Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:43 Page Number: 127

5 Effects of L1 and Social Attitudes on English Gender-Fair Pronouns

Morana Lukač and Evan D. Bradley

5.1 Introduction

The discussions on gender-fair language (language subversive to a binary notion of gender that prevents discrimination experienced by trans and non-binary individuals) have in recent years risen to prominence, not only among linguists studying its adoption and usage across languages, but also in political circles and among the public at large (Jones et al., 2023). In spite of robust evidence that misgendering causes harm to trans and non-binary people (e.g. Barr et al., 2022; Jacobsen et al., 2023; Puckett et al., 2021), some who hold cisnormative and binary views on gender vehemently oppose the usage of gender-fair language (Bailey et al., 2024; Bradley, 2020). Yet, while certainly central, views on gender are not the sole factor influencing the spread and mainstreaming of this language change in progress. A more comprehensive sociolinguistic understanding of diverse factors at play may help guide those attempting to introduce social change with the aid of and through language activism.

Research on the acceptance, usage, and attitudes towards gender-fair language, and more specifically, pronouns, has until recently largely focused on L1 speakers of English. Considering however that L2 speakers outnumber L1 speakers of English by three times (Ethnologue, 2023), their role in the linguistic community and in the process of this ongoing language change must not be overlooked. Literature indicates that L2 speakers resort to gender-fair forms less frequently (LaScotte, 2021) and are less accepting of them (Hekanaho, 2020), arguably because the changing usage has not become an integral part of the prescriptive grammar taught across L2 contexts (Hekanaho, 2020: 198). Whereas this argument holds some merit, it is worth acknowledging that for all L2 speakers, especially adult ones, acquisition extends beyond the context of formal instruction, and is also shaped by various forms of linguistic exposure and their own usage, allowing for alternative explanations as to why some L2 speakers adopt gender-fair forms while others do not. This is an important consideration for teachers of English and other languages (Knisely, 2021).

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:43 Page Number: 128

In this study, we further investigate the variation in the use of gender-fair pronouns in English among L1 speakers of three grammatically gendered languages: Croatian, Dutch, and German. Some evidence suggests that L1 may be a significant factor influencing the usage of gender-fair language among L2 speakers of English (Stormbom, 2022). Much remains unknown, however, about the role of other factors, leaving many sources of variation unexplored. In this study, we address the grammaticality judgements and production among L2 speakers considering not only the different L1 sociolinguistic contexts but also those variables that have either been shown to be significant in earlier research or that we hypothesize could account for variation. These factors include attitudes about gender (Bradley, 2020), which we tested through the Transgender Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (TABS) (Kanamori et al., 2017), experience with gender diversity, political alignment, and demographic variables including age, gender, and LGBTQ+ membership.

We carried out an online survey through which we collected both grammaticality judgements and production data. We first examine whether anthropomorphization of non-human (e.g., *mouse*, *flower*), inanimate (*winter*), and abstract (*friendship*) antecedents in English might lead the participants to use L1 gender categories, independently of gender-fair language, as a result of cross-linguistic transfer (Mecit et al., 2022), or, in Ackerman's terms (2019),[1] congruency of the grammatical gender in speakers' L1 with the conceptual gender cross-linguistically. We then focus on pronoun choice and acceptability ratings in both generic and specific references to people. This study aims to (1) assess whether L1 and individual differences affect choices and acceptability of gender-fair pronouns among L2 speakers of English, and (2) test aim 1 by comparing different groups of speakers with each other.

Producing such knowledge improves our understanding of the role that cross-linguistic and cross-cultural transfer may play in adopting gender-fair language along with people's social attitudes and demographic groups. This could inform language educators and policymakers concerned about gender disparities and the adoption of gender-fair language. Moreover, moving away from the emphasis on the 'native speaker' in empirical linguistic research (Truan, 2023), this study further highlights the important role that L2 speakers play within the global English community.

[1] Ackerman (2019) introduces a useful framework for disambiguating the concept of 'gender' in linguistic discussions. The author primarily differentiates between *grammatical gender* (the formal syntactic or semantic feature that is morpho-syntactically defined), *conceptual gender* (the gender that is expressed, inferred and used by a perceiver to classify a referent, be it human or anthropomorphised) and *biosocial gender* (the gender of a person based on a phenotype, socialisation, cultural norms, gender expression and gender identity) (p. 3).

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:43 Page Number: 129

5.2 Background

5.2.1 Cross-linguistic Transfer

Studies of learner language posit linguistic transfer. Namely, even the production of advanced L2 speakers may be influenced by their L1 pronominal system (Antón-Méndez, 2011). For example, L2 speakers often resort to generic masculine forms, especially if these are common in their L1 (Stormbom, 2018). In a recent study of singular *they* in L2 English, Stormbom (2022) found L1 to be a significant factor influencing pronoun choice. Both syntax and sociocultural context proved to be relevant. L1 speakers of Russian and Italian, languages in which generic masculine is the norm, used singular *they* the least, and speakers of Swedish and Danish, languages in which grammatical gender plays less of a role and where language-fair reforms have been introduced, used it the most. Building on insights from this literature, it is plausible to hypothesize that L1 has an impact on L2 gender-fair usage. What we are yet to uncover is the extent to which individual differences included into the analysis of L2 gender-fair usage may help explain differences in the production and acceptability ratings.

5.2.1.1 Grammatical Gender in Croatian, Dutch, and German There arguably are no languages that do not distinguish gender at all, but the extent to which they do varies. Languages are typologically broadly categorised into *grammatical gender*, *natural gender*, and *genderless* (Stahlberg et al., 2007). Whereas in grammatical gender languages, as the name suggests, all nouns are assigned a grammatical gender, in natural gender languages, gendering is mostly present in the form of personal pronouns. In genderless languages, gender is expressed only in lexical gender words (Sczesny et al., 2016). While gender-fair language policies are often deemed unnecessary for genderless languages, implementing linguistic gender equality can be rather challenging for grammatical gender languages (Sczesny et al., 2016).

Although the three languages that we have chosen for our analysis all broadly belong to the grammatical gender group, there are notable distinctions among them in terms not only of their grammatical gender marking but also regarding the level of adoption of gender-fair strategies and the public discussions on the topic, which guided our decision to focus on speakers of these languages. Let us first focus on their structural differences. Croatian, a South Slavic language, is the most morphologically complex. It has a three-way grammatical gender distinction, which is represented in grammatical morphemes for nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and, sometimes, verbs ((1)–(3)).

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:43 Page Number: 130

(1) feminine
jed-na pamet-na žena je otiš-la
one-FEM clever-FEM woman has left-FEM
'a clever female student has left'

(2) masculine
jed-an pamet-an muškarac je otiš-ao
one-MASC clever-MASC man has left-MASC
'a clever male student has left'

(3) neuter
jed-no pamet-no dijete je otiš-lo
one-NEUT clever-NEUT child has left-NEUT
'a clever child has left'

In German, articles, pronouns, and adjectives signal the feminine, masculine and neuter gender of a noun ((4)–(6)) (from Braun et al., 2005: 2)

(4) feminine
ein-e klug-e Frau
a-FEM clever-FEM woman
'a clever woman'

(5) masculine
ein-Ø klug-er Mann
a-MASC clever-MASC man
'a clever man'

(6) neuter
ein-Ø klug-es Kind
a-NEUT clever-NEUT man
'a clever child'

Dutch is a marginal member of this typological group, and as such it is sometimes also categorized as a combination of a grammatical and a natural gender language (Gygax et al., 2019). Its marginal status is characterized by its lack of grammatical distinctions between masculine and feminine genders, both of which are marked with the definite article *de*. A distinction is made only between common (*de*) ((7)–(8)) and neuter (*het*) (10). Personal pronouns, however, have variable forms that reflect three genders.

(7) feminine
een slimm-e vrouw
a clever-C woman
'a clever woman'

(8) masculine
een slimm-e man
a clever-C man
'a clever man'

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:43 Page Number: 131

(9) neuter
een slim-Ø kind
a clever-NEUT child
'a clever child'

5.2.1.2 Strategies for Gender-Fair Language Whereas the attempts to introduce gender-fair langua[illegible]or, in Anne Curzan's terms, *politically responsive prescriptivism* (2014: 114–13[illegible]hat would replace masculine generics are to an extent present in all of the LMs of interest here, the degree to which the novel usage has been adopted varies due to both the properties of the languages and social and cultural differences.

Considering its inflectional richness, avoiding grammatical gender marking in Croatian is cumbersome. Most Croatian usage advice resorts to generic masculine forms. Specifying gender in describing professional functions for example is only recommended when speaking of a specific woman in that function. Feminization strategies, that is, introducing feminine forms to make feminine referents visible (e.g. *profesori i profesorice* 'male and female professors') is not common in generic references, and is generally perceived as inefficient (Hudeček et al., 2011: 94–98). Language used to refer to non-binary individuals is not part of wider public discussions, although some solutions have been recorded in interviews conducted with non-binary Croatian speakers (Šincek, 2020; Špoljar, 2021).[2]

Two of the most common substitutions for masculine generics in German are feminizing language forms, that is, introducing feminine–masculine word pairs (*Lehrerinnen und Lehrer* 'female and male teachers') and, as of more recently, non-binary inclusive forms, the most common among which is the gender asterisk or the *Gendersternchen* (*Lehrer*innen* 'teachers'). The introduction of non-binary inclusive forms has become a divisive topic in public discourse.[3] Yet, a recent corpus-based study on gender-inclusive language in

[2] Some solutions for using language beyond the binary have been in usage among LGBTQ+ communities. Linguists working with non-binary individuals (Šincek, 2020; Špoljar, 2021) report the interchangeable usage of gendered pronouns to refer to oneself (*on*, *ona* 'he, she'), using the neuter (*ono*) and the masculine plural pronoun (*oni*) avoiding gendered morphological marking on verbs by resorting to dialectal constructions as well as the archaic verb forms *aorist* and *imperfekt*, which, unlike *perfekt*, the most frequently used past tense, are not gendered.

