

Josefiina Maaranen

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN LANGUAGE

The Case of the Phrase *He or She*

TIIVISTELMÄ

Josefiina Maaranen: Political Correctness in Language: the Case of the Phrase *He or She*

Kandidaatintutkielma

Tampereen yliopisto

Englannin kielen, kirjallisuuden ja kääntämisen tutkinto-ohjelma

Helmikuu 2020

Pronominin *they* käyttäminen viittaamaan yhteen henkilöön on aihe, josta keskustellaan yhä enemmän englannin kielessä. Tämä tutkielma keskittyy tutkimaan pronomini käytön muutosta englannissa, mutta siltä kannalta, onko pronomini fraasien, kuten *he or she*, käyttö vähentynyt. Tämän perusteena on oletus, että jos pronomini fraasien suosio on pudonnut, oletettavasti muut pronominit, kuten *they*, ovat korvanneet ne. Tutkielman motivaationa on kasvava tietoisuus muunsukupuolisuudesta, eli sukupuoliesta, joka ei ole mies tai nainen. Englannin kielessä usein käytetty pronomini fraasi *he or she* ei ole inklusiivinen muunsukupuolisia henkilöitä kohtaan, joten tutkielman tarkoitus on tarkastella, onko englannin kieli muuttumassa sukupuolineutraalimmaksi.

Tutkielma pohjautuu vahvasti diskurssianalyysiin sekä korpuslingvistiikkaan, mutta myös esimerkiksi kriittistä diskurssianalyysia on käytetty teoriapohjana. Tutkielmassa käytetään kahta korpusta, *The Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) ja *The Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA). Näiden avulla tutkielma tarkastelee muutoksia seuraavien pronomini fraasien käytössä: *he or she*, *his or her*, *him or her*, ja *she or he*. Fraaseja tarkastellaan ajankulun lisäksi myös eri rekistereissä, kuten akateemisessa ja fiktiivisessä. COCA sisältää dataa vuodesta 1990 vuoteen 2019, eli nimensä mukaisesti viimeaikaisempia tuloksia kuin COHA, joka kattaa ajan vuodesta 1810 vuoteen 2009.

Tutkielman tulosten mukaan muutosta pronomini fraasien käytössä on tapahtumassa, sillä pronomini fraaseja käytetään yhä vähemmän. Molemmassa korpuksissa näkyy selvästi pronomini fraasien vähentyminen, mutta muutoksen nopeus sekä pronomini fraasien yleisyys vaihtelee rekistereittäin.

Avainsanat: pronominit, pronomini fraasit, sukupuolineutraali kieli, kielellinen muutos, korpuslingvistiikka

Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Literature Review	2
2.1. Discourse Analysis	2
2.2. Critical Discourse Analysis	3
2.3. <i>They</i> Versus <i>He or She</i>	3
2.4. Nonbinary Identities and Gender-Neutrality	6
2.5. Previous Studies	7
3. Method and Material	8
3.1. Corpus Linguistics.....	8
3.2. Data.....	8
3.2.1. <i>He or She</i>	9
3.2.2. <i>His or Her</i>	12
3.2.3. <i>Him or Her</i>	13
3.2.4. <i>She or He</i>	14
3.2.5. Comparison of <i>He or She</i> and <i>They</i> in a Specific Case	16
4. Results and Discussion	18
4.1. Lowering Frequency.....	18
4.2. Register Differences	19
5. Conclusion.....	21
Bibliography	22
Appendix 1	24
APPENDIX 2	24
APPENDIX 3	24
APPENDIX 4	25
APPENDIX 5	25

1. Introduction

Grammar and language are constantly changing, and one of the recent changes relates to the third person singular pronoun use. Historically and even occasionally in modern times, referring to a person whose gender is unknown or unspecified is often done by using the generic *he*. The feminist revolution from the 1960s onwards brought attention to this matter and the sexism in it, and popularized using *he or she*, a method that is usually accepted as more inclusive and less sexist.

However, in recent years, as the existence of nonbinary people has become increasingly known and acknowledged, using *he or she* to refer to a person of unknown or unspecified gender has become problematic itself. Many argue that despite being more gender-neutral than the generic *he*, *he or she* is not truly gender-neutral either. This is because nonbinary people may use neither *he* nor *she* to refer to themselves. This thesis uses corpora to examine how the usage of *he or she* has changed over the years, and whether it is actually losing popularity in such a way that one can expect singular *they* to become the new norm.

To specify, this thesis uses nonbinary as an umbrella term that includes genderfluid, agender, and otherwise gender-nonconforming people. Transgender men or women are not included in the nonbinary category, however, as they are female or male. Additionally, some men and women also use *they/them* or other more gender-neutral pronouns to refer to themselves.

Regarding pronouns, or rather referring to them, to save space and time I will not write out the full pronoun list every time. As such, *he* stands for *he/his/him/himself*, *she* stands for *she/her/hers/herself*, and *they* stands for *they/their/theirs/them/themselves*. Other pronouns may be mentioned, and there too the simplified version should be considered to stand for all versions of that pronoun.

As for the actual phrases examined in corpora, this thesis will not only focus on *he or she*, but also examines the phrases *his or her*, *him or her*, and *she or he*. This is because the aim of this thesis is to consider the overall change in third person singular pronoun usage, and whether *he or she* and variations thereof are losing popularity, possibly because of the rise in the usage of *they*. As such, although this thesis is based on corpus linguistics, the aim is to examine changes not only in language but in society in general.

It should, nevertheless, be acknowledged that any possible change in the frequency of the previously listed pronoun phrases may not be due to a desire for more gender-neutral language, even if those pronoun phrases are replaced by the singular *they*. The change could, for example, be at least partly due to a growing desire to use more concise language, and an acceptance of *they* being also a singular pronoun, without any consideration towards gender-neutrality or inclusivity. Thus, this thesis cannot conclusively prove a link between a possible change in language and a change in society.

The structure of the thesis is the following: firstly, it will discuss the theory and literature utilized in this thesis, which consists of discourse analyses, previous literature on pronouns, academic literature written on nonbinary identities, and what previous studies related to pronoun usage exist. Secondly discussed will be the method used to gather the data, corpus linguistics, and the data itself. Lastly there will be a discussion on the results provided by the data, followed by the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is, according to Taylor (2013), approaching language material beyond the individual person. This means that discourse analysts believe that language material such as

text or speech can tell us something beyond the individual who produced the language material. In this thesis, the belief is that examining the phrase *he or she* will be informative on a larger scale, that is, to show how language regarding pronoun usage is changing.

Another definition Taylor (2013, 4) presents is this: “Discourse analysis is the close study of language and language use as evidence of aspects of society and social life.” This definition is especially relevant to this thesis, since while the focus here is on language and more specifically phrases such as *he or she*, the claim is made that the possible changes in the usage of such phrases reflect the changing society and norms. As such, this thesis utilizes discourse analysis to observe the data and examine the results in a broader societal scale instead of just language or linguistics.

2.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) differs from discourse analysis in that CDA is more involved in examining the power structure of society and observing instances where racism, sexism and other such matters are imbued in language. For example, Thao Lê et al (2009) list social power, ideology and social practices as core interests in CDA. In this thesis, CDA is relevant because not only will the focus be on language and society as in discourse analysis, but also in how the usage of language affects social power and ideology.

