

Shifting Attitudes, Shifting Styles: Codifying Gender-Inclusive Language Use in Style Manuals

Discussion around gender-neutral pronouns in English has been documented since the 13th century (Nabila, et al 2021) with a great deal of debate focusing on whether epicene pronoun construction is acceptable in academic discourses (Noll, Lowry, & Bryant, 2018). However, recent sociopolitical movements concerning gender identity have created disruptions in binary thinking, shifting conversations about language use and meaning around the world. In France, the emergence of neo-pronouns such as "iel" as an alternative for French-speaking non-binary folks to express their non-binary identity and the use of inclusive writing in education textbooks has been met with resistance and opposition from the French Academy and the French government, forbidding the use of inclusive writing (Tudisco, 2022). In the United States, singular they has become focal in gender politics (Saguy & Williams, 2022) as citizens and governmental bodies, argue about gender and language to promote ideological agendas. Recent debates about gender-inclusive language can be traced to high profile legal battles around "bathroom bills" granting transgender students rights to use school bathrooms that align with their gender identity and civil rights legislation banning gender discrimination in education programs receiving federal funds (Kralik, 2017). Most recently, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) circulated a memorandum advocating that government agencies that enforce the federal civil rights law banning gender discrimination in education programs receiving federal funds (Title IX) adopt the use of a more restrictive legal definition of "sex" which is "based on immutable biological traits identifiable by or before birth" (Guillen, 2022). Debates in both France and the U.S. demonstrate how gender has become a site of ideological struggle with language serving as the defining feature in negotiations of power and belonging.

Those promoting gender inclusivity have advocated for the use of gender-neutral pronouns, such as singular they, as a way to counter binary ways of knowing gender identity rather than merely relying on biological sex assigned at birth. Research by Pew Research (2019) showed that the linguistically changing landscape and knowledge about gender-neutral pronouns and their usage has become a mainstream issue in U.S. society in recent years despite mixed comfort levels using gender-neutral pronouns to reference others (Geiger & Graf, 2019). Those who defend binary ways of understanding sex and gender as only male or female, tend to reject innovative lexical options and language forms. In the case of singular they, defending grammatical correctness has long been used as a rationale to avoid change despite increasing calls for gender-inclusive language.

Writer's reference manuals, which dictate rules of writing across academic and professional fields, reflect sociopolitical arguments about gender-inclusive language while demonstrating language change in process with each new revised edition. Style guides codify written communication and have done so over the last hundred years, enabling these manuals to dictate and disrupt language practices and ideologies on a far-reaching and global scale. In this study, we employ critical discourse analysis and a queer linguistics approach to examine the shifting guidelines around gender and sexuality language use in reference manuals by comparing the two most recent editions of the commonly recommended style guides by academic libraries in top universities in the U.S. specifically AMA (American Medical Association), AP (Associated Press), APA (American Psychological Association), and MLA (Modern Language Association).

Our analysis catalogs the documentation of language change in these guides regarding singular they and related linguistic forms to analyze gender inclusivity and language attitudes in relation to the academic and professional writing context associated with these guides. By exploring gender-inclusive language across multiple editions of these style guides, we demonstrate where and how singular they usage is prescribed and described. Across these style guides, gender-inclusive language sections advise writers to strive for accuracy, clarity, reader understandability, and writer accountability while drawing attention to the nuanced language around gender-fair discourse. Consequently, the demands of inclusivity versus grammatical accuracy often lead to ambiguity and discrepancies about utilization and

endorsement of singular they in formal language writing. Thus, while there is growing acceptance of gender-inclusive language in style guides, a tension exists between descriptions and prescriptions for language use. As of the latest editions of each of these guides, the use of singular they is now deemed acceptable. However, an analysis of singular they usage shows that strategies to avoid using the form are still consistently recommended suggesting that negative attitudes persist.

In response, this research expands upon emerging scholarship on language attitudes and gender-discriminatory language (Grove, 2021). Our analysis shows that while grammar and formal writing styles are being queered, as evidenced by the acceptance of singular they and expanding sections on gender-inclusive language in newer editions of style manuals, the depth to which such manuals address genderqueer language varies widely and is still dominated by gender binary ideology as reflective of popular attitudes about language and gender, continuing to affect the inclusivity in both professional and academic spheres.

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