[3] Steffen Herrmann, the queer theorist who proposed the introduction of the *Gendersternchen* in the early 2000s, stated that using the gender-inclusive orthographic conventions 'means to position oneself politically' (Herrmann, 2018). A 2019 representative survey carried out by the German high-profile national newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* showed that only 27.1 per cent of men and 27.9 per cent of women believed gender-fair language to be important for gender equality in Germany; more than 60 per cent believed the topic to be '(very) unimportant' (Schmoll, 2019). Many continue to find gender-fair usage to be 'unnatural and marked by the insignia of the contexts in which it first arose and continues to be most widespread: academic and administrative bureaucracy' (Halverson, 2021).

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:43 Page Number: 132

German media shows a rapid increase in its usage in recent years (Waldendorf, 2024).[4] Although gender-neutral pronouns have been the subject of discussion, and several proposals have been formulated (including *en*, *hen*, *dey*, *they*, *sier*, and *xier*) (Verein für Geschlechtsneutrales Deutsch e.V., 2023), none are part of mainstream usage at this moment.

In Dutch, similarly to English, grammatically masculine forms are envisaged as semantically gender neutral.[5] Entries for professions in the leading Dutch dictionary, Dikke Van Dale, are all accompanied by designations *m/v/x*. This means that words such as *de minister* and *de bakker* refer to ministers and bakers who identify as male, female, and non-binary (Van Dale, 2022). Gender remains most prominent in the usage of pronouns. In 2016, the Dutch Transgender Network organized the Election of Nonbinary Pronouns, and since then the pronouns *hen* (poss. *hun*), and *die* (poss. *diens*) have been included both in publications and style guides (Decock et al., 2023). Studies however show that Dutch speakers both in Flanders (Decock et al., 2023) and in the Netherlands (Agema, 2021) are generally not familiar with gender-neutral pronouns, and attitudes towards them remain at the moment neutral or slightly negative.

5.2.1.3 Hypotheses: L1 and Gender-Fair Pronouns Based on earlier research on L2 speakers of English and gender-fair pronouns, we expected to find the following relationships:

– Grammatical gender is established to be an important linguistic element in shaping anthropomorphism tendencies among speakers of grammatical gender languages (Mecit et al., 2022). When presented with sentences including anthropomorphized objects, we expect the respondents to choose pronouns in accordance with the grammatical gender of the antecedent in their L1 because of cross-linguistic transfer (Hypothesis 1).
– We predict that respondents are the least accepting and rarely if at all choose neopronouns, are more accepting of singular *they* in specific contexts, and are the most accepting of singular *they* in generic and epicene contexts. Based on earlier research (Hekanaho, 2020), however, we expect L2 participants to be less accepting of all gender-fair pronouns compared to L1 participants (Hypothesis 2).

[4] Although only left-leaning newspapers use non-binary inclusive forms, right-leaning newspapers also include gender-fair forms via gender-binary word pairs (feminine–masculine). Such large-scale changes in linguistic behaviour, Waldendorf (2024) suggests, may signal an ongoing change in attitudes.

[5] Historically, many Dutch nouns had female suffixes (*held – heldin* 'hero, heroine', *leraar – lerares* 'male, female teacher', *zwemmer – zwemster* 'male, female swimmer', *advocaat – advocate* 'male, female lawyer', *acteur – actrice* 'actor, actress'). Today, however, these suffixes are no longer particularly productive.

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:43 Page Number: 133

- Since feminization strategies (*he or she*) are more common in all the L1s included here than in English, we further hypothesize that L2 participants opt for slash forms (*he/she*) more often than L1 speakers (Hypothesis 3).
- We hypothesize that the acceptability and the rate of production of gender-fair language in English are higher among speakers of languages that are less morphologically marked for gender (Croatian < German < Dutch) (Hypothesis 4).
- We also predict a relationship with the sociolinguistic context. Namely, we propose that L1 speakers 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) (Hypothesis 5).
- Hypotheses 4 and 5 are somewhat in conflict; thus, which one is more supported by the data will tell us something about what influences are most strong on L2 English users' selection of pronouns: if L1 morphology is more important, Dutch participants are likely to accept and use English gender-fair language to a greater degree (Hypothesis 4); if, on the other hand, sociolinguistic context and the status of implementation of gender-fair strategies in L1 (as laid out in Section 5.2.1.2) matters more, German participants are likely to accept and use English gender-fair language to a greater degree (Hypothesis 5).

5.2.2 *Individual Differences in Attitudes*

Most attitudinal surveys on gender-fair language have been carried out among speakers of American English and they have largely focused on gender-neutral singular personal pronouns. Recent research has found that acceptability differs depending on both the pronoun itself and on the social groups and beliefs of speakers. The generic and epicene uses of *they* (10) are now widely adopted among most speakers (Conrod, 2019; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020) and this usage is becoming standard. Singular *they* is included in most publishing style guides, although it is not recommended by them all (Robertson & Thompson, 2023). The adoption of singular *they* with specific, often gender-known antecedents (11), however, is a change in progress, with younger people being more accepting of this usage (Bjorkman, 2017; Conrod, 2019; Moulton et al., 2020).

(10) *Anyone* can be successful, even if *they* may not have the best education.

(11) *Maria* couldn't pay the tuition, so the professor told *them* to double check with the bursar.

Next to age, unsurprisingly, LGBTQ+ identity and social proximity have been found to influence one's acceptance of gender-fair pronouns (Bradley,

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:43 Page Number: 134

2020; Conrod, 2019; Hekanaho, 2020). Studies that looked at gender have found no significant differences in the acceptance of gender-fair pronouns between cis men and women, but they did find differences between cis men and women on the one hand and trans men and women and non-binary individuals on the other. For the latter group, gender-fair pronouns are part of their community's linguistic norms (Conrod, 2019). In a similar vein, those who hold essentialist beliefs about gender and have negative attitudes towards trans and non-binary people generally do not endorse gender-fair pronouns, and opt for gendered alternatives (Bailey et al., 2024; Bradley, 2020).

Finally, gender-fair language has become part of divisive political discussions across national contexts in a number of Western countries (Erdocia, 2022). In the US, comfort with using gender-neutral pronouns closely aligns with party membership (Minkin & Brown, 2021). Some findings suggest that social dominance orientation, which promotes hierarchies and closely correlates with conservatism (Pratto et al., 1994), is related to and positively correlates with the use of gendered pronouns (Bailey et al., 2024). Thus, linguistic prescription may well be a cover for other forms of intolerance – here, transphobia – as it has in other cases been a cover for racism, sexism, etc. (Bradley, 2023).

5.2.2.1 Hypotheses: Individual Differences and Gender-Fair Pronouns
Taken together, previous research on individual differences regarding attitudes towards gender-fair language has led us to expect the following relationships:

- We expect for younger respondents to be more accepting of singular *they* and neopronouns in specific contexts; however, we do not expect to see differences according to age for its use in generic and epicene contexts (Hypothesis 6).
- We propose that those who belong to LGBTQ+ communities are more accepting of gender-fair language, especially of those usages that are not yet widely used: primarily specific singular *they* and neopronouns (Hypothesis 7).
- We expect for non-binary respondents to be more accepting of all gender-fair pronouns than men and women (Hypothesis 8).
- We anticipate more positive attitudes and beliefs about trans and non-binary people to increase the endorsement and production of gender-fair pronouns (Hypothesis 9).
- We expect more liberal respondents to be more accepting of and opt more often for gender-fair pronouns compared to their conservative counterparts (Hypothesis 10).

5.3 Experiment

Participants completed two experimental tasks: grammatical acceptability ratings and multiple-choice sentence completion. In addition, participants

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:43 Page Number: 135

answered questions about their experiences of and attitudes towards gender, as well as demographic and language history questionnaires.

5.3.1 Stimuli

5.3.1.1 Grammatical Acceptability Judgement Sentences for acceptability rating were adapted from a subset of those used by Bradley (2020). These included sentences using singular *they* with antecedents that were generic ((12); n=1), specific NPs ((13); n=1), and named individuals ((14); n=3). The neopronoun *xe/xem* was also included in generic ((15); n=1), specific ((16); n=1), and named ((17); n=3) contexts, along with grammatical (n=4) (18) and ungrammatical (n=3) (19) controls. The full set of sentences is listed in the Appendix.

(12) When an athlete gets injured, they should go to the trainer.

(13) Whenever my best friend comes over, I make sure to serve snacks for them.

(14) Mario called to cancel the meeting they had scheduled with you.

(15) A well-prepared hiker always brings an umbrella with xem.

(16) That artist told me that xe needs a ride because the bus is late.

(17) When Anna packs lunch, xe always includes an apple.

(18) John likes football so much that he plays every Saturday.

(19) David wondered what them were up to.

Participants were asked to 'indicate how grammatical you find each sentence (that is, is it a natural way of using English to you?)' using a five-point scale ranging from 1 ('not right at all') to 5 ('perfectly normal').

