degree of individuation, the prevalence of singular *they* declines, whereas the prevalence of epicene *he* and the combined pronoun *he or she* steadily rises. Hence, antecedents placed towards the lower end of the individuation cline are more strongly associated with the use of singular *they*, whereas the higher end of the individuation cline is more consistent with the choice of epicene *he* and *he or she*. This finding is in line with previous studies on the relationship between the degree of individuation of an antecedent and the choice of an epicene pronoun (Newman 1998, Paterson 2014, Stormbom 2018, Zhang et al. 2020). The following examples illustrate the use of *he* as an epicene pronoun with a definite NP (17), an indefinite NP (18), and an NP with quantifier (19).

- (17) If *the person* loves chemistry, *he* will still love it even after the injury but maybe *he* will find some aspects of it not interesting. [ICLE v3: MDCM2063]
 (18) *A person with a university degree* can look for a highly paid job and can do a job that *he* had been studied for. [ICLE v3: MDCM3010]
 (19) *Every criminal* don’t think about other people’s live *he* thinks that *he* is mightier than anyone else, and that *he* is above all. [ICLE v3: MDCM1165]

He or she occurred more than twice as frequently with definite NP antecedents compared to indefinite pronoun antecedents (13.98 vs 6.88%, respectively), which suggests a perceived higher degree of individuation of this pronoun, as is the case with epicene *he*.

Sometimes even within the same essay, various strategies were employed to refer back to singular NP antecedents, possibly depending on the perceived varying degrees of individuation of the NPs. Thus, in (20), the author used *they* with an indefinite NP and *he* with a definite one.

- (20) For instance, *a well educated student* could do *their* best if *they* work what have already been studying. ... For instance a rich student who cannot take the most difficult exam might try to offer bribe, but *the poor student* knows *he* must try harder to succeed. [ICLE v3: MDCM3016]

On the whole, the first hypothesis was confirmed since singular *they* did indeed occur more readily with antecedents leaning towards the lower end of the individuation spectrum, such as indefinite pronouns, while the use of *he* and *he or she* was more prevalent with antecedents towards the higher end of the individuation spectrum, most notably definite NPs.

5.3 Epicene pronouns use across the years of study at the university

At the Department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Philology the undergraduate studies proceed over 4 years. The textbooks used in the first year of studies are at an upper-intermediate level (or B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference – CEFR). In the second year, students use textbooks at an advanced level (or C1 according to CEFR), while the third year is a transition from an advanced to a proficient level of study (C1 to C2 according to CEFR). The textbooks used in the final year are at the proficiency level (or C2 according to CEFR). Knowing that the essays in ICLE-MK were contributed by students in the second, third, and fourth years of their studies, the information above should give readers only an approximate indication of the students’ level of proficiency.

The second hypothesis suggests that there is an association between the prevalence of specific epicene pronouns and the students' progression in their academic years at the university. It posits that students who have advanced to the senior years of study are expected to use *he or she* and *they* more frequently compared to the second year students. This is based on the assumption that with the progression through the academic years, especially as they move towards the advanced level of L2 proficiency and beyond, students get exposed to diverse L1 English sources, not necessarily in the classroom, but in all sorts of different contexts, that could potentially increase their awareness of the current trends regarding epicene pronouns in the English-speaking world (Speyer and Schleef 2018). There is practically no previous research in this area, so no comparisons to prior studies can be made.

Assuming that the evolution of English epicene pronouns is unlikely to have been particularly addressed in the textbooks used at the time of corpus collection, one cannot expect there to be a typical learning curve over the years for the majority of the students regarding this issue. On the contrary, students might exhibit greater or lesser awareness of the shifts in the pronoun paradigm by virtue of some extra-linguistic factors, such as the degree and variety of their exposure to English-speaking media, communication with English native speakers or staying in an English-speaking country for those students who could afford that opportunity. Developmental factors are also at play. Namely, some learners of English at the B2 level are believed to find it hard to relate a stereotypical masculine and feminine antecedent to *they*. However, these issues are outgrown at levels C1–C2 (Speyer and Schleef 2018).

Overall, the results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference from the second to the third, from the third to the fourth, and from the second to the fourth year of study regarding the prevalence of particular epicene pronouns viewed in their totality. However, analysing the prevalence of each of the epicene pronouns in the four distinct antecedent categories across the academic years pointed to a statistically significant increase in the prevalence of *they* with NPs with quantifiers between the second and the fourth year of study. Since NPs with quantifiers are placed towards the lower end of the individuation continuum, this finding is hardly surprising. Singular *they* is typically found more frequently with antecedents that display lower individuation. That the fourth-year students should display a greater prevalence of *they* with NPs with quantifiers as antecedents compared to the second-year students indicates that students become increasingly aware that a gender-neutral epicene pronoun like *they* is more suited to NPs with quantifiers than the other epicene pronouns.

