

NIKOLETT KISS

Debreceni Egyetem, Irodalom-, Kultúra- és Nyelvtudományok Doktori Iskola
nikolettkiss1998@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9997-1959>

Nikolett Kiss: An investigation into language development and pronoun distribution
in Hungarian university students' English writing
Alkalmazott Nyelvtudomány, XXVI. évfolyam, 2026/1. szám, 134–147.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.18460/ANY.2026.1.008>

An investigation into language development and pronoun distribution in Hungarian university students' English writing

Recent changes in academic third-person singular pronoun use in English have an inevitable influence on non-native speakers' pronoun choices. Studies on third-person singular pronoun usage by non-native speakers are scarce, with varied methodology, focusing on different non-native speakers; thus, the results are rather contradictory. The present study aims to investigate how Hungarian native speakers use third-person singular pronouns in their English written works in an academic context throughout their first academic semester as English majors. Results show that while in the first part of the semester singular *they* is preferred, as per the recommendations of stylistic guides, there is a significant shift in the second part of the semester where avoidance techniques and the indefinite pronoun *one* become more frequent. Pronoun choices seem to be connected to stylistic choices to some extent, but other variables may hold a much stronger influence. The study recommends that university educators educate students on the academic standards of third-person singular pronoun choices.

Keywords: third-person singular pronouns, academic writing, Hungarian non-native speakers of English

1. Introduction

The English third-person pronoun system has been rapidly changing in the last few decades, especially in the case of epicene pronouns. Academic language use has also been impacted as the prescribed epicene pronoun shifted from the andro-centric generic *he* to the combined pronouns *he/she*, and more recently to singular *they* (Lee, 2019; MLA Style Center, 2020). This shift has also become increasingly important for non-native speakers of English in academia, as they are expected to adhere to the rules of stylistic guides. However, these changes have yet to impact language education on the level of textbooks and grammar books (LaScotte, 2016; Zuber & Reed, 1993), which discrepancy may create confusion among learners.

The present study sets out to investigate how the distribution of third-person singular pronoun usage changes in written texts over time during the first semester spent at a university. The structure of the paper is the following: Section 2 provides a brief literature review of the available information on the use of third-person singular pronouns among both native and non-native speakers of English. This section also details influencing factors of pronoun usage. Section 3 describes the methodology used in the study, such as providing information on

the participants, the data collection methods, and the corpus, as well as the strategies used in the analysis. Section 4 describes the results of the study, first by comparing the pronoun distribution among the four texts, followed by a breakdown of each text based on stylistic choices, while Section 5 provides a discussion of the results and the implications of the results in a higher-education setting. Finally, Section 6 summarises the goals, findings, and future directions of the research.

2. Literature review

In recent decades, the use of third-person singular pronouns in English has been changing both in everyday and academic language use as well. From the 19th century, prescriptivist grammarians prescribed the use of generic *he* in unspecified contexts, claiming it to be gender neutral, based on the idea that singular *they* violates grammatical agreement (Baron, 1981; Bodine, 1975; Cruzan, 2003). Despite a few attempts to create a new, truly genderless pronoun (see Baron, 1981), only in the late 20th century has the practice started to be harshly criticised (Baron, 1981; Bodine, 1975; Martyna, 1980; Newman, 1992, 1998; Sklar, 1983).

Debates about androcentric language use (see Loureiro-Porto & Hiltunen, 2020) influenced language use away from the prescribed generic *he* towards the combined pronouns *he/she*, and then back to singular *they* (Paterson, 2020). The shift can already be seen in Meyers (1990), a study investigating epicene pronoun usage among English native speaker university students. The results of this study show that while 34% of the participants used generic *he*, almost the same number of participants, that is, 32%, used singular *they* in academic settings.

Recent studies show that singular *they* is now the most commonly used third-person singular epicene pronoun among English native speakers (Baranowski, 2002; Newman, 1992, 1998; Strathan, 2018), and it is also popular among some non-native English speakers (Ebrahimi & Hosseini, 2021; Kiss, 2023, 2025a, 2025b; Speyer & Schleef, 2019; Stojanovska–Ilievska, 2024; Stormbom, 2019, 2021). However, not all non-native speakers seem to use the pronoun (Abudaluh, 2012; LaScotte, 2021; Ma et al., 2022; Zhang & Yang, 2021). The reason for this is two-fold. First, language change influences not only native speakers' pronoun choices, as shown in Paterson (2020), but also those of non-natives, for example, English speakers of Swedish origins (Stormbom, 2019). This study shows that starting from the 1970s, when singular *they* was unused, a significant change occurred by the 2010s when 52% of epicene pronouns were in fact singular *they*. Second, formality may also influence pronoun choices, as Stormbom's (2019) findings are based on term papers and theses. Additionally, LaScotte (2016) shows that despite the fact that most participants used singular *they* as an epicene within formal contexts, the combined pronouns *he/she* were still found most appropriate at that time.

