GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND SHIFTING STYLES: KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND CODIFYING LANGUAGE USE IN STYLE GUIDES

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Abstract

Recent sociopolitical movements concerning gender identity have shifted conversations about language use and meaning. Style guides reflect this shift, updating and expanding sections on inclusive language in newer editions, and codifying written communication, enabling them to dictate language practices and ideologies. By comparing editions of commonly used guides, specifically AMA, AP, APA, and MLA, we employ queer linguistics to document language change regarding singular *they* in academic and professional spheres. In our research on gender-non-discriminatory language, we found consistent integration of gender inclusivity into popular style guides, yet guides tend to recommend avoidance of singular *they* and are ambiguous about usage.

Keywords: Queer linguistics, transgender, language change, gender-neutral pronouns, gender identity.

Resumo

Género, sexualidade e estilos em transformação: produção de conhecimento e codificação do uso da linguagem em guias de estilo

Movimentos sociopolíticos recentes relacionados com a identidade de género têm alterado a discussão sobre o uso e significado da linguagem. Os guias de estilo refletem essa mudança, atualizando e expandindo as seções sobre linguagem inclusiva em edições mais recentes e codificando a comunicação escrita, possibilitando a prescrição de práticas e ideologias linguísticas. Ao comparar edições de guias comumente utilizados, especificamente AMA, AP, APA e MLA, usamos a linguística *queer* para documentar a mudança na linguagem em relação ao uso de *they* no singular em esferas académicas e profissionais. Na nossa pesquisa sobre linguagem não discriminatória de género, encontrámos uma integra-

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ção consistente da inclusão de género nos guias de estilo mais usados, mas estes tendem a recomendar que se evite o pronome singular *they* e são ambíguos quanto ao seu uso.

Palavras-chave: Linguística *queer*, transgénero, mudança de linguagem, pronomes de género neutro, identidade de género.

Résumé
Genre, sexualité et évolution des styles: Production de connaissances et codification de l'usage de la langue dans les guides de style
De récents mouvements sociopolitiques autour de l'identité de genre ont impacté les conversations autour de l'utilisation et de la signification du langage. Certains manuels de style notent cette évolution en mettant à jour et en développant les sections sur le langage inclusif des éditions plus récentes, codifiant ainsi la communication écrite et permettant l'expansion de pratiques linguistiques et d'idéologies. En comparant les différentes éditions des manuels couramment utilisés, en particulier l'AMA, l'AP, l'APA, et le MLA, nous utiliserons la linguistique *queer* pour analyser les changements de discours autour du pronom singulier *they* dans les sphères académiques et professionnelles. Dans notre recherche sur le langage non discriminatoire de genre, nous avons constaté une intégration cohérente de l'inclusivité de genre dans les manuels de style, bien que ces manuels prescrivent majoritairement l'évitement de pronom et restent ambigus quant à son utilisation.

Mots-clés : Linguistique *queer*, transgenre, changement linguistique, pronoms neutres en genre, identité de genre.

1. Introduction

While discourse on gender-neutral pronouns (GNPs) has been documented since the 13th century (Nabila, Setiawan & Widyastuti 2021), the linguistic landscape has undergone a transformative shift in recent years, propelled by sociopolitical movements related to changing perceptions of gender identity in many Western societies. This shift has sparked intense debates, especially regarding the acceptance of singular *they*, as individuals who identify outside traditional binary gender categories are increasingly acknowledging it as their self-identified pronoun. Opponents of the epicene pronoun often argue that singular *they* as a GNP is grammatically incorrect and potentially impedes communication despite research disproving such claims.

The historical origins of indefinite uses of singular pronouns *he* and *they* date back to the 15th century, wherein writers have exercised flexibility in employing either *he* or *they* interchangeably when referencing singular indefinite gender-neutral antecedents (Curzan 2003). There is also a vast history of neutral pronoun usage in literature dating back to Shakespeare and Austen (Bjorkman 2017) and in recent publications like the *Washington Post* and the *Economist* (Jones & Mullany 2019). In spoken language, Bjorkman (2017) has shown there is precedent of native English speakers using singular *they* as a pronoun to refer to individuals of known

gender, though people rarely use singular *they* consciously to refer to an individual due to "pragmatic or cultural assumptions about the binarity of gender" (11).

