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THE USE OF EPICENE PRONOUNS IN EFL SETTINGS
A Comparative Study between Finnish and Austrian University Students

ABSTRACT

Vilma Karhu: The Use of Epicene Pronouns in EFL settings: A Comparative Study between Finnish and Austrian University Students
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The purpose of this Master's thesis is to investigate what epicene pronouns are selected by native Finnish and German speakers when using second language, in this case English, when the gender of the referent is unknown. There is an abundance of research on epicene pronoun use among native English speakers. Previous research shows that the use of generic *he* has declined in contexts where the gender of the referent is unknown or when it is irrelevant. However, the use of epicene pronouns in English has not been widely studied in EFL contexts. This study aims to offer more information on the influence of the structures and language ideology of first language in second language use.

Previous research in sociolinguistics shows that previously widely used generic *he* as an epicene pronoun has decreased since the 1970s, which has also been influenced by the strong position of the feminist movement on gendered pronouns. Previous research also demonstrates that native English speakers prefer gender-neutral expressions by using singular *they* in gender-indefinite reference. Research on second language acquisition illustrates that linguistic structures of first language can affect second language acquisition through phenomenon known as *transfer*. Research focusing on linguistic relativity hypothesis shows that linguistic structures may influence the way individuals perceive the surrounding society. In addition, research on language ideology indicates that thoughts about language use justify the use of certain expressions. Furthermore, in addition to individual evaluation and judgement, the formation of language ideologies is also affected by stakeholders who may have moral or political interests.

The aim of this study was to examine how the use of epicene pronouns by EFL speakers relates to the patterns observed in the use of epicene pronouns by ENL speakers, how do the linguistic structures and language ideologies of L1 affect epicene pronoun use in L2, and whether differences in the use of epicene pronouns in English can be found between L1 Finnish speakers and L1 German speakers. The data consist of answers from 100 native Finnish-speaking and 90 native German-speaking university students to an online survey. The first part of the survey consisted of gap-filling tasks where the respondents were asked to select a pronoun they would use in the given context. The alternatives given were pronouns *he*, *she*, *he or she*, *they*, *s/he*, and "Other, please specify". The second part of the survey consisted of open-ended questions which inquired about the motivation behind the selection of pronouns in the gap-filling tasks, opinions on grammatical issues, and possible problems in the use of the pronouns included in the survey. The analysis focused on the quantitative analysis of the answers received in Part I of the survey, which offered data on actual pronoun use in practice. With this information, general tendencies in pronoun use in different contexts could be observed. Furthermore, the quantitative analysis enabled the objective comparison between language groups. Answers to Part II of the survey were analysed qualitatively. This analysis provided explanations for the tendencies observed in the quantitative analysis.

The results of this study show that also EFL speakers prefer gender-neutral *they* and expression *he or she* over generic *he* in gender-indefinite reference. The form of the verb influenced pronoun selection significantly. Furthermore, the structures and language ideology of first language affected the use of pronouns as native German speakers used gendered expressions, *he or she* and *he* more often than native Finnish speakers. Native Finnish speakers used the "Other" option more than native German speakers to alter the structure of the sentence to allow for the use of pronoun *they*. The qualitative analysis shows that the main reason behind the selection of the pronouns is either to include all possible gender constructions in discourse or the equal treatment of women and men in language use, although the participants recognised also the influence of grammar rules, register, and first language structures on pronoun use.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, gender-neutral language use, pronouns, linguistic structures, language ideology, language acquisition, linguistic relativity, English, Finnish, German

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman tarkoitus on selvittää, millaisia pronomineja suomea ja saksaa äidinkielenään puhuvat valitsevat käyttäessään toista kieltä, tässä tapauksessa englantia, kun viitattavan kohteen sukupuolta ei tiedetä. Yksikön kolmannen persoonan geneeristä viittausta on tutkittu englannin kieltä äidinkielenään puhuvien kontekstissa runsaasti. Aiempi tutkimus osoittaa, että geneeristen maskuliinien käyttö on vähentynyt konteksteissa, joissa viitattavan kohteen sukupuoli ei ole tiedossa tai sukupuolella ei ole merkitystä. Englannin kielen yksikön kolmannen persoonan pronominien käyttöä geneerisessä viittauksessa ei ole kuitenkaan laajasti tutkittu englantia toisena kielenä käyttävien osalta. Tämä tutkimus pyrkii tarjoamaan lisää tietoa äidinkielen rakenteiden ja kieli-ideologian vaikutuksista toista kieltä käytettäessä.

Aiempi sosiolingvistinen tutkimus osoittaa, että aikaisemmin laajasti käytetyn *he*-maskuliinin käyttö yksikön kolmannen persoonan geneerisessä viittauksessa on vähentynyt 1970-luvulta lähtien, mihin on vaikuttanut osaltaan myös feministisen liikkeen vahva kannanotto sukupuolittuneisiin pronomineihin liittyen. Aiempi tutkimus osoittaa, että englantia äidinkielenään puhuvat suosivat sukupuolineutraalia ilmaisua niin sanotun yksiköllisen *they*-pronominin avulla. Toisen kielen omaksumiseen liittyvä aiempi tutkimus osoittaa, että äidinkielen rakenteet voivat vaikuttaa toisen kielen oppimiseen ja käyttöön. Lisäksi, kielelliseen relativismiin painottuva tutkimus osoittaa, että kielen rakenteet voivat vaikuttaa siihen, miten yksilö havainnoi ympäröivän yhteiskunnan. Lisäksi, kieli-ideologiaan painottunut tutkimus osoittaa, että ajatukset kielenkäytöstä oikeuttavat tiettyjen ilmaisujen käytön. Lisäksi, kieli-ideologian muodostumiseen ja edistämiseen vaikuttavat yksilöllisen arvioinnin ja arvottamisen lisäksi myös sidosryhmät, joilla voi olla moraalisia tai poliittisia intressejä.

Tutkimus pyrki selvittämään, miten englantia toisena kielenä puhuvien pronominien käyttö vertautuu englantia äidinkielenään puhuvien kohdalla havaittuun pronominien käyttöön, miten äidinkielen kielelliset rakenteet ja kieli-ideologia vaikuttavat geneeristen pronominien käyttöön toisessa kielessä, ja onko suomea ja saksaa äidinkielenään puhuvien välillä havaittavissa eroja näiden pronominien käytössä. Tutkimusaineisto koostuu sadan suomea äidinkielenään puhuvan ja yhdeksänkymmenen saksaa äidinkielenään puhuvan yliopisto-opiskelijan vastauksista englanninkieliseen verkkokyselyyn. Kyselyn ensimmäinen osa koostui tehtävistä, joissa vastaajien tuli valita pronomini, jota he käyttäisivät annetussa kontekstissa. Vaihtoehdot olivat pronominit *he*, *she*, *he or she*, *they* ja *s/he* sekä "Muu", jolloin osallistujaa pyydettiin täsmentämään vastauksensa. Kyselyn toinen osa koostui avoimista kysymyksistä, jossa kysyttiin osallistujien perusteluja kyselyn ensimmäisessä osassa tehtyihin valintoihin, ajatuksia kieliopillisista kysymyksistä, sekä mahdollisista ongelmista kyselyssä ilmenneisiin pronomineihin liittyen. Tutkimuksen analyysi painottui ensimmäisen osan määrälliseen analyysiin, joka tarjosi vastauksia pronominien käyttöön käytännössä. Tämän tiedon avulla voitiin havaita yleisiä suuntauksia pronominien käytössä eri konteksteissa. Lisäksi, tämä määrällinen analyysi mahdollisti kieliryhmien välisen objektiivisen vertailun. Kyselyn toinen osa analysoitiin laadullista menetelmää käyttäen. Tämä analyysi tarjosi selityksiä määrällisessä analyysissa havaittuihin suuntauksiin.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että myös englantia toisena kielenään puhuvat suosivat sukupuolineutraalia *they*-pronominia tai *he or she* ilmaisua geneerisen maskuliinin sijaan. Verbimuoto vaikutti merkittävästi pronominin valintaan. Myös äidinkielen rakenteet sekä kieli-ideologia vaikuttivat pronominien käyttöön, sillä saksaa äidinkielenään puhuvat valitsivat sukupuolittuneita ilmaisuja *he or she* ja *he* useammin kuin suomea äidinkielenään puhuvat. Suomea äidinkielenään puhuvat käyttivät Muu-vaihtoehtoa useammin kuin saksaa äidinkielenään puhuvat, ja muokkasivat lauserakennetta niin, että se salli *they*-pronominin käytön. Laadullinen analyysi osoittaa, että suurin syy pronominien valinnan takana on joko kaikkien mahdollisten sukupuolikonstruktioiden sisällyttäminen diskurssissa tai naisten ja miesten tasa-arvoinen kohtelu kielenkäytössä, mutta osallistujat tunnistivat myös esimerkiksi kielioppisääntöjen, rekisterin ja äidinkielen rakenteiden vaikuttavan pronominien käyttöön.

Avainsanat: sosiolingvistiikka, sukupuolineutraali kielenkäyttö, pronominit, kielen rakenteet, kieli-ideologia, kielen omaksuminen, kielellinen relativismi, englanti, suomi, saksa

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1. Introduction

The linguistic representation of women and men, and later in the 21st century, of other gender representations, is not only a central issue in sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, sociology, and psychology, among other fields, but also a heated topic in the society as a whole. There has been increasing interest in sociolinguistics towards gendered language since the 1970s with seminal studies on the topic by Lakoff (1973) and West and Zimmerman (1983), and debates on correct or desirable third person singular pronoun use have circulated in discussions on the English language as early as the 18th century, gaining momentum much later in the early 1970s with the rise of feminism (Baranowski 2002, 379; Kroskrity 2004, 496-7). Towards the end of the 20th century, more attention was paid on inclusive language use, focusing on including women in discourse alongside men. Now in 2020, the concern of inclusive language use has moved beyond the binary classification of women and men, and there is an ever-increasing desire to include all possible gender representations in discourse, be it men, women, nonbinary, or fluid gender constructions. This is strongly linked to the awareness of sexual minorities and nonbinary gender groups that have been given a voice through the expanding LGBTQ+ community. The apparent gender politics which affect multiple areas of our existence, including language use, is the background and motivation for this study on the use of epicene pronouns in EFL settings.

As identity is built in discourse through social processes, consequently, as gender is one of the building blocks of an individual's identity, certain aspects of language are of key importance when talking about "doing gender" in discourse (Stokoe 1998, Bucholtz & Hall 2004, Wodak 2012, Hazenberg 2016). One such aspect is the use of personal pronouns when referring to human antecedents. There are multiple celebrities in addition to previously mentioned groups who have explicitly declared on social media or in interviews that they wish to be referred to as *they/them* (Insider 2020). Furthermore, non-discriminatory language use is addressed in legislation, for example in Bill C-16 in The Canadian Human Rights Act and in the Criminal Code targeting hate speech and sentencing for hate crimes (Parliament of Canada 2020). The modifications made to Canadian legislation in 2017 could cover situations where an individual repeatedly refuses to use someone's preferred pronouns, possibly leading to monetary and non-monetary sanctions such as sensitivity training or a publication ban, and in extreme cases even imprisonment. These examples show that there is clearly a wide understanding of the gendered English pronoun system and many parties have decided to change the use of personal pronouns in discourse, expecting other language users to follow.

Patterns towards more inclusive language use are observed in numerous languages where structural modifications are taking place due to sociocultural changes (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 18). In addition to English, the binary constructions are considered a problem in gendered

languages such as German and Swedish. The nonbinary pronoun *hen* has been introduced to Swedish to replace masculine *han* and feminine *hon* or to offer an alternative for language users who wish to use a gender-neutral pronoun. The issue of gendered language use and male generics has also been noted in grammatically genderless languages such as Finnish. This can be observed in the reaction to occupational terms, where male generics including the word for man, *mies* in Finnish, such as *esimies* 'lit. pre-man, supervisor' have been replaced with gender neutral terms such as *esihenkilö* 'lit. pre-person', *tiiminvetäjä* 'team leader' and *päällikkö* 'chief' (Kotimaisten kielten keskus 2019, Duunitori 2020).

The phenomenon has also been identified in organizations, for example at governmental, non-governmental, company, and academic levels (Australian Government 2020, United Nations 2020, CNN 2020, American Philosophical Association 2020). Some style guides condemn the use of generic *he* and promote equal representation of men and women via expressions such as *he or she* or through feminization, the use of feminine correspondents of masculine terms or the use of both terms (European Parliament 2018, 5). Increasingly more style guides promote the use of singular *they* as well as strategies to avoid gendered pronouns altogether (Australian Government 2020, United Nations 2020, American Philosophical Association 2020). The effect of usage guides has also been identified by Hellinger and Bussmann (2001, 18) who state that language planning and usage guides for more inclusive language use have emerged, which in turn promotes language reform.

Previous research shows that a language reform targeting personal pronoun use in English has materialised for decades, accelerating from the early 1970s with the rise of feminism (Baranowski 2002, 379). An abundance of comparative and diachronic studies can be found on the emergence of singular *they* alongside generic *he* and either the gradual decline in use or a total disappearance of generic *he* in different varieties of English (Green 1977; Meyers 1990; Matossian 1997; Hazenberg 2015; LaScotte 2016; Noll, Lowry & Bryant 2018). Numerous studies comparing British and American English have also been conducted, describing the reasons behind preferences to use a certain expression in the United Kingdom or in the United States (Cooper 1984, Baranowski 2002). The present study, however, focuses on epicene pronoun use in EFL settings, an area which is still very fruitful for further research although some studies on gender-neutral pronoun use in EFL settings have been conducted (Lee 2007, Hekanaho 2015, Stormbom 2018, Stormbom 2019, Hekanaho 2020). It has not yet been widely studied whether this change to favour singular *they* is apparent also in EFL settings. Furthermore, comparative studies on whether the first language of a speaker affects the way epicene pronouns are used in second language should receive more attention.

To fill this gap in research, this cross-linguistic study aims to collect data from native Finnish and German speakers and examine how these groups use epicene pronouns in English. The study is interested in discovering whether first language (L1) structures and language ideologies

effect second language (L2) use, and whether similar tendencies in pronoun use in L2 can be observed between speakers of different L1s. The study takes a different approach to previous investigations on epicene pronoun use by focusing not only on the pronouns available for speakers of English but also on the possible influence of the speaker's first language, an area which is less explored in connection to epicene pronouns in English and language inclusivity as a whole. The purpose of this study is to contribute to literature on language and gender, more specifically on gender ideology in language and the transmission of gendered messages through linguistic structures in a language. The results of this study can hopefully contribute to academic discussion on inclusive language use in different linguistic settings. More concrete implications of this study could relate to the design of EFL textbooks with examples of more inclusive language and this way the results of this study could affect English language teaching in ESL/EFL contexts.

To study the abovementioned aspects, the research questions in this study are the following:

1. How does the use of epicene pronouns by EFL speakers relate to the patterns observed in the use of epicene pronouns by ENL speakers?
2. How, if at all, do linguistic structures and language ideologies of L1 affect epicene pronoun use in L2?
3. Can differences in the use of epicene pronouns in English be found between L1 Finnish speakers and L1 German speakers?

The hypothesis in this study is that a similar pattern as in ENL settings is observed in EFL settings also, with most participants using gender-neutral construction with singular *they* when the gender of the antecedent is unknown in the context. Following studies on language acquisition, especially SLA theory, it is possible that the structures of L1 are transferred to L2 production. In this case it could be assumed that speakers of languages with no gender distinction in third person singular pronouns in their L1 would favour the use of pronouns with no gender distinction when using L2 as well. In practice, this could mean avoiding the use of generic *he* and *she*, and favouring gender-neutral expressions such as singular *they* instead. Similarly, speakers of L1s where there is a gender distinction in the third person singular in the first language could favour a gendered construction, such as generic *he* or expression *he or she* over the gender indefinite construction with singular *they*. Thus, some differences between L1 Finnish speakers and L1 German speakers are expected to be found, with more *he or she* constructions alongside singular *they* with L1 German speakers due to the linguistic structures of the German language. However, if no such differences are found, it could be assumed that there is a universal awareness across individual language communities that inclusive language should be aimed for regardless of structural aspects of individual languages. This shift towards more inclusive language use in different L1s could be an indication of a globally

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overarching ideological movement.

The thesis begins with a literature review where the theoretical foundations behind this study are introduced. After the literature review, the data and methodology used in this study are discussed in Chapter 3. In this chapter, a description of a previous pilot study and the data collection method are provided, and the details of the collected data are discussed. In Chapter 4, quantitative and qualitative analyses of the answers to the online survey are conducted. Discussion of the results of the study is offered in Chapter 5. The final chapter of the thesis is a conclusion where the main observations of this study are summarised, some of the methodological problems are addressed, and suggestions for future research are provided.

2. Literature review

This chapter begins with a definition of key areas of research that provide the theoretical background for this study. The first section introduces previous research on second language acquisition which is followed by a review on studies focusing on aspects of grammar in relation to textbooks. In Section 2.3, Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis and research related to the weak form of linguistic determinism are discussed. Next, research on language ideology in relation to gender issues is introduced in Section 2.4. Linguistic gender categories as described by Hellinger and Bussmann (2001) are presented in Section 2.5. After this, research on epicene pronouns in ENL and EFL settings is examined in Section 2.6. The chapter concludes with a summary of key findings of previous research and suggests gaps in research this study aims to fill.

Relevant fields for this study are sociolinguistics, second language acquisition, sociology, and cognitive and experimental psychology. The field of research in which this study operates in is sociolinguistics, more specifically gender linguistics, combined with previous research on language acquisition and connections between language and though. Gender linguistics, a sub-branch of sociolinguistics, has provided an abundance of information on language structures that affect 'doing gender' in discourse. Researchers in the field have investigated the differing use of language and discourse practices by women and men (Lakoff 1973, West & Zimmerman 1983, Ochs & Taylor 1995) and also language structures that relate to identity construction on the levels of phonology (Smyth, Jacobs & Rogers 2003; Hazenberg 2016), lexis (Hazenberg 2016), and stylistic development in relation to gender (Eckert 1996). Similarly, numerous studies on epicene pronoun use in ENL settings have been conducted and new studies on the subject are published at a rapid pace (Bodine 1975; Green 1977; Stanley 1978; Baron 1981; Cooper 1984; Baron 1986; Hughes & Casey 1986; Meyers 1990; Newman 1992; Matossian 1997; Stringer & Hopper 1998; Baranowski 2002; Stotko & Troyer 2007; Strahan 2008; Flanigan 2013; Hazenberg 2015; Lascotte 2016; Bjorkman 2017; Noll, Lowry & Bryant 2018). These studies provide a firm theoretical background to the present study and enable comparisons of patterns observed in ENL settings and EFL settings.

In addition to sociolinguistics, another important research field for this study is second language acquisition. In this field, the phenomenon called *transfer* is relevant to this study. Similarly, when discussing the effects of first language, the concept of weak form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, or Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis, should also be addressed. Finally, sociology and psychology, fields interdisciplinary with linguistics should be mentioned when discussing issues relating to gender construction. Sociology is imperative when defining terminology as the very introduction of the concept of socially constructed gender alongside biological sex stems from this field of research. Studies from the field of psychology should also be considered as conceptual categorizations and their relation to language are studied in cognitive psychology (Slobin 1996, Phillips & Boroditsky 2003).

Before discussing previous research in more detail, some key terms relevant for this study should be defined. The terms *first language* (L1) and *second language* (L2) are central in this study. As Cook states, the obvious difference between L1 acquisition and L2 acquisition is that in the former scenario language is acquired in a tabula rasa setting while in the latter the learner has already (at least) one other language in their mind. Thus, L2 acquisition should not be viewed in isolation of the already existing L1 but instead the effects of the pre-existing language to L2 acquisition should be considered. (Cook 2010, 137, 147). Macaro et al. define *first language* as "…the language a child began learning at the moment of birth and which the child continues to develop and master" (Macaro 2010, 63). Consequently, sometimes a distinction is made between *second language* and *foreign language* where second language refers to a language that is learned where it is spoken, such as English in the United States and foreign language would be defined as a language that is learned where it is not spoken, for example English in Finland. Although the contexts of learning are vastly different, in SLA research in particular, all learning of languages other than first language are simply referred to as *second language acquisition*. (VanPatten & Benati 2010, 145) In this study, the participants were asked to indicate their first language (Finnish or German), but they were not asked whether English was their second or possibly third or fourth language. For simplicity, English is referred to as their L2 in this study.

Furthermore, as the study is interested in investigating language use in EFL settings, the distinction between ENL, ESL, and EFL should be clarified. ENL refers to English as a Native Language, ESL represents English as a Second Language, and EFL, the focus of this study, stands for English as a Foreign Language (Schneider 2007, 12). It should be noted that these definitions refer to societies as a whole, not individual speakers. According to Schneider, in ENL countries such as Canada or the United States, English is the vernacular of the majority of the population. In ESL countries, English exists alongside indigenous languages, serving different functions for example in politics, media, or higher education as is the case in Nigeria, India, and Singapore. Finally, in EFL countries such as Finland and Austria investigated in this study, English is acquired mostly through formal education and performs no official domestic function, although it might still be widely used in

some domains. The terms ENL, ESL, and EFL also correspond to Kachru's Three Circle Model of World Englishes with its Inner Circle, Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle. (Schneider 2007, 12) Even when the models are rather superficial and describe language use on macro level instead of individual level, they have been widely accepted in academia and thus are considered useful for this study as well. To summarise, the participants in this study are considered L2 speakers of English in EFL settings where English serves no official function but is still used in various contexts.

2.1 Second language acquisition

This chapter introduces the research field of second language acquisition (SLA). SLA research is significant for this study because of its interest in the influence of first language structures to second language acquisition. Second language acquisition research is a field within applied linguistics that investigates how second, or third languages are learned, combining research from linguistics, language teaching, sociology, and psychology (Macaro 2010, 6; Gass & Mackey 2012, 1) SLA research attempts to find explanations to the wide range of second language learning outcomes, from learners achieving competence close to a native speaker to those with poorer learning results (Macaro 2010, 4). SLA research also investigates the role of individual differences such as aptitude, motivation, identity, working memory, age, and educational level to second language learning outcomes (Gass & Mackey 2012). In the next subsections, a brief overview on research history and key concepts within SLA is provided after which the phenomenon known as *transfer* is discussed.