Major attitude changes towards the academic use of singular *they* began around 2015 when the pronoun first became the Word of the Year chosen by the American Dialect Society (Marquis, 2016). In 2019, Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) selected it as the Word of the Year again, which was followed by its inclusion in the 7th edition of the APA style guide (Lee, 2019). Soon, MLA would follow course (MLA Style Center, 2020), and others joined (Robertson & Thompson, 2024) with goals to make academic language more inclusive. Additionally, this language change is also fuelled by a bottom-up process, whereby singular *they* is widening its scope from a so-called *genuinely epicene* use where the antecedent is unknown to more *innovative* uses where the gender of the antecedent is either unknown or concealed on purpose, as well as to *specific* uses for non-binary people (Bjorkman, 2017). However, at present, not all academic style guides embrace the singular *they* completely.

Several linguistic and non-linguistic factors influence pronoun usage for both native and non-native speakers of English. Linguistically, the most important determining factor is the definiteness of the antecedent. That is, singular *they* typically appears with less definite antecedents such as indefinite pronouns or quantificational noun phrases, while more definite pronouns, such as definite or indefinite noun phrases, appear with gendered pronouns (Baranowski, 2002; Newman, 1992; Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 1997; Stormbom, 2021; Kiss, 2023, 2025b). The second most important determining linguistic factor of third-person singular pronouns is the gender of the antecedent. Gender bias not only influences pronoun choices and interpretation in the sense that masculine-biased antecedents attract the masculine pronoun *he*, while feminine-biased antecedents attract the feminine pronoun *she*, but also neutral and feminine-biased antecedents are more facilitated with singular *they* than masculine-biased antecedents (Kiss, 2023, 2025b; Noll et al., 2018; Stormbom, 2019). Non-linguistic factors also have a considerable influence over pronoun choices. Typically, people who are younger, more educated, or are in the education system are more likely to use singular *they*, along with those who do not hold sexist or prescriptivist beliefs (Bjorkman, 2017; Bradley, 2020; Meyers, 1990; Renström et al., 2022).

While non-native speakers of English are influenced by all the above-mentioned factors, there are unique influences in regard to language learning as well. The language proficiency level of non-native English speakers influences pronoun usage (Kiss, 2025a; Speyer & Schleef, 2019) as well as their mother tongue (Antón-Méndez, 2009). Whether students encounter genderless pronouns and in what capacity can also affect their choices. Textbooks and grammar books rarely mention *they* in its singular reference (LaScotte, 2016; Zuber & Reed, 1993), thus students are not likely to encounter it during their studies. Despite this, Hungarian students know about singular *they*, mostly from social media platforms such as TikTok (Kiss, 2025b), which, however, does not necessarily mean that students are confident with epicene pronouns, as doubts

about the grammaticality of the pronoun have been expressed before (Kiss, 2023, 2025b). This necessitates more research into patterns of usage to aid students in both everyday and academic language use.

Furthermore, today, few corpus studies of non-native speakers are available that investigate language in context (Kiss, 2025a; Stojanovska-Ilievska, 2024; Stormbom, 2019; Zhang & Yang, 2021). To understand how epicene pronouns are used in an academic educational context, this paper continues the analysis of Kiss (2025a) with the expansion of examining English texts produced throughout a full university semester by Hungarian university students.

Long-term investigations into pronoun usage are also rare, especially with the same participants. For example, Gustafsson Sendén and colleagues (2015) investigated the long-term usage of the Swedish epicene pronoun *hen*, but with different participants, while Miller and James (2009) repeated a previous study. Furthermore, Noll et al. (2018) completed two experiments within 15 years, in both cases with native speakers. Additionally, as previously discussed, corpus studies exist as well, both Paterson (2020) investigating the native corpus and Stormbom (2019) non-native corpus; however, these studies do not investigate the same participants. The present study aims to fill this gap by following the same participants throughout a semester at university and gathering data from them at regular intervals with the aim of answering the following research questions:

- 1) What third-person singular pronouns are used in written works of first-year, Hungarian native speaker English major university students?
- 2) Does the time participants spent at university affect the distribution of third-person singular pronouns?
- 3) How does the genre of the texts produced affect third-person singular pronoun distribution?

