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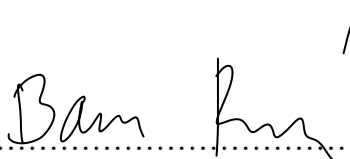
Bakalářská práce

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Gender-neutral personal pronouns in the English language

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a výhradně s použitím uvedené literatury.

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis was to analyse the usage of epicene and non-binary personal pronouns in contemporary fiction and television series. The conducted research focused on determining their frequency and differences in usage between literature and television. In eight selected texts, 65 thousand personal pronouns were recorded, and 1,969 were found to be gender-neutral. These were further examined and compared. The findings showed that singular *they* was the most frequent epicene and non-binary pronoun, and that gender-neutral pronouns were more prevalent in literature than in television series. However, in comparison to other personal pronouns, gender-neutral pronouns were not found to be overly common.

Introduction

In 1992, an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* introduced an alien race called the J'naii, who are neither men nor women. At one moment, the following interaction occurs between Commander Riker and Soren, a member of the J'naii race:

Commander, there are no hes or shes in a species without gender.

Okay. For two days I've been trying to construct sentences without personal pronouns. Now I give up. What should I use, "it"? To us, that's rude.

We use a pronoun which is neutral. I do not think there is really a translation.

(*Star Trek: The Next Generation*, "The Outcast", 6:57-7:13)

At the time the episode aired, there was no appropriate neutral pronoun that could be used, but thirty years later, that is no longer true. Had the story been written now, this conversation would likely not have needed to happen, because Commander Riker would have simply used the pronoun *they*.

This thesis focuses on gender-neutral pronouns in the English language, both generic and non-binary. The reason for selecting this topic is, apart from personal interest, its current relevance in a world where gender and the language connected with it remain a constant matter of debate, whether it is eradicating sexism from the lexicon or the struggle for transgender rights that is in question.

As the question of non-binary gender and related pronouns is relatively recent, there is yet little academic research pertaining to the topic, particularly in combination with other gender-neutral pronouns, which is a gap this work strives to fill. The theoretical part provides an overview of language change, human and grammatical gender, and personal pronouns, including gender-neutral ones, in three chapters. The practical part then summarises the material used for research purposes and the methodology and presents the findings, again in three chapters.

The aim is to analyse the occurrence of gender-neutral personal pronouns in contemporary English-language literature and television. For that purpose, a corpus of eight selected works of literature and television series of different genres is investigated. The research objectives are to determine the most frequent epicene and non-binary pronouns, compare the usage of plural and singular *they*, analyse the frequency of gender-neutral pronouns among

other personal pronouns, and examine differences in usage between literature and television. This is done via corpus analysis. The findings should offer insight into how gender-neutral pronouns are used in contemporary English.

1 Language change

It is an inevitable fact that all languages change with the passage of time. This is no less true of English. When the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and contemporary authors such as Neil Gaiman are compared, it is evident that neither's language is identical, whether the aspect of concern is spelling, syntax, semantics, or the lexicon. Language change is a natural and necessary phenomenon, motivated by the evolution and progress of society (Crystal, 2010, p. 132).

Perhaps most prominently, words become obsolete because the objects or concepts they denote disappear, and on the other hand, neologisms are continuously added into the lexicon as entirely new ideas emerge. Newly coined words are frequently related to technology (Crystal, 2010, p. 131), namely *smartphone*, *to google*, or *Zoom fatigue*, though of course, they may, and do, appear throughout all areas of human life. The term *non-binary gender* and the pronouns connected with it are also representatives of language change. As a matter of fact, updates to the Oxford English Dictionary ranged between 100 and 1400 words per three months only in the year 2021 (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021).

Further examples include for instance the gradual replacement of the second-person singular pronoun *thou* by the plural *you* (McMahon, 2006, p. 149) or, similarly, the increasing use of singular *they* and other gender-neutral pronouns, which are elaborated in Chapter 3. As was mentioned, however, it does not affect merely vocabulary or grammar, and the cases presented herein are, naturally, only a few of many and serve to exemplify merely a small portion of the phenomenon that is language change.

1.1 Causes of language change

Language change occurs as a result of several contributing factors. As mentioned above, it often parallels the development of society, but that cannot be regarded as its sole catalyst. Attempts at discovering the causes have been made for centuries, and in the past, “physical, social, mental and environmental” influences have been considered. Two sets of factors prevail: sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic (Aitchison, 2001, p. 133).

Sociolinguistic factors include fashion, foreign influence, and social need. Although the former should not be considered principal, there is certain, if not significant, influence pertaining to fashion and external circumstances such as the speech of an individual's vicinity (Aitchison, 2001, p. 136). Crystal (2010, p. 134) remarks that “a new usage arrives when most

people in a society decide to use it". Examples of such 'fashionable' changes are internet trends or texting language (Crystal, 2010, pp. 183-194).

Social need is, on the other hand, a potentially major cause of language change (Aitchison, 2001, p. 137). It is reflected for instance in political correctness, which arose from a need to make language less discriminatory and insulting towards various groups of people, such as women, people of colour, the disabled, the elderly, or non-binary people. A closely related concept is gender inclusivity, which is reflected in the usage of neutral words such as *flight attendant* instead of the gendered *steward* and *stewardess* (Crystal, 2010, pp. 215-218) or in replacing generic *he* with *he or she* or singular *they*. Gender inclusivity has been spreading since the second half of the 19th century, induced by changing views on feminism and gender (Baron, 2020, pp. 8-22).

1.2 Resistance to language change

Language change may be a natural, logical occurrence, but that does not mean it is without opposition. While English grows and develops nearly every day, now particularly due to the worldwide reach of the internet, there are and always have been those who disapprove of novel ways of using it. Many changes to English have been called 'sloppy' or 'lazy', and English itself 'on the decline'. In fact, the belief that English is deteriorating tends to be more prevalent than the belief that it is evolving in a positive direction (Aitchison, 2001, pp. 4-8; Zanuttini, 2017).

Language often progresses more rapidly than human nature, and the troubles of old persist, only the content and form of people's complaints transform over time. Aitchison (2001, p. 13) mentions, for example, a current argument about the word *media* and whether it is singular or plural, which was preceded by the same disagreement over *chicken* centuries ago. Furthermore, the same unfavourable opinions that were originally expressed via essays and letters to newspapers are now directed at broadcast services or published online. Futile this effort though is, because English will continue to evolve regardless of the public's displeasure (Crystal, 2010, p. 134).

Resistance to change is a matter of generations (Crystal, 2010, p. 134), but also of social class and education. In the past, the majority of language purists comprised grammarians, published authors, and the social elite in general, including the writers Jonathan Swift and Samuel Johnson or Robert Lowth, Bishop of London. Although their opinions and beliefs were

often subjective and rooted in prejudice against the lower classes and their language, the educated elite held sufficient power to affect English for generations to come. One such example is Bishop Lowth's belief that sentences should not end with prepositions, which continues to be viewed as "correct" and taught at schools 260 years later (Aitchison, 2001, pp. 7-13).

Language purism identifies with the idea that some forms, pronunciations, or ways of using syntax are more prestigious than others. According to purists, any that deviate from this prestigious norm are 'wrong' and 'ruining the language', even though they are more commonly and naturally used by the general public, such as the mentioned preposition at the end of a sentence (Aitchison, 2001, p. 13), or the gender-inclusive singular *they* used in place of the generic *he* (Baron, 2020, p. 8). It should, however, be noted that this is merely an opinion, and it cannot be truly judged whether the language used now is better or worse than that of the past. As Zanuttini (2017) claims, "rather than decry [language change], we should enjoy it and see it as a reflection of our minds' ability to use and expand the complex system that underlies our knowledge of language."

2 Gender

The word ‘gender’ descends from the Latin *genus*, which means ‘kind’, ‘sort’, or ‘race’, and it is related to words such as ‘genre’ or ‘general’. The term itself has two definitions, one of which is associated with linguistics, and the other with human behaviour and culture (Merriam-Webster, 2022). As Baron (2020, p. 15) states, grammatical gender does not necessarily correlate with the human one, but nonetheless, it indubitably “links to the real world” (Corbett, 2014, p. 1), and the concepts cannot be discussed separately.

2.1 Gender vs. sex

In reference to human gender, the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are sometimes used interchangeably. That is, however, largely known to be incorrect. Sex refers strictly to biology and traditionally divides humans into male and female, depending on characteristics such as chromosomes, gonads, or hormones (Tseng, 2008, p. 427). In addition to male and female, there is a third sex category: intersex, which describes individuals who possess characteristics of both sexes and whose anatomy or chromosomes differ from what typically constitutes male and female (Intersex Society of North America, 2008). Furthermore, sex might or might not correlate with a person’s gender (Conerly et al., 2021).

Gender, on the other hand, “refers to the continuum of complex psychosocial self-perceptions, attitudes, and expectations”, as Tseng (2008, p. 427) explains. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), gender also pertains to relationships, opportunities, or views of individual ability or social role (EIGE, 2022). It delineates what is considered traditionally masculine and feminine and divides society into men, women, and those who do not conform to the gender binary (Richards et al., 2016, p. 95). Behaviour associated with a given gender is imparted to children during the process of socialisation, sometimes from an age as young as six months. This practice is often unconscious, and similarly, most adults tend not to realise the extent of the involvement of gender in their lives and the stereotypical views thereof, claims Airton (2018, pp. 28-37).

A term closely related to gender and used synonymously since the end of the 20th century is gender identity. Merriam-Webster (2022) defines it as the following: “a person’s internal sense of being male, female, some combination of male and female, or neither male nor female”. Typically, gender identity is recognised in early childhood and remains stable throughout life (Gender Spectrum, 2019). Another key concept are gender roles, which relate

to general expectations for men and women’s behaviour and appearance. They have a basis of long-standing historical tradition, though they may tend toward stereotypicality, such as the notion that men are strong, dominant, and assume positions of leadership in both work and family (Conerly et al., 2021).

