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GENDER REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH

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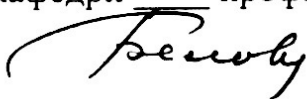
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ABSTRACT

This master's thesis examines current developments in gender linguistics, focusing on the evolution of gender-inclusive language as a developing norm in contemporary English. The relevance of this research is conditioned by the need to understand how language adapts to shifting norms of gender representation and to provide empirical evidence of these changes. Using corpus-based methods, the study traces how new forms become normalized and identifies patterns of both change and resistance in contemporary usage.

The aim of the thesis is to investigate key changes in the use of gender-inclusive language at the lexical, grammatical and pragmatic levels. The research methodology combines quantitative diachronic analysis of large text corpora (NOW and COCA) with qualitative analysis of concordance lines (KWIC) and focused comparative studies.

The scientific novelty of the work lies in its multi-level approach and in the identification of mechanisms of language change that extend beyond simple lexical substitution.

The main results show that the integration of inclusive language is a steady yet complex process. At the lexical level, the rapid replacement of many gender-marked job titles was traced, alongside the lexical persistence of terms embedded within institutional contexts. At the grammatical level, the analysis revealed the replacement of masculine pronouns and the phenomenon of “idiom obsolescence”. Additionally, the study identifies distinct social and cognitive barriers associated with neopronouns compared to the widely accepted singular *they*. Finally, in the field of pragmatics, the study provides a quantitative measure of “pronoun avoidance” that demonstrates cognitive and social hesitation in adopting new communicative norms.

The structure of the thesis comprises an introduction, three main chapters, general conclusions, a list of references and appendices.

Keywords: gender linguistics, gender-inclusive language, corpus linguistics, diachronic analysis, singular *they*, pragmatics, language change.

АНОТАЦІЯ

Ця магістерська робота присвячена дослідженню сучасних тенденцій у межах гендерної лінгвістики, зокрема еволюції гендерно-інклюзивної мови як норми, що розвивається в сучасній англійській мові. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена потребою дослідити специфіку адаптації мови до трансформації норм гендерної репрезентації, а також надати емпіричне підтвердження цих змін. Використовуючи методи корпусної лінгвістики, робота відстежує процес нормалізації нових форм та виявляє закономірності змін і опору в сучасному мовному вжитку.

Метою роботи є дослідження ключових лінгвістичних засобів репрезентації гендеру на лексичному, граматичному та прагматичному рівнях. У дослідженні застосовано змішані методи. Теоретична частина базується на критичному аналізі наукової літератури. Аналітичні розділи поєднують кількісний діахронний аналіз корпусів текстів (NOW and COCA) з аналізом конкордансних рядків (KWIC), а також включають порівняльне дослідження.

Наукова новизна роботи полягає в цілісному підході та виявленні неочевидних механізмів мовних змін, що виходять за межі простого лексичного заміщення.

Основні результати дослідження свідчать про те, що перехід до інклюзивної мови є сталим, але водночас складним процесом. На лексичному рівні підтверджено швидке витіснення гендерно маркованих назв посад, проте водночас виявлено явище «лексичної стійкості» термінів, закріплених в інституційних контекстах. На граматичному рівні аналіз відстежив заміну займенників чоловічого роду, а також процес архаїзації традиційних ідіоматичних виразів. Крім того, було виявлено специфічні соціальні та когнітивні бар'єри у сприйнятті неозайменників порівняно з дедалі більш поширеним вживанням *they* в однині. Нарешті, у сфері прагматики аналіз продемонстрував наявність реальних вагань у процесі впровадження нових норм, виявлених під час аналізу конкретних випадків «уникнення займенників».

Структура роботи складається зі вступу, трьох основних розділів, загальних висновків, списку використаних джерел і додатків.

Ключові слова: гендерна лінгвістика, гендерно-інклюзивна мова, корпусна лінгвістика, діахронний аналіз, займенник *they* в однині, прагматика, мовні зміни.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the English language has emerged as a primary site for negotiating broader social changes. In particular, it serves as a mirror of the gradual move away from a strict binary understanding of gender. This shift is not limited to theoretical discussion. It can be observed in everyday language use, in the media and in institutional communication. As speakers adapt their language, changes begin to affect different levels of the system, including vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatic norms.

This study employs a constructionist perspective on language and gender. Within this framework, language is viewed as both a reflection and a creator of social relations. As Joanna Litosseliti points out, the field has gradually shifted from the idea that “we use language because of who we are” to the view that “who we are is partly because of the way we use language” [47]. From this perspective, the use of gender-inclusive language can be understood as one of the ways in which such change is expressed.

The **relevance of this research** lies in the ongoing shift in English toward a gender-inclusive standard, which represents a notable instance of language change in progress. While many discussions of this issue are often ideological, this study adopts an empirical approach consistent with contemporary sociolinguistics. It examines how social shifts influence linguistic structures using a corpus-based method. Through these methodologies, the thesis contributes to understanding how new forms become normalized and why certain lexical and grammatical changes encounter resistance in modern discourse.

The **aim of this study** is to examine key linguistic strategies for gender-inclusivity in present-day English at the lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic levels using a data-driven approach. To achieve this, the following **objectives** must be accomplished:

- To outline the theoretical and historical background of gender representation in English.

- To analyze common contemporary strategies for inclusive language, in particular, the replacement of gendered vocabulary and the evolution of the pronoun system.
- To identify the historical roots of singular they and the emergence of neopronouns, and compare the perception of them in society.
- To conduct an original, corpus-based diachronic study of how these linguistic changes are reflected in the specific domain of journalistic discourse.
- To investigate the pragmatic choices made by speakers in real-life communication, including the use of relational terms and the adoption of "inclusive defaults."

The **subject of the study** is the linguistic mechanisms and levels of realization (lexical, grammatical and pragmatic) of gender-inclusive strategies, as well as the patterns of their development in contemporary English.

The **object of the study** is the phenomenon of gender-inclusive language as a developing norm of contemporary English.

The **research methodology** utilizes an integrated design. The theoretical part of the work includes an overview of foundational academic literature in gender linguistics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics. The practical and analytical parts of the thesis use a mixed-methods approach:

1. Corpus Linguistics: A quantitative, diachronic analysis of multi-billion-word corpora (primarily the NOW Corpus and COCA) is used to track the trends in language use over time. The data is measured in normalized frequencies (Per Million Words).
2. Qualitative Analysis: This includes a qualitative analysis of concordance lines (KWIC) to understand context, alongside a comparative case study of news articles.

The **research material** for this thesis is drawn from several types of contemporary public discourse. The main empirical basis consists of data from two large corpora: the NOW (News on the Web) Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The resources were used both for

quantitative analysis of frequency trends and for qualitative examination of concordance lines (KWIC).

In addition to corpus data, the study also relies on selected primary sources. These include journalistic texts, such as news articles from sources such as BBC News and Entertainment Tonight, which are used for a contemporary case study. Institutional materials were also considered, in particular the official style guidelines of the American Psychological Association and GLAAD, to examine how inclusive language is addressed at the public level.

The **novelty of this research** is in its multi-level approach. This thesis combines lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic analysis to provide a more nuanced perspective. It also includes original corpus-based observations, which makes it possible to examine how these changes operate within contemporary discourse.

The **practical value** of the work is in its attempt to ground discussions of inclusive language in empirical data. The findings may be relevant for journalists, editors, and other professionals who work with public texts, as they reflect current tendencies in discourse. They may also be useful for institutions, such as universities or organizations that develop internal guidelines. They might benefit from the examples of how inclusive language is adopted or, in some cases, resisted.

The **structure** of the thesis includes an introduction, three main chapters, a general conclusion, a list of references, and appendices. Chapter 1 outlines the theoretical foundations of gender linguistics and introduces key concepts. Chapter 2 examines both historical and contemporary strategies of gender-inclusive language, including changes in vocabulary, developments in the pronoun system, and shifts in pragmatic use. Chapter 3 presents the results of the data analysis. It combines quantitative corpus data with a qualitative case study. The conclusion summarizes the main findings.

1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF GENDER AND LANGUAGE

1.1. Defining gender as a social phenomenon

Understanding the role and place of gender in language requires a clear theoretical foundation. The concept of gender currently plays a fundamental role in shaping social perception and individual identity. It influences our understanding of social norms and contributes to the construction of individual identity.

Individuals often form judgments about others – whether consciously or not – based on gender assumptions. Since language both reflects and reinforces these perceptions, defining the concepts of gender is essential to any linguistic analysis that aims to identify social tendencies and power dynamics in a given era. This subchapter highlights gender's status as a social phenomenon by examining the various definitions and interpretations of the concept across disciplines.

According to the sociologist Steven E. Barkan, gender is a social phenomenon that refers to the behavioral patterns, roles, and attributes that a society assigns to individuals based on their biological sex. Consequently, gender is a social construction [10]. In contrast, sex refers to the biological factors; it is based on the reproductive potential. Genetics and physiological traits predetermine it. The binary opposition of male and female represents sex [42].

Two important concepts associated with gender are gender roles and gender identity. Gender roles are behavioral patterns that men and women are expected to adopt based on their sex. From a sociological perspective, there is a distinction between masculine and feminine gender roles. It should be noted that, according to sociologists, these two concepts are not necessarily connected to males' and females' biological traits. They are rather flexible and dependent on the level of power that males and females hold in society [14].

While gender is associated with a person's socialization and sex with their biology, gender identity is primarily classified as a psychological aspect. According to the American Psychological Association, gender identity is defined as an internal sense of being a man or woman, or belonging to a non-binary gender [6]. It is

essential to highlight that a person's identity may not correspond to their sex assigned at birth or primary or secondary sex characteristics.

To better understand how gender is conceptualized, we should examine how scholars from different fields define it. The two different points of view are reflected in the ongoing debate between essentialism and social constructivism.

Proponents of psychological essentialism believe that members of a certain social category (for example, men) share a particular "essence" that distinguishes them from another social category (women). They state that gender differences are defined by innate biological factors, meaning they are embedded in the genetic code and hormonal structures [12].

This theory is questioned by the representatives of social constructivism, who argue that gender, as well as other social categories, such as race or sexual orientation, are reinforced through language particularities, values, norms, and beliefs [60].

Although these two theories are often considered to contradict each other, they can still coexist. For instance, in our research, we support the idea that gender identity is largely connected with some innate biological traits. At the same time, we embrace the critique of binary gender systems that exclude non-binary individuals.

Gender is not static; it is shaped by socialization and cognitive development. Several key psychological theories explain how individuals internalize gender roles from early childhood. Social Learning Theory suggests that individuals learn gender roles by observing and imitating the behavior of others, especially parents, peers, and the media. Rewards and punishments reinforce gender-acceptable or gender-unacceptable behavior [9].

Another theory was developed by the American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg [43]. He states that gender is constructed in our childhood during the period of cognitive growth. He argues that achieving a stable gender concept is a critical milestone for later gender-related development. Kohlberg divides this process into three main stages:

- Gender identity (Age 2-3): the period when children start labeling themselves as boys or girls;
- Gender stability (Age 4-5): a stage when a child realizes the consistency of their gender over time;
- Gender constancy (Age 6-7): the formation of a stable understanding that gender remains the same despite the appearance, activities, and other superficial changes.

Gender schema theory, proposed by the psychologist Sandra Bem, suggests that individuals develop schemas [12]. These schemas are the frameworks that shape the way we perceive ourselves and others. They act as filters: our response to new information is based on already existing gender-linked associations. The theory explains why sex-typed individuals (those who strongly align with gender norms) process gendered information more readily, while others may challenge or expand these categories.

We have defined that gender is a constitutive element of social relationships. Based on this idea, the concept of gender consists of four elements: cultural symbols, normative concepts, social institutions and organizations, and subjective identity [60]. This classification provides us with an understanding of the dynamics of gender construction. Gender is not a biological or static concept; it is shaped by different elements connected to society.

The first element stands for the symbols people use to identify and signify gender, often in a very contradictory way. For example, Eve and Mary can be at the same time the symbols of femininity but also be associated with pollution and purification, corruption, and innocence. The second element is represented by normative concepts. They set the parameters for understanding gender. These concepts are reflected in different ideologies, doctrines, and interpretations. An example of their realization is the formation of a fixed binary opposition.

Moving to the next aspect, it's important to clarify that the concept of gender is shaped not only by family relationships but also by social institutions and organizations. Labor markets, education systems, social structures, and media are

the arenas for gender to be constructed. The final element stresses the role of gender in forming our identity. Our historical and cultural backgrounds also influence the way we perceive gender differences. In other words, a historically grounded approach cannot be overlooked [60].

These four elements help us explore how gender is socially constructed. Such classification is essential in highlighting the importance of external factors in shaping gender. However, it is still not sufficient for a complete understanding of how gender identity is formed. Gender is internalized by individuals through socialization and cognitive development. Several key theories of gender development explain how people come to understand and perform gender roles.

Beyond individual behavior and social roles, gender is closely tied to the systems of *power* and *ideology*. Instead of being a fixed identity, gender is constructed and maintained through institutional norms and discursive practices that regulate how gender is understood and performed. French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, in “The History of Sexuality”, argued that power is productive – it generates knowledge and shapes social reality. According to Foucault, “power and knowledge directly imply one another” [27, p. 27]. This means that dominant ideologies about gender are produced and maintained through discourses embedded in institutions such as education, medicine, and media.

These discourses regulate how gender is performed and perceived. They often present social norms as if they are neutral. For instance, in the media, language used to describe women who embrace positions of power often differs significantly from that used for men: women may be labeled as “bossy” or “emotional”, while men in similar roles are described as “confident” or “assertive”. Such patterns of representation are not neutral – they reinforce gendered power hierarchies by shaping public perception and validating certain behaviors as acceptable or unacceptable based on gender.

In summary, the concept of gender is shaped by biological, cultural, and social forces. Theories such as social learning, cognitive development, and gender schema provide important insights into how individuals come to understand and perform

gender roles. At the same time, systems of power and dominant ideologies reinforce these roles through language and discourse. Since language both reflects and reproduces social norms, it plays a central role in constructing and regulating gender. The next chapter turns to linguistics to explore how gender has been studied in language-focused research.