3. Methodology

This study continues the investigation of Kiss (2025a) about pronoun distribution in four different texts (N=189) written by Hungarian native speakers (N=51) who major in English either as undergraduates or teacher trainees at the University of Debrecen. The current analysis is based on homework assignments in a language course in the autumn semester of the 2024/25 academic year, intended to prepare first-year students for the English language exam.

As for the texts to be analysed, the topics for this investigation were included with an intent to examine the possible changes with time in students' writing, thus, the tasks were given to them with two or three weeks apart during the semester. The first three prompts were developed based on Meyers' study (1990), which asked native English speakers to describe what an educated person is. The first two prompts asked for one paragraph each about successful learners and educated people, i.e., *Who is a successful learner?* and *Who is an educated person?*, respectively, while the third task asked for two paragraphs with the help of the

following prompt: *What is your dream job?*. For the final text, participants were required to write an essay with the topic of *Is handwriting a dying art?*, which was an essay question in a previous year in the English language exam at the end of year. As not all students completed all homework assignments, a different number of texts have been provided per topic. In total, 49, 50, 47, and 43 texts were available for investigation per topic.

With the help of a consent form, students were asked to grant permission for their texts to be used for research purposes. The texts were then anonymized by the instructor of the course and provided for this research without students' names or any other identifiable features. Altogether, 57 first-year students consented to their homework being used for research purposes. Out of the 57, six participants' contributions have been taken out of the data entirely, as some of their assignments were noticed to be fundamentally different from their other contributions, as well as flagged as potentially AI-generated texts by Quillbot (Learneo, 2025) (five students). In the case of one student, although their texts did not show any signs of AI-generatedness, the submitted work was significantly higher quality than every other submission of the other participants; thus, all the assignments of this student have also been excluded from the research. The remaining 51 participants are assumed to be at least at the B1 level, as they needed to complete an advanced-level Matura exam in English to be admitted to the university. As for their gender, 45 of them were female, and 6 were male. Half the students (N=25) were English major undergraduates, while 26 of them were studying in the English teacher training programme.

As for length, the participants were asked to write the texts based on a one-sentence prompt; however, no guidelines on length were provided for the first three texts apart from giving participants the instruction to write one or two paragraphs. In the case of the last texts, students were requested to write an essay of 300-350 words. All in all, students' contributions differed in length (as shown in Table 1 below). The wordcount for Text 1 was 6352 with 129.63 words per text on average (SD= 52.02), and the corpus for Text 2 contained 6417 words with an average of 128.34 words per text (SD= 39.39). As for Text 3, the corpus has 9456 words, averaging 201.19 words per text (SD= 64.68), while the corpus of Text 4 has 14191 words, with 330 words per text (SD= 59.91).

