



Gender Politics in English Language: Exploring the Factors that Affect the Use of the Epicene Pronoun in Esl Context

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Abstract: The English language lacks a pronoun for a singular genderless nominal antecedent. Due to that, different schools of thought have emerged in language studies over what item to be considered appropriate for such role. The pronouns that are used to play the role are collectively known as epicene pronoun. Over the years, the debate has lingered on three epicenes- generic he, coordinated he or she and the singular they, with recent debates tilting towards the singular they. The APA's (2019) style manual, in its latest edition, i.e. the 7th edition, instructed scholars to use they/them/their pronouns for situations where gender is unknown or irrelevant. While several studies have confirmed that the singular they has become the most preferred epicene in L1 context, minimum studies have been conducted in L2 contexts. This study explores the factors that affect the use of the epicene in the L2 context, in Ghana precisely. 20 English major tertiary students were recruited for the study and data were collected using questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The outcome of the analysis confirms that the coordinated he or she is the most preferred epicene in the L2 context. However, it is revealed that when the singular antecedent evokes a plural 'sense', the singular they is the most preferred. The study also reveals that three factors account for the use of the epicene- socio-cultural factors, input/amount of exposure factor and grammaticality factors. It is recommended that, as the concept of gender evolves and expands beyond the simplistic binary male and female, the singular they becomes more gender responsive and should be introduced into the language curricula of L2 contexts.

Keywords: English Education, Gender Politics, Epicene Pronoun, Esl.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the major limitations of the English language is that, it has no specific pronoun for a gender-neutral third-person singular nominal (Ebrahimi & Hosseini, 2021). The English



language has pronouns for all the third person singular nouns that have a specified gender, but does not account for the third person singular pronoun for a genderless antecedent. For example, the pronoun he is used to refer to a singular male nominal, the pronoun she is also used to refer to a singular female nominal and the pronoun it refers to non-human nominal items. Sentences 1-3 below exemplifies the pronouns and their antecedents.

1. Desmond left when he saw the animal.
2. Esi believes she can achieve her dreams.
3. The goat screeched when it was hit.

In the sentences above, it can be seen that the pronoun he and she are used anaphorically to refer to the singular antecedents Desmond and Esi, in sentences 1 and 2 respectively. The pronoun it in sentence 3 also replaces the non-human noun phrase The goat. It can be noted that all the three antecedents possess a known gender so it is easy to select the appropriate pronoun to replace them.

What however remains contentious among English language scholars is the pronoun that is best suitable for a singular antecedent whose gender is not known. Due to that, different people use different pronouns depending on their ideology, beliefs and perspectives resulting in a permanent scholarly debate in an attempt to find the most appropriate choice (Ebrahimi & Hosseini, 2021). The need to find a specific pronoun to replace the gender-neutral third-person singular nominal in English has given credence to the epicene pronoun in recent years. The epicene pronoun is a pronoun that is used to refer to an antecedent whose gender is unknown (Moulton et al, 2020). Over the years, three pro-forms have generally been used to serve the function. These are the;

1. *generic he,*
2. *binary he/she*
3. *singular they*

These three pronouns are collectively known as epicene pronouns (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002; Stormbom, 2019). The *generic he* is where the pronoun *he* is used generically to represent both the male and female genders, and all other genders. The *Binary he/she* is the use of the coordinated *he* and *she* and all its variants such as *s/he, he/she, she/he, he or she* to represent all genders and the *Singular they* is the use of the pronoun *they* with a singular 'sense' to represent all genders (Stormbom, 2019). Different language scholars subscribe to different epicenes depending on several factors such as their gender, their ideology and beliefs, grammatical orientation, among others. In fact, Loughlin (2022) contends that the decision to choose a particular epicene over the other is a 'political statement'. While some scholars believe that the *generic he* is only used by misogynists who want to perpetuate male dominance, others believe the *binary he/she* does not sufficiently represent persons who do not identify with either of the male or female genders (Maryskova, 2021). These divergent points of view give credence to the use of the *singular they* which seems to more gender representative.