1.2 The development of gender studies in linguistics

The emergence of gender studies within linguistics was a part of a broader transformation in the academic landscape of the late twentieth century. As noted by Yuliia Maslova, one of the key forces that influenced this shift was the rise of postmodernism [3]. Postmodern thinkers recognized that reality is constructed through language and text. This created an urge for new methods to analyze how language shapes socio-cultural categories such as gender.

At the same time, although the feminist movement of the 1970s is often regarded as the starting point for gender linguistics, important foundations had already been laid in earlier research. As Maslova notes, linguists such as Otto Jespersen and Edward Sapir documented differences between male and female language in the 1920s [3]. These early observations later became the basis for more critical reinterpretation by feminist scholars.

One of the most prominent figures in this reinterpetive shift is Robin Tolmach Lakoff, an American professor emerita of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. Her seminar work “Language and Woman’s Place” sparked the entire field of language and gender studies and is considered to be the most foundational publication in that area [45]. In her book, R. Lakoff describes the close connection between language and gender. She states that language is both a mirror and a tool for reinforcing different power dynamics in society. The author explains how language reflects gender inequality, focusing on linguistic discrimination experienced by women in two ways: in the way they are taught to express themselves through the language, and in the way general language use treats them [45, p. 47].

In her work, the professor introduces the notion of women’s language, which refers to both language restricted in use to women and language used to describe

women alone [45, p. 48]. Lakoff provides examples of linguistic phenomena common in women's speech, which are socially taught and reinforced from early childhood. They include:

- Vocabulary precision (fine discrimination of color): women's more nuanced speech patterns are often linked to their relegation to non-crucial decisions in a male-dominated society [45, p. 50].
- The use of 'meaningless' particles (softeners such as "Oh dear!", "Goodness"): women are conditioned to express emotions less openly than men [45, p. 51].
- The use of tag questions ("The war in Vietnam is terrible, isn't it?"): specifically in this sentence, the syntactic structure reflects looking to the addressee for confirmation [45, p. 55].
- Intonation patterns (for example, raising intonation in declarative sentences) suggest uncertainty.
- Marked politeness and indirect speech (compound requests such as "Won't you close the door?") [45, p. 57].

Lakoff concludes that women's language contributes to their systematic exclusion from power, both linguistically and socially, and reflects a broader societal framework in which women are expected to remain in "their place". However, her theory does not specifically examine the deeper power structures and dynamics that produce and sustain women's subordinated position.

Later, building on Lakoff's work, the Dominance Theory was developed. Its proponents shifted the analytical focus from description to explanation. Researchers such as Zimmerman and West, Pamela Fishman, and Dale Spender argued that linguistic interactions reflect broader social inequalities, namely male dominance. According to the theory, both genders have access to the same linguistic resources and share similar communicative purposes. The apparent difference lies in the way they utilize these resources to achieve these goals. These patterns contribute to the maintenance of a hierarchical social structure and the continued subordination of women within the patriarchal system [68].

To support this theory with more specific examples, it is useful to examine how male dominance in interaction was observed by Zimmerman and West in their work “Sex Role, Interruptions and Silence in Conversation” [68]. Their study analyzed the interruptions and silence in conversational turn-taking. It focused on how these features are used to assert control and maintain dominance in conversation. The researchers found that, in mixed sex conversations, men were more likely to interrupt than women. West and Zimmerman considered interruptions as disruptions of the speaker’s right to complete the turn. This leads to the idea that such acts of speech can function as tools for exercising control and power.

This perspective is further supported by Ghilzai and Inayat, who offer a psychological analysis of interruptions as a strategic device [29]. The authors argue that interrupting is a deliberate means of establishing authority and regulating social hierarchy. It is frequently used to assert or maintain domination in interaction.

Similarly to Lakoff’s perspective, Zimmerman and West’s focus on how language reflects and reproduces gendered power relations is valuable for analyzing the contemporary discourse in this study. However, like Lakoff’s theory, the Dominance approach has also been subject to criticism. One major concern is that it pays insufficient attention to women’s position in society, neglecting their strategies of resistance in discourse. They are portrayed primarily as passive victims of patriarchal power, rather than active participants capable of challenging dominant norms [68]

In response to criticism of Dominance theory, Deborah Tannen, an American author and professor of linguistics, proposed her alternative theoretical framework known as Difference theory [62]. As the name suggests, the theory focuses on the differences in communicative goals and strategies employed by men and women, rather than on power imbalances. Tannen emphasizes that men and women are socialized into distinct “conversational cultures”, which can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication. In her influential work “You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation”, she suggests that these differences in the adoption of communicative strategies arise from culturally shaped

expectations associated with gender. In the same book, she used the term *genderlect* to frame distinct male and female speech styles.

One of the central distinctions Tannen makes is the contrast between *status* and *support*, or *independence* and *intimacy*. She argues that men tend to use communication as a means of asserting their social status, maintaining autonomy, and avoiding failure. These communicative goals reflect their broader orientation toward independence, which is often emphasized in their socialization. In contrast, women tend to prioritize establishing connections and negotiating relationships in conversations. This reflects their broader cultural focus on intimacy and support.

To illustrate the difference between men's and women's communication styles, Deborah Tannen introduced one of her central dichotomies: *report-talk* and *rappor talk*, which she relates to public and private speaking [62]. *Report-talk*, typically associated with men, is used to convey information, demonstrate competence, and maintain a sense of independence, especially in public or formal settings. Tannen explains that this tendency is rooted in early socialization, as boys are often taught to use communication as a tool for getting attention. That is why they feel more comfortable when they need to speak to a larger audience of less familiar people (public speaking).

In contrast, *rappor-talk* is more common among women. It serves their purpose to foster closeness and share personal experiences. Tannen suggests that girls feel most comfortable communicating in the home or in other intimate and familiar settings where they build close personal connections. This preference often stems from the fact that girls face more peer criticism than boys when trying to stand out. As a result, they form their strongest bonds at home or when they feel closely connected with people, which aligns with the characteristics of private speaking [62].

Tannen does not deny that women also value independence or that men are capable of building connections through communication. Rather, she highlights the differing priorities and tendencies that men and women often exhibit in interactions, which can lead to everyday miscommunication, and further explains how these

patterns are rooted in socialization. Despite this valuable shift, she made from power towards cultural misunderstanding, her theory has also faced criticism for overlooking the complexity of gender.

This criticism has focused on the concept of genderlects. Some contemporary research suggests that this model is too simplistic and overstates the differences. As Ukrainian scholar O. Gertsovska summarized in her review of the field, more recent studies show that it is unjustified to speak of a genderlect [1]. The differences between male and female speech are not significant enough, do not appear in every speech act, and are often outweighed by other factors such as professional status, age, or the specific social context.

In contrast to Tannen's binary framework, Judith Butler, a feminist philosopher and one of the most influential contemporary theorists in gender studies, offers a radically different perspective in her book "Gender Trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity" [17], she introduces a groundbreaking theoretical framework called Performative Theory. According to Butler, gender identity is constituted through its expression, which includes repeated social and linguistic performance. In other words, gender is defined not by some fixed categories, such as *man* or *woman*, but by what the person is doing.

Butler argues that language is an active force that plays a central role in shaping our understanding of gender [17]. Words and phrases are not neutral tools used to describe identity; they actively participate in producing it. Consequently, language does not merely reflect gender – it helps to constitute it. Drawing on J. L. Austin's theory of performative speech acts, Butler illustrates how gendered language contributes to the formation of social identity, which begins at the moment when a newborn is declared to be a boy or a girl. For example, when the doctor declares "It's a girl!" at birth, this utterance sets into motion a lifelong process of gender expectations.

Butler's theory is innovative in its analysis of gender identities that fall outside traditional binary norms, such as those of non-binary, transgender, and genderqueer individuals. For instance, someone who uses they/them pronouns challenges the

linguistic binary of *he* and *she*. In such a way, the traditional gender system is subverted, and the language becomes a powerful tool for resistance and reshaping the social meaning of gender.

Another central component of Butler's theory is the notion that gender is constituted through the repetition and citation of normative behaviors [17]. Gender performances – such as gestures, modes of dress, and patterns of social interaction – are not freely chosen in a vacuum but are instead driven by pre-existing cultural scripts. These scripts must be cited or repeated over time to sustain the illusion of stable gender identity.

Language plays a central role in this process. Examples of terms that reinforce the binary gender system include the use of pronouns, gendered job titles (*chairman*, *stewardess*), and conventional forms of address such as “ladies and gentlemen”. As these linguistic choices must be repeated to maintain gender norms, they are open to disruption. When individuals purposefully alter these patterns – for instance, by using *they* as a pronoun - the performative nature of gender is revealed, and the illusion of a fixed gender category is challenged. In this way, English becomes a tool for subverting linguistic and social conventions as well as the medium through which gender is enacted [17].

The study of gender in linguistics has developed significantly over time. It has moved from early observations of how women speak to more complex theories about how language shapes and mirrors gender identities. Robin Lakoff's work in the 1970s laid the foundation by showing that social norms often shape women's language and reflect their subordinated position. Building on that, Dominance Theory explored how men use language to assert control, while Difference Theory focused on the idea that men and women are taught to communicate differently, which can lead to misunderstandings.

In the last five years, research on language and gender has continued to develop these theoretical foundations. A notable contribution has been made by a sociolinguist, Laura Hekanaho. She examines attitudes toward English non-binary pronouns. Her study shows that singular *they* has become more frequent in both

public and online discourse, especially among young users. This reflects a broader shift toward recognizing non-binary identities [37].

Recent sociolinguistic research on singular *they* supports this tendency. It demonstrates that the spread of gender-inclusive language is not uniform across all speakers. According to the research, the most consistent users of the singular *they* are younger speakers, non-binary individuals, and members of the LGBTQ2S+ community. This suggests that linguistic change is being driven by those for whom inclusive language is personally significant [48].

At the same time, Hekando points out that not all forms are accepted equally. While singular *they* is now relatively common and often treated as the default option, neopronouns such as *ze* and *xe* still tend to provoke a stronger reaction. The resistance is often linked to their novelty and unfamiliarity. Hekanaho also notes that attitudes can become more positive with increased exposure. However, she acknowledges that her sample mainly included younger and more progressive participants, which may affect the results [37].

Similar tendencies can be observed in contemporary corpus-based research on media language. James Brooke, for example, compares the recommendations of the Associated Press Stylebook with actual usage in the NOW Corpus in his article on gender-specific and gender-neutral language trends [41]. In his study, he mentions a steady increase in gender-neutral occupational titles over the past decade. However, these changes do not follow predictable patterns such as the *-person* suffix. In many cases, alternatives with a function focus, such as “council member” or “business owner,” have become more common.

Further findings are provided by Renström and Klysing, who focus on the attitudes toward singular *they* in society [58]. They distinguish between two main types of its usage: de-gendering, where gender is unknown or not relevant, and multi-gendering, where the pronoun refers to a specific non-binary person. According to their study, this pronoun is less widely accepted when used for known individuals. It is also suggested that different ideological factors play a role. For example, resistance to de-gendering is linked to strong gender identification, while

resistance to multi-gendering is more often associated with traditional or binary views of gender.

Ukrainian linguistics has also made a significant contribution to the development of gender studies. As Dunebabina notes in her analytical bibliographic view, linguogenderology has become one of the prominent interdisciplinary directions in contemporary Ukrainian linguistics. Research in this field has shown big thematic diversity during 2015-2023. It covered topics such as gender asymmetry in translation, gender manipulation in media and political discourse, and the role of language in information warfare [2, p. 63].

An important political aspect of this development is examined by Marfa Skoryk [4]. In her analysis of the Ukrainian translation of the Glossary and Thesaurus of the European Institute for Gender Equality, she shows that over twenty years of creating individual gender dictionaries in Ukraine had mixed results. While they helped establish a terminological foundation for specific projects, they also led to significant inconsistencies and terminological confusion. Skoryk argues that these problems can be resolved by adopting authoritative institutional sources, such as the EIGE Glossary. This could provide a reliable basis for Ukraine's gender policy, legislation, and academic research.

While the present study focuses on the English language, the discussion of gender-inclusive language is not limited to one linguistic context. In Ukraine, this field was pioneered by the foundational work of Lesya Stavytska. In her study, "Gender: Language, Consciousness, Communication" [5, pp. 33-45], she outlined key concepts in the field, including "gender stereotypes" and "linguistic sexism". Her research is often seen as a starting point for later studies in Ukrainian linguogender studies.

1.3. The role of language in shaping and reflecting gender roles

To understand how language reflects and reinforces gender roles and norms, it is essential to consider how language is defined from various theoretical perspectives. Over time, many linguists have offered definitions of language, each highlighting a different aspect of its nature. Below, we will present several well-

known perspectives that are still widely referenced today. After that, we will focus on how language functions both as a product of gender ideologies and as a tool for their reproduction.

According to the American anthropological linguist Edward Sapir, “Language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols” [59]. Such a view highlights the strong connection between language, thought, and culture. Sapir’s work laid the foundation for the theory of linguistic relativity, known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

Alongside his student Benjamin Lee Whorf, Sapir proposed that language structure and categories influence the way its speakers perceive and understand the world. Concerning gender, this theory suggests that linguistic forms – such as gendered pronouns or job titles – can significantly change and reinforce social beliefs and roles. Thus, Sapir-Whorf’s theory provides a theoretical basis for examining how everyday language contributes to the maintenance of gender ideologies [59].

Noam Chomsky, the father of generative grammar, offered a different approach to language. It focuses on its underlying structure. He stated that language is “a set of (finite or infinite sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements” [19, p. 13]. His work is essential for understanding language as a rule-governed mental system. Chomsky’s perspective has been criticized for its limited attention to the social functions and implications of language use.

Unlike Chomsky, Michael Halliday’s main focus in studying language was on its functional and semiotic dimensions. He emphasized that language is a “social semiotic system”, stressing its role in constructing meaning within a social context [34, p. 2]. His model allows scholars to trace the correlation between power dynamics, gender roles, and identities. Halliday highlights three main functions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual [33].