In the past decade, a notable rise in research has focused on gender-neutral language and pronouns across various languages with those promoting inclusivity advocating for GNPs as an alternative to binary ways of knowing gender identity. Research has shown how representation in various languages, including English, French, German, and Swedish, can be laboring for people on account of linguistic contexts and grammatical gender systems that rely on binary pronoun models (Hord 2016; Konnelly, Bjorkman, & Airton 2022). Auxland (2020) has examined proposed changes to Portuguese, such as replacing the traditional masculine "o" or feminine "a" with the neutral "e" as a gender-neutral option (68), and Tudisco (2022) has illustrated how neo-pronouns like *iel* provide alternatives to the traditional *il* and *elle* in spoken French for nonbinary identity representation.

In English, more specifically, Moser and Deveraux (2016: 332) suggest pronoun forms like *e/er/ers/erself* to lessen the ambiguity of other singular nonbinary pronouns, like singular *they*, which "feel awkward, violate grammar rules […] and do not resemble standard pronouns sufficiently; [nor] have been accepted by any influential group or […] used consistently". However, responses to Moser and Deveraux's proposal of using *e/er/ers/erself* unanimously agree that a more inclusive pronoun like singular *they* is preferred for a number of reasons, most prominently because it is gaining acceptance in a number of contexts, including institutional ones (Jones & Mullany 2019). Conrod (2018) has also shown that an increasing number of English speakers have embraced the use of singular *they,* with younger speakers more likely to accept its use as it "is an example of a grammatical innovation that has happened in concert with (and perhaps due to) significant social-cultural changes that are underway" (14). In recognition of its rising prominence, the American Dialect Society voted singular *they* as Word of the Year in 2015 and Word of the Decade in 2020.

As a result of rising visibility of transgender individuals and related linguistic challenges, scholars have engaged in language reform efforts (Zimman 2017) to create affirming standards and promote education about nonbinary pronoun use (Crowley 2022, 165). Descriptive grammarians (Green 2019) point out that singular *they* follows a pattern similar to other words that have become commonplace in the English language like *transgender* and *cisgender,* which have arisen in everyday discourse in the past decade. Examining nonbinary GNPs from a descriptive standpoint reveals how prescribing pronoun usage restricts language, undermining the purpose of using language for gender expression. Bodine (1975) argued that while prescriptivist cries against the problematics of singular *they* date back to the 1700s, contemporary discussions largely reflect the backlash against feminist and queer movements' goals of neutralizing language that grammatically privileges patriarchal and cisnormative ways of being in the world. However, few scholars mention style guides and how such guides dictate the rules of writing.

Through an exploration of pronoun use in style guides, specifically singular *they*, we attend to this gap in research, demonstrating how refusals to accept descriptive language patterns as functionally "correct" perpetuate cisnormative standards, delegitimizing marginalized people who utilize such linguistic innovations.

The codification of style can be traced back to 1906 with the first edition the *Manual of Style*, now recognized as *The Chicago Manual of Style* (CMS). In the following fifty years, several widely-used guides were introduced, including *The Associated Press Stylebook* (AP) in 1909, *American Psychological Association Stylebook* (APA) in 1929, *The Modern Language Association Style Manual* (MLA) in 1951, *The Computer Science & Engineering Manual: Scientific Style and Format* (CSE) in 1960, and *American Medical Association Manual of Style* (AMA) in 1962. Numerous other styles and style manuals emerged as professional organizations, academic presses, and industries developed their distinct house style. To keep pace with linguistic variance, shifts in societal norms, legal considerations, and educational curricula, style guides undergo frequent updates, setting standards for writing and document design, codifying written communication, and dictating language practices and ideologies. Updated editions reflect changes in language use, address emerging concerns, adapt to technological advancements, and incorporate feedback from users implicated by the discussions of pronoun usage and integration of singular *they* in influential manuals in the US and UK (Paterson 2020).