In 2019, the American Psychological Association (APA) Publication Manual, in its revision of the publication manual, in the 7th edition, updated its referencing guidelines instructing writers to use the epicene singular they and its variants as "a generic third person singular pronoun in



English”, i.e. for situations where the gender of the antecedent/s is not known or is irrelevant. Earlier, in 2017, the Associated Press Stylebook had adopted the use of the singular they (Berendzen, 2017). Similarly, the Modern Language Association (MLA) referencing style has also encouraged the use of the singular they stating that “the MLA encourages writers to accept its [singular they] use to avoid making or enabling assumptions about gender” (Breccia, 2021: 7). Also, The American Dialect Society adopted the singular they as its Word of the Year in 2015 claiming that, “They was recognized by the society for its emerging use as a pronoun to refer to a unknown person, often as a conscious choice by a person rejecting the traditional gender binary of he/she” (Breccia 2021; 9). Similarly, the Merriam Webster dictionary added the singular they to their lexicons and made it their word of the year in 2019 (Baumler & Rudinger, 2022). These show that the use of the singular they has gained some strong recommendations in many credible outlets and its usage has spiked in recent years, especially among L1 speakers. Stormbom (2019: 97) says “singular they is now exceedingly common in L1 English”.

However, the point must be made that there are scholarly objections to the use of the singular they, especially among prescriptive grammarians (Maryskova, 2021). Bjorkman (2017) gives two predominant reasons that prescriptivists project in their objection to the acceptance and use of the singular they as the genderless singular third person pronoun. Firstly, he says that people have an internalized cultural assumption that all humans can be categorized into a male and female binary gender classification, which makes the binary he/she more acceptable. And secondly, since they traditionally evokes a plural sense, using it to replace a singular item becomes grammatically problematic. Hence, in a sentence such as “The student is so respectful that they are cleaning the entire compound,” the use of they to represent the singular nominal ‘the student’ together with the verb are changes the singular ‘sense’ in the original statement. These debates have been ongoing for several decades but little research has been done on it particularly in the second language context (Stormbom, 2019). The longstanding controversies surrounding singular they make it unappealing for language scholars, which is partly why Paterson (2014) recommends the avoidance strategy to avoid the need to use it in structures. It must, however, be recalled that this “pronoun battle’ is not the first in the history of English language. In the 17th century, the pronoun you used to be plural while thou, thee and thy were its singular forms until later, these singular forms were completely phased out in Modern English to give way for the pronoun you to assume both singular and plural usages (Baron, 2018).



It must be underscored that the concept is not an entirely a new one in English. The use of the *singular they* predates the 17th century. Balhorn (2004) and Pinker (2014) agree that evidences of its use are found in the fourteenth and fifteenth century manuscripts and literary pieces such as *The Canterbury Tales*, *Ancrene Wisse* and *Shakespeare*. For instance, in *Shakespeare's* book, "*Comedy of Errors*", there is a line that reads, "*There's not a man I meet but doth salute me as if I were **their** well-acquainted friend*" (Bjorkman, 2017:3) with **their** being a reference for the singular antecedent *a man*. However, since the end of the 17th century, prescriptive grammarians have problematized the use of the epicene pronoun and consistently made it a subject of attack prescribing only the use of the *generic he* and describing the *singular they* as 'ungrammatical'. To the prescriptivist school of thought, the use of the plural pronoun to refer to a singular antecedent defies grammatical number (Gonzalez, 2020). Henley and Abueg (2003) confirm that the use of the prescriptivists' *generic he* lasted to the second half of the 20th century until feminist movements revolted against it fiercely contesting with empirical research findings that the *generic he* evokes male imagery. Feminists movements continued to argue for the use of more gender representative alternatives and that resulted in the adoption of the binary 'he or she' (Balhorn, 2004). However, gender has evolved and become a more complex phenomenon making the binary 'he or she' become too simplistic and unrepresentative of all genders and that has given reason for the use and acceptance of the *singular they* in language scholarship (Ackerman, 2019; Bjorkman 2017, Bradley et. al. 2019, LaScotte 2016).

Regardless of the spiked interest of language scholarship on the concept of the singular they in recent years especially in the past 30 years (Breccia, 2021), not many studies have researched into it, most especially in the second language context (Abudalbh, 2012; Ackerman et. al. 2018; Ackerman, 2019; Bjorkman 2017; Bradley et. al. 2019; Camilliere et. al., 2019; Conrod, 2018; Conrod 2019; Doherty & Conklin 2017; Konnelly & Cowper 2020; LaScotte, 2016; Prasad 2017; Stormbom, 2020). In his comparative study, Abudalbh (2012) found that while native English speakers used the singular they most often, the non-native speakers, Arabs, preferred the generic he. Currently, two studies are regarded as the most comprehensive on the epicene; Stormbom (2020) and Conrod (2019) (Moulton et al, 2020). Stormbom (2020) examined 1003 research papers on the epicene pronouns and confirmed that the singular they was the most frequently used epicene while the generic he and the binary he/she had equal representation in the data, suggesting that they are equally preferred, i.e., neither is preferred over the other. Conrod (2019) conducted an acceptability judgement study on the singular they engaging 754 participants. The study found that age, gender and transgender identities of speakers affect their preference for the epicene. The controversies and complexities that surround the understanding and use of the singular they in English raise concerns of how second language speakers, ESL, approach the issue (Stormbom, 2019). Ebrahimi and Hosseini (2021) asserts that since there are different ideas about the epicene, investigating it among ESL is of immense value. These premises give credence for the need for more scholarly investigations into the concept, hence, the current study. In this study, the researchers adduce substantial evidence to argue that the grammaticality of the nominal antecedent affect the use of the epicene they among tertiary English-major students in Ghana. The study seeks to answer the question; what factor/s affect the use of the epicene pronoun in the L2 context?



2. METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative. It closely examines the knowledge of L2 speakers on the singular they and their reasoning or attitude towards it. The qualitative approach makes it possible for researchers to painstakingly conduct a detailed examination of non-numerical data such as attitude, knowledge and perception (Permatasari, 2022).

Questionnaire and semi-structured interview are the instrumentation for data collection. While the questionnaire presented the participants with closed-ended and alternative options, the interview was open-ended and afforded the participants the opportunity to give reasons and explanations for their choices.

The corpus of Maryskova (2021), which employs six gender-neutral nominal; student, person, child, reader, patient and individual to test for knowledge in epicene are adapted for the study. These words are adapted for the study because they are regarded comprehensive for a study on epicene. They are obtained from the corpora of the British National Corpus (BNC) and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The BNC is a 100-million-word collection of 10% spoken and 90% written language from a wide range of sources collected from 1991-1994 and the COCA has over one billion words collected from 1990 to 2019. The COCA is the most widely used corpus of English. These two corpora complement each other in a more robust manner that makes it credible and reliable for use. While the BNC is a corpus of British English, the COCA is a corpus of American English. It is from these pool that the six words were chosen due to their performance in the corpora. However, Maryskova (2021) tested the six words on L1 speakers but the current study tests them on L2 speakers.

These six words were put into different contexts that evoke varying degrees of individuation. This is consistent with Stormbom (2019) who asserts that the degree of individuation could affect the type of epicene. For each structure, the participants are required to choose an epicene which they consider more suitable for the antecedent. She (Stormbom) confirms that there are four types of epicene antecedents; definite noun phrases (NPs), e.g. the child; indefinite NPs, e.g. a student; quantificational NPs, e.g. every person; and indefinite pronouns, e.g. anyone. These antecedents evoke different levels of individuation. These four types of antecedents can be broadly put into two categories- those that evoke singular sense (definite noun phrases (NPs), e.g. the child; indefinite NPs, e.g. a student) and those that evoke plural sense (quantificational NPs, e.g. every person; and indefinite pronouns, e.g. anyone). In order to explore both categories, the questionnaire was structured into two parts- A and B. Part A uses items that evoke singular sense and Part B uses items that evoke plural sense. This was to ensure a fair distribution of the antecedents to ensure that the results obtained are holistic enough to be able to analyse and draw credible conclusions. The questionnaire had 12 items with 3 alternative options each. After the participants were done with the questionnaire, they were also engaged in interview sessions to explain why they selected a particular epicene over the other for an antecedent in a given context. The results collated from the questionnaire and



the interview are corroborated and analysed to bring out the necessary thematic areas that are used to draw informed conclusions.

The participants are 20 student-teachers from a College of Education in the Western-North region of Ghana who are studying English Language to become professional teachers of English. These student-teachers have been instructed in English and studied English (as core subject) for an average of 12 years (6 years primary, 3 years JHS and 3 years SHS) and are specializing in English at the tertiary. It is therefore not odd to expect that such participants would have a considerably informed opinion about the use of the English pronouns generally, and the epicene, specifically. The 20 participants responded to the questionnaire while 11 engaged in interview sessions.

Ethical issues are essential in research (Alzamil, 2021). The researchers made sure that no participant was forced, coerced, deceived or participated under duress. The purpose of the study was thoroughly explained to the participants hence, they engaged in the study on their own convictions. The participants were also assured of the confidentiality of their identities which is why personal names, institutional names or items that may give a clue of their identities have been avoided. The participants also had the liberty to withdraw from the research at any time if they wished.

3. RESULTS

This section presents the result gathered from the questionnaire and the interview sessions.