5.3.1.2 Sentence Completion First, the nouns that would have mismatching genders in the L1 of the target groups were selected. Then we found sentences including these nouns in contexts where they were anthropomorphized in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008–) and on different websites with examples of creative writing. For example, one of the chosen nouns was *snail* ((20); n=x), which has feminine gender in German, masculine gender in Croatian, and common gender in Dutch. Antecedents included inanimate objects and abstract concepts, animals, plants, unnamed humans ((21); n=8), and named individuals ((22); n=3). We also included a subset of sentences based on Foertsch and Gernsbacher (1997) which included human antecedents associated with gender stereotypes ((23); n=6). The full set of sentences is listed in the Appendix.

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:44 Page Number: 136

(20) Cara sidestepped, away from the snail's head, toward the grass covered spiral at the side of _ shell.
(a) their
(b) its
(c) his
(d) her
(e) xyr
(f) his/her
(g) us

(21) If a person is audited, _ can supply that paperwork to validate the charitable contribution.
(a) they
(b) it
(c) he
(d) she
(e) xe
(f) he/she
(g) them

(22) As many times as Robin told this story over the years, _ would never quite be able to explain the logic of the next move.
(a) they
(b) it
(c) he
(d) she
(e) xe
(f) he/she
(g) him

(23) A housekeeper has to clean the toilet, even if __ may find it disgusting, because that's the housekeeper's duty.
(a) they
(b) it
(c) he
(d) she
(e) xe
(f) he/she
(g) herself

A pronoun was removed from the sentence and replaced with a blank. Participants were asked to choose the word that best completes the sentence. The choice of answers always included plausible forms of *he*, *she*, *they*, *xe*, a slash form (*he/she*), and a foil which had a case inappropriate for the context (e.g. *him* in subject position); sentences requiring a reflexive pronoun included both *themselves* and *themself* as a possible answer.

5.3.1.3 Attitudes and Experiences Participants completed the Transgender Attitudes and Beliefs (TABS) scale (Kanamori et al., 2017), which quantifies

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:44 Page Number: 137

transphobia and attitudes towards trans and non-binary people along three dimensions: interpersonal comfort, human value, and sex and gender beliefs (gender as a fixed binary vs. a fluid spectrum). Degree of experience with pronouns and gender diversity is assessed by asking participants whether they knew any transgender/non-binary individuals, or anyone who uses *they/them* or neopronouns (possible responses were: Yes (this describes me), Yes (many such people), Yes (one person), No (I'm not sure).

5.3.1.4 Demographics and Language History Participants indicated their age, political orientation, gender, and sexuality (multiple selection including free response). Participants also listed the languages they knew, including their degree of proficiency, age of acquisition, and frequency of use.

5.3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected using the Qualtrics platform between June and September 2023, and deployed via social media (Twitter/X, Reddit, LinkedIn) and email advertising targeted at Dutch, Croatian, and German audiences in the researchers' professional networks (but participants of any language background were invited to participate). L1 English control participants were recruited via university subject pool. Participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to examine effects of their L1 on their use of English, but they were not informed specifically about the hypotheses regarding gender until the debriefing. The procedures were approved by the review boards at both authors' institutions.

5.4 Results

5.4.1 Sample

In total, 582 participants began the online study; 391 completed the full survey and were included in the analysis. The most-frequently reported first languages were German (n=125), English (n=84), Croatian (n=52), and Dutch (n=49).[6] Some participants reported more than one first language, but none reported more than one of the three target languages as their first languages. If participants reported English and another language as their first languages, they were included in the L1 English group. The next most-frequent first language in the sample was French (n=29). Among other participants (n=52), twenty-five languages were represented, including other Slavic and Germanic languages,

[6] Participants reporting related varieties of the target languages (e.g. Serbo-Croatian, Swiss German) were classified with the target groups, because we did not expect significant differences among these varieties in regard to gender.

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:44 Page Number: 138

Table 5.1 *Mean (sd) English proficiency ratings by L1*

	Receptive	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Croatian	4.84 (0.37)	4.66 (0.48)	4.84 (0.37)	4.68 (0.47)
Dutch	4.79 (0.42)	4.64 (0.48)	4.80 (0.40)	4.68 (0.52)
German	4.71 (0.53)	4.49 (0.71)	4.82 (0.41)	4.54 (0.59)
Other	4.66 (0.61)	4.43 (0.66)	4.70 (0.51)	4.47 (0.67)

as well as other Indo-European and non–Indo-European languages; there were no more than six participants reporting any one language.

Participants rated their proficiency in understanding, speaking/signing, reading, and writing in each of the languages they knew on a scale of 1 (not at all proficient) to 5 (fluent). Self-ratings for English are summarized in Table 5.1. L2 participants were highly proficient overall, with averages in the highly proficient range, and the L1 groups did not differ from one another.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 76, with an average age of 29.6 (sd=11.7). Participants described themselves using a multiple-select and free-response gender item, and in addition chose which of three analysis groups (women, non-binary, and men) they preferred to be included in.

Participants included 267 women, 99 men, and 22 non-binary individuals (three participants declined to answer); among these, twelve described themselves as transgender, including participants from each gender group. Participants self-identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community; 37% indicated they consider themselves LGBTQ+, while 45% do not (the remainder declined to answer). This proportion was largely consistent across language groups (LGBTQ+ participants were represented within each group).

Given the modest sample size, it was not feasible to conduct a full regression analysis or examine the interaction between multiple participant variables. Nevertheless, we present a descriptive analysis of the hypotheses, which, interpreted in the context of extant literature on trends among L1 English speakers, provides some insight on the similarities and differences for L2 participants.

5.4.2 L2 Status

L2 participants rated both typical and ungrammatical control sentences similarly to L1 participants (Table 5.2). The three primary groups of interest also did not differ in their overall ratings of control sentences (Table 5.3).

5.4.3 Animacy

In order to examine whether the grammatical gender categories of participants' L1 were affecting their use of pronouns in English independently of their

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:44 Page Number: 139

Table 5.2 *Mean (sd) ratings of control sentences (1 = least grammatical, 5 = most grammatical)*

	L1	L2
Grammatical Controls	4.63 (0.52)	4.77 (0.44)
Ungrammatical Controls	1.69 (0.92)	1.55 (0.82)

Table 5.3 *Mean (sd) ratings of control sentences by language group (1 = least grammatical, 5 = most grammatical)*

	Croatian	Dutch	German
Grammatical Controls	4.71 (0.41)	4.84 (0.46)	4.81 (0.41)
Ungrammatical Controls	1.48 (0.75)	1.64 (0.85)	1.60 (0.86)

perspectives on gender-fair language [redacted] examined pronoun choices for sentences containing non-human antecedents compared to L1 English participants. L2 participants primarily used *it* for abstract, inanimate, plant, and animal referents, as did L1 participants. However, the degree to which participants used animate pronouns (*he*, *she*, *they*, *xe*, *he/she*) varied between referent types, and was higher for all types among L1 English participants (Figure 5.1).

One contributing factor to this trend could be that many of the stimuli sentences including inanimate referents encourage the anthropomorphization of the subject (e.g. 'The apartment spoke to me; _ said, "Navy Blue walls are a modern invention, I'm too old for modern, paint me pink."'); it could be that L2 participants are less sensitive to these nuances, or prefer to adhere to standard rather than poetic usage.

The pronoun selections for some non-human referents are suggestive of an influence of the gender of the target word in the participant's L1. Here, we present data for the targeted and most numerous participant groups (Croatian n=52, Dutch n=49, and German n=125; L1 English n=84). For example, Croatian participants who chose an animate pronoun for the referent *winter* tended to select *she*, while German participants who chose an animate pronoun tended to choose *he* (Table 5.4); the corresponding noun in Croatian (*zima*) is feminine, while in German (*Winter*) it is masculine. Likewise in the reverse case: the Croatian equivalent of *flower* (*cvijet*) is masculine, while the German (*Blume*) is feminine (Table 5.5).

The small number of relevant trials and the existence of several counter-examples make it difficult to establish a clear trend of L1 influence. For example, the Croatian equivalent of *apartment* (*stan*) is masculine, while the German (*Wohnung*) is feminine, but participants in both of these groups chose

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:44 Page Number: 140

Table 5.4 *Animate pronoun frequencies for the sentence 'The maple had already lost most of its leaves. It was only October, but winter seemed to be planning _ early entrance.' Shaded boxes indicate corresponding gender of the underlined NP in the L1 of the participant group.*

	Croatian (52)	Dutch (49)	German (125)	English (84)
he	1	1	5	1
she	4	-	-	2
slash	-	-	-	1
they	-	-	1	4

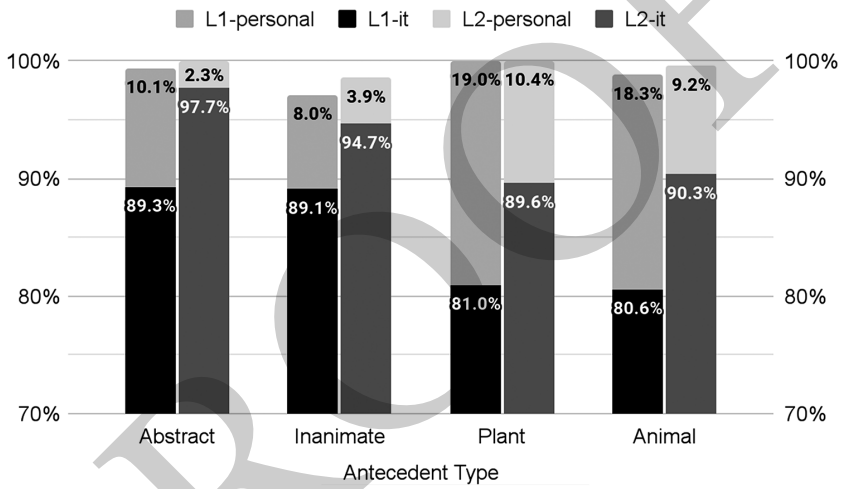


Figure 5.1 Frequency of pronoun selection for non-human antecedents by L2 status. Columns represent either L1 or L2 participants with the percentage selecting *it* for non-human antecedents, with the percentage of those selecting other pronouns (*she/her, he/him, they/them*) on top.

they more frequently than other animate pronouns (Table 5.6). Some sentences also contained competing antecedents that could have affected the selection of pronouns. For example, in the sentence 'Cara sidestepped, away from the snail's head, toward the grass covered spiral at the side of [redacted]hell', both Croatian and German participants selected *her* more often than other animate pronouns. *Snail* is feminine in German (*Schnecke*) and masculine in Croatian (*puž*), but all participants could have been influenced by the more feminine name *Cara* appearing in the sentence.

