



Effects of L1 and social attitudes toward gender-fair English

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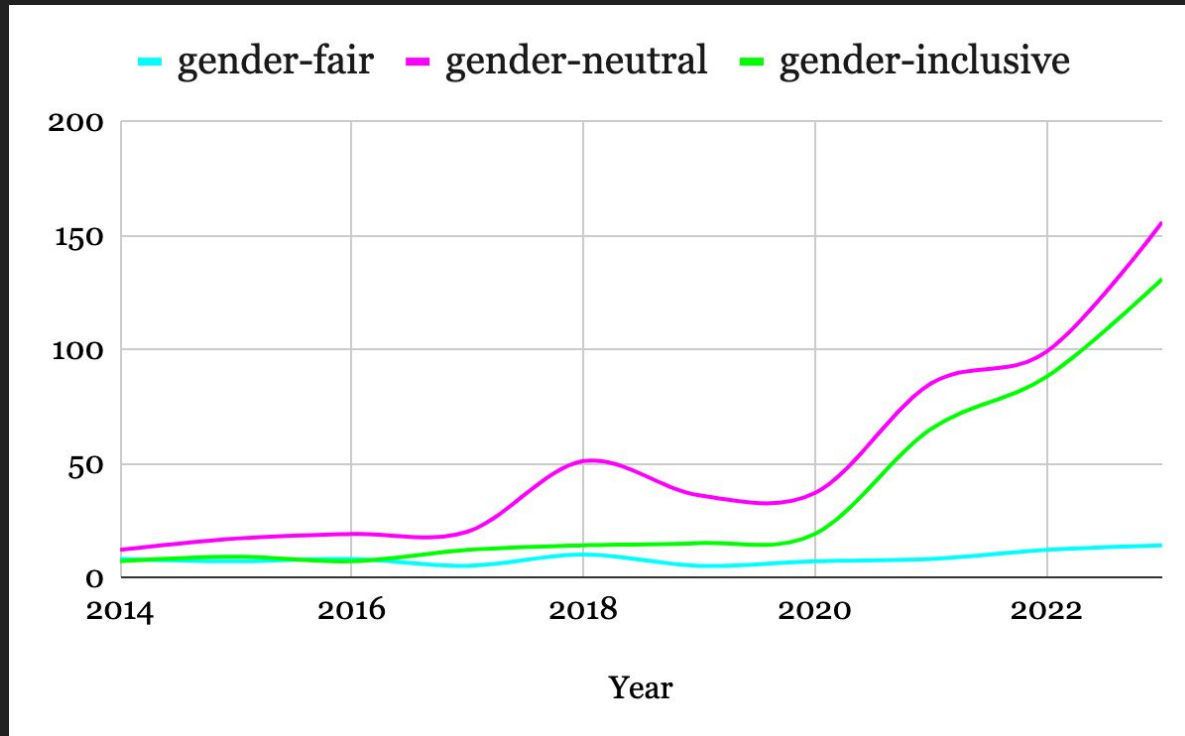
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Gender-fair English

- What do we mean by *gender-fair English*?

Figure 1.

Keyword search based on EBSCOhost data (2014–2023)