Table 3.1 below shows the frequency and percentages of the epicenes gathered from the participants.

Choose among the alternatives the item that best suits each sentence.				
Antecedent	PART A- Sentence evoking singular sense	Generic he	Binary He/she	Singular They
Student	A student who steals from (his; his/her; their) teacher is not serious in life.	3 15%	16 80%	1 5%
Person	A person must be sanctioned when (he; he/she; they) cannot protect state properties.	1 5%	19 95%	0
Child	A child cries as if (his; his/her; their) parents are dead.	2 10%	16 80%	2 10%
Reader	A reader must know how (he; he/she; they) can pronounce words correctly.	3 15%	17 85%	0
Patient	A patient goes to the hospital to seek (his; his/her; their) well-being.	3 15%	15 75%	2 10%
Individual	An individual who abandons (his; his/her; their) dream cannot succeed in life.	1 5%	18 90%	1 5%
TOTAL		13 10.83%	101 84.17%	6 5%



	PART B- Sentence evoking plural sense			
Student	Every student depends on (his; his/her; their) parents for survival.	1 5%	7 35%	12 60%
Person	Each person deserves to eat the fruit of (his; his/her; their) labour.	0	6 30%	14 70%
Child	Any child can blame (his; his/her; their) parents for failing in life.	2 10%	11 55%	7 35%
Reader	I personally know every reader who comes here for (his; his/her; their) books.	0	8 40%	12 60%
Patient	Each patient has to buy (his; his/her; their) drugs from the pharmacist.	1 5%	9 45%	10 50%
Individual	Every individual must listen to (his; his/her; their) teachers' advice.	1 5%	7 35%	12 60%
TOTAL		5 4.17%	48 40%	67 55.83%
OVERALL TOTAL (Singular sense + plural sense)		18 7.5%	149 62.08	73 30.42

Table 4.1: Frequency and Percentage of Selections of the Epicenes

Each of the 20 participants responded to all the 12 items on the questionnaire. This presented the researchers with responded 240 items for analysis. The participants were presented with the three epicenes, i.e., the generic he, the binary he/she and the singular they to decide which of them is most suitable for the six words- student, person, child, reader, patient and individual. Each of these words were presented in both their singular sense (marked with a definite determiner) and plural sense (marked with an indefinite determiner). This was done to present the words in different contexts so as to determine if and to what extent contexts affect the choice of the epicene.

It is revealed that, out of the 240 applications of the epicenes in different contexts, the generic he is the least preferred with 18 uses, representing 8%. The data also reveal that the binary s/he is the most preferred epicene with 149 uses, representing 62% and the singular they which is the second most preferred epicene has 73 uses, representing 30%. It is evident that, in the ESL context, the binary he or she is the most preferred epicene students would use for antecedents with unknown gender. Figure 4.1 below gives a clearer impression of the data.