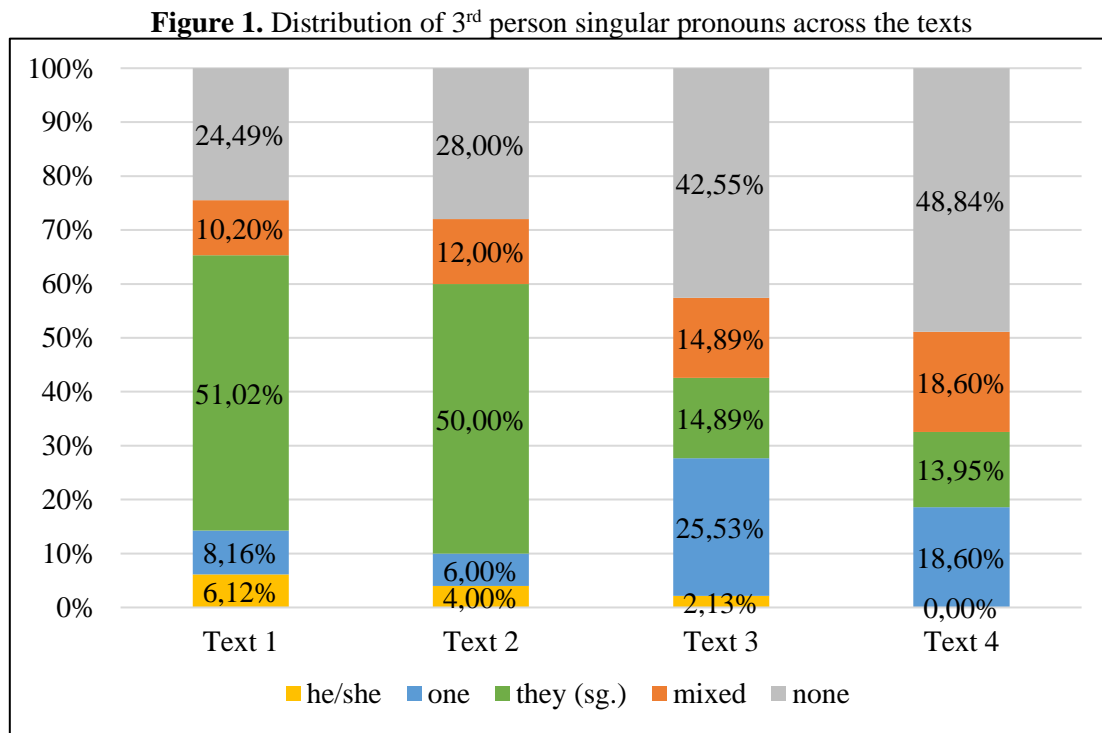
Table 1. Text length per topic

Topic	No. of texts	All words	Average words/text	SD	Maximum	Minimum
Successful learner	49	6352	129.63	52.02	268	56
Bilingual speaker	50	6417	128.34	39.39	215	60
Ideal profession	47	9456	201.19	64.68	363	91
Handwriting	43	14191	330.02	59.91	535	173

The texts were manually analysed for third-person singular pronoun use and checked at least twice. Each form of the pronoun was counted (personal, possessive, etc.). The antecedent of the pronoun distinguished singular and plural uses of *they*, and only singular cases were counted. If the combined pronoun *he/she* occurred in more than one way, such as *he/she*, *he or she*, *she/he*, *she or he*, *s/he*, all possible forms were counted in one category.

4. Results

The distribution of animate third-person singular pronouns across the four texts is shown in Figure 1.



In Text 1, the most frequently used pronoun was singular *they* (51.02%), as can be seen in Example 1. Participants who did not use this pronoun either avoided third person singular pronouns in favour of other pronouns (24.49%, Example 2) or used several types of third person singular pronouns (10.20%, see Example 3). Few chose to use the indefinite pronoun *one* (8.16%) or the combined pronouns *he/she* (6.12%, see Examples 4 and 5, respectively). Mixed pronouns were used either as a combination of singular *they* and *one*, or singular *they* and *he/she*.

Example 1: *A successful learner has many good traits. **They** are hard-working, **they** always do **their** assignments. **They** are disciplined and determined. **They** never lose sight of the goal **they** want to achieve in the future.*

Example 2: *If **you** want to be a successful learner, **you** should be very motivated to learn. **You** have to pay attention to **your** classes and write notes every time because it'll help **you** to study at home.*

Example 3: *Furthermore I think that the grades someone receives are not essentially helping to examine **ones** learning success, because **he or she** could be nervous at the time of the test. And finally a successful learner is the **one** who can and will use **their** acquired knowledge in **their** everyday life.*

Example 4: *Being a natural at something is great, but that is often not enough to succeed in learning something, **one** must also work hard to practice, but that hard work almost always pays off.*

Example 5: *For me a successful learner is a person who is hardworking enough to overcome any obstacles in learning. **He/she** has confidence and welcomes every opportunities. [...]. A successful learner is known by that **he/she** know the balance in mind and body (like physical trainings) too.*

As for Text 2, similar tendencies can be seen. Singular *they* is used most often (50%), followed by texts with no pronouns (28%). A small number of participants used mixed third-person singular pronouns (12%), *he/she* (4%), or *one* (6%). Similar to Text 1, the mixed category contained either a combination of singular *they* and *one*, or singular *they* and *she*, or singular *they* and *he/she*.

However, Texts 3 and 4 display a significant change in third-person singular pronoun distribution. In Text 3, most often there are no third-person singular pronouns (42.55%, Example 6). Participants who use pronouns chose the indefinite pronoun *one* most often (25.53%, Example 7), followed by either mixed pronoun use (14.89%) and singular *they* (14.89%), or rarely, *he/she* (2.13%). In the case of Text 3, the mixed category only contains instances of singular *they* and indefinite *one* (see Example 8).

