

A Corpus-Based Diachronic Study on Indefinite Pronominal Anaphora in English

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Abstract : From old English to modern English, the gender category has changed from grammatical gender system to natural gender system. The word classes that reflected gender has changed from pronouns, adjectives, and numerals in old English to only pronouns in modern English. In present-day English, the third person singular pronouns are the only paradigm that keeps an intact gender. 'He' and 'they' used as epicene pronouns are one of the two commonest phenomena of gender disagreement (the other being those against the natural gender). Considering the convenience of corpus concordance, epicene pronoun usage is selected in this study in which the anaphors are restricted to possessives (eg. his, their), and the antecedents are restricted to compound indefinite pronouns (eg. someone, somebody). Factors like writing form (eg. someone vs. some one), the semantics of the prefixes (eg. some- vs. any-), and suffixes (eg. -one vs. -body), as well as frequency, are taken into consideration. Statistics indicate that 'their' is increasingly used as the epicene pronoun compared with the decline of 'his' (when both writing forms are considered). This is influenced by social factors such as feminist movement, as well as the semantics and frequency of antecedents. Their (plural) used in anaphoric reference to various indefinite pronouns (singular in form) can also be treated as number variation in third person pronouns, and the trend that 'their' in place of his can also be treated as a change in number category. Among different candidates for the gender-neutral function, 'their' is proven to be the most promising one based on the diachronic data. This does not reject any new competitors in the future which still remains to be seen.

Keywords : language variation and change, epicene pronouns, gender, number

Conference Title : ICLACL 2021 : International Conference on Language and Applied Corpus Linguistics

Conference Location : Dubrovnik, Croatia

Conference Dates : October 04-05, 2021