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:44 Page Number: 141

Table 5.5 *Animate pronoun frequencies for the sentence 'When the flower is yet to sprout Small insects bullied _. The flower said: That's okay. One day I will grow big.' Shaded boxes indicate corresponding gender of the underlined NP in the L1 of the participant group.*

	Croatian (52)	Dutch (49)	German (125)	English (84)
he	3	1	1	-
she	-	4	7	3
slash	1	2	1	4
they	-	-	2	9

Table 5.6 *Animate pronoun frequencies for the sentence 'The apartment spoke to me; [redacted] said, 'Navy Blue walls are a modern invention, I'm too old for modern paint me pink.' Shaded boxes indicate the corresponding gender of the underlined NP in the L1 of the participant group.*

	Croatian (52)	Dutch (49)	German (125)	English (84)
he	-	-	-	-
she	1	1	-	-
slash	3	2	1	5
they	4	-	12	5

5.4.4 Generic Antecedents

L1 and L2 participants rated variants of pronouns for generic references similarly. Singular *they* was the most preferred pronoun for generic referents (e.g. 'When an athlete gets injured, they should go to the trainer.') and was rated similarly to controls (Figure 5.2). This was reflected in the production data (Table 5.7) as well, where *they* was the preferred pronoun selected for generic human referents[7] (e.g. 'Someone must feed the cat, even if _ might not like the cat, because the cat will die if no one feeds it.'), with similar rankings of alternatives between L1 groups; a notable departure from these trends includes a high proportion of generic *it* among German participants.

[7] One production item contained the referent *baby* ('A baby can learn a lot, even if _ may not have the highest IQ, because the ability to learn is useless.'). A significant portion (25 per cent) of L1 participants and a majority (52 per cent) of L2 participants chose *it* for this item, in contrast to the pattern of responses for other generic human referents. This item was therefore excluded from additional analyses of human referents.

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:44 Page Number: 142

Table 5.7 *Pronoun selection for generic human antecedents by participant L1*

	English	Croatian	Dutch	German	Other
they	76.4%	72.9%	76.3%	86.7%	77.4%
he/she	18.5%	22.4%	17.8%	6.3%	17.1%
it	1.8%	1.7%	2.4%	3.8%	2.3%
he	1.3%	0.9%	2.4%	2.8%	1.9%
she	1.3%	2.1%	0.7%	0.4%	1.0%
xe	0.2%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%

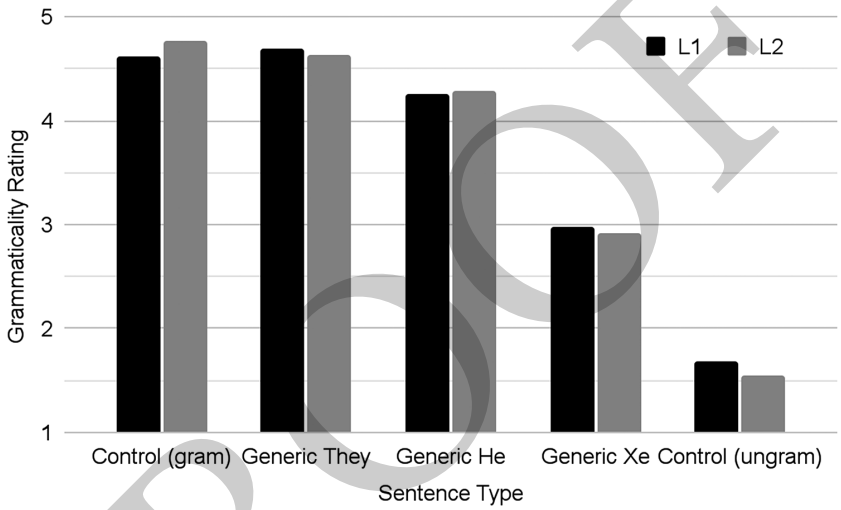


Figure 5.2 Ratings of pronouns with generic human antecedents (1 = least grammatical, 5 = most grammatical)

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5.4.5 Specific Antecedents

Ratings for sentences with definite antecedents were rated similarly by L1 and L2 participants (Figure 5.3). Sentences in which definite antecedents, whether names or definite NPs (e.g. 'the student'), occurred with singular *they* were rated more highly than those with the neopronoun *xe* (although neopronoun sentences were around the midpoint of the scale). Among L2 participants, Croatian participants consistently rated such sentences the lowest, while German participants rated them highest (Figure 5.4).

Production results were similar for L1 and L2 participants. Singular *they* was the preferred pronoun for unknown people (e.g. *someone*), with slash

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:45 Page Number: 143

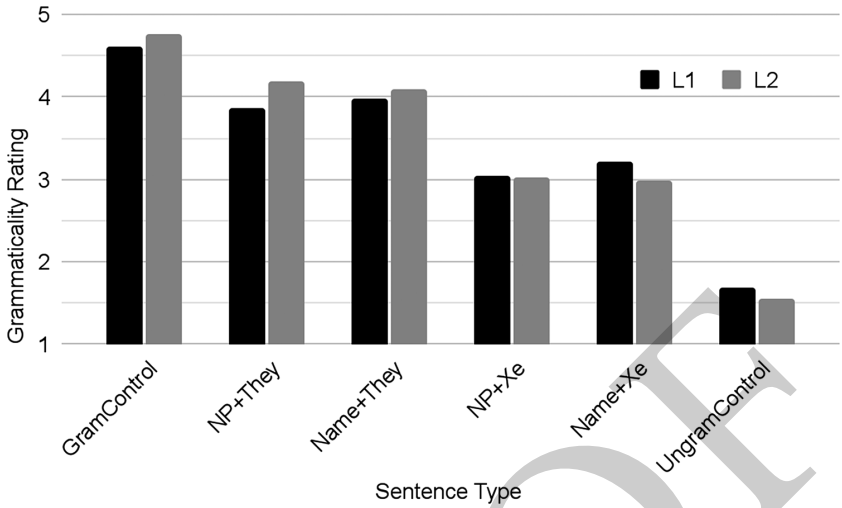


Figure 5.3 Ratings of pronouns with specific human antecedents (1 = least grammatical, 5 = most grammatical)

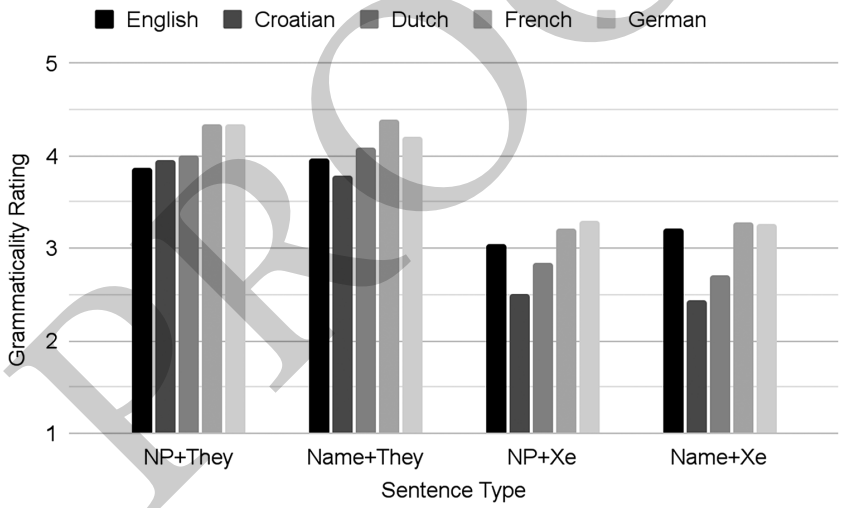


Figure 5.4 Ratings of pronouns with definite human antecedents by L1 (1 = least grammatical, 5 = most grammatical)

forms used by a small but noticeable minority (Figure 5.5); single gendered pronouns and neopronouns were virtually unused in this case, but were used frequently when the antecedent was a named person, according to the gender stereotypically associated with the name (Table 5.8).