Example 6: *Before getting a job, **you** have to have some work experience, which is often provided by the university **you** study at. Other than a degree, **you** must have adequate communicative skills and a health certificate. **You** are to be patient, caring and creative.*

Example 7: *Not only that, but unfortunately the lack of appreciation also can be seen in the amount of money **one** can earn as teacher.*

Example 8: *Teachers are hardworking people, and **one** has to work really hard to be one. Firstly a teacher must be patient, grade tests, and talk to parents and children when needed. When a person wants to be a teacher, **they** have to go to university for 5 years, where **they** learn the basics of being a teacher, and also the material, they want to teach.*

The occurrence of third-person singular pronouns continues in Text 4, with no pronouns (48.84%) used most frequently, followed by mixed pronoun usage (18.60%), indefinite *one* (18.60%), then singular *they* (13.95%). None of the participants uses the pronouns " *he/she* " in this text. This time, the mixed category involves the combination of singular *they* and indefinite *one*, and indefinite *one* and *he/she*.

To determine whether there is a significant correlation between the distribution of third-person singular pronouns and the four texts, a two-sided Fisher's Exact test is used. There is a statistically significant correlation ($p= 0.0010$) in regard to how pronouns are used in the four texts. Further Fisher tests show no statistically significant differences between Texts 1 and 2 ($p=0.9711$) or Texts 3 and 4 ($p= 0.8627$); however, there are statistically significant differences between Texts 1 and 3 ($p= 0.0009$), Texts 1 and 4 ($p= 0.0005$), Texts 2 and 3 ($p= 0.0010$), and Texts 2 and 4 ($p= 0.0009$).

Even though the first three tasks asked students to provide descriptive texts, only a few texts fulfilled this requirement, thus, the written texts resulted in different stylistic characteristics (labelled as genres for convenience). As far as Text 1 is concerned, almost half of the texts were written as descriptions (48.98%), followed by description and advice (20.41%), advice (12.24%), opinion and advice (10.20%), and finally other genres (8.16%). The pronoun distribution in Text 1 can be seen in Table 2 below. Overall, singular *they* occurs mostly with description and giving advice (70%) and other types of texts (75%), but the pronoun occurs in all genres. No third-person pronoun usage is most common in giving advice (66.67%) and opinion and giving advice (40%). Mixed pronouns only occur with descriptions (16.67%) and description and giving advice (10%), while the indefinite pronoun *one* is used with opinion and giving advice (20%), description and giving advice (10%), and descriptions (4.17%). The combined pronouns *he/she* only occur with descriptions (12.50%).

Table 2. Pronoun distribution based on genre in Text 1

	he/she	one	they	mixed	none	Σ
description	12.50%	4.17%	45.83%	16.67%	20.83%	100%
giving advice	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	0.00%	66.67%	100%
description & giving advice	0.00%	10.00%	70.00%	10.00%	10.00%	100%
opinion & giving advice	0.00%	20.00%	40.00%	0.00%	40.00%	100%
other	0.00%	0.00%	75.00%	0.00%	25.00%	100%

As for Text 2, most of the writings produced were descriptions of their own status (58%), as students would often mention whether they would consider themselves bilingual or not. Fewer texts were sole descriptions (28%), other types (8%), or texts describing a bilingual person, personal experience with bilingualism, and whether they consider themselves bilingual (6%). Regarding pronoun distribution (Table 3), singular *they* is mostly used with descriptions combined with own experience and own status reports (70%), while now descriptions show a clear preference for no pronouns (66.67%). The indefinite pronoun *one* occurs with other types of texts (20%), but not to such an extent with other genres.

Table 3. Pronoun distribution based on genre in Text 2

	he/she	one	they	mixed	none	Σ
description	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	0.00%	66.67%	100%
description & own status	12.50%	4.17%	45.83%	16.67%	20.83%	100%
description & own experience & own status	0.00%	10.00%	70.00%	10.00%	10.00%	100%
other	0.00%	20.00%	40.00%	0.00%	40.00%	100%

In the case of Text 3, only two genres can be identified: a few cases of self-reflections on the participant's ideal job (12.77%), with the majority of the texts being a mixture of the description of the job and the participant's relation to said profession (87.23%). There are no noticeable differences with any pronoun choices except for mixed pronoun usage (0% and 17.07%), but the small number of texts in this genre (n=6) may be the reason for this (see the pronoun distribution in Text 3 in Table 4).

Table 4. Pronoun distribution based on genre in Text 3

	he/she	one	sg. they	mixed	none	Σ
self-reflection	0.00%	33.33%	16.67%	0.00%	50.00%	100%
description & self-reflection	2.44%	24.39%	14.63%	17.07%	41.46%	100%

Two-sided Fisher's Exact tests were used to determine if there is a significant correlation between the distribution of third-person singular pronouns and the different genres of the texts. The results of these tests show that there are no statistically significant correlations in regard to how third-person pronouns are used with different genres in Text 1 (p= 0.6475), in Text 2 (p= 0.4548), or in Text 3 (p= 0.8803).

