

Laura Louise Paterson

British Pronoun Use, Prescription and Processing.

NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.h/bk 192 pp.

ISBN 978-1-137-33272-1

Price \$55.

Laura Louise Paterson's book entitled as *British Pronoun Use, Prescription and Processing* gives a very compelling, lucid and in-depth analysis of the term *epicene pronoun*, which is defined as a pronoun which does not convey gender or sex information and is coindexed with a singular noun phrase referring to an animate being. The book targets for linguistic and non-linguistic readership and also designed for students and it aims at chronologically giving a survey of epicene pronouns and proposes the Homonymy Theory, an analysis of different varieties of English.

The book has 5 well-designed chapters starting with a focus on theoretical, experimental and empirical data, concerned with language-internal (syntactic) and language-external (social) factors affecting an epicene choice. The development of the epicene pronouns, *he* and *they*, is showcased in a historical context, documenting that generic *he* appears to have a default masculine value in Chapter 1 "Exploring Epicene Pronouns in History".

Chapter 2 "Epicenes in the Twenty-First Century" is the first of two corpus- based investigation of current epicene usage. Almost 10.000 occurrences of *he* and *they* are analysed in two subcorpora of BE06 (based on Lancaster University) and this remarkable study highlights that the use of *they* is the overwhelming choice of epicene pronoun in British English. However, generic *he* is quite frequent in the modern data despite the issues of gender neutrality and proponents of *she*.

Chapter 3 “Epicenes and Social Movement” takes a very close look at the language-external (social) factors affecting the personal pronoun paradigm and revolves around two key elements of the epicene debate: the promotion of generic *he* in the eighteenth century and the rise of second wave feminism which rejects gender exclusive terms. This structured chronologically arranged chapter moves from traditional grammatical prescriptivism during the Middle Ages (where the dominance of male generics is understandable as women were all but excluded from the educated audience) to sexist language reforms which argue that “languages which mark gender assiduously in their grammars and treat the masculine as the unmarked gender will lead their speakers to perceive the world in gender-polarised and androcentric ways (91). The result of these reforms is the singular use of *they*, which correlates with the fact that 60 per cent of the teachers (in Pauwels and Winter’s study in 1998) would correct any students’ use of generic *he* in the classroom despite the promotion and overemphasis in the grammar books.

Chapter 4 “Prescriptions, Standards and Epicenes” delves into research on epicene prescriptions in grammar books up to date and address the fact that there is very little data on epicene prescriptions after the 1980s with little hypothesis that grammars published at the start of the twenty-first century will continue the trend stated in Chapter 3. Laura Louise Paterson talks about how she created the Grammar Corpus in detail and meticulously by enthusing that she went through a long ordeal to select 20 bestselling grammar books out of 42 books, 31 of which have been published post-2000. It is clear that not only has there been a movement away from endorsing generic *he*, there has also been an increase in the consideration of singular *they* which is six times more likely to coindex with an indefinite pronoun (such as *somebody*, *anybody*...) than *he*.

The last chapter “Accounting for Epicene Choice” is concerned with the results from the corpus analyses which are contextualized within a wider literature. Paterson claims that the current epicene choice in written British English is singular *they*, which is treated more

favourably in grammar books. The final section of Chapter 5 is devoted to Whitley's theory (1978), known as the Homonymy Theory, which is based on the principle that there are two morphologically identical but syntactically different forms of *they* in the lexicon: one singular and the other plural, which are accessed depending on the syntactic form of the antecedent.

For all the readers whether they have linguistic or non-linguistic background, Paterson's work offers insights into the pronouns *he* and *they* and constitutes an indispensable tool in understanding not only the chronological history of epicene pronouns but also their current status derived from corpus studies. Paterson renders the study a stimulating and welcome contribution to the rising critical dialogue in epicene pronoun scholarship. However, these five chapters do not conform to a conventional train of thoughts of an average reader who expects a linear presentation of historical documentation of epicene pronouns. It requires a very alert and circumspect mind to assemble the bits of information and the results of the corpus studies highlighted in the book and to visualize the future debate of the use of epicene pronouns of which even the author herself is not sure.

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