The ideational function is of particular significance in gender studies. It reflects how our word choices and grammatical structures encode social realities,

including gendered cultural notions. For example, the use of generics such as *he* or *mankind* to refer to all humans reinforces a man-centered worldview. In performing its interpersonal function, language signals authority and societal hierarchy, which are closely connected with gender norms. Finally, the textual function enables language to organize information coherently. This function is useful in analyzing how media constructs gendered narratives and how it challenges gender norms through framing.

The approaches mentioned above highlight the complexity and multifunctionality of language. While Sapir focuses on its human and symbolic nature, Chomsky emphasizes its generative power. Halliday's sociolinguistic perspective most accurately captures how language reflects sociocultural norms. His model establishes a framework for approaching language as a dynamic social practice shaped by context, functions and social interaction.

Penelope Eckert later expanded this view of language in her influential work "Language and gender" [24]. In her book, Eckert explores how language is closely connected to social identity, including gender. She asserts that linguistic expressions are never entirely neutral. They emerge from, and continue to function within, specific historical and cultural contexts. To illustrate this, Eckert highlights the absence of an equivalent to *sir* for women in business. She explains a linguistic reflection of broader systemic imbalances rooted in the historical underrepresentation of women in authoritative roles.

According to Eckert, language is adaptable to social changes and ideological shifts [24]. An example of this is a feminist-led introduction of the honorific *Ms.* in the late 1960s. Its emergence represented a deliberate attempt to challenge the linguistic framing of women's identities through their marital status. Traditionally, it had been indicated by titles such as *Mrs.* or *Miss.* The adoption of *Ms.* aimed to provide a neutral alternative that would reflect a woman's professional identity independent of her relationship to men.

Such examples reinforce Eckert's argument that shifts in language do not emerge in isolation or from a single decisive movement. They are the result of

countless daily interactions within different social groups. New lexical units and their usage arise when language collides with social dynamics such as power, gender, and identity. In this way, language is both an object of conflict - when it challenges some social norms - and an instrument of social change.

Moreover, these linguistic shifts have tangible effects on everyday life. They influence how individuals are perceived and treated across professional, legal, and interpersonal interactions. For instance, adopting gender-neutral words or inclusive language can promote a greater sense of belonging for marginalized groups. Additionally, the challenging and revealing of power structures is embedded in language usage. It serves as a reminder that linguistic change involves reconsidering social norms and reshaping identities.

All these theories on language are essential for understanding how certain linguistic forms can both reflect and construct social ideologies, particularly concerning gender. However, to gain a better insight into how gender roles are internalized and perpetuated through language, we should turn to the earliest stages of one's development – early childhood. At a young age, children begin the process of socialization, during which their initial understanding of culturally appropriate gender roles is shaped. In other words, they learn how to “act like a boy” or “act like a girl”. Language thus plays a crucial role in this process.

The field that studies how language, gender, and early childhood socialization intersect is known as language socialization. Its goal is “understanding of how persons become competent members of social groups and the role of language in this process” [54]. American linguist Susan Moore Ervin-Tripp made a significant contribution to this area of study. In her academic work, she focused on child language acquisition. Ervin-Tripp points out that children do not merely acquire vocabulary and grammar while learning to speak. They also absorb the social roles of communication. In other words, language carries social meaning from the beginning [25].

Gender expectations often shape this process: girls are usually encouraged to be polite and to avoid overly expressive language, whereas boys are often praised

for being confident or competitive in their speech. For instance, girls might be told, “Don’t be bossy” if they give firm instructions, while a boy using the same authoritative tone might be seen as a “leader” [46, p. 572]. Over time, such patterns teach girls to soften their language (using hedges “maybe”, “I think”, “It seems to me” or tag questions “It’s a good idea, isn’t it?”) and they sound less confident [20].

Another way in which language both reflects and shapes gender roles during early childhood is through praise. Girls often receive compliments that focus on their appearance – “You look so pretty!”, “What a nice dress”. These comments suggest that attractiveness is a key value for girls. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to be praised for their strength and achievement – “You’re so strong!” or “Great job climbing that!” [46] These linguistic choices may seem harmless, but their repeated use has a cumulative effect on the perception of gender roles. Over time, they perpetuate the idea that girls’ worth lies in how they look, while boys’ value lies in what they do.

The factors that shape children’s understanding of gender roles are not limited to parental interactions. Broader social environments, such as schools, peer groups, and media, also make a great contribution to this process [46]. Teachers, for example, may use different tones when addressing boys and girls differently. They tend to use more directives with boys (“Stop talking, sit down, and pay attention”) and softer language with girls (“Please, stop talking and concentrate”) [20]. This reinforces the expectations that boys should be active and not restrained, while girls are expected to be compliant and considerate.

Some distinguished features can also be traced in girls’ and boys’ peer communication. Boys are often discouraged from expressing vulnerability, which is typically associated with femininity. Phrases like “Don’t cry like a girl” or “Be a man” teach them to suppress their emotions. In the future, they may be unable to express their empathy or emotional pain, which can result in different mental disorders [46, pp. 578-579].

Girls, in contrast, may be criticized for demonstrating their accomplishments or showing pride in their abilities among peers. Such discouragement may be marked

by comments like “Don’t brag” or “That’s not ladylike”. The restriction on self-expression frequently leads to a lack of confidence, reinforcing the expectation that modesty and humility are more suitable for girls. This aligns with a study where academically gifted girls reported that a primary obstacle to their school achievement was that they “did not want to be viewed as either competitive or bragging about their accomplishments” [46, p. 578].

These patterns demonstrate how language reflects existing cultural norms and actively directs children towards specific behaviors, attitudes, and identities. As Grujicic-Alatrisme points out, assumptions that women are naturally more polite and cooperative continue to shape both public and everyday linguistic practices [30].

This phenomenon occurs not only in English-speaking contexts. In languages where gender is marked grammatically – French, Spanish, or Ukrainian – gender distinctions are embedded even more deeply. As Boroditsky suggests, when children learn to categorize nouns and pronouns as masculine or feminine, they begin to internalize these gendered associations early on, reinforcing a binary understanding of gender roles [28]. By contrast, English relies more heavily on semantic and cultural forms of expression of gender roles, which makes it particularly rich for examining how gender is constructed through discourse, pragmatics, and vocabulary choice.

In conclusion, language is not a neutral medium. It is a cultural tool that both reflects and shapes gender roles. Theoretical approaches by Sapir, Whorf, Halliday, and Eckert demonstrate how language contributes to the construction of gender ideologies by encoding assumptions about roles, identity, and power into everyday speech. Through grammar, word choice, and discourse patterns, language largely supports a binary worldview and reinforces expectations for how people should behave according to their gender.

This impact begins early in life. Research on language socialization shows that children learn vocabulary and grammar as well as gendered speech norms. Girls are often praised for being polite, while boys are encouraged to be assertive, strong, and accomplished. These patterns are reinforced in many social settings, including

families, schools, and peers. This shapes how children perceive and express their gender.

Conclusion to Chapter 1

This chapter has provided the theoretical foundations necessary for understanding the complex relationship between language and gender. Before analyzing the specific linguistic shift in modern English, it was important to examine the key concepts in this field.

First, we established a distinction between biological sex and gender. Gender was defined as a complex social phenomenon. We examined the sociological perspective, which interprets gender as a set of socially constructed roles, behavioral patterns, and attributes. We also explored how the social construct is internalized by individuals. To do this, we used key psychological theories such as Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Kohlberg's stages of cognitive development, and Bem's Gender Schema Theory. These theories demonstrate that gender is a learned, performed, and deeply personal part of our identity.

We then traced the evolution of studies within linguistics itself. The section began with Robin Lakoff's seminar work, which demonstrates how language reflects women's subordinate position. Later, the dominance theory, developed by Zimmerman and West, shifted the focus to power. It demonstrated how men use conversational strategies, such as interrupting, to assert control. In response, Deborah Tennen's theory of differences offered an alternative framework. It argues that men and women are socialized into different "conversational cultures" which can lead to misunderstanding. Then we presented Judith Butler's Performative Theory. She argues that gender is now something we are, but something we do through a series of repeated social and linguistic acts.

Finally, we moved to the study of language itself. Theories such as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis suggest that the language we speak influences how we perceive the world. At the same time, Halliday's model of social semiotics shows how our word choices encode social realities and power dynamics. The work by Penelope Eckert provided specific examples, demonstrating that linguistic shifts, such as the

introduction of “Ms.”, are the result of countless daily interactions shaped by social forces. This section has demonstrated that the connection between language and society begins in early childhood, as research in the field of language socialization shows that, besides vocabulary and grammar, children also acquire gendered norms of how to speak.

Thus, this theoretical overview demonstrates that language is now a neutral mirror of society. It is an active and powerful force that helps people to construct, maintain, and sometimes challenge our understanding of gender. It reinforces social norms and, at the same time, provides us with the tools necessary to change them.

2. GENDER EXPRESSION AND THE SHIFT TO INCLUSIVE ENGLISH

2.1. Gendered language in English: lexical, grammatical, and semantic aspects

Chapter 1 provided the theoretical framework for understanding the connection between language and gender. This chapter focuses on the manifestation of this relationship in language use. Language is a tool that reflects societal gender norms. It also actively contributes to their construction through everyday use. The reinforcement of these norms can be observed at different linguistic levels.

Although English does not have grammatical gender in the way some other languages do, gender is often marked indirectly through patterns of vocabulary, structure, and meaning. This section examines how gender is expressed, reinforced, and challenged at two levels: the lexical and the grammatical, the latter of which encompasses semantic patterns of pronominal reference.

- Lexical level concerns gender distinction in vocabulary, including gender-specific word formation (e.g., actress, stewardess), lexical asymmetries (master vs mistress), and gendered job titles.
- Grammatical level focuses on pronouns and their patterns of reference. This includes both the structural rules of gender agreement with antecedents and the more flexible, semantic use of pronouns in figurative contexts.

By analyzing these aspects of English, this chapter explores how gender roles are sustained and reproduced through everyday linguistic choices. Understanding these tendencies is essential for recognizing how language contributes to gender representation and functions as a social tool in shaping gender communication. The discussion will begin with the lexical level, focusing on how words and expressions encode gender meaning.

2.1.1. Lexical level

Lexical level refers to the level of language analysis that deals with words and their meanings, including word choice, word formation, and vocabulary used in communication [67]. In studies of gender and language, the lexical level often focuses on gender-specific or gender-marked vocabulary, lexical asymmetry, and

naming conventions [56]. It is the level where gender is often most visibly expressed. Word choices reflect social attitudes towards gender and also shape our perception of masculinity and femininity. The English lexicon provides numerous examples of how vocabulary both reinforces and challenges traditional gender norms.

In this section, we examine the lexical level broadly, including word choice and vocabulary as well as derivational morphology, such as gender-specific suffixes (-ess; -ette). As Pauwels notes, this is a key mechanism for creating gender asymmetries, where the female form is often constructed as a “derivative of man/male” [56, p. 553]. Although morphology is often considered to be a part of grammar, derivational processes largely affect the lexical level as the words are created. That is why we describe them in this section.

In English, gender distinctions are often realized through morphological markers. The morphological gender markers are represented by suffixed morphemes in English. The most common gender-specific suffixes are -ess (actress; waitress); -ette (brunette; majorette); -trix (directrix; aviatrix), and less frequent borrowings such as -enne (doyenne); -ine (heroine); -a (prima donna). These suffixes were borrowed into English from French and Latin after the Norman Conquest (1066). The suffix -ess, which comes from Greek, became widespread in Middle English. It appeared both in borrowed words (countess, hostess, mistress) and in new formations such as danceress and teacheress [26].

By the fifteenth century, the use of -ess sometimes became excessive, as seen in words *operatress* and *interlocutress*. From the eighteenth century, grammarians began to discourage -ess, preferring unmarked forms like *author* or *poet*. Still, the suffix has remained strong and appeared in common words (actress, murderess) and even in occasional informal uses [26].

The shift from the active usage to the decline of these suffixes can be understood within a broader context of English gender history. Old English, similar to many Indo-European languages, had a system of grammatical gender. It classified nouns as masculine, feminine, and neutral, regardless of biological sex. After the Norman Conquest in 1066, the English language experienced significant

simplification. Most inflectional endings that indicated grammatical gender were lost. Anne Curzan, an American scholar in English language and literature, describes this change as a major “cognitive shift”, in which “sex triumphed over gender” [23, p. 44].

By the early Middle English period (c.1150-1500), the English language system had been restructured mainly around what Curzan called “natural gender” [23]. In such a way, semantic and social categories (male, female, inanimate) were prioritized over morphological ones. This change marked a break from the grammatical gender system still found in many Indo-European languages.

Moreover, this transition enabled the appearance of new gender distinctions marked by derivational suffixes rather than inflection. This helps explain the rise of feminine suffixes in later English. Starting from the 14th century, suffixes such as *-ess*, *-ette*, and *-trix* became important markers of femininity. To some extent, they compensated for the loss of the older grammatical system [23].

However, over time, these suffixes became associated with specific social meanings. As Curzan points out, the fact that English speakers and grammarians stated seeing masculine gender as the standard, or “default” (*actor* vs *actress*), is connected with the focus on the previously mentioned natural gender. In contrast, feminine forms were often used as secondary or even diminutive [23]. Their decline in Modern English reflects a complicated history of grammatical change, shifts in meaning, and social influences.

Corpus data support the previously described tendency. The Helsinki Corpus of English Texts [79], which includes Old English through Early Modern English (c.700-1700), demonstrates the use of feminine derivational forms during the late medieval and early modern periods. Words such as *countess*, *lioness*, and *executrix* appear frequently in legal, religious, and literary texts. This suggests that such suffixes were not limited to one specific register. They were widely used in different contexts. The data also show that the suffix *-ess* was particularly common in Middle English. At the same time, forms in *-trix* (*executrix*) were mainly found in legal contexts. This evidence from different time periods highlights how morphological

gender markers served social purposes and depended on the type of text, reflecting the linguistic norms of their time [23].