As the last task required students to write argumentative essays, a genre-analysis was not performed in the case of Text 4. The main difference between students' essays was shown by how successfully the argumentation was

constructed. Some students relied on their own experiences and opinions, while others mentioned objective arguments and studies; however, all texts fulfilled the requirements of argumentative essays.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the results indicates a significant change in pronoun distribution comparing texts produced by participants at the beginning and at the end of the semester. At the time of entering university, nearly half of the participants used singular *they* as their third-person singular pronoun (51.02% in Text 1 and 50% in Text 2). Avoidance techniques are applied by some students (24.49% and 28%, respectively), but not to the same extent as in the texts written later. As the requirement was to write one paragraph, Texts 1 and 2 are shorter; at the same time, the standard deviation is noticeably lower in the case of Text 2 (39.39) than Text 1 (52.02). The genre choices are also much more varied than what can be seen later on.

A statistically significant ($p=0.0010$) change in pronoun choices can be seen between the first two and the second two texts. That is, the use of singular *they* drastically decreases between Texts 2 and 3 from around 50% to under 15% (Text 3=14.89%, Text 4=13.95%). Instead of singular *they*, either avoidance techniques (42.55% and 48.84%, respectively), or the indefinite pronoun *one* is used (25.53% and 18.60%, respectively). It can be assumed that such a change occurs from outside sources influencing pronoun choices in more formal texts, possibly from students' university classes. That is to say, students seem to assume that the use of singular *they* is inappropriate in formal written assignments and essays after a few weeks of attending university.

This is in line with the findings of previous studies among Hungarian native speakers (Kiss, 2023, 2025a, 2025b), which show a clear preference towards singular *they* in gap-filling tests; on the other hand, its usage is shown to be less frequent in productive writing tasks. Also, LaScotte's report (2016) on residents of the United States documents that participants prefer the use of singular *they*, but find the combined pronouns *he/she* more appropriate in formal contexts.

Such a belief can be problematic, especially as the two largest stylistic guides, APA (Lee, 2019) and MLA (The MLA Style Center, 2020), are now endorsing the use of singular *they* in their latest editions in line with the general tendency towards inclusivity (Robertson & Thompson, 2024). Also, students are likely to encounter problems regarding pronoun usage when writing term papers and theses in their academic future without the use of singular *they*.

Stylistic choices, however, seem to improve with time based on the decreasing number of genres seen in Tables 2, 3, and 4. Written products with time become more and more uniform and stylistically accurate, a possible correlate for pronoun distribution, especially for pronouns used to avoid epicene third-person singular pronouns. For example, in the case of Text 1, 12.24% of the texts were written as

advice, from which 66.67% do not use third-person singular pronouns, because rather than describing what a successful learner is, they advise what *you* or *we* should do to become one (see Example 2 above). A similar tendency can be observed with opinion and giving advice genres (10.20%), where 40% of texts avoid third-person singular pronouns. Such choices quickly disappear in Text 2, where all major genre types are now some forms of description, even if mixed with other genres. By the time of the assignment of Text 3, most students write in uniform style (87.23%), so much so that by the final assignment, Text 4, all students are able to produce an argumentative essay. However, these results should be taken cautiously as the grades received were not available.

To answer the research questions, at the time of entering university, singular *they* is the most commonly used pronoun in the writing of Hungarian university students majoring in English. However, a shift can be observed as the semester advances and avoidance techniques become preferred to third-person singular pronouns that can be seen in the texts students produced throughout the semester. As students improve their language skills and learn to make appropriate stylistic choices, pronoun distribution shifts; however, these are not the only influencing factors. Besides them, outside forces influencing pronoun choices likely overshadow natural progression. Such forces must be identified in the future in order to appropriately weigh what controls the shift. Additionally, while the shift in pronoun usage in relation to genres was not found to be statistically significant in the present paper, it is possible that with a larger pool of data, a different pattern could be identified.

This study brings attention to the need for instruction on third-person singular pronouns in higher educational contexts. University instructors should address the topic of pronouns in formal contexts, especially considering that only a few English textbooks or coursebooks mention the issue (LaScotte, 2016; Zuber & Reed, 1993), thus students only learn about it outside the classroom. This can possibly fuel confusion (Kiss, 2023) and may lead to avoidance, despite the recommendations of stylistic guides.