2.1.1 Brief history of SLA research

After behaviorism was rejected as a convincing theory for language acquisition in the late 1950s, Noam Chomsky attempted to better explain the complex processes of language acquisition with his 'nativist' or 'innate' view of language acquisition which included terminology such as Universal Grammar (UG) and Language Acquisition Device (LAD) (VanPatten & Benati 2010, 68, 101; White 2012, 671). As Macaro, Vanderplank, and Murphy state, the evidence for Chomsky's theory is that all children, regardless of L1, seem to go through similar developmental stages in their first language development where babbling precedes the first word and one-word sentences precede two-word sentences etcetera. Furthermore, children learn their L1 even when the input is not always grammatical and acquire language even without negative evidence, that is, without indication of what is ungrammatical. (Macaro et al. 2010, 78) The idea of developmental sequences in language acquisition was also suggested by developmental psychologist Jean Piaget in 1969 and was embraced later in SLA research (Cook 2010, 139).

Interest in SLA research grew in the 1960s, initially mimicking ideas and research methods from L1 acquisition research (Cook 2010, 138). One seminal theory on second language

acquisition is Stephen Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition, also known as Monitor Model or Monitor Theory, which was developed in the turn of the 1970s and 1980s. The five hypotheses of the theory include the Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Shehadeh 2012, 437). Krashen's theory distinguishes subconscious language *acquisition* from conscious *learning* into two separate processes, notes that some structural features are naturally acquired earlier than others, and suggests that L2 performance is a result of acquired skills, leaving the conscious learning of grammar rules to the role of a moderator or editor. Furthermore, the Input Hypothesis sees comprehensible input as a condition for language acquisition and output simply as a means to receive more input, not as a tool for acquiring language. Finally, the Affective Filter Hypothesis emphasises the effects of personal traits and emotional state when acquiring language. (Shehadeh 2012, 437-8).

While most of Krashen's hypotheses have been discarded, some have found supporters. The hypothesis of a natural order of acquisition is supported by research showing that some grammatical forms and structures are acquired earlier than others, for example *-ing* progressive is acquired earlier than third person singular *-s* or regular past tense *-ed* in English (Dulay & Burt 1974; VanPatten & Benati 2010, 114). Yet, some argue that the frequency of features in input affects the adoption of the features and research should be aimed at developmental readiness instead of predictable acquisition order (Macaro et al. 2010, 32). Similarly, while the Affective Filter Hypothesis remains unproven, affective factors are identified alongside other individual differences which affect the learner's success in acquiring a second language (Macaro et al. 2010, 33-4). Krashen's attempt to distinguish *acquisition* from *learning* was unsuccessful in the field of SLA where it has become widely accepted that learning can be defined broader than simply as a conscious, formal process (Macaro 2010, 5). In Krashen's theory, the consciously learned system with explicitly learned rules monitors speech production if the speaker knows the rules and has enough time to apply the conscious rule (VanPatten & Benati 2010, 108; Macaro et al. 2010, 83). It has been argued that the role of the monitor is lesser in speech due to time constraints but is applied more often in writing (VanPatten & Benati 2010, 108). Monitoring is a generally accepted concept in SLA research and is involved also in speech production but is defined usually in broader terms than suggested by Krashen (Macaro et al. 2010, 83; Kormos 2012, 439). Krashen's suggestion that comprehensive input would suffice for successful language acquisition and that output is simply a means to receive more input has been neglected and has later been challenged by an approach that emphasises interaction and output alongside input. Although Krashen's input hypothesis provided theoretical support for communicative language teaching, it neglected explicit teaching of grammar rules (Macaro et al. 2010, 49). Still, the importance of input is recognised in SLA research (Piske & Young-Scholten 2009). The attention to comprehensible input has inspired a pedagogic strategy known as *input enhancement* where certain features in the L2 input are highlighted to

become more salient and noticeable by the learner, but he effectiveness of input enhancement remains debated (Lee & Huang 2008, 307; Han 2012, 313-4). In addition to focus on form (FonF), researches have also investigated psychological processes involved in input processing (VanPatten 2012).

The Main Theories in SLA research in addition to Linguistic Theory and Monitor Theory discussed above include Competition Model, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Fundamental Difference Hypothesis, Skill Acquisition Theory, Processability Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Complex Dynamic Systems Theory. The key issues in current SLA research involve, but are not limited to exploring the differences between L1 and L2 acquisition, critical period in L2 acquisition, developmental stages in acquisition, the roles of explicit and implicit learning, the roles of input and output, individual differences, the effects of instruction, and constraints to acquisition (VanPatten & Benati 2010, 9). A more comprehensive list and explanations of key concepts and theories in SLA research is provided for example in VanPatten and Benati 2010, Robinson 2012, and Gass & Mackey 2012. The next subsection focuses on a phenomenon which is known as *transfer* in SLA research and relates it to the issue of personal pronouns.

2.1.2 Transfer

It is important to consider the effects of transfer in this study to discover whether features from first languages, here Finnish or German, are carried over to L2 production in English. As Macaro et al. state, the effect of *transfer* was also a part of The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis made by Lado in 1957, where the standpoint was that difficulties in learning a second language stem from the interference of the first language and that these obstacles can be predicted by comparing the structural properties of the languages. Furthermore, two types of transfer can be observed, *negative transfer* which results from the differences between the languages and *positive transfer* which occurs when the languages share similarities, making learning of L2 easier. (Macaro et al. 2010, 52). It is now widely accepted in SLA research that L1 influences L2 acquisition (Sjöholm 1995; Chen 2011; Rashid 2013; Sato, Gygax & Gabriel 2013; Derakhshan & Karimi 2015, 2112). Siegel (2012) defines *transfer* as:

> "a particular psycholinguistic process in which the linguistic features of one language are employed by individuals in learning or using another language (Færch and Kasper 1987: 112). As such, transfer can be positive, when the features of the L1 and L2 are similar, or negative, when the features are different."   (Siegel 2012, 189)

In this study, the definition of *transfer* follows that of Siegel. Furthermore, Jarvis and Pavlenko use terms *transfer* and *cross-linguistic influence* (CLI) interchangeably, but differentiate between *linguistic transfer* focusing on linguistic forms and *conceptual transfer* which is the transfer of mental

concepts or conceptual representations which are incorporated in language (Jarvis & Pavlenko 2008, 1, 61, 112). However, Bagherian (2012, 157) notes that language proficiency can affect the extent of conceptual transfer from one language to another, with more proficient language users transferring concepts less than elementary level learners. Conceptual transfer is important for this study as it is similar to the concept of language ideology discussed later in Section 2.3 when referring to work by Kroskrity (2004) and Abudalbuh (2012).

Transfer has often been viewed as a negative contributor hindering L2 acquisition, but it can also be argued to function as a learner strategy if the target language is similar to L1, contributing positively to the learning process. This idea can also be applied to the use of personal pronouns in L2 production. As is later explained in the literature review, Finnish is a language which makes no gender distinction in third person singular pronoun *hän* (formal) or *se* (informal) while in German there is a distinction between masculine form *er*, feminine form *sie*, and neuter *es*. Following the definition by Siegel (2012), it could be that the gender-neutral linguistic features in third person singular pronouns in Finnish could transfer to English and similarly, the gendered third person singular pronoun use in German could lead to gendered epicene pronoun use in the target language as well. Technically, there is a deviation in pronoun structures between Finnish and English and a similarity in the gendered pronoun system between German and English. Thus, transfer of gendered pronoun structures of German to gendered pronouns in English could be seen as an example of positive transfer. However, as pronoun use in English is changing towards non-gendered expressions such as singular *they* as a third person singular pronoun, there is a mismatch between gendered pronoun structures of German and aspiration towards gender-neutral language use in English. Then, it could be argued, that the genderless third person singular pronoun in Finnish would result in positive transfer in English, when gender neutral pronouns are a desirable target. Furthermore, following Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008), conceptual transfer, here the representation of different genders in language, is also a key component when discussing the effect of transferring mental categories from one linguistic system to another. However, proficient language users might rely on their L1 language structures and mental concepts less than elementary language learners (Lindqvist 2006, Bagherian 2012). As the participants of this study are highly skilled in English, it is possible that role of conceptual transfer is small. The link between mental concepts and language is also addressed in Section 2.3 and Section 2.4.

2.2 Gender representation in textbooks

In this section, research into gender representations in EFL textbooks is briefly introduced. The section begins with a discussion on previous research focusing on gender representations in the EFL classroom and textbooks and ends with notions on prescriptive and descriptive grammar rules in relation to epicene pronouns in English textbooks. There is sometimes a mismatch between the

findings in SLA research and the methods used by teachers in EFL classrooms. However, incorporating the results of SLA research into teacher training, classroom activities and learning materials could benefit the learning process (Chaochang 2016, Liceras 2014). Furthermore, it is important to recognise the effects of learning materials as textbooks function as sources of target language and cultural input and it is possible to promote a certain ideal, such as gender equality, in and through education.

The ideal for inclusive language use and equal representation of women and men in textbooks has been debated already in the 1970s when it was perceived problematic that male characters occupied central stage in textbooks (Cochran 1996, 159). The role of textbooks is emphasised because of their contribution in socialising learners with their authoritative status and the time spent studying them, influencing learners in terms of social concepts, attitudes, and understanding of norms, culture, and society (Mustapha 2013, 455; Hall 2014, 260). The gender imbalance in learning materials has been widely recognized, producing an abundant body of research on the subject (Hartman & Judd 1978; Porreca 1984; Jones, Kitetu & Sunderland 1997; Amerian & Esmaili 2015). Following awareness on these issues, reforms in learning materials have been made, leading to improvements in balanced and non-stereotypical gender representation (Mustapha 2013, 456-7). The issue has also been recognised in EFL textbooks worldwide (Parham 2013, Amerian & Esmaili 2015). Improvements in EFL textbooks have been reported in terms of visibility of women, balanced male and female appearance and representation of societal roles such as occupations (Hall 2014, Lewandowski 2014). More recent EFL textbooks have also paid attention to gender-neutral pronouns and neutral address terms (Lee & Collins 2008). Although there is an overall trend towards gender inclusion, not all learning materials follow, and some are even reported increasing the male bias further in follow-up studies (Hall 2014, 260).

Recent studies on prescriptive and descriptive grammar in ENL and EFL textbooks are relevant for detecting possible explanations for the tendencies in epicene pronoun use observed in this study. Previously, many English textbooks were based on prescriptive grammar but in recent years the focus has shifted towards textbooks with an emphasis on descriptive grammar (Baranowski 2002, 379-80). *Prescriptive grammar* specifies how language and grammar rules should be used correctly, while *descriptive grammar* depicts how language structures and rules are used by its speakers, including standard and nonstandard varieties (Newby 2000, 248). Previously, epicene pronouns in EFL textbooks reflected the attitudes observed in native English-speaking world, favouring the use of generic *he,* highlighting its grammatical correctness regarding agreement in number, despite the expression, although thought all-encompassing, was not actually agreeing in gender. This also led to condemning alternative expressions such as *he or she* as cumbersome and singular *they* as ungrammatical as it did not agree in number with the antecedent. (Baranowski 2002, 378-9). However, Pauwels and Winter (2006) investigated Australian teachers' reactions to alternative constructions alongside generic *he* and found that alternatives were adopted both by

students and teachers, with female teachers even intervening in their students writing to promote other alternatives to generic *he*. Similarly, Lee and Collins observed that in EFL textbooks used in Hong Kong, paired pronouns such as *he/she*, *s/he*, and *his or her* in addition to singular *they* and even generic *she* were employed as a response to the male bias observed with the use of generic *he* (Lee & Collins 2008, 134-5). In addition to textbooks, the importance of 'teacher talk' and comments about the learning material and classroom activities should also be noted (Pauwels & Winter 2006).

The influence of learning materials and the role of the educator is important for this study for the obvious reason that the pronoun system is a fundamental part of language teaching, and guidelines for epicene pronoun use are given through education. The time spent in compulsory education is intense and the effects of formal teaching can be long reaching, influencing individuals after exiting the education system. However, the role of education should not be overemphasised as there are other factors contributing to the creation of norms for correct or desirable language use than formal education alone. The influence of traditional socialising groups such as family and friends is critical. Furthermore, the conditioning of individuals and groups through social media is highlighted in the 21st century as social media engages almost all age groups and is a powerful tool to drive societal changes.

2.3 Linguistic relativity

Looking at the interdependency between language and thought, in addition to *transfer* discussed in Subsection 2.1.2, the effects of L1 structures have been approached also in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. The concept of linguistic determinism or linguistic relativism was first introduced by Sapir and Whorf in the 1930s with their Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis which can be defined as follows:

> "The original idea of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis (LRH) was that the semantic structures of different languages were (or might be) incommensurable, and, if they were, then there would or could be implications for speakers of particular languages in terms of their thinking and behaviour. The LRH is also referred to as the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis after its two modern champions, B. L. Whorf and Edward Sapir"
>
> (Davies 2012, 156)

The theory of a strong form of linguistic determinism, that language would limit thought potential, has faced strong opposition and it might be that this is not what Whorf intended in his 1939 paper either (Gumperz & Levinson 1996, 22; quoted in Davies 2012, 157; Bylund & Athanasopoulos 2014, 953). However, the weak form of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, an idea that language can affect syntactic processing and influences but does not determine thought, has found supporters. In other words,

the features available in a language could affect the way information is processed and thus affect the abstract concepts available for speakers.

The findings of Phillips and Boroditsky (2003) suggest that the mental representations of the world are not universal between groups of people and that even perceptions about concrete objects can be shaped by structural aspects of different languages. The researchers conducted a series of studies with Spanish-English bilinguals and German-English bilinguals who were asked to rate similarities between pictures which showed a person (male or female) and an object that had either masculine or feminine grammatical gender in Spanish and German. The tasks were completed in English. The results show that grammatical gender structures of L1 can affect the way people perceive objects and other people even in a language devoid of grammatical gender such as English. The authors argue that their results showed that cross-linguistic differences in mental categories could be the effect of grammatical differences alone, in the absence of other cultural factors. (Phillips & Boroditsky 2003) Another study focusing on the influence of grammatical gender was conducted by Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, and Laakso, discovering that there are links between a gender system in a language and the gender equality in the respective countries where that language is spoken. According to the authors, "…countries where gendered languages are spoken evidence less gender equality compared to countries with other grammatical gender systems. Furthermore, countries where natural gender languages are spoken demonstrate greater gender equality, which may be due to the ease of creating gender symmetric revisions to instances of sexist language." (Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2011) Han and Cadierno (2010) edited a book titled *Linguistic Relativity in SLA: Thinking for Speaking* which is a compilation of studies focusing on Slobin's (1996) thinking-for-speaking hypothesis which supports the weak form of linguistic determinism. Furthermore, Bylund and Athanasopoulos (2014) support the developing of linguistic relativity studies in SLA into a full research program (Bylund & Athanasopoulos 2014).

Odlin (2010) attempts to show the links between linguistic relativity, language transfer, and conceptual transfer in the following definition:

"Linguistic relativity concerns the putative influence of language on cognition, especially the influence of linguistic structures not common to all languages. Language transfer is the influence of one language on another and, in cases of second language acquisition (SLA), is most typically the influence of a native language on a new language to be acquired. Conceptual transfer is a more specific type of cross-linguistic influence where linguistic relativity is also involved."

(Odlin 2010, 183)

Following these concepts, it could be assumed that L1 Finnish speakers would not perceive gender differentiation as strongly as L1 German speakers because in Finnish there are less ways to make

gender distinctions on the level of grammar as there is in German. This might also be reflected in their thought processes and L2 use. This hypothesis is tested in this study by comparing the selection of epicene pronouns by L1 Finnish speakers and L1 German speakers in an online questionnaire, with further evidence sought in the qualitative analysis of the answers to open questions inquiring about the reasons for the selection of certain pronouns.

2.4 Linguistic gender ideology

As discussed in the previous section, the connection between language and thought has received wide academic attention. Another perspective, thoughts about language use, also referred to as language ideology or linguistic ideology, should be briefly introduced. Silverstein (1979) defines linguistic ideologies as "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use", emphasising individual's judgement on possible acceptance of linguistic structures (Silverstein 1979, 193; quoted in Kroskrity 2004, 497). On the other hand, Irvine (1989) highlights the influence of collective culture and political agendas in shaping language ideologies in her definition for language ideologies as "the cultural (or subcultural) system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests – which is a crucial mediating factor" (Irvine 1989, 255). Kroskrity rejects the idea of a uniformly shared culture in linguistic ideology, underlining the recognition of individual variation by demographic variables such as age, gender and class:

> "Since social and linguistic variation provide some of the dynamic forces which influence change, it is more useful to have an analytical device which captures diversity rather than emphasizing a static, uniformly shared culture. Used in opposition to culture, language ideologies provide an alternative for exploring variation in ideas, ideals, and communicative practices."
>
> (Kroskrity 2004, 496)

In sum, language ideologies are beliefs about language that justify certain type of language use, they might be somewhat shared by collectives such as interest groups or nation-states but individual variation in evaluation occurs from speaker to speaker. This study is interested in whether the language ideologies at a collective level, that is, at the level of language communities, affect the use of L2. However, it is recognised that different perceptions on language use occur within language communities, as will be shown in the analysis of the answers to the online survey in Chapter 4. Previous research on language ideologies is briefly discussed next, following an attempt to exemplify the gender ideologies in Finland, Austria, and native English-speaking countries the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

The academic interest in language ideology began with Silverstein's work in late 1970s and early 1980s, hoping that the subject would be recognised as an influential part of language (Kroskrity 2004, 498). Since then, language ideologies have been investigated in relation to group and individual interests, diversity of ideologies, the awareness of speakers, mediating functions of ideologies, and the role of language ideology in identity construction (Kroskrity 2004, 501). Language is a powerful tool to promote interests of stakeholders and it should be noted that changes in language development always benefit some group over another, especially if they are strongly advocated on a large-scale (Silverstein 1985; Woolard 1985; Errington 2000; Kroskrity 2004, 501). This holds true also for the ideals to achieve gender-neutral language goals not only in English but in languages all around the world. It should also be kept in mind that even the 'neutral' or 'naturalised' ideologies are a product of a historical process employed by a specific group (Blommaert 1999b). However, as societies consist of individuals who all have their own ideologies that may or may not align with the dominant ideology, possible conflicts among language users are likely to occur. When it comes to gender-neutral language use, this diversity of ideologies within a population can easily be detected, for example between those who strongly support erasing gender aspects when referring to individuals and those who prefer to continue the use of traditional forms, such as referring to others with gendered pronouns *he* and *she*. When it comes to awareness in gender-neutral language use, as Kroskrity states:

> "Nouns, our 'words for things,' display an unavoidable referentiality that makes them more available for folk awareness and possible folk theorizing than, say, a rule for marking 'same subject' as part of verb morphology"
>
> (Kroskrity 2004, 506)

Thus, it should not be surprising that gendered occupational terms, for instance, have been noticed by language users and changes towards gender-neutral role nouns are demanded. This is visible in the recommendation to change *chairman* to *chairperson* in English and *esimies* 'supervisor', including the word for 'man', *mies,* to non-gendered alternatives such as *tiiminvetäjä* 'team leader', *työnjohtaja* 'work manager', and *päällikkö* 'chief' in Finnish. Similarly, in languages which include gendered pronouns, epicene pronouns have attracted attention from language users. The decision to introduce gender-neutral *hen* alongside *han* (m.) and *hon* (f.) in Swedish is an example of speakers' awareness of the effects of personal pronouns. Lastly, the role of language ideology in identity construction and as an indication of group membership is crucial. For instance, the role of language has been important throughout history when building shared national identity after independence from a previous occupier (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983, Bhabha 1990, Anderson 1991, Foster 1995). As previous research shows, aspects of language affect "doing gender" in discourse (Bucholtz & Hall 2004, Wodak 2012, Hazenberg 2016). Similarly, language ideology on gender

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issues is a component of a speaker's identity and may signal group membership.

In the previous section discussing linguistic relativity it was stated that research supports the idea of weak form of linguistic relativity, the idea that linguistic structures can affect the way we think. Reversing this idea, Hundt and Szmrecsanyi suggest that different world views would affect the way gender systems are constructed in languages, some adopting sex-based systems while others do not (Hundt & Szmrecsanyi 2012, 243). Similarly, Wodak suggests that language is constructed by our perception of reality, not vice versa. She adds that the perception of inequality between genders is realised in language, which then again influences our views and ideologies (Wodak 2005, 520). Additionally, Abudalbuh (2012) examined L1 Arabic speakers who were L2 learners of English and found that the male-dominated language ideology transferred from Arabic to English, affecting the subjects' linguistic behaviour in L2. As this study is interested in discovering whether language ideologies from L1 could also transfer to L2 use, it is important to illustrate the possible gender ideologies in Finnish, German, and English which could originate from general perceptions on genders and the practices around gender issues in Finland, Austria, and ENL countries.

As stated earlier, Irvine (1989, 255) emphasises the influence of collective culture and political agendas together with their moral and political interests in shaping language ideologies. Thus, it is necessary to provide a brief overview on issues relating to gender equality in Finland, Austria, and the main ENL countries which may contribute to the formation of language ideologies. Finland is often considered one of the leading countries in gender equality and is performing well in international measurements focusing on gender equality, for example ranking third in the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index Ranking and fourth in the Gender Equality Index monitored by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) (World Economic Forum 2019, World Economic Forum 2020, EIGE 2020, UNDP 2020). Furthermore, in 2020, the leaders of the parties in the Finnish government were all women and 92 of 200 members of the Finnish parliament were women (Eduskunta 2020). However, there is still a pay gap between women and men, gender stereotyping is still an issue, and violence against women remains a challenge (European Commission 2020, Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö 2020). Similarly, differences in men's health and well-being as well as exclusion from society is a concern (Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö 2020). When it comes to the LGBTQ+ community, according to OECD (2020b) "Legal inclusion of LGBTI people in Finland has dramatically improved over the past decade", as Finland ranks among top 17 countries that have most legal protections for sexual and gender minorities. However, the next steps for Finland would be to criminalise hate speech based on gender identity and remove the requirement of sterilisation when transgender individuals want to change their gender marker in the civil registry (OECD 2020b).