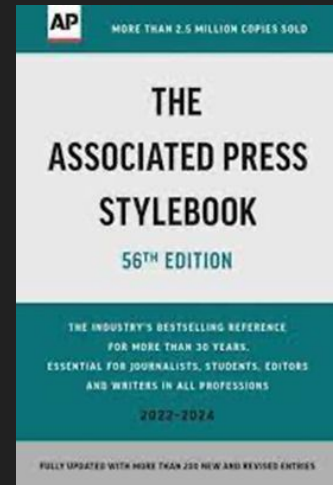
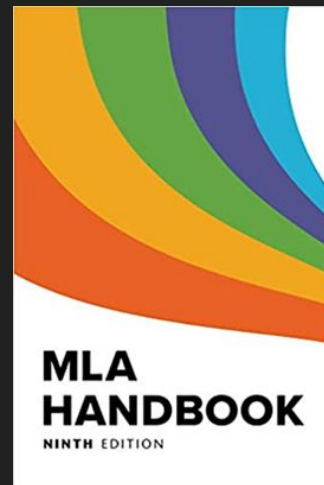
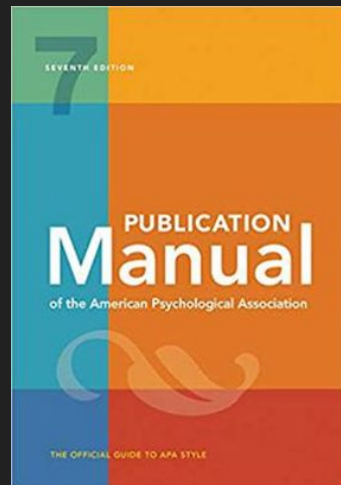
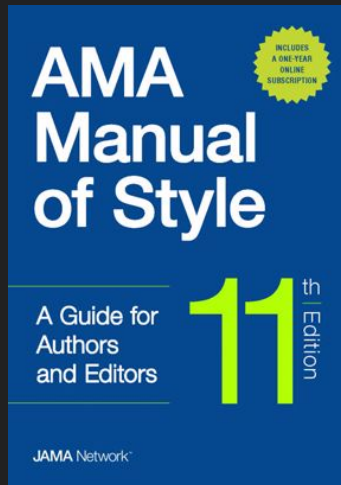


Gender-fair English


- What do we mean by *gender-fair* English?
- Language that is subversive **not only to gender inequality** (generic *he*, *chairman* → 1st wave of gender language reforms) but **also to a binary notion of gender** (*he/she* > *they*) and supports **fair treatment** of all genders

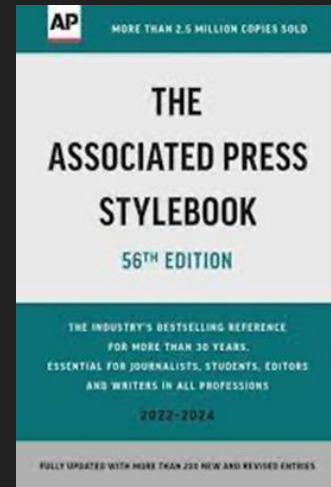
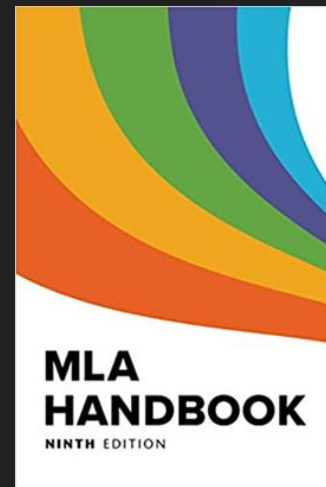
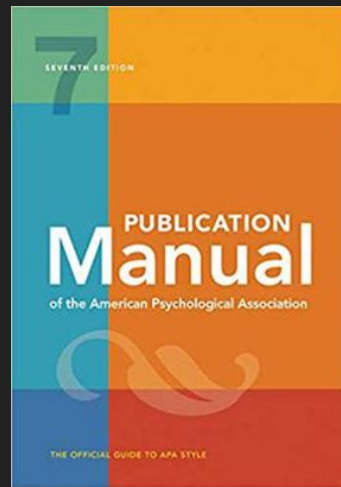
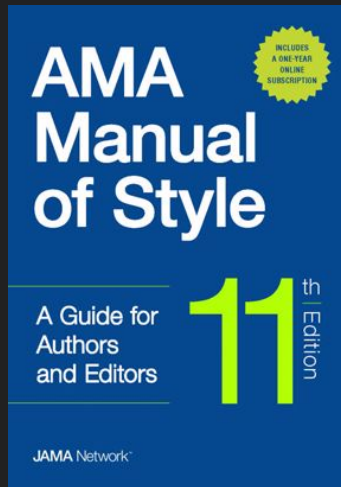
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Gender-fair English

- What do we mean by *gender-fair* English?
- Language that is subversive not only to gender inequality (generic *he*, *chairman* → 1st way  *gender* → 2nd way → a binary notion of gender (*he/she* > *they*) as *WotY 2019* (Merriam-Webster) *WotD 2019* (American Dialect Society) *WotY 2019* (Merriam-Webster) *WotD 2019* (American Dialect Society)



Earlier literature

- Research on the acceptance, usage, and attitudes toward gender-fair language has largely focused on L1 users
- LX users of English outnumber L1 users by at least 3 times (Ethnologue, 2024) → what is their role in the ongoing language change?