At present, gender roles are being re-examined (EIGE, 2022). However, in the past, they were strictly enforced and based solely on sex. Gender and sex were not recognised as separate concepts until the 20th century when the meaning of both shifted towards their current interpretation (Merriam-Webster, 2022). Until then, a person’s anatomy dictated their role in society, which was unequally biased towards men. To some extent, this convention persists, as is evident from the continuous existence of the gender pay gap or underrepresentation of women in politics or law, though equality is rapidly increasing, and not merely for women, but for non-binary or transgender individuals (i.e., those whose gender identity does not correspond with their sex) as well (Conerly et al., 2021).

2.2 Non-binary gender

The previous section mentions the concept of the gender binary. By definition, binary means ‘consisting of two parts’, which, in application to gender, refers to men and women. Those are the traditional gender categories assigned to humans based on sex (McNabb, 2018, pp. 5-8). However, an argument can be made that “gender, like language, is a social construct, not a scientific constant” (Baron, 2020, p. 3). It is therefore not necessarily linked with sex, and in practice, it allows for greater complexity.

Genders that fall outside the binary are known as non-binary, and they may include identities that are neither man nor woman, between man and woman, both man and woman, or fluctuating between genders (Richards et al., 2016, pp. 1-2). The possibilities of gender are represented by the dots in Figure 1.

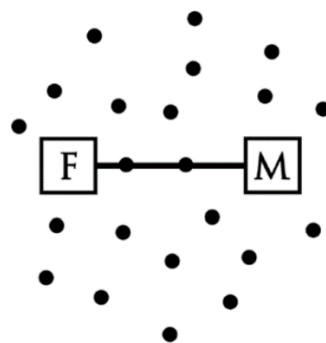


Figure 1: Possibilities of gender (McNabb, 2018, p. 4)

In English, the term ‘non-binary’ was not used to describe gender until the early 2010s, with ‘genderqueer’ as its precursor (McNabb, 2018, p. 9). Non-binary gender is a superordinate term and includes identity labels such as ‘pangender’, ‘bigender’, ‘agender’, ‘genderfluid’, ‘androgyne’, ‘neutrois’, ‘genderqueer’, ‘demigender’, ‘third gender’, or the Native American Two-Spirit identity (Richards et al., 2016, p. 2). Gender Wiki (2022) lists altogether 301 possible gender identities, 299 of which are non-binary. The majority of these terms originated among internet communities after the year 2000 (McNabb, 2018, p. 23).

In practice, non-binary gender presentation is typically reflected in the manner of speech, clothing, and mannerisms and may be supported by medical transitioning, such as hormone replacement therapy or surgery. Some individuals choose to change their name or the pronouns they wish others to use in reference to them. This is another area of language where non-binary people have been instigators of change. For instance, the gender-neutral honorific Mx (pronounced as ‘mix’) was added to the lexicon, thus joining the traditional Mr, Mrs, Ms, and Miss, the gender-neutral pronoun *they* gained another usage, and other pronouns such as *ey*, *ze*, *xe*, *hir*, or *ou* were revived or coined (McNabb, 2018, p. 9). This is further explained in Chapter 3.

Although non-binary gender is not yet widely acknowledged and accepted (Evans, 2010, as cited in Higley, 2019, pp. 10-11), a study conducted in the United States in 2021 found that over 1.2 million US adults aged 18-60 identified as non-binary (Wilson & Meyer, 2021, p. 2). Furthermore, in non-Western cultures, non-binary or third gender is not a new concept and has, in fact, been recognised since pre-colonial times, both culturally and legally. Such cultures include for example Native Americans, Polynesians, Indians, Indonesians, Filipinos, and Thais (McNabb, 2018, pp. 40-48). Nevertheless, the abovementioned study also reports that non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals are a frequent target of discrimination, harassment, or assault (Wilson & Meyer, 2021, pp. 11-12).

Though as previously mentioned, views on gender are changing. As Gender Spectrum (2019) reports: “A 2015 Fusion Millennial poll of adults ages 18-34 in the USA found that the majority see gender as a spectrum, rather than a man/woman binary.” Non-binary visibility in media is increasing, which leads to greater acceptance among younger generations and continuous blurring of gender norms. Gendered language is in the process of reform, and gender-neutral personal pronouns are shown increased support (McNabb, 2018, pp. 26-27). For example, as of May 2021, Instagram allows users to display their pronouns, “including she, he,

they, ze and others” (Paul, 2021). Many celebrities are also coming out as non-binary and changing their pronouns, and non-binary characters appear in various television programmes, from *Star Trek* to children’s cartoons (McNabb, 2018, pp. 229-236).

2.3 Gender in language

As stated earlier, gender is not only social but also grammatical. Merriam-Webster (2022) gives this definition of grammatical gender: “a subclass within a grammatical class of a language that is partly arbitrary but also partly based on distinguishable characteristics and that determines agreement with and selection of other words or grammatical forms”. A typical example of such a grammatical class are nouns, the gender of which may determine pronouns. A language may have several genders, or it may have none. The former applies to English, which has three: masculine, feminine, and neuter (Corbett, 1991, p. 1).

Some languages, such as German or Czech, have developed elaborate systems of grammatical gender, in which each noun is assigned to a gender class and must be in agreement with determiners or adjective and verb suffixes. English, on the other hand, is not a gendered language and retains merely a ‘natural’ gender system, which is based on biological sex (McConnell-Ginet, 2014, pp. 4-5). Gender is typically reflected in references to humans and animals, for instance in the noun pairs *son—daughter*, *actor—actress*, or *bull—cow*, or when a gendered adjective is attributed to a given noun, such as *male cat* (Biber et al., 1999, p. 312).

In English, gender agreement is expressed solely between nouns and pronouns, and only where it is possible. Masculine nouns, such as *son*, are referred to as *he*, feminine nouns, such as *actress*, are referred to as *she*, and neuter nouns, which include inanimate objects and typically animals as well, are referred to as *it*. However, in spoken English, both animals and certain inanimate objects might be assigned a gender. Although it is becoming less common, it is a tradition to speak of ships or cars in the feminine gender, and animals, particularly when their sex is known, are often referred to as *he* or *she* as well (McConnell-Ginet, 2014, p. 7).

Furthermore, there is an issue with gender agreement regarding epicene nouns and pronouns, i.e., those of indeterminate gender, such as *friend*, *doctor*, or *everyone*. In their case, gender cannot be clearly determined without context (McConnell-Ginet, 2014, p. 5). The problem arises from the fact that English has no epicene third-person singular pronoun, despite the continued efforts of writers and grammarians, who have been attempting to find a solution for more than 200 years. The language provides several options, including generic *he*, *he or*

she, singular *they*, or *one*; nevertheless, epicene words remain an example of failure in gender agreement (Baron, 2020, p. 22).

Another issue, which has developed rather recently, is gender agreement in relation to non-binary individuals. Since their gender cannot be categorised as ‘man’ or ‘woman’, it would be imprecise and incorrect to use masculine or feminine grammatical gender in reference to them. In English, which is not a grammatical gender language, the struggle for inclusivity is focused mainly on pronouns and ‘naturally’ gendered terms (Airton, 2018, p. 169), both of which are elaborated on below. This issue is somewhat more complex in gendered languages such as German or Hindi, as mentioned by McConnell-Ginet (2014, p. 19).

2.4 Gender-inclusive language

As stated above, in English, gender may be expressed through complementary masculine/feminine noun pairs such as *actor* and *actress*. In addition to distinctively feminine suffixes, many nouns, particularly names of professions, end in *-man* and *-woman* respectively, for example *policeman* and *policewoman* (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 312-313).

However, as referenced in Chapter 1, Crystal (2010, p. 215) also stresses the ongoing shift away from gendered language and towards inclusivity. According to him, “most of the ‘-ess’ names have disappeared, as a result of a huge social movement to make men and women equal in the workplace.” The same applies to *-man* and *-woman* suffixes, which tend to be replaced with gender-neutral terms such as *police officer* (Crystal, 2010, p. 215) or nouns ending in *-person*, as in *spokesperson* (Biber et al., 1999, p. 315).

Additionally, the European Parliament (2018) specifies guidelines for gender-inclusive language that warn against “generic use of ‘man’” in cases such as *mankind* or *man-made* and instead propose using *humanity* or *artificial*, respectively. Using generic *he* is also disfavoured, all in order to avoid discrimination against women. Regarding non-binary individuals, it is appropriate to circumvent gender altogether. Apropos of gendered terms such as those denoting relationships, for example the abovementioned *son* and *daughter*, it is recommended to use neutral terms instead, such as *child* or *kid*. *Partner* or *spouse* are preferred to *husband* and *wife*, and *sibling* to *brother* and *sister* (Airton, 2018, pp. 170-171).

3 Pronouns

In short, pronouns are parts of speech that are used as substitutes for nouns or noun phrases, which are referred to as antecedents. They enable the speaker or writer to avoid unnecessary repetition, which makes communication clearer and more natural (Herring, 2016, p. 62). The previous sentence itself demonstrates pronoun use, by reason of the antecedent ‘pronouns’ being replaced by a pronoun: ‘they’. A more detailed example, provided by Kramer (2021), are the following two sentences:

Sarah has always loved fashion. Sarah announced that Sarah wants to go to fashion school.

The second sentence contains no pronouns, and the resulting repetition of Sarah’s name sounds ‘unnatural’ in the English language. Instead, it is more appropriate to reword it as follows:

*Sarah has always loved fashion. **She** announced that **she** wants to go to fashion school.*

Pronouns are further divided into multiple categories, which include personal (e.g., she, we), reflexive (herself, ourselves), intensive (herself, ourselves), indefinite (no one, everybody), demonstrative (that, these), interrogative (who, what), relative (which, whom), reciprocal (each other, one another), possessive (her, our, mine), and distributive (either, any) pronouns (Kramer, 2021).

3.1 Personal pronouns

According to Herring (2016, p. 67), personal pronouns “represent a grammatical person within a sentence”. Apart from a human being, they may be applied to an animal, an object, or an abstract concept, such as the term ‘pronouns’ as exemplified in the previous section. Personal pronouns include the following: *I, you, he, she, it, we, and they*. The choice of a given pronoun depends on number, person, gender, and case, which dictate its inflected form.

The grammatical number of a personal pronoun is either singular or plural. Singular pronouns include *I, he, she, and it*, and plural pronouns include *we* and *they*. *You* is both singular and plural in modern English (Herring, 2016, p. 69), though it has not always been so, as suggested in Chapter 1. A Middle English feature that began to disappear during the Renaissance was the second-person singular *thou*, which was gradually replaced by the ‘more polite’ plural *you* and eventually disappeared from common use (McMahon, 2006, p. 149).