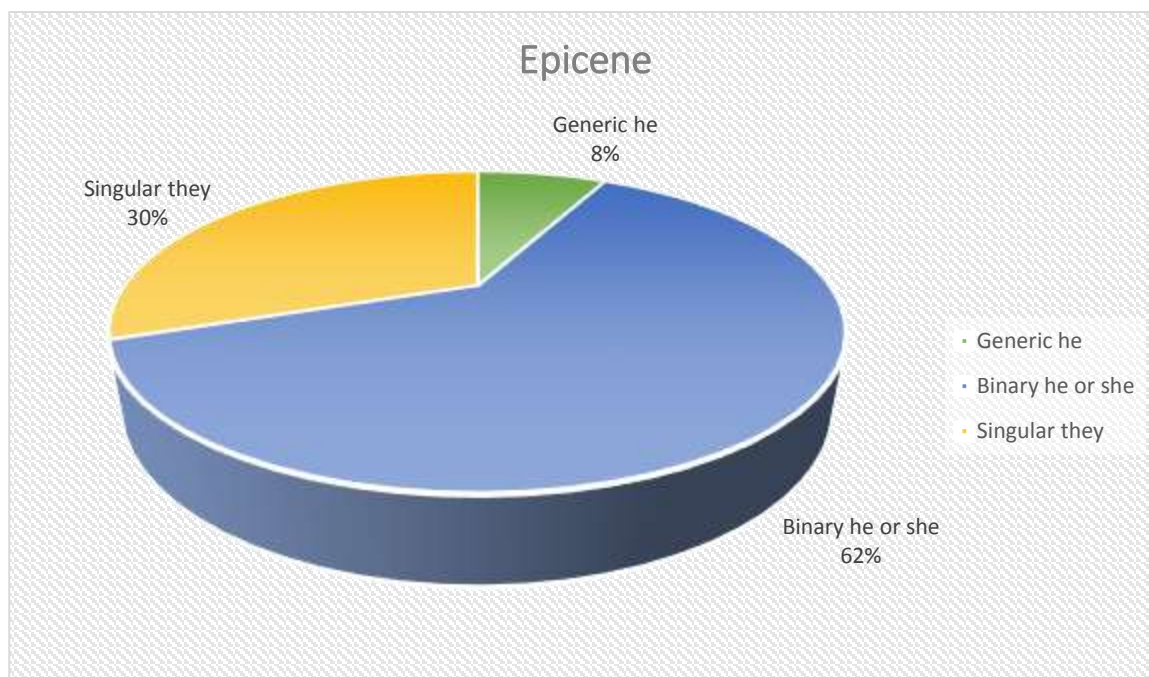


Figure 4.1: The use of the Epicenes

Beyond the issue of gender, the other important scholarly debate surrounding the epicenes is the issue of their grammaticality in terms of number. This has been the argument of prescriptivists over the years. To be able to situate the ‘number’ argument in the L2 context, the researchers went further to take data on how number could also affect the L2 speakers’ preference for an epicene. Due to that, all the six words were used in contexts that evoke singular and plural senses and participants were asked to choose the epicenes they consider appropriate. Figure 4.2 shows the responses for the singular contexts.

As can be observed from table 4.1, the frequency of the generic he in the singular context is 13, representing 10.83% while the singular they is the least preferred epicene in the singular context with a frequency of 6, representing 5%. Again, the binary he or she is the most preferred epicene in the singular context with a frequency of 101, representing 84.17%. These statistics are illustrated on figure 4.2 below.

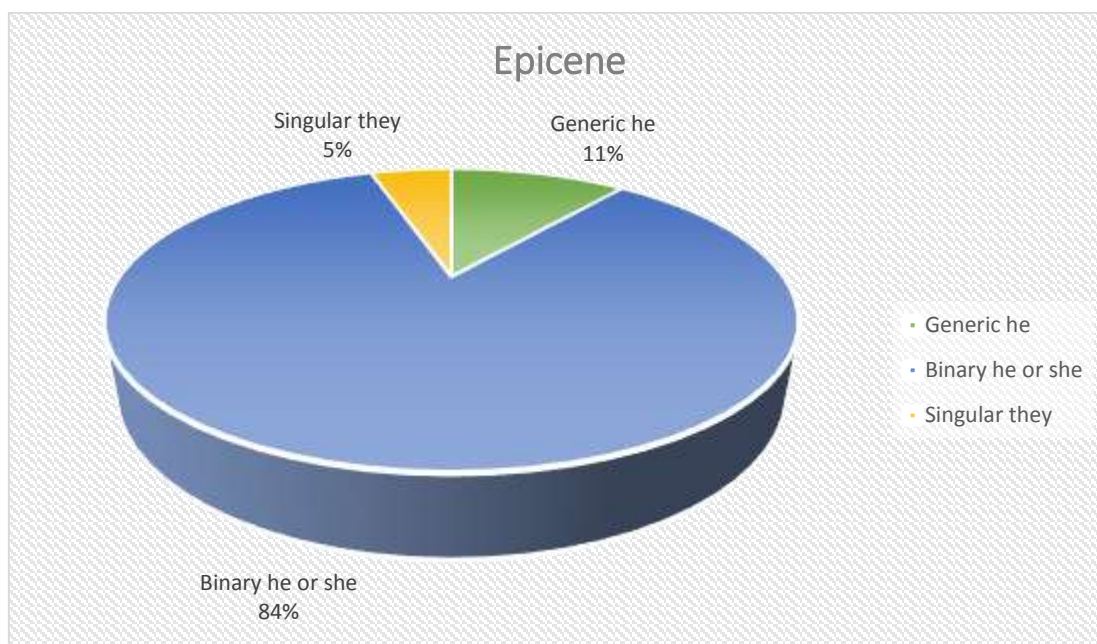


Figure 4.2: The use of the epicenes in singular sense

In terms of the plural sense, the data, as presented in 4.1, show that the generic he is least preferred epicene with a frequency of 5, representing 4.17% while the singular they is the most preferred epicene in the plural context with a frequency of 67, representing 55.83%. The binary he or she is the second most preferred epicene in the plural context with a frequency of 48, representing 40%. These statistics are illustrated on figure 4.3 below.