Although the study produces significant results explaining pronoun usage patterns, the research has several limitations as well. Only a small number of texts were available; thus, statistical analyses cannot be completely reliable. Further analysis on a larger pool of data would be desirable. Additionally, most participants were female; thus, differences between genders could not be investigated. The written products were also rather short, especially with regard to Texts 1 and 2, which sometimes resulted in only a few instances of pronoun occurrences. Further data collection in the form of essays and longer texts is necessary to see a more general tendency of pronoun usage. The grades received for the homework assignments were also not available; thus, further analysis comparing styles and additional, independent measures of quality would be beneficial. Finally, future work should also look at individual differences, as this

paper could only investigate changes displayed within this particular group. More pronoun-usage patterns could be identified by looking at how each participant changes their pronoun usage throughout the semester.

6. Conclusion

The paper investigated the use of third-person singular pronouns among Hungarian native speakers throughout a university semester. Participants were asked to write texts based on one-sentence prompts. The analysis of the texts shows that at the beginning of the term, singular *they* is the most commonly used pronoun, which then shifts towards avoiding third-person singular pronouns and towards using the indefinite pronoun *one*. Although further investigation is needed to discover the exact reasons behind this shift, the reason could be that as students improve their language skills, they start to employ different strategies, and begin to perceive singular *they* as inappropriate in academic works. Consequently, formal education may be needed at the university to help students pick third-person singular pronouns appropriately in academic writing assignments.

References

- Abudaljuh, M. (2012). *Ideology, gender roles, and pronominal choice: A sociolinguistic analysis of the use of English third-person generic pronouns by native speakers of Arabic*. [Doctoral dissertation. University of Kansas.] KU ScholarWorks Repository. Letöltés: <http://hdl.handle.net/1808/12304>
- Antón-Méndez, I. (2010). Gender bender: Gender errors in L2 pronoun production. *Journal of Psycholinguist Research*, 39, 119–139. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10936-009-9129-z>
- Baranowski, M. (2002). Current usage of the epicene pronoun in written English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 6(3), 378–397. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9481.00193>
- Baron, D. E. (1981). The Epicene Pronoun: The Word That Failed. *American Speech*, 56(2), 83–97. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/455007>
- Bjorkman, M. B. (2017). Singular they and the syntactic representation of gender in English. *Glossa: A journal of general linguistics*, 2(1), 1–13. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.374>
- Bodine, A. (1975). Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: Singular ‘they’, sex-indefinite ‘he’, and ‘he or she.’ *Language in Society*, 4(2), 129–146. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500004607>
- Bradley, D. E. (2020). The influence of linguistic and social attitudes on grammaticality judgements of singular ‘they’. *Language Sciences*, 78, 1–11. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2020.101272>
- Cruzan, A. (2003). *Gender shifts in the history of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ebrahimi, H. & Hosseini, H. M. (2021). Investigating the use of singular ‘they’ across two social contexts: A comparative study of Iranian and Polish EFL students. *Language Teaching Research Quarterly* 24, 65–85. doi: <https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2021.24.04>
- Foertsch, J. & Gernsbacher, M. A. (1997). In search of gender neutrality: Is singular *they* a cognitively efficient substitute for generic *he*? *Psychological Science*, 8(2), 106–111. doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40063154>
- Gustafsson Sendén, M., Bäck, E.A. & Lindqvist, A. (2015). Introducing a gender-neutral pronoun in a natural gender language: The influence of time on attitudes and behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 1–12. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00893>
- Kiss Nikolett (2023). *Usage, acceptability, and attitudes towards singular they among students of English language studies* [Unpublished master’s thesis]. Debrecen: University of Debrecen.
- Kiss Nikolett (2025a). Az angol nemsemleges névmások használatának elemzése egyetemi hallgatók írásaiban. *Alkalmazott Nyelvészeti Közlemények* 18(2), 179–193. doi: <https://doi.org/10.32977/anyk.2025.0039>