This proposes that there are, indeed, links between the phrase *he or she* and the power structures of society as well as ideology. This is further explained in the following parts which discuss previous literature in pronoun use.

2.3. *They Versus He or She*

Using *he or she* and other similar phrases can occur when discussing known people, but it also occurs in instances where the gender of the referent is not known, which is the focus of

this thesis. For example, in school, one might find in the instructions a sentence such as “a student must remember to bring his or her study materials to class” or “a student must behave properly or he or she might get detention”. Using the phrase *he or she* is currently very popular as people wish to express their inclusivity, and using only *he* to stand in for a person of unknown gender is often seen as sexist.

Many dictionaries list *he or she* and other variations in them, although the awkwardness of the phrase is not ignored. *Garner’s Modern American Usage* (henceforth referred to as GMAU) mentions using *he or she* “not at every turn, but sparingly” and comments about using *he/she* that “sometimes [it] gets quite out of hand” (GMAU 2003, s.v. *he or she*, senses A and B). *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (henceforth referred to as CGEU) also says about *he or she* that “[o]nce or twice in a text it’s alright, but cumbersome if used repeatedly” (CGEU 2004, s.v. *he and/or she*, sense 1). CGEU lists using *they* as an alternative, commenting on how “nowadays *they* and *them/their* are used increasingly in writing after a singular human referent – as has long happened in speech” (CGEU 2004, s.v. *he and/or she*, sense 6). However, acknowledging singular *they* is a fairly recent development, as can be seen from a dictionary in 1975 saying “[e]ven feminists themselves have failed to come up with a single word which could mean either sex” (*Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* 1975, s.v. *he/she/him/his/her*).

There is an issue besides the awkwardness that some have raised with the phrase *he or she*, however, and that issue concerns the existence of people whose pronouns are neither *he/him/his* or *she/her*. Often people’s pronouns are referred to as “preferred pronouns”, meaning pronouns a person has chosen to use, but transgender and nonbinary people commonly prefer simpler phrases such as “my pronouns”. This is because “preferred pronouns” mentions preference, and as such implies that one could also use other pronouns, which is usually not the case. As the existence of nonbinary people has become more

commonly known, people have increasingly started arguing for the usage of *they* as a singular pronoun. This is because *he or she* is not truly gender-neutral, but *they* is. Brown, the director of legal writing at Brooklyn Law School, calls for increased usage of *they* in her article. She says that “[t]he concept of inclusive legal writing is an opportunity for lawyers to be at the forefront of balancing grammatical correctness and cultivation of gender inclusiveness” (Brown, 2018). This shows that gender-neutral pronouns is a widespread issue, one which extends to many different registers.

Parks, O’Connor and Parrish (2016) write about a case study in their university, Elon. The university has implemented many inclusivity projects, including spreading information on preferred pronoun usage. “While most would agree that each of us should be recognized as an individual, few are ready to upend deep-seated notions about basic grammar (Parks et al 2016, 84),” they say, observing how, despite the wish for inclusiveness, many still struggle with accepting grammar changes. This is often the case with all grammatical and otherwise linguistic changes to a language, as people are often resistant to any alterations in languages.

Darr and Kibbey (2016) mention in their article that the usage of singular *they* is not a recent phenomenon, using an example from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, which dates back to 1396. Yet still using *they* as a singular gender-neutral pronoun prompts many protests from different sources, including academics (Darr and Kibbey, 2016). In the same article, Darr and Kibbey also discuss the history of pronouns in the English language, and how all of them have changed over time. In addition, they explore the multiple options for gender-neutral pronouns – such as *ze/zir* and *ne/nem/nir* – but also mention how these neopronouns are not mainstream, which makes it difficult for a person to be addressed by them outside of their own communities. This explains why people using *they/them* as their preferred pronoun

is so popular, because at the very least people are aware that it exists, even if they are reluctant to use it.

The problem with using singular *they* is often that people fear awkward grammatical constructions or confusion as to whether *they* is being used in its plural or singular form, that is, who it is referring to. But in addition to Darr and Kibbey's note of how pronouns have changed before, there is Clarke's (2019) relevant mention in her article about how *you* is both plural and singular, and people have managed to handle that confusion. CGEU also mentions how "[l]anguage historians would note that the trend towards using *they* for both plural and singular is exactly what happened with *you* some centuries ago", referring to the combining of *you* and *ye* into only *you* (CGEU 2004, s.v. *they, them, their*). Naturally, *they* and *you* have different popular contexts, as for example *they* is very frequently used in stories and other prose, while *you* often appears in speech.

2.4. Nonbinary Identities and Gender-Neutrality

As mentioned in the introduction, the motivation for this thesis was largely the increasing awareness of nonbinary people and the need to be respectful and considerate in one's pronoun usage when referring to them. Regardless of what "label" a nonbinary person falls under, be it genderfluid, gender-nonconforming, genderqueer, agender, or anything else, it is very common for nonbinary people to use gender-neutral pronouns. Even some women or men, for reasons of their own, may realize that gender-neutral pronouns better suit them.

The hypothesis of this thesis is that the usage of *he or she* has lessened over time, at least partly because more people are becoming aware of nonbinary identities and thus choose to utilize truly gender-neutral pronouns instead. I believe it is important to discuss the realities of nonbinary identities and why people find using gender-neutral pronouns important.

Firstly, as alluded in the previous section, the article by Darr and Kibbey (2016) discusses nonbinary people. They point out the existence of gender-nonconforming individuals and how preferred pronouns are not necessarily linked to someone's gender. They remark that "[m]isgendering students in this way may cause them to feel uncomfortable among peers and in society" (Darr and Kibbey 2016, 74). Misgendering here is specifically linked to pronoun usage, but it can be someone addressing another by any gendered title, word or phrase where the assumed gender does not match the addressee's gender identity, or even something as "minor" as offhandedly implying someone's gender is something other than what it is.

Misgendering is also addressed by McLemore (2014) in his article, which discusses two studies. The findings of these studies were similar and both supported the theory that misgendering has largely negative consequences on the people it affects. According to McLemore, these negative effects relate to worsening self-esteem and confidence, particularly in connection to appearance and identity. As such, it is no surprise that many people who wish to be considerate of others also wish to avoid misgendering and causing negative reactions in the people they address.

Although there are many studies conducted and articles written about nonbinary and transgender people and gender-neutrality, the ultimate goal of all of them is the same: equality. As Clarke (2019, 963) succinctly says in her article, "equal treatment means giving 'them' the same respect as 'he' and 'she.'" In practice, because it is superfluous to say *he or she or they*, this often means simply using *they*, the truly gender-neutral pronoun.

2.5. Previous Studies

There have been some previous articles and studies regarding the change in the usage of pronouns. For example, Merkhofer (2013) wrote her graduate thesis on how twitter users

utilize pronouns in gender-neutral situations. Most of these studies focus on examining the increase in the usage of *they*, while this thesis does the opposite – examining the fall of *he or she*. In addition, few of the academic papers that study the phenomenon use corpora to examine it, which creates an ample gap that this thesis can attempt to fulfill.