Earlier literature

- LX users of English use gender-fair forms less frequently (LaScotte, 2021) and are less accepting of them (Hekanaho, 2020)

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- Why?
- Arguably, because the changing usage has not become an integral part of the prescriptive grammar taught across L2 contexts (Hekanaho, 2020, p. 198)

Present study

- Further exploration of gender-fair attitudes and usage among LX users of English
- Three grammatically gendered languages:
 - Croatian, Dutch, and German

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- Three grammatically gendered languages:
 - Croatian, Dutch, and German
- Why these three?
 - L1 may be a significant factor influencing the usage of gender-fair language (Strombom, 2022)
 - Not only structural linguistic properties but also the socio-cultural context

Present study

Table 1

Gender marking in Croatian, German, and Dutch

Croatian	German	Dutch
<p><i>jed-na pamet-na student-ica</i> one-FEM clever-FEM student-FEM</p> <p><i>je otiš-la</i> has left-FEM “a clever female student has left”</p>	<p><i>ein-e klug-e</i> a-FEM clever-FEM <i>Student-in</i> student-FEM “a clever female student”</p>	<p><i>een slimm-e student-e</i> a clever-C student-FEM “a clever woman”</p>

Present study

We hypothesize that:

- H1: the acceptability and the rate of production of gender-fair language in English are higher among users of languages that are less morphologically marked for gender (Croatian < German < Dutch)
- H2: L1 users of those languages for which the debates on gender fair language are more visible are more accepting of and opt for gender-fair usages more often (Croatian < Dutch < German)
 - If morphology is more important → H1
 - If sociocultural context more important → H2

Present study

- Next to L1, relevant demographics and social attitudes:
 - H3: Younger respondents more accepting (Bjorkman, 2017; Conrod, 2019; Moulton et al., 2020)
 - H4: LGBTQ+ respondents more accepting (Bradley, 2020; Conrod; 2019; Hekanaho, 2020)
 - H5: Liberal respondents more accepting (Bailey et al., 2023)
 - H6: LX users of English less accepting than L1 users (Hekanaho, 2020)
 - H7: Those with more positive attitudes toward trans and nonbinary people more accepting (Bailey et al., 2023; Bradley, 2020)

Experiment

- Data collection between July and September 2023
- The Qualtrics-based survey was deployed *via* social media
- 581 respondents started the survey and 391 completed it
- L1 English control participants were recruited via university subject pool
- The most frequently reported first languages were German (n=125), English (n=84), Croatian (n=52), and Dutch (n=49)
- Age range from 18 to 76, with an average age of 29.6 (sd=11.7)
- 267 women, 99 men, and 22 non-binary individuals; 37% LGBTQ+

Experiment

- Two experimental tasks:
 1. Grammatical acceptability ratings
 - (a) When an athlete gets injured, they should go to the trainer.
 - (b) Whenever my best friend comes over, I make sure to serve snacks for them.
 - (c) Mario called to cancel the meeting they had scheduled with you.
 - (d) A well-prepared hiker always brings an umbrella with xem.
 2. Multiple-choice sentence completion
 - (e) A truck driver must take a break every 4 hours, even if ____ may not be tired.
- In addition: experiences of and attitudes toward gender, as well as demographic questionnaires

Findings

- If morphology is more important \rightarrow H1 (Croatian < German < Dutch)
- If sociocultural context more important \rightarrow H2 (Croatian < Dutch < German)