Austria is not performing as well as Finland in the international comparisons for gender equality between women and men, but still places rather high when compared to all the countries

involved in these reports, with its highest ranking being 13th in the evaluation of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE 2020, UNDP 2020, World Economic Forum 2019, European Commission 2020). In Austria, women's unpaid care work within the family, gender-segregated labour market, and underrepresentation of women in leading positions in the economy have been listed as challenges to gender equality (Federal Chancellery Republic of Austria 2020). Concerning the LGTBQ+ community, homosexuality lost its criminal status in 1971 and in 2019 marriage was opened to homosexual citizens (Legal Dialogue 2019). Like Finland, Austria is included among the top 17 counties when it comes to LGBTQ+ inclusion but could improve their processes with removing the requirement for a mental health diagnosis when changing a gender marker in civil registry (OECD 2020a).

Lastly, of the major ENL countries the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, New Zealand is the only one ranking in the top ten of World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index Ranking, placing sixth in 2020 with a score of 0.799 out of 1 (World Economic Forum 2020). In the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Reports for 2019, the United States received the highest score in the Gender Development Index (GDI) with 0.991 points out of 1 and Canada performed best in the Gender Inequality Index (GII) with 0.083 points. Of these countries, New Zealand ranked last in the GDI and the United States performed worst in the GII. (UNDP 2020). These results also indicate that the performance of a country in international comparisons is affected by the parameters used. For example, New Zealand performed well in the World Economic Forum's ranking but not in the one used by the United Nations Development Programme. Hence, it could be said that Finland represent the most progressive stance to gender equality which might be demonstrated in more gender-neutral language ideology as well when compared to German and English. The next section examines different ways to transmit gendered messages, which can also be seen as manifestations of language ideologies.

2.5 Gender Categories

In this section, aspects of linguistic gender are introduced, and linguistic features of the languages involved in this study are described in more detail. The concept of social gender is also examined, following examples of false generics at the end of the section. Concepts and terms central to the current research include terminology on linguistic gender as defined by Hellinger and Bussmann (2001). The authors identify four universal gendering mechanisms through which gender-related messages can be performed. These are grammatical gender, lexical gender, referential gender, and social gender (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 6). These gendering mechanisms help to understand how gender is constructed in one language but can also be applied as the basis for cross-linguistic analysis of gender representation (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001). The authors have described

aspects of linguistic gender in their collection *Gender Across Languages: The Linguistic Representation of Women and Men*. The authors discuss the linguistic representation of women and men in four volumes, including analyses of 42 languages of very different structural and socio-cultural backgrounds, including English in Volume I published in 2001, Finnish in Volume II published in 2002, and German in Volume III published in 2003. The contributors in these volumes adopt a contrastive orientation, discussing the same linguistic issues in relation to each language and by using same terminology and methodological framework (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001). As the editors state, the volumes focus "on personal nouns and pronouns, which have emerged as a central issue in debates about language and gender" (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 2). Personal nouns and pronouns play an important role in transmitting gendered messages as they are used to talk about the self and others, they may transmit attitudes towards individuals or groups, they are used in identity construction, and they contain information on stereotypical performers of activities, for example typical representatives of a profession (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 2-3).

2.5.1 Grammatical gender

In languages with grammatical gender, or "gender languages", there are normally two or three gender classes, for example feminine, masculine and neuter (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 5). Examples would be *en* (common gender) and *ett* (neuter gender) in Swedish and *die* (feminine) *der* (masculine), and *das* (neuter) in German. Grammatical gender is an inherent property of the noun which controls agreement with its gender-variable satellite elements such as adjectives, verb forms, and pronouns (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 7). Examples of this agreement are *Den här röda bilen* 'This red car' (common gender) and *Det här röda äpplet* 'This red apple' (neuter gender) in Swedish and corresponding phrases *Dieses rote Auto* (n.) and *Dieser rote Apfel* (m.) in German. In German, a masculine *der* or feminine *die* gender is typically assigned to human referents, with some exceptions such as *das Kind* 'the child'.

According to Misersky et al. "In natural-gender languages, there is no classification of nouns, but a distinction appears in personal pronouns (e.g., 'the musician . . . she' vs. 'the musician . . . he')" and "in genderless languages (e.g., Finnish 'muusikko . . . hän'), neither nouns nor pronouns are marked to indicate a human referent's biological gender." (Misersky et al. 2014, 842). Thus, the languages in this study can be defined as grammatical gender language (German), natural gender language (English) and genderless language (Finnish).

2.5.2 Lexical gender

As opposed to grammatical gender described above, lexical gender relates to extra-linguistic features, with words having semantic properties of [female] or [male]. According to Hellinger and Bussmann, these semantic properties require the use of semantically corresponding satellite forms such as the English anaphoric pronouns *she* or *he* or German equivalents *sie* and *er* (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 7-8). Lexical gender is often visible in kinship terminology such as *mother*, *son*, and *grandfather* which is also the case with German kinship terms *Schwester* (f.) 'sister' and *Bruder* (m.) 'brother'. As Hellinger and Bussmann state, these nouns can also be labelled as "gender-specific", in contrast to nouns such as *resident* or *child* which are considered "gender-indefinite" or "gender-neutral". Similarly, address terms such as *Ms.*, and *Mr.* in English, and *rouva* 'Mrs.' and *herra* 'Mr.' in Finnish display lexical gender (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 7; Engelberg 2002, 113). Lexical gender may also be marked morphologically with the help of suffixes. This overt gender marking is visible in English nouns *actor – actress* and *widow – widower* and German nouns *Bundeskanzler* (m.) – *Bundeskanzlerin* (f.) 'chancellor' (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 8). This type of overt gender marking is also used in some Finnish words with suffixes *-kko* or *-kkö* and *-tar* or *-tär*, according to vowel harmony, in words such as *sihteerikkö* 'female secretary' (from sihteeri 'secretary') and *kreivitär 'countess'* (from *kreivi* 'count') (Engelberg 2002, 113).

2.5.3 Referential gender

Like lexical gender, referential gender relates linguistic expressions to the non-linguistic reality, identifying a referent as "female", "male", or "gender-indefinite". When reference is made to a known individual, the choice of anaphoric pronouns may be referentially motivated and override grammatical gender, for example in German *Fussballstar* (masculine) … *sie* (feminine) if the athlete is identified as female (Hellinger and Bussmann 2001, 8-9). As Engelberg states, in Finnish "Referential gender can also be specified by modifiers such as *nais(puolinen)* 'female' or *mies(puolinen)* 'male' in compounds" such as *liikenainen* 'businesswoman' or *miespuolinen jälkeläinen* 'male offspring'" (Engelberg 2002, 113; Tyysteri 2011).

2.5.4 Social gender

If the associated words cannot be explained by grammatical or lexical gender, personal nouns are specified for social gender (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 10). The concept of social gender is a relatively recent invention. Before the 1970s, the term *gende*r was associated mostly with grammar (Udry 1994, 561; Haig 2004). The terminological distinction between biological *sex* and *gender* as a role was introduced by John Money with his concept of "gender roles" (Money 1955; Money &

Ehrhardt 1972; Haig 2004, 87). After the introduction of the term, feminist scholars adopted it as a way of distinguishing socially constructed aspects of female–male differences known as gender, from biologically determined aspects described by sex (Haig 2004, 87). Nowadays, the term *gender* does not involve only socially constructed aspects of the binary construction of either female or male, but also other alternatives such as agender, androgynous and bigender, among others (Darwin 2017; Galupo, Pulice-Farrow & Ramirez 2017).

Hellinger and Bussmann (2001, 11) state that in language, some occupational terms, especially the ones describing higher professions, are frequently pronominalized by the male-specific pronoun *he* even in contexts where the gender of the referent is unknown or irrelevant, relying on stereotyping based on social gender. On the other hand, low-income occupational terms are often followed by anaphorical *she* (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 10-11). The authors argue that deviation of these stereotypical assumptions is often overtly marked, such as *male nurse* or *female surgeon* (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 11). Studies in cognitive psychology support these claims about conceptual categorizations and their relation to properties of language as was previously discussed in Section 2.3 (Phillips & Boroditsky 2003; Slobin 1996; Misersky et al. 2014, 841).

Misersky et al. (2014) studied stereotypically gendered role nouns in seven European languages, including English and German. The authors collected lists of role nouns in Czech, English, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, and Slovak, and checked the stereotypical categorization of these role nouns which could then be used as a basis for the selection of stimulus materials in future studies, such as this one. In their study, the participants rated 422 English role nouns (translated to their first language) based on the extent to which they felt the presented social and occupational groups actually consisted of women and men on an 11-point rating scale ranging from 0 % women and 100 % men to 100 % women and 0 % men, with 10 % incremental increases. The data were then transformed into proportions, such that "100 % women and 0 % men" was recoded as 1, "50 % women and 50 % men" as .5, and "0 % women and 100 % men" as 0. (Misersky et al. 2014, 844) The most stereotypically female professions for English speakers in Misersky et al. were beautician (.84), manicurist (.84), cheerleader (.83), chambermaid (.82) and nanny (.82). For German, these professions were manicurist (.9), child-minder (.87), beautician (.85), knitter (.84), birth attendant (.83) and babysitter (.83). Most stereotypically male professions in the English-speaker group were heavy equipment operator (.15), miner (.16), president (.16), priest (.16) and bricklayer (.16). For German speakers, the most stereotypically male professions were miner (.13), general (.15), lorry driver (.15) and road worker (.15). These results from Misersky et al. serve as the basis for the selection of nouns in Task 3 of the online survey used in this study, described in detail in Section 3.1.

2.5.5 False generics

Finally, a concept that Hellinger and Bussmann define as "false generics" should be addressed. The authors make a distinction between "generic masculines" in grammatical gender languages such as German and "male generics" in languages with no grammatical gender such as English and Finnish, where "male" symbolises a lexical-semantic property of the noun (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 9). These false generics are used to refer to all gender constructions. In many gender languages, the grammatically masculine nouns have a wider lexical and referential potential than their feminine counterparts which tend to be female-specific (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 9). Schneider and Hacker suggest that the use of generic masculine terms "may serve to 'filter out' women, largely by suggesting imagery appropriate only or primarily to men" (Schneider & Hacker 1973, 12). According to Hellinger & Bussmann, the use of false generics may create referential ambiguities and reflect the underlying gender belief system which creates expectations about appropriate female and male behaviour, discussed above in relation to social gender (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 10).

Male generic use is often found in the nouns themselves. In English, reference to all people has been made with the words *human* and *mankind* and in German the word for 'human', *der Mensch*, is masculine. Interestingly, German translation for 'mankind' includes the word for 'man', *Mensch*, but the grammatical gender of 'mankind', *die Menschheit*, is feminine due to the suffix *-heit* as nouns ending in *-heit* and *-keit* are always feminine in German (Bussmann & Hellinger 2003, 144). In Finnish, the terms *ihminen* 'human' and *ihmiskunta* 'mankind' are gender-neutral with the absence of *mies* 'man' or *nainen* 'woman' (Engelberg 2002, 112). However, male generics occur in Finnish as well, as the words for 'man' *mies* and 'father' *isä* are regularly employed. As Engelberg states, "Finnish male generics are compounds, derivations and idioms (cf. Karlsson 1974)". For example, expressions *jokamiehenoikeudet* 'lit. every man's rights', public right of access', *isännöidä* 'to host', and *miesmuistiin* 'lit. in man's memory, in living memory' illustrate this point (Engelberg 2002, 114).

Male generic use has been an issue with occupational terms such as *postman* or *policeman* in English or *esimies* 'lit. pre-man, supervisor' in Finnish. In German, female counterparts are derived from masculine occupational terms by using suffixes, for example in 'teacher' *der Lehrer* (m.) - *die Lehrerin* (f.) and *Bundeskanzler* (m.) – *Bundeskanzlerin* (f.). Furthermore, derivation may produce asymmetric pairs where the female counterpart represents the lesser category as in English *governor – governess* and German *Sekretär* (m.) – *Sekretärin* (f.) where the masculine form translates as 'secretary of an administration, trade union or the like' and the feminine form as 'secretary in an office' (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 12). To overcome issues with gendered occupational terms in German, different strategies to achieve gender-indefinite expressions can be employed, such as lexical neutralisation, semantic neutralisation, feminisation, and the use of collective nouns such as *das Ministerium* 'the Ministry' for otherwise masculine der *Minister* (Bussmann & Hellinger 2003, 154-6). However, research shows that the use of male generics in

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English occupational terms has decreased (Balhorn 2009, 392). This is an ongoing trend also in Finnish, where many of the occupational titles including male generics such as *palomies* 'lit. fire man, firefighter' and *äänimies* 'lit. voice man, sound technician' are now being replaced with gender-neutral alternatives, for example *palopelastaja* 'lit. fire rescuer' and ääniteknikko 'sound technician' for the examples above (Yle 2019).

The topic of this thesis, the epicene pronoun, is a widely used example of false generics as the prescriptive choice to refer to all genders in English has been the generic *he*, in phrases such as *an American drinks his coffee black* (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 10; Baranowski 2002). In German, due to the grammatical gender assigned to nouns, a pronoun agreeing with the grammatical gender of the noun should be selected. Gender-neutral pronoun *es* is not used to refer to people in standard language and is not advised to be used for reference to people, although some nonbinary persons wish to be referred to with *es*. Some suggestions to overcome gendered reference in German is to use masculine pronoun *er* with feminine noun endings or vice versa. Finnish has only gender-neutral pronouns in third person singular, *hän* [+animate] and *se* [-animate] (Engelberg 2002, 112). Pronoun *hän* is usually used in formal contexts and written language while *se* is used to refer also to people in informal contexts.

2.6 Epicene pronouns

Before discussing previous research on epicene pronouns, the terminology should be defined. First, *pronoun* can be defined as "[…] a word that is used instead of a noun or noun phrase. Pronouns refer to either a noun that has already been mentioned or to a noun that does not need to be named specifically" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2020). The *Cambridge Dictionary* uses the following definition of a pronoun: "Pronouns are often used to refer to a noun that has already been mentioned" (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2020). *Personal pronouns* "refer to the person or people speaking or writing (first person), the person or people being spoken to (second person), or other people or things (third person)" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2020). An interesting addition to the definition by the *Cambridge Dictionary* is that they mention that "Someone's pronouns are the way they choose to be referred to according to their gender identity (= their feeling of having a particular gender)" with examples such as *Her pronouns are "she/her", but she is also happy with "they/them"* and *It might be helpful to share your pronouns when introducing yourself (Cambridge Dictionary*, 2020). According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, epicene can be defined as "1 of a noun : having but one form to indicate either sex" or "3 : lacking characteristics of either sex" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2020). Similarly, Baranowski defines epicene pronoun as "third person neutral-gender pronoun" (Baranowski 2002, 378).

2.6.1 Epicene pronouns in ENL settings

In this subsection, history of epicene pronoun use in English is described after which the findings of previous research on epicene pronoun use in ENL settings is discussed and summarised. Research on common-gender pronoun, and the lack of it in English has been actively published starting from the 1970s, and new research on the topic is emerging rapidly (Bodine 1975; Green 1977; Baron 1981; Cooper 1984; Baron 1986; Hughes & Casey 1986; Meyers 1990; Newman 1992; Matossian 1997; Stringer & Hopper 1998; Baranowski 2002; Strahan 2008; Flanigan 2013; Hazenberg 2015; Lascotte 2016; Bjorkman 2017; Noll, Lowry & Bryant 2018).

According to Howe, in Old English "the distinctions between masculine, feminine, and plural in the nominative forms of the third person pronoun rested solely on the vowels " and in Middle English the pronouns *he* (m.), *heo* (f.), and *hie* (pl.) were often used in a way that the feminine forms were reduced to *he*, *ho*, *ha*, *hi* and plural forms to *hy*, *ho*, *he*, *ha*, thus making the pronouns sound indifferent as distinctions between the forms were either obscured or lost completely. The development of *she* and *they* began later as an attempt to reduce ambiguity between these forms (Howe 1996, 160-1). Since then, "English coped with the problem of the third person neutral-gender pronoun by means of forms such as *they* and *he or she* alongside *he*" (Baranowski 2002, 378).

According to Baranowski, the problems with using *they* and *he or she* as epicene pronouns arose only in the 18th century when grammarians declared *they* to be purely plural and condemned its use as an epicene pronoun because it disagreed in number with the noun which it referred to. *He or she* agreed in number and gender, but was abandoned as cumbersome and unnecessary, thus leaving the generic *he* as the preferred pronoun to be used, allegedly including both men and women even when it disagreed with its sex-indefinite antecedent (Baranowski 2002, 378). The expression *he or she* was also officially replaced with *he* in an Act of Parliament of the United Kingdom in the Lord Brougham's Act in 1850, aiming at simplifying language used at statutes (Bodine 1975; quoted in Baranowski 2002, 379). The idea that *he* was long perceived as including representatives from all genders is reflected also in a letter to the editor written as a response to students' protest on the use of *he* to refer to people in general. In 1971, Calvert Watkins, chair of the Harvard linguistic department together with his colleagues stated that English masculine forms were linguistically "unmarked" for gender, having both generic and specific functions and that there was no need to oppose them (Harvard Crimson 1971, 17; quoted in Livia 2001, 3). However, despite multiple institutes favouring prescriptive *he*, many language users continued to use singular *they* and expressions such as *he or she* as epicene pronouns (Meyers 1990, 228).

Attempts to revise the pronoun system have appeared already for a few centuries with neologisms such as *thon, e*, *ey, per*, *ze*, *hir*, and *zhe* among many others to replace the problematic sex-definite pronouns (Hekanaho 2020, 38). Alternatives have also been proposed by authors of English novels, such as *kin* by Dorothy Bryant and *na*, *nan*, and *naself* by June Arnold (McConnell-

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Ginet 2003, 728). The "Spivak pronouns" *E*, *Em*, and *Eir* are probably the most famous proposed set of gender-neutral pronouns in English, popularized as neologisms by Michael Spivak (Spivak 1990). Stotko & Troyer (2007) noted that in Baltimore, a new gender-neutral pronoun *yo* was emerging in schools, but a follow-up study indicated that it had not yet spread to other areas. Similarly, *co* is used as a generic pronoun in a community called Twin Oaks in rural Virginia (Flanigan 2013). However, these gender-neutral singular pronouns have not been widely adopted and have remained unsuccessful, partly due to difficulties in pronunciation or spelling and the existence of traditional forms.

The reason why generic *he* remained the favoured expression for so long relates to prescriptive grammar rules and guidebooks on correct use of language. As rules, recommendations and guidelines are often faithfully relied on, it is no wonder that the generic masculine remained popular until the 1970s, supported in many grammar books and usage guides (Stanley 1978; quoted in Baranowski 2002, 379). Prescriptive grammarians were the first to condemn *they* and *he or she* as acceptable epicene pronouns alongside *he*. Similarly, in a survey of American editors in 1985, many opposed singular *they* and only half of the editors favoured *he or she* over *he* (Kingsolver & Cordry 1987). However, starting from the 1970s with the rise of feminism, the English pronoun system gained the attention of the masses and the dissatisfaction with generic *he* grew due to the ambiguity of the expression and the exclusion of women (Baranowski 2002, 379; Kroskrity 2004, 496-7). As demand for a more representative epicene pronoun grew, grammar books published in late 20th century became descriptive rather than prescriptive, acknowledging the problems related to generic *he* and recognizing singular *they* as an alternative, although sometimes emphasising that its use should be restricted to informal language (Baranowski 2002, 380). Similarly, many style guides provided by governments, non-governmental organizations, companies, and academia support the use of gender-neutral language and recommend avoidance strategies such as pluralisation or omitting the pronoun as well as the use of singular *they, who*, *one*, or *you* instead of gendered pronouns (Australian Government 2020; European Parliament 2018, 5; United Nations 2020; American Philosophical Association 2020). The effect of usage guides has also been identified by Hellinger and Bussmann who state that language planning and usage guides for more inclusive language offer tools for fair representation of genders and reinforce tendencies of linguistic change (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001, 18-9).

Overall, previous research shows that in ENL settings, the use of previously common generic *he* is sinking and the use alternatives such as singular *they* and *he or she* is increasing as more inclusive pronouns to refer to an antecedent whose gender is unknown. Green (1977) studied written English of American high school students and discovered that although most participants selected the prescriptive generic *he*, one fourth opted for singular *they*, suggesting that its use was likely to expand. It has later been shown that *they* is widely used as an epicene pronoun in education and academia (Meyers 1990; Rubin, Greene, & Schneider 1994; Adami 2009), newspaper language

(Cooper 1984, Baranowski 2002), and speech (Newman 1992, Matossian 1997, Stringer & Hopper 1998). Previous research also shows that women are less likely to use a generic masculines than men (Meyers 1990; Rubin, Greene, & Schneider 1994). Similarly, differences between varieties of English have been observed (Baranowski 2002, Adami 2009). Additionally, Strahan (2008) suggests that singular *they* in Australian English is not only used when a writer is unsure of the gender of the referent, but also when the gender of the referent is known, but this is not considered relevant for the hearer/reader. Baranowski also found that indefinite and definite antecedents (*a burglar*/*your doctor*) influence the use of pronouns as definite antecedents rarely anaphorise in singular *they*. Similarly, quantifiers such as *somebody*, *everybody*, and *nobody* seem to influence pronoun selection as the majority of epicene *they*s refer to quantificational expressions. Notional number of the antecedent and social roles stereotypically associated with the referent also affect epicene pronoun use. (Baranowski 2002). The online questionnaire used in this study is modelled based on Baranowski's findings.