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:45 Page Number: 144

Table 5.8 *Pronoun selection for named individuals among L2 participants*

	they	she	he	slash	xe
Feminine name (Maria)	3.9%	92.9%	0.3%	2.6%	0.3%
Masculine name (Derek)	1.0%	0.3%	93.8%	2.3%	1.0%
Ambiguous name (Robin)	26.6%	11.7%	28.2%	31.8%	0.3%

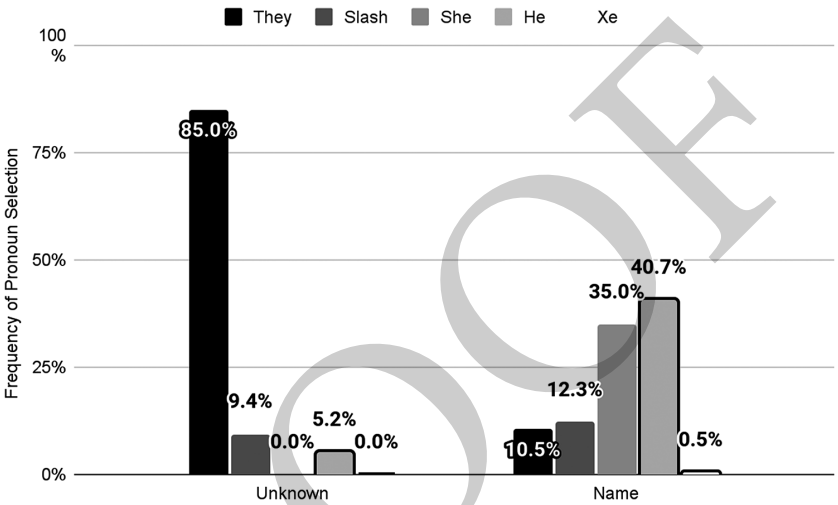


Figure 5.5 Pronoun selection for definite human antecedents among L2 participants

5.4.6 *Reflexive* They

Conrod and colleagues (2022) observed variation in whether the *-self* or *-selves* variant of the reflexive form of singular *they* is preferred, finding that *themselves* was rated higher when occurring with the antecedent *someone*, and by more linguistically conservative participants generally, while *themself* was rated higher for more specific antecedents, such as proper names. We examined how L2 English speakers distributed their responses in production using the sentence 'There's a lot of ego and erroneous information made in the above article from someone who obviously considers _ to be an expert.' L1 English participants selected *themself* more frequently than *themselves* by a narrow margin (Figure 5.6). All L2 groups selected *themselves* more often, apart, unexpectedly, from German participants. (Why this may be the case requires further exploration and a more controlled sample.) If, as suggested by

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Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:45 Page Number: 145

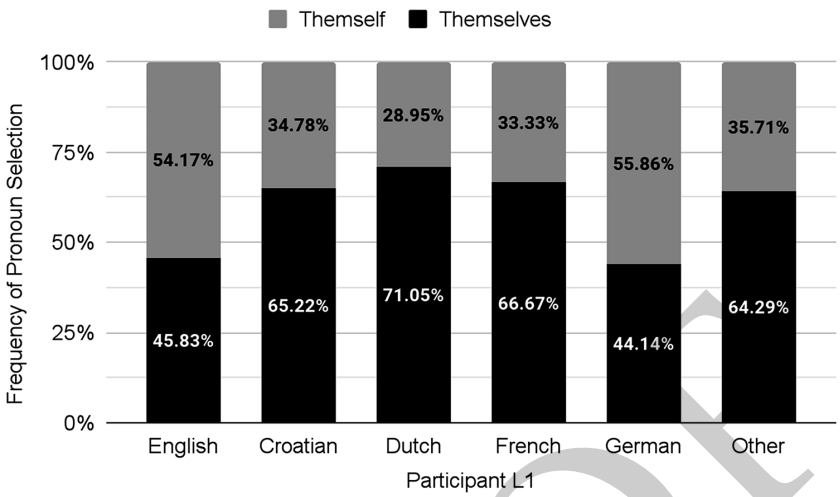


Figure 5.6 Proportion of *themself* vs. *themselves* production (among all singular *they* responses) by L1

Conrod and colleagues, these variants are in flux, with the *-self* form on the rise and preferred by younger and non-binary English speakers, then we might expect L2 usage to lag slightly behind, since L1 usage is conventionally considered to be norm-setting.

5.4.7 Individual Differences

5.4.7.1 Gender Concepts Attitudes about gender measured by the Transgender Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (TABS) include three subscales: Sex and Gender Beliefs (SGB), which describes whether individuals' concepts of gender are more binary, fixed, and essentialist (e.g. 'A person who is not sure about being male or female is mentally ill.'), vs. a fluid spectrum (e.g. 'A person does not have to be clearly male or female to be normal and healthy.'); Interpersonal Comfort (IC), which describes personal feelings about transgender people (e.g. 'I would feel uncomfortable finding out that I was alone with a transgender person.'); and Human Value, which describes views on the human rights of gender-diverse people (e.g. 'Transgender individuals should be treated with the same respect and dignity as any other person.').

Overall TABS scores were towards the spectrum/high comfort/value end of the scale for all subscores. SGB showed the greatest variance within and between language groups (Table 5.9). There was a small correlation between SGB and grammaticality ratings for generic singular *they* (r=0.17), and larger

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:45 Page Number: 146

Table 5.9 *TABS subscale means (sd) (1 = more binary gender beliefs/less comfort with transgender individuals, 7 = more flexible gender beliefs/more accepting of transgender individuals)*

	Sex & Gender Beliefs	Interpersonal Comfort	Human Value
English	4.96 (1.87)	5.91 (1.28)	6.37 (1.31)
Croatian	5.09 (1.72)	6.19 (0.94)	6.68 (0.50)
Dutch	6.07 (1.14)	6.45 (0.90)	6.87 (0.27)
German	6.31 (1.06)	6.62 (0.56)	6.86 (0.40)
Other	5.54 (1.42)	6.10 (1.10)	6.66 (0.67)
Average	**5.74 (1.52)**	**6.33 (0.96)**	**6.71 (0.75)**

correlations between SGB and definite singular *they* (r=0.53) and neopronouns (r=0.51). Participants with higher SGB scores used *they* for generic antecedents somewhat more often (r=0.32), while frequency of the use of *they* for definite unknown referents (r=0.13) and named individuals (r=0.20) was only weakly correlated with SGB.

5.4.7.2 Experience with Gender Diversity To quantify degree of experience with gender diversity, individual experience scores were created from the following questions:

1. I know/have met someone who is transgender.
2. I know/have met someone whose gender is non-binary.
3. I know/have met someone whose pronouns are 'they/them' (in English).
4. I know/have met someone whose pronouns are neopronouns (like 'xe' or 'ey') (in English).
5. I know someone who uses non-binary (not masculine, not feminine) terms for themself in my first language (if it isn't English).

Respondents received three points if the item applied to them; two points if they knew multiple people who fit that criterion, and one point if they knew only one person. Two separate scores were generated for each participant: one for gender (items 1–2, ranging from 0–6) and one for pronouns (items 3–4 for all participants, ranging from 0–6; item 5 was considered only for L2 participants). These scores were also combined into a total experience score, ranging from 0–12; the median score for all participants was 5. Of note is that German participants had about as much experience with *they/them* pronouns and neopronouns as did L1 English participants (Table 5.10). German participants also reported the most experience with diverse genders. Familiarity with non-binary language in participants' L1 varied greatly. Most Croatian participants and a plurality of Dutch participants had never encountered someone

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:45 Page Number: 147

Table 5.10 *Mean (sd) experience scores for gender diversity and English pronouns by L1*

	Gender experience	English pronoun experience
English	3.1 (1.7)	2.0 (1.4)
Croatian	2.5 (1.9)	1.4 (1.6)
Dutch	2.8 (1.7)	1.3 (1.2)
German	3.3 (1.8)	2.0 (1.5)
Other	2.9 (2.0)	1.7 (1.5)

Table 5.11 *Experience with pronoun diversity in participants' L1: 'I know someone who uses non-binary language (neither masculine nor feminine) for themself in my first language.'*

	None	One	Many	Self
Croatian	77%	2%	4%	6%
Dutch	43%	14%	16%	6%
German	34%	20%	18%	8%
Other	58%	12%	13%	6%

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who used non-binary linguistic markers in their respective languages, while a majority of German participants knew at least one person who did (Table 5.11). The proportion of participants who used such identifiers themselves was consistent across groups.

There was a tendency for L2 participants with more diverse gender and pronoun experiences to rate all gender-neutral and non-binary uses of *they* and *xe* more highly (Figure 5.7). This was also reflected in a slight increase in the use of *they* in relevant contexts by L2 participants with greater experience with gender and pronoun diversity (Figure 5.8).