3. Method and Material

3.1. Corpus Linguistics

As this thesis is hugely reliant on corpora and their analysis, corpus linguistics is a highly relevant field of study. Using corpora is commonly seen as a purely quantitative method of study, but it can in fact be also qualitative or any combination of the two. This thesis will make use of largely quantitative method, because the purpose here is to examine the changes in frequency.

Frequency, indeed, is an important aspect of corpus linguistics. Although corpora list words and phrases and where they occur, it is not as simple as examining how many instances of a particular search there are. This is because corpora differ in their sizes, and there are also differences in the amount of material within a corpus, for example, across different Englishes or time periods. Thus frequency is important, as it compares the number of search results to the amount those search results were found from. As such, the main numbers to focus on are the normalized frequencies shown later in this thesis rather than the overall number of occurrences.

3.2. Data

The data is collected from several different corpora, dividing the results based on time periods. Differences in Englishes are not taken into consideration, as that would expand the study

beyond a reasonable scope of a bachelor's thesis, and the two corpora utilized are both from American English. A dividing aspect of the data, in addition to time, is register, and differences in registers will be observed and analyzed.

Although the focus of this thesis is the phrase *he or she*, as mentioned previously, it is not the only phrase that will be examined. Along with *he or she*, phrases *his or her*, *him or her*, and *she or he* will be examined in different corpora. Originally I had planned to also examine *he/she*, but that proved difficult with the algorithms of the corpora. The data will be divided based on phrases for simplicity of reading, although comparisons may occur.

The reason for these chosen phrases is that they will adequately reflect the changes in pronoun usage. Inspecting the changing frequencies of singular *they* was also considered, but it was determined to be too time-consuming for a bachelor's thesis, as determining whether the use of *they* is singular or plural would require examining each instance separately. Regardless, upon observing the data, there may be comparisons between the usage of *they* and phrases such as *he or she* in specific contexts.

3.2.1. *He or She*

The first phrase examined is *he or she*, firstly via the Corpus of Contemporary American English, henceforth referred to as COCA. The corpus was chosen because it is relatively large, containing around 520 million words, and it has a time range of 1990-2017, thus providing sufficient data to examine recent changes.

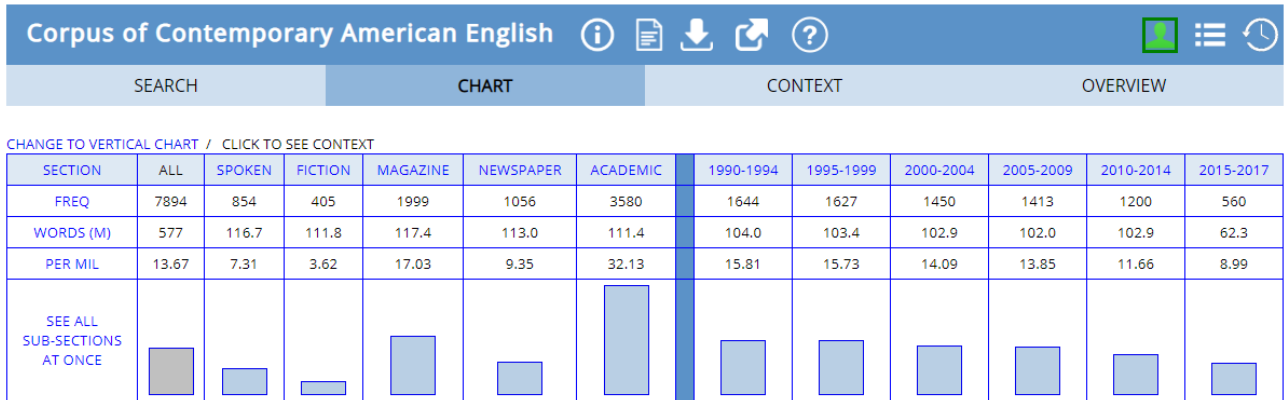


Chart 1. The number of occurrences of *he or she* in COCA

Chart 1, a screenshot from COCA, shows the results for searching *he or she*. The numbers to examine are the normalized "per mil" frequencies, as they present the frequencies in relation to the numbers of words in the corresponding sections of the corpus. Thus it is clearly visible that throughout the time periods examined, *he or she* becomes less frequent. From 1990-1994 to 2015-2017, the amount that the phrase appears per million words has fallen from 15.81 to 8.99, which is a significant decline. As regards the register, *he or she* is clearly most popular in academic language, and least popular in fiction.

However, doing further searches and examining the academic register closer reveals that there, too, exists a shift away from using *he or she*, as results per million have fallen from 34.21 to 18.73, which is in fact a steeper decline than the one including all registers, if only narrowly. This means that although the academic register does seem to utilize *he or she* much more than other registers, even it is starting to abandon that habit. Contrastingly, in the fiction register, the frequency of *he or she* does not show a steady decline, nor has it fallen by much from 1990-1994 to 2015-2017, having lessened from 3.24 to 3.03.

The second corpus to be utilized in this examination is the Corpus of Historical American English, henceforth referred to as COHA. As opposed to COCA, COHA is focused on time periods further in the past, as can be inferred from the name. However, COHA is

relevant to this thesis in that it can give a clear idea of how phrases such as *he or she* have developed over the years, since I previously alleged that they became popular when people wanted to be more inclusive in their speech and writing.

Based on the data shown in Chart 2 below, it is clear that the phrase *he or she* gained traction in the 1970s and was most popular in the 1990s with the per mil frequency of 10.31, and conversely lost popularity in the 2000s when the frequency fell to 8.83. This can be explained by the feminist movement in Western society becoming stronger in the 1970s, whereas in the 2000s people have become more aware of gender variation.

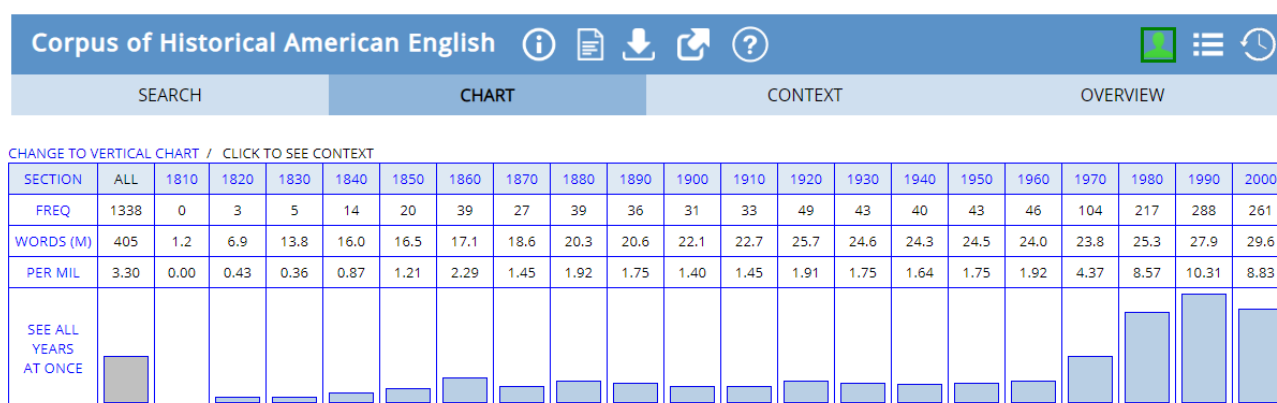


Chart 2. The number of occurrences of *he or she* in COHA

Most of these results are indeed relevant to this thesis, even the older ones, as they refer to an unknown person. Some instances refer to known people, such as in the case of “His manner was as frank and natural as ever: he conversed about the books which he or she had recently read” (COHA, 1863, FIC, *Hannah Thurston: A Story of American Life*), where *he* in *he or she* refers specifically to the man the protagonist is speaking about, and *she* to the protagonist herself. Regardless, the majority of the results do refer to a person of unknown gender. Here are some examples, taken from different centuries:

(1) Let us each labour for it in the evening worship, and he or she to whom it may be given shall forthwith undertake the cure of this precious soul. (COHA, 1824, FIC, *Redwood: A Tale, Volume 2*)

(2) No teacher or pupil shall attend any school without furnishing satisfactory certificate that he or she has been successfully vaccinated or otherwise protected from smallpox.

(COHA, 1915, NF, *Health Work in the Public Schools*)

(3) Besides, even as a person rests, he or she can quietly persist. (COHA, 2007, MAG, *Psychology Today*)

3.2.2. *His or Her*

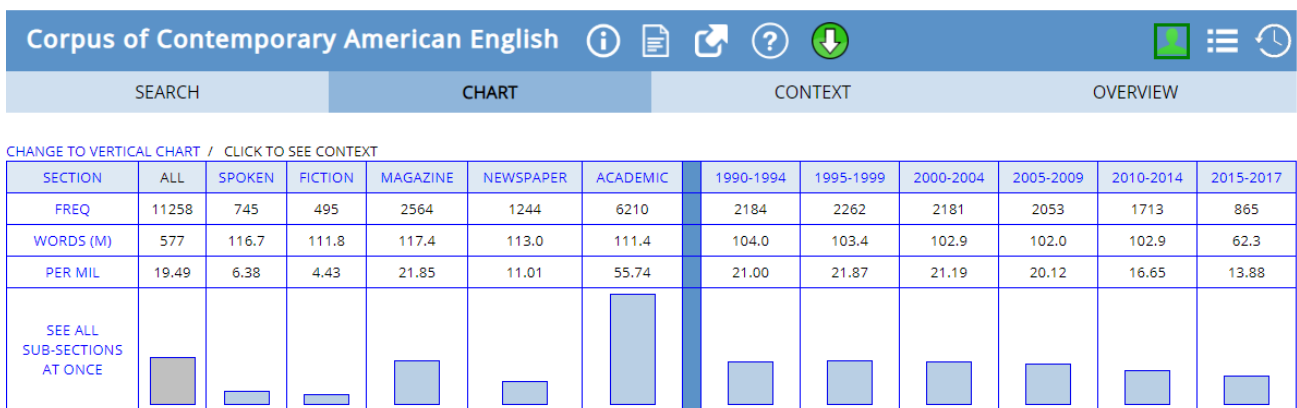


Chart 3. The number of occurrences of *his or her* in COCA

Examining the phrase *his or her* in COCA shows similar results to the phrase *he or she*, where the frequency has quite rapidly declined, and the academic register is the one to use the phrase the most. However, *his or her* was previously and is still more popular a phrase than *he or she*, showing a decline from 21.00 to 13.88. In the academic register this is blatantly obvious, as the result for the time frame 2015-2017 is 35.00, which is more frequent than *he or she* was even in 1990-1994 (observe appendix 1). Interestingly, the ratio of usage in different registers is dissimilar, as *his or her* is far more popular in academic language than the other registers, and although *his or her* is more frequent than *he or she* in fiction, it is less so in spoken language.

In contrast, COHA shows *his or her* following the same patterns as *he or she* did in the same corpus: increased in frequency until the 1990s, and decreased in the 2000s

(observe appendix 5). This is presumably due to the same phenomenon as the changing frequency with *he or she*, which I purported was increasing attempts at inclusivity, and that is supported by the apparent redundancy of adding the traditionally female pronoun to the phrase. For example, one magazine source has the phrase “to every student who turned in his or her halogen” (COHA, 1998, MAG, *Forbes*). As “every student” already encompasses all students, using *he or she* instead of just *he* appears to only serve the purpose of increasing inclusivity.

3.2.3. *Him or Her*

As to *him or her*, this phrase has never been hugely popular either in COCA or COHA. COCA shows it at an all-time high in 2000-2004 with the result of 3.19, and having fallen to 1.70 in 2015-2017.

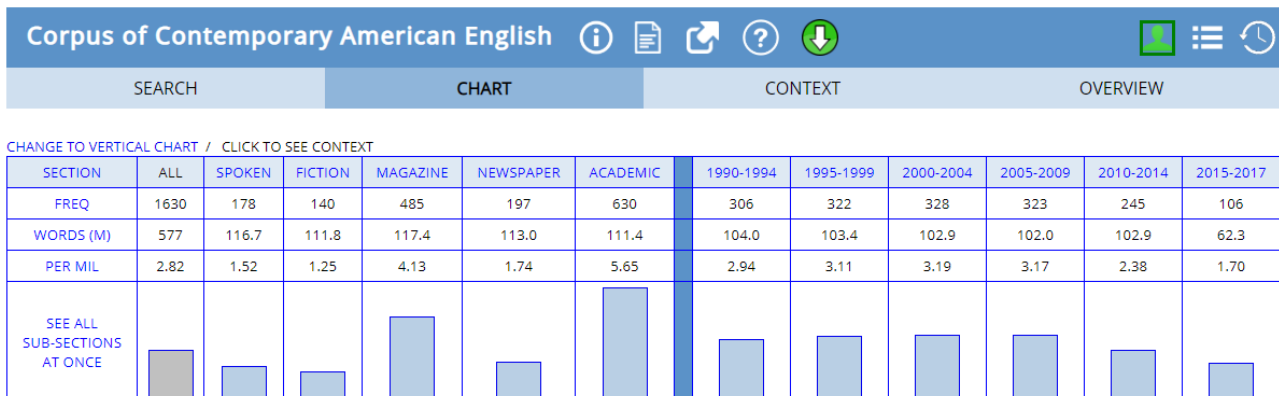


Chart 4. The number of occurrences of *him or her* in COCA

Again, the academic register uses the phrase most frequently, although even there the frequency in 2015-2017 is only 2.38 (observe appendix 2). The situation in the fiction register differs from the previously examined phrases however, as *him or her* has been more frequent from 2005 to 2017 in comparison to the years between 1990 and 2004 (observe appendix 3). In fact, *him or her* has increased in fictive language from 0.98 words per million in 1990-1994 to 1.23 words per million in 2015-2017. It should be noted, however, that the frequencies are still quite low, lower than they have been when examining the other phrases.

As mentioned, the frequencies of *him or her* are also low in COHA. However, remarkably, the frequency of the usage of *him or her* has increased in COHA over time, as shown on the chart below.