2.6.2 Epicene pronoun use in EFL settings

Research on epicene pronoun use in EFL settings has also been conducted, even though not to the extent as in ENL settings. Lee (2007) investigated the use of epicene pronouns with indefinite pronouns such as *someone* and occupational terms, for example *doctor*. The findings reveal that sexist language was still prevalent in Hong Kong, but the strong feminist movement of the Western countries, which has penetrated also the field of education, has impacted young people in their use of pronouns (Lee 2007, 285). Generic *he* was the most commonly used epicene pronoun while *she* was most widely used with stereotypically female occupational terms such as *nurse* and *secretary* (Lee 2007, 290). However, *they* was used with quantificational expressions with a "plural meaning" such as *everyone* and *each student*, and *he/she* was selected more often than *they* when the antecedent was a definite noun phrase (Lee 2007, 292).

Abudalbuh (2012) analysed the use of English third person generic pronouns by L1 Arabic speakers with a gender role assignment questionnaire and a written sentence completion task to examine what gender roles are assigned to a list of personal nouns and which epicene pronouns are used with these personal nouns. The analysis shows that while native English-speakers used singular *they* for the majority of lexically gender-neutral antecedents such as *a person*, L1 Arabic speakers used the masculine pronoun *he* for the vast majority of both typically male and lexically gender-neutral antecedents. Abudalbuh argues that this might due to a language ideology in Arabic where men occupy both the male and neutral positions in society and women are assigned to marked, "female only" positions. (Abudalbuh 2012).

Hekanaho (2015) studied native speakers of English and Finnish to compare whether these two groups have different attitudes about generic masculine forms due to the different

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structures of English and Finnish. The results validated previous findings that most participants chose gender-neutral expressions rather than generic masculines, although these too were also still used. The study also shows that first language influenced gender-neutral language use, as L1 English speakers were more likely to use singular *they* than L1 Finnish speakers (Hekanaho 2015, 91). This is an interesting finding as it could be assumed that speakers of a language with gender-indefinite pronouns, in this case Finnish, would be more likely to use gender-neutral pronouns in other languages as well. Another rather surprising finding is that Finnish speakers accepted the generic nature of *man* and the generic *he* more likely than native English speakers in some of the survey questions. This is accounted for a prescriptive nature of English teaching at school, which could be a plausible explanation (Hekanaho 2015, 93-4). However, the study suggests that Finnish participants considered gender-neutral language use as important more often that native English speakers, which Hekanaho attributes to cultural factors (Hekanaho 2015, 95).

Stormbom has studied epicene pronouns in intermediate to advanced EFL writing (Stormbom 2018) and language change in the use of epicene pronouns in L2 academic writing (Stormbom 2019). The 2018 study examined L1 and L2 corpora of student writing in English, where the native English speakers used either British English or American English, and the first languages in the L2 corpus included 13 European languages, including Finnish and German. The study shows that L2 English speakers use *he* significantly more than the L1 speakers who prefer singular *they*. Stormbom also notes that "Variation found in the L2 subcorpora seems to be partly related to L1 influence: The writers who use *he* the most are speakers of gendered L1s with a traditional practice of masculine generics" (Stormbom 2018, 1). This finding supports the hypothesis of this study that speakers of German would use generic *he* more than speakers of Finnish who are expected to prefer gender-neutral forms. The 2019 study investigated L2 academic writing of university students, where the first language of most of the writers was Swedish. The results show that the use of generic *he* has decreased since the 1970s but there is still variation in use of epicene pronouns in the texts from 2010s (Stormbom 2019). According to Stormbom, "Such variation is indicative of a language change that is still very much in progress" (Stormbom 2019, 95). The results of both studies show that with noun phrases, the highest frequency of singular *they* occurred with quantificational expressions such as *each student*, and more often with indefinite noun phrases such as *a person* than with definite noun phrases like *the individual* (Stormbom 2018, 14-5, Stormbom 2019, 100). These findings support the conclusions of Baranowski (2002) mentioned in the previous subsection.

As this section of the literature review shows, research on epicene use in ENL settings is abundant, covering written and spoken forms, formal and informal speech, and different types of contexts. It is clear that the use of generic masculines is decreasing and singular *they* has become acceptable in third person singular reference in ENL settings. Research also shows that the type of the antecedent affects epicene pronoun choice (Baranowski 2002, Lee 2007, Stormbom 2018, Stormbom 2019). Research on epicene pronoun use in EFL settings is also emerging. However,

there is still room for more contrastive studies on the influence of different L1s in epicene pronoun use in English. Stormbom (2018) approached this topic with a corpus-based study while this study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse data gathered by using an online survey.

2.7 Summary of previous literature

The section concludes with a summary of the key findings of previous research and suggests gaps on previous research that this study aims to fill. As explained in the beginning of this chapter, SLA research shows that linguistic structures of L1 can affect L2 use either through positive or negative transfer. Similarly, connections between language and though have been confirmed and the importance of language ideologies, thoughts about language, has been recognised. Section 2.5 shows that gendered messages are transmitted in languages in multiple ways, such as through grammatical gender, lexical gender, referential gender, and social gender. Furthermore, false generics have been identified as problematic in many languages. Lakoff (1973) suggested that only if an effort was made to bring pronouns to speaker's awareness a change in epicene pronoun use would be possible. It has become evident that a need for change in epicene pronouns available in English has been identified by language users and a linguistic change has been underway for decades, amplified by the debate brought to public attention by the feminist movement starting from the 1970s. The use of generic masculines is sinking in ENL settings, which is enhanced by prescriptive grammar rules, reforms in the representation of genders in textbooks, and usage guides for gender-neutral language. According to research on epicene pronouns in EFL settings, generic *he* is still used more than in ENL settings, although alternatives for the generic masculine, such as *he or she* and singular *they*, have been embraced by language users. Seminal contrasting studies between different L1s suggest that the linguistic structures of first languages affect epicene pronoun use also.

As discussed earlier, issues relating to language and gender have been investigated in various research fields which provide an abundance of useful information for this study. However, sociolinguistic studies on the use of epicene pronouns lack research from EFL settings, especially comparative studies on the effects of different first languages in L2 English production. This study contributes to previous work by filling a gap in research by comparing the effects of linguistic structures and language ideologies of Finnish and German on epicene pronoun use in L2 English production.

3. Data and methodology

In this chapter, a description of the data collection method is provided, followed by an evaluation of the data itself. In Subsection 3.1, a detailed description of the structure of the online questionnaire is given and its relation to findings from previous research is discussed. In Subsection 3.2, characteristics of the participants involved in this study are provided and an evaluation of the data collection method and possible shortcomings is provided.

3.1 Methodological framework

The theoretical framework of this study builds mainly on the field of SLA research for the evaluation of the effects of transfer as well as research focusing on the connections between language and thought, including the way these two affect each other. The plethora of studies on the use of epicene pronouns in ENL settings and emerging research on the subject in EFL settings provide important information on epicene pronoun use, especially how epicene pronouns are used with different types of antecedent (Baranowski 2002, Lee 2007, Stormbom 2018). The methodological framework of this study is similar to that of Abudalbuh (2012) and Hekanaho (2015) where language ideologies and the use of pronouns in EFL settings were tested using questionnaires. In this study, the three research questions

1. How does the use of epicene pronouns by EFL speakers relate to the patterns observed in the use of epicene pronouns by ENL speakers?
2. How, if at all, do linguistic structures and language ideologies of L1 affect epicene pronoun use in L2?
3. Can differences in the use of epicene pronouns in English be found between L1 Finnish speakers and L1 German speakers?

are approached by using an online questionnaire to receive answers from L1 Finnish speakers and L1 German speakers, and analysing the epicene pronoun use in these answers. The questionnaire is designed to elicit instances of epicene pronouns referring to third person singular human antecedents whose gender is unknown in the context. The questionnaire is modified based on previous work by Baranowski (2002), Abudalbuh (2012), and Misersky et al. (2014). Baranowski's work influenced the structure of the expressions used in all three tasks in Part I of the survey. Special attention was paid to ensure that the questionnaire included expressions with indefinite and definite antecedents, quantifiers, and singular and plural verb forms (Baranowski 2002). Studies by Abudalbuh (2012) and Misersky et al. (2014) helped in the selection of stereotypically female and male role nouns used in Task 3 in Part I. In particular, the study by Misersky et al. (2014) in the field

of experimental psychology provides valuable information for this study regarding the stereotypical gender roles associated with certain occupations. In addition, the structuring of filler items in Hekanaho (2015) and Misersky et al. (2019) was helpful when creating the fill-in questions for this survey.

Methodology used in this study is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The focus of the data analysis is on the quantitative analysis of the multiple-choice questions found in Part I of the online survey. This part provides data on actual epicene pronoun use in L2, information that can be converted into numbers to detect general tendencies in L2 production by L1 Finnish speakers and L1 German speakers. In the data analysis of Part I, frequencies of the dependent variable *he*, *she*, *he or she*, *they*, and *s/he*, including inflected forms expect for *s/he*, are identified. The second part of the survey consists of three open-ended questions and one multiple-choice question which inquire about attitudes towards grammatical correctness, the participant's preferred pronoun when the gender of the referent is unknown in the context and possible problems they think might arise with the use of some of the suggested pronouns. The qualitative analysis of the questions in Part II is used to provide additional information and possible explanations for the tendencies observed in the gap-filling exercises in Part I and motivation behind the use, or neglection, of certain expressions. Background information of the participants, including demographic variables such as age, gender, first language, country of residence, highest level of education attained, level of studies in university, and years of studying English in total, was gathered after the completion of Part I and Part II of the survey. The online survey can be found in Appendix A.

In Part I, participants completed three gap-filling tasks with 20 questions in total, where they had to choose a pronoun which they felt they would most likely use in the given context. The options the participants could choose from were *he*, *she*, *he or she*, *s/he*, *they*, and "Other". If the participants selected "Other", they were asked to specify their answer. These forms were preceded by a morphosyntactically singular antecedent with the semantic value [+human]. The inflected forms of the pronominals (objective and possessive cases as well as reflexives) were included, except for *s/he*. The reflexive form given for singular *they* was *themselves,* as this is the accepted reflexive form in standard English. However, *themself* as a reflexive form has also gained support in recent years when referring to a person of unspecified or nonbinary gender (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2020, Lexico 2020). Proper names, impersonal *they*, collectives, and pronouns without a lexical antecedent were excluded. Task 1 focused on formal setting and included expressions with indefinite and definite antecedents, quantifiers, singular and plural verb forms, and gender-neutral nouns. Task 2 followed a similar structure but focused on informal setting. In Task 3, the intention was to test stereotypically female and male role nouns, focusing on occupational terms. Only indefinite nouns were used with singular and plural verb forms in Task 3 and no expressions with quantifiers were included. The semantically gender-neutral occupational terms used in Task 3 were selected based

on previous research by Misersky et al. (2014) described in detail in Subsection 2.5.4. The lists of the most stereotypical occupational terms found for English and German were compared and four highly stereotypical occupational terms were selected for both female and male professions. These were *beautician* .84 in English/.85 in German, *cheerleader* .83/.82, *babysitter* .78/.83 as synonym for *nanny* which was not translated to German in the study by Misersky et al. (2014), and *nursery teacher* .80/.81. The stereotypically male professions chosen for the study were *heavy equipment operator* .15/.17, *president* .16/.17, *lorry driver* .19/.15 (AmE equivalent *truck driver* used in the online survey), and *football coach* .19/.20 (*coach* used in the online survey). As some of the top stereotypically female and male professions in both English and German could be seen to imply similar qualities associated with women or men, such as occupations in beauty and healthcare for women and occupations which enhance strength or manual labour for men, some professions at the top of the lists for English and German were replaced with other heavily stereotypically female or male professions, such as nursery teacher and coach, implying different kinds of assumptions of the qualities of women and men in professional fields, such as empathy for women and association with sports for men. The professions selected for the survey follow tendencies for female and male dominated fields in Finland as well. According to Tilastokeskus, in 2016 the most female-dominated fields were sales and healthcare while men worked as vehicle drivers and construction workers more often than women (Tilastokeskus 2020). These eight professions are expected to trigger similar gendered stereotyping in German speakers and Finnish speakers.

The basic structure of the questionnaire was piloted in a previous study on epicene pronoun use by Finnish university students in spring 2017. The questionnaire was modified for this study by adding more questions on stereotypically female or male professions and by reducing the amount of open-ended questions. In addition, fill-in questions with plural antecedents were added as an attempt to distract the participants of the focus of the study. The fill-in questions followed a similar format as the focus questions in the survey. However, in Task 1 and Task 2 the filler items included plural antecedents instead of singular antecedents and in Task 3 the two filler items included plural forms of gender-neutral role-nouns which were not occupational terms (*parents*, *colleagues*). Answers to these four filler questions are not analysed in the study. Special attention was also paid to the overall wording of the questionnaire, especially to using gender-inclusive language in the questionnaire itself by rephrasing expressions such as "when the sex of the referent is unknown" to "when the gender of the referent is unknown" because some participants in the 2017 survey felt the previous wording with a binary expression was offensive. After these modifications, the questionnaire was tested with four volunteers. The aim of this final check was to seek any spelling mistakes or inconsistencies in the survey. With the help of the volunteers it was confirmed that the survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. The answers from the four volunteers were excluded from the study. The data in the pilot study included 43 anonymous responses from Finnish students who studied English language, literature or translation as their major subject at the University of Tampere,

now Tampere University. However, in the present study, the number of participants is significantly higher and includes also L1 German speakers, and more conclusive remarks can be drawn from the data.

3.2 Data

This section elaborates on the details from the collected data and concludes with an evaluation of the data collection method and the data itself. Data in this study were collected from university students who study English language, literature or translation as their main subject at Finnish and Austrian universities. The online survey was sent by email to six Finnish universities that offer a degree programme in English language, literature or translation and to five Austrian universities that offer a similar programme, usually titled as "English and American Studies" or "Anglistik" in German. The students in these programmes were targeted by contacting both student associations and university lecturers or professors in these programmes. The first email with a cover letter that could be used when distributing the online survey to students, including a link to the online survey was sent in November 2019. A reminder email was sent in December 2019 as an attempt to maximise the number of participants. The cover letters can be found in Appendix B. After the reminder emails, 206 replies were gathered altogether, including 100 (48.5 %) responses from native Finnish speakers and 90 (43.7 %) responses from native German speakers. From the total number of responses, 16 (7.8 %) came from speakers of other languages. The responses from bilinguals as well as participants whose first language is not Finnish or German were excluded from the data analysis. The participants in the study vary according to their linguistic and sociocultural background, both of which may affect the way they use their L2, but the participants are somewhat similar when it comes to demographic variables such as age, English proficiency, educational level, income level, or social class. It is recognised that Austrian German differs from Standard German especially at the level of vocabulary and pronunciation. However, the underlying grammar rules and gendering mechanisms in these varieties are similar which is why the first language of Austrian participants is simply referred to as German. With this dataset where the main independent variable is the first language of the participants, Finnish or German, it is hoped to find some variation and general tendencies in the use of the dependent variable, an epicene pronominal.   .

The data collection method was fairly efficient, although it was more challenging to find Austrian university students to answer the survey than Finnish students. The data collected from Finnish speakers (n=100) and German speakers (n=90) are rather symmetrical and enables the comparison of these groups. However, the gender representation in the data is asymmetrical as 143 participants (75.3 %) identified as women, 36 (18.9 %) as men and 11 (5.8 %) as other or they preferred not to say. As comparative studies on the influence of gender on epicene pronoun use are abundant, this variable is not analysed in this study. However, it is recognised that the large

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representation of women might affect the results. The sample size (n=190) is useful for formulating an overall idea of the epicene use of L1 Finnish speakers and L1 German speakers when using English. However, it should be kept in mind that the data represent only a description of tendencies of a fraction of people in Finland and Austria and do not reflect language use of the entire population. A larger sample containing informants with different demographic information would be needed to make further generalisations about the way Finnish speakers and German speakers use English and how their first language affects L2 use.

4. Data analysis

In this chapter, the answers from native Finnish speakers and native German speakers are analysed. Part I of the online survey, including Task 1, Task 2, and Task 3, is analysed first in Section 4.1 and its subsections focusing on formal setting, informal setting, and occupational terms. In Section 4.2, the open questions of Part II of the online survey are analysed qualitatively, identifying common themes relating to the use of epicene pronouns. A summary of the results is provided at the end of each section. The online survey is found in Appendix A.

4.1 Part I

As stated in Section 3.1, Part I of the survey provides data for the quantitative analysis. In Part I, the participants chose pronouns they felt would fit the example sentences best. Part I consisted of three tasks focusing on different aspects of language use. Task 1 reflects a formal setting, Task 2 an informal setting and Task 3 focuses on stereotypically gendered occupational terms. The options given in the gap-filling exercise were *he*, *she*, *he or she*, *s/he*, *they*, and "Other", including inflected forms of the pronouns except for *s/he*. If a participant selected the "Other" option, they were asked to specify their answer.

　　　In this part of the data analysis, frequencies of the pronouns chosen by the participants are identified. The analysis follows the structure of the online questionnaire. In each subsection of the analysis, the answers from L1 Finnish speakers are analysed first, followed by the analysis of responses from L1 German speakers. For clarity, the variables shown in the figures include only the nominative forms of the pronouns *he*, *she*, *he or she*, *s/he*, *they*, and "Other" for rephrased expressions. The total number of answers to a variable has been converted to percentages in the Figures for an easier comparison between language groups. For L1 Finnish speakers the percentage is identical to the number of answers collected for that alternative, because there were 100 L1 Finnish speakers participating in this study. Respectively, the answers collected from L1 German speakers have been converted to represent percentages. There were 90 answers in total collected from L1 German speakers, so, for example, 18 responses for the alternative *he or she* would constitute 20.0

percent of the answers to that question. The percentages are rounded to one decimal place. Comparing the absolute numbers between L1 Finnish speakers and L1 German speakers would be problematic because there are fewer German-speaking participants in this study than native Finnish speakers.

4.1.1 Formal register

In this subsection, the answers to Task 1 from L1 Finnish speakers are analysed first, followed by a similar analysis to the answers from L1 German speakers. Task 1 of the survey focused on formal register and was modelled based on Baranowski's (2002) findings, including expressions with indefinite and definite antecedents (*a student*, *the student*), quantifiers (*each*, *any*), and singular and plural verb forms (*picks up*, *hands in*, *feels*, *has been*, *should bring*). All nouns in Task 1 were gender neutral. The participants were asked to imagine themselves working as an assistant to a university professor and to select pronouns that they would use in an information sheet sent to university students attending a course.

As can be seen from Figure 1 below, the answers from L1 Finnish speakers seem to follow two different patterns. Pronoun *their* was clearly the preferred option in questions 1 and 2 while *he or she* was favoured in questions 4 and 5, followed by the "Other" option. Singular *they* was chosen most often in question 1 (93 %) which included quantificational expression *each* and phrasal verb *picks up* in singular verb form. In question 2, *their* was selected by 82 % of L1 Finnish speakers. The question included an indefinite antecedent *a student* and a modal verb form *should bring*. These findings support previous claims that epicene *they*s most often refer to quantificational expressions and indefinite antecedents (Baranowski 2002, Stormbom 2018). It seems that in question 1, the singular verb form does not affect pronoun selection as much as the quantifier. Furthermore, phrasal verbs might not trigger the use of expressions such as *his or her* as strongly as verbs without prepositions attached to them, due to the distance between the singular verb form and the pronoun. In question 2, the combination of the modal verb *should* and the infinitive form *bring* seem to support the use of *their*.

Pronoun *his or her* was selected only by 7 % in question 1 and by 15 % of the participants in question 2. However, *he or she* was the preferred pronoun in questions 4 (49 %) and 5 (47 %). Question 4 included a definite antecedent *the student* and a phrasal verb *hands in* in singular verb form. Question 5 included a quantifier-specified indefinite antecedent *anyone* and singular verb forms *feels* and *has been* in addition to modal verb *should* at the end of the sentence. The findings suggest that the characteristics of the antecedent do not affect the pronoun choice as much as the verb form. The singular verb forms in questions 4 and 5 elicited not only *he or she* pronouns but also one generic *he* in question 4 and *s/he* which was selected by 8 % in question 4 and by 6 % in question 5. Pronoun *s/he* is absent in questions 1 and 2 because inflected forms were

required in these questions. Generic *she* was not used at all in formal register.

The "Other" option was not used at all in question 1, but three participants rephrased the sentence "A student should bring [blank] notes to the tutorial" in question 2 with alternatives "Nothing.", "one's" and "You should bring your". However, sentences in questions 4 and 5 were rephrased often (30 %, 34 %). In most of the rephrased sentences in question 4, 27 out of 30, the singular verb form was changed to a plural form "hand in" and pronoun "their" was included. Furthermore, in question 5, 30 participants out of 34 who chose the "Other" option changed the wording to "they have". Other suggestions in question 4 were to fill the blank with "the student", "one" and "your grade will be affected if you hand in" and in question 5 "one", "he/she", "If you feel your essay has been…" and "their assignment". Some of the modifications reflect those supported by guidelines for gender-neutral language use discussed in Subsection 2.6.1, replacing the subject with *you* and *one*. Still, some participants chose singular *they* in questions 4 and 5 without rephrasing the sentence (12 %, 13 %).