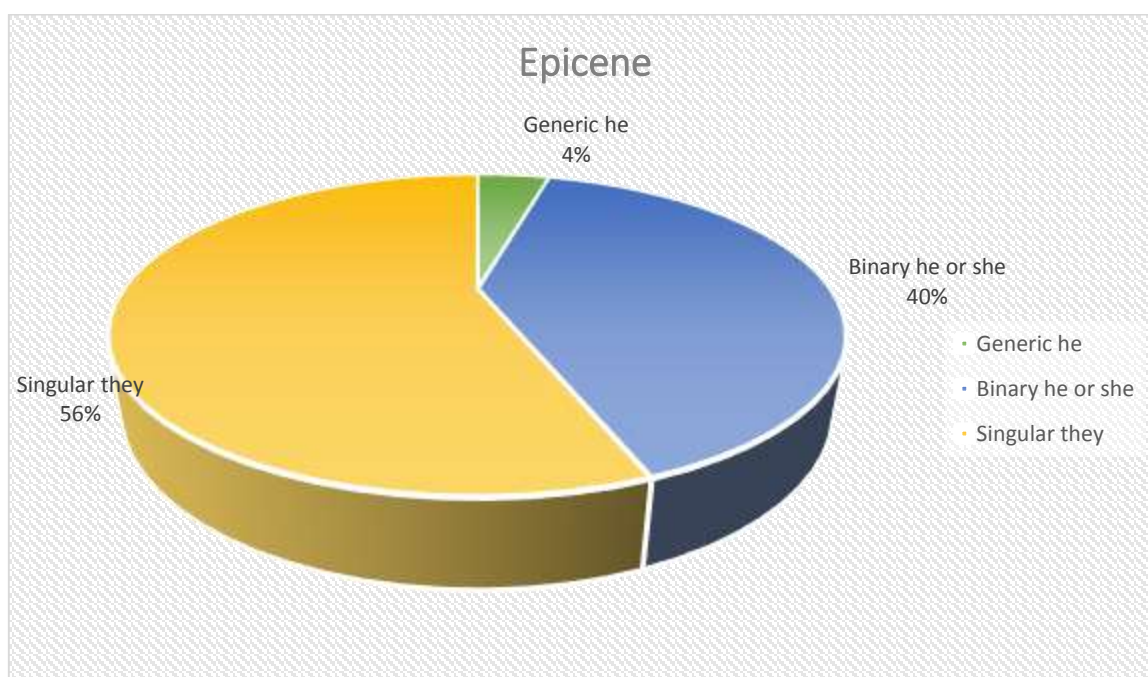


Figure 4.3: The use of the epicene in plural sense



4. DISCUSSION

Psycholinguists recognize the importance of gender-fair and inclusive language and have adduced substantial evidence to suggest that language can affect gender-related cognition, behaviour and attitudes (Arthur, et al., 2008; Bradley, 2020; Leaper, 2014; Moulton, et al. 2020; Stahlberg, et al., 2007; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). The problem however is that, when the gender of the antecedent is unknown, deciding on the appropriate epicene pronoun that meets both gender and grammatical balances becomes challenging. Deciding to use the generic he makes the speaker appear patriarchal, misogynistic, anti-feminist and a perpetrator of a male dominated orientation (Speyer & Schleef, 2019). Also, using the binary he or she, though preferred over the generic he, divides the genders into a strict binary sense- male and female. Meanwhile, the concept of gender has evolved over the years to include people who do not identify with any gender, transgenders, among others. This explains how the singular they becomes a strong alternative. However, prescriptivists argue that it is ungrammatical (Bradley et al., 2019) because it violates the singular and plural collocations in sentences.

The result reveals some important details about how the L2 users of the English language exploited the *gender* and *grammaticality* dimensions of the epicenes. As revealed in the data, cumulatively, the *binary he or she* is the most preferred epicene, followed by the *singular they*. The *generic he* is the least preferred epicene. The researchers further engaged the participants through interview sessions on the underpinning orientations that affect their use of the epicenes and three themes emerged- socio-cultural orientation, academic exposure and, third, grammaticality. On the socio-cultural orientation, the participants confirmed that in their context, the society, culture and constitution recognize, acknowledge and legally endorse only two genders, that is, the male and the female. Therefore, even when the gender of a nominal antecedent is unknown, it is assumed that it can only be either a male or a female. Therefore, it feels safe to use the *binary he or she* in such contexts. This is consistent with Abudaljuh's (2012) assertion that culture influences the way people use language. A participant recounted,

A lot of us (second language speakers in Ghana) are comfortable using the *binary he or she* for the genderless nominal antecedent because our culture only recognizes the male and female genders. Therefore, using *s/he* is more consistent with our cultural disposition.