The combined pronoun demonstrated a consistently declining trend over the years, suggesting that students tend to become more polarized over the years in their choice of an epicene pronoun, i.e. they primarily choose between *he* or *they*, while *he or she* is considered a less viable alternative, possibly because it is “too long, too awkward, too binary” (Baron 2020, 7). The other two epicene pronouns, *he* and *they*, demonstrated fluctuating trends over the years, suggesting that no pronoun has stabilized as the pronoun of choice. That said, singular *they* was still the predominant epicene pronoun across all years of study. In general, learners of English are expected to be more resistant to change and more compliant with the prescriptive norms in grammar (Hekanaho 2020) so as not to violate the number concord principle with singular *they*. Then again, many of them are familiarized to a certain extent with the predominance of singular *they* in actual L1 English speech and writing and are tempted to mirror the model provided by the native speakers. Hence, the fluctuating trends of *he* and *they* are understandable, as the shift in the pronominal system was a work in progress anyway in the mid-2010s, even for the English native speakers.

5.4 Epicene pronouns use and the students' gender

The third hypothesis proposed a connection between the selection of certain epicene pronouns and the gender of the students. It anticipated that male students would tend to use *he* more frequently than female students, who would in turn tend to use *he or she* and *they* more often than male participants. This hypothesis was based on previous research that proved that male participants tend to use epicene *he*, especially if their L1 has prominent masculine generics and if they live in androcentric societies (Abudalbhuh 2012, Lee 2007).

Conversely, female participants tend to be “more sensitive to the exclusive maleness of *he* than males are” (Balhorn 2009, 403), and they typically exhibit greater awareness and concern regarding gender equality in language use, by opting for *he/she* more frequently than males (Lee 2007).

In a culture where gender inequality is still an issue, one could expect a ‘carryover (i.e., transfer) effect of a male-biased ideology’ from the learners’ L1 to their L2 (Abudalbuh 2012, 138). However, this study did not verify that expectation. Even though the prevalence of epicene *he* was higher among male students, and the prevalence of *he or she* and singular *they* was predominant among female students, yet the very fact that there was no statistically significant difference between the male and the female students with regard to any of the three investigated epicene pronouns could mean that the once predominant male-biased gender framework is being challenged and that there is a gradual shift towards a more inclusive understanding of gender.

6 Conclusion

The significance of this study lies in the fact that it provides a glimpse into the discernibly changing trends regarding the use of epicene pronouns in learner English. The results from this study based on ICLE-MK point to a much wider distribution of singular *they* relative to epicene *he* and the combined pronoun *he or she*. Given the native context of an L1 with pronounced masculine generics, as well as a society with a gender equality index lower than the EU average, these findings become even more important, since they are indicative of the profound knock-on effect of the dramatically shifting policies regarding epicene pronoun use in most of the English-speaking countries.

The findings from this study provided additional evidence for some of the claims made in previous studies on epicene pronouns in learner English regarding the association between the choice of epicene pronouns and the degree of antecedent individuation. More precisely, in ICLE-MK, *he* and *he or she* were the least prevalent with indefinite pronouns and their prevalence increased with the rise in the degree of individuation, reaching their peak with definite NPs. Singular *they*, in contrast, demonstrated a reverse trend, occurring most frequently with indefinite pronouns and gradually declining before reaching its trough with definite NPs. Thus, the individuation continuum, ranging from indefinite pronouns, through NPs with quantifiers, indefinite NPs, all the way to definite NPs, has proved to be a valid factor in the selection of specific epicene pronouns.

The comparison across the years of study at the university did not point to virtually any statistically significant differences in the use of English epicene pronouns. Yet there was a clearly observable declining trend for *he or she* over the years. The fluctuating trends of *he* and *they* indicate that learners are still hesitant about the correct form: either the traditionally prescribed *he* or singular *they*, as the currently predominant epicene pronoun in present-day native English input. In addition, this study found that there was no significant difference in the use of English epicene pronouns between the male and the female participants, which seems to be an important indicator of a trend towards greater gender sensitivity among the younger generations.

The major contribution of this study is that it demonstrates a significant shift in learner English when it comes to the use of singular *they*. However, the study also has its limitations, one of which is that it focuses on only one subcorpus of ICLE, version 3. This study would hopefully inspire other scholars to investigate other learner English subcorpora from ICLE version 3, so as to verify whether studies of subcorpora compiled in the same time frame (the 2010s) would report similar findings. The study also emphasizes the importance of corpus collection time for comparisons across corpora, especially when analysing linguistic issues in the process of on-going change, as corpora compiled a few decades apart could be deemed literally incomparable in such situations. Along the same lines, the compilation of new native English corpora of more recent student writing, such that would be comparable to the ICLE v3 L2 English subcorpora would be highly desirable for research purposes at this point. Finally, this study could also raise awareness among English language teachers about the importance of modelling gender-fair language practices and familiarizing students with the evolution of the English epicene pronouns. Thus, by encouraging students to adopt a more gender-inclusive attitude towards language, educators would also prepare students for respectful and more effective communication in diverse contexts.

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