In contrast to historical corpora, modern data show a considerable drop in the use of feminine suffixes. The exact numbers were retrieved from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) [71], which contains approximately 1 billion words from spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper, and academic sources (1990-2019). To complement this data, the News on the Web corpus (NOW) [72] covers over 16 billion words of online news texts from 2010 to the present and updates daily. Together, COCA offers a balanced view up to 2019, while NOW helps us follow how these tendencies continue into the 2020s. In such a way, both historical trends and current language practices are included in the analysis. For comparability, frequencies are reported in per million words (PMW).

The analysis of the two corpora reveals that terms such as *authoress* and *poetess* are nearly obsolete. In contrast, neutral counterparts such as *author* and *poet* are now widely used. For example, in COCA, the word *authoress* occurred at 0.03 PMW during 1990-1994, and this number dropped even further by 2015, reaching just 0.01 PMW in 2015. In the same way, we analyzed the data on the word *author*. A completely different tendency was traced: its frequency rose steadily from about 64 PMW in 1990-1994 to 82.2 PMW in 2015-2019.

However, data from the NOW Corpus complicate this picture. While the word *actress* showed a decline in usage according to COCA, its frequency in online news from 2010 to 2019 remained fairly stable at around 40 to 50 PMW. After 2020, it started rising again and reached over 61 PMW. This suggests that *actress* continues to appear widely in media discourse. This indicates that language change in this area might be influenced by competing professional standards and popular choices.

Job titles are one of the best examples of gender marking in English [61]. Traditionally, many job titles indicated the gender of the person performing the role, for instance, *fireman*, *stewardess*, *policeman*, or *actress*. Masculine forms were normally used as basic forms as a default (*fireman*, *policeman*), whereas feminine

forms appeared only when there was a need to point out the gender (*actress* instead of *actor*).

Such asymmetry mirrors the broader context of past social reality, in which many professions were considered male by default. According to Prewitt-Freilino et al., this linguistic pattern was often evident even in definitions. This means that the masculine form (steward) was associated with authority and competence. In contrast, the feminine equivalent (stewardess) was associated with service and subordination [57, p. 270].

This historical tendency can still be traced in contemporary usage. An analysis of the NOW Corpus shows that gender-marked words are still used in specific contexts, even though their frequency is considerably lower compared to their gender-neutral counterparts. For instance, *policeman* occurred 2.1 PMW over the past year, mostly in official reports and crime-related news (“I didn’t see any police that day either, not one single policeman at the beach” [policeman, 2025, NOW Corpus]). In contrast, in 2012, the frequency of this word was considerably higher (9.2 PMW). It occurred in a wider range of contexts, including community events, public safety campaigns, and historical references.

The study of the lexical level of language helped us to trace the shifts in gender distinctions over time. Feminine suffixes such as *-ess*, *-ette*, and *-trix* were once very widespread, but *they* has largely declined. This tendency reflects wider social and language changes. Corpus data confirm that many gendered terms, such as *authoress*, *poetess*, and *stewardess*, are nearly obsolete. In contrast, neutral terms, which will be discussed in more detail in the next subchapter, dominate nowadays. However, some words like *actress* still occur in the media. This indicates that changes in language happen slowly and are influenced by different norms. Overall, word choices demonstrate how language conveys historical gender roles and moves toward more inclusive patterns.

2.1.2 Grammatical and semantic aspects of pronominal reference

According to Huddleston & Pullum, “grammar is concerned with the principles that govern the structure of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences in a

language” [44, p. 3]. In other words, the grammatical level deals with the structural aspect of language, including pronouns, agreement patterns, and sentence structure.

In English, gender is not expressed through grammatical gender classes as in many Indo-European languages. However, it does appear in specific grammatical categories. Unlike languages such as German or French, English nouns and their modifiers (articles, adjectives) do not inflect for grammatical gender. For example, in French, adjectives and determiners must agree in gender and number with the noun (*un petit garçon* vs. *une petite fille*). In contrast, the corresponding forms in English remain the same (a little boy, a little girl) [21].

This absence of gender agreement demonstrates how limited grammatical gender is in English compared to many related languages. As a result, pronouns are the main site where gender distinctions remain visible. As Hockett observes, gender is marked in pronominal reference in English. In other words, it is determined by the choice between *he*, *she*, and *it*, depending largely on the natural sex of the subject or sometimes on stylistic preference [39, pp. 231-232].

As morphological gender markers declined, pronouns became the primary source of gender expression in English. In Old English, third-person pronouns were defined by grammatical gender, for example:

- *hē* (“he”) for masculine nouns;
- *hēo* (“she”) for feminine nouns;
- *hit* (“it”) for neuter nouns.

This applied to both animate and inanimate nouns. For instance, *sēo sunne* (“the sun”) was referred to as *hēo*, while *se mona* (“the moon”) was referred to as *hē* [23].

In addition to pronouns, Old English expressed gender through agreement in determiners and adjectives, as in languages like German and French today. For example, *sēo sunne* vs. *se mona* shows that the article agreed in gender with the noun. Adjectives also reflected grammatical gender, following the inflectional system inherited from Proto-Germanic. This means that gender was once a pervasive grammatical category in English [21, p.125].

By the Middle English period, pronouns began to reflect natural gender instead of grammatical gender. Living beings were referred to with gender-specific pronouns. Inanimate objects were usually neutral. In poems or literary texts, writers could still use feminine pronouns for ships or countries, but this was more stylistic than grammatical.

In Modern English, grammatical gender is no longer marked on nouns or other elements. Instead, pronouns are the main expression of gender. Nowadays, inanimate objects are referred to as *it*, while living beings are referred to as *he* or *she* based on their sex. A clear example of it is how we refer to infants. If we know the baby's sex, we can use *he* or *she*. However, if it is unknown or irrelevant, we use *it* [39, p.231].

In addition to the uses mentioned above, pronouns also serve a key role in maintaining gender agreement in English, especially when the referent is generic, indefinite, or collective. For example, singular pronouns based on natural gender are often used with generic antecedents, as in the following example:

“The school must engage in the interactive process with the student and his or her parent...” [72].

“We know that each student has his or her own path” [72].

Constructions such as “his or her” were a common solution, but not the only one. English has always had another grammatical tool for these situations. The pronoun *they* have historically been used with singular, generic antecedents. This pattern has existed for centuries [50]. Similarly, *they* can be used for collective nouns when we emphasize the individuals within the group rather than the group as a whole. These historical grammatical patterns are important because they provide the basis for the modern, socially driven use of singular *they*. A full and detailed analysis of the modern evolution, including its support by style guides and its role in non-binary identity, will be the main focus of section 2.2.2.

Beyond these structural rules, pronominal reference in modern English also allows for semantic flexibility through personification and cultural metaphor. This makes English a so-called natural-gender language [22, p. 209]. Pronouns such as

he and *she* are chosen based on the biological sex of the referent, while *it* functions as a semantically neutral form.

However, when speakers refer to infants, animals, or generic human roles, they may alternate between *he*, *she*, and *it*, depending on context, knowledge of sex, or stylistic preference. This suggests that semantic interpretation, rather than grammatical agreement, is central to gender expression in modern English [22].

At the semantic level, gender distinctions in English are not tied to grammatical rules. The decision on which pronoun to use may depend on cultural associations, figurative language, and symbolic personification. Unlike the lexical or grammatical aspects, which are more systematic, the semantic aspect highlights how gendered meanings are assigned to otherwise neutral nouns. This reflects cultural ideologies and stylistic conventions.

One of the clearest examples of this phenomenon is the use of gendered pronouns to personify inanimate objects. Ships, boats, and other vehicles have been traditionally referred to as *she*, which reflects symbolic connections. This convention has been declining in contemporary usage. Nevertheless, it illustrates how gender functions as a cultural metaphor [22].

Crystal adds that many inanimate entities are given variable gender depending on whether they are thought of in an inanimate way, as with ships, countries, or even technological devices. He emphasizes that while female personifications are especially common, the choice is not always predictable. Feminine forms may be used in both affectionate and aggressive contexts. In such cases, gender assignments reflect cultural attitudes [22].

In mythological or poetic contexts, countries may also be personified as feminine. For example, a NOW Corpus instance from fiction illustrates this: “overwhelmingly white Britain finds herself under attack...” Here, the use of *herself* shows how a country, which is grammatically neutral, can take on a feminine identity to make the description more emotionally appealing. This reflects the broader cultural trend of viewing nations as female figures, often associated with concepts of homeland, protection, or vulnerability.

Similarly, sciences and abstract notions can be assigned gendered pronouns: feminine for those linked to fertility, care, or creativity. In one example from the Now Corpus, drawn from news, justice is described as being aware of a situation: “At the same time, the justice showed herself to be alive to the dilemma facing educators”. This use of *herself* personifies an abstract concept and gives it human qualities and a feminine identity. It demonstrates how writers might assign gendered pronouns to inanimate or abstract nouns, adding stylistic emphasis.

Nature and the earth are also frequently depicted as feminine. They are often personified as nurturing figures like “Mother Nature”: “You have to help Mother Nature. She can’t do it all, you know” [72]. In contrast, masculine personifications are often used for forceful or destructive ideas. A search of the NOW Corpus finds hundreds of instances of “Old Man Winter”, used to personify the harshness of the season: “Spring is finally here, kicking out old man winter and breathing color back into nature”.

Finally, highly valuable possessions may also be affectionately referred to as *she*. In informal speech and fiction, it is common to hear a person refer to their prized vehicles using female pronouns. The COCA provides an illustration of this from a TV script where the characters discuss a classic car:

Wha... who... who is that?

It’s Bessie. It’s Bessie the Mustang. *She’s a female Mustang.*

That doesn’t make any sense. Technically, that would make *her* a...

Check inside Bessie’s wheels.

Check inside *her* wheels.

In this example, the characters refer to the car as *she* and *her*. Moreover, they discuss its assigned female identity (“She’s a female Mustang”). This practically demonstrates how gender can be semantically assigned to an inanimate object based on affection and cultural convention. At the same time, it operates outside the grammar rules.

Overall, these patterns show that while grammatical gender in English mainly appears in pronouns, the system may be flexible. It blends biological sex distinctions

with cultural symbolism, rhetorical tradition, and personal practical choice. Therefore, pronouns might also serve as tools for figurative and stylistic expression.

2.2. Gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language

In recent decades, gendered language has become one of the central focuses of linguistic reform in English. Institutions, style guides, and social movements have increasingly emphasized the need to avoid expressions that perpetuate gender bias or exclude certain groups of speakers [61]. What was once considered a matter of etiquette or “political correctness” has developed into a broader transformation of communicative norms, in which inclusivity and precision are regarded as essential features of effective and respectful language use.

These reforms have influenced different domains of English, including official documents, academic writing, media discourse, and everyday interaction. Organizations such as the United Nations [66] and the American Psychological Association [7] have published guidelines that promote neutral alternatives to gender-marked job titles. In addition, singular *they* has become officially and widely adopted in institutional communication. Grassroots language practices, especially those originating within LGBTQ+ communities, have introduced new pronouns and terms that challenge traditional gender categories and broaden the way language represents identity.

Changes in gendered language are a part of a broader contemporary movement to reshape English to reflect social realities. These shifts provide the context for the following discussion of specific linguistic strategies that help achieve gender neutrality and inclusivity in practice.

While previous sections have demonstrated how English historically expressed gender through vocabulary, structure, and meaning, this section focuses on the strategies speakers use to avoid unnecessary gender marking. Our research examines how gender inclusivity is achieved on three different levels:

- Vocabulary choice includes replacing gender-marked terms with neutral alternatives (for example, *firefighter* instead of *fireman*, *chairperson* instead of *chairman*).

- Pronoun usage explores the rise of singular *they*, neopronouns such as *ze* and *xe*, and the role of pronouns in representing non-binary and gender-diverse identities.
- Pragmatic choices in occupational and relational terms illustrate how speakers actively negotiate gender in discourse, for example, by choosing *partner* instead of *husband/wife* or *spokesperson* instead of *spokesman*.

By focusing on these aspects, this section highlights how English adapts to evolving cultural values and demonstrates the role of linguistic reform in shaping more equitable patterns of communication.

2.2.1 Vocabulary choice in gender-neutral language

Among all levels of language, word choice most clearly reflects the impact of gender reforms in contemporary English. As societies work toward gender equality, people have started to rethink how everyday words may reinforce gender bias or exclusion. Lexical reform is often the first and most visible step in promoting equality, as speakers consciously replace gender-marked terms with neutral alternatives. The adoption of forms such as *firefighter*, *police officer*, and *chairperson* illustrates a practical response to evolving social norms.

The shift toward neutral language appeared alongside social and political changes in the late twentieth century. Starting in the 1970s, feminist linguistics and equality movements highlighted how language reinforced gender hierarchies. Scholars such as Hellinger and Bussman pointed out that English vocabulary is a particularly productive field for reform, since vocabulary is more easily modified than grammatical structures. According to Hellinger and Bussmann, the shift towards gender-neutral terms emerged across multiple languages in the late twentieth century and was particularly connected with the women's movement and wider socio-political change [38, p. 18].

As Mills observes, “the concern to change language which discriminated against women and which seemed to belittle and trivialize those activities associated with women was a key concern for feminist theorists and activities” [53, p. 1]. This early feminist focus on linguistic representation helped raise public awareness of how everyday words reproduce gender bias.

From a linguistic perspective, gender-neutral words can be defined as language that avoids specifying or implying a specific gender unless it is directly relevant to the meaning or context [7]. According to the United Nations gender-inclusive language guidelines, such language “avoids bias toward a particular sex or social gender and therefore is less likely to convey gender stereotypes” [66, p. 1]. Similarly, the American Psychological Association encourages the use of gender-neutral expressions in academic and institutional writing as a way to promote inclusivity and prevent biased associations [8, pp. 147-149].

These institutional recommendations illustrate how language reform has moved beyond academic debate to become part of official communication standards. They provide an important reference point for analyzing how gender-neutral and gender-marked vocabulary functions in public discourse, including advertising. In professional, academic, and media contexts, gender-marked titles such as *fireman*, *policeman*, or *chairman* have increasingly been replaced by neutral equivalents – *firefighter*, *police officer*, and *chairperson*. This lexical shift emphasizes the function or role rather than the gender of the individual performing it.