Singular pronouns are typically more prevalent (Biber et al., 1999, p. 133), excepting the special case of singular *they*, which is only used in certain circumstances (Herring, 2016, p. 75).

According to grammatical person, personal pronouns can also be sorted into first-, second-, and third-person pronouns, which denote perspective (Herring, 2016, p. 71). Another crucial grammatical category is gender. As was mentioned before, English is not a language with grammatical gender, but its ‘natural’ gender is reflected in third-person singular pronouns, which are *he*, *she*, and *it* (Herring, 2016, p. 74).

Finally, pronouns are also inflected on the basis of case, namely nominative and accusative. The nominative case is applied when the pronoun represents the subject of a sentence, and conversely, when the pronoun serves as the object or as a complement of a preposition, the accusative case is used (Biber et al., 1999, p. 335). An example by Herring (2016, p. 77) demonstrates the difference: “**He** told **her** to be quiet.” In this sentence, *he* is the subject, and *she* is the object, therefore the pronoun in question must be inflected.

Sometimes, possessive and reflexive pronouns are grouped with personal pronouns as well because they likewise represent their inflected forms (Herring, 2016, pp. 79-81). Possessive pronouns demonstrate possession, as in, “**He** told **his** sister to be quiet.” Reflexive pronouns are used “when both the subject and object of a verb refer to the same person or thing” (Kramer, 2021). With the use of a reflexive pronoun, the same sentence could be changed to say, “**He** told **himself** to be quiet.”

All personal pronouns and their inflected forms are as follows:

Personal pronouns and corresponding possessive and reflexive forms					
person	personal pronoun		possessive	reflexive pronoun	
	nominative	accusative	determiner	pronoun	
1st					
singular	<i>I</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>my</i>	<i>mine</i>	<i>myself</i>
plural	<i>we</i>	<i>us</i>	<i>our</i>	<i>ours</i>	<i>ourselves</i>
2nd					
singular	<i>you</i>	<i>you</i>	<i>your</i>	<i>yours</i>	<i>yourself</i>
plural	<i>you</i>	<i>you</i>	<i>your</i>	<i>yours</i>	<i>yourselves</i>
3rd					
singular	<i>he</i>	<i>him</i>	<i>his</i>	<i>his</i>	<i>himself</i>
	<i>she</i>	<i>her</i>	<i>her</i>	<i>hers</i>	<i>herself</i>
	<i>it</i>	<i>it</i>	<i>its</i>	–	<i>itself</i>
plural	<i>they</i>	<i>them</i>	<i>their</i>	<i>theirs</i>	<i>themselves</i>

Figure 2: Personal pronouns (Biber et al., 1999, p. 328)

3.2 Gender-neutral pronouns

The first gender-neutral pronouns arose from a need for a word that would include women as well as men and could be used when gender is unknown. According to Baron (2020, p. 22), the effort to invent one has lasted since the 19th century. Since the 16th century, the only pronoun used with indefinite gender was *he*, such as in the example “*everyone forgets his passwords*”. This idea was based on the Latin ‘worthiness doctrine’, which dictated that the masculine grammatical gender was more worthy than any other. This pronoun, called ‘generic *he*’, was intended to include both men and women. However, it later became a subject of argument and began to be viewed as purely masculine and, in fact, sexist, and it is currently reported to be on the decline (Baron, 2020, pp. 23-26).

A more inclusive and more grammatical alternative is the coordinated pronoun *he or she*, as in, “*everyone forgets his or her passwords*” (Baron, 2020, p. 27). This form is preferred in academic texts (Biber et al., 1999, p. 317) and by teachers; nevertheless, it is also largely unpopular and considered ‘cumbersome’ by writers, grammarians, and the general public alike. Another recent concern with *he or she* is that it enforces the gender binary (Baron, 2020, pp. 27-28). Two yet more unpopular and rarely used versions of this pronoun are *he/she* or *s/he*, which are recommended to be avoided (European Parliament, 2018, p. 10).

Another option is to avoid personal pronouns altogether and instead replace them with the indefinite pronoun *one*, as in, “*everyone forgets one’s passwords*” (Baron, 2020, p. 32). However, as Biber et al. (1999, p. 331) remark, “*one* is virtually restricted to the written registers, and is perceived as a non-casual choice”. Baron (2020, p. 32) likewise concludes that it is not suited as a gender-neutral pronoun of choice, and that it is only applicable in certain contexts.

The most popular gender-neutral pronoun seems to be singular *they*, as seen in the example “*everyone forgets their passwords*”. This option is criticised as well, particularly by grammarians and writers who argue that it is grammatically incorrect and does not follow the rule of number agreement because it is theoretically plural (Baron, 2020, p. 26). However, since English has no official gender-neutral third-person pronoun and the previous alternatives are not always suitable, *they* remains the prevalent form, especially in informal communication, and “is gradually becoming accepted as the norm” (Herring, 2016, p. 75).

Singular *they* has been used since the 14th century, which marks its first written mention in a romance poem titled *William and the Werewolf*, although its spoken history may be longer (Baron, 2018). Singular *you*, on the other hand, was not commonly used until the early 17th century, which indicates that singular *they* predates it (Baron, 2020, p. 152). In fact, criticism of this pronoun developed in the 18th century and has been continuously refuted since. In formal writing, singular *they* still tends to be corrected; nevertheless, it is gaining approval and is used for example by the Oxford English Dictionary (Baron, 2018). It also appears in the works of many classic authors, such as William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, or Charles Dickens (Baron, 2020, pp. 154-155).

Apart from these pronouns, there have also been attempts at coining completely new words to describe a person of indeterminate gender, particularly by those who found generic *he* or singular *they* to be inadequate. The earliest known attempt at an epicene pronoun was made in 1841, when *E*, with the object form *em* and the possessive form *es*, was invented. Further coinages included for example *ne* and *hiser*, which were invented a decade later, *ve* and *ze* (1864), *um* (1869), *se* (1874), *hi* (1890), or *heer* (1912), although they all inevitably failed (Baron, 2020, pp. 82-100).

The only epicene pronoun that was not entirely unsuccessful is *thon*, coined in 1858 by the attorney Charles Crozat Converse. It is a blend of *that* and *one*, and at the time, it was the most widely discussed of the proposed neologisms. Though it also eventually failed due to a lack of use, it was included in crossword puzzles and several dictionaries, including Merriam-Webster's, for several decades (Merriam-Webster, 2019a). New pronouns have continued to appear throughout the 20th century, and sometimes the older ones were revived, but the fact remains that none of them was successfully implemented into everyday language (Baron, 2020, pp. 108-111).

The popularity of singular *they* is confirmed for example by Hekanaho's (2020, pp. 116-126) study of gender-neutral pronouns. Participants were asked to complete a free writing task and a gap-filling exercise focused on epicene antecedents, and the results showed that in both cases, *they* was used by more than 80 per cent. *He*, *he or she*, *he/she*, and *one* were used sparingly in both tasks, more often by older participants. In free writing, gendered pronouns were used more often by men, but in the gap-filling task, they tended to be preferred by women. In addition, transgender participants used gender-neutral pronouns almost exclusively. Another

subject of the study was acceptability. 33 per cent of participants found generic *he* acceptable, but in the case of *they*, the acceptability rate was 94 per cent (Hekanaho, 2020, p. 131).

3.3 Singular ‘they’ as a non-binary pronoun

Originally, the debate over gender-neutral pronouns concerned women’s rights and epicene antecedents. In the 21st century, however, it began to include non-binary people, who use pronouns other than *he* or *she* to affirm their identity. Sometimes, these pronouns are referred to as ‘non-binary pronouns’ and separated from gender-neutral ones, although grammar-wise, their usage is identical (Baron, 2020, pp. 116-117). The only distinction is that non-binary pronouns refer to a specific individual, as shown in Baron’s (2020, p. 118) example of non-binary singular *they*:

*Alex likes mustard and ketchup on **their** burger, but no way do **they** like onions.*

It is also possible for the reflexive form of the pronoun to be written as *themselves* rather than *themselves*, because while the pronoun is plural, the person in question is singular. This does not apply to gender-neutral *they*, but neither is it a widely recognised rule, and both forms appear to be used equally often. As for subject-verb agreement, both usages of singular *they* are treated as plural (Airton, 2018, pp. 126-127), the latter of which can be seen in the example above.

Singular *they* seems to be the most popular pronoun used by English-speaking non-binary individuals, as Gender Census (2021) reports. According to a worldwide survey, it is preferred by 79.2 per cent of its 44,583 non-binary participants. Furthermore, in 2019, Merriam-Webster declared singular *they* their Word of the Year, and the dictionary’s webpage mentions that “it is increasingly common to see *they* and *them* as a person’s pronouns in Twitter bios, email signatures, and conference nametags” (Merriam-Webster, 2019b). A frequent argument for singular *they* is that it is already common as an epicene pronoun and easier to remember and use than any other gender-neutral pronoun (Young, 2019, p. 55). Hekanaho (2020, p. 147) reports that non-binary *they* is largely viewed as acceptable.

As was suggested in Chapter 2, there has been an increase in non-binary representation in media and among celebrities (McNabb, 2018, p. 55), which has led to increased visibility of gender-neutral pronouns as well. For example, the popular singers Sam Smith and Demi Lovato have come out as non-binary and changed their pronouns to they/them (BBC, 2019; BBC,

2021), and in television series, individuals who use singular *they* as a personal pronoun are represented for instance by the *Star Trek: Discovery* character Adira Tal or the *Billions* character Taylor Mason (Olivo, 2021, pp. 17-19). Inclusion of such characters in popular media can aid in integrating gender-neutral pronouns into the lexicon, which has been the goal of advocates of non-binary rights, Baron (2020, p. 144) remarks.