- Kiss Nikolett (2025b). (2025, December 5–8). *Singular they usage among Hungarian university students* [Conference presentation]. 49th Austrian Linguistics Conference, Klagenfurt, Austria.
- LaScotte, D. K. (2016). Singular *they*: An empirical study of generic pronoun use. *American Speech*, 91(1), 62–80.
- LaScotte, D. K. (2021) Non-native English learners' use and understanding of singular *they*. *Language Awareness*, 30(1), 84–94. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2020.18697534>
- Learneo (2025). *Quillbot AI detector*. Letöltés: <https://quillbot.com/ai-content-detector>
- Lee, C. (2019, October 31). *Welcome, singular "they"*. APA Style. Letöltés: <https://apastyle.apa.org/blog/singular-they>
- Loureiro-Porto, L. & Hiltunen, T. (2020). Democratization and Gender-neutrality in English(es). *Journal of English Linguistics*, 48(3), 215–232. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0075424220935967>
- Ma, Z., Wu, S. & Xu, S. (2022). Acceptance and Online Interpretation of “Gender-Neutral Pronouns”: Performance Asymmetry by Chinese English as a Foreign Language Learners. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 1–14. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.765777>
- Marquis, M. (2016, January 8). *2015 Word of the Year is singular "they"*. American Dialect Society. Letöltés: <https://americandialect.org/2015-word-of-the-year-is-singular-they/>
- Martyna, W. (1980). Beyond the “He/Man” Approach: The Case for Non-sexist Language. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5(3), 482–493. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1086/493733>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Merriam-Webster's Words of the Year 2019*. Wordplay. Letöltés: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/word-of-the-year-2019-they>
- Meyers, W. M. (1990). Current generic pronoun usage: An empirical study. *American Speech*, 65(3), 228–237. Letöltés: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/455911>
- Miller, M. M. & James, L. E. (2009). Is the generic pronoun *he* still comprehended as excluding women? *The American Journal of Psychology*, 122(4), 483–496. Letöltés: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27784423>
- Newman, M. (1992). Pronominal disagreements: The stubborn problem of singular epicene antecedents. *Language in Society*, 21(3), 447–475. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500015529>
- Newman, M. (1998). What can pronouns tell us? A case study of English epicenes. *Studies in Language*, 22(2), 353–389.
- Noll, J., Lowry, M. & Bryant, J. (2018). Changes over time in the comprehension of he and they as epicene pronouns. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 47, 1057–1068. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10936-018-9577-4>
- Paterson, L. L. (2020). Non-sexist Language Policy and the Rise (and Fall?) of Combined Pronouns in British and American Written English. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 48(3), 258–281. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0075424220938949>
- R Core Team (2022). R (4.2.2): *A language and environment for statistical computing*. R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria. Letöltés: <https://www.R-project.org>
- Renström, E. A., Lindqvist, A. & Gustafsson Sendén, M. (2022). The multiple meanings of the gender-inclusive pronoun *hen*: Predicting attitudes and use. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 52(1), 71–90. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2816>
- Robertson, M. & Thompson, R. (2024). Gender, sexuality, and shifting styles: Knowledge production and codifying language use in style guides. *Ex Aequo*, 49, 253–274. doi: <https://doi.org/10.22355/exaequo.2024.49.06>
- Sklar, S. E. (1983). Sexist grammar revisited. *College English*, 45(4), 348–358. Letöltés: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/376543>
- Speyer, L. G. & Schleef, E. (2019). Processing ‘gender-neutral’ pronouns: A self-paced reading study of learners of English. *Applied Linguistics*, 40(5), 793–815. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amy022>
- Stojanovska-Ilievska, N. (2024). A corpus-based study of epicene pronouns used by Macedonian learners of English. *Open Linguistics* 10(1), 1–16. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/opli-2024-0017>
- Stormbom, C. (2019). Language change in L2 academic writing: The case of epicene pronouns. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 38, 95–105. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2019.02.001>
- Stormbom, C. (2020). Gendering in open access research articles: The role of epicene pronouns. *English for Specific Purposes*, 60, 193–204. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2020.08.001>

- Stormbom, C. (2021). *Gendered language in flux: The use of epicene pronouns in EFL and ELF writing*. [Doctoral dissertation. Åbo Akademi University.] Doria Repository. Letöltés: <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-12-4026-3>
- Strahan, T. E. (2008). “They” in Australian English: Non-gender-specific or specifically non-gendered? *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 28(1), 17–29. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07268600701877473>
- The MLA Style Center. (2020, March 4). *How do I use singular they?* Letöltés: <https://style.mla.org/using-singular-they/>
- Zhang, X. & Yang, H. (2021). Gender voices in Chinese university students’ English writing: A corpus study. *Linguistics and Education*, 64, 1–10. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2021.100935>
- Zuber, S. & Reed, A. M. (1993). The politics of grammar handbooks: Generic *he* and singular *they*. *College English*, 55(5), 515–530. Letöltés: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/378587>