The second factor that affects the use of the epicene pronoun is input. Research proves that a central factor in the successful acquisition of a language is the frequency of input (Ellis, 2012). The more the input, the more one acquires the language. The binary *s/he* obtained the highest frequency in usage because, according to the participants, it is the epicene that they are exposed to in the language classroom. The language teachers and textbooks use the binary *s/he* anytime they refer to the genderless third person singular antecedent. This continuous input has influenced the students' use of the epicene. Of the 20 participants, only 3, representing 15% indicated that they had seen the generic he being used as an epicene in their English textbooks. 19, representing 95%, confirmed that they had seen the binary *s/he* epicene used and only 1

participant, representing 5%, indicated that they had seen the singular they. Figure 4.4 illustrates the data.

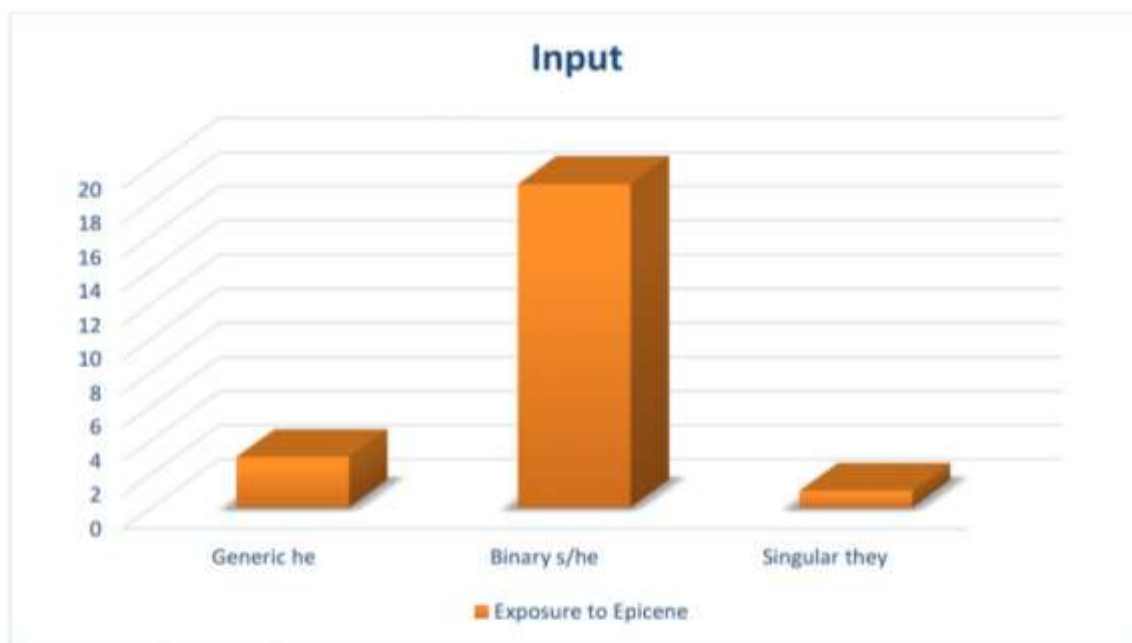


Figure 4.4: Impact of exposure to the epicene

The figure above reveals a clear indication that the frequency and quality of an input affects one's knowledge and use of the epicene, or any other concept as well. Obviously, majority of the L2 users would use the *binary s/he* because that is the epicene they have learnt in the language classroom or read about in their textbooks. It must be added that the researchers also interrogated the syllabus, textbooks, handouts and reading materials of the English language. They found out that none of the materials use the *generic he* or the *singular they* to refer to the genderless third person singular. Anytime the pronoun *they* was used in a structure, it was referring to a plural antecedent or an antecedent that evokes a plural sense. A participant explained,

Throughout Basic to Senior High School and even to this tertiary level, I have never seen the pronoun *they* being used to refer to a singular noun before. Our English teachers, in teaching us the pronouns, make it clear that *they* is a plural pronoun. As for the *generic he*, it is only in the Holy Bible that I've come across it, but even with that, I believe it's an Old English. None of our modern textbooks use it.