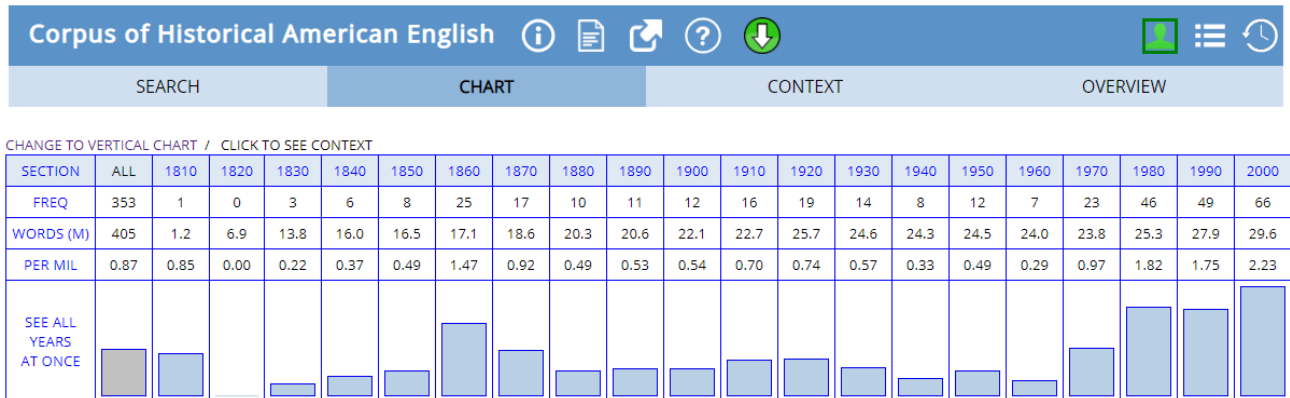


Chart 5. The number of occurrences of *him or her* in COHA

In the 1860s there was a rapid increase in the frequency as one fictive source used the phrase *him or her* on sixteen different occasions. What relates to this thesis, however, is the increase starting from the 1970s, which has only grown even in the 2000s. This differs greatly from the previously examined phrases, where the highest frequency occurred in the 1990s, followed by a decrease in the usage. The reason for this divergence from the pattern is unclear, as although some sources do repeat the phrase, they only do so once or twice. Yet it should be noted that the frequencies indeed are very low, as the number of times *him or her* has been used has increased from 23 in the 1970s to 66 in the 2000s, both within a sample size of far over 20 million words.

3.2.4. *She or He*

She or he is by far the least popular of all the phrases examined in both COCA and COHA, as its frequency in words per million does not go above 1.00 in any time period in either corpus. Only in the academic register in COCA does it exceed 1.00 with a frequency of 2.20 words per million (see Chart 6 below). Its usage has declined in all the registers except the newspaper register, where the frequency has increased from 0.24 words per million in 1990-

1994 to 0.32 words per million in 2015-2017 (observe appendix 4). In comparison to the other phrases, *she or he* is still not notable even in the academic register.

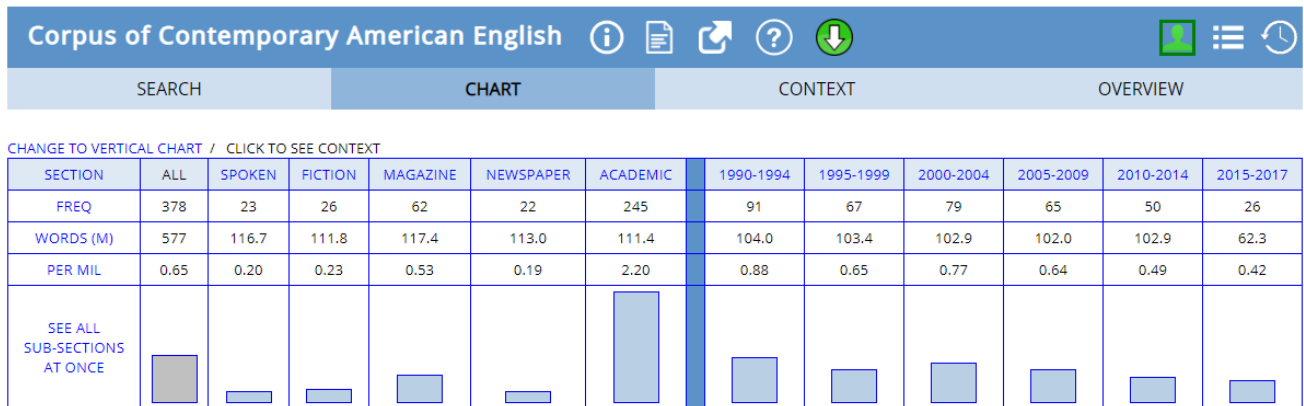


Chart 6. The number of occurrences of *she or he* in COCA

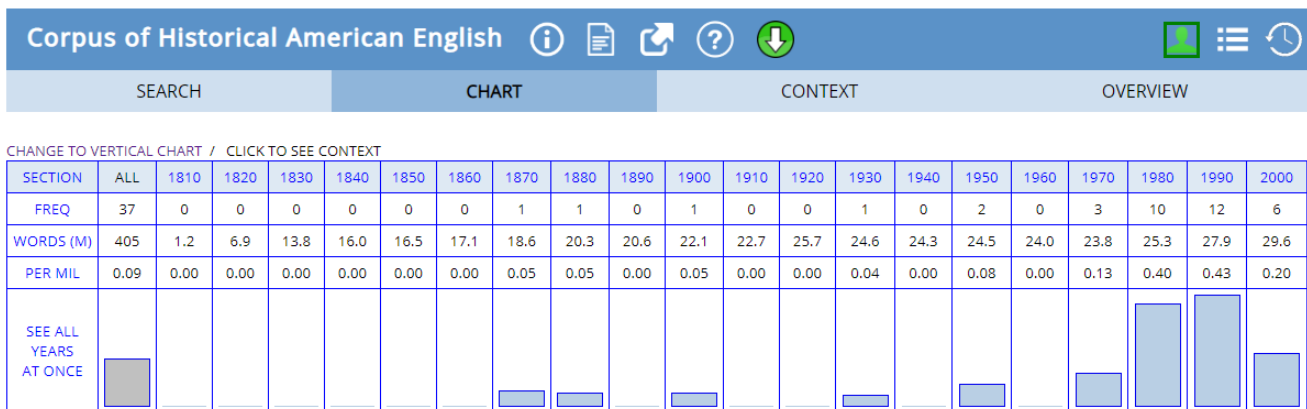


Chart 7. The number of occurrences of *she or he* in COHA

Although as stated before, *she or he* has the lowest frequencies of all the phrases discussed in COHA as well, it also had the most rapid increase from the 1970s to the 1980s as the usage tripled between those decades. Additionally, the decline in the frequencies from the 1990s to the 2000s is the steepest of all the phrases, as it was halved. It should be noted, however, that as the phrase appears so few times, the increase and decline are not as significant as first would seem. The steep incline occurs due to a single source which utilizes the phrase *she or he* five times, which then doubles the frequency as the phrase occurs only ten times altogether. Similarly, in the 1990s, one source uses the phrases three times while another uses it twice, which means that the frequency of sources is nine instead of the twelve shown in the chart, and thus the decrease to the 2000s does not in fact halve the frequency.