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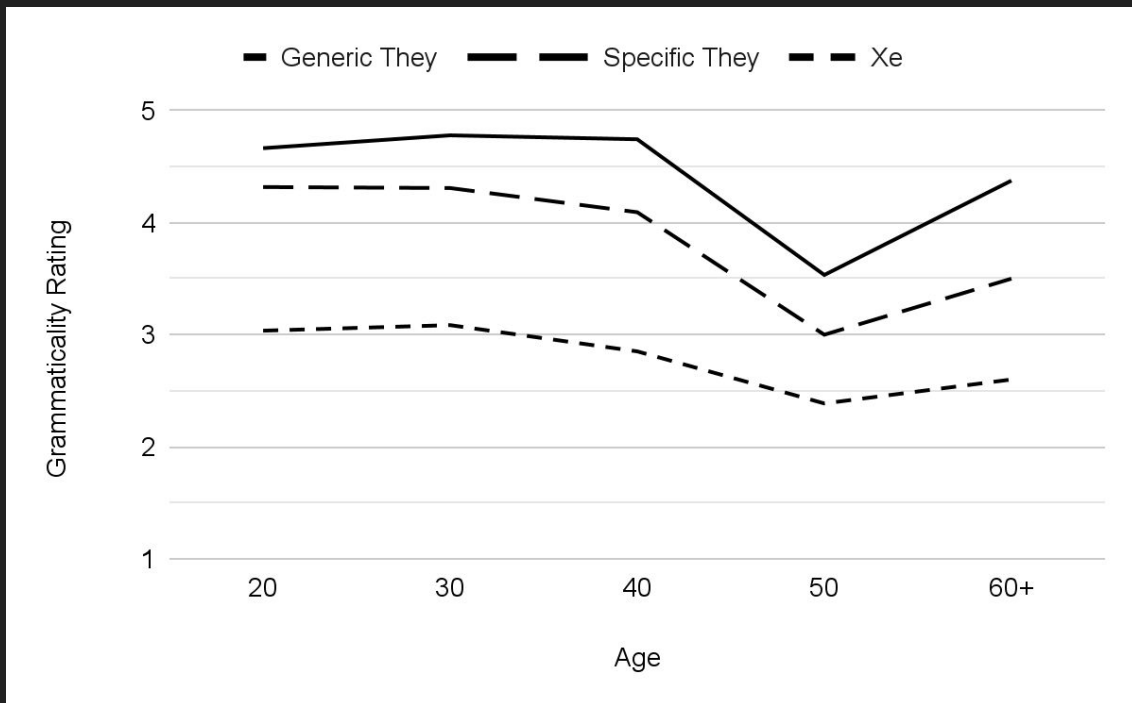
- If morphology is more important → H1 (Croatian < German < Dutch)
- If sociocultural context more important → H2 (Croatian < Dutch < German)
 - German participants were most accepting of gender-fair language, despite Dutch being least morphologically marked
 - **Spillover of gender-fair awareness** among multilingual speakers due to prominent debates in L1

Findings

- H3: Younger respondents are more accepting of non-binary pronouns

Figure 2.

Ratings of singular they and neopronouns by L2 participants over participant age, binned by decade



Findings

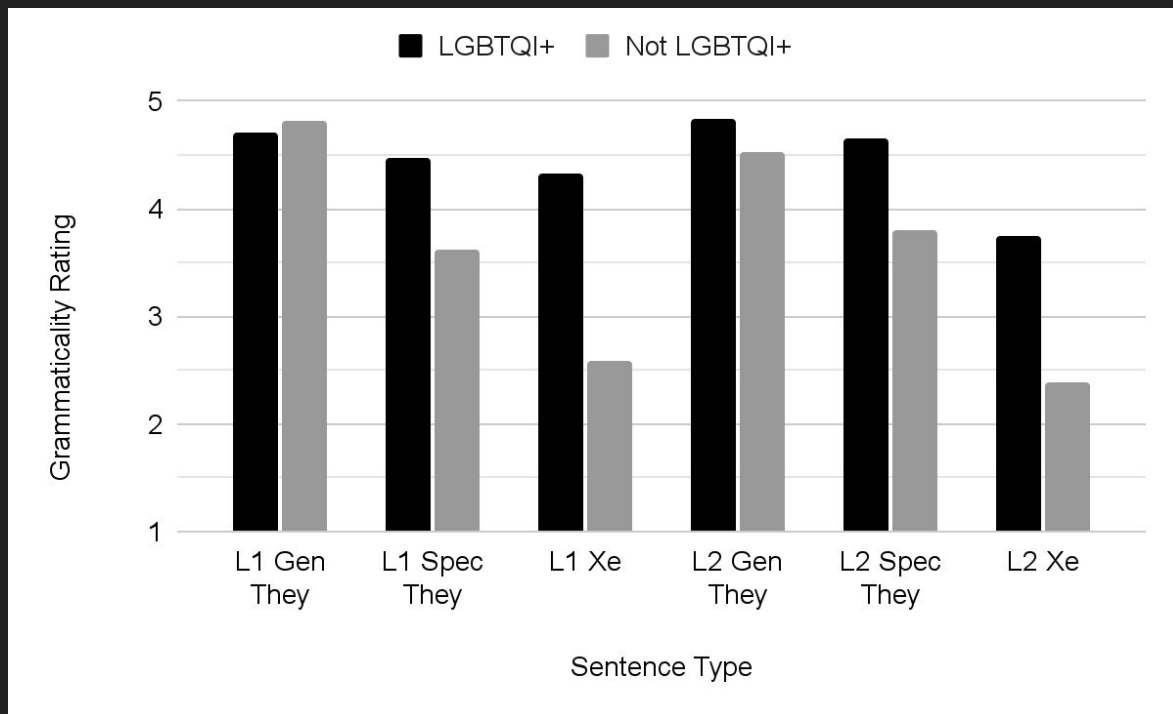
- H3: Younger respondents are more accepting of non-binary pronouns
 - No significant differences to confirm age grading (but our sample skewed young)