The third factor that influences the use of the epicene pronoun is grammaticality (LaScotte, 2016). Prescriptivists contest the grammaticality of the singular they. They are conservative in their thoughts that the pronoun they still has its original quality of evoking plurality and should therefore not be used for a singular antecedent (Stormbom, 2019). The argument further delves into the issue of concord, i.e. subject-verb agreement, claiming that when a singular antecedent with the appropriate verb-form is replaced by a singular they, the verb will also be affected thereby generally affecting the syntactic and semantic properties of the structure. For instance,



The patient is back because they are told to see the doctor again.

In the sentence above, the pronoun they is used anaphorically to refer to The patient, and that has affected the verbs as well [changing is to are]. This has syntactic and semantic implications and could affect communication (Fowler & Aaron, 1983). However, when the third person singular antecedent evokes a plural sense, L2 speakers find it more convenient to use the plural they. Therefore, for such speakers, a sentence such as “Every individual is craving for food because they are hungry”, does not appear problematic. The data corroborate these assertions as it showed that 55.83% of the participants prefer to use the singular they epicene when used in a context that evokes a plural sense while 40% would use the binary he or she in similar context. In fact, a number of studies have shown that the singular they is sensitive to the type of antecedent it takes (Ackerman, 2018; Doherty & Conklin 2017). With respect to the argument of grammaticality, a participant indicated;

I find it difficult, almost impossible, to replace a singular noun with a plural pronoun. I am a student-teacher hoping to become a teacher of English in a few years’ time. How do I explain this ungrammatical phenomenon to my kids?

Another participant who shared a similar view also asserted;

I would rather use he or she to replace a singular antecedent. That sounds more logical and, besides, that is what we have been trained with. Using they to replace a singular antecedent would break the grammatical concord of the structure.

These results corroborate the assertion of Stormbom (2019) that the acceptance of the grammaticality of the singular they has been slow, especially among L2 speakers even though the concept is no longer prescribed as fiercely as it used to be some decades ago.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study has investigated the use of the epicene pronouns in a second language context, using Ghana as the case study. The epicene is not a new concept in English language, however, scholarship discussions on it has heightened in recent years due to the growing complexity of the concept of gender and the need for the English language to reflect this complexity and ensure a gender-inclusive and fair representation. What has made the debate fester for long is that, the English language traditionally has no specific pronoun for a gender-neutral third-person singular nominal (Ebrahimi & Hosseini, 2021). Therefore, different language scholars have tended to use items they deem best suitable, depending on which school of thought they belong. Over the years, three types of epicenes have served the function; generic he, binary he or she and singular they.

The generic he was popular during the era of Old English. That was when male dominance and patriarchy were welcomed in the society. However, around the 17th century when Feminist movements begun to questionnaire male dominance and intensify their efforts to have a fair representation in society, the language needed to reflect the new dimension. That was when the



binary he or she also became popular. The binary he or she looked more gender friendly than the generic he. It reflected the male and female divisions of society. However, over the years, the concept of gender has evolved. It is no longer a simplistic he or she anymore. It has now come to include people who do not want to identify with any gender, those who are transgender, those who are biologically female but psychologically male and vice versa, among several other complexities. The language again has to evolve to reflect this growing complexity. It is against this background that the singular they has gained some appreciable space in the English language, especially in recent years. It must be clearly stated that the singular they is “now exceedingly common in L1 English” Stormbom (2019: 97). What is yet to be confirmed is its status in the L2 context and this is where the current study becomes needful.

This study is an attempt to add to the discussions on the epicene and contribute to the long-held attempt by scholars to bring some finality to the subject. The study recruits 20 tertiary students majoring in English language and solicit their knowledge and attitude towards the epicene using the instrumentation of questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The qualitative approach is adopted in a bid to obtain deeper appreciable of the issues. The analysis and discussion of the data reveal critical outcomes about the epicenes. The first is that the varying degrees of individuation which arises from the type of antecedent in a sentence determines which epicene the L2 would use. However, regardless the type of antecedent, the *binary he or she* has a higher stake than any other epicene. It is the most popular and most preferred in the L2 context. However, the L2 speaker prefers the *singular they* in contexts where the antecedent evokes a plural ‘sense’. The study found three underlying factors for the L2 speaker’s choice of the epicene. These are socio-cultural factors, amount and frequency of epicene input and exposure and grammaticality.

This study is not without limitations. Being one of the pioneer studies on epicene in Ghana, it would have been ideal if the researchers had sufficient resources to engage a larger and more representative sample to be able to generalize the results. Adopting the qualitative approach and engaging its characteristic small sample size of participants make it difficult to generalize the results. It is, therefore, recommended that a further and future study on epicene will broaden the sample.

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