This study focuses on the linguistic evolution of English pronouns in four popular style guides in their two most recent editions, examining how different disciplines and writing contexts adapt to shifts in societal norms related to gender expression and language inclusivity. By comparing editions of AMA, AP, APA, and MLA, we document language changes around singular *they* to analyze gender inclusivity in academic and professional spheres. Our research adds to the unexplored area of style guides and inclusive language, contributing to emerging scholarship on language reform and gender-discriminatory language (Grove 2021; Robertson 2024 [in press]).

2. Theoretical Framework

Our research examines language, power, and gender with an eye to exposing ideological work at play. By positioning ourselves within critical sexuality studies, we recognize the pervasive impact of "epistemological violence" in language use (Fahs & McClelland 2016, 393). With our *queer linguistics* approach, we align with objectives of critical discourse studies to delve into these intersectional dynamics, unveiling social injustices and scrutinizing structures of normative authority and regulatory power (Leap 2015; Motschenbacher 2019; Thompson 2024). Our commitment also extends to contribute to the evolving field of *trans linguistics*, focusing on GNPs and inclusive language, responding to Zimman's (2020, 2021) call for

studies that aim to positively influence the lives of transgender individuals, and advocating for social and linguistic justice for all gender communities.

Specifically, our analysis explores ways style guides shape states of being through explicit guidance about pronoun use in writing and acknowledge the intricate connection between gendered language and power, highlighting how these dynamics often contribute to power imbalances that extend to academic and professional spaces. These imbalances perpetuate ideologies that present experiences as universally applicable, through homogenizing all genderqueer experiences (Fahs & McClelland 2016). Our analysis will demonstrate that when style guides recommend avoiding the pronouns *they*/*them*/*theirs*, it results in an act of linguistic violence by excluding and dismissing individuals with gender nonconforming identities who use these pronouns. We also show how moves to embrace GNPs are tied into social change and corresponding linguistic innovation that allows people to rename themselves as identities evolve.

We openly acknowledge our biases toward gender inclusivity and nonbinary language as activists and observers for the genderqueer[1] community and researchers of queer language practices. Our claims are strictly rooted in data and literature collection, yet our analysis is influenced by our identification as queer, white, cisgender women whose pronouns are *she*/*her*/*hers*. We align with the insights of scholars like Galupo (2017) and Jones (2022) who highlight the need to recognize the implicit bias ingrained in a privileged cisgender positionality, and refrain from claiming to represent the entire queer community, which intersects with diverse defining characteristics and complex identities. While our research advocates for gender inclusive language and increased research involving genderqueer communities, we acknowledge that our language may not universally resonate with all individuals or those speaking from personal experience on this research topic. Ultimately, we strive to identify points of concern, offer perspectives on why they are problematic, and provoke thought to facilitate awareness and change.

3. Methods

We survey shifting guidelines around language and gender in style guides to understand how these manuals are, or are not, reflective of the ideologies surrounding singular *they*. Our goal is to examine guides reflective of current academic, teaching, and professional practices across disciplines to explore the current limitations of research regarding singular *they* use. We wondered whether higher learning institutions were privileging certain styles and strategies, so we began at the local level to identify which guides were being recommended to

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[1]   We are using the term genderqueer to include individuals whose identities may fall or resonate outside of normative binary gender labels (McGuire *et al*. 2020).

students at our regional institutions on the US East and West coasts. Next, we expanded to the national and global level, using the top ten schools listed in *Best Colleges Rankings* (2022) and *Best Global Universities in Europe* (2022). Then, we reviewed library and writing center websites from these schools to identify recommended style guides in their respective regions. We found that APA (*American Psychological Association Publication Manual*), MLA (*Modern Language Association Handbook*), and CMS (*The Chicago Manual of Style*) were most consistently recommended across regions. In North America, other guides commonly recommended included Turabian, AMA (*American Medical Association Manual of Style*), AP (*Associated Press Stylebook*), and CSE (*The Computer Science & Engineering Manual*) whereas *Harvard* and *Vancouver* were popular in Europe. While all of these styles were developed in North America, all are utilized in various countries around the world.