Findings

- H4: LGBTQ+ respondents more accepting

Figure 3.

Ratings of singular they and neopronouns by LGBTQ+ status.



Findings

- H4: LGBTQ+ respondents more accepting
 - LGBTQ+ identity proved to be a significant positive predictor of gender-fair pronoun acceptance in all contexts bar generic singular *they*, which was equally accepted across all groups of L1 participants. This shows that, for L1 participants, generic singular *they* has become standard and unmarked.

Findings

- H5: Liberal respondents more accepting

Figure 4.

Ratings of singular they and neopronouns by L1 status and political orientation.

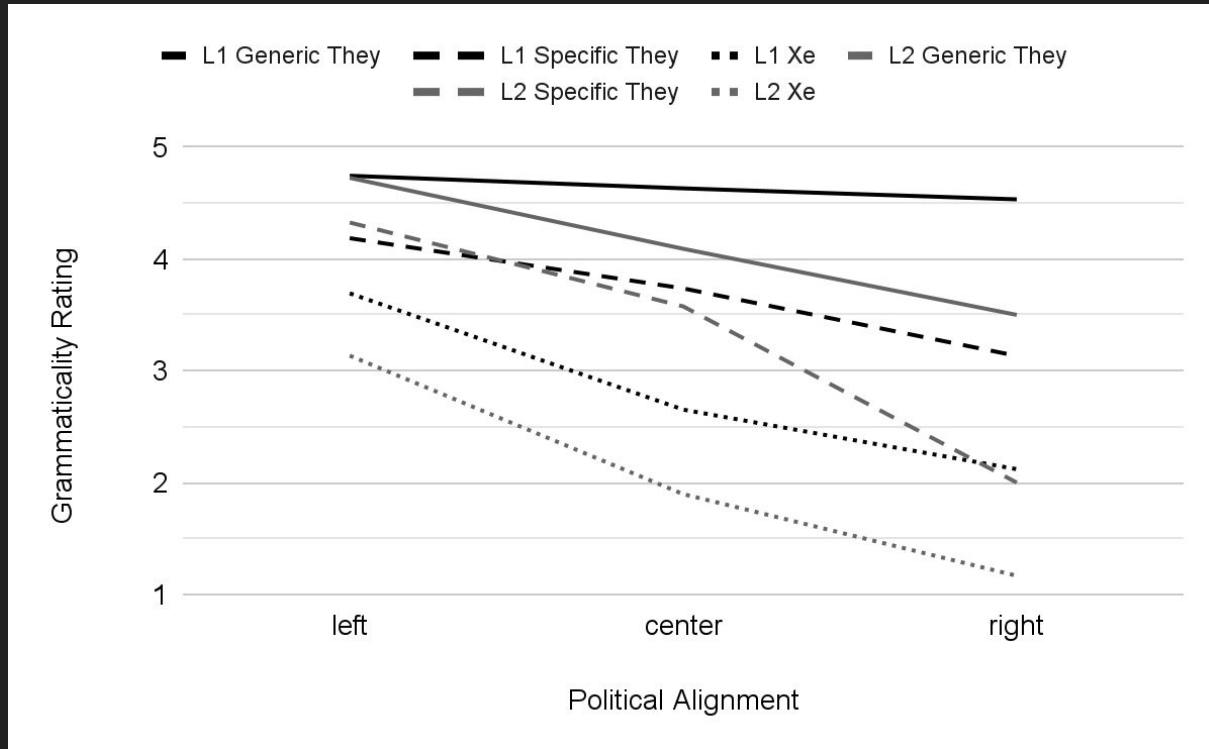
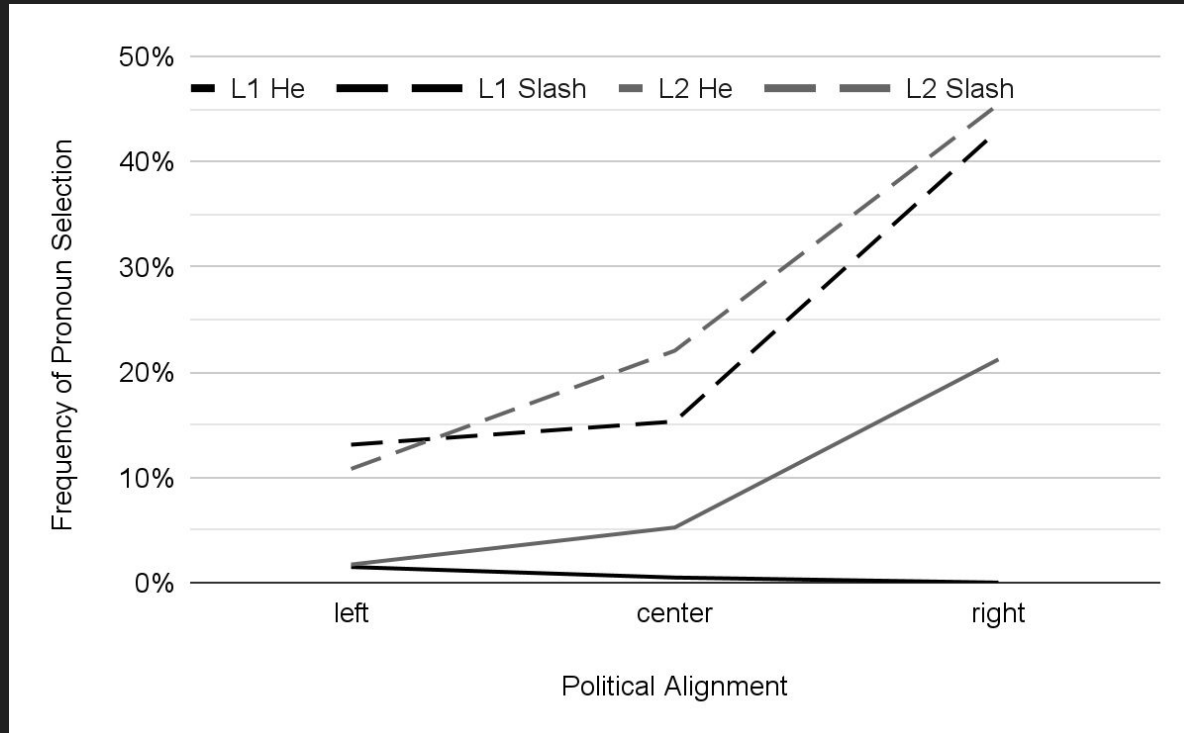


Figure 5.

Use of he and he/she in generic contexts by political orientation.



Findings

- H5: Liberal respondents more accepting
 - More liberal participants across groups rated all gender-fair options higher.
 - Generic *he* and binary options *he/she* were much more commonly used in generic contexts among politically more conservative respondents with inter-group differences.
 - Only L2 participants still opt for generic *he*, which seems to be completely falling out of L1 usage.