Prescriptive guidelines and feminist linguistic debates have strongly influenced attitudes toward gendered language. However, the actual implementation of neutral vocabulary is best observed in corpus data. As McEnery & Wilson argue, a key strength of corpus linguistics for a sociolinguistic topic like this is its ability to provide “a representative sample of naturalistic data which can be qualified” [51, p. 115].

The corpus analysis confirmed a general increase in the use of gender-neutral vocabulary across news, academic, and official registers. For instance, in COCA, the frequency of the word *firefighter* rose significantly from 1.39 PMW (1990-94) to 3.65 PMW (2015-2019). The title *police officer* showed a marked rise within just five years: from 10.77 PMW in 2010-14 to 21.99 PMW in 2015-19.

In contrast, data from COCA indicate that the use of *chairperson* has declined in frequency over recent decades. This neutral form has been partially replaced by alternative expressions such as *chair* or *head*. *Chairperson* was initially promoted in

the 1970s and 1980s as a gender-neutral substitute for *chairman*. Since then, a lot of speakers and organizations have adopted the shorter forms, such as *chair* and *head*. They are perceived as more inclusive and more neutral in contemporary usage. This case of *chairperson* versus *chair* demonstrates that although *chairperson* is technically neutral, many speakers have preferred the shorter, more established term *chair*.

In some other cases, a new neutral term completely takes over. The best example is *flight attendant*. In the past, people used the word *stewardess*. The data from COCA shows a change. In the early 1990s, *stewardess* appeared at a frequency of 1.35 PMW, while *flight attendant* was already more common at 1.59 PMW. By the late 2010s, the gap became much bigger: the frequency of *stewardess* had plummeted to just 0.51 PMW, while *flight attendant* had risen to 1.85 PMW. This shows how a gender-neutral word can almost completely replace an older, gendered one.

Replacing words with suffixes like *-man* or *-ess* is not the only way English creates neutral language. In fact, some of the most widespread changes involve adopting existing, ungendered words for roles that were once seen as gender-specific. This strategy avoids inventing new terms and instead broadens the meaning of the words we already use.

A great example is the shift from *foreman* to *supervisor*. The title *foreman* was historically tied to male-dominated industries and literally meant the “leading man” of a crew. Even though the term still exists in some specific trades, the broader term *supervisor* is now used almost universally. The data from the NOW Corpus show that *supervisor* appears over ten times more frequently than *foreman* in recent news. This change shifts focus from the person’s gender to their actual function: supervision.

These examples demonstrate that the creation of gender-neutral language is a flexible and dynamic process. It involves replacing, repurposing, and broadening the meaning of words to better reflect an inclusive society.

2.2.2 Pronoun usage: the grammar of inclusion

Replacing words such as *fireman* or *chairman* with more neutral equivalents undoubtedly makes language more inclusive. But an even more profound shift is happening on the grammatical level of English, where the pronoun system is evolving. As we have traced earlier, pronouns such as *he* and *she* have long been the primary tool for marking gender in English. These short words connect our sentences to a world divided into men and women.

However, this traditional system has a major drawback: it excludes people who fall outside that binary. For a long time, people used the generic *he* or the clumsy *he or she* when they did not know the person's gender. This linguistic gap was more than inconvenient. It made it almost impossible to refer to unknown people accurately and respectfully.

To address this problem, English speakers have adopted two remarkable solutions. The first one is the revival of the singular *they*. This old tool has been widely used for both generic and specific purposes [13]. The second one is grassroots linguistic innovation: the creation of neopronouns, new words introduced to offer more precise options for self-identity. The shift of singular *they* from a historical oddity to a more modern standard, together with the progressive creation of neopronouns, shows that even the most fundamental grammar can adapt to better reflect the people who use the language.

The singular *they*

Some people believe that using singular *they* is a new or “ungrammatical” trend. However, this view is mistaken. It actually comes from 18th-century grammarians who wanted English to follow the rules of Latin. But history tells a different story. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, traces the use of the singular *they* all the way back to 1375 [55]. According to Bodine, the 18th-century prescriptive grammarians attempted to eliminate singular *they*. These scholars were strongly influenced by an androcentric perspective. They sought to make English follow Latin grammatical norms. Nevertheless, singular *they* had already been widely used in both spoken and written English for centuries [15, p. 131].

As Curzan argues, singular *they* was very common long before these rules were invented [23]. Authors such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Jane Austen all used it. For them, using *they* for a single person was just a natural part of the English language. For example, in Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors*, we can find the line "There is not a man I meet but doth salute me / As if I were their well-acquainted friend" [51, p. 37]. Here, Shakespeare naturally uses *their* to refer back to the singular "a man".

Today, the use of singular *they* has achieved widespread institutional acceptance. This is a big turning point. The American Psychological Association (APA) now encourages the use of singular *they* for inclusive writing. They state that writers should use singular *they* when a person's gender is unknown. According to APA, studies have found that when people read the word *he*, they actually picture a man, even if the word is meant to be generic [7]. Other studies show that gendered professional language can make people feel like they do not belong and even lose motivation if they do not fit that gender. [7, p.147]. The Modern Language Association (MLA) [65] and the Chicago Manual of Style agree [64]. In 2019, Merriam-Webster dictionary even named *they* its "Word of the Year" [78].

Corpus data can support this shift. The analysis of COCA shows a significant change over the last few decades. The phrase "everyone has his" has nearly disappeared, while "everyone has their" is very common. The use of the first phrase has decreased from 0.11 PMW in the 1990s to only 0,02 PMW by the late 2010s. In contrast, the singular *they* construction ("everyone has their") has risen significantly during the same period, increasing from 0.17 PMW to 0.51 PMW.

What's more interesting is *where* each pronoun is used. We have analyzed the context in which the pronouns *his* and *their* are used to refer to a person. The COCA chart shows that singular *they* is most common in informal language. It is the most frequently used in blogs (2.00 PMW) and on the web (1.79 PMW). These two categories are followed by spoken language (0.98 PMW). This proves the idea that for most people in everyday situations, singular *they* is the neutral and default choice.

The diachronic analysis reveals a steady adoption. The phrase's usage increased from 0.50 PMW in the early 1990s to 0.89 PMW by the late 2010s. Such a rise of nearly 80% indicates that using singular *they* with a generic noun, such as person, is becoming a grammatical standard in contemporary English.

We have seen that the generic singular *they* has a long history in English literature. This proves that it is not a grammatical error. Its official acceptance by major style guides also supports its importance. Most importantly, corpus data confirms that singular *they* is the dominant, natural choice in modern English. This reflects a fundamental shift towards a more inclusive grammar.

The specific *they*: a pronoun for non-binary identity

The importance of the singular *they* is not only in its use when referring to an unknown person. It has recently taken a new and significant role as a pronoun for a specific, known individual. This is the latest and most important part of what linguists Lex Konnelly and Elizabeth Cowper describe as a “grammatical change in progress” [44]. This is not just about a hypothetical person. It is the chosen pronoun for many real non-binary people.

Konnelly and Cowper argue that this change happens in stages. The language moves towards a final, fully inclusive stage where *they* can refer to any specific person, regardless of gender. For many non-binary people, this is now just a preference. It is their personal pronoun of reference. Konnelly and Cowper highlight that for someone who uses *they*, it is the correct pronoun, just as *he* is correct for a man who uses *he* [44].

A study by Evan D. Bradley and his team provides a practical understanding of this word [16]. They suggested that some people read descriptions of a person who used the pronoun *they* and then choose a photo that matched. The participants could choose from photos of men, women, and non-binary people. The result showed that people see *they* as genuinely gender-neutral. It is an inclusive, umbrella term that includes non-binary people, but it is not limited to them. According to Bradley's team, it is a “naturally occurring” option that people understand, even if they have never met someone who uses *they* [16, p. 4].

The academic research we have reviewed shows that the English language is steadily moving toward a more inclusive grammar, and singular *they* is crucial to this process. However, this change is not always smooth or quick. This can be explained by a conflict between the social and practical challenges of language. Jannifer E. Arnold and her colleagues conducted research and discovered that writers used pronouns much less often for non-binary people [8]. Instead, they chose to repeat their names over and over. Arnold's team explained this hesitation partly as a cognitive issue. In other words, this happens because the pronoun form is rather new. Consequently, it makes it less automatic for our brain to retrieve quickly.

However, this cognitive hesitation is amplified by a social one. As Konnelly and Cowper argue, resistance to this new pronoun is often a social judgment about gender diversity disguised as a grammatical complaint. This social pressure helps explain the “audience design” problem noted by Arnold's team. Writers might worry if their audience will accept the person's identity. This creates a powerful incentive to choose the safer, less controversial option: simply repeating the person's name.

Neopronouns

While singular *they* has become the most common option for gender inclusivity, it is not the only one. For some individuals, the broad neutrality of *they* does not feel specific enough. This leads to a grassroots linguistic innovation: the creation of new third-person singular pronouns, or “neopronouns”.

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines a neopronoun as “a new pronoun (= a word used instead of a noun or noun phrase), especially one that is intended to avoid using *he* or *she*” [18]. A neopronoun is a newly created word meant to fill a gap in the language. They emerged from within LGBTQ+ communities as what Konneely and Cowper describe as an act of “linguistic self-determination” [44]. Neopronouns provide more precise and personalized options for identity. Some of the most common examples include:

Table 2.1

Subject	Object	Possessive Adjective
ze	hir or zir	hir or zir
xe	xem	xyr
ey	em	eir

Common Neopronouns in Contemporary English

Neopronouns are not just a modern trend. They have a long and serious history. Linguist Dennis Baron documents that the deliberate creation of new pronouns started over 150 years ago to address the “missing word problem”. His research has found more than 200 invented pronouns. The earliest examples date to the 1840s. The most famous of these, “thon” (a blend of “that one”), was coined in 1858 [35]. It was considered so seriously that it appeared in major dictionaries for decades [11].

However, the path for neopronouns into wider acceptance has been much tougher than that of singular *they*. In a thematic analysis of people’s attitude toward nonbinary pronouns, Laura Hekanaho found that while *they* was often seen positively as a “natural extension” of an existing word, neopronouns frequently faced resistance. Hekanaho’s participants often labeled them as “uncommon”, “unnatural”, or “untraditional” [37, p. 15]. This indicated a major social barrier to their use.

In addition, it mirrors a practical comprehension barrier, a result of the same study that confirmed the success of singular *they*. In the experiment by Evan D. Bradley and his team, which we reviewed earlier, the researchers did not just test *they*. They also examined the neopronoun *ze*. The results were strikingly different. While participants accurately understood *they* as a genuinely gender-neutral term, the study found that “Ze does not appear to be recognized by enough English speakers to determine a definitive interpretation” [16, p. 1]. In fact, many participants misunderstood *ze* and associated the person described with a masculine photo. This likely happened because they read the unfamiliar word as a typo for *he*.

This comparison from within a single study is very revealing. It shows that while singular *they* is a “naturally occurring option” that people intuitively grasp, neopronouns face a significant social resistance (as noted by Hekanaho) and a basic lack of recognition (as measured by Bradley’s team). This highlights that while both approaches address the same issue, they are at very different stages of the language change.

Considering these social and cognitive barriers, it might seem that neopronouns are meant to stay a niche phenomenon. However, a case study from Sweden provides evidence to the contrary. A 2015 study by Marie Gustafsson Sendén and her colleagues examined the public’s response to the introduction of the neopronoun *hen* into the Swedish language. They found that when *hen* was proposed in 2012, it faced negative and hostile reactions. The media debate was so heated that some newspapers initially banned the word’s use [31].

In 2012, their data showed that the majority of the Swedish population, 56.5%, had very negative attitudes toward the word. In a short period, this trend completely reversed. By 2015, the number of people with very negative attitudes had dropped to just 9.6%. Their conclusion is that while new words challenging the gender binary often provoke hostility, “attitudes can normalize rather quickly” with time and exposure [31, p. 1].

The success of *hen* in Sweden shows that the barriers of unfamiliarity and social resistance, which Hekanaho identified for English neopronouns, are not permanent. It presents real-world evidence that, with sufficient media coverage and the mere passage of time, even a newly coined pronoun can move past negative reception. Moreover, it can become a widely accepted and even officially recognized part of a language.

The difference between the now widely accepted singular *they* and the still-emerging neopronouns can also be seen in official language guidelines. A comparison of the style guides from the American Psychological Association (APA) Style website [69] and GLAAD’s media guide [73] demonstrates this contrast. Both sources treat singular *they* as a standard and fully acceptable part of inclusive

language. However, their approach to neopronouns is more cautious. Instead of presenting them as established forms, the guides tend to explain their use rather than formally standardize them.

This suggests that although neopronouns play an important role in individual identity and self-expression, they remain at an early stage of broader acceptance. (A more detailed comparison of these institutional guidelines is provided in Appendix B.)

2.2.3 Pragmatic choices in communication

We have already explored the changing vocabulary and the significant shift in the pronoun system. Now it is time to turn to the final and perhaps most important aspect of gender-inclusive language: pragmatics. So far, we have focused on the tools themselves – the words and grammatical structures which are now available in English. This final section of Chapter 2 will focus on how we apply those tools.

Pragmatics can be defined as the study of speaker meaning. In other words, it concerns what people mean by their utterances, not just what the words themselves mean. It is also the study of contextual meaning, requiring us to consider how speakers organize what they want to say based on “who we are talking to, where, when, and under what circumstances” [52].

If changing vocabulary is about updating the dictionary and changing pronouns, then pragmatics is about updating our social contract. It goes beyond the theoretical existence of inclusive words and looks at how people actually use them. The main idea is that using gender-inclusive language is an active way to show respect, demonstrate awareness, and handle social situations where gender is uncertain or non-binary. These small choices, made daily by millions of speakers, truly drive language change.

This section will explore two key areas where pragmatic choices are most visible and impactful.

- First, we will briefly introduce the concept of relational language, noting how the rise of words such as *partner* represents a key pragmatic shift. A full, corpus-based analysis of this phenomenon will be presented in Chapter 3.

- Second, we will examine the important pragmatic strategy of the “inclusive default” in situations of social uncertainty. This analysis will focus on both the individual level (the use of singular *they*) and the institutional level (the adoption of forms such as “Parent 1” and “Mx.”).