5.4.7.3 Political Beliefs The political affiliation was assessed through a five-point scale (Very conservative/right-wing, Somewhat conservative/right-wing, Moderate/centrist, Somewhat liberal/left-wing, Very liberal/left-wing, Something else). All language groups skewed towards the liberal end of the political spectrum, but the degree of this imbalance varied (Table 5.12). English and Croatian participants were the most conservative, while German were the most liberal. L1 English participants had the greatest variation in political orientation. Political orientation showed correlation with SGB scores (r=0.66; conservatives reported more binary gender concepts, liberals more

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:45 Page Number: 148

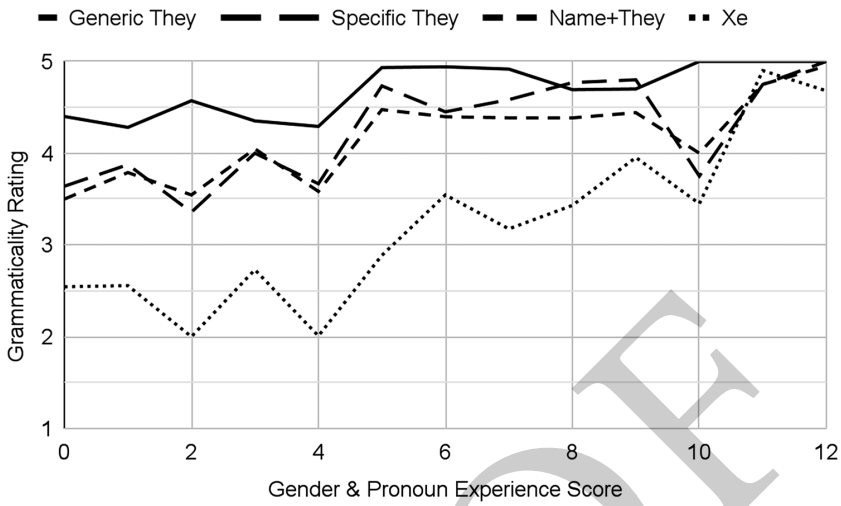


Figure 5.7 Ratings of singular *they* and *xe* by gender and pronoun experience

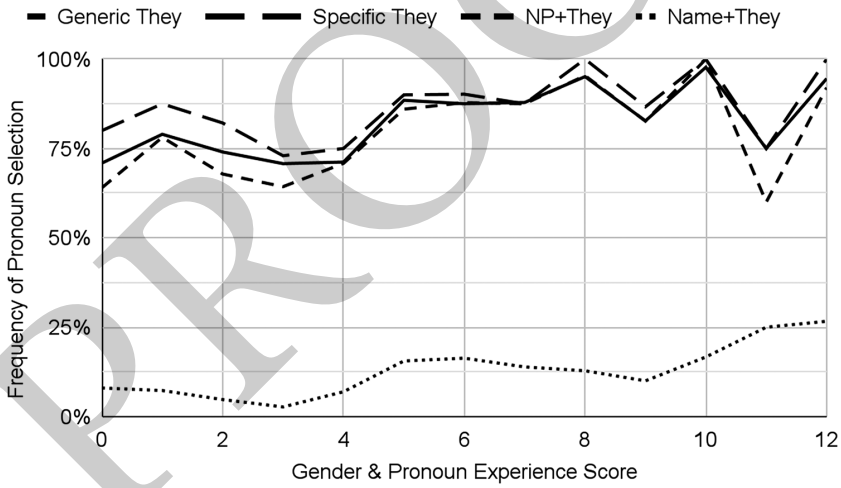


Figure 5.8 Use of singular *they* for different antecedent types by gender and pronoun experience

spectrum concepts), and moderate correlations with IC (r=0.54; conservatives less comfort, liberals more comfort) and HV (r=0.40; conservatives less value, liberals more value) scores, although all such correlations should be interpreted with caution due to the small number of conservative respondents.

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:46 Page Number: 149

Table 5.12 *Political orientation by L1; 1 = most conservative/right, 5 = most liberal/left, 3 = moderate/centrist (participants choosing 'other' were excluded from score averages)*

	Mean (sd) score	Con (1–2)	Mod (3)	Lib (4–5)	Other
English	3.5 (1.4)	18%	23%	51%	8%
Croatian	3.9 (0.9)	4%	23%	56%	17%
Dutch	4.3 (0.9)	2%	14%	82%	2%
German	4.5 (0.7)	2%	5%	84%	10%
Other	4.2 (0.8)	2%	15%	65%	17%

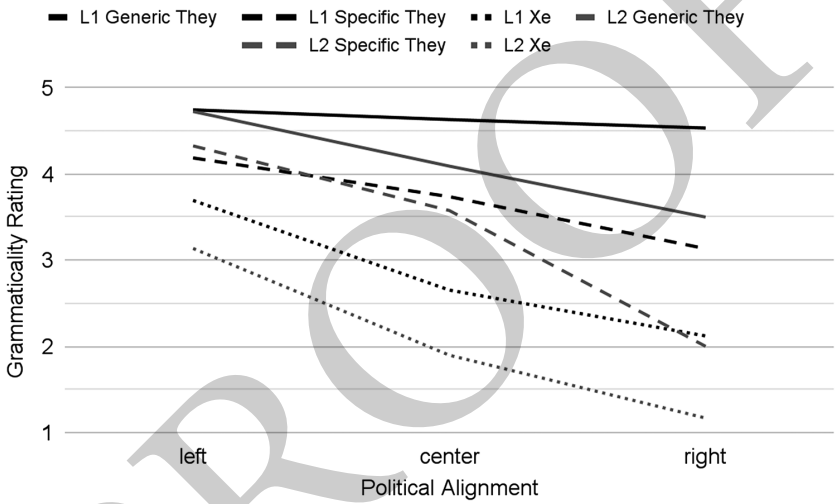


Figure 5.9 Ratings of singular *they* and neopronouns by L1 status and political orientation

More liberal participants (both L1 and L2) rated all gender-neutral/non-binary sentences higher than others, which was most pronounced for specific singular *they* and neopronouns (Figure 5.9). The most conservative participants (both L1 and L2) used *they* dramatically less often than others (Figure 5.10). This appears to be partially due to a greater use of slash forms (*he/she*) by both L1 and L2 participants, and generic *he* by L2 participants (Figure 5.11). This use of the generic *he* may represent a holdover of English pedagogy (at least among conservative L2 speakers) which is no longer in common usage among L1 English speakers.

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:46 Page Number: 150

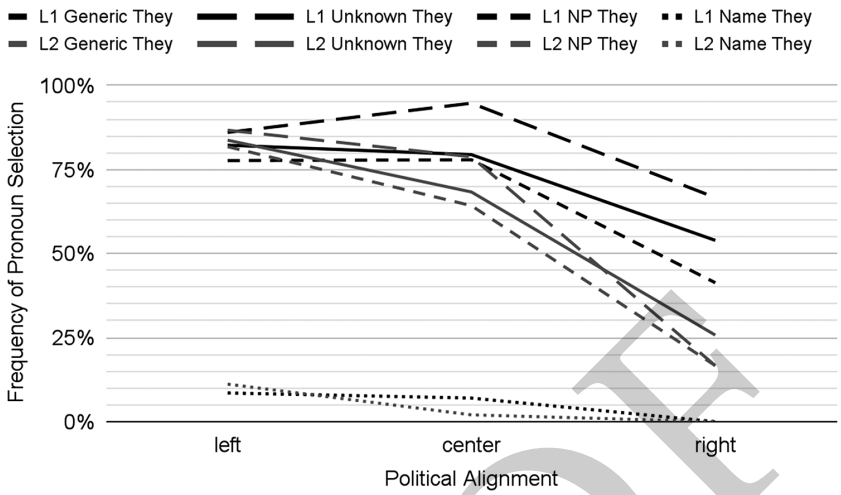


Figure 5.10 Use of singular *they* for different antecedent types by political orientation

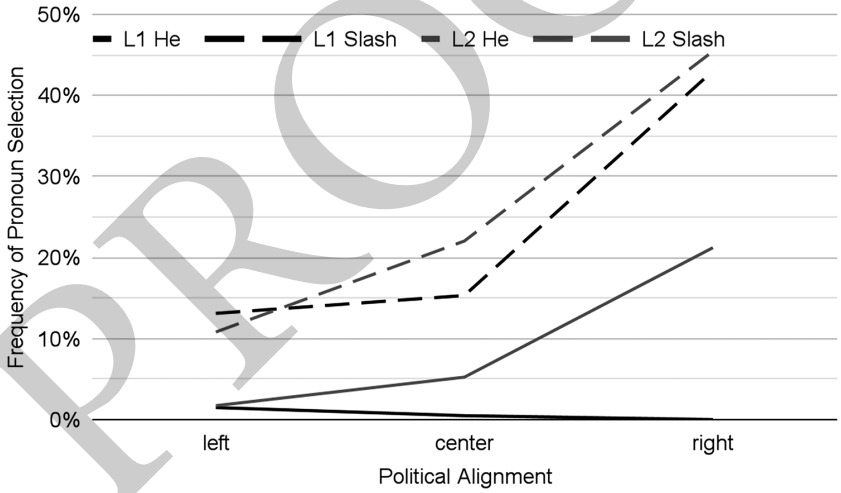


Figure 5.11 Use of *he* and *he/she* in generic contexts by political orientation

5.4.7.4 Personal Identity There was a slight decrease in ratings for and use of singular *they* and neopronouns with increasing participant age among L2 participants (Figures 5.12 and 5.13), although this must be interpreted with caution given the overall youth of the sample. L1 English non-binary

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:46 Page Number: 151

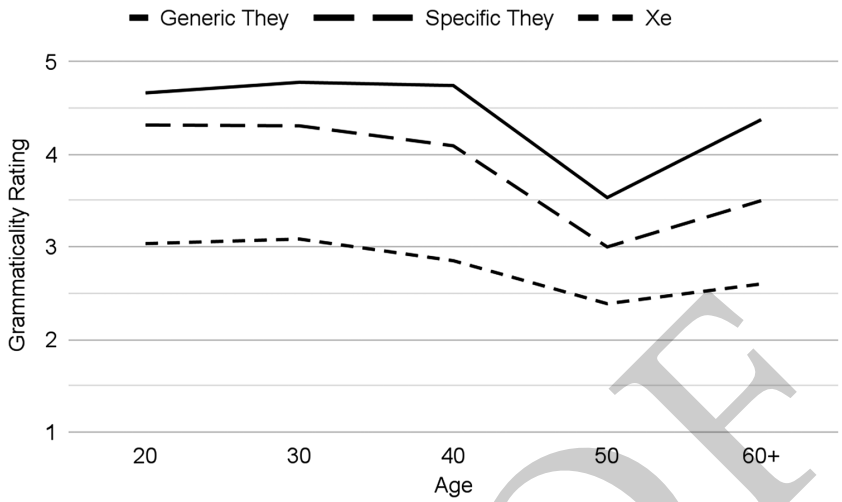


Figure 5.12 Ratings of singular *they* and neopronouns by L2 participants over participant age, binned by decade