To summarise, singular *they* was preferred in the first two questions which included quantificational expressions and indefinite antecedents, together with phrasal and modal verbs. However, it seems that verb form affects the pronoun choice more than the type of the antecedent, because sentences with singular verb forms were rephrased the most to include plural verb forms that agree in number with pronoun *they.* If the sentences were not rephrased, *he or she* was most likely chosen. The use of generic *he* is almost non-existent in the formal register among L1 Finnish speakers as it was selected only once and generic *she* was not used at all. Pronoun *s/he* was used only with singular verb forms in questions 4 and 5.
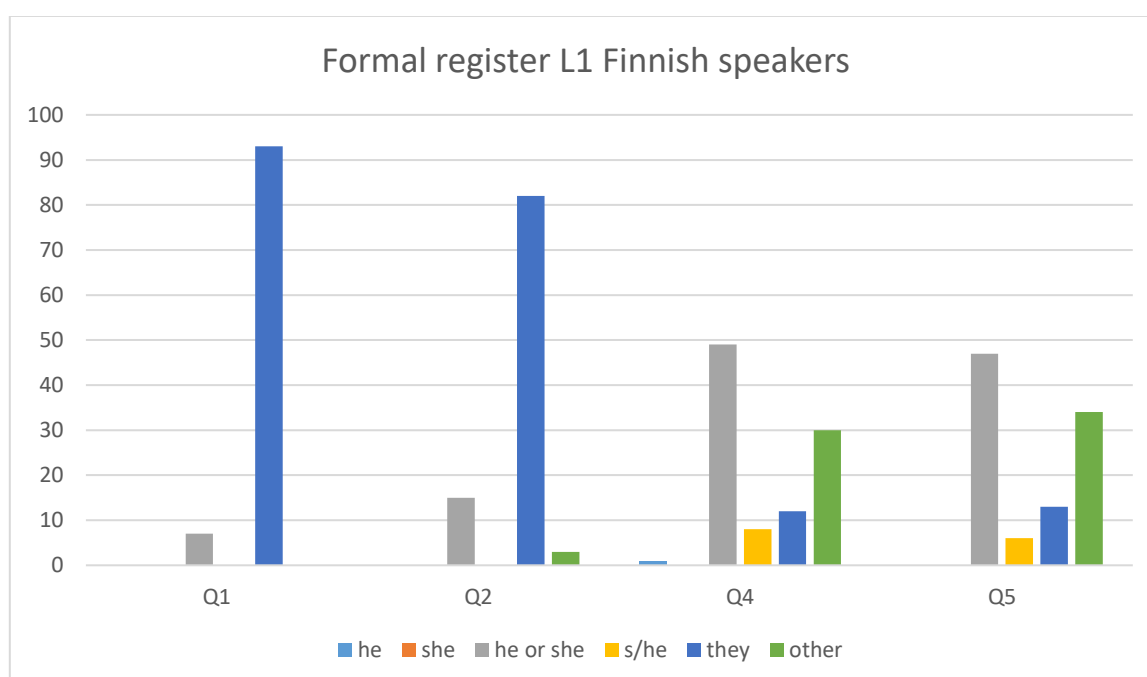

Figure 1: Formal register L1 Finnish speakers

Next, the answers from L1 German speakers to Task 1 are analysed and compared to the answers from L1 Finnish speakers. As can be seen in Figure 2, *their* was again the preferred alternative in questions 1 (76.7 %) and 2 (53,3 %). However, it should be noted that the alternative *his or her* was used more by L1 German speakers (20.0 %, 43.3 %) than L1 Finnish speakers (7%, 15 %) in these questions. What is also interesting compared to the analysis of L1 Finnish speakers discussed previously, in question 2 the answers from L1 German speakers are distributed rather evenly between *their* (53.3 %) and *his or her* (43.3 %) with only 2.2 % of the answers to pronoun *his* and 1.1 % to the "Other" option. Question 2 "A student should bring [blank] notes to the tutorial" included an indefinite antecedent *a student* and a modal verb form *should bring*. For L1 Finnish speakers the use of singular *they* was clearly the most preferred option (82 %) which was supported by the indefinite antecedent combined with the modal verb *should* with the infinitive verb form *bring*. For 53.3 % of L1 German speakers this is also the case. However, for 43.3 % the indefinite noun *a student* could foster the use of *his or her.* For comparison, 15 % of Finnish speakers selected this alternative in question 2.

It can also be interpreted from Figure 2 that pronoun *he or she* dominated in question 4 (62.2 %, n=56) and question 5 (54.4 %, n=49), a pattern which was also observed in the analysis for L1 Finnish speakers. Question 4 and question 5 included singular verb forms *hands in*, *feels*, and *has been* which might trigger the use of the expression *he or she*, motivated by the number agreement between the noun and the verb. Overall, *he or she* was more popular among L1 German speakers (20 %, 43.3 %, 62.2 %, and 54.4%) than L1 Finnish speakers (7 %, 15 %, 49 %, and 47 %) in formal register. Pronoun *s/he* was only used in questions 4 and 5 as was the case with L1 Finnish speakers also, as questions 1 and 2 required inflected forms of pronouns.

What is different compared to L1 Finnish speakers in the answers to question 4 and question 5 is that the "Other" option was used far less among L1 German speakers and the answers were divided more evenly between *s/he* (12.2 %, 11.1 %), singular *they* (12.2 %, 16.7 %), and "Other" (12.2 %, 15.6 %). In question 4 "The grade of the student will be affected if [blank] hands in the course essay after the deadline", there were nine alternative spellings that changed the verb form to a plural and used pronoun *they* in "they hand in", out of the total 11 answers to the "Other" option. The other two alterations switched the order of the expression *he or she* to "she or he" where the feminine pronoun precedes the masculine. In question 5, there were 12 alternative spellings with "they have" and two with expression "she or he".

Unlike with L1 Finnish speakers, generic *he* was used in all questions, although its use was nevertheless marginal (2.2 %, 2.2 %, 1.1 %, 2.2 %). Like L1 Finnish speakers, L1 German speakers seem to avoid the use of epicene *he* in formal register. As was the case with L1 Finnish speakers, L1 German speakers did not use pronoun *she* at all in formal register.
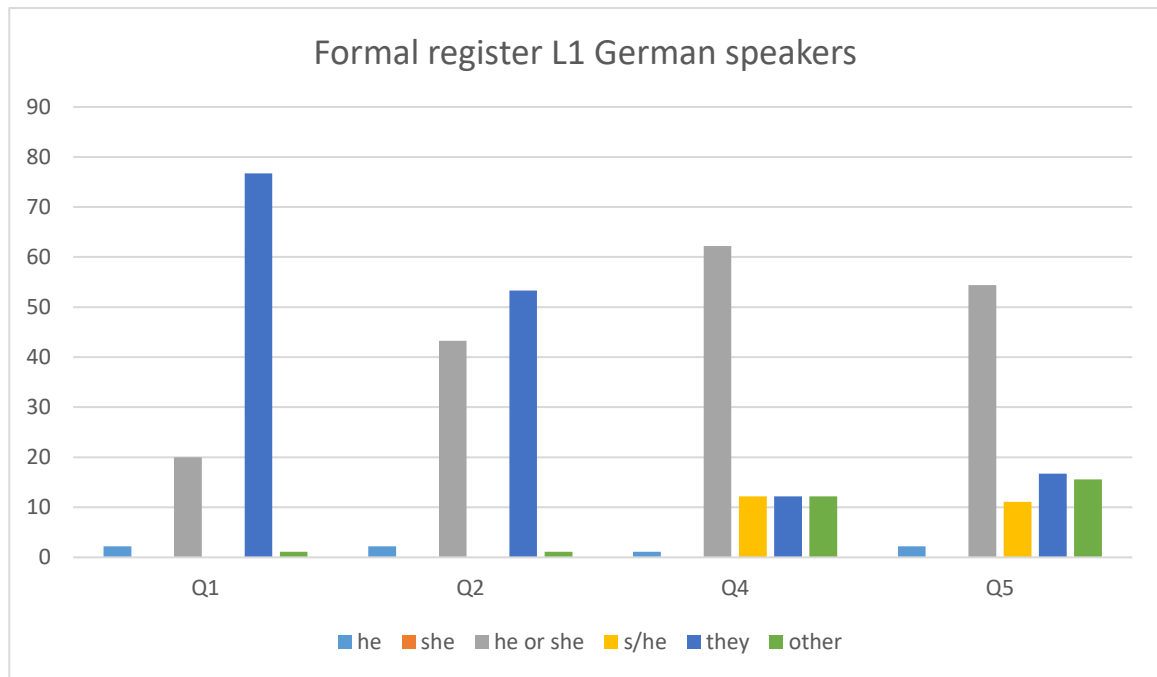
Figure 2: Formal register L1 German speakers

To summarise the results of the analysis of formal register, it can be stated that *their* was the most preferred option for both groups in question 1 and question 2 which included quantificational expression *each student*, indefinite noun phrase *a student*, phrasal verb *picks up* and modal verb *should bring*. With singular verb forms *hands in*, *feels*, and *has been* in questions 4 and 5, *he or she* was the preferred option in both language groups. It seems that number agreement between the verb and the pronoun affects the choice of epicene pronouns more than the type of antecedent as in question 4 the antecedent was definite *the student* and in question 5 quantifier-specified indefinite *anyone*. The participants were aware of grammatical rules concerning agreement in number between the subject and the verb. When singular verb forms occurred, many participants chose to rephrase the sentence and replaced singular verb forms with plural verb forms to allow for the use of singular *they*. L1 Finnish speakers used rephrasing more than L1 German speakers, who on the other hand used expression *he or she* notably more than Finnish speakers. Pronoun *s/he* was used only with singular verb forms when inflected forms were not required, generic *he* was used only marginally and generic *she* was not used at all in formal setting. Strategies identified by Baranowski (2002) such as omitting the pronoun as well as rephrasing the sentence to overcome problems relating to agreement can be observed. Sentences which included singular verb forms were often rephrased to include a plural verb form, thus matching the notional number of the verb and the pronoun. Previous research (Lee 2007, Stormbom 2018) suggests that singular *they* is most often used to refer to quantificational expressions, followed by indefinite antecedents, and that it would be used the least with definite antecedents. The results of the analysis of Task 1 support this claim. However, the type of the antecedent is not as significant as verb form. Prescriptive grammar

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rules have suggested that singular *they* should be reserved to informal settings but according to the analysis of Task 1, the use of singular *they* is accepted also in formal context.

4.1.2 Informal register

In this subsection, the answers to the online survey are analysed with respect to an informal setting. In the instructions of Task 2, the participants were asked to imagine talking to a close friend of theirs. The questions in Task 2 followed a similar structure as in Task 1, the only difference being in register. Following the structure of the previous subsection, the answers from L1 Finnish speakers are analysed first, followed by an analysis of the answers collected from L1 German speakers.

As can be seen from Figure 3, pronouns *themselves* and *their* were clearly the most popular options among L1 Finnish speakers in questions 6, 7, and 8 (83 %, 94 %, 76 %). Question 6 included an indefinite noun phrase *a fool* as well as verbs *would hitchhike* and *lay*. Question 7 included a quantifier *no* in *no one* and singular verb form *wants to place.* The antecedent in question 8 was definite *your child* and the verb form singular *wants*. Of these questions, question with a quantificational expression received most answers for singular *they*, indefinite antecedent received second most answers and definite antecedent the least. This is in line with previous research suggesting that *they* is used most with quantificational expressions (Lee 2007, Stormbom 2018). However, the expression *no one* in question 7 clearly suggests reference to a singular entity. Similarly, it would be assumed that the singular verb form *wants* would foster the use of pronouns such as *his or her* rather than *their.* However, the distance between the singular verb form and the pronoun seems to affect the pronoun selection more. It could be that the infinitive form *to place* right before the pronoun supports the use of *their* as it does not highlight the number agreement issue. In question 6, indefinite antecedent together with infinitive verb forms seem to elicit answers *themselves*. Many participants (76 %) selected *their* in question 8 even when it included a definite antecedent *your child* and a singular verb form *wants*. Baranowski (2002) suggests that definite antecedents rarely anaphorise in singular *they,* possibly because the referent is known to the speaker. This was a point that some participants highlighted in their comments as well, saying that if they are talking about a child of their friend, they would most likely know the gender of the child in question and would choose the pronoun accordingly.

In question 10, "When a citizen wants to get a passport [blank] has to go to the police station", the answers were distributed more evenly. Here, *he or she* was the most preferred option (40 %) followed by "Other" (30 %) and singular *they* (14 %). It appears that the singular verb form supports the selection of *he or she* over *they*. All 30 participants that chose to rephrase the sentence in question 10 changed the wording to "they have", tackling the grammatical problem concerning agreement between the notional number of the verb and the noun. Pronoun *s/he* was only used in question 10 (4 %) as it was the only question which did not require inflected forms. Generic *he* was

selected in all questions, most often in question 10 (5 %, 1 %, 6 %, 11%). Generic *she* was not used at all in formal register by L1 Finnish speakers but was selected by some in informal register in questions 6 (4 %), 7 (1 %), and 10 (1 %).
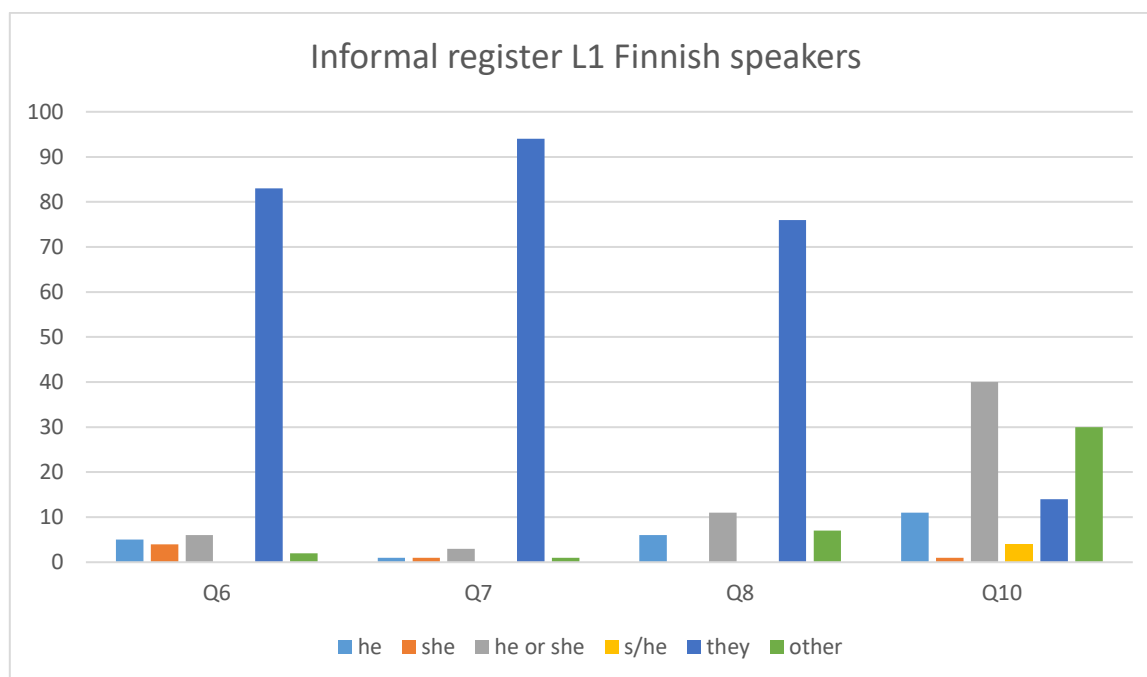

Figure 3: Informal register L1 Finnish speakers

Next, the answers from L1 German speakers to Task 2 are analysed. As Figure 4 below shows, as with L1 Finnish speakers, pronouns *themselves* and *their* were the most common alternatives in question 6 (58.9 %), question 7 (74.4 %) and question 8 (55.6 %). Again, question 7 with a quantificational expression *no one* and singular verb *wants to place* elicited most answers for *their*. Quantifier *no*, which can be argued to be situated in the 'singular end' of the notional number spectrum, and the singular verb form *wants* do not appear to be obstacles for selecting singular *they*. As with L1 Finnish speakers, the proximity of the infinitive form *to place* and the pronoun seems to affect the selection of *their* more than the antecedent and singular verb form. Question 6 included an indefinite antecedent *a fool* and an infinitive verb forms *would hitchhike* and *lay* which support the use of pronoun *themselves*. Pronoun *their* was a popular alternative also in question 8 (55.6 %, n=50), even with a definite antecedent *your child* and a singular verb form *wants* in the sentence. However, regarding these questions, singular *they* was more popular among L1 Finnish speakers (83 %, 94 %, 76%) than L1 German speakers (58.9 %, 74.4 %, 55.6 %).

As with L1 Finnish speakers, expression *he or she* was the most popular alternative (54.4 %) in question 10 with a sentence "When a citizen wants to get a passport [blank] has to go to the police station". Here, the indefinite article *a* and singular verb forms *wants* and *has to* might steer the selection of pronoun to *he or she* rather than singular *they*. Like with Finnish speakers, the "Other"

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option was used the most in question 10 (13.3 %, n=12), where ten participants rephrased the sentence to include a plural verb form "have to" to allow the use of "they". As in Task 1, two participants chose to use the expression "she or he". However, in question 10, L1 German speakers rephrased the sentence less (13.3 %) than their Finnish counterparts (30 %). Compared to L1 Finnish speakers, L1 German speakers were more comfortable in choosing expression *he or she* than L1 Finnish speakers throughout Task 2.

Epicene *he* was used more frequently in informal context (28.9 %, 12.2 %, 6.7 %, 12.2 %) than in formal context (2.2 %, 2.2 %,1.1 %, 2.2 %) by L1 German speakers. In the informal register there is also a significant difference to L1 Finnish speakers in questions 6 and 7. L1 Finnish speakers chose epicene *he* five times (5 %) in question 6 and once (1 %) in question 7 as opposed to L1 German speakers who chose the alternative 26 times (28.9 %) in question 6 and 11 times (12.2 %) in question 7. Similarly, for L1 Finnish speakers, pronoun *he* was never more popular than *he or she*, but L1 German speakers used *he* in questions 6 and 7 (28.9 %, 12.2%) more than *he or she* (12.2 %, 11.1 %). These questions included nouns *fool* and *no one*. *A fool* 'der Tor' has masculine grammatical gender in German and *no one* 'jemand' inflects like masculine words in German. This could be at least a partial explanation for the stark contrast between language groups in the use of generic *he* in these questions. However, there is not a significant difference in the use of epicene *he* in questions 8 and 10 between language groups. The noun *child* 'das Kind' has neuter gender in German and *citizen* 'der Bürger' is grammatically masculine. As with Finnish speakers, pronoun *s/he* appeared in question 10 where it was selected by 7.8 % of the participants. Pronoun *she* was used only in questions 7 and 8 where it was selected once.
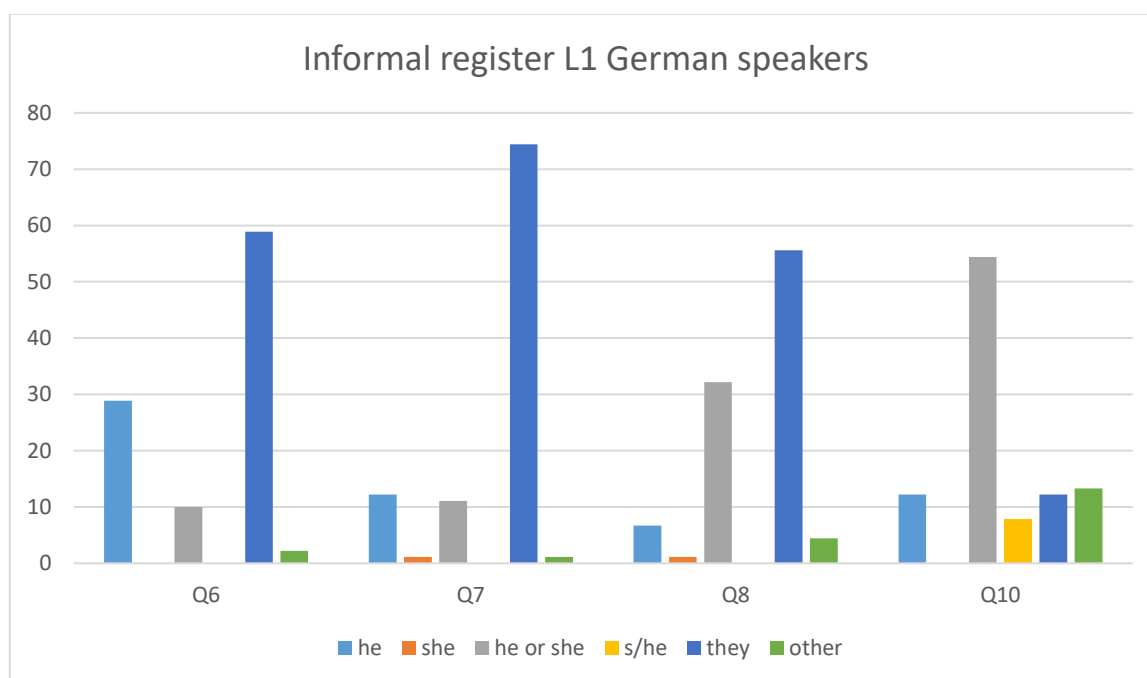

Figure 4: Informal register L1 German speakers

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To summarise the results for informal register, pronoun *they* was clearly the preferred option among L1 Finnish speakers. If singular verb form disrupted the use of the pronoun, L1 Finnish speakers rephrased the sentence with plural verb forms to go together with pronoun *they. They* was also the most popular option among L1 German speakers in question 6, 7, and 8. However, *he or she* was preferred in question 10, even after the instances for *they* and rephrased sentences were calculated together. Overall, the use of *he or she* was more frequent among L1 German speakers than L1 Finnish speakers. Generic *he* was also more readily accepted by L1 German speakers while L1 Finnish speakers were more hesitant to use generic *he*. When *s/he* was available it was used more than generic *she* which appeared only marginally. The results support previous claims that speakers of grammatically gendered L1s with a traditional practice of masculine generics would use *he* the most (Stormbom 2018, 1). Speakers of German were also more likely to select *he or she* than Finnish speakers, which supports the hypothesis of this study that more *he or she* constructions alongside singular *they* would occur among L1 German speakers due to the linguistic structures of German.

Baranowski (2002) suggests that in the beginning of the 21st century, singular *they* was more common in informal than in formal settings. The data suggest that this separation between contexts is narrowing as there is no major difference in the use of epicene *they* between formal and informal contexts. However, *he or she* appears to be used more in formal than informal setting which has been observed in previous literature as well (Baranowski 2002). Interestingly, generic *he* was almost entirely absent in formal register but was used more frequently in informal setting, especially by L1 German speakers. These findings contrast the ones made by Baranowski (2002) in the early 2000s that suggested that generic *he* was more frequent in formal than informal context. This also contradicts the idea that prescriptive grammar rules favouring *he* in formal settings would be applied by the participants. Generic *she* was completely absent in formal register but was selected by a few participants in informal register.