Relational language as a pragmatic choice

One of the most powerful examples of a pragmatic shift is the changing of relational language, namely the rise of the word *partner* when referring to romantic relationships. In most cases, this is a deliberate choice that carries social meaning.

As journalist Olivia Harrison noted in a 2021 article for *Refinery29*, the term was historically crucial for the LGBTQ+ community [75]. She explained that during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 90s, the fight to have “domestic partnership” legally recognized was a life-or-death struggle. In this context, using *partner* was a pragmatic choice to demand social and legal legitimacy. As Harrison concludes, queer people were “literally trying to save their lives by showing society-at-large that their commitments to one another mattered as much as those of heterosexual couples” [75, para. 10].

Today, its use has expanded, and it has several key social meanings. For some, as noted in the same *Refinery29* article, using *partner* (even in a heterosexual relationship) is an act of “solidarity” with the LGBTQ+ community. For others, it is a way to convey the seriousness of the relationship, making it feel “more formal and established” than boyfriend or girlfriend. The choice is supported by a distinct statistical pattern and is a purposeful social signal.

In all these cases, the choice to use *partner* is a conscious act of social meaning. It is a performance of identity, values, and social awareness. A full, corpus-based analysis of the rise of *partner* and its comparison to other relational terms, such as *spouse* and *soulmate*, will be presented in Chapter 3.

The inclusive default in situations of uncertainty

The flexible and gender-neutral term *partner* is widely used in the context of our own, known relationships. However, when we face social uncertainty, the principle of “defaulting to inclusive” becomes even more essential. In these

situations, word choice is an immediate act of showing respect. This section will examine this second application of the inclusive default. We will first look at how individuals use singular *they* as a strategy of respectful uncertainty. Then, we will discuss how this strategy is being built into the institutions.

As we noted in the previous section, the singular *they* is a valid feature of English. It has significant pragmatic power due to its role as a “safe default”. When someone is about to meet a new colleague, “Dr. Smith”, a pragmatic choice is to say, “I hope they have the report”. This helps to avoid the potential social harm of misgendering, showing respect, and making no assumptions. This is the direct opposite of the older, and now unacceptable, practice of using the generic *he*.

The principle of the inclusive default is now also being introduced into the very structure of the institutions. This is not a theoretical change; it is a pragmatic one. We can observe it in the language of official documents.

University admissions provide notable examples of this institutional shift. A clear illustration can be found in The Common Application, a standardized form used by over 1000 universities in the US [76]. For example, a step-by-step guide from the test-preparation service InGenius Prep includes a screenshot of the application’s “Family” section (see Figure 2.1). As a figure shows, the application has changed from the traditional, binary fields of “Mother’s Name” and “Father’s Name” to the inclusive default of “Parent 1” and “Parent 2” [76]. In this way, the language of institutions is welcoming for all family structures.

Family

The family section is divided into:

- Household
- Parent 1
- Parent 2
- Sibling

Figure 2.1. The ‘Family’ section of the Common Application, as shown in the InGenius Prep guide [76].

This shift is also visible in government and commercial settings. For example, while many commercial institutions such as banks have adopted the gender-neutral title “Mx.”, more conservative government bodies have shown resistance. (For a detailed comparative case study of the policies of HSBC bank versus the UK Passport Office, see Appendix A).

Conclusion to Chapter 2

In this chapter, we have traced significant language changes. First, we explored how English has historically represented gender. We started by establishing the historical context in which words like actress and policeman indicated gender, and the pronoun system was built on a strict *he/she* binary. Even though English did not have grammatical gender, it was still deeply gendered in its structure and use.

Secondly, we analyzed some modern vocabulary changes. We observed a shift toward neutral terms, driven by social need and linguistic practicality. Some replacements were quite simple and clear, such as *fireman* with *firefighter*. But some other changes were more complex. They included, for example, the preference for the simpler *chair* over *chairperson*, and the repurposing of existing words like supervisor for new, gender-neutral roles.

The core of the analysis was the evolution of the pronoun system. First, we traced the transition of the singular *they* from an often-criticized historical usage to a fully accepted modern standard. It is now also used as a personal pronoun for non-binary individuals. In contrast, we explored the grassroots innovation of neopronouns. We analyzed their long history and the social barriers they sometimes faced. We have also looked at the hopeful story of the Swedish pronoun *hen* as an example of a more conscious and not less important form of linguistic creation.

Finally, we moved from the specific words and grammatical structures to their everyday use, exploring the important area of pragmatics. Here, we observed that the most significant change is happening in the active everyday choices made by speakers and institutions. We have outlined the principle of the “inclusive default” – when an individual is choosing *they* for a stranger or an institution, adding Mx. to a form.

All this evidence shows that the shift to gender-inclusive language is something more than just a minor trend or a simple political debate. It is an ongoing reshaping of the language’s core vocabulary and grammatical structure. It reflects the conscious decisions made by English speakers in their everyday lives as they move towards a more tolerant and open society.

3. CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS OF GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored the broad changes occurring in the English language as it becomes more gender-inclusive. It demonstrated how old words are being replaced and how our grammar is evolving. In this chapter, we take a closer look at these changes in news media and related public texts.

To capture the full picture of this evolution, we will investigate the changes at three distinct levels: lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic. Each level requires a slightly different methodological approach to collect the most accurate results.

First, to track the lexical shift, we focus on the most recent decade of rapid change. We analyze how the use of gender-marked job titles (such as *chairman*) versus their neutral alternatives (such as *chairperson*) has changed in online news between a baseline period of 2010-2012 and the current “new norm” of 2022-2024, using the massive and contemporary NOW Corpus [72].

Secondly, we look at the broader grammatical change. For this, we analyze the competition between old, masculine-default idioms and their modern, inclusive replacements. The time frames 2013-2015 and 2023-2025 will be used for this part. The analysis itself will be in two parts. We will first look at the quantitative data, then conduct a qualitative analysis of the context to understand how certain idioms are used.

Finally, this section examines the pragmatic dimension of language change. The analysis is divided into two parts. The first takes a broader perspective and compares relational terms such as *spouse*, *partner*, and *soulmate*. It focuses on how writers use more neutral language to express social values or, in some cases, to maintain a degree of privacy. The second part examines pronoun use in individual journalistic texts. This allows us to look closer at how writers handle references to people with different pronoun preferences. It also helps to illustrate some of the tendencies in the broader data.

Together, these approaches provide a more detailed view of how inclusive language operates in contemporary English. They show how it appears in actual writing practices.

3.2 Methodology

This chapter uses a data-driven approach to track how gender-inclusive language has changed in modern English. This section outlines the overall structure of the research: the choice of corpora, the analytical methods employed, and the specific procedures for each of the chapter's three main analyses.

The primary data source for the qualitative analysis is the NOW (News on the Web) Corpus [72]. It is a massive database with billions of words from online news published since 2010. This corpus has a contemporary focus, which allows us to observe language changes as they happen, giving us more current data. Its focus on journalistic writing enables us to see how professional journalists use language and how public standards have developed.

For analysis that required a longer historical perspective (dating back to 1990) or a comparison of different registers (such as spoken language versus academic writing), we also used the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) [71].

The chapter's analysis is presented in three parts:

- For **the lexical analysis of occupational titles**, the years 2010-2012 were chosen as a baseline period. This was the time when neutral alternatives were established but not yet dominant. This makes it an excellent starting point to measure their rapid growth. This baseline is compared to the most recent period from 2022 to 2024, which represents the current “new norm”.
- For **the grammatical analysis of idioms**, we used a slightly different baseline from 2013 to 2015. We made this choice because the data indicated that the inclusive forms of these idioms started to appear more consistently during this later period. Comparing this with the 2023 to 2025 period gives us a clear view of their specific emergence and development.
- For **the pragmatic analysis**, this section uses two distinct methods. The first is a corpus-based analysis of relational terms (*spouse*, *partner*, *soulmate*). It uses both

diachronic and gender-based distributional data from COCA (to track long-term trends across genres) and NOW (to identify specific peaks related to social events (e.g., the 2011 marriage equality debates)). The second qualitative case study is intended to examine the pragmatic dimensions of language use, particularly in contexts where speakers or writers refer to non-binary individuals. The analysis is based on a controlled comparison of two thematically similar news articles published within a comparable time frame. To ensure consistency, the texts were selected according to shared parameters, including genre, topic, and the public profile of the individuals discussed.

The NOW Corpus grows every day, which means that raw frequency counts cannot be directly compared across years. To make a proper, scientific comparison, we need to use a normalized frequency.

For this study, all data are presented in per million words (PMW). This measure shows how many times a word or phrase appears for every one million words of text in the corpus for that year. By using PMW, we can accurately compare the frequency of a word in 2010 (when the corpus was smaller) to its frequency in 2024 (when the corpus is much larger).

3.3 Findings

This section presents the results of the research on gender-inclusive language in modern English. The analysis is based on data from the NOW and COCA corpora, which help track linguistic change in real-time usage. The findings are organized in three levels: the lexical, the grammatical, and the pragmatic. By combining quantitative data with a qualitative examination of concordance lines, this section identifies specific mechanisms of linguistic normalization.

3.3.1 Gender-specific vs gender-neutral occupational titles

The replacement of gender-marked occupational titles has been widely discussed in research on inclusive language [61]. Studies show that masculine generics, such as *chairman* or *policeman*, tend to produce a male bias in how people imagine these roles. This makes women less likely to be considered typical representatives.

This effect can also shape perceptions of professional roles, influence hiring decisions, and affect career aspirations. For this reason, the use of gender-neutral alternatives, such as *police officer* or *chairperson*, is often seen as an effective way to reduce gender bias in languages such as English, where grammatical gender is not strongly marked.

The first section of the findings examines how neutral occupational titles have been replacing gender-marked counterparts in modern journalistic discourse. To measure this shift, three well-known pairs – *chairman/chairperson*, *spokesman/spokesperson*, and *policeman/police officer* – were selected for examination.

These terms were chosen for two reasons. First, they are high-frequency words that have been at the very center of long-standing debates about inclusive language. As a result, they are powerful indicators of linguistic reform. Secondly, they represent a variety of forms of formality and commitment, from the highly institutional *chairman* to the more general *policeman*. This allows for a more detailed analysis.

The normalized frequencies (per million words) for each item are shown in Table 1 for the two target periods. As outlined in the methodology section, the years 2010-2012 represent the baseline before inclusive language became widely institutionalized in major style guides. This is compared against 2022-2024, which represents the current “new form”.

Table 3.1

Lexical Item	2010 (PMW)	2011 (PMW)	2012 (PMW)	Average (2010– 12)	2022 (PMW)	2023 (PMW)	2024 (PMW)	Average (2022– 24)	% Change
chairman	92.16	94.35	96.66	94.39	88.94	100.91	82.87	90.91	-3.7%
chairperson	4.83	6.87	7.96	6.55	9.09	10.63	12.76	10.83	+65.2%
spokesman	75.77	71.10	70.46	72.44	38.79	37.98	26.11	34.29	-52.7%
spokesperson	25.80	27.18	30.83	27.91	80.52	97.28	91.77	89.86	+221.9%
policeman	8.05	7.08	9.18	8.10	3.37	3.18	2.31	2.95	-63.6%

Lexical Item	2010 (PMW)	2011 (PMW)	2012 (PMW)	Average (2010– 12)	2022 (PMW)	2023 (PMW)	2024 (PMW)	Average (2022– 24)	% Change
police officer	20.29	18.94	19.83	19.69	20.76	21.66	19.08	20.50	+4.1%

Lexical Shift: Frequency of Gender-Marked and Neutral Occupational Titles (NOW Corpus)

The data present a powerful, though not consistent, move away from titles that are gender-marked. The three marked forms all declined, but at noticeably different rates. *Spokesman* and *policeman* show the steepest drops, with sharp declines in usage of 52.7% and 63.6% respectively. The corresponding neutral forms tell the other side of the story: *spokesperson* has more than tripled (+221.9%) and has now clearly become the dominant standard in journalistic writing, while *chairperson* has grown by a solid 65.2%.

However, the case of *chairman* is more complex. This example highlights how uneven linguistic change can be. At first glance, the data from the NOW corpus seems less dramatic. The marked term *chairman* has only decreased by a slight 3.7%. It is still far more common than the neutral *chairperson*. This data indicates that *chairman* remains a more entrenched term, perhaps because it is often tied to fixed institutional titles (board chairman, committee chairman). For some writers and editors, it may also carry a sense of perceived neutrality, even as broader norms push toward alternatives.

This less dramatic shift can be explained by a more complex linguistic competition, a phenomenon we first identified in Chapter 2.2.1. As noted in our earlier analysis of COCA corpus, *chairperson* is also competing with the even shorter and increasingly popular neutral term *chair*. The seemingly small decline in the NOW data is therefore not a sign of its strength, but a reflection of its dominance being undermined on two fronts simultaneously.

To see the true historical trajectory of this decline, we can turn to the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), whose data extends back to 1990. An analysis of the COCA data reveals the full story: a dramatic collapse in the use of

the marked term. In the early 1990s, *chairman* was a dominant term, appearing at a frequency of 81.54 per million words (PMW). By the late 2010s, its usage had been nearly halved, plummeting to 44.89 PMW.

This longer view from COCA shows that the apparent stability of *chairman* in the NOW corpus is not a sign of strength. Instead, the recent data simply captures a slower phase in a much longer decline.

A qualitative look at the concordance lines (KWIC) from 2022-2024 helps explain this pattern. In recent years, *chairman* has mostly appeared in fixed institutional phrases or paired executive titles. Common examples include “chairman and chief executive officer” (e.g., “Tom Baltimore, our chairman and chief executive officer, will provide a review...” [The Motley Fool, 2022]), “Chairman and Managing Director” (e.g., “Balu Choudhary, Chairman and Managing Director of Big C, said...” [Times of India, 2024]). It also appears frequently in direct quotes from official sources, such as announcements regarding a “new V&A Law chairman and CEO” [Law.asai, 2024].

These specific contexts – official titles, appointments, and quoted speech – are exactly where traditional terms tend to survive the longest. In contrast, neutral options like *chairperson* or the shorter *chair* appear more often in general, narrative reporting. This suggests that while *chairman* is declining, its use is becoming limited to high-formality or quoted contexts. This restriction is another sign that the word is being pushed out of general journalistic usage.