Nevertheless, non-binary pronouns such as singular *they* remain a subject of controversy, in part because they are likewise considered ungrammatical and viewed as another instance of ‘sloppy’ language of the new generation, and in part due to adherence to the gender binary and a lack of acceptance of non-binary identities (Young, 2019, pp. 52-53). Perceived acceptability and willingness to use non-binary pronouns was found to decrease with age (Hekanaho, 2020, p. 151; Minkin and Brown, 2021), and a connection with political inclination was found as well. A study showed that 68 per cent of adults who leaned towards the conservative Republican Party “would feel uncomfortable using these pronouns”, while the opposite was true of supporters of the Democratic Party (Minkin and Brown, 2021).

3.4 Neopronouns

‘Neopronouns’ is a term sometimes used for ‘non-traditional’ pronouns such as *ze*, *hir*, or *E*, which have recently been reinvented as non-binary ones (Baron, 2020, pp. 11-12). They are used less frequently than singular *they*, the Gender Census (2021) reports. According to the survey, the most popular neopronoun was *xe* (pronounced as ‘zee’), which was preferred by 8.5 per cent of respondents, followed by *fae* (pronounced as ‘fey’), *E* (pronounced as ‘ee’), and *ze* (pronounced as ‘zee’). The latter two were preferred by fewer than five per cent of respondents.

As the statistic suggests, neopronouns are not widespread. Nevertheless, they appear in media as well, for example in a 2014 play by Broadway artist Taylor Mac, titled *Hir*, which is also the object form of the pronoun *ze* used by one of its characters (Baron, 2020, p. 116), or in reference to non-human characters in science fiction literature (Baron, 2020, pp. 231-234). McNabb (2018, p. 77) mentions the late Leslie Feinberg, known activist and author of the novel *Stone Butch Blues*, who likewise preferred ungendered *ze/hir* pronouns along with *she/her*. In practice, neopronouns mostly appear online (Baron, 2020, p. 128), but they are also acknowledged by some American universities (Baron, 2020, p. 136).

A study of four corpora, namely the Intelligent Web-based Corpus, the Global Web-based English Corpus, the Corpus of Historical American English, and the British National

Corpus, also found *xe* to be the most frequently used neopronoun, though with only 67 total occurrences. Furthermore, neopronouns only appeared in the first two corpora, which include data from 2010 onwards, and more specifically on websites related to creative writing, roleplaying, feminism, or LGBTQ+ topics (Hakanen, 2021, pp. 15-18).

Another study showed that speakers of American and Canadian English were more likely to view neopronouns as acceptable than speakers of British and Australian English (Hekanaho, 2020, p. 143), which corresponds with Baron’s findings and the corpus analysis above. Overall, merely a third of the survey’s respondents found neopronouns acceptable. Arguments against them included claims that they were “artificial”, “not real pronouns”, “weird”, “insignificant”, “unnecessary”, or “impossible to catch on” (Hekanaho, 2020, pp. 147-190).

Other respondents expressed a willingness to use neopronouns as a non-binary individual’s chosen pronouns and claimed that they were a part of a language’s natural evolution (Hekanaho, 2020, pp. 190-191). Ten of the survey’s participants used neopronouns themselves, though they also stated that they were “impractical” and “difficult” and that asking people to use them was currently “unrealistic” in real life, for which reason they preferred singular *they* or gendered pronouns (Hekanaho, 2020, pp. 221-222).

Usage of selected neopronouns is demonstrated in Figure 3.

Common neopronouns, with the singular ‘they’ included for reference, and examples of how they are used

	Subject Pronouns	Object Pronouns	Possessive Adjectives	Possessive Pronouns	Reflexive Pronouns
They	<i>They</i> laughed	I called <i>them</i>	<i>Their</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>theirs</i>	<i>They</i> like <i>themselves</i>
Ne	<i>Ne</i> laughed	I called <i>nem</i>	<i>Nir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>nirs</i>	<i>Ne</i> likes <i>nemself</i>
Ve	<i>Ve</i> laughed	I called <i>ver</i>	<i>Vis</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>vis</i>	<i>Ve</i> likes <i>verself</i>
Spivak	<i>Ey</i> laughed	I called <i>em</i>	<i>Eir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>eirs</i>	<i>Ey</i> likes <i>emself</i>
Ze/Zie and Hir	<i>Ze</i> laughed	I called <i>hir</i>	<i>Hir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>hirs</i>	<i>Ze</i> likes <i>hirself</i>
Ze/Zie and Zir	<i>Ze</i> laughed	I called <i>zir</i>	<i>Zir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>zirs</i>	<i>Ze</i> likes <i>zirself</i>
Xe	<i>Xe</i> laughed	I called <i>xem</i>	<i>Xyr</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>xyrs</i>	<i>Xe</i> likes <i>xemself</i>

Figure 3: Neopronouns (The University of North Carolina, 2018)

4 Research

The practical part of this thesis investigates the usage of various epicene and non-binary pronouns, which are treated as separate categories for greater clarity and precision of the research. The aim is to analyse the occurrence of gender-neutral personal pronouns in contemporary English-language literature and television series.

4.1 Research questions

In order to further specify the focus of the research, six questions have been formulated as follows:

- 1) What is the most frequent epicene pronoun in all analysed texts?
- 2) What is the most frequent non-binary pronoun in all analysed texts?
- 3) How does the frequency of usage of singular *they* differ in comparison to plural *they*?
- 4) How frequent are gender-neutral pronouns in comparison to all personal pronouns?
- 5) Is there a significant difference between literature and television series with regard to the frequency of gender-neutral pronoun usage?
- 6) Which of the analysed texts has the highest occurrence of gender-neutral pronouns?

4.2 Analysed material

For the purpose of the research, a corpus of eight texts has been chosen, namely one play, three fiction books, and four television series. A specific criterion for selection was the inclusion of at least one non-binary main character whose pronouns are different from *he* and *she*. This was established to ensure an accurate comparison of the usage of plural *they* and both epicene and non-binary singular *they*, as well as the usage of non-binary *they* and any potentially found neopronouns. All texts have been written after 2010 and should reflect contemporary American English. No work of fiction or television series that originates outside the USA and matches the criterion has been found.

4.2.1 *Hir*

The first analysed text is the play *Hir* by Taylor Mac (2014). The author calls its genre absurd realism (Mac, 2014, p. 1), and it can be classified as a dark comedy that focuses on the struggles of an American family. As mentioned by Baron (2020, p. 115), one of its four characters is genderqueer and uses *ze/hir* pronouns, which is why the play was chosen as a

representative of neopronoun usage. The selected script includes dialogue, names, stage directions, and scene descriptions.

4.2.2 *No Man of Woman Born*

No Man of Woman Born by Ana Mardoll (2018) is a collection of seven fantasy short stories. They are titled as follows: “Tangled Nets”, “King’s Favor”, “His Father’s Son”, “Daughter of Kings”, “Early to Rise”, “No Man of Woman Born”, and “The Wish-Giver”. According to the author, the work’s main theme is the subversion of gendered prophecies that frequently appear in fantasy (Mardoll, 2018, p. 10). Bernstein (2021, p. 4) includes the collection among fairy tales with “trans representation”, and as a matter of fact, three of the stories feature non-binary protagonists who use a variety of pronouns. Another story also includes two minor non-binary characters. All seven are considered in the research.

4.2.3 *I Wish You All the Best*

Mason Deaver’s *I Wish You All the Best* (2019) is a young adult novel that features a non-binary protagonist and a secondary character whose pronouns are they/them. This novel is listed among books with non-binary representation in *The International Journal of Young Adult Literature* (Corbett, 2020, p. 9). It was chosen as a representative of young adult literature, which is perhaps the only literary genre with its own category of transgender, and more recently non-binary, novel (Airton, 2018, p. 77).

4.2.4 *Graham’s Delicacies*

Mina Waheed’s *Graham’s Delicacies* (2019), an adult romance novel, is the last literary text selected for analysis. It was chosen after consulting McNabb’s (2018, p. 173) list of genres and books with non-binary characters and Scalisi’s (2020) list of books with characters who use they/them pronouns for the purpose of broadening the scope of genres. The novel focuses on relationships among the staff of a bakery and includes two non-binary characters.

4.2.5 *Star Trek: Discovery*

Star Trek has a history of non-binary storylines dating to the 1990s (McNabb, 2018, p. 55), but *Discovery* is the first of its series to introduce a character whose pronouns are they/them (Olivo, 2021, p. 14). The character first appears in its third season (2020), which is why it was selected for the research. As the series belongs to the science fiction genre, it also diversifies the analysed sample. On average, the episode length is 51 minutes.

4.2.6 *One Day at a Time*

One Day at a Time is a contemporary remake of a situational comedy that aired between 1975 and 1984. It focuses on a Cuban family living in Los Angeles. One of the characters, the significant other of the protagonist's daughter, is genderqueer (Freeman, 2019, p. 102). The second season (2018) was chosen, likewise for the reason that it introduces this character. This series' average episode length is 28 minutes.

4.2.7 *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*

McNabb (2018, p. 56) states that “gender-nonconforming characters have appeared in children's animation”, yet again a wholly different genre, which is why the animated series *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (henceforth *She-Ra*) was included in the sample of series. Coincidentally, it is also a reboot of an existing series from the 1980s. It also features a genderfluid character in seasons four and five, the former of which (2019) was selected for analysis. Its episode length is likewise shorter, with an average of 24 minutes.

4.2.8 *Billions*

Billions is a drama television series. It is centred on business and finance and the corruption in the world thereof, and it was chosen to represent a more “serious” genre. This is reflected in its average episode length, which is 57 minutes. The second season (2017) introduces a non-binary financial analyst (Olivo, 2021, p. 19). Thanks to its LGBTQ+ representation, *Billions* was also nominated for several awards.

5 Methodology

As stated in Chapter 4, the research concentrates on contemporary literature and television series of varied genres. The play and novels, the length of which ranges between 16 and 86 thousand words, were analysed in their entirety. A sample of a twelve- or thirteen-episode season was chosen from each television series in order to ensure research efficiency, resulting in total word counts between 28 and 73 thousand words. Dialogue transcripts were found online.

The method of corpus analysis was implemented. All texts and episode transcripts were transferred to Microsoft Word documents, which enabled precise word count determination and expedited the data collection. The data gathering itself was done via the Advanced Find function. The “find whole words only” option was selected in order to filter personal pronouns from all other occurrences of the given letter combination, such as *he* from *then* or *I* from *in*. Each of the pronoun’s five forms was included in the research. Colloquial forms such as *ya* or *‘em* were omitted.