To evaluate recent language change and guidance around pronoun usage we selected style guides with editions published no earlier than 2020, and compared them to their previous edition (Table 1). These guides represent a cross section of academic disciplines and professionally oriented guides focused on writing about people and experiences related to gender identity. To cover a variety of contexts, we selected APA for social sciences, MLA for Humanities, AP for journalism in mainstream media, and AMA for medical professional environments.

Table 1
Style Guides Publication Data

Style Guide	Edition	Year	Edition	Year
AMA	10th	2007	11th	2020
AP	55th	2020-2022	56th	2022-2024
APA	6th	2010	7th	2020
MLA	8th	2016	9th	2021

Source: Compiled by Meg Robertson.

We aimed to identify "language pedagogies" (Daniels 2019, 20), examining sections on pronoun usage, inclusive or non-discriminatory language, and references to gender identity, sexuality[2], and genderqueer language. We used an iterative process (Robertson 2024 [in press]), conducting four levels of inquiry to address inclusive language use and language change, with specific attention to inclusive language for creating descriptive trends.

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2   In these style guides, gender and sexuality are often conflated via organizational categories with pronoun discussions in sections related to both sexuality and gender.

First, we conducted an index word search for "pronoun," "personal pro-nouns," and "gender" to drive our discourse analysis within the guide. We looked for direct commentary on pronouns *he/she,* genderqueer language like "nonbi-nary," "transgender," and "singular *they,*" and frequently used phrases like "non-sexist language," "inclusive language," and "biased/bias-free language." The final analysis detailed the guides' overarching perspectives and directives, which largely related to correct usage and avoidance strategies for singular *they* use and identified trends that spoke to prescriptive or descriptive grammar rules through-out the various manuals.

4. Style Guide Changes Over Time

While each guide has changed over time, some have progressed more than others. Most notably, APA (social sciences) demonstrates the most growth from the 6th edition (2010) to the 7th edition (2020) with the addition of a chapter on bias-free language where only general guidelines for "reducing bias in language" (70) were previously offered. The new chapter discusses gender, sex, sexual orientation, and pronouns extensively, including a section on intersectionality and gender and sex in terms of cultural, racial, and ethnic contexts. This insertion drastically marks growth from the 6th edition, which is dominated by binary wording, considering gender and sex as only "referring to women and men" (71) and "one sex or both sexes" (73). Additionally, while the 6th edition mentions transgender individuals, it problematically considers "transsexual" and "cross-dresser" appropriate terms, and while noting that "*transgender* refers to persons whose gender identity or gender expression differs from their sex at birth" (74), it equates gender to sex, identifying transgender individuals as only "female-to-male" (or vice versa) and suggests a switch of pronouns (*she* to *he* or *he* to *she*) as appropriate (74). Comparatively, the 7th edition not only notes that "transsexual is largely outdated," but also addresses other terms that could be "disparaging" to transgender individuals (139). The 7th edition also includes specific discussions of gender identity, transgender and gender nonconforming people, sex assignment, pronoun usage, and "terms that imply binaries" (138-140). Words like *agender, cisgender, gender diversity, gender expansiveness, gender-fluid, genderism, gender-neutral, gender-noncon-forming people, genderqueer, gender variance,* and *nonbinary gender* were added to the index or discussed in various sections. Overall, the 7th edition shows great atten-tion to explaining gender and how to use and understand it in writing.