Findings

- H6: LX users of English less accepting than L1 users

Findings

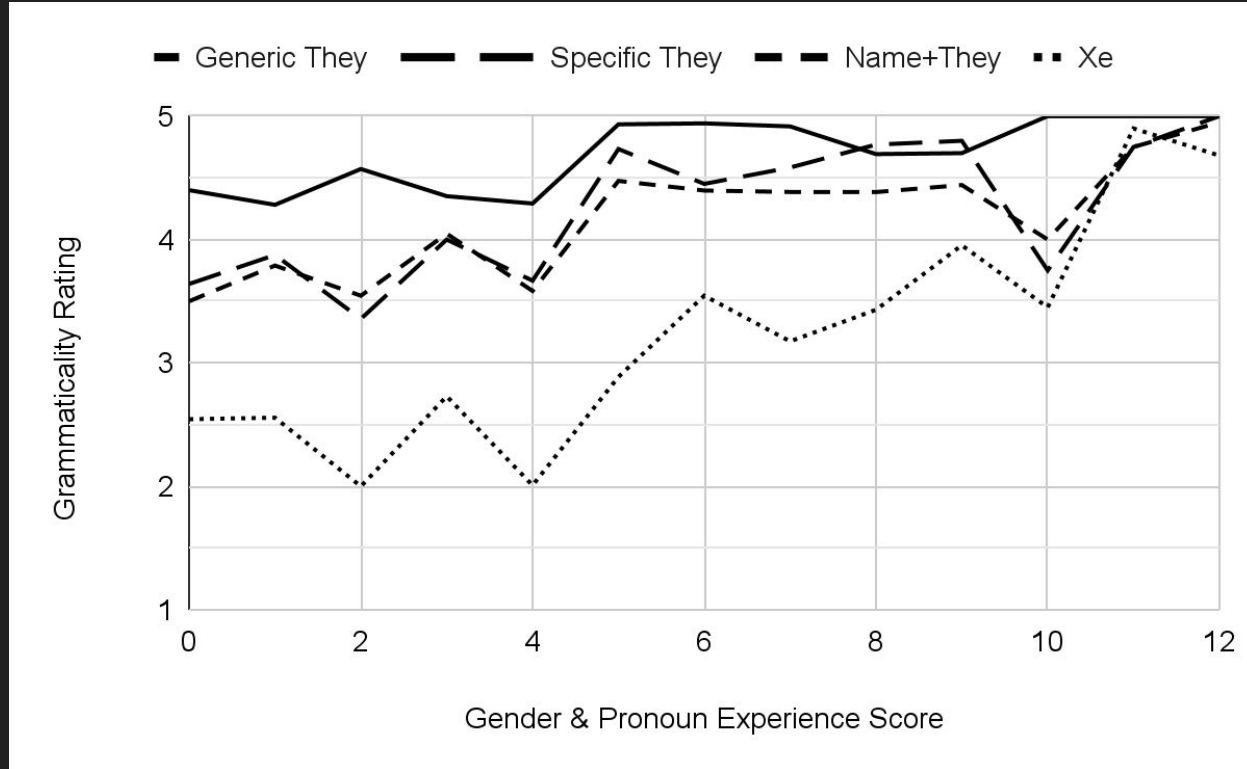
- H6: LX users of English less accepting than L1 users
 - No significant differences between L1 and LX participants.
 - Contradictory to earlier literature.
 - Our sample is made up of highly proficient users whose usage does not seem to considerably differ from the L1 controls in our sample.

Findings

- H7: Those with more positive attitudes toward trans and nonbinary people more accepting

Figure 6.

Ratings of singular they and xe by gender and pronoun experience.



Findings

- H7: Those with more positive attitudes toward trans and nonbinary people more accepting
 - Participants with more diverse gender and pronoun experiences to rate all gender-neutral and non-binary uses of *they* and *xe* more highly

Conclusion

- Where we started:
 - Exclusion of LX users from discussions on language fairness
 - Sociolinguistic attention needed for diverse language users ("native speaker" vs. global English language community)

Conclusion

- What we've found:
 - Overall, language reforms are taking hold
 - Similar trends in acceptance of gender-fair language among L1 and LX English users
 - Intra-group variation among LX participants based on socio-cultural factors

Conclusion

- What still remains to be addressed:
 - More fine-grained understanding of who is more likely to adopt gender-fair language and why
 - Relevant factors: liberal views, gender beliefs, demographics, socio-cultural factors
 - Why? Understanding these can contribute to policy formulation and adoption of gender-fair language

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