3.2.5. Comparison of *He or She* and *They* in a Specific Case

As the hypothesis of this thesis relates both to the lowering frequency of *he or she* and other similar phrases and the increasing frequency of singular *they*, it is relevant to present evidence of such a connection. Previously only the relevant pronoun phrases have been examined, as determining whether *they* occurs in a singular or plural context would require work beyond the reasonable scope of a bachelor's thesis. However, it is possible to observe the usage of *they* in a specific context only. Here that context is “anyone who [singular verb] they”, for example “anyone who believes they...”. As such, a search of “anyone who _v?z* they” was performed on COCA, and that is compared to “anyone who _v?z* he or she” to determine whether singular *they* or the pronoun phrase *he or she* is more popular in that context.

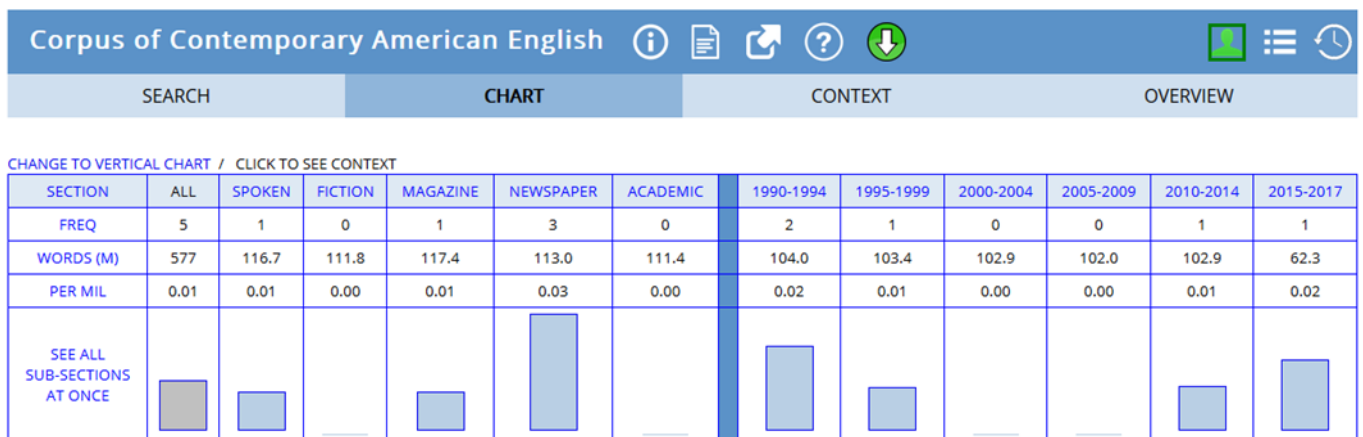


Chart 8. The number of occurrences of *anyone who _v?z* he or she* in COCA

As Chart 8 above shows, the usage of “anyone who [singular verb] he or she” is not particularly common. The frequencies are very minimal, and in some registers and time periods the phrase is not used once. What is more relevant, however, is whether the phrase with singular *they* is more common.

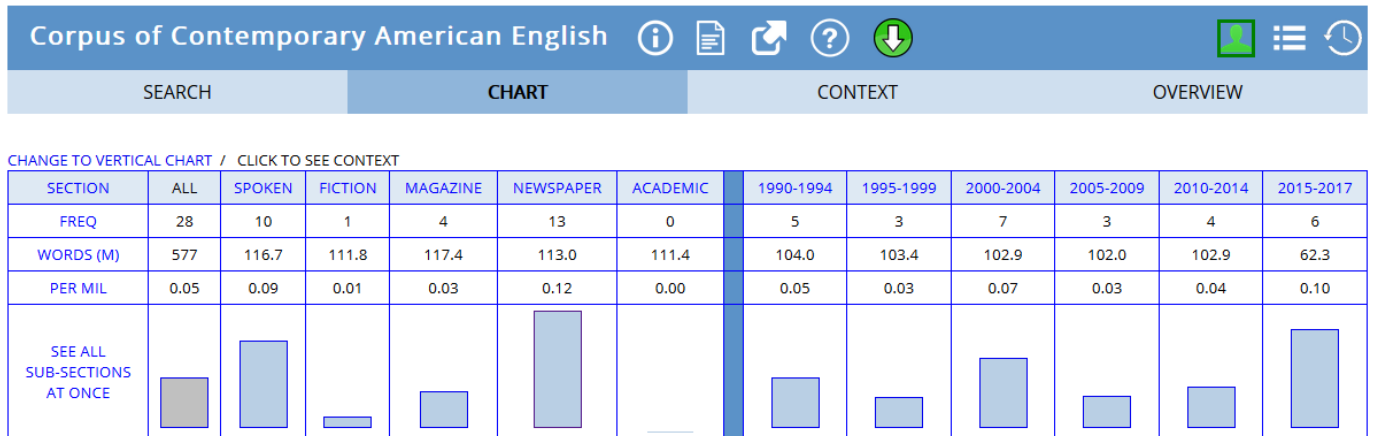


Chart 9. The number of occurrences of *anyone who _v?z* they* in COCA

The phrase “anyone who [singular verb] they” is distinctly more common than the same phrase with the pronoun phrase *he or she*. According to Chart 9, the phrase with singular *they* has been used in every time period, and the only register it does not appear in is academic. Even with this version of the phrase, however, the frequencies are not very high. In addition, although almost all of the occurrences are legitimately of singular *they*, there is also an occurrence where the referent of *they* is different than the referent of *anyone*. The following examples portray the difference of that style of occurrence:

(1) In fact, last year, the federal government estimated that about 740,000 taxpayers used abusive tax schemes in the year 2000. Atkinson's advice for anyone who thinks they may have been duped this year? (COCA, 2003, SPOK, NPR ATC)

(2) “The accounting industry has been one of most powerful and effective lobbying forces on the hill,” said Barbara Roper, director of investor protection at the Consumer Federation

of America. “Anyone who thinks they're out for the count is a fool.” (COCA, 2002, NEWS, *Washington Post*)

In example one, *they* is referring to the word *anyone*, that is, any person who “may have been duped”. However, in example two, *they* is not referring to *anyone*, and is instead referring to the accounting industry mentioned earlier in the quote.

Regardless, examining these two versions of the same phrase is helpful, as example two seems to be the only case of *they* and *anyone* having different referents. Example two should thus be discounted from this case study, but there are still more occurrences of the phrase using *they* instead of *he or she*. Thus it can be observed that at least in this one specific case, using singular *they* as the gender-neutral pronoun is preferred over using the pronoun phrase *he or she*.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Lowering Frequency

Based on the data shown in the previous section, it is obvious that as far as American English is concerned, the usage of phrases such as *he or she* is lessening, with the exception of *him or her* in COHA, which is an outlier. This supports the hypothesis that using *he or she* is becoming less frequent, although one cannot tell solely from the data of this thesis whether that lowering frequency is due to the increasing popularity of truly gender-neutral pronoun expressions such as *they*.