Similarly, MLA's (Humanities) guide changes were notable as the the 9th edition (2021) now includes a chapter on "Principles of Inclusive Language" where the 8th edition (2016) was strictly stylistic: no mention of gender, people pronouns, inclu-sive language, or sex. While the added chapter is brief, words like *gender-neutral language, generic pronouns, inclusive language, Latinx, man, pronouns, sexual orienta-*

tion, singular they, they/them, and *transgender people* have been added to the index and discussed in the chapter sections. Furthermore, MLA makes note of referencing authors whose names have changed, especially "trans authors" (117), and advises to not use former names when referencing. While still focused on formatting and stylistics, the inclusive language chapter and discussion of how to refer to transgender authors marks a progressive approach to language around gender and sex, addressing the importance of humanizing writing.

AP (Journalism) also takes a stance on humanizing written discourse in journalism and professional writing. While most changes happened between the 54th (2019) and 55th (2020) editions, the 56th edition (2022) progresses in relation to section extensivity and nuance, in particular, transitioning from the umbrella term "gender and sexuality" to "gender, sex, and sexual orientation". This rewording allows for inclusion of words like *deadnaming, gender-dysphoria, gender identity, genderqueer, sexuality, sexual identity, sexual orientation,* and *transphobia,* resulting in an additional page of content and explanation dedicated to exploring singular *they*, aspects of gender and sex, and key components of language use when writing about individuals. Likewise, much of the 56th edition moves away from binary language, including to "avoid references to *both, either* or *opposite sexes or genders*" (119) where previously using "*men and women, boys and girls, males and females*" was acceptable (121). As this guide is geared toward newsroom and media platforms, their adherence to identity demonstrates the continued efforts to approach gender-neutral language as acceptable and preferred.

In terms of inclusion and additional sections, AMA (medical publishing) also made distinguished subsections for gender and sex specific words in its 11th edition (2020) that were not included in the 10th edition (2007). These sections define terms like *cisgender* and *transgender* and discuss *gender-inclusive language, he/she construction,* and *singular they*. However, the guide largely stays the same in perpetuating binary language patterns, including recommending pronoun constructions *s/he, he/she,* and *he or she* (429) and offering language like "sex-specific pronouns" (544) in relation to gender. Despite having the greatest time gap between editions, this guide made the least amount of changes; it demonstrated a slight evolution but lacked detail relating to overarching language patterns.

5. Gender Bias Avoidance

Across all four style guides examined, the latest editions advise writers to employ gender-neutral language and avoid gender bias. Traditionally, avoiding gender bias focused on nouns, coinciding with removing the generic masculine (*man* or *he*) and replacing it with more neutral and recognized suffixes or terms like *firefighter* vs *fireman*, *chair* vs *chairman*, or *police officer* vs *policeman*. However, recently guides have expanded gender-neutral language to address pronoun

usage. Each guide provides multiple methods for achieving neutrality, but also offers other strategies for rewording and adjusting sentences and sentence structure to avoid gender bias. These avoidance strategies are described as: replacing a pronoun or noun for a more concrete noun or article, changing the verb to imperative mood, rewriting or rephrasing the totality of a sentence, dropping the pronoun completely, rewording as plural, or a conditional use of singular *they*. Table 2 demonstrates one avoidance strategy from each guide.

Table 2
Style Guides Gender Bias Avoidance Strategy Examples

Style Guide	Avoidance Strategy	Avoid	Preferred
AMA	Using a neutral noun equivalent	The physician and his (her, their) office staff can do much to alleviate a patient's nervousness (545).	The physician and the office staff can do a lot to alleviate a patient's nervousness (545).
AP	Eliminating the pronoun	Hendricks said Hendricks is thrilled about the new job or Hendricks said they are thrilled about the new job (239).	Hendricks said the new job is a thrill (239).
APA	Replacing the pronoun with an article	A researcher must apply for his grant by September 1 (121).	A researcher must apply for the grant by September 1 (121).
MLA	Rephrasing for plural	When a student studies abroad, his or her communication skills in the target language are likely to improve dramatically (91).	When students study abroad, their communication skills in the target language are likely to improve dramatically (91).

Source: Compiled by Meg Robertson.