4.1.3 Occupational terms

This part of the quantitative analysis focuses on comparing the pronoun choices of the two language groups in relation to stereotypically gendered nouns. In Task 3, the emphasis was on stereotypically female and male occupational terms *babysitter*, *cheerleader*, *nursery teacher*, *beautician*, *president*, *truck driver*, *coach*, and *heavy equipment operator*. Based on Misersky et al. (2014), *babysitter*, *cheerleader*, *nursery teacher*, and *beautician* were considered as occupations stereotypically associated with women and *president*, *truck driver*, *coach*, *and heavy equipment operator* were considered as stereotypically male occupational terms. Only indefinite nouns were used with singular and plural verb forms.

As can be seen from Figure 5 below, the answers from L1 Finnish speakers seem to

form two groups. In questions 11, 15, and 19, *he or she* is the preferred pronoun (53 %, 37 %, 41 %) but the answers are distributed rather evenly across different alternatives whereas in questions 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20 most of the participants chose alternatives *their* and *they* (81 %, 78 %, 79 %, 79 %, 75 %). Questions 11, 15, and 19 included singular verb forms *is re-elected*, *trusts*, *is able to perform*, *arrives*, and *has to assess*. As was already identified in Task 1 and Task 2, singular verb forms support the use of *he or she* over singular *they*. In questions 11, 15, and 19, "Other" was the second most used option (26 %, 27 %, 28 %). Most of the alterations changed the singular verb form to a plural form "are" or "have" and used pronoun "they*".* In question 11, some participants (3 %) chose to omit the singular verb and rephrased the sentence as "A president can serve up to 12 years in the office if re-elected". Singular *they* without alterations to the sentence was the third preferred option in questions 11 and 19 (10 %, 15 %).

Contrary to the questions discussed above, questions 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20 show a spike in singular *they* (81 %, 78 %, 79 %, 79 %, 75 %)*.* Questions 12, 16, 18, and 20 included verb phrases *must take into account*, *can push*, *make*, *should keep in mind*, and *can ruin*. However, it should be noted that question 14 included only singular verb form *is very aware of* while question 16 and question 20 included singular verb forms *has* and *uses* in addition to plural verb forms. As was discussed previously regarding phrasal verbs, the distance between the verb and the pronoun might influence the selection of the pronoun. In questions 14, 16, and 20 the singular verb forms are further from the pronoun than other verb forms and thus might not affect the pronoun selection as strongly. In questions where singular they was the most popular, *he or she* was the second preferred option (9 %, 15 %, 15 %, 12 %, 16 %). Rephrasing with "Other" was used in question 12 (6 %) and question 18 (3 %). In question 12, five participants filled the blank with article "the", rephrasing the sentence as "A truck driver must take into account the customer's timetables." In question 18, the alternatives were to change the sentence completely to "A nursery teacher should keep in mind that working with little children can be challenging, especially mentally" or to fill the blank with "the teacher" instead of a pronoun.

Interestingly, pronouns *he* and *she* were used more in Task 3 than in previous tasks. As can be seen in Figure 5, some stereotypically female or male occupations can be identified. There is a higher number of *he* than *she* in questions 11, 12, 16, and 19 while the reverse is true for questions 14, 15, 18, and 20. The nouns in questions 11, 12, 16, and 19 were *president*, *truck driver*, *coach*, and *heavy equipment operator*. The occurrence of generic *he* was 8 %, 4 %, 5 %, and 10 % respectively. Of these questions, there is only one instance of generic *she* used in question 19 with the noun *heavy equipment operator*. These occupations scored high on stereotypically male occupations also in Miserky et al. (2014) discussed in Subsection 2.5.4 and Section 3.1. On the contrary, answers to questions 14, 15, 18, and 20 included more generic *she* pronouns (15 %, 21 %, 4 %, 6 %) than generic masculines (1 %, 1 %, 0 %, 1 %). The nouns in these questions were *babysitter*, *cheerleader*, *nursery teacher*, and *beautician*. The noun *cheerleader* was clearly seen as

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the most stereotypically gendered occupational term of the set of nouns used in Task 3. Not surprisingly, *babysitter*, *cheerleader*, *nursery teacher*, and *beautician* were considered stereotypically female occupations in Misersky et al. (2014). Even when alternatives *they*, *he or she*, or rephrasing the sentence are favoured over the use of generic *he* and generic *she* by the participants throughout, a traditional pattern dividing occupations as stereotypically female or stereotypically male can still be detected. Pronoun *s/he* was used occasionally, but the frequencies remain low (Q11 3 %, Q12 0 %, 14 0 %, Q15 6 %, Q16 1 %, Q18 2 %, Q19 5 %, Q20 2 %) and there is no major difference to the use of the pronoun to the one observed in formal and informal settings.
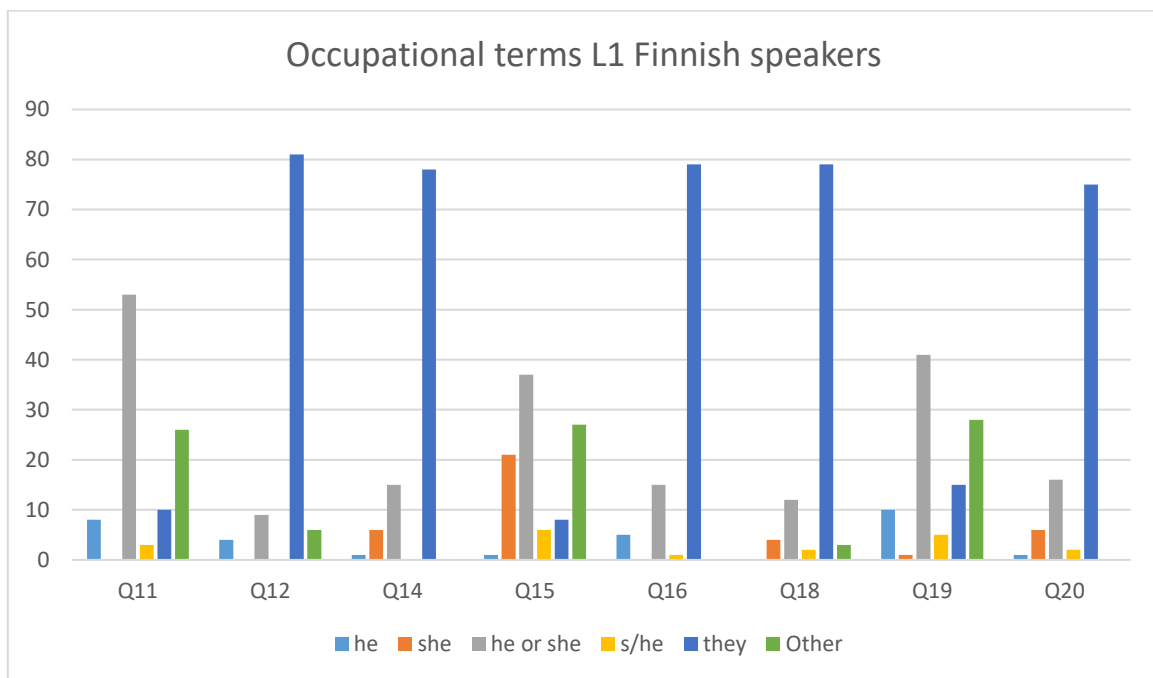

Figure 5: Occupational terms L1 Finnish speakers

Next, moving on to the analysis of L1 German speakers, it can be inferred from Figure 6 that the answers again seem to form two main groups following the pattern already observed with L1 Finnish speakers. Again, the selection between singular *they* and *he or she* seems to be determined mostly by the verb form. For questions 12, 16, 18, and 20, which included modal verb forms, singular *they* was used the most (57.8 %, 58.9 %, 53.3 %, 55.6 %). Pronoun *their* was popular also in question 14 which included a verb phrase *is very aware of*. In questions 11, 15, and 19 the most preferred option was again *he or she* (61.1 %, 47.8 %, 47.8 %). As was already identified in the analysis for L1 Finnish speakers, these questions included singular verb forms (*is re-elected*, *trusts*, *is able to perform*, *arrives*, *has to assess*) which support the selection of *he or she* over singular *they* and questions 12, 16, 18, and 20 included infinitive verb forms, modal verbs, and phrasal verbs (*must take into account*, *can push*, *make*, *should keep in mind*, and *can ruin*). Although question 14 included a singular verb form *is very aware of,* 57.8 % of German speakers chose

singular *they*. However, L1 German speakers showed lower percentages for singular *they* and higher percentages for *he or she* than Finnish speakers.

The "Other" option was used more frequently in questions 11, 15, and 19 which include singular verb forms than in questions 12, 14, and 18. Rephrasing was not used at all in questions 16 and 20. In question 11, nine participants (10 %) used the "Other" option. Seven of these rephrased the sentence with a plural verb form "are" and used pronoun "they*"*. One participant altered the sentence using "they got to be" and one preferred the expression "she or he". In question 15, eight participants out of ten who selected the "Other" option rephrased using "they are". The other two alterations were "it" and "she or he". In question 19, also eight participants out of ten altered the sentence with "they have", one participant used "one of them" and one rephrased with "she or he". For these questions, L1 German speakers used rephrasing less than Finnish speakers. As for questions with other verb forms, there was little rephrasing as the "Other" option was used only by two participants (2.2 %) in question 12 and 14 and by three participants (3.3 %) in question 18. In questions 12 and 14, the pronoun was replaced with article "the" and in question 18 the suggestions were "people", "you", and "you/trainees/one".

L1 German speakers used pronoun *he* more than *she* in questions 11, 12, 14, 16, and 19. These questions included the nouns *president* (13.3 %), *truck driver* (21.1 %), *babysitter* (6.7 %), *coach* (13.3 %), and *heavy equipment operator* (22.2 %). It should be noted, however, that the difference is only slight in question 14 regarding the noun *babysitter* (*he* 6.7 %, *she* 4.4 %), and a much stronger contrast occurs in questions 11, 12, 16, and 19 which included stereotypically male occupational terms. The pronoun *she* was used only once in these questions, in question 11 with the noun *president,* and with the nouns *truck driver*, *coach*, and *heavy equipment operator* it was not used at all. Occupations that were considered stereotypically female by L1 German speakers include *cheerleader* (23.3 %), *nursery teacher* (4.4 %), and *beautician* (10 %). Of these, cheerleader was the most stereotypically female occupation with 23.3 % (n=21) of the participants selecting *she*. This was the case also for L1 Finnish speakers, of whom 21 % (n=21) selected the pronoun. It should also be mentioned that generic *she* was not used in question 12, question 16, and question 19 at all, but generic *he* was used in all questions to a varying degree.
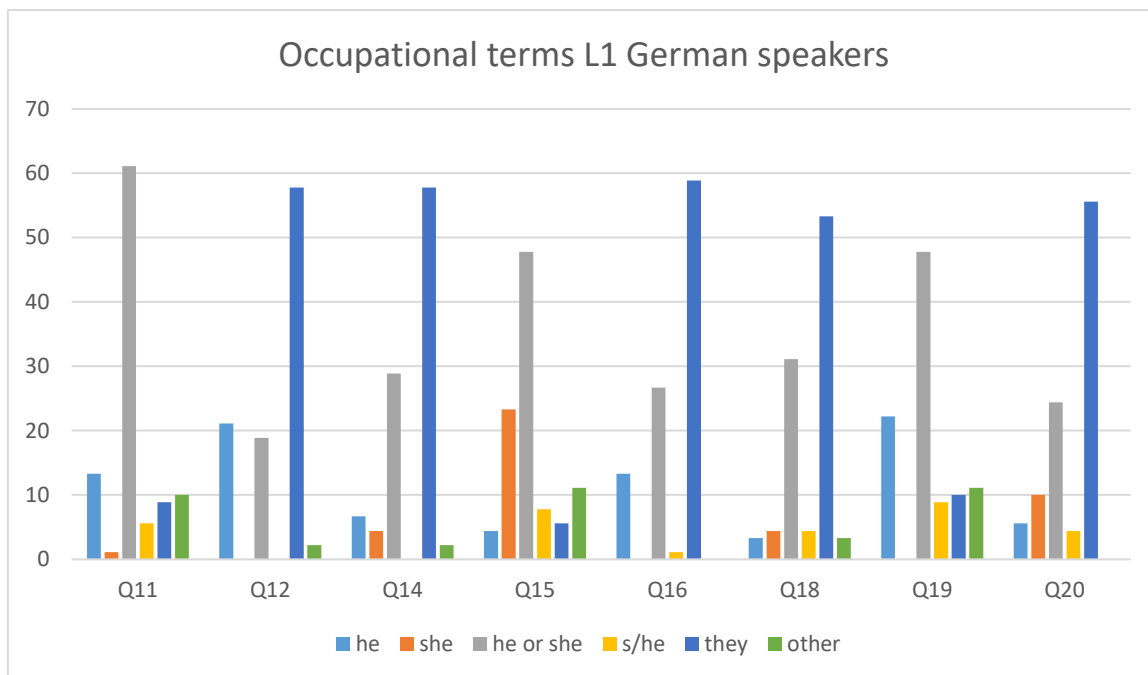
Figure 6: Occupational terms L1 German speakers

In sum, the majority of the answers in Task 3 from both L1 Finnish speakers and L1 German speakers reflect the tendencies observed previously in the quantitative analysis of Part I. Singular *they* is preferred with infinitive verb forms, modal verbs, and phrasal verbs while pronoun *he or she* is favoured in conjunction with singular verb forms. With singular verb forms, participants from both language groups rephrased the sentences more often than in questions which included plural verb forms. However, Finnish participants rephrased sentences more than German speakers while German speakers used the pronoun *he or she* more than Finnish speakers. Despite the popularity of singular *they* and *he or she*, there is a tendency to use pronouns *she* and *he*, reflecting traditional gender roles aligning with the findings of Misersky et al. (2014). Speakers of both languages had similar stereotyping patterns of female and male occupational terms. Both language groups viewed *heavy equipment operator* to be the most stereotypically male occupational term and *cheerleader* as the most stereotypically female role noun. German speakers assigned more generic masculines than Finnish speakers in all of the questions in Task 3.

4.1.4 Summary of the results from Part I

The quantitative analysis of the answers to Part I of the online survey reveals that singular *they* and *he or she* were the most popular alternatives for epicene pronouns. The choice of pronoun was determined mostly by the form of the verb. When the verb did not include third person singular -*s* suffix, singular *they* was most likely selected. When the verb was in singular form, *he or she* was the most popular alternative, along with rephrasing the sentence, followed by singular *they* without alterations to the sentence. When the "Other" option was used, most participants changed the verb

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form to allow the use of *they*. These results indicate that the participants are aware of grammar rules concerning number agreement between the verb and the pronoun and selected forms that follow number agreement. There were no major differences in the use of *they* between formal and informal register. However, generic *he* appeared only marginally and generic *she* was absent in formal register, while both forms were used in informal register. Still, the frequency of *he* and *she* remained low also in informal register. Pronoun *s/he* was used by roughly 10 % of the participants in all tasks, but its use was restricted to contexts where inflected forms of the pronoun were not needed. Even when gender-neutral expressions *they* and *he or she* were most popular alternatives in Task 3, stereotypically gendered occupational terms could be detected as pronouns *he* and *she* were used the most in this task. Both language groups viewed role nouns *babysitter*, *cheerleader*, *nursery teacher*, and *beautician* as feminine while *he* was selected more often than *she* for nouns *president, truck driver*, *coach*, and *heavy equipment operator*. It should also be mentioned that neopronouns, such as *E*, *ze*, *hir*, *ey*, and *zhe* were not suggested at all by the participants. As previous literature shows, these pronouns have not been successful in the past either. Although gender-neutral, they appear to be uncommon among language users.

It should be noted that in some questions there were two structures that might affect the selection of the pronoun. For example, question 2 included both an indefinite antecedent and an infinitive verb form, both of which have been found to favour the use of singular *they.* Similarly, question 4 included a definite antecedent and a singular verb form which usually support the selection of *he or she* instead of *they*. It would be recommended for future research on the topic to modify the questionnaire in a way that the structure of the sentence would vary only in one feature, such as the definite/indefinite dimension or verb forms. However, as the analysis shows, in questions whose structure supported the selection of expressions such as *he or she*, the "Other" option was used often, and participants rephrased the sentence to include verb forms which allow the use of they. Only a few instances were found where the definite/indefinite nature of the noun phrase was modified. This shows that participants were more concerned with the number agreement between the pronoun and the verb, not so much of the definite/indefinite aspect of the antecedent.

However, differences between language groups were found. L1 German speakers used the expression *he or she* more than L1 Finnish speakers throughout the online questionnaire, even in questions that did not involve singular verb forms, such as question 2 in Task 1. Similarly, German speakers were more likely to use generic *he* than Finnish speakers. On the contrary, Finnish speakers used the "Other" option more than German speakers to alter the sentence to include plural verb forms that allow for the use of pronoun *they*. These findings confirm the hypothesis of the study that speakers of languages with no gender distinction in third person singular pronouns in their L1 would favour the use of pronouns with no gender distinction, such as *they*, when using L2 as well. Similarly, speakers of L1s where there is a gender distinction in the third person singular in their first language could favour a gendered construction, such as generic *he* or *he or she* alongside the

gender indefinite construction with singular *they*.

There is no longer a gap in the use of singular *they* between formal and informal register, which shows that the linguistic situation has changed since the work of Baranowski two decades ago (2002). The verb form affects the choice of the pronoun more than the type of the antecedent. However, when the verb form was similar, singular *they* was most often selected with quantificational expressions, followed by indefinite expressions and definite expression, confirming the findings of previous research (Lee 2007, Stormbom 2018). Descriptive grammar books and guidelines for language users suggest avoidance strategies such as rephrasing the sentence, pluralizing the subject or leaving out the pronoun altogether to avoid using gendered pronouns. These strategies were also employed by the participants in this study. Similarly, stereotypically gendered role nouns followed the pattern identified by Misersky et al. (2014). The results also support findings made by Stormbom that speakers who used *he* the most are speakers of gendered L1s with a traditional practice of masculine generics (Stormbom 2018, 1).

4.2 Part II

In this section, the answers to Part II of the online survey are analysed qualitatively. The aim of the analysis is to provide possible explanations for the tendencies observed in the gap-filling exercises in Part I and offer insight on the motivation behind the use, or neglection, of certain expressions. Furthermore, it is hoped that the qualitative analysis reveals reasons for the differences observed in the quantitative analysis between L1 Finnish speakers and L1 German speakers.

The second part of the survey consisted of three open-ended questions and one multiple-choice question. These questions inquired about attitudes towards grammatical correctness, the participant's preferred pronoun when the gender of the referent is unknown in the context, and possible problems they think might arise with the use of some of the suggested pronouns. The questions in Part II were

21. Why do you prefer to use the pronouns you have previously selected in Part I?
22. Do you think grammatical correctness, namely agreement*, is important? *pronoun agrees with its antecedent in gender and number, for example: 1. "Every mother loves her child." (agrees in lexical gender: female) 2. "Two boys scratched their heads." (agrees in number: plural)
23. Which one of the suggested pronouns would you use if the gender of the referent is unknown?
24. Do you see any problems regarding the use of any of these pronouns? If yes, which pronoun(s) would you consider problematic and why?

As in the quantitative analysis, the answers from L1 Finnish speakers are analysed first in Subsection 4.2.1, followed by an analysis of the answers from L1 German speakers in Subsection 4.2.2. The answers are not analysed separately question by question, rather, the answers to the open-ended questions are grouped under themes that emerged from the answers to all of the questions in Part II. In each of the themes identified, passages from participants are included to exemplify the essence of the theme. Number counts or percentages are not given in the qualitative analysis because multiple categories often overlap in the participants' statements. The examples given are unaltered, direct quotes from the participants.

4.2.1 Categorization of the answers received from L1 Finnish speakers

In the qualitative analysis of the answers received from L1 Finnish speakers, multiple themes were identified, including inclusive language use, grammatical correctness, awareness of register, easiness of the expression, influence of education, influence of L1, and political correctness. These themes can be found in Table 1 below. Some participants also admitted that their selection of pronouns was rather arbitrary or that they were unsure of the logic behind their pronoun use. Many of the categories overlap in the statements received form the participants, for example in the following statement "The singular they is quicker, easier and more inclusive than any of the other options" where the participant appreciates both the smoothness of singular *they* as well as the inclusive aspect of the expression. In the following analysis, each of the themes is briefly discussed and examples are given for each theme to illustrate the tendencies emerging from the responses. The answers to question 24 "Do you see any problems regarding the use of any of these pronouns? If yes, which pronoun(s) would you consider problematic and why?" are analysed at the end of the subsection.

Theme	Example sentence
Inclusive language use	Pronoun they recognizes more than two genders
Grammatical correctness	Using they is more inclusive, however, sometimes "he or she" is grammatically more correct hence that pronoun.
Awareness of register	I think that in informal speech 'they' or 'their' is nowadays widely used instead of he/she, although grammatically it's not actually a plural.
Easiness of the expression	using 'they' is more quick than 'he or she' if it does not quarrel with the verb. Sometimes I would use just generic 'he' since it's fast and easier to pronounce than 'she'.
Influence of education	I recall being taught to use them this way. I also refer to the input from the past.
Influence of L1	I'm used to gender neutral pronouns in Finnish and if you don't know the gender of a certain person, "they" is an appropriate pronoun to use in my opinion.
Political correctness	Gender neutral, 'safe' when not 100% sure about the person's preferred pronouns
Unsure	I am not entirely sure of the criteria myself yet. I do try to be ambigious when it is necessary and possible. "He/she" is too clunky in most contexts and mostly fits formal texts. Otherwise I would use "they", although in the reflexive form it is difficult to use in this way.