Unambiguous pronouns, namely *I*, *it*, *we*, and neopronouns, were simply counted and recorded in a table. The only exception was the possessive form *mine*, which required manual filtering from nouns and verbs. *She* was relatively straightforward as well, although in the analysis of *She-Ra*, the program included both the pronoun and the name She-Ra in the search, which had to be subtracted from the number of occurrences of *she*. In the case of *he* and its inflected forms, each instance was manually examined to separate gendered *he* from generic *he* and *he or she*, such as in this example of generic *he* from *Billions*:

“When you ask a person to invest **his** money with you, that’s a seduction. When you ask **him** to pledge his net worth—” (Billions, “The Oath”, 17:30-17:36)

The pronouns *you* and *they* were likewise inspected to separate the singular form from the plural based on context, and singular *they* was further split according to epicene and non-binary use. As for the reflexive form, both *themselves* and *themselves* were included. An example of ambiguous *they* use can be seen in the following sentence:

“Well, someone wouldn’t be my True Love if **they** were discouraged by my hairstyle, right?” **they** pointed out, though **they** could hear the doubt in **their** voice. (Mardoll, 2018, p. 102)

In the first case, the pronoun refers to a hypothetical *someone* and therefore is an example of epicene singular *they*. The remaining three instances, however, refer to the short story's genderfluid protagonist and represent non-binary *they*.

Where literature was concerned, filtering singular and plural *you* and *they* was not overly difficult by virtue of surrounding context, which was made sufficient by descriptions and distinct antecedents. Episode transcripts, on the other hand, often required consultation with the source material to ascertain who was addressed or talked about in a given line of dialogue, particularly in the case of *you*.

All pronoun counts were entered into Microsoft Excel tables, separate according to form and number (see Appendix 1). Using the Sum function, the total occurrence of a given pronoun as well as the total number of pronouns used in each novel or series were calculated. Each short story in *No Man of Woman Born* and television series episode was counted separately, and pronouns were then totalled for the entire collection or series. Another variable that was taken into account was the percentage that each pronoun constituted in the text's word count and total pronoun count, also calculated in Excel.

6 Results

The final chapter provides the findings and results of the conducted research. First, an overview of collected data and general findings is presented, which is then elaborated in greater detail with a focus on answering the established research questions.

6.1 Data overview

Overall, the corpus consisted of 412,694 words, 65 thousand of which represented personal pronouns (see Table 1). The percentage of personal pronouns in the word count was calculated for each text. In total, they made up 15.8 per cent of the word count, with 11.6 per cent (*No Man of Woman Born*) being the lowest and 17.8 per cent (*One Day at a Time*) being the highest percentage. Typically, texts with a higher word count tended to contain more pronouns.

Analysed text	Word count	Pronoun count	Percentage
<i>Hir</i>	16,238	2,285	14.1%
<i>No Man of Woman Born</i>	55,857	6,494	11.6%
<i>I Wish You All the Best</i>	86,737	15,176	17.5%
<i>Graham's Delicacies</i>	55,373	7,649	13.8%
<i>Star Trek: Discovery</i> S03	59,335	9,477	16.0%
<i>One Day at a Time</i> S02	37,083	6,589	17.8%
<i>She-Ra</i> S04	28,281	4,865	17.2%
<i>Billions</i> S02	73,790	12,465	16.9%
Total	412,694	65,000	15.8%

Table 1: Word and personal pronoun count in all analysed material

A notable finding is that the highest occurrence of personal pronouns can be attributed to texts where the most frequent personal pronoun is *I*, namely all television series and *I Wish You All the Best*, the only novel with a first-person narrator. This phenomenon may be related to narration but also the type of text. Television series transcripts contain only dialogue, which is comparable to spoken conversation, and as Biber et al. (1999, p. 333) report, personal pronouns appear more often in conversation than in fiction. They also claim that *I* and *you* occur most in conversation, which corresponds with these findings. In *Hir*, *you* is the most frequent personal pronoun, closely followed by *I*, as can be seen in Table 2 (bolded numbers represent the most prevalent pronoun).

Analysed text	I	you (s.)	he	she	it	they (s.)	ze	nee	xie	kie	we	you (pl.)	they (pl.)
<i>Hir</i>	555	634	274	105	370	1	81	-	-	-	164	22	79
<i>NMOWB</i>	883	706	1,598	1,427	398	104	-	312	245	36	196	31	558
<i>IWYATB</i>	7,463	1,866	1,548	998	1,651	218	-	-	-	-	678	98	656
<i>GD</i>	894	616	2,714	1,572	642	821	-	-	-	-	50	5	335
<i>ST: DSC S03</i>	2,844	2,296	469	432	1,030	43	-	-	-	-	1,438	376	549
<i>ODAAT S02</i>	2,806	1,697	277	294	746	34	5	-	-	-	420	132	178
<i>She-Ra S04</i>	1,592	1,158	50	337	663	12	-	-	-	-	722	123	208
<i>Billions S02</i>	4,338	3,656	999	259	1,667	46	-	-	-	-	826	161	513

Table 2: Overview of all analysed personal pronouns

The most frequent personal pronoun in the two third-person narratives, *No Man of Woman Born* and *Graham's Delicacies*, is *he*. This also confirms Biber et al.'s (1999, p. 333) statements that third-person pronouns are predominant in fiction and that *he* appears more often than *she*. In fact, *she* outweighs *he* in only two cases, both of which are female-led series (*One Day at a Time* and *She-Ra*). The overall count of both gendered pronouns is significantly higher in novels than in television series and the play, as indicated in Table 2. The same can be said of singular *they*.

The following excerpts of approximately 50 words demonstrate the individual differences between third-person and first-person narratives regarding personal pronouns:

*Mist rolled over the bay in the wake of the summer storms, bringing a wet chill that seeped through every crack and soaked each blanket. The bitter morning wind forced Wren to bundle up in **xer** second set of clothes before leaving the hut to lug **xer** fishing nets down to the grass-speckled hill overlooking the bay. (Mardoll, 2018, p. 11)*

*"Ben, honey, are **you** feeling well?"*

*Mom plucks the plate from in front of **me**, with most of **my** dinner still on **it**, untouched. **I**'d taken maybe one or two bites before **it** fell into **my** stomach like a rock and what little appetite **I**'d had to begin with was gone. (Deaver, 2019, p. 7)*

Both of the above are taken from the beginnings of novels. They represent works with the smallest and second-largest percentage of personal pronouns respectively, which can be observed even in such relatively short passages. Excerpts from the play and series resemble the second one pronoun-wise, though the inclusion of characters and stage directions in *Hir* might

contribute to the lower number of pronouns found therein. However, as both largely consist of dialogue, the pronouns *I* and *you* appear with a similar frequency, as marked below:

*ISAAC (Trying to open the front door, which is blocked by too much stuff): Hey, **I**'m home--*

PAIGE: Honey?

ISAAC: Is something blocking the door?

PAIGE: Come around back.

ISAAC: Why won't the door open?

*PAIGE: **I** thought **you**'d use the back.*

*ISAAC: Why wouldn't **I** use the front door?*

*PAIGE: **It**'s blocked. (Mac, 2014, pp. 2-3)*

*Stop **it**!*

***It** doesn't belong to **you**!*

***You** think **you** can just take **it** 'cause **you** knocked **me** out of the sky?*

***I**'m not trying to take anything. That was an accident.*

No one comes all the way out here by accident.

***I** am telling **you**, stop!*

Now, nobody has to get hurt. (Star Trek: Discovery, "That Hope Is You, Part 1", 12:06-12:19)

Overall, the most frequent personal pronoun in all analysed material is *I* with a count of 21,375, which accounts for a third of all recorded personal pronouns. It is followed by singular *you* (19.4%) and *he* (12.2%). Barring neopronouns, the pronoun with the lowest occurrence is plural *you* (see Figure 4).

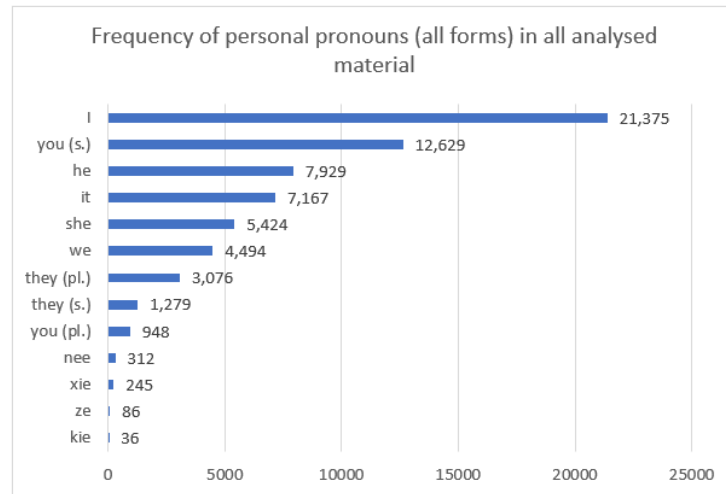


Figure 4: Frequency of personal pronouns in all analysed material

As for case, the nominative is predominant. The sole exceptions again appear in *Hir*, *No Man of Woman Born*, and *Graham's Delicacies*, where the accusative or possessive form occasionally surpasses the nominative in the case of *he*, *she*, and all neopronouns (see Appendix 1). This might also be a result of the choice of narrative style.

6.2 Epicene pronouns

The first research question concerns epicene pronouns, which are surveyed in this section. As stated in Chapter 3, epicene pronouns follow ungendered antecedents such as *everyone* or *person*. It has also been mentioned that generic *he* has more or less been replaced by singular *they* due to a shift towards inclusivity. The research findings confirm this statement.

Epicene pronouns have been recorded in varying frequency in all eight texts (Table 3). Generic *he*, *he or she*, and singular *they* have been the focus. The former two are found only in *Billions*, while singular *they* appears in each text. The fact that *Billions* is a male-led drama series likely contributes to these findings; nevertheless, both pronouns still occur less frequently than singular *they*. Among 41 epicene pronouns found in the series, 30 are singular *they*, and *he or she* appears only once:

*You can't afford to be carrying someone who isn't pulling **his or her** weight. (Billions, "Golden Frog Time", 19:30-19:33)*

This line is spoken by a female character. All instances of generic *he*, an example of which can be seen in Chapter 5, are used by men. Singular *they* is used by characters of all genders.