AMA and APA provide five different avoidance strategies for navigating gender bias (AMA 2020, 544; APA 2020, 121), and AP and MLA each offer four (AP 2022, 239; MLA 2021, 91). However, despite all guides recommending avoiding gender bias, each simultaneously illustrates how to avoid singular *they* while discussing its acceptance. Only APA considers singular *they* as a strategy to employ regularly and provides examples of how to use it (121). AP and MLA also provide examples of how to use singular *they*, but these guidelines are listed with limitations as to when the construction is appropriate.

These regulations demonstrate ideologies about language change related to gender, which now reflect an emphasis on gender avoidance. Avoiding gender-specific language, such as AP determining pronoun elimination as a best practice, and the avoidance of addressing gendered language, such as AMA's recommendation to use a neutral noun equivalent instead of including a pronoun, does

not address the problem of language perpetuating cisnormative standards, and therefore, encourages hegemonic practices.

6. Singular *They* Guidelines

In looking at the changes across guides, the question arose: how is singular *they* being recognized or allowed in stylization manuals? As nonsexist language use has previously been analyzed, it was important to explore the gap around singular *they* use, particularly when considering formal vs informal writing, and identify if and how singular *they* was discussed in guides. To determine this specificity, we considered three types of singular *they* usage from Bjorkman (2017):

1. Specific *they*, a pronoun for individuals with a known binary gender (*Jason's girlfriend is on their way*).
2. Generic *they*, a pronoun for individuals of unknown gender (*The anonymous contributor shared their feedback*).
3. [Direct[3]] *they*, a pronoun for individuals of known, nonbinary gender (*My close friend, Joyner, went to their first concert yesterday*).

These three distinctions are similarly defined by Saguy and Williams (2022, 5) as:

1. a nonbinary personal pronoun
2. a universal gender-neutral pronoun
3. an indefinite pronoun when a person's self-identified gender is unknown

Between 2015 and 2022, each of the guides affirmed the use of singular *they*, with some introducing changes via their online platform before integration into print version. These announcements, as illustrated in Figure 1, cover the construction's role in framing inclusive language or creating rules for clarity, ranging from stylistic concerns to ontological ones.

AMA allows for specific *they* usage, particularly when "patient identifiability is a concern (e.g., removal of gender-specific pronouns)" (430). However, AMA sees singular *they* as a last resort for clarity and stylistic preference, only permitting *they* "as a singular pronoun when rewriting the sentence as plural would be awkward or unclear" (430), or "when rewriting [in general] would be awkward or unclear" (544). The emphasis on technical and scientific specificity is the guide's predominant concern for users.

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[3]   Bjorkman (2017) defines this third type of singular they, but we put forth the label "direct they" to distinguish it more clearly.

Figure 1

Timeline of gender inclusive language change in style guides between 2015-2022

Gender Inclusive Language Change in Style Guides

2015   **APA online** says it's appropriate to use singular they depending on context.

2016   **MLA** online introduces guidelines supporting the use of "singular they" as a gender-neutral pronoun.

2017   **AP** states that They/them/their is acceptable in limited cases as a singular and-or gender-neutral pronoun, when alternative wording is overly awkward or clumsy.

2018   **MLA Online** – Introduces guidelines for writing about trans authors who have transitioned to list their works under the name they currently use, regardless of the name that appears in the source cited.

2020   **APA** fully endorses singular they stating that "writers should always use the singular they to refer to a person who uses they as their pronoun." **AMA** endorses they for when "rewriting the sentence as a plural would be awkward or unclear." **MLA Online Newsletter** advises writers to always follow the personal pronouns of individuals they write about and use singular they is a way to make language more inclusive and avoid making assumptions about gender.

2021   **MLA** advises not to use former names of author's whose names have changed, such as with "trans authors".

2022   **AP** moves away from binary language, including noting to "avoid references to both, either or opposite sexes or genders" and adds content about singular they usage.

Source: Created by Riki Thompson.

Similarly, AP allows for specific *they* when a "source's gender must be shielded" (239), and direct and generic *they* as preferable to *he/she* or *he or she* with the caveat that "clarity is paramount" (239). AP acknowledges that singular *they* "may be confusing to some readers and amount to a roadblock" to further reading, but also notes that "efforts to write without pronouns to avoid confusion may make people feel censored or invisible" (238-239). Thus, as AP style is used for mainstream journalism, it reflects a goal of informing the widest public audiences through grammatical accessibility.