Overall, the findings from both corpora show a clear shift toward inclusive occupational nouns. The most rapid replacements have occurred where style guides gave clear instructions, as with the fast rise of *spokesperson*. Terms such as *chairman* have changed more slowly, often because they face competition from multiple neutral alternatives.

3.3.2 Shifts in the use of gender-neutral pronouns

The second section of our findings moves from the lexical level of individual nouns to the grammatical level. It examines the evolution of generic pronouns within fixed idiomatic phrases. The shift from generic *he* to singular *they* can be difficult to

measure in free-flowing text due to the statistical “noise”. For example, there is a high frequency of the specific pronoun referring to a male person when analyzing the pronoun *he*. That is the reason why we chose some established idioms for this section. They provide a “clean” and controlled environment to observe this grammatical competition directly.

For this analysis, three well-known idiomatic pairs were selected from the NOW Corpus. The aim was to trace the decline of the older, masculine-default forms and the rise of their modern, inclusive alternatives:

1. “everyone has his own” vs “everyone has their own”
2. “every man for himself” vs “every person for themselves”
3. “to each his own” vs “to each their own”

These specific idioms were chosen because their basic structure is usually fixed. As a result, any changes to the pronoun provide a very clear example of shifting language rules. They are also common enough in public discourse to provide measurable data.

To capture the unique story of each phrase, the target time periods were selected based on the data. As outlined in the methodology, the years 2013-2015 serve as our baseline. During this time, inclusive forms were just starting to appear consistently. This is compared against the most recent period, 2023-2025, which reflects the current “new norm”. As Table 2 shows, the shift toward inclusive language is not identical across the board. Some phrases show a clear pattern of replacement. Others, however, reveal a more complicated process of linguistic trial and error.

Table 3.2

Phrase	2013 (PMW)	2014 (PMW)	2015 (PMW)	Average (2013- 15)	2023 (PMW)	2024 (PMW)	2025 (PMW)	Average (2023- 25)	% Change
everyone has his own	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.000	0.000	0.003	-66.7%
everyone has their own	0.290	0.280	0.320	0.297	0.360	0.310	0.340	0.337	+13.5%
to each his own	0.140	0.090	0.080	0.103	0.030	0.030	0.030	0.030	-70.9%
to each their own	0.070	0.070	0.040	0.060	0.070	0.100	0.090	0.087	+45.0%
every man for himself	0.080	0.090	0.070	0.080	0.040	0.030	0.040	0.037	-53.8%
every person for themselves	0.000	0.040	0.010	0.017	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	-40.0%
Average across masculine forms	0.077	0.063	0.053	0.064	0.027	0.020	0.023	0.023	-64%
Average across inclusive forms	0.120	0.130	0.123	0.124	0.147	0.140	0.147	0.145	+16.9%

Grammatical Shift: Frequency of Gender-marked and Neutral Idiomatic Expressions (NOW Corpus)

The data in Table 3.2 reveals a clear trend: in every single case, the older, gender-marked idiom is in sharp decline. At the same time, its inclusive alternative is on the rise. However, the character of these changes is not the same.

The first and second pairs in the table demonstrate a classic and powerful linguistic replacement trend. The old idiom “to each his own” has experienced a dramatic 70.9% decrease in usage. During the same timeframe, its contemporary equivalent, “*to each their own*”, has increased significantly by +45%.

Impressive changes can also be observed with the expression “everyone has...”. The phrase “*everyone has his own*” has almost completely disappeared from the data, falling by -66.7%. At the same time, its modern replacement, “*everyone has their own*”, has increased by 13.5%. This data offers quantitative evidence that *their* has increasingly replaced *his* as the default grammatical choice in these common expressions.

The transformation of “every man for himself” is far more complex and revealing. Although the traditional phrase has declined by 53.8%, its contemporary equivalent, “every person for themselves”, has not experienced the same level of growth. In fact, its usage has also declined by 40% from its already limited level.

This does not indicate that the evolution of language is failing. Instead, it points to a different linguistic occurrence: the obsolescence of idioms. It seems that this is not the case when one phrase is being directly substituted for another. Instead, both expressions are simply losing popularity in current journalistic writing. Authors are not opting for the old or the new version. They are choosing to avoid the idiom altogether. In this case, the change does not occur through direct replacement.

To understand why the original phrase has not disappeared completely, a qualitative examination of its recent concordance lines (2022-2024) from the NOW corpus is necessary. The analysis shows that the phrase is now rarely used in the reporter’s own spontaneous narrative style. Instead, its modern usage is quite common in three specific, “fossilized” contexts:

1. As a direct quotation: the phrase is often used to quote a source that directly describes a chaotic or competitive situation (e.g., “As Phil said, it’s every man for himself at the moment” [BBC, 2022]).
2. This phrase appears when someone refers to the literal title of a film, book, or other work of art. In this case, the only choice for a journalist is to use the original

term (e.g., “Ever the contrarian, Godard refused to declare Every Man for Himself a comeback” [Rolling Stone on MSN.com, 2022]).

3. As a formal noun phrase or “Mentality”: when journalists use this phrase, it is not seen as a simple idiom. They treat it as a formal noun phrase and often explicitly label it as an “attitude”, a “mentality”, or a “philosophy” to describe a state of selfish individualism. (e.g., “... of alien invasion movies focus on this ‘every man for himself’ mentality that could...” [cinemablend.com, 2022]).

This finding highlights an important aspect of linguistic change. It shows that achieving inclusive language often is not as straightforward as replacing one term with another. Sometimes, it requires the complete disappearance of outdated phrases as fresh, alternative methods of communication emerge.

The decreasing usage and more limited usage of the phrase may reflect a broader tendency in contemporary English to move away from masculine-default expressions. Expressions that use the male term *man* as a universal reference are increasingly losing their neutrality. Instead, they are more frequently seen as historically marked or stylistically deliberate.

However, it should be mentioned that these findings are supported by data from the NOW corpus, which mainly consists of journalistic writing. Therefore, the patterns described here may partly reflect stylistic tendencies of contemporary news discourse rather than a complete disappearance of the idiom from everyday English. Additionally, even though the concordance analysis indicates that the phrase appears more frequently in a limited set of recurring contexts, these results should be viewed as indicative tendencies rather than absolute restrictions. To determine whether the decline observed here reflects a broader linguistic shift or a gender-specific development, additional research using other corpora and registers of English would be beneficial.

3.3.3 The pragmatic shift

The practical shift toward gender-neutral language is evident in the growing use of three important terms: *spouse*, *partner*, and *soulmate*. All three terms are gender-neutral, but a comparative analysis of their usage reveals that they serve

different social and linguistic purposes. *Spouse* acts as a direct, formal substitute for *husband* or *wife*. *Partner* functions as a more flexible, modern term with rich social meaning. *Soulmate* is the language of personal, romantic belief. By examining the different work each word does, we can see how people use language to define their relationships in legal, social, and emotional terms.

The word *spouse* is a precise, gender-neutral term for a legally married person. Its formal nature stems from its origins and current use, as supported by major dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster [52]. The term has Latin and Old French origins, which indicate a more formal register in English. The word's primary pragmatic function is to neutralize gender in formal, official, or legal contexts where marital status is the only relevant piece of information.

An analysis of its usage in COCA confirms this. The word *spouse* is mainly found in formal and public genres. It appears most frequently in Web-based text (23.70 PMW), which includes many official and informational websites. This is followed by magazines (17.38 PMW) and academic journals (10.50 PMW). In contrast, in spoken language (8.47 PMW), it is used nearly three times less often than on the web. The lowest frequency occurs in fiction (3.36 PMW), a genre that closely resembles personal storytelling.

This data is revealing. The numbers confirm that *spouse* belongs to the language of institutions, not to intimate conversations. Historical data also reveals a marked decline in its usage, falling from 9.95 PMW in the early 1990s to just 5.86 PMW in the late 2010s. This suggests that other, more flexible terms may be replacing it, even in formal settings.

In contrast to the formal *spouse*, the term *partner* covers a broader and more complex range of pragmatic work. An analysis of its usage in COCA shows that it is rather versatile.

First, historical data indicate that the rise of the term *partner* is a relatively recent but significant change. Its usage remained stable in the 1990s but started a steady climb after the year 2000, peaking in the late 2000s at 65.09 PMW. Although

its frequency has slightly declined over the last decade to 57.44 PMW, it remains a dominant and commonly used term in modern English.

A breakdown of its use across different genres highlights its unique social functions:

1. The function of inclusivity

As we discussed in Chapter 2, the *inclusivity* of *partner* is rooted in its historical importance for the LGBTQ+ community as a pragmatic tool for social and legal legitimacy. Today, this inclusive meaning is also visible in actual language use, particularly in corpus data. One useful example is the phrase “unmarried partner”.

The data from the NOW Corpus shows a distinct peak in usage around 2011 (0.06 PMW), a time when social and legal debates about marriage equality were widely discussed in the news. However, the phrase’s frequency declines after this peak. This likely indicates success. As *partner* alone became more widely understood to not imply marriage, the need for the “unmarried” clarifier decreased. This proves that *partner* is an important linguistic tool that establishes a social category that other relational terms do not.

2. The function of privacy and public discourse

Being so inclusive, *partner* acts as a strong tool for privacy. The COCA data illustrates this well. Its highest frequency appears in public and often impersonal TV/Movie genres (78.35 PMW), followed by Magazines (71.49 PMW) and News (66.75 PMW). This indicates that in public discussions, *partner* might be used to refer to relationships without sharing unnecessary personal details.

3. The function of intimacy and social signaling

While it is commonly used in public contexts, *partner* appears much less often in the most personal and intimate settings. According to COCA, its frequency in spoken language (34.93 PMW) is less than half that of TV/Movies. This is revealing. It suggests that in private conversations, people likely use more specific, intimate terms (boyfriend, wife, etc.) because they feel less need for privacy or formality.

However, when someone uses *partner* in an informal situation, such as a spoken interview, it often serves as a strong social signal. A closer look at the data

shows a clear pattern. We found many real-world examples using a “two-step” phrase where a speaker first uses *partner* and then specifies the gender. According to COCA data, both male and female partners use this pattern, but there is a striking asymmetry: the construction “partner ... he” (at 0.09 PMW) is about three times more common than “partner ... she” (0.03 PMW).

This construction is used not for clarity. A more direct term like “my husband” could be used for that purpose. Instead, it is a pragmatic performance. The initial choice of the modern, inclusive *partner* signals the speaker’s support for the egalitarian ideals. According to the data, this strategy is more frequently used when discussing a male partner. This might be because the traditional alternatives (*boyfriend*, *husband*) do not meet the speaker’s pragmatic needs in the same way as *girlfriend* or *wife* do. This real-world evidence proves that the word is actively used to create a social identity as well as to transmit information.

Finally, a third gender-neutral term, *soulmate*, occupies a completely different pragmatic space from both *spouse* and *partner*. This term is emotionally and ideologically charged. Its function is not to express a social reality, but a personal belief in a specific kind of romantic destiny. According to the COCA data, *soulmate* is most common in media that emphasize storytelling, entertainment, and personal experience. TV and movie scripts are where it most frequently appears (0.73 PMW). More informal, personal writing styles like blogs (0.46 PMW) and magazines (0.46 PMW) are next.

On the other hand, it is very rare in the most formal and impersonal genres. Its frequency in News is a mere 0.30 PMW, and in Academic writing, it is practically zero (0.03 PMW). This suggests that *soulmate* is the language of pop culture and personal narrative.

The diachronic corpus analysis showed the rapid growth of the word *soulmate*. In the early 1990s, the word was very rare, occurring at just 0.08 PMW. Since then, its use has skyrocketed, rising by almost ten times to a frequency of 0.77 PMW in the 2010s.

This comparison between *spouse*, *partner*, and *soulmate* shows how strong word choice depends on context rather than on fixed rules. Speakers are not required to choose one term over another. They make situational decisions in real-time interaction. A word such as *spouse* may emphasize legal status, while *soulmate* highlights emotional closeness or personal belief. In many cases, however, *partner* is chosen precisely because it allows speakers to balance intimacy with discretion, especially in socially diverse or uncertain settings. This demonstrates a key strategy of gender-inclusive communication: choosing a flexible, neutral term not just because it is available, but because it performs the necessary social work.

The quantitative data presented in the analysis of relational language demonstrate the existence of an ongoing linguistic shift. However, it does not fully account for the mechanisms through which this change operates in actual usage. In particular, large-scale frequency data cannot capture the practical difficulties and stylistic decisions involved in adopting new pronoun conventions. To address these limitations, the present section examines the phenomenon at the pragmatic level through a qualitative comparative case study.

The aim of this analysis is to identify empirical evidence of what has been described in the literature as “pronoun avoidance” [8]. The guiding research question is as follows: in comparable journalistic texts, is the frequency of pronoun use lower when referring to a non-binary individual than when referring to a cisgender individual?

To explore this question, two news articles published within a similar time frame were selected:

1. Sam Smith: A Grammy-winning British singer who uses they/them pronouns. The article is “Sam Smith Talks ‘Villain era’...” from Entertainment Tonight [80].
2. Ed Sheeran: A Grammy-winning British singer who uses he/him pronouns. The article is “Ed Sheeran sings and plays guitar at copyright trial...” from BBC News [77].

Both texts focus on widely recognized British musicians of comparable professional status. The first article discusses Sam Smith, who uses *they/them* pronouns, while the second focuses on Ed Sheeran, who uses *he/him* pronouns. By choosing two artists with similar levels of fame, nationality, and profession, we can focus on the impact of pronoun usage, minimizing the influence of external variables.

In each article, we counted every mention of the main subject. We categorized these references as either pronominal (*they/he*) or nominal (e.g., surname or descriptive noun phrase). Based on these counts, a “pronoun rate” was calculated as the proportion of pronominal references relative to the total number of references.

The quantitative results are striking and serve as a clear confirmation of the theory described by Arnold [8].