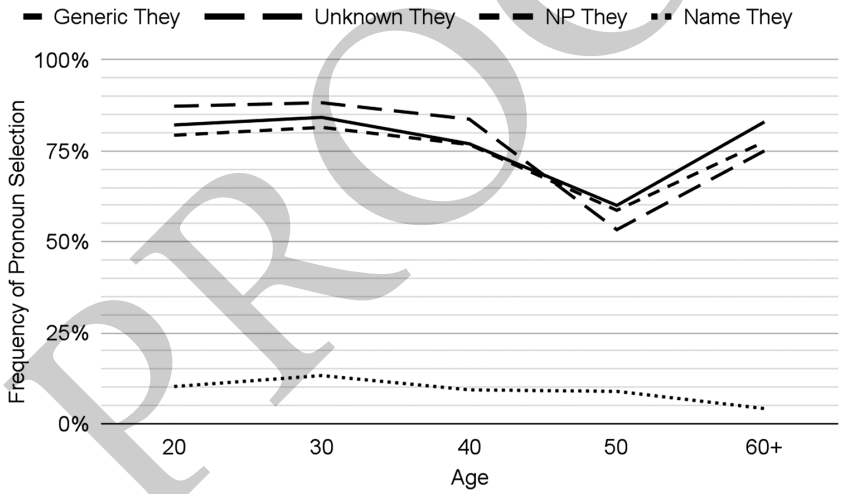


Figure 5.13: Use of singular *they* by L2 participants over participant age, binned by decade

participants both rate singular *they* higher and use it more frequently than men and women.

Non-LGBTQ+ participants rated all variants lower than LGBTQ+ participants, except for L1 English participants, who rated generic

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:46 Page Number: 152

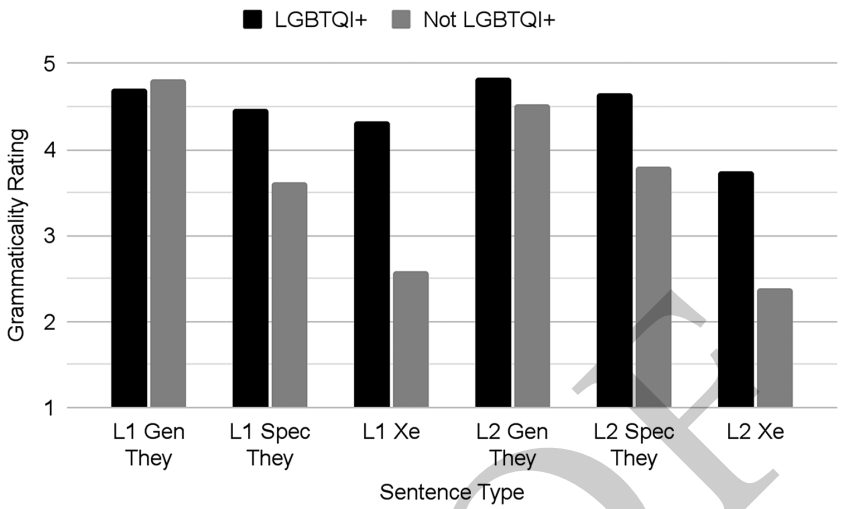


Figure 5.14 Ratings of singular *they* and neopronouns by LGBTQ+ status

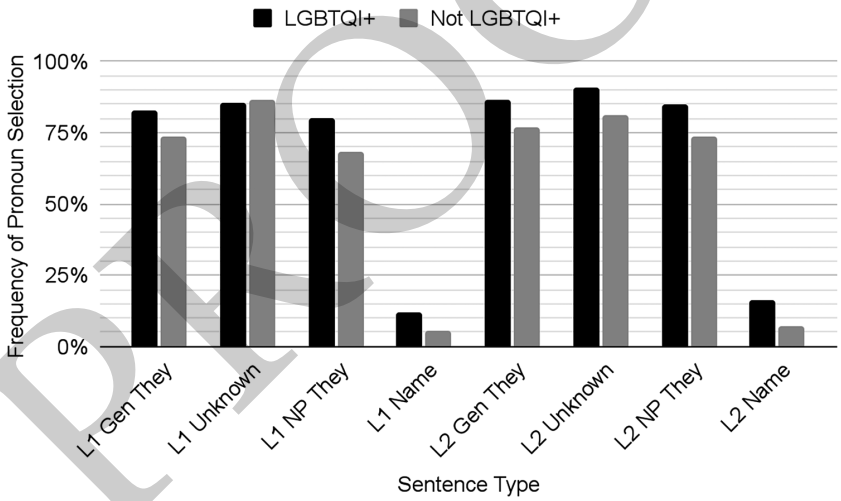


Figure 5.15 Use of singular *they* by LGBTQ+ status

singular *they* as equally acceptable as did LGBTQ+ participants (Figure 5.14). LGBTQ+ participants also used *they* more frequently in most contexts, except for L1 participants referring to an unknown person (Figure 5.15).

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:47 Page Number: 153

5.5 Discussion

The present study extended the scarce literature on gender-fair language outside the US and L1 contexts by considering L2 speakers of English and individual differences in terms of age, LGBTQ+ identification, gender, political views, and beliefs about and experience with trans and non-binary people. We did not find clear evidence for cross-linguistic transfer when presenting our participants with sentences in which abstract, inanimate, and non-human nouns were nthropomorphized. In spite of some data that supported Hypothesis 1, the influence of L1 grammatical gender was modest at best, as L2 participants opted out of resorting to poetic, animate (and gendered) pronoun usage more than L1 participants did, perhaps because they preferred the 'safe', standard usage by choosing the inanimate *it* pronoun in a survey situation, which may to L2 participants feel like an exam. Unsurprisingly, animal and plant referents were gendered more often than inanimate and abstract ones.

In line with Hypothesis 2, *they* for generic referents was accepted by all groups most, followed by specific referents, and neopronouns were rated lowest. Unexpectedly, however, there did not appear to be major differences between L1 and L2 participants. This we find to be a particularly meaningful finding, which somewhat contradicts earlier literature. We recognize however that our sample is made up of highly proficient speakers whose usage does not seem to considerably differ from the L1 controls in our sample. To further untangle the relationship between proficiency and gender-fair usage, future research could focus on samples comprising L2 speakers of different proficiency levels.

Despite inter-group similarities, we observed some variation within the L2 group, with German L1 participants rating more highly specific *they* usage than Croatian participants did, confirming Hypothesis 4. We posit possible cross-linguistic and cross-cultural transference, which may have influenced the ratings of L1 speakers of Croatian, the most morphologically gendered language with the least-developed guidelines on gender-fair language. In line with Hypothesis 5, we find German participants to be most accepting of gender-fair language, despite Dutch being least morphologically marked. This we tentatively argue may signal socio-cultural context (Hypothesis 5) to be more important than characteristics of a specific L1 (Hypothesis 4) when it comes to transference. The debates about gender-fair language are arguably most prominent in German when compared to the other languages in our sample. Thus, awareness of gender fairness may be higher among these participants, and these beliefs may then 'spill over' and become visible in all language use of these multilingual participants. This is reflected in the attitude (TABS) and experience levels of the participants, and mirrors trajectories observed in other languages, such as Swedish (Renström et al., 2022).

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:47 Page Number: 154

Although we expected to see a correlation between age and the ratings of specific usages of singular *they* and neopronouns (Hypothesis 6), we found some indication of it for all usages of singular *they* and for neopronouns only among L2 participants. Since extant literature has found more robust evidence of age grading, our findings arguably mirror the fact that our sample skewed young. In line with Hypothesis 7, LGBTQ+ identity proved to be a 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.

Although we anticipated to see higher acceptance of gender-fair pronouns among non-binary respondents than among men and women (Hypothesis 8), unexpectedly, we found this to hold only for the L1 group. Whereas Conrod (2019) found gender-fair pronouns to be part of the linguistic norms within the trans and non-binary community in the US context, they do not seem to have the same status among non-binary L2 speakers of English, who may not linguistically socialize in English to such an extent. This finding calls for further research into the linguistic norms among trans and non-binary L2 speakers.

As expected, overall more positive attitudes and beliefs about trans and non-binary people generally resulted in greater acceptance and more frequent usage of gender-fair pronouns (Hypothesis 9). The correlation was strongest for the grammaticality ratings for singular *they* and neopronouns. The correlations were weaker for production, and were pronounced only for *they* with generic antecedents, suggesting that passive acceptance of new forms precedes adoption in individual usage. We observed variation in both attitudes and experience levels, with German respondents reporting more positive attitudes towards and greater experience with trans and non-binary people, followed by Dutch, English, and Croatian respondents, which mirrors our initial expectations about the socio-cultural differences.