Alternatively, APA embraces singular *they*. They affirm all uses of singular *they* are allowed and are "part of APA Style", "inclusive of all people [and] helps writers avoid making assumptions about gender" (121). From an ontological and epistemological perspective, APA approves singular *they* as a successful way for writers to avoid making assumptions about gender.

Likewise, MLA allows for all uses of singular *they*, most notably, direct *they*, acknowledging that "writers who wish to use a non-gender-specific pronoun to refer to themselves may prefer *they* or *their* […] [and] should follow the personal pronoun of individuals they write about, if individuals' pronouns are known" (91-92). They also assert that "Writers wishing to use inclusive pronouns sometimes use both feminine and masculine pronouns, use only feminine pronouns, or alternate between feminine and masculine pronouns" (91). MLA also adds that singular *they* is "considered a less desirable option" even if it has emerged as "a tool for making language more inclusive" (92), positioning singular *they* as an instrumental writing device rather than an implement for gender inclusivity.

7. Comparative Analysis Across Guides

While each of these statements about singular *they* is an improvement from each previous edition, which either omit mention of the epicene pronoun or provide incomplete explanations, they still harbor problematic assumptions. For AMA, lack of acknowledgement around singular *they* can be detrimental for patients discussed in medical contexts, particularly as the guide does not mention direct *they* for individuals of known nonbinary gender or generic *they* when an individual's gender identity is unknown. This lack of information reinforces the pattern of assuming individuals' identities and beliefs that gender is binary. Patient identifiability, bodily maladies, and biological elements influence treatment for illnesses and often confront physical and cultural perceptions of sex and gender, underscoring the importance for biological sex and gender to be navigated and explored within the content and parameters of the guide. As AMA claims to be "'the bible of medical publishing'" (v), it should differentiate gender and sex in practice as well as discussion, but as seen in examples such as "sex-specific pronouns" (544) there is a lack of language clarity which affects medical accuracy when discussing patients.

Similarly, AP is used for public and professional writing and designating stipulations like using singular *they* only "as much as possible" (238), even if a subject's pronouns are *they/them/theirs*, offers contradictive guidelines for respecting and assuming a person's identity. As the guide serves writers who deal with current events, pop culture, and is attuned to reader consumption, advocating for language most commonly understood by broad and diverse audiences is useful but can also be a disservice to the media's informative objectives. Moreover, while

AP provides ample explanations on biological sex vs gender, the lack of contextual language and inconsistent directives related to gender inclusive singular pronouns undercuts the definitions and inclusion of concepts that affect the lives of gender-queer individuals.

Conversely, while APA is the most progressive style guide in endorsing singular *they*, their approach may be too generalizing, particularly in fields concerning mental health and clinical and research settings. As a guide for social sciences and reflective of the American Psychological Association, an organization that acknowledges "people [should be] described using language that affirms their worth and dignity" (2024), the designation that "singular *they* is inclusive of all people" (121) is perhaps too broad and blanketing of individuals' experiences. This could result in misrepresentation for those who do not want to be referred to with singular *they* as a pronoun. As such, despite providing detailed guidelines that dictate the precise usage of singular *they* and offering extensive sections on gender and sex, including discussion of LGBTQIA+ related content and centering subjects/participants as individuals, APA's approach might be overly prescriptive and erase important nuances.

Alternatively, MLA allows for the use of singular *they*, but the discussion around the construction is minimal. MLA, an organization that serves the Humanities to understand the human condition through language, places focus on aesthetics of that expression rather than the effects of it. Although the guide notes common missteps when using biased language and encourages terms that respect subjects' identities, its attention to precise language and clear grammatical structures overrides common questions prioritized by the field about the human experience. Without adequate explanations and minimal coverage of singular *they*, users may perceive the usage as irrelevant or fail to grasp the significance of incorporating the pronoun into published work.