Table 3.3

Reference Type	Sam Smith (ET)	Ed Sheeran (BBC)
Pronoun (they/he)	2	18
Name/Description	9	10
Total Reference	11	28
Pronoun Rate	18%	64%

Table 3.3 Pronoun Avoidance in Practice: Comparison of Pronominal and Nominal References (Sam Smith vs Ed Sheeran)

The difference is considerable. The pronoun rate for the article about Sam Smith is only 18%. In contrast, the article about Ed Sheeran has a rate of 64%. This shows that the writer, referring to Smith, chose to repeat a name roughly four out of five times. Meanwhile, the writer for Sheeran used a pronoun nearly two out of every three times.

This statistical difference becomes noticeable when we examine the writing itself, or textual cohesion. The avoidance of pronouns for Sam Smith results in sentences that can sound repetitive and even a little unnatural: “What little of the new music that fans have heard... even without *Smith* having to promote it...”, “Smith said...”, “According to Smith...”, “Smith shared.”

In this section, the name “Smith” appears four times, where a pronoun would normally help the text flow better. This is a sharp contrast to the smooth, natural use of pronouns in the BBC article about Ed Sheeran:

He told the jury how his 2014 song was written at his home in England with friends and collaborator Amy Wadge. He said the process began during a brainstorming session, with him saying the phrase ‘I’m singing out now’...

Here, pronominal reference supports a more fluid and cohesive narrative structure.

This direct comparison illustrates the “pronoun avoidance” phenomenon. The much lower pronoun rate for Sam Smith indicates the hesitation and “audience design” concerns that writers face when using the specific, non-binary they. This case study clearly shows that the shift to inclusive language is a real process that comes with the human uncertainty typical of any major grammatical change.

Conclusion to Chapter 3

This chapter examined recent developments in gender-inclusive language in contemporary English. The previous chapter outlined broader theoretical and historical trends. The present analysis explored how these tendencies appear in actual language use. We compared earlier and more recent periods in the NOW corpus and drew on COCA data for pragmatic aspects. As a result, this chapter provides empirical evidence of how linguistic choices in modern English are gradually changing.

The findings at the lexical level show a noticeable shift away from gendered titles. Some terms are being replaced consistently. The significant decline of words like *spokesman* and *policeman*, combined with the strong rise of *spokesperson* and the steady use of *police officer*, suggests that neutral options are becoming the preferred choice in journalistic writing.

However, the term *chairman* illustrates that lexical change does not always follow a straightforward pattern of substitution. Although this term has declined over time, recent data show that the pace of change has slowed. Additional evidence from the COCA corpus and the concordance analysis helps explain this phenomenon. The

results suggest that the continued use of *chairman* is partly due to its presence in institutional titles and established organizational contexts. In these cases, older forms tend to remain stable for longer periods.

Similar processes have been observed on the grammatical level. For this analysis, we focused on fixed idiomatic expressions. In such a way, we could trace how the traditional generic pronoun *he* is slowly being replaced by more inclusive options. Phrases such as “to each his own” and “everyone has his own” are steadily declining. At the same time, forms using singular *they*, such as “to each their own” and “everyone has their own”, are becoming more common.

The analysis also found cases where the change does not involve direct replacement. The expression “every man for himself” seems to be declining without a rise in the suggested alternative, “every person for themselves”. This pattern suggests that some expressions are gradually disappearing from journalistic language.

Together, these findings indicate that the shift toward gender-inclusive language in contemporary English happens through several different mechanisms. In some cases, older forms are replaced by more neutral alternatives. In others, linguistic competition between several expressions makes the process of change slower. In yet other situations, an entire phrase may gradually become less common. Despite these differences, the overall direction of change remains the same. Both the lexical and grammatical analyses show a gradual shift toward forms that avoid masculine-default reference.

The results also highlight the role of context. The continued use of certain expressions in institutional titles, quotations, or culturally established phrases shows that language change is rarely uniform across all areas of language use. Journalistic discourse is quite influential. However, it still represents only one register of English. Therefore, the patterns observed in the NOW corpus should not be interpreted as definite evidence of change across the entire language. Instead, they should be treated as tendencies within contemporary media language.

The analysis of relational terms highlights the pragmatic complexity of gender-inclusive language. The comparison of the terms *partner*, *spouse*, and *soulmate* revealed how we use words to navigate the legal, social, and emotional dimensions of our relationships. The data suggest that *spouse* remains relatively stable but is mostly limited to formal or institutional contexts. In contrast, *partner* has become a much more flexible and widely used term. Its rise since 2000, especially in news media, indicates that it allows speakers to describe relationships in a way that balances personal meaning with a degree of neutrality or privacy.

Furthermore, the qualitative case study of pronoun avoidance complements the quantitative findings by highlighting patterns that are not fully visible in large-scale data. The difference in pronoun rates observed in the two articles (18% compared to 64%) indicated a systematic variation in referential strategies that depends on the gender identity of the individual discussed.

The result suggests that, even though singular *they* is becoming more common in contemporary English, its use in reference to specific individuals may still present certain challenges in practice. In particular, writers tend to rely heavily on nominal repetition in contexts where non-binary reference is required.

In conclusion, the findings from this chapter demonstrate that gender-inclusive language is becoming more common in modern English. However, this spread is not uniform. The analysis demonstrates that a variety of mechanisms – such as lexical replacements, variations in grammatical patterns, and the gradual decline of certain expressions – constitute this change. At the same time, the case study of pronoun avoidance indicates that these developments are not fully stabilized in actual usage, especially when referring to non-binary people. Taken together, the results suggest that linguistic change is continuous and influenced by both structural factors and communicative practice.

CONCLUSION

This master's thesis examines contemporary developments in English associated with the rise of gender-inclusive language. The study is based on the assumption that language does not simply reflect social reality. It participates in shaping it. The research combined theoretical discussion with empirical analysis to trace how inclusive forms function in real-life usage.

Chapter 1 established the theoretical foundation of the study by distinguishing between biological sex and socially constructed gender. It explored how gender roles are internalized through theories such as Social Learning Theory, Kohlberg's cognitive development, and Bem's Gender Schema Theory. The chapter also traced the development of gender linguistics from Robin Lakoff's work on women's language, through Dominance and Difference approaches, to Judith Butler's theory of performativity. This chapter demonstrates that language participates in the construction, maintenance, and challenge of gender norms.

The analysis of gender representation in Chapter 2 demonstrates a shift from traditional binary models toward gender-inclusive communicative norms. While historical English gender was primarily marked through morphological suffixes and a strict pronominal binary, contemporary usage prioritizes gender-inclusive forms. The study traced developments in the pronoun system, including the increased use of singular *they* and the emergence of neopronouns.

The corpus-based analysis in Chapter 3 supported the shift. At the lexical level, the data showed a gradual replacement of gender-marked occupational titles. However, the pace of change varies depending on context. Some forms are rapidly declining (for example, *spokesman*), while others remain relatively stable in more formal registers (for example, *chairman*).

At the grammatical level, similar tendencies were observed in fixed expressions. Certain masculine-default phrases are becoming less frequent. However, the phenomenon of "idiom obsolescence" suggests that some traditional masculine-defaults expressions are sometimes simply disappearing rather than being directly substituted. This indicates a broader archaicization of gendered language.

Addressing the pragmatics, the research includes a qualitative analysis focused on specific contexts of use. The findings show that the adoption of inclusive language involves a degree of pragmatic negotiation. The rise of relational terms such as *partner* reflects an effort to balance inclusivity and privacy. However, the case study of “pronoun avoidance” provides evidence of some social hesitation in real usage. This suggests that even when inclusive forms are available, their use is influenced by factors such as audience expectations and a lack of habitual usage.

The study acknowledges certain limitations. Its primary focus on journalistic texts means that the results cannot be fully generalized to other types of discourse, such as informal communication or spoken language. Future research could extend this analysis to spoken English, explore the normalization of neopronouns, and compare developments across different varieties of English (for example, British vs. American).

To conclude, the changes described in this thesis highlight the dynamic nature of language. Linguistic systems are not fixed; they evolve in response to social developments. The growing presence of inclusive forms in English can therefore be seen as part of a broader process where language adapts to new communication needs.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Institutional approach to gender-inclusive language: a comparative case study (HSBC vs UK Passport Office)

The Case of HSBC (Commercial Sector)

The world of banking provides a clear example of a proactive institutional change. In 2017, the multinational bank HSBC expanded its title options for UK customers. According to BBC News, the bank did not just add “Mx.” It introduced a set of nine gender-neutral prefixes, including “Ind” (for individual) and “Misc” (for miscellaneous) [70].

Stuart Barette, the trans lead of HSBC’s Pride Network, noted that for a transgender person, updating their details at a bank could be “terrifying”. He mentioned that these changes came after feedback from employees to make it “a lot easier for customers to have the confidence to go into branches” [70, para.17-21]. This move is a great example of a business improving its language to show respect to its diverse clients.

The Case of the UK Passport Office (Government Sector)

In contrast, some institutions show some resistance. An analysis of the UK government’s official guidance for passports does not reveal the full recognition of “Mx.” The document contains detailed instructions on how to accept and verify a wide range of “other titles”, including professional titles like “Doctor” and even aristocratic “titles of nobility”.

But for non-binary titles, the instruction is the opposite: simple deletion. The guidance states:

“If a customer enters any other title in the ‘other title’ field, you must remove the title from the ‘other title’ field and leave it blank. For example, a variation of ‘Mister’, or a non-binary title such as ‘Mx’ or ‘Person’” [74, Other title section].

In doing so, the institution is making a deliberate choice to exclude non-binary titles. At the same time, it validates many other non-standard titles. This is an example of an institution resisting a key aspect of gender-inclusive language.

Discussion

This comparison demonstrates that the “inclusive default” is not being adopted consistently. It reflects different approaches taken by institutions towards inclusive language. There is a clear split between the pragmatic, user-focused strategy of commercial institutions like HSBC and the resistance of government bodies. Even though we can observe a big progress in the acceptance of inclusive language, the shift is still not simple and smooth. It has become a site of active negotiation – an ongoing struggle between evolving social norms and the institutional opposition.

Appendix B

Institutional Treatment Of Singular *They* And Neopronouns: Guidance From APA And GLAAD

To explore the current institutional status of neopronouns, we have examined the official guidance from the “language gatekeepers” – the influential institutions that define and regulate standard English. The direct comparison of how these institutions treat the established singular *they* and emerging neopronouns allows us to gain a clear view of where each pronoun fits in the language change process.

For this analysis, we will examine official articles and web-based guides from two key sources. The first one is the American Psychological Association (APA) Style website [69]. It sets the rules for academic writing in the social sciences. The second one is the GLAAD Media Reference Guide [73]. It is an important online resource for journaling covering LGBTQ+ topics.

Both institutions view singular *they* as a standard part of respectful and clear communication. The APA manual includes several detailed paragraphs about its use. Similarly, the GLAAD Media Reference Guide states that singular *they* “has been adopted in all leading style guides” and provides a clear example of how to use it correctly. Both organizations treat singular *they* as a settled practice, not a new trend.

In contrast, both sources present neopronouns as an important concept that still needs explanation. The guidance from the APA highlights this difference. Its entire mention of neopronouns is just one brief sentence. It acknowledges that “some

individuals use... alternative pronouns such as ‘ze’, ‘xe’, ‘hir’,...” [69, Pronoun usage section, para. 10]. With such brevity, the APA simply recognizes their existence without standardizing their use.

The GLAAD guide provides more details. At the same time, it maintains an educational tone. It states that “Other pronouns like ze/zim and xe/xir exist and some nonbinary people use them” [73, Pronoun usage section, para. 10]. The language is descriptive, encouraging awareness rather than mandating use. This helps journalists understand what neopronouns are, unlike the clear directive for singular *they*.

In conclusion, the official authorities confirm that singular *they* has already become a standard part of inclusive grammar, while neopronouns are still in an earlier, community-oriented stage of language change. Their treatment focuses on explanation, not yet on full support or standardization, which still confirms their status as a valid and important tool for linguistic self-determination.

SUMMARY

Магістерська робота на тему «Гендерна репрезентація в сучасній англійській мові» досліджує тенденції появи та подальшого закріплення в ужитку гендерно-інклюзивних форм англійської мови. Загальний обсяг – 83 сторінки. Список використаних джерел налічує 81 найменування.

Об'єктом дослідження є явище гендерно-інклюзивної мови як норми, що розвивається у сучасній англійській мові. Предметом – лінгвістичні механізми та рівні реалізації (лексичний, граматичний та прагматичний) стратегій гендерної інклюзивності, а також закономірності їхнього розвитку в сучасній англійській мові.

У першому розділі подано теоретичне обґрунтування гендеру як соціального та лінгвокультурного феномену. На основі аналізу ключових психологічних і соціологічних теорій (Л. Кольберга, С. Бем, М. Фуко та ін.) доведено, що мова є активним інструментом формування гендерної ідентичності.

У другому розділі систематизовано сучасні засоби гендерної інклюзивності. Досліджено процес зміни гендерно маркованих термінів їхніми нейтральними відповідниками на лексичному рівні. На граматичному – детально проаналізовано структурні зміни в займенниковій системі, зокрема історичний розвиток та інституціалізацію займенника *they* в однині, а також появу неозайменників як засобів лінгвістичного самовизначення. Прагматичний аспект фокусується на змінах у назвах партнерських стосунків (*partner*, *spouse*, *soulmate*) та стратегіях інклюзивного вибору за замовчуванням (займенник *they* в однині).

У третьому розділі представлено результати емпіричного дослідження на матеріалі корпусів NOW та COCA. Кількісний аналіз підтвердив сталу тенденцію до витіснення гендерно маркованих назв посад, проте виявив явище лексичної стійкості (“lexical persistence”) для термінів, закріплених у офіційних інституційних назвах. Встановлено, що гендерно марковані ідіоматичні вирази поступово виходять із ужитку. Аналіз журналістського

дискурсу дозволив зафіксувати феномен «уникнення займенників» (“pronoun avoidance”), що є частиною перехідного етапу нормалізації нових граматичних форм.

Загальні висновки підтверджують, що англійська мова перебуває у стані активної нормалізації та інституціалізації нових комунікативних норм. Доведено, що процес інституціалізації інклюзивних норм є нерівномірним і залежить від жанру та соціального контексту.