Regarding political beliefs, in line with Hypothesis 10, more liberal participants across groups rated all gender-fair options higher and this was most pronounced for specific singular *they* and neopronouns. Additionally, generic *he* and binary options *he/she* were much more commonly used in generic contexts among politically more conservative respondents with inter-group differences. Whereas conservative L1 and L2 participants both resort to *he/she*, only L2 participants still opt for generic *he,* which seems to be completely falling out of L1 usage. Thus, instead of finding the differences between L1 and L2 groups for *he/she* as predicted (Hypothesis 3), we found this difference between conservative and liberal respondents. Rather than linguistic habits from L1 influencing the respondents' choice of the *he/she* alternatives, their political beliefs are seemingly relevant, and these strongly correlate with binary notions about gender.

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:47 Page Number: 155

One additional insight this survey has produced is the rising popularity of the reflexive singular pronoun *themself*. The majority of L1 participants and L2 German participants prefer it, and on average a third of other L2 groups opted for it instead of *themselves* in singular contexts. This supports earlier findings showing the uptake of *themself* to be a change in progress, which now seems to be catching on in L2 contexts.

5.6 Conclusion

In spite of burgeoning critical discussions surrounding the term 'native speaker' (Cheng et al., 2021), much empirical research in linguistics continues to focus on those who are 'born into' a language, 'inherit' it, and most commonly live in a country where that language has the official status (Dewaele et al., 2021). Not only is this type of conceptualization problematical and harmful to speakers, it also is inconsistent, and it hinders theory, research design, and analysis. We argue that sociolinguists need to pay closer attention to those language speakers who comprise much of the global English language community (and yet cannot be placed within the enumerated categories) to account for the variation that we see in language use.

Although change motivated by language fairness within the English pronominal system has been the subject of much recent research, L2 speakers have largely been excluded from these discussions, save a few studies conducted in applied linguistics. We set out to find whether L1 and individual factors (age, gender, LGBTQ+ status, political affiliation, and beliefs and attitudes towards trans and non-binary individuals) were relevant to the attitudes towards and the production of gender-fair pronouns. Our findings reveal that disparate groups of people behave linguistically more similarly than initially expected. Overall, the trend towards acceptance of gender-fair language (neopronouns < specific *they* < generic *they*) is similar in degree among both L1 and L2 speakers of English. The data also tell a story of the rising success of gender-fair linguistic activism; generic singular *they* has become unmarked for L1 speakers. Remnants of generic masculine usage in English are only visible among the small group of the most conservative L2 speakers, with their L1 counterparts opting for the binary *he/she* alternative. The reflexive singular pronoun *themself* is gaining ground over *themselves* in equal measure among L1 and German L2 participants. The role of language teachers as agents of language change, especially socially-motivated change, is an important area for research into how such teachers balance the transmission of linguistic standards with practical training on navigating social issues in L2 (Pauwels & Winter, 2006).

Intra-group variation among L2 participants reveals important differences; speakers of German are the most accepting of gender-fair language, followed

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:47 Page Number: 156

by Dutch, and finally Croatian respondents. This suggests that rather than the structural properties of L1 and the morphological complexity of their gender marking, socio-cultural factors may be key in production and attitudes towards gender-fair language in English. Although Dutch is morphologically the least marked for gender among the three languages, the debates about and the attempts to implement gender-fair language have been the most prolific in German. Unsurprisingly, German respondents also score highest in their gender beliefs and attitudes and experience with gender diversity; Croatian respondents score lowest among L2 participants and are also the most conservative. The connections we draw here are tentative and the relationship between socio-cultural factors and attitudes and beliefs on the one hand and gender-fair language use on the other are a fruitful area for future research.

Whereas our respondents behaved in the way we expected them to across demographic groups, we did not find strong effects for age, and gender was only a relevant factor among L1 participants, among whom the non-binary respondents were more accepting of specific *they* and neopronouns. Although perhaps obvious, we would still like to note the importance of including in surveys gender categories beyond the binary, which reveal variation that would otherwise remain hidden. Finally, less essentialist gender beliefs, greater experience with gender diversity, and more liberal views are all related to the acceptance of gender-fair language.

The findings from this study provide a valuable foundation on which future research can draw from to understand which groups of people are more likely to adopt gender-fair language and why.

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Appendix to Chapter 5

Sentences for Acceptability Judgment

1. When an athlete gets injured, they should go to the trainer.
2. Whenever my best friend comes over, I make sure to serve snacks for them.
3. Mario called to cancel the meeting they had scheduled with you.
4. Maria couldn't pay the tuition, so the professor told them to double check with the bursar.
5. After Kit finished the paper, they made sure to proofread it before turning it in.
6. If a musician is confused, she should talk to the conductor.
7. After the typist finished the document, she began a new one.
8. Michael went to the dentist because her tooth was hurting all day.
9. Your parents asked Sharon if she failed the exam.

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:47 Page Number: 157

10. Rory told all her friends that vanilla is the best kind of ice cream.
11. If you see that a player is open, throw the basketball to him.
12. The surfer didn't want us to forget him when we ordered lunch.
13. Kris sleeps in when he doesn't have class in the morning.
14. John likes football so much that he plays every Saturday.
15. Lucy was very tired, so I told him to take a nap.
16. After Linda went to school, her went to work.
17. David wondered what them were up to.
18. On he morning walk, Matthew saw a butterfly.
19. That artist told me that xe needs a ride because the bus is late.
20. Casey told me that xe listens to The Beatles every day.
21. When Anna packs lunch, xe always includes an apple.
22. Joseph doesn't like when we make too much noise around xem during class.
23. A well-prepared hiker always brings an umbrella with xem.
24. The actor who played Queen Victoria in the film was nominated for an award.
25. My mom liked the historical costumes worn by the actresses in the play.
26. The waiter said she would bring the bill, but then she disappeared into the kitchen.
27. Sam asked the waitress to serve another bowl of noodles.
28. The firefighter quickly put on her boots and jumped onto the ladder truck.
29. If you are the victim of a pickpocket, you should report it to the nearest policeman.

Sentences for Completion

1. When the flower is yet to sprout, small insects bullied _. The flower said: That's okay. One day I will grow big.
2. The mice were going to school, work, or just hanging out with their friends. All but one little mouse. This mouse was different than all of the other mice. _ was the smallest in height but had the biggest ears that any mouse ever had.
3. Cara sidestepped, away from the snail's head, toward the grass covered spiral at the side of _ shell.
4. The apartment spoke to me; _ said, 'Navy Blue walls are a modern invention, I'm too old for modern, paint me pink.'
5. I wake up one morning and lie for a long time next to Zo, watching the sun try to make _ way around the curtains.
6. Friendship is a living thing that lasts only as long as _ is nourished with kindness, empathy and understanding.

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:47 Page Number: 158

7. Alone, then, in the trailer, I supposed he was right: the house we thought we were building didn't exist. _ never would.
8. The book suddenly started to change _ color and became like a water manuscript in her hands.
9. Perceiving a load that might be more than _ could bear, the chair sighed, which, for a chair, entails a gentle slackening of wooden slats.
10. The fish is still, besides the opening and closing of _ mouth. Sad, froggy breaths.
11. Outside there was rain bordering on sleet. _ blurred the neon light of the reflecting beer signs.
12. The maple had already lost most of its leaves. It was only October, but winter seemed to be planning _ early entrance.
13. The church sends out an itemised statement early in January that lists all the donations and what they were for. If a person is audited, _ can supply that paperwork to validate the charitable contribution.
14. There's a lot of ego and erroneous information made in the above article from someone who obviously considers _ to be an expert. That's a shame. To say it's impossible for a wolf to run out from a wooded area and attack a human being is downright absurd. Of COURSE it's possible!
15. Derek was gone to New York; one other close friendship had lapsed when I'd left the public schools; and the Academy was a bleak place. So I clung to John because _ was all I had.
16. The bell rang. A flood of shoulders and sneakers swirled around Maria, and _ couldn't see much until the sea of strangers streamed back into classrooms.
17. As many times as Robin told this story over the years, _ would never quite be able to explain the logic of the next move.
18. A pre-school teacher has to remain calm at all times, even if _ may be stressed because stress affects children negatively.
19. A housekeeper has to clean the toilet, even if _ may find it disgusting, because that's the housekeeper's duty.
20. A hairdresser cannot just cut a customer's hair very short, even if _ may think that it would suit the customer, because it's the customer's decision.
21. A truck driver must take a break every 4 hours, even if _ may not be tired because driving for long periods of time without taking a break is dangerous.
22. A criminal must not be set free, even if _ may feel remorse about the crime, because criminals are a threat to the public.
23. A police officer has many responsibilities, even if _ may not be in a very high position, because being a police officer is the funniest job in the world.
24. A teenager can be very annoying, even if _ may not do it on purpose because the teenager's hormones can cause mood swings.

PROOF

Comp. by: R.Manikandan Stage: Proof Chapter No.: 5 Title Name: SmithandCollins
Date:2/3/26 Time:11:31:47 Page Number: 159

25. A kid can learn a lot, even if _ may not have the highest IQ, because the ability to learn is useless.
26. A child must follow teachers' instructions, even if _ may not want to, because parents don't like children.
27. Everyone should use resources responsibly, even if _ may not believe in human-caused global warming because our resources are finite.
28. Someone must feed the cat, even if _ might not like the cat, because the cat will die if no one feeds it.
29. Anyone can be successful, even if _ may not have the best education, because anything is possible if one works hard enough.

Note: sentences (2), (5) and (15) inadvertently included verb forms which are incompatible with *they/them* pronouns. However, we do not believe this was sufficient to affect the results significantly.

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