

He_i should do his or her_i homework if they_i want a good grade: Variable L2 epicene pronoun usage

Communicative contexts arise in which speakers need to refer to a single referent without specifying their gender. However, English lacks a distinct and standard gender-neutral (i.e., epicene) third-person singular pronoun. This has yielded three primary epicene variants: singular *they*, *he or she*, and generic *he*. First-language (L1) and second-language (L2) English speakers have exhibited variation with these forms (e.g., Stormbom, 2018). Investigating L2 epicene pronoun variation is important for English language instructors and learners, as epicene pronoun usage is related to the development of sociocultural competence in that L2 English learners could be interpreted as using exclusionary language or conveying the wrong information depending on the pronoun used. Prior work has primarily focused on homogenous groups of L2 English learners in their countries of origin (Abudalbuh, 2012; Sibanda & Begede, 2015; Stormbom, 2019; Zhang & Yang, 2021). As a result, previous studies have been unable to examine the roles of cultural immersion and possible L1 effects in comparison to other L2 English learners in similar contexts. The analysis presented here builds upon this work by analyzing data from a heterogeneous group of 83 learners from 12 L1s in the University of Pittsburgh English Language Institute Corpus (PELIC). Our mixed-effects multinomial analysis compares the three epicene pronoun variants according to (extra)linguistic predictors that include the learner's gender, years of English study, age, and L1; and the grammatical case of the pronoun (subject, object, reflexive, possessive), antecedent type (indefinite pronoun, indefinite noun phrase, qualified noun phrase, definite noun phrase), and clause location (same, different). Epicene pronoun usage patterns are compared within the L2 learner group without comparison to an expert English speaker group, which allows us to analyze L2 systems of epicene reference in their own right. Namely, we highlight exclusively what learners do in conveying epicene references and the factors that influence such variation. The current study found that L2 English learners in PELIC used *he or she* most frequently and generic *he* least frequently. This differs from previous research, which has consistently shown high rates of generic *he* (e.g., Abudalbuh, 2012; Zhang & Yang, 2021). We interpret this difference as potentially reflecting that PELIC learners may have primarily received *he or she* forms as input in prescriptive American English sources, as American English has been observed as implementing *he or she* more frequently in formal writing (Curzan, 2014). This would suggest that the preference for *he or she* is the result of outdated language teaching materials or methods, as usage of *he or she* by L1 English speakers has been declining (Stormbom, 2021, 2023). Results also showed an effect for L1s without grammatical gender to disfavor generic *he* and favor singular *they*, which aligns with findings for L2 English learners in settings outside of the United States (Stormbom 2018, 2021). The results of this study contribute to our understanding of the influence of L1 and sociocultural background on patterns of gendered speech variation in L2 English.

References

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