Collectively, these guides are moving toward singular *they* inclusion, yet discussions on its usage and reasoning remain underdeveloped and inconsistent. Thus, it's important to note how direct, specific, and generic *they* translate to others' ideas and definitions as the descriptions challenge binaries in language in different ways from acknowledging that gender is beyond a binary construct, assumptions about gender in social, political, and cultural contexts, and encouraging writer accountability and intentionality with syntactic and diction choices in respect to people.

8. Conclusion

Our goals have been to examine shifting guidelines around gender and language use to demonstrate how style guides are participating in language change by responding to bottom-up innovations of speakers and as top-down prescribers.

This research contributes to descriptivist projects around the impacts of institutional language change relating to GNPs and activist goals of countering marginalization and misrepresentation of genderqueer individuals. Embracing language change in regard to singular *they* and queer linguistic forms and finding common ground across contexts is vital to efforts to improve inclusivity and accessibility.

This research highlights the growing acceptance of unconventional constructions, revealing the evolving landscape of gender and sexuality in grammar and formal writing styles and the queering of language to varying degrees. Major changes have been made to all updated editions of AMA, AP, APA, and MLA style guides with singular *they* now being accepted in all these manuals. However, there is much ambiguity about how these guides approach gender-neutral language and singular *they*. While the guides now include a statement about singular *they* and describe how to avoid gender bias, some still advocate for avoidant rather than inclusive strategies. Inconsistent recommendations and patterns within guides reflect dominant binary frameworks that contribute to struggles to enact effective inclusionary language to describe people. However, despite this normative stance, our analysis demonstrates that gender-neutral language is increasingly addressed in style guides, which has the potential to further legitimize these forms.

As language evolves to promote inclusivity and affirm visibility of marginalized individuals, style guides should also adapt. The power endowed on manuals of style as authorities on language use places them directly in the center of political debates on language policy. These guides that prescribe rules for writing are not neutral, but rather, reflect the language ideologies of those who create (and revise) them.

In many ways, style guides take a normative stance as they must account for stylistic constraints, language use in the fields they cover, possible opposing views of the editorial staff, and as self-reported and perceived authorities on language use across academic and professional domains. As linguistic activists, we argue that editors of style guides have a responsibility to be aware of linguistic discrimination embedded in their texts. While editors are bound by the aims of their disciplines and writing contexts, we hope to see editors move away from pervasive cisnormative practices and gender prescriptiveness to support linguistic innovations that improve inclusivity. Recognizing their impact on written discourse, editors of guides should be working to offer descriptive discursive grammatical constructions to suit all individuals. Incorporating singular *they* into style guides as an acceptable gender-neutral option is a step forward, yet there is room for style guides to further deconstruct social injustices and challenge normative, silencing regulatory powers.

We advocate for continuing research and education that centers the experiences of people most affected by language change, or lack of change. Much more can be done in terms of affirming and supporting linguistic innovation through style guides, such as continuing explorations of prescriptivism, linguistically

including genderqueer experiences in various spheres, and extending education and development of tools for new literacies. Future research is needed to examine other popular style guides to document gender-inclusive language change, user experience research, and further enhancement of our understanding of language, gender, and power intersectionality.

Authors' contributions:

MR: Conceptualization; formal analysis; research; methodology; validation; writing of original draft; review & editing.

RT: Conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; software; validation; writing of original draft; review & editing.

Conflict of interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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How to cite this article

[Chicago Style]
Robertson, Meg, & Riki Thompson. 2024. "Gender, Sexuality, and Shifting Styles: Knowledge production and codifying language use in style guides." *ex æquo* 49: 69-86. DOI: https://doi.org/10.22355/exaequo.2024.49.06

[APA Style – adapted]
Robertson, Meg, & Thompson, Riki (2024). Gender, sexuality, and shifting styles: Knowledge production and codifying language use in style guides. *ex æquo,* 49, 69-86. DOI: https://doi.org/10.22355/exaequo.2024.49.06