Examining the data also showed that it is common for the phrases to appear multiple times within the same source. This is understandable, as it is common for a source that refers to people of unknown gender to do so more than once, and if a source has already

used the phrase *he or she* it is unlikely that it will change to using *they*. Still, the phrases recurring within a single source can obscure the data, as it did with the phrase *she or he*. However, the data is clear enough to show a definite decline in the frequency of the phrases, excluding *him or her*, whose increased frequency is difficult to explain, yet is also rather insignificant when considering societal change, as its overall frequency is much lower than that of the phrases *he or she* and *his or her*.

As regards the societal change towards more gender-neutral pronoun usage, the data does seem to support the hypothesis: although one cannot directly infer that from the data gathered, one can assume that such a change is happening. This is because although the usage of *he or she* is lessening, it is unlikely that the need to refer to people of unknown gender is lessening along with it. That would then heavily imply that *he or she* is being replaced by some other phrase or word, and considering how much discussion is revolving around using *they* as a singular gender-neutral pronoun, it is not unreasonable to presume that perhaps it is precisely *they* and other truly gender neutral expressions which are the ones replacing *he or she*. This cannot be proven with the data gathered for this thesis, but it is not an unjustified hypothesis to form. However, even if gender-neutral pronouns such as *they* are replacing the pronoun phrases, it is possible that it is caused not by a desire for more gender-neutral language and inclusivity, but for example by a desire for more concise language.

4.2. Register Differences

The frequency of *he or she* and the other phrases is lowering across all registers, although it most commonly remains the highest in the academic register. That is not to say that the academic register has not experienced a significant drop in frequency, as it indeed has, but the academic register favored the phrases so heavily that even halving the frequency of usage

leaves it with the highest frequency across the registers. The data does not clearly show why, but there are some hypotheses which can be inferred from the nature of academic language.

Firstly, academic language often aims to be precise. It is necessary for the reader to know what the author is referring to in academic texts, perhaps even more so than in other registers. Using solely *he* can create a false impression in the mind of a reader that the author is only referring to men if that reader considers *he* to be a masculine pronoun and thus may not realize that *he* has been used as the generic *he*. Avoiding confusion is often integral in the academic register.

Secondly, there are more opportunities in academic texts to use the phrase *he or she*, as the nature of the academic register is such that the referent is not always known. For example in psychology, texts will often discuss unspecified people as they talk about specific phenomena or effects that certain things will have, and thus the text must refer to people whose gender is unknown. Contrastingly other registers may not need to refer to unspecified people as often, as for example in fiction it is generally known who the people are. In magazines and newspapers it is also common for the author to know who they are referring to, although less common than it is in speech according to the data gathered.

It is clear that fiction requires the use of pronouns or pronoun phrases to refer to unknown people or people of unknown gender far less than academic language does, and the same applies to the other registers in lower numbers. Thus the data should not be considered to prove that academic language favors the gender binary pronoun phrases over gender neutral pronouns such as *they* any more than other registers, but rather that using one of those options is more frequent in the academic register. Considering the purpose of this thesis is to examine societal change, the inability to compare the frequency of *they* to *he or she* is a definite limitation, but for that reason it is important to not presume that academic language prefers the gender binary over gender neutrality.

5. Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to examine whether corpora on the English language supports the hypothesis that a societal change regarding gender-neutral language is truly occurring. According to the data, a change is indeed happening, which can be inferred to support the hypothesis. The usage of the pronoun phrases examined in this thesis has lessened based on the corpora examined.

However, more studies are needed to understand the relationship between the lowering frequency in using *he or she*, the gender-neutral pronoun *they*, and societal change towards gender neutrality. A study on the possible changes in the frequency of using singular *they* would be useful, as would a more qualitative study on why people choose to use certain pronouns or pronoun phrases. The motivation for this thesis was the increasing awareness of nonbinary people, but there are many different reasons why people choose to use a specific pronoun or pronoun phrase.

In conclusion, the data gathered from the two different corpora definitely shows a lowering in the frequency of pronoun phrases such as *he or she*. However, whether that change in frequency is due to a desire for gender-neutrality or, for example, concise language, cannot be determined based on this study. Thus there remains room for many future studies related to pronouns and pronoun phrases.

Bibliography

Brown, Heidi K. 2018. "We Can Honor Good Grammar and Societal Change Together." *ABA Journal* 104, 4: 22-23. Available online at http://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/inclusive_legal_writing

Clarke, Jessica A. 2019. "They, them, and Theirs." *Harvard law review* 132, 3: 895-991. Available online at: https://harvardlawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/894-991_Online.pdf

Davies, Mark. 2008-. *The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): 560 million words, 1990-present*. Available online at <https://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>. Accessed 01.03.2019-05.12.2019

Davies, Mark. 2010-. *The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA): 400 million words, 1810-2009*. Available online at <https://corpus.byu.edu/coha/>. Accessed 01.03.2019-05.12.2019

Darr, Brandon and Kibbey, Taylor. 2016. "Pronouns and Thoughts on Neutrality: Gender Concerns in Modern Grammar." *Pursuit: The Journal of Undergraduate Research at the University of Tennessee* 7, 1: 71-84. Available online at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/pursuit/vol7/iss1/10>

Garner, Bryan A. 2003. *Garner's Modern American Usage*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.

Lê, Thao; Lê, Quỳnh; Short, Megan. 2009. *Critical Discourse Analysis: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.

McLemore, Kevin A. 2014. "Experiences with Misgendering: Identity Misclassification of Transgender Spectrum Individuals." *Self and Identity* 14, 1: 51-74. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2014.950691>

Merkhofer, Elizabeth M. 2013. "She, He and they Trending on Twitter: Polyvocal Pronouns and More-Public Messages." Master's Thesis. Georgetown University. United States, District of Columbia. Available online at: <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.tuni.fi/docview/1347645870?pq-origsite=summon>

Morris, Mary and Morris, William. 1975. *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage*. New York: Harper & Row.

Parks, Rodney; O'Connor, Margaret and Parrish, Jesse. 2016. "Gender Pronouns: Recommendations from an Institution with Solutions." *College and University* 91, 4: 83-86. Available online at: <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.tuni.fi/docview/1845101568?pq-origsite=summon>

Taylor, Stephanie. 2013. *What is Discourse Analysis?* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Appendix 1