Table 1. Themes and example sentences from L1 Finnish speakers

A clear majority of the answers related to inclusive language use. Two different approaches to inclusive language can be detected, language including all possible gender representations and inclusive language that considers equal representation of men and women in discourse. Examples (1) to (3) highlight the prior approach:

(1)   I don't want to assume anyone's gender and I think the use of 'they' should become widespread way to express things in a gender neutral way. 'He or she' is clumsy imo and it leaves out some genders; 'he' is traditionally used to refer to everybody but it still creates a clearly gendered and man-favoring image while othering rest of the genders. I know that 'she'is sometimes used in rebellion against general 'he' but I can't see it ever becoming as widely accepted and used as 'he' because it's not gender neutral

(2)   I prefer using gender neutral pronouns, because all people do not fit under the s/he umbrella thus I do not feel comfortable using it and excluding some

(3)   It's more accurate and inclusive to use "they" when the specific gender of the person that's referred to is not known. It's unnecessary and can be insulting to assign gender needlessly. The person may not even identify with either "he" or "she", so guessing or using "he or she" is also inconsiderate and not usually even relevant.

Similarly, a large portion of the participants considered equal representation of women and men important, focusing on the traditional binary gender representations:

(4)   They doesn't tell the gender of the person. In these sentences the gender wasn't known, so I wouldn't want assume them to be a he or she.

(5)   I want to include both genders, and not only use 'he' as a generic pronoun. I also think in some cases, 'they' can be used instead of 'he or she' cos it makes the utterance simpler and shorter.

(6)   Unless I am aware of a person in these scenarios who calls themselves anything non-binary, I find it most logical to use "he or she" in most scenarios, or "they" if gender is completely ambiguous or multiple people are involved. The gender binary/biological sex is correct for easily over 90% of people.

As stated earlier, these were the most typical comments on the reasons behind pronoun choice. Many L1 Finnish speakers were interested in including all possible gender constructions in discourse and would require others to follow suit, but there were also a significant number of participants who felt that focusing on equal representation between the traditional gender identities would suffice.

Another important theme for the respondents was grammatical correctness. The main issue with grammar was agreement in number between the subject and the verb. Participants reported that they would use *he or she* if the verb was in singular form because they felt singular *they* was ungrammatical. Participants also emphasised that they preferred rephrasing the sentences so that they included plural verb forms to allow for the use of pronoun *they*. This was also a pattern observed in the quantitative analysis of Part I. It appears that the use of a singular verb form is not, at least yet, accepted in conjunction with singular *they*. However, when inquired about the importance of grammatical correctness and agreement, the answers varied. Some participants felt grammatical correctness to be of paramount importance while others felt that agreement in number is more important than agreement in gender. Some participants felt that in general, grammatical correctness should be aimed for, but not in all contexts. There were also participants who wished that *they* could be an exception to grammar rules:

(7)   Using they is more inclusive, however, sometimes "he or she" is grammatically more correct hence that pronoun.

(8)   I prefer to use "they" as it is gender neutral. However, in many parts the verb form didn't allow for "they" to be used, otherwise it would have resulted in bad grammar like "they is". In these cases I used "he or she", which is problematic in its assumption of only two genders.

(9)   I don't think gender agreement is relevant, the gender of the word "mother" is as clear as needed in the word itself, it is not necessary to repeat it in pronouns. Agreement in number feels more natural and makes speech and text feel more fluent.

(10)   I believe the singular they should be an official exception to this rule

(11)   In a formal text yes, but informally it's not the same, as spoken language has it's variants and is used more freely (like in Finnish and many other languages too).

It should be noted that the participants in this survey were all university students of English language, which most likely affects their views on grammar rules and correct speech.

Like grammatical correctness, the participants were also aware of the effects of register. Some participants felt that singular *they* can be used rather freely in informal register but would prefer to use expressions such as *he or she* in formal register, a pattern observed in previous literature as well (Baranowski 2002). However, some participants felt that singular *they* is the preferred option also in formal register:

(12)   In general I like to use "they" where possible as it covers both genders but where it clashes with grammar (i.e. they is, they has, etc.) I prefer to use "he or she" in official contexts. In unofficial contexts I tend to choose one of the genders semi-arbitrarily.

(13)   If I don't know the gender of the person I'm talking about I feel like a gender neutral option is the best. He/she is more professional than the maybe a bit controversial they/them so that's why I would use that in work context and they/them with friends and family.

(14)   I prefer non-binary 'they' in formal contexts for its neutrality and brevity.

Another theme that arose from the answers to Part II of the online survey was the easiness of the expression chosen. Singular *they* found supporters because it was perceived as quicker to write or pronounce. Interestingly, also epicene *he* was favoured because participants felt it is faster and easier to pronounce than *she*, even when the expressions differ only by one consonant. Some participants also said that they selected a pronoun that felt right or natural to them:

(15)   using 'they' is more quick than 'he or she' if it does not quarrel with the verb. Sometimes I would use just generic 'he' since it's fast and easier to pronounce than 'she'.

(16)   Generally speaking, "they" is faster to say than going for "he or she", although I have been known to use the generic he or even "one" when I have opted for a 3rd person singular verb in my sentence.

(17)   Because using they/them is easier than having to say/write she/he or s/he.

Furthermore, education also affected the selection of the pronoun for some. As stated in Section 2.2. focusing on grammar rules and textbooks, it is important to identify the ramifications education has on language use, views on society and its structures, and socially accepted norms:

(18)　　I recall being taught to use them this way. I also refer to the input from the past.

(19)　　I don't like to use gendered pronouns when I'm not 100% sure of the gender of the person. I was also taught to use "they" when I'm unsure.

The influence of learning materials and the role of the educator should be recognised because the pronoun system is a central part of language teaching. The time spent in compulsory education is intense and the effects of formal teaching can be long reaching, influencing individuals after exiting the education system as can be seen in the answers above.

L1 Finnish speakers also referred to the effects of their first language, and the lack of third person gendered pronouns in Finnish. These answers relate to the linguistic relativity hypothesis discussed in detail in Section 2.3 where it was suggested that the features available in a language could affect the way information is processed and thus affect the abstract concepts available for speakers. Example sentences demonstrating this theme include the following:

(20)　　I prefer the use of "they" probably because it fits my thinking: being a Finn i grew up using personal pronouns that do not specify the gender, so when I learned about the possibility to use of "they" instead of he/she when gender is unknown, I quickly grew accustomed to using it.

(21)　　They are more gender neutral and equal. I also think having Finnish as my L1 affects my thinking as I sometimes find gendered pronouns slightly uncomfortable when they are used to refer to everyone regardless of gender.

As will be discussed later in the analysis, the effects of first language were also identified by L1 German speakers. With L1 Finnish speakers, it seems that gender neutral pronoun structures from L1 could transfer to L2 language use and that language users are aware of the phenomenon themselves.

A small portion of the participants also referred to political correctness. This category could also be seen fit under the inclusive language use category. However, in the inclusive language use theme it seems that the participants themselves advocate the use of inclusive language. With the participants that pay attention to political correctness, it could be said that societal norms oblige them to use expressions that are accepted and demanded by others to avoid conflict:

(22)　　Gender neutral, 'safe' when not 100% sure about the person's preferred pronouns

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(23)   Because they were the first to come to mind and fit the context the best without overanalyzing their political correctness.

Finally, a couple of participants reported that the use of personal pronouns did not necessarily follow a particular pattern. The selection of personal pronouns could vary based on register, in which form the pronoun was used, and medium:

(24)   I am not entirely sure of the criteria myself yet. I do try to be ambigious when it is necessary and possible. "He/she" is too clunky in most contexts and mostly fits formal texts. Otherwise I would use "they", although in the reflexive form it is difficult to use in this way.

(25)   When writing I try to use the more neutral "they" where possible, or construct the sentence so that a personal pronoun is not needed. I use the "she/he" form where the use of "they" would be awkward. In speech I use all forms (she/he/they), depending on the situation. I sometimes make the choice between he and she based on ease of pronunciation. I sometimes intentionally contradict existing gender norms by e.g. referring to a firefighter as "she", and a nurse as "he", but this doesn't come automatically.

As has been identified in the qualitative analysis, the answers collected from L1 Finnish speakers emphasise inclusive language use as the underlying theme when selecting epicene pronouns. Most participants felt that it is important to include all possible gender constructions in language while others focused on equal representation of women and men. L1 Finnish speakers also paid attention to grammatical correctness, especially agreement. While many answered that they felt that agreement is important both in gender and number, some participants felt that gender agreement is becoming irrelevant and attention should be paid only to agreement in number. Furthermore, there were also participants that felt that inclusive language should always be aimed for, even when it would result in expressions such as *they is,* hoping that singular *they* could be seen as an exception to grammatical rules. For most participants the use of *they* together with a singular verb form was uncommon, and they and preferred to construct sentences in ways that include plural verb forms or omit pronouns altogether. L1 Finnish speakers were also aware of the effects of register. Interestingly, some felt that expressions like *he or she* should be used in formal contexts, while others reported that singular *they* should be used in formal writing and gendered pronouns *he* and *she* were to be used in informal speech. Factors such as the easiness and smoothness of expression also affect pronoun choice. Additionally, L1 Finnish speakers identified that language teaching and L1 patterns alike contribute to the way they use pronouns. Finally, political correctness and pressure from other language users can be seen to influence pronoun choice.

When asked if participants saw any problems regarding the use of any of these pronouns in question 24, many issues were identified regarding all personal pronouns suggested in

the online survey (*he*, *she*, *he or she*, *s/he*, *they*). Some deemed gendered pronouns *he* and *she* discriminatory because they either exclude the other gender in binary gender constructions or exclude all other possible gender constructions beyond the traditional binary classification. In addition to referring to traditional gender constructions, generic *he* was perceived as archaic and as a reminder of patriarchy while generic *she* seemed forced and as a label for the feminist movement which not all participants associate with. Expressions like *he or she* and *s/he* also cater only for gender constructions within the binary and were perceived as clumsy by many. Additionally, there are no inflective forms established for *s/he* and participants felt that it could only be used in writing, still facing problems as fitting mostly to informal register. As expected, singular *they,* even when being the most popular option, also comes with its own problems concerning number agreement. It should be noted that not all L1 Finnish speakers considered epicene pronouns as problematic and felt that there was too much fuss about them in the first place. The answers below summarize these issues:

(26)   Generic he and she can upset some people because people get upset very easily nowadays.

(27)   I think that all of them are problematic in some contexts. "He or she" is impractical, because repeating it becomes tedious very quickly (e.g. "He or she is responsible for his or her actions"). "He" on the other hand sets masculinity as a norm and I think language use should be equal whenever possible. Using "she" has the same problem, in addition to which I think some people would be against it, as it has not been the custom to use it. "S/he" only works in a written format and not with possessive pronouns, so it falls short. And "they" is plural and using it when referring to a singular referent can create problems with other words and it may sound funny.

(28)   As of now, all of them are problematic. Generic he is almost archaic and does not promote equality. But neither does generic she, plus when it is used in textbooks in a context like university, which is already supposed to be more gender-equal than much of society, it sounds too marked and "feminazi". He or she is just plain awkward with three words/syllables, using s/he all the time adds too much extra punctuation, and many people still look down on you like a weirdo if you use they and plural for a singular referent.

(29)   I do not believe in pronouns being problematic. The only struggle I have is with s/he since I like it for convenience but I find it too informal to be used in many contexts and I am not confident with verbally expressing it.

(30)   I don't think using only 'he' is as much of a problem as people make it out to be. Of course it's better to be inclusive, but 'he/she' etc. are kind of awkward in terms of readability. 'They' is the most stylistically apt pronoun if one wants to be inclusive of all genders.

To summarise, although singular *they* and *he or she* were clearly the most popular pronouns used in the online survey, they too come with their own issues. However, the number agreement that

occurs with singular *they* can be overcome rather easily with avoidance strategies and pluralisation of the noun. According to the qualitative analysis of L1 Finnish speakers, it seems that *they* is widely accepted as a gender-neutral pronoun and that no new alternatives need to be introduced to achieve gender-neutral reference with third person singular pronouns.

4.2.2 Categorization of the answers received from L1 German speakers

In this subsection, the answers received from L1 German speakers are analysed qualitatively and grouped into themes. The themes identified follow a similar pattern as with L1 Finnish speakers, with the exception that influence of education and issues with political correctness were not mentioned by L1 German speakers in this study. Thus, the themes formed are inclusive language use, grammatical correctness, awareness of register, easiness of the expression, influence of L1, and unsure. The themes together with example sentences are included in Table 2 below. As with L1 Finnish speakers, the categories overlap in the statements received form the participants which is why number count for each theme is not presented in the analysis.

Theme	Example sentence
Inclusive language use	They are gender fair (they/their even gender neutral, saying "he or she" at least balanced).
Easiness of the expression	because it sounds better
Grammatical correctness	I prefer to use mostly 'they' so I don't offend anyone or accidentally use the wrong pronoun. If 'they' doesn't make sense grammatically or sounds bad I use 'he or she' instead for the same reason.
Awareness of register	In an official text, you shoud write both he and she
Influence of L1	in an university context, I would use he or she because of the policy, in my own texts and oral interaction, I use the generic he just like in my mother language German, with a plural form I use their
Unsure	Not really sure. Those were just the ones that popped up in my head first.

Table 2. Themes and example sentences from L1 German speakers

As with L1 Finnish speakers, most answers to Part II of the online survey can be assigned to the inclusive language use theme. Following the pattern observed with L1 Finnish speakers in the previous subsection, there are two groups within this category. The first group emphasises taking all possible gender constructions into account while the second is more concerned with treating women and men equally:

(31)   I use 'they' as a gender-neutral term. It fits everyone and includes non-binary people.

(32)   Because "they" isn't gender-specific, not everyone is a "he/she" and to be honest I've just gotten used to saying it. Also to consciously counteract certain gender roles/ stereotypes e.g. people often using "he" when speaking about the qualities of a president etc.

(33)   i try to represent both genders equally in my speech

(34)   Include both male and female, preferably in 1 word (s/he or plural) for reasons of economy and readability

The answers in this theme follow the ones received from L1 Finnish speakers which suggests that, as stated in the hypothesis for this study, there could be ongoing reforms in different languages fostering a universal ideal of inclusive language use, regardless of structural aspects of individual languages.

The second largest theme among L1 German speakers relates to the easiness of the expression, either by being short and simple or easy to understand, that is, not creating miscommunication. Participants also highlighted that the pronouns they chose felt natural to them or that they went with their 'gut feeling' when choosing pronouns:

(35)   Because they sound natural to me in the given context.

(36)   easier to understand

(37)   What comes to mind the fastest

Like L1 Finnish speakers, L1 German speakers also paid attention to grammar rules. Again, the participants found the main grammatical issue to be number agreement between the verb and the pronoun. When asked about the importance of agreement in question 22, the answers varied. The majority replied that agreement is important and that it should be respected. However, as with L1 Finnish speakers, some participants said that agreement should be aimed for most of the time, but not in all cases. Singular *they* was again seen as an exception to the rules. Finally, there were also participants that felt inclusive language use should be the primary goal and grammar rules may be discarded if necessary:

(38)   I prefer to use mostly 'they' so I don't offend anyone or accidentally use the wrong pronoun. If 'they' doesn't make sense grammatically or sounds bad I use 'he or she' instead for the same reason.

(39)   Since gender is not specified and I wanted the sentences to be grammatically correct - otherwise I would have used the plural forms

(40)   Yes, I definitely think there should be rules to how language can be used, as they are there for a reason, namely communication without misunderstandings.

(41)   Yes, in most cases. Sometimes I make an exception with "they" or "their".

(42)   interestingly, it varies. within one clause i go for it, in a subordinate clause I may ignore agreement with the main clause in order to use a they pronoun.

(43)   In official documents it is very important. In spoken/everyday language it only matters when people can not be understood otherwise.

(44)   I think inclusion matters.

Participants were also aware of register when choosing epicene pronouns. The participants stated that *he or she* is most likely expected in a formal context and in academia. Interestingly, some participants felt that *he or she* is easy to use in conversation, while the reverse was true for others:

(45)   Because they/them is a gender neutral option. However, it gets complicated in academia as many professors do not accept it.

(46)   For plural it sound more natural to use they/their, otherwise 'he or she' is fine - even though the transgender people are left out then. But I guess in particular in the spoken form, it's just more convenient to use 'he or she'. For written English (the formal letter/email), s/he can/should be used, in my opinion.

(47)   Because even though it would hinder readability a bit, it's still important to use both genders in official documents/utterances. In day to day language nobody can be bothered to use both forms, which is unnessecary most of time anyway since normally a speaker has a specific person, and by extention, gender in mind.

A few participants referred to their first language for explanations. As mentioned earlier in the analysis, L1 Finnish speakers thought that the lack of gendered third person singular pronouns reinforces their use of gender-neutral pronouns when using English. For L1 German speakers, on the other hand, the structures in their first language seem to hinder the use of singular *they* and foster the use of epicene *he* for some. This was also noted in the quantitative analysis of answers to Part I of the online survey where it shows that L1 German speakers used epicene *he* more often than L1 Finnish speakers. The statements below exemplify the influence of German:

(48)   in an university context, I would use he or she because of the policy, in my own texts and oral interaction, I use the generic he just like in my mother language German, with a plural form I use their

(49)   I don't like the fact that I often gravitate towards the male singular "he" because it is the most common in my mother tongue, therefore I consider it to be a bit problematic (at least for myself)

As with L1 Finnish speakers, there were also participants who said that their use of epicene pronouns is not always systematic:

(50)   Personal preference I guess? I don't like to assume that a nursery teacher is a she, just like I don't want to assume that a truck driver is a he. In the middle of a sentence I prefer to use he or she, while at thd beginning I feel like s/he looks totally fine.

Finally, as with L1 Finnish speakers, there were participants who felt that the issue about gender neutral epicene pronouns has gone too far and attention should be geared elsewhere: "Don't be bothered by too many opinions and problems by others."

When asked about possible problems relating to pronouns *he*, *she*, *he or she*, *s/he* and *they*, L1 German speakers found similar issues as L1 Finnish speakers discussed in the previous subsection. Generic *he* faced strongest opposition for various reasons, such as reflecting patriarchal views, being sexist against women, and being outdated. Pronoun *she* was also disliked because it excludes all other gender identities than women and also because it has not been established as an epicene pronoun like generic *he*. Similarly, expression *he or she* was disliked because it assumes the referent to be either female or male and excludes other gender identities. Furthermore, some participants felt that *he or she* is laborious to use both in writing and in speech, especially if repeated often. *S/he* was not even considered to be a correct word by one participant, and others accentuated the issues regarding pronunciation. The problem with singular *they* is again number agreement between the noun and the verb. It should also be noted that 16 L1 German speakers did not see any problems regarding these pronouns. The answers below illustrate these issues:

(51)   personally, i do not like the use of the "generic he" or just "she" if the gender is unknown in the sentence, because it would exclude all other genders. i also do not like to assume someones gender based on stereotypes and gender norms concerning jobs, for instance.

(52)   he or she - too mouthy, in my opinion.

(53)   I think using a generic he can be very misleading unless it's done in combination with a generic she in a systematic way (e.g. in a book, she on even pages, he on odd pages or vice versa). Otherwise if gender is unknown, using "they" seems the least complicated option to me. I can't recall having ever read a text using s/he.

(54)   she - generic he is common, generic she isn't. Seems politically "overcorrect" (or ridiculous)

(55)   Reading and using „s/he" in texts might be the „politically correct" way to do it, yet it is incredibly hard to read in fluent text.

(56)   Yes. 'They' shouldn't be used for singular forms. 'He or she' leaves out transgender people. 'S/he' is fine in a written form, but confusing in spoken form. 'Generic he' reinforces gender stereotypes.

(57)   I don't think there are any problems with these pronouns, more so with people being overdramatic.

The answers received to Part II from L1 German speakers reflect similar tendencies as with L1 Finnish speakers, although influence of education and issues with political correctness did not arise as themes for German speakers. Compared to Finnish speakers, some German speakers struggled with transfer of generic *he* from their first language to second language. As observed in the qualitative analysis, German speakers were more comfortable in using *he or she,* even when many emphasised that it excludes nonbinary genders.

4.2.3 Summary of the themes identified in Part II

The answers received in Part II were very insightful and offered explanations for the tendencies observed in Part I. The answers covered many areas from inclusiveness to easy and smooth language use and grammatical correctness. Some participants seemed almost irritated by the questionnaire, for different reasons. Some felt that everyone should already know that sensitive and inclusive language, taking all possible gender identities into account, should be aimed for while some participants thought that epicene pronouns have gained too much attention already and there are bigger problems to solve than a fight over pronoun use:

(58)   Yes, language should be gender neutral, hence they is used nowadays. By now I really don't get the point of your study because you are somehow suggesting this was optional.
(59)   stupid question, i hate political correctness, as we had no other problems!!!

At least for university level language students, it seems evident that the majority supports the idea that there are more than the traditional binary gender constructions female and male, and that all possible gender constructions should be considered when using language. The idea of the socially constructed gender identity and alternative gender identities beyond the binary have become normalised if not by all, but a significant group of participants in this study. This supports statements about language use being in close relation to changes in society, by both adapting to the changes but also by fostering the changes (Irvine 1989, 255)

Reasons for the selection of the most popular variables in this study, namely singular *they* and *he or she* are plentiful. In both language groups, majority of the participants appeal to inclusive language use. Another theme that attracts attention is grammatically correct structures. Although singular *they* is already widely accepted as an epicene pronoun, it is considered ungrammatical to use it in conjunction with singular verb forms. In these cases, participants either chose *he or she* or rephrased the sentence with other verb forms, or omitted the pronoun altogether.

Participants were also aware of the influence of register. Interestingly however, the attitudes varied in what pronoun fits which context. Some felt that *he or she* should be used in formal register and in academia, while others felt that singular *they* should be used especially in formal writing. Language teaching and L1 structures also affect the selection of personal pronouns. Other contributing factors are easiness or smoothness of the expression and political correctness – the normative pressure from other language users. Still, there were a few participants that felt their selection of epicene pronouns is rather arbitrary, without any set rules and a couple of participants from both language groups expressed that the debate on appropriate epicene pronouns has attracted too much attention.