Analysed text	Epicene pronouns
<i>Hir</i>	1
<i>NMOWB</i>	42
<i>IWYATB</i>	17
<i>GD</i>	3
<i>ST: DSC S03</i>	23
<i>ODAAT S02</i>	21
<i>She-Ra S04</i>	5
<i>Billions S02</i>	41

Table 3: Frequency of epicene pronouns in all analysed material

Epicene pronouns occur 153 times among more than 412 thousand words, which constitutes a mere 0.04 per cent of the total word count and 0.24 per cent of the personal pronoun count. As mentioned, *they* is the most frequent with precisely 142 occurrences (Figure 5). The text with the highest frequency of singular *they* is *No Man of Woman Born* (42), followed by *Billions* (30) and *Star Trek: Discovery* (23). *Hir* only contains one singular *they* in the following line: “*Someone dies, you put them to rest.*” (Mac, 2014, p. 48). This may be due to the fact that it is the shortest text. Overall, however, epicene pronouns do not seem to be overly frequent.

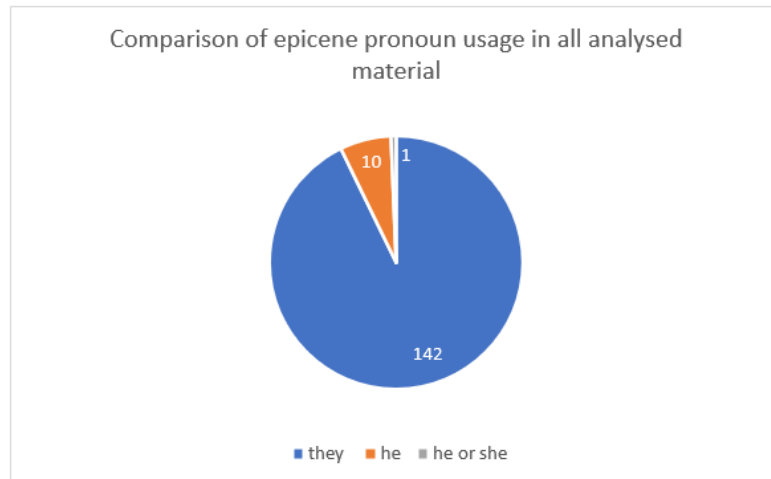


Figure 5: Frequency of epicene pronouns in all analysed material

6.3 Non-binary pronouns

Another question this thesis aims to answer concerns the most frequent non-binary pronoun. They differ from epicene pronouns in that they refer to a specific non-binary person. In sum, five such pronouns have been identified: *they*, *ze*, *nee*, *xie*, and *kie*. The theoretical part suggests that singular *they* is the most common non-binary pronoun as well, which is likewise

confirmed by the research. Due to circumstances concerning the narrative perspective in one of the books, however, the margin between *they* and neopronouns is slightly less substantial than the literature and Gender Census (2021) would indicate.

Singular *they* appears in all texts except for *Hir*. Neopronouns are less recurrent, with *ze* featured in *Hir* and one episode of *One Day at a Time* and the remaining three in three of the short stories in *No Man of Woman Born*. This fact contributes to their relatively high occurrence, as it is one of the third-person narrative novels. Nonetheless, *they*, with 1,137 occurrences, constitutes 63 per cent of all non-binary pronouns, of which there are 1,816 in total (Figure 6). The number is more than eleven times higher than that of epicene pronouns, yet it accounts for 0.44 per cent of the total word count and 2.8 per cent of the total personal pronoun count.

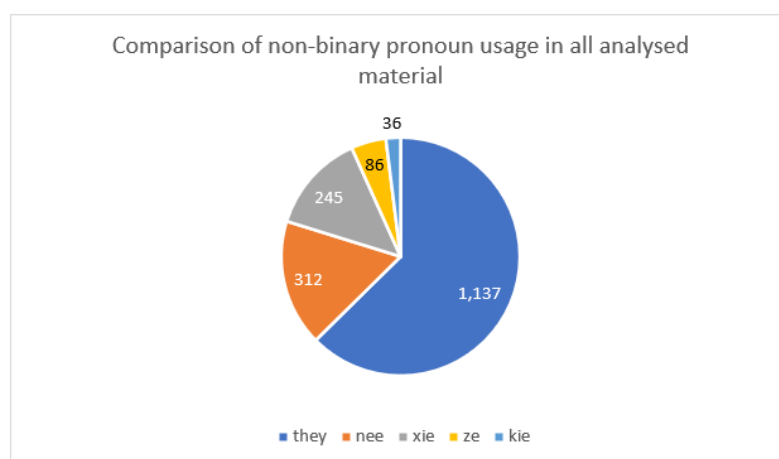


Figure 6: Frequency of non-binary pronouns in all analysed material

To expound on neopronouns, the play *Hir* contains 81 cases of *ze/hir*, which is lower than the number of both *he/him* (274) and *she/her* (105) and constitutes 0.5 per cent of the word count. The pronoun is used in reference to Max, a character who has been found to have the fewest lines and appearances despite the play’s title referencing *hir*. As mentioned, *ze*, with the accusative form *zir*, has also been found in the series *One Day at a Time*, but only in reference to a minor character in one episode. Its five appearances make up 0.01 per cent of the total word count and one per cent of the word count of the episode.

No Man of Woman Born is the only work in which neopronouns exceed *they* when all are present (see Figure 7). *They* appears in two of the seven stories, 26 times in relation to a minor character in “No Man of Woman Born” and 36 times in “Early to Rise” as one of the pronouns used by a genderfluid protagonist who, however, alternates between *she/her* and

he/him pronouns in most of the story. Slightly less than one per cent of the collection’s personal pronouns is comprised of singular *they*. The pronoun *kie* is used 36 times in “No Man of Woman Born”, though by another minor character, which contributes to its infrequency.

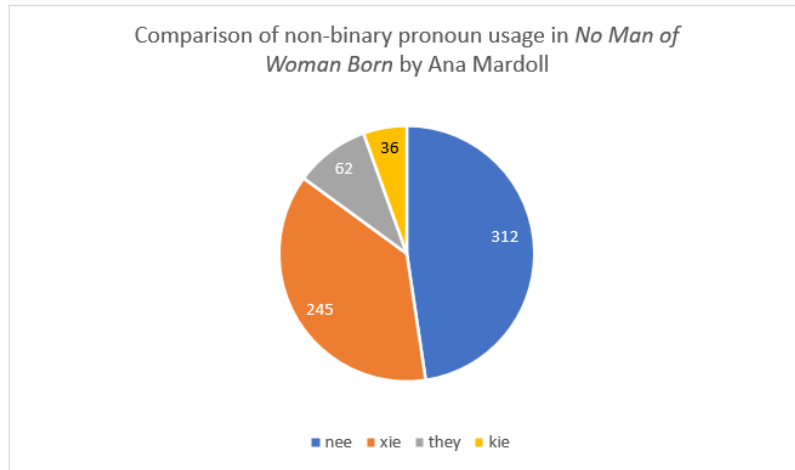


Figure 7: Frequency of non-binary pronouns in *No Man of Woman Born*

Xie and *nee*, however, are the pronouns of the protagonists of “Tangled Nets” and “King’s Favor” and, because of the third-person point of view, are featured more frequently than other personal pronouns (see Table 4 & 5). In both stories, the neopronoun accounts for less than four per cent of the word count, but among personal pronouns, the percentages are 32.4 (*xie*) and 38.3 (*nee*). Nevertheless, the fact remains that in the collection’s total word count, neither pronoun exceeds 0.6 per cent. In the remaining short stories, the protagonists’ pronouns (*he* or *she*) likewise form the majority of the recorded personal pronouns, thus confirming the pattern in all third-person narratives.

Frequency of personal pronouns (all forms) in “Tangled Nets”								
xie	she	it	I	they (pl.)	you (s.)	he	we	you (pl.)
245	136	101	96	81	39	30	25	3

Table 4: Personal pronouns in “Tangled Nets” by Ana Mardoll

Frequency of personal pronouns (all forms) in “King’s Favor”									
nee	I	they (pl.)	you (s.)	she	it	we	they (s.)	he	you (pl.)
312	119	107	103	87	50	25	6	5	3

Table 5: Personal pronouns in “King’s Favor” by Ana Mardoll

In the remaining works, the only non-binary pronoun is singular *they*. *I Wish You All the Best* has been found to contain it 201 times, which is 0.2 per cent of the word count and 1.3 per cent of personal pronouns. The novel features two non-binary characters, the protagonist,

Ben, and their best friend, Maryam. Given that it is written in the first person, the pronoun references Maryam in nearly all cases and is only related to Ben when they are talked about or when they mention their pronouns, such as in the following example:

“*Can I ask what pronouns you use?*”

“*They and them,*” I say. (Deaver, 2019, p. 46)

The novel’s narrative significantly impacts its pronoun usage, which would almost certainly be more inclined towards singular *they* in the third person, as evidenced by the other novels.

The count of non-binary *they* in *Graham’s Delicacies* is 818, which constitutes 1.5 per cent of the novel’s word count and 10.7 per cent of all personal pronouns. That is higher than in any of the other texts, again likely due to being written in the third person. Another contributing factor, however, appears to be the fact that it has three narrators and includes two main non-binary characters among six, one of whom is also a narrator. Table 6 shows a comparison of the novel’s personal pronouns:

Frequency of personal pronouns (all forms) in <i>Graham’s Delicacies</i>								
he	she	I	they (s.)	it	you (s.)	they (pl.)	we	you (pl.)
2,714	1,572	894	821	642	616	335	50	5

Table 6: Personal pronouns in *Graham’s Delicacies* by Mina Waheed

All four television series yield mutually similar results, specifically that non-binary *they* is the least frequent personal pronoun, and in the case of *She-Ra*, second-to-last before epicene *they*. Given that the analysed material consists of pure dialogue, all pronouns occur in conversation. What might be a possible explanation for these findings is that each series features only one non-binary character among several who use he/him and she/her pronouns, which results in the character and the pronoun being referenced less often. Table 7 summarises findings from all series:

Series	<i>They</i> count	% of word count	% of pronouns
<i>ST: DSC</i> S03	20	0.03	0.21
<i>ODAAT</i> S02	13	0.04	0.20
<i>She-Ra</i> S04	7	0.02	0.14
<i>Billions</i> S02	16	0.02	0.13

Table 7: Non-binary *they* in television series

The series with the lowest count of singular *they* is *She-Ra*. In the cartoon, *they* and *them* are the pronouns of a shape-shifting antagonist who assumes the identity of a girl and often

masquerades as various other characters to deceive the series' heroes. They do not appear in their natural form often and are not often discussed by others, which more or less explains the results.