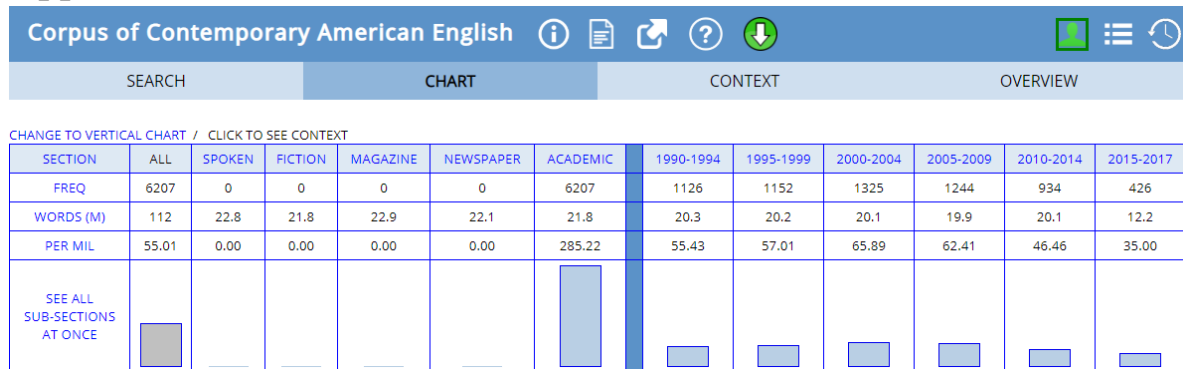


Chart 10. The number of occurrences of *his or her* in academic language in COCA

APPENDIX 2

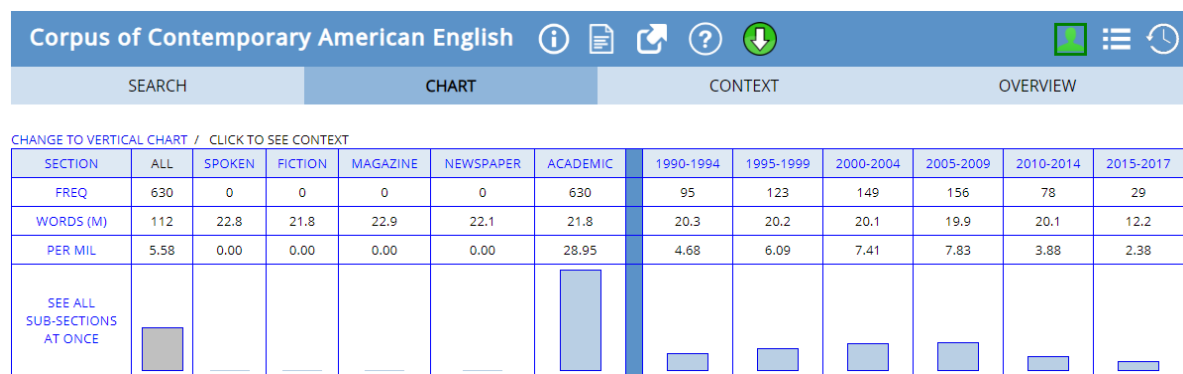


Chart 11. The number of occurrences of *him or her* in academic language in COCA

APPENDIX 3

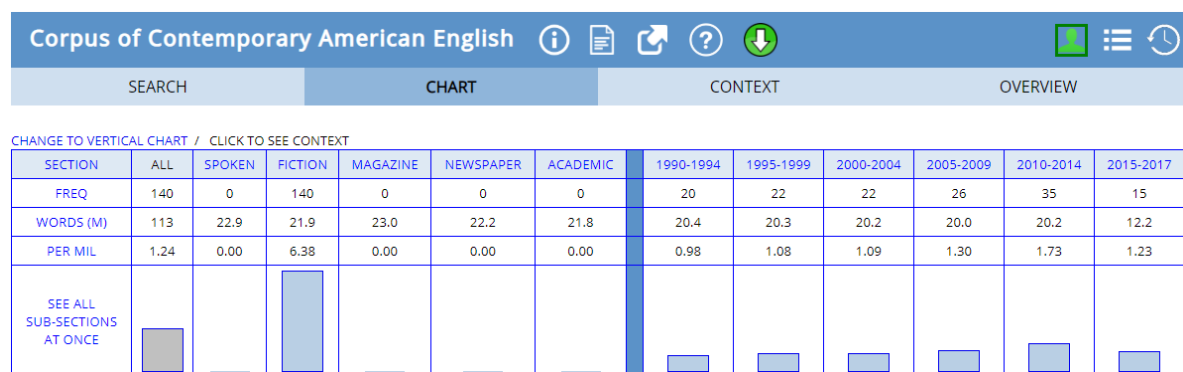
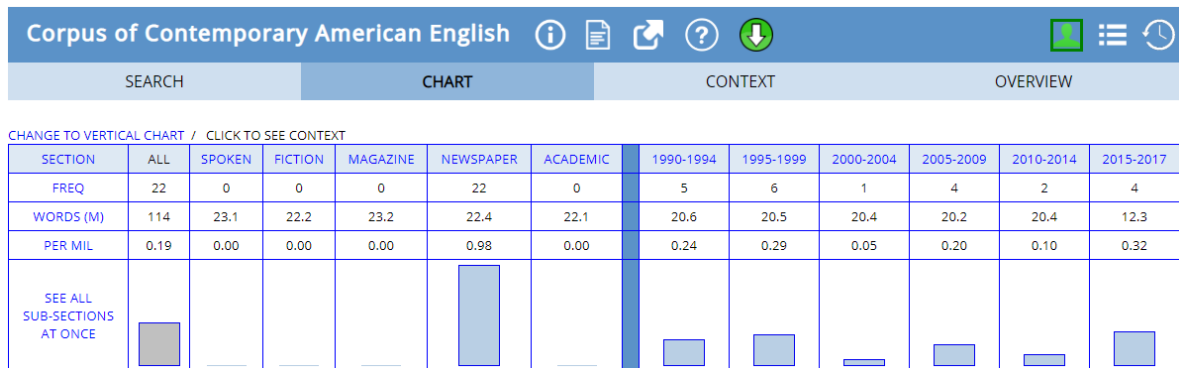
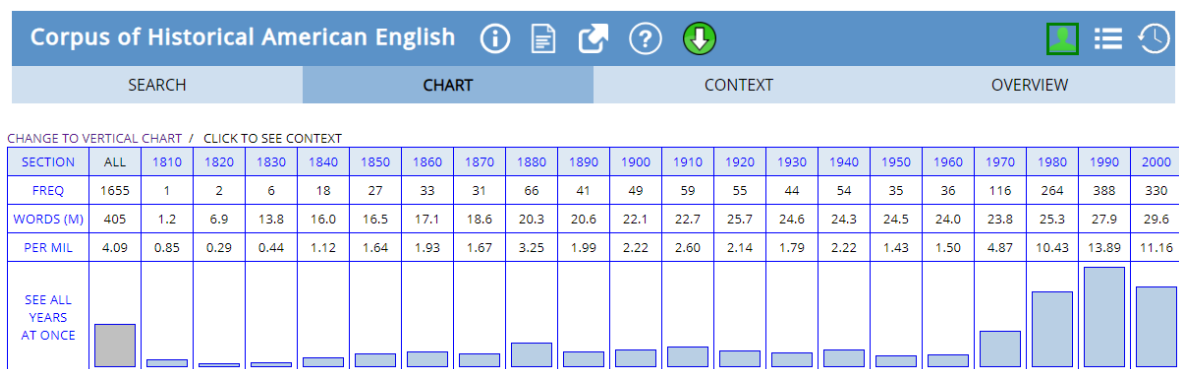


Chart 12. The number of occurrences of *him or her* in fictive language in COCA

APPENDIX 4

Chart 13. The number of occurrences of *she or he* in newspaper language in COCA

APPENDIX 5

Chart 14. The number of occurrences of *his or her* in COHA