

GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN MODERN ENGLISH: A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS OF SHIFTING NORMS

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Abstract: This paper examines the growing use of gender-inclusive language in modern English, focusing on how social and cultural changes are reflected in evolving linguistic norms. Drawing on data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the NOW corpus, and institutional documents, the study investigates three key features of inclusive English: the singular they, gender-neutral occupational titles, and non-binary honorifics such as Mx.. The analysis reveals that these forms have gained considerable frequency and institutional recognition, particularly in academic, legal, and professional contexts. The singular they has become widely accepted as a personal pronoun for individuals who do not identify within the traditional gender binary. Gender-neutral job titles are now standard in many formal documents, while the use of Mx. is emerging in administrative systems, though it remains less common. These changes reflect broader societal shifts toward equality, visibility, and respect for gender diversity. While some resistance to inclusive forms persists, the data indicates that inclusive language is becoming mainstream. The study argues that gender-inclusive language is both a descriptive reflection of how English is used today and a prescriptive tool for promoting social justice through language.

Keywords: gender-inclusive language, singular they, non-binary pronouns, corpus linguistics, sociolinguistic change, Mx., gender-neutral terms, inclusive English

Language does not merely describe the world; it also shapes how individuals perceive and structure it. In recent years, discussions on gender equality and diversity have increasingly extended into the domain of language. The call for gender-inclusive language in English has gained momentum, challenging traditional male-default linguistic norms. The evolution of English towards greater inclusivity reflects the complex interplay between language ideology, identity politics, and societal change. This paper investigates the linguistic forms that embody these changes and explores how they are being integrated into everyday English usage. Particular focus is placed on the use of the singular they, gender-neutral job titles, and newer forms of address such as Mx., all of which are analyzed using a corpus-based approach.

The study of gender and language has long addressed how grammar and vocabulary reflect and reinforce gender hierarchies. Early feminist linguists argued that so-called “generic” masculine forms such as he, or gendered occupational nouns like chairman and fireman, serve to render women and non-binary individuals linguistically invisible (Bodine, 1975; Lakoff, 1975). These forms not only reflect a male-centered worldview but also restrict the representation of gender diversity in language. As a result, scholars and activists have advocated for gender-neutral alternatives as a means of promoting linguistic equity and social inclusivity. In contemporary discourse, inclusive language goes beyond simply avoiding sexism—it also aims to respect and represent people whose gender identity does not align with the traditional binary.

To investigate how such forms function in real-life usage, this study draws on data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the NOW (News on the Web) corpus, and selected institutional and academic documents. The COCA provides insights into changes in spoken, written, and academic English from 1990 onward, while the NOW corpus offers more recent data from online media sources globally. In addition, current versions of institutional guidelines, such as the APA Manual (7th edition), and policies from universities and governmental bodies are analyzed to identify prescriptive trends toward inclusive forms. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used, including frequency analysis, collocation patterns, and pragmatic contextualization.

One of the most notable developments in inclusive English is the rise of the singular they. Historically used to refer to an indefinite antecedent, they has now gained recognition as a personal pronoun for individuals who identify outside the male-female binary. While the use of singular they has been present in English for centuries, its recent institutional endorsement marks a turning point. For instance, the APA (2020) officially recommends singular they as a preferred pronoun when a person’s gender is unknown or non-binary. Analysis of COCA data shows that the use of they as a singular pronoun has significantly increased in academic writing, media articles, and even legal documents. In the NOW corpus, examples of singular they referring to specific individuals, such as celebrities or political figures who identify as non-binary, have become common since 2017. These developments suggest a growing societal acceptance of linguistic forms that align with evolving understandings of gender.

Another major area of change involves occupational titles. Traditionally gendered job terms like policeman, stewardess, and fireman have been widely replaced by neutral alternatives such as police officer, flight attendant, and firefighter. This shift is particularly noticeable in formal and institutional contexts. A review of job advertisements and government websites reveals that neutral terms are now the standard. The NOW corpus confirms this trend: by 2020, gender-neutral job titles vastly outnumbered their gendered counterparts in frequency. This transformation is less controversial than changes to pronouns, likely because it affects lexical items rather than grammatical systems. Nevertheless, it carries significant symbolic value by promoting gender inclusivity in professional identity and public discourse.

While singular they and neutral job titles have achieved relatively broad adoption, the use of new honorifics such as Mx. remains limited, though symbolically important. Mx. serves as a gender-neutral alternative to titles like Mr., Mrs., or Ms., and is used by individuals who do not wish to indicate gender. Though its frequency in both corpora is currently low, Mx. has been officially recognized in various institutions, particularly in the UK. Government agencies and universities increasingly include Mx. as an option on forms, and some style guides have begun to accept its use. While adoption in the United States is slower, its inclusion in administrative databases and customer service systems is growing. This development highlights how inclusive language can serve not only communicative functions but also as a marker of social identity and legal recognition.

The rise of gender-inclusive language is not without controversy. While progressive institutions and social movements promote inclusive forms, conservative voices often resist such changes, arguing that they are unnatural or ideologically motivated. This resistance reflects broader societal divisions over gender and identity politics. Nevertheless, the trend is clear: what was once seen as radical or marginal is increasingly normalized. The mainstreaming of singular they and the disappearance of many gender-specific job titles point to an irreversible shift in English usage, particularly in professional and institutional contexts.

These developments highlight a crucial function of language: its capacity to evolve in response to social and cultural needs. Gender-inclusive language functions both descriptively, by capturing how people currently speak and write, and prescriptively, by promoting values of respect, equality, and representation. It serves not only to avoid offense but to affirm the identities and experiences of



those historically excluded or misrepresented in language. As such, the push for inclusivity in English reflects a broader rethinking of how language can empower rather than marginalize.

Importantly, these changes in English have global implications. As a lingua franca, English is used in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. The promotion of inclusive forms thus raises questions for English language teaching (ELT), translation, and international communication. How do non-native speakers navigate these shifts? Should English curricula include training on inclusive language? These are vital questions for future research. While this paper focuses on usage patterns in native English contexts, the next step is to examine how inclusive norms are interpreted, adapted, or resisted in English as a second or foreign language environments.

In conclusion, gender-inclusive language is both a response to and an agent of social transformation. Through empirical analysis, this paper has demonstrated how inclusive forms like singular they, gender-neutral job titles, and non-binary honorifics are becoming embedded in modern English. These linguistic shifts reflect changing cultural values and growing recognition of gender diversity. As the English language continues to adapt, it provides a powerful lens through which to understand contemporary debates around identity, equality, and representation. The continued study of these forms is essential for understanding how language can both reflect and shape the societies in which it is spoken.

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