Overall, non-binary pronouns tend to be equivalent to only a small percentage of personal pronouns in dialogue, mainly because third-person pronouns altogether do not appear in conversation frequently, as the previous section states. On the other hand, they feature more prominently in third-person narratives where the narrator is non-binary, as evidenced by *Graham's Delicacies* and *No Man of Woman Born*.

6.4 Singular vs. plural 'they'

The research also concerns the question of whether singular or plural *they* is more frequent. In concordance with the theoretical part, the expected result was that the plural would be more prevalent. This has more or less been confirmed by the text analysis, as well as suggested by all previous findings and Table 2, which show that plural *they* is more common in nearly all cases. A complete overview is provided in Table 8.

Analysed text	Plural <i>they</i>	Singular <i>they</i>
<i>Hir</i>	79	1
<i>NMOWB</i>	558	104
<i>IWYATB</i>	656	218
<i>GD</i>	335	821
<i>ST: DSC S03</i>	549	43
<i>ODAAT S02</i>	178	34
<i>She-Ra S04</i>	208	12
<i>Billions S02</i>	513	46

Table 8: Plural and singular *they* in all analysed material

Although both epicene and non-binary *they* have been taken into consideration, the only text where singular *they* is more frequent than the plural is *Graham's Delicacies*. Generally, the three novels have a higher singular *they* occurrence than the remaining texts, again likely owing to the inclusion of descriptions, which results in an increased frequency of non-binary pronouns. All series have similar counts of singular *they*, with a variance that more or less corresponds with episode length.

The analysis of plural *they* has proportionally similar results. However, there no longer appears to be a significant difference between the two longer television series (*Star Trek: Discovery* and *Billions*) and the novels, all of which have a similar word count (see Table 8). It

seems that plural *they* occurs with a comparable frequency regardless of the type of text. Only *Graham's Delicacies* is, once again, an outlier. In this novel, plural *they* constitutes a mere 29 per cent of all uses of *they* due to reasons explained above. In the entire corpus, however, 71 per cent of *they* usage is comprised of the plural (3,076 occurrences).

In total, plural *they* constitutes 0.8 per cent of the word count and 4.7 per cent of all personal pronouns. Singular *they*, on the other hand, only accounts for 0.3 per cent of the word count and two per cent of personal pronouns. Altogether, *they* constitutes 1.1 per cent of the total word count and 6.7 per cent, or $\frac{1}{15}$, of all personal pronouns, which is a relatively small amount. Nevertheless, it corresponds with the results of Biber et al.'s (1999, p. 334) corpus study on personal pronouns, which has revealed that *they* and *we* tend to be the least common ones.

6.5 Gender-neutral pronouns

Finally, all gender-neutral pronouns are collectively addressed in this subchapter. Several questions regarding their frequency were posed, and the analysis has revealed the results to meet expectations. An overview of gender-neutral pronoun use in all eight texts is provided in Table 9.

Analysed text	GNP count	% of word count	% of pronouns
<i>Hir</i>	82	0.52	3.59
<i>NMOWB</i>	697	1.25	10.73
<i>IWYATB</i>	218	0.25	1.44
<i>GD</i>	821	1.48	10.73
<i>ST: DSC S03</i>	43	0.07	0.45
<i>ODAAAT S02</i>	39	0.11	0.59
<i>She-Ra S04</i>	12	0.04	0.25
<i>Billions S02</i>	57	0.08	0.46

Table 9: Gender-neutral pronouns in all analysed material

The text with the highest count of gender-neutral pronouns is *Graham's Delicacies*. As a matter of fact, it is equivalent to the number of singular *they* used in the novel. The second highest count is found in *No Man of Woman Born*, which features neopronouns and singular *they*. These results are consistent with the fact that all gender-neutral pronouns count among third-person pronouns, which are abundant in third-person narratives.

Coincidentally, gender-neutral pronouns constitute precisely 10.73 per cent of both novels' pronoun counts, although their percentage of the total word count differs. *Graham's Delicacies*,

however, contains more pronouns than *No Man of Woman Born* (see Table 1), which might explain these findings. Furthermore, both novels are the only texts in which the number of gender-neutral pronouns exceeds one per cent of the word count.

The remaining novel, as well as the play, contain fewer gender-neutral pronouns, though in both cases, they still exceed one per cent of all personal pronouns. The opposite can be said of television series, neither of which contains more than 60 gender-neutral pronouns, which then make up a negligible amount of the series' total word count (Table 9). While the difference in gender-neutral pronoun usage between literature and television series cannot be described as substantial in all cases, the findings show that it nonetheless exists. As has been said, series more or less reflect conversation, where the occurrence of third-person pronouns tends to be lower.

In all texts, a total of 1,969 gender-neutral pronouns has been recorded. The number constitutes 0.5 per cent of the total word count. In comparison with all personal pronouns, gender-neutral pronouns constitute three per cent, as seen in Figure 8. The figure also shows the distribution of pronouns according to person, which is coincidentally similar between the first (39.8%) and the third (39.3%), likely due to the choice of novels included in the corpus.

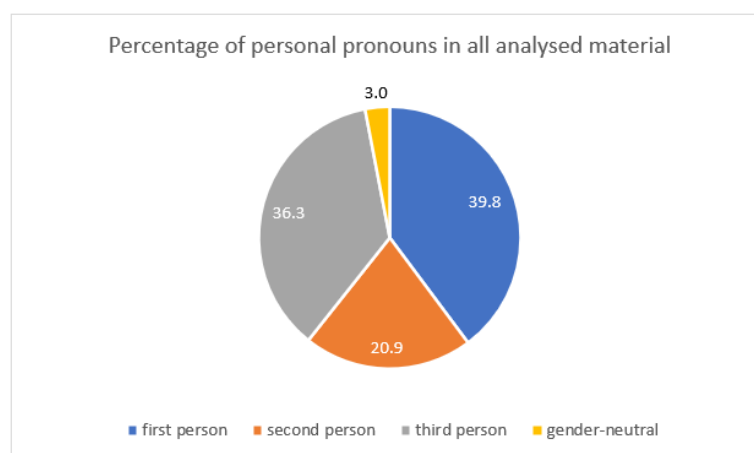


Figure 8: Percentage of personal pronouns in all analysed material

Figure 8 separates only gender-neutral pronouns and groups the remaining third-person ones together, but to fully illustrate the distribution of gendered, ungendered, and plural third-person pronouns, Figure 9 is included. When only the third person is considered, all gender-neutral pronouns account for 7.7 per cent, fewer than plural *they*. Therefore, gender-neutral pronouns can be labelled as relatively infrequent. This may be related to three factors: the rarity

of epicene pronouns, the narrative perspective of the selected literature, and the number of non-binary characters, which does not exceed two in either novel, short story, or television series.

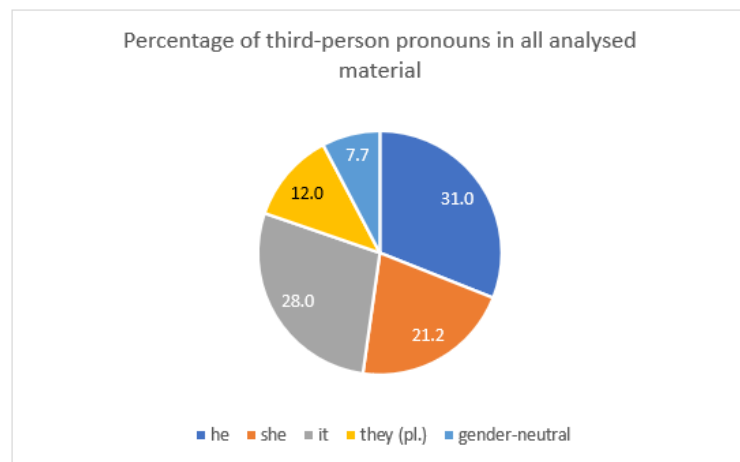


Figure 9: Third-person pronouns in all analysed material

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to analyse the occurrence of gender-neutral personal pronouns in contemporary English-language literature and television series. It provided a literature review focused on language change, gender, and pronouns and presented an original research, conducted via corpus analysis of a play, three novels, and four seasons of four television series. All personal pronouns were sorted according to person, number, case, and gender, and among 65,000 personal pronouns, 1,969 gender-neutral ones were identified.

The first objective was to determine the most frequent epicene pronoun. Singular *they*, generic *he*, and *he or she* were considered. It was discovered that singular *they*, which appeared in all analysed texts and constituted 93 per cent of epicene pronouns, was the most common. The second objective was to determine the most frequent non-binary pronoun. Five were detected, and likewise, singular *they* was found to be the most frequent pronoun with a 63 per cent majority. The occurrence of singular and plural *they* was also compared, revealing that plural *they* appeared more often in all but one text. Non-binary singular *they* was found to be more common than epicene singular *they*.

Another question was how frequent gender-neutral pronouns were in comparison to all personal pronouns. They were found to be relatively infrequent, as they constituted only three per cent of personal pronouns and 7.7 per cent of third-person pronouns specifically. The most frequent pronoun of all was *I*, followed by *you* and *he*. The penultimate research objective concerned the difference in gender-neutral pronoun usage between literature and television series, which was generally found to be higher in novels and theatre. The text with the highest occurrence of gender-neutral pronouns was *Graham's Delicacies*, a novel with a non-binary narrator. It was followed by *No Man of Woman Born*, a short story collection that includes two non-binary narrators.