According to the replies to Part II, generic *he* was considered the most problematic alternative. It was perceived as the most discriminatory, archaic, reflecting patriarchal world view, and male-dominated structures. It should be noted that despite these negative connotations, generic *he* was selected more often than generic *she*, for instance, in Part I of the online survey. Still, none of the alternatives *he*, *she*, *he or she*, *s/he*, or *they* is without its problems. For instance, while generic *he* reflects a world of male dominance, reversing this by using generic *she* was not considered as a sustainable solution either. Some reject *he or she* because it neglects people beyond the binary and because the expression is longer than the others, *s/he* faces problems with inflection and in spoken language, and singular *they* is considered ungrammatical in certain structures. It should also be noted that the participants are aware that their answers are used in a MA thesis which might affect how consciously they answer the questions.

5. Discussion

The aim of this cross-linguistic study was to collect data from native Finnish and German speakers and examine how these groups use epicene pronouns in English. To answer the first research question "How does the use of epicene pronouns by EFL speakers relate to the patterns observed in the use of epicene pronouns by ENL speakers?", the data clearly show that the use of singular *they* is common also in EFL settings, as has previously been observed in ENL settings as discussed in Subsection 2.6.1. Similarly, the use of generic *he* is rare, although it was used especially by native German speakers in this study. Furthermore, the quantitative analysis of Part I shows that, where the verb form permits, most *they* pronouns referred to quantificational expressions, followed by indefinite antecedents and definite antecedents, a pattern that has been observed in previous literature as well (Baranowski 2002, Stormbom 2018).

Another interest was to investigate whether first language structures and language ideologies affect second language use through phenomena such as transfer and linguistic relativity. The answer to the second research question "How, if at all, do linguistic structures and language ideologies of L1 affect epicene pronoun use in L2?" is that the structures of first languages did affect the way participants used epicene pronouns in their second language. As identified in the quantitative

analysis, German speakers used gendered expressions *he or she* and *he* more than Finnish speakers. In addition, as observed in the qualitative analysis, some participants in both language groups were aware that their first language affects the way they use pronouns in other languages. It could also be assumed that as Finland is ahead Austria and ENL countries the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand regarding gender equality, gender ideologies in these countries might affect thoughts about language use, that is language ideologies, which may then be manifested in second language use. It might be difficult to determine whether linguistic structures affect the use of epicene pronouns in L2 more than language ideology. There data show that both play a part, as the quantitative analysis shows that L1 German speakers used gendered expressions more than L1 Finnish speakers. However, the answers in the qualitative analysis highlighted the importance of inclusive language use, which is an ideological position.

Similarly, the answer to the third research question "Can differences in the use of epicene pronouns in English be found between L1 Finnish speakers and L1 German speakers?" is clear. While both language groups preferred singular *they* with verb forms with no third person singular marker and *he or she* with singular verb forms, L1 German speakers used gendered expressions *he or she* and *he* more often than L1 Finnish speakers. In turn, L1 Finnish speakers used the "Other" option more than L1 German speakers to rephrase the sentence to allow for the use of singular *they* or to employ other avoidance strategies.

The hypothesis was that a similar pattern as in ENL settings will be observed, with most participants using gender-neutral construction with singular *they* when the gender of the antecedent is unknown in the context. This hypothesis was confirmed in the quantitative analysis, although it would have been interesting to include L1 English speakers in this study to compare whether EFL speakers still used generic *he* more than ENL speakers as was observed in Stormbom (2018). Correspondingly, the hypothesis that L1 structures could be transferred to L2 production seems to be correct as speakers of languages with no gender distinction in third person singular pronouns in their L1 favoured the use of gender-indefinite pronouns when using L2 and speakers of a grammatically gendered language used gendered expressions more. Although differences in L2 epicene pronoun use were found, the qualitative analysis reveals that there is an awareness across language communities that inclusive language use should be aimed for, regardless of structural aspects of individual languages. This is also suggestive that language reforms towards inclusive language use are underway to avoid generic masculines in languages with grammatical gender or male generics in languages with no grammatical gender (Hellinger & Bussmann 2001).

It seems that motivation for the selection of *they* and *he or she* as preferred epicene pronouns stems mostly from a shift in language ideology, as most of the participants stated that they prefer these pronouns because they promote equal representation of genders in discourse. As stated in Section 2.4, language ideologies as defined by Silverstein are "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use",

emphasising individual judgement on the acceptance of linguistic structures (Silverstein 1979, 193; quoted in Kroskrity 2004, 497). The answers to Part II of the survey reflect this idea. However, not all participants in this study share a same ideology, highlighting individual differences in language ideologies (Kroskrity 2004, 496). There is a separation in language ideologies when it comes to who should be considered in discourse. One ideology supports including all possible gender constructions, another one reflects representing men and women equally, and there is also a language ideology where it is though that epicene pronouns have attracted too much attention and following tradition should not be penalised by other language users. When discussing ideologies, it is important to remember that ideologies often consist of moral and political interests, and that changes in language development always benefit some group over another (Irvine 1989, 255; Kroskrity 2004, 501).

As discussed previously, phenomena identified in SLA research, such as transfer, also influence the use of epicene pronouns as some participants agreed that the structures in their first language affect the way they use their second language. Although transfer is sometimes viewed as a negative contributor hindering L2 acquisition, it can also be argued to function as a learner strategy if the target language is similar to L1, contributing positively to the learning process. This can also be seen in the answers received from some L1 Finnish speakers in the qualitative analysis of Part II. Another theoretical framework which relates to the influence of linguistic structures is the connection between language and thought. The results of this study support previous research on linguistic relativity, an idea that language structures can affect syntactic processing and influences but does not determine thought. Although Phillips and Boroditsky (2003) argue that cross-linguistic differences in mental categories could be the effect of grammatical differences alone, in the absence of other cultural factors, this study cannot confirm that statement as there clearly are cultural factors at play in this study. However, this study supports the findings of Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2011) who suggest that links between a gender system in a language and the gender equality in the respective countries where that language is spoken could be detected.

An aspect that should be considered when discussing the use of personal nouns and pronouns in L2 is the effect of language teaching policies. Even if there is an ideological change reflected in a speaker's first language, this might not always transmit to their second language use. Although gender representation in EFL textbooks has improved and grammar rules in current textbooks tend to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, some participants still felt that some pronouns are reserved only for certain registers, for instance that singular *they* can easily be used in informal register but in academia it is not yet fully accepted. According to the results, singular *they* is not, at least yet, widely accepted to be used with singular verb forms, which reflects a prescriptive view where constructions such as *they is* are perceived as nongrammatical and incorrect. It is also important to acknowledge 'teacher talk' around learning materials that might affect the students' perceptions on appropriate language use (Pauwels and Winter 2006).

As stated earlier, it would have been helpful to analyse epicene pronoun use of also L1 English speakers in this study to see if similar differences between L1 and L2 speakers could be observed as in Stormbom (2018). Similarly, it would be interesting to compare the answers given by representatives of different genders to see if there is still a difference between the answers given by women and men, as observed in previous literature (Meyers 1990; Rubin, Greene, & Schneider 1994). Most of the participants in this study identified as women (n=143, 75.3 %) while 36 participants (18.9 %) identified as men and 11 (5.8 %) as other or they preferred not to say. Previous sociolinguistic studies show that young language users and women are most likely to foster linguistic change, which could also be the case here (Labov 2001). Unfortunately, this analysis is beyond the scope of this study.

Interestingly, neopronouns such as *E*, *ze*, *hir*, *ey*, *zhe*, *co*, or *yo* were not suggested at all by the participants. It has been identified in previous literature on epicene pronouns that these expressions have not been successful in gaining the awareness of the masses and acceptance from language users. Although gender neutral, they still seem foreign and unnatural for language users. Hekanaho (2020) also concludes that singular they is supported both in generic and nonbinary contexts and that the expression is overall favoured over neopronouns. Other languages, such as Swedish, have been more successful in introducing new gender-neutral pronouns that have been adopted by a significant proportion of language users. According to the results of this study, it seems unlikely that language users feel a need to introduce new gender-neutral pronouns to the English language, as singular *they* is perceived as satisfactory, contrasting the findings of Hekanaho (Hekanaho 2015, 95). Singular *they* has become popular in gender-indefinite reference and its use is encouraged in inclusive language guidelines as well. Additionally, language users rephrase their sentences in ways that allow for the use of the pronoun. Although some guidelines and dictionaries recognise the nonstandard reflexive form *themself*, it was suggested by only two L1 Finnish speakers in this study (Australian Government 2020, Lexico 2020, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2020).

It should also be stated that it was not asked in the questionnaire where the participants were born and raised. This means that the participants from Finnish and Austrian universities could have their upbringing elsewhere than in these countries. Their experiences in their home countries could affect the way they perceive the world, including gender equality in society and in speech. This aspect could be studied in further studies focusing on the effect of gender ideologies in society and language ideologies regarding gender-neutral language use.

The participants in this study were university students who had English language, literature, or translation as their major subject. It could be that students in these fields of research are more aware of the power of language and of the effects linguistic choices have on representation of different groups in the society. It could also be that students in the field of humanities are more aware of gender issues than students of other fields. However, Hekanaho reports that there were no significant differences in the perception of male generics between participants with a background in

linguistics and those participants who had no experience in linguistics (Hekanaho 2015, 90).

Finally, it is hoped that the questionnaire design of this study helps other researchers who wish to investigate epicene pronoun use in EFL settings. However, some modifications to the questionnaire are suggested. Especially in Task 1 and Task 2, it would be helpful to adjust the questionnaire so that the sentences would vary only with respect to verb forms or the type of the antecedent to gather more reliable data on what structures affect the selection of pronouns the most. Now, some sentences included both a quantifier and a verb form without singular marker which both support the selection of *they*. Similarly, other sentences included a definite antecedent and a singular verb form which in turn support the use of expressions like *he or she*, for instance. However, as many participants rephrased sentences that included singular verb forms to allow for the use of *they*, it appears that verb form affects the choice of the pronoun more than the type of the antecedent.

6. Conclusion

One aim of this study was to discover whether trends in epicene pronoun use observed in ENL settings can also be detected in EFL settings. As the use of generic *he* was low in this study and singular *they* and expression *he or she* were the most popular ones, it can be said that there is most likely a universal shift both in ENL and EFL settings in the way pronouns are used when the gender of the antecedent is unknown or irrelevant in the context. Another goal was to investigate whether the linguistic structures and language ideologies in the participants' first languages affect the use of their second language. The results of the analysis show that linguistic structures and language ideologies can affect epicene pronoun use in L2.

The results of this study can hopefully contribute to academic discussion on inclusive language use in different linguistic settings. The study is also relevant to researchers interested in questions on language and gender, more specifically how gendered messages are transmitted in a language and from one language to another. This study supports previous findings of research focusing on second language acquisition, linguistic relativity hypothesis, and language ideology. Researchers from interdisciplinary fields such as sociology and psychology could benefit from the results of this study as well. More concrete implications of this study could relate to the design of EFL textbooks and 'teacher talk' around learning materials. The findings of this study could be applied in English language teaching both in ENL and EFL settings when teaching third person singular pronouns and generic reference with these pronouns. It is hoped that the results of this study can further validate the influence of grammar rules and guidelines for language use, as the study shows the effects of both prescriptive and descriptive grammar rules as well as guidelines which all can be used to promote linguistic change. Hence, the study could have some practical implications to textbook producers, language teachers and for professionals offering communication training, for example in NGOs or companies. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see if translation

devices will identify the influence of L1 structures in target language translations in the future. However, as issues on inclusive language use are highlighted more and more in society, the results of the study can be used by anyone interested in the representation of different groups in language.

When observing the changes that are currently taking place in society, it is likely that education will promote the use of gender-neutral pronouns, such as singular *they*, in the future. Research has already observed that teachers are correcting their students if they use traditional gendered expressions in generic reference (Pauwels & Winter 2006). Furthermore, if more emphasis is placed on descriptive grammar, it might be that singular *they* will eventually become an exception to grammar rules concerning number agreement between the verb and the pronoun, as was already hoped by some of the participants in this study. However, even when the effects of education are long lasting, other factors in society might be even more relevant when promoting ideological changes, such as social media platforms and media representation in addition to peer groups, all influencing the creation of societal norms. It remains to be seen what the future holds for individuals who keep using traditional expressions or who refuse to use someone's preferred pronouns. In some countries, these issues are already addressed in legislation, where refusing to use someone's preferred pronouns could lead to sanctions (Parliament of Canada, 2020).

As observed in this study, linguistic changes are taking place in multiple languages to replace gendered expressions with gender indefinite alternatives. As stated in the Introduction, Swedish has been successful in introducing a gender-neutral third person singular pronoun *hen* alongside feminine *hon* and masculine *han* to the language. It is possible that other languages will follow this example. Gendered messages are transferred in various ways, both in languages with and without grammatical gender, which has been noticed by language users. This has already lead to efforts to remove false generics at various levels, such as pronouns, lexical gender, and social gender. It is assumed that the trend observed with neutralising occupational terms will expand to other areas of vocabulary as well.

Proposals for future research include a similar study with larger set of data and broader analysis of different variables such as first language, gender, age, and national culture, some of which were beyond the scope of this study. Although Stormbom (2018) compared epicene pronoun use of speakers of multiple European languages in a corpus-based study, further research on epicene pronoun use in EFL settings is encouraged. It is hoped that a wide range of language groups are studied in the future, using different methodological frameworks. Corpus-based research offers data on actual language use, while using questionnaires might be helpful especially for researching attitudes and motivation behind the use of certain expressions.

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Appendices

Appendix A - The Google FormsTM questionnaire

Language use of non-native English speakers

Dear participant,

Your contribution to this survey is highly appreciated. The aim of the survey is to investigate language use in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings. The survey is distributed to Finnish and German native speakers. The results of this survey are used in a Master's thesis conducted in the English language programme at Tampere University, Finland.

It takes approximately 10 minutes to answer the questionnaire. The participation in this study is voluntary, the survey is completely confidential, and all informants will remain anonymous. By taking part in the survey you give the researcher your informed consent to use the anonymous data collected in the survey. The answers can be withdrawn without any consequences to the participant upon request. Please contact the researcher if you wish your answer to be removed by sending an email to vilma.karhu@tuni.fi.

Thank you in advance!

Kind regards,
Vilma Karhu
MA student of English language and literature Tampere University, Finland
Email: vilma.karhu@tuni.fi

*Required

Part I: Gap-filling

This part includes three gap-filling tasks in which you are asked to choose an option that you would most likely use. You can also select "Other", in this case please specify your answer.

Task 1 _____

Instructions: You work as an assistant for a university professor. The professor wants to inform all students about the aims and requirements of a course that is taught next semester. Your task is to write an information sheet for the students. Please choose a form you would use. You can also select "Other", in this case please specify your answer.

1. Each student picks up_____own copy of the required reading from the university library. *
Mark only one oval.

her
his
his or her
their
Other:

2. A student should bring_____notes to the tutorial. *

Mark only one oval.

her
his
his or her
their
Other:

3. Successful students can show that_____can apply the theories introduced during the semester in the final essay. *

Mark only one oval.

he
they
he or she
she
s/he
Other:

4. The grade of the student will be affected if_____hands in the course essay after the deadline. *

Mark only one oval.

s/he
he or she
they
she
he
Other:

5. Anyone who feels_has been graded in an unfair manner should contact the professor. *

Mark only one oval.

they
s/he
he
he or she
she
Other:

Task 2 _____

Instructions: The following phrases could hypothetically occur in a conversation with a close friend of yours. Please fill in the gaps in a way you would most likely use the phrases. You can also select "Other", in this case please specify your answer.

6. Strangers can be dangerous. Only a fool would hitchhike and lay_____open to danger. *

Mark only one oval.

herself
himself
himself or herself
themselves
Other:

7. I mean, no one wants to place_____own health at risk like that. *

Mark only one oval.

her
his or her
their
his
Other:

8. If your child wants_____weekly allowance in advance, how do you react? *

Mark only one oval.

his or her
her
their
his
Other:

9. If the residents lose the apartment keys_____should pay a 100 euro fine. *

Mark only one oval.

she
he
he or she
they
s/he Other:

10. When a citizen wants to get a passport_____has to go to the police station. *

Mark only one oval.

they
he or she
he
she
s/he
Other:

Task 3 _____

Instructions: Please fill in the gaps with one of the given options. You can also select "Other", in this case please specify your answer.

11. A president can serve up to 12 years in the office if_____is   re-elected. *
Mark only one oval.

he
he or she
they
s/he
she
Other:

12. A truck driver must take into account_customer's timetables. *
Mark only one oval.

his or her
her
his
their
Other:

13. Parents should always keep an eye on_____children in public spaces. *
Mark only one oval.

her
his
their
his or her
Other:

14. A good babysitter is very aware of____tasks for the day. *
Mark only one oval.

her
their
his
his or her
Other:

15. If a cheerleader trusts the team,_____is able to perform better. *

Mark only one oval.

s/he
she
he
they
he or she
Other:

16. There's a classic definition of a good coach:____can push you to your limits and make you develop more than you would imagine. *

Mark only one oval.

they
she
he or she
s/he
he
Other:

17. I have colleagues who feel_are demanded to handle too many things in one day. *

Mark only one oval.

they
he
she
s/he
he or she
Other:

18. A nursery teacher has a demanding job with little children:_should keep in mind that the work can be challenging, especially mentally. *

Mark only one oval.

they
he or she
s/he
he
she
Other:

19. When a heavy equipment operator arrives at the fire scene, _____ has to assess the surroundings of the fire. *

Mark only one oval.

he or she
they
he
s/he
she
Other:

20. If a beautician uses wrong hair colours,_____ can ruin the customer's hair. *

Mark only one oval.

he or she
he
she
they
s/he
Other:

Part II

This part includes both open-ended and multiple-choice questions.

21. Why do you prefer to use the pronouns you have previously selected in Part I? *

22. Do you think grammatical correctness, namely agreement, is important?
'pronoun agrees with its antecedent in gender and number, for example:
1."Every mother loves her child." (agrees in lexical gender: female)
2. "Two boys scratched their heads." (agrees in number: plural) *

23. Which one of the suggested pronouns would you use if the gender of the referent is unknown? *

Mark only one oval.

they
she
generic he
s/he
he or she
Other:

24. Do you see any problems regarding the use of any of these pronouns? If yes, which pronoun(s) would you consider problematic and why? *

Background information

25. Age *

26. **Gender** *
Mark only one oval.

Female
Male
Prefer not to say
Other:

27. First language *
Mark only one oval.

Finnish
German
Other:

28. Country of residence *
Mark only one oval.

Austria
Finland
Germany
Switzerland
Other:

29. Highest level of education attained *

Mark only one oval.

Basic education
Upper secondary education (general or vocational)
Tertiary education
Other:

30. Level of studies in university

Mark only one oval.

Bachelor's level
Master's level
Doctoral level

31. Years of studying English in total *

Thank you for your time!

Please remember to submit your answers below. If you have any questions regarding the study, please contact the researcher via email.

Contact details:
Vilma Karhu
MA student of English language and literature Tampere University, Finland
E-mail: vilma.karhu@tuni.fi

Appendix B – Cover letters

Cover letter for emails sent to university professors and student associations

Subject: Online survey for a Master's thesis - Language use of non-native English speakers
Bcc: 21 recipients in Finnish universities and 33 recipients in Austrian universities (student associations and university professors)

Dear recipient,

I am contacting you hoping that you could help me distribute the attached online survey to your students. The aim of the survey is to gather data from EFL settings, and the survey is distributed to Finnish and Austrian university students who study English language, literature or translation as their main subject.

The answers to the survey are used in a Master's thesis conducted in the English language programme at Tampere University, Finland. It will only take 10 minutes to complete the survey. The survey can be accessed using the following link: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf7Ky9XEHR7bdkPBd1HoYCbtjMuiHyOf3jAf-VzyoixnbtDkw/viewform.

A cover letter is attached at the end of this email which you may use when distributing the link to your students.

Thank you in advance and have a great weekend!
Kind regards,
Vilma Karhu
MA student of English language and literature
Tampere University, Finland
Email: vilma.karhu@tuni.fi

Cover letter for student email lists

University students of English language, literature or translation are sought to participate in an online survey studying language use in EFL settings. Your participation in the study is highly appreciated as the results of this survey are used in a Master's thesis conducted in the English language programme at Tampere University, Finland.

The survey can be accessed using the following link: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf7Ky9XEHR7bdkPBd1HoYCbtjMuiHyOf3jAf-VzyoixnbtDkw/viewform.

It takes approximately 10 minutes to answer the online questionnaire. The participation in this study is voluntary, the survey is completely confidential, and all informants will remain

anonymous as you are not required to log in and no email addresses are collected. By taking part in the survey you give the researcher your informed consent to use the anonymous data collected in the survey. The answers can be withdrawn without any consequences to the participant upon request. Please contact me if you wish your answer to be removed by sending an email to vilma.karhu@tuni.fi.

If you have any questions regarding the survey or the study as a whole, feel free to contact me by email at vilma.karhu@tuni.fi.

Kind regards,
Vilma Karhu
MA student of English language and literature
Tampere University, Finland
Email: vilma.karhu@tuni.fi

Cover letter for the reminder email

Subject: Online survey for a Master's thesis - Language use of non-native English speakers
Bcc: 29 recipients in Austrian universities (student associations and university professors

Dear recipient,

This is a reminder email of an online survey used in a Master's thesis conducted in the English language programme at Tampere University, Finland. I sent you an email in November asking if you could possibly help distributing a link to the survey to your students of English language, literature or translation.

If you have already passed the survey to your students, thank you very much! I have received some answers from Austria, so your contribution has truly been helpful. I would appreciate if you could send a reminder of the survey to the students, so a representative sample could be gathered from Austrian university students as well.

It takes 10 minutes to complete the survey and it can be accessed using the following link: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf7Ky9XEHR7bdkPBd1HoYCbtjMuiHyOf3jAf-VzyoixnbtDkw/viewform.

Thank you again and have a great week!
Kind regards,
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