The main point of this work was to ascertain the extent of language change pertaining to gender inclusivity and non-binary representation, which is reflected in the use of personal pronouns. Gender-neutral pronouns were mapped across genres, and a conclusion was reached that gender-neutral language is seemingly growing in prevalence. Generic *he*, which is considered to have sexist undertones in the present, appears to be disappearing and is instead replaced by singular *they*. Non-binary characters and their pronouns also begin to appear on mainstream television and reach a wider audience, which is a positive development with respect to the visibility of a marginalised group.

The research findings largely agreed with the presented theory, which suggested that singular *they* was the most common epicene and non-binary pronoun but that it was less frequent than plural *they*, and that gender-neutral pronouns had a low frequency of occurrence due to a low frequency of occurrence of both epicene antecedents and non-binary representation in media. Furthermore, as was suggested, language change of this magnitude is inevitably slow because of people's tendency to complain or refusal to accept the validity of non-binary gender identities.

As for the difference between gender-neutral pronoun usage in literature and television, the research also achieved the expected outcome. Because the content of both novels and plays extends beyond the bare dialogue that television series transcripts consist of, more opportunities for pronouns to appear present themselves. In this respect, the results also seemed to agree with the theory.

Minimal research has been done on a similar topic, but nevertheless, results regarding the frequency of epicene and non-binary *they* usage and the comparison of singular *they* and neopronouns corresponded with previous studies. However, it must be stated that this research was limited to American English and included a limited number of sources. Furthermore, the results were tied to the inclusion of non-binary characters. While the occurrence of epicene *they* may be similar in most works of literature or television series, the findings concerning the total usage of *they* were almost certainly influenced by non-binary *they*, and in truth, singular *they* occurrence might be lower than recorded.

To that end, more research could be conducted in order to compare literature, television series, and films from various English-speaking countries regardless of whether they feature non-binary characters or not. Additionally, more comprehensive research on all works of fiction that do include them could be done, such as a more extensive corpus study.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Personal pronouns in all analysed material

Personal pronoun occurrence in <i>Hir</i>						
	I	me	my	mine	myself	
	423	87	42	1	2	555
	you		your	yours	yourself	
S	526		101	0	7	634
PL	17		5	0	0	22
	we	us	our	ours	ourselves	
	135	15	12	0	2	164
	they	them	their	theirs	themselves	
PL	44	22	12	0	1	79
EP	0	1	0	0	0	1
	he	him	his		himself	
	120	77	68		9	274
	she	her		hers	herself	
	55	47		0	3	105
	it		its		itself	
	367		3		0	370
	ze	hir		hirs	hirself	
	37	41		1	2	81
						2,285

Table 10: Personal pronouns in *Hir*

S = singular, PL = plural, EP = epicene, NB = non-binary

Personal pronoun occurrence in <i>No Man of Woman Born</i>						
	I	me	my	mine	myself	
	565	130	172	5	11	883
	you		your	yours	yourself	
S	553		131	5	17	706
PL	22		9	0	0	31
	we	us	our	ours	ourselves	
	118	44	33	0	1	196
	they	them	their	theirs	themselves	
PL	231	129	189	1	8	558
EP	19	7	16	0	0	42
NB	29	8	21	0	4	62
	he	him	his		himself	
	655	242	672		29	1,598
	she	her		hers	herself	
	528	859		10	30	1,427
	it		its		itself	
	318		69		11	398
	xie	xer		xers	xerself	
	104	134		1	6	245
	nee	ner		ners	nerself	
	132	172		0	8	312

	kie	kir	kirs	kirself	
	17	18	0	1	36
					6,494

Table 11: Personal pronouns in *No Man of Woman Born*

Personal pronoun occurrence in <i>I Wish You All the Best</i>						
	I	me	my	mine	myself	
	4,974	1,190	1,145	25	129	7,463
	you		your	yours	yourself	
S	1,633		211	7	15	1,866
PL	96		2	0	0	98
	we	us	our	ours	ourselves	
	528	105	42	0	3	678
	they	them	their	theirs	themselves	
PL	311	265	73	2	5	656
EP	7	5	5	0	0	17
NB	89	51	60	0	1	201
	he	him	his		himself	
	807	275	457		9	1,548
	she	her		hers	herself	
	547	444		0	7	998
	it		its		itself	
	1,640		9		2	1,651
						15,176

Table 12: Personal pronouns in *I Wish You All the Best*

Personal pronoun occurrence in <i>Graham's Delicacies</i>						
	I	me	my	mine	myself	
	577	172	137	1	7	894
	you		your	yours	yourself	
S	523		86	1	6	616
PL	5		0	0	0	5
	we	us	our	ours	ourselves	
	31	9	9	0	1	50
	they	them	their	theirs	themselves	
PL	124	109	99	0	3	335
EP	1	1	1	0	0	3
NB	335	98	339	6	40	818
	he	him	his		himself	
	1,185	427	1,054		48	2,714
	she	her		hers	herself	
	710	828		9	25	1,572
	it		its		itself	
	618		22		2	642
						7,649

Table 13: Personal pronouns in *Graham's Delicacies*

Personal pronoun occurrence in <i>Star Trek: Discovery</i> S03						
	I	me	my	mine	myself	
	2,047	432	341	8	16	2,844
	you		your	yours	yourself	
S	1,916		340	13	27	2,296
PL	278		92	1	5	376
	we	us	our	ours	ourselves	
	947	252	220	3	16	1,438
	they	them	their	theirs	themselves	
PL	316	162	68	0	3	549
EP	16	5	2	0	0	23
NB	10	8	2	0	0	20
	he	him	his		himself	
	246	127	89		7	469
	she	her		hers	herself	
	236	191		1	4	432
	it		its		itself	
	982		38		10	1,030
						9,477

Table 14: Personal pronouns in *Star Trek: Discovery*

Personal pronoun occurrence in <i>One Day at a Time</i> S02						
	I	me	my	mine	myself	
	2,031	357	396	5	17	2,806
	you		your	yours	yourself	
S	1,434		246	3	14	1,697
PL	106		26	0	0	132
	we	us	our	ours	ourselves	
	322	46	48	2	2	420
	they	them	their	theirs	themselves	
PL	110	49	18	0	1	178
EP	7	9	5	0	0	21
NB	6	5	2	0	0	13
	he	him	his		himself	
	150	86	41		0	277
	she	her		hers	herself	
	179	113		0	2	294
	it		its		itself	
	738		7		1	746
	ze	zir		zirs	zirself	
	3	2		0	0	5
						6,589

Table 15: Personal pronouns in *One Day at a Time*

Personal pronoun occurrence in <i>She-Ra and the Princesses of Power</i> S04						
	I	me	my	mine	myself	
	1,151	232	194	7	8	1,592
	you		your	yours	yourself	
S	992		156	1	9	1,158
PL	113		10	0	0	123
	we	us	our	ours	ourselves	
	525	124	68	2	3	722
	they	them	their	theirs	themselves	
PL	122	61	25	0	0	208
EP	1	3	0	0	1	5
NB	5	2	0	0	0	7
	he	him	his		himself	
	28	14	8		0	50
	she	her	hers		herself	
	204	130	0		3	337
	it		its		itself	
	656		7		0	663
						4,865

Table 16: Personal pronouns in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*

Personal pronoun occurrence in <i>Billions</i> S02						
	I	me	my	mine	myself	
	3,130	697	459	16	38	4,338
	you		your	yours	yourself	
S	3,111		491	16	41	3,656
PL	127		30	0	4	161
	we	us	our	ours	ourselves	
	618	105	94	4	5	826
	they	them	their	theirs	themselves	
PL	305	131	72	2	3	513
EP	16	5	8	0	1	30
NB	10	1	4	1	0	16
	he	him	his		himself	
	558	246	163		21	988
EP	0	4	7		0	11
	she	her	hers		herself	
	162	92	2		2	258
EP	0	1	0		0	1
	it		its		itself	
	1627		29		11	1,667
						12,465

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Résumé

Cíl této bakalářské práce je analýza užití genderově neutrálních osobních zájmen v současné anglické literatuře a televizních seriálech. V osmi vybraných textech bylo detekováno 65 tisíc osobních zájmen, z nichž 1 969 jich bylo genderově neutrálních. U těchto zájmen byla dále analyzována četnost a rozdíly v užití mezi literaturou a seriály. Výzkum prokázal, že nejčastějším neutrálním i nebinárním zájmenem je tzv. „singular they“ neboli zájmeno „oni“ užití v jednotném čísle, které se v korpusu vyskytlo 1 137krát jako nebinární a 142krát v neutrálním smyslu, a dále také, že literatura všeobecně obsahuje více genderově neutrálních zájmen než seriály. Bylo také zjištěno, že ve srovnání s ostatními osobními zájmeny jsou ta genderově neutrální relativně vzácná a zaujímají pouhá tři procenta celkového počtu osobních zájmen.

Annotation

Jméno a příjmení:	Barbora Rošková
Katedra nebo ústav:	Ústav cizích jazyků
Vedoucí práce:	Mgr. Blanka Babická, Ph.D.
Rok obhajoby:	2022

Název práce:	Genderově neutrální osobní zájmena v anglickém jazyce
Název v angličtině:	Gender-neutral personal pronouns in the English language
Anotace práce:	Bakalářská práce je zaměřena na genderově neutrální a nebinární osobní zájmena v současné anglické literatuře a televizních seriálech. Teoretická část představuje současnou problematiku tématu and pojednává o klíčových pojmech. Cílem výzkumu v praktické části je analýza četnosti těchto zájmen v souboru osmi vybraných textů a rozdílů v jejich užití mezi literaturou a seriály.
Klíčová slova:	gender, nebinární gender, zájmena, osobní zájmena, genderově neutrální zájmena, nebinární zájmena, neo-zájmena
Anotace v angličtině:	The bachelor thesis is focused on gender-neutral personal pronouns in contemporary English-language literature and television series. The theoretical part provides a literature review and introduces the key terms. The research aims to analyse the occurrence of these pronouns in a corpus of eight selected texts and compare the differences between their usage in literature and television series.
Klíčová slova v angličtině:	gender, non-binary gender, pronouns, personal pronouns, gender-neutral pronouns, non-binary pronouns, neopronouns
Přílohy vázané v práci:	Appendix 1: Personal pronouns in all analysed material
Rozsah práce:	36 + 4 strany příloh
Jazyk práce:	Anglický jazyk