

# *He or She or They:* Generic pronoun use among Finnish and Swedish L2 speakers of English

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## **Abstract**

The use of pronouns by native Finnish and Swedish L2 speakers of English was tested in order to discover a possible cross-linguistic transfer. The participants were tasked to refer to gender-ambiguous antecedents in both oral and written form as well as report their attitudes towards issues regarding gendered language and gender in society. The hypotheses were that either the gender-neutrality of Finnish would cause the Finnish participants to use more neutral pronouns or that the Swedish speakers would be more neutral because they are more familiar with the issue of gendered pronouns than the Finns. No statistically significant difference was found between the groups regarding the neutrality of pronouns, but there were some statistically significant differences between the occurrences of gender neutral pronouns ( $p=.0001$ ). There was also a statistically significant difference in the attitudes ( $p=.0016$ ); the Swedes were more in favor of gender-inclusive language and aware of gender discrimination in society. The results of the study bear implications to the importance of early gender inclusive language education.

## **Keywords**

Cross-linguistic transfer, epicene pronouns, non-native speakers, language attitudes.

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# 1. Introduction

Both pronouns and the effect of transfer from L1 to L2 are well-researched areas within linguistics. Particular focus has been paid to third-person pronouns and their use, specifically with the goal of trying to account for the apparent gender-bias the English third-person singular pronouns *she* and *he* create (e.g. Gastill, 1990). Despite the extensive research on pronouns with various gender-focused approaches, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the pronoun use of L2 English speakers. Even though studies (e.g. Baranowski, 2002; al-Shaer, 2014) have concluded that the use of *singular they* is currently the most common way to refer to generic or unknown antecedents by English native speakers (NS), there is considerably less research on whether non-native speakers (NNS) conform to these conventions as well.

Because language is a multifaceted phenomenon, there are several factors that influence the way we speak. With NNSs of a language, the process could be seen as even more intricate. On the one hand, there is the mental framework of the L1 that could either hinder the learning of the L2 and cause errors (negative transfer) or facilitate and make the acquisition of the L2 easier. On the other hand, there are the surrounding culture(s), norms and personal preferences and attitudes that impact language use as well. Several studies have established a link between speakers' attitudes towards women and gender equality and their language use (e.g. Parks & Robertson, 2004). Even though there is some debate about it, the consensus is that, the more positive attitudes towards women and gender equality the speaker claims to have, the more gender inclusive the language they are using tends to be (Parks & Robertson, 2004).

For studies of possible transfer effects, Sweden and Finland offer a prolific site. Both countries share a similar cultural context; however, since Swedish and Finnish are not related languages it is possible to investigate whether there are differences between the L2 English Swedes and Finns produce. These languages are especially relevant for investigating pronouns, since English and Swedish have two gendered third-person singular pronouns whereas Finnish has only one, which is gender-neutral. Although *hen* has been introduced into Swedish as a neutral alternative in recent years, it is not fully similar to the Finnish epicene *hän* because it is still somewhat marked and used in parallel with the gendered forms.

In order to establish L1 influence, at least two groups with different L1s should be compared. A group with the same L1 should perform similarly and there should be contrast with the other group (Jarvis, 2000). Furthermore, as many extra-linguistic features as possible should be controlled for, as they affect the way we speak. Among these are, for example, age, gender and educational background. Investigating the English L2 speakers' use of pronouns can give new insights into L2 teaching and learning by paying more attention to learners' attitudes towards larger issues such as gender inclusivity.

A considerable part of transfer studies focuses on negative transfer and error analysis (Ringbom, 1992). Much less attention has been paid to word choices and features that cannot be labeled as erroneous, but which are still considered to be outside the norm, such as the use of singular *they*. There have only been a limited number of studies focusing on L2 speakers' use of pronouns and the factors influencing it. For NS, their attitudes towards gender-related issues and the gender of the speaker are observed to correlate with the use of pronouns; women and those more in favor of gender equality tend to use more gender-inclusive and fewer generic masculine pronouns (e.g. Meyers, 1990; Jacobson & Insko, 1985). The aim of this research is therefore to shed more light on this area and see whether there is any effect of transfer or if speakers' attitudes could explain the pronoun choices as it does with native speakers.

There are two hypotheses for this study. The first one states that the Finnish speakers will use fewer gendered pronouns in English and have more favorable attitudes towards gender-neutral language than the Swedish speakers, because their L1 is less gendered. Thus, they would prefer the gender-neutral alternatives in English. Favorable attitudes are based on a hypothesis by Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gygax (2012), who claim that the fewer structural changes language reform involves and the less effort it requires, the more positive the attitudes towards it are. As Finnish already is quite gender-neutral, great changes are not required for even further neutrality. The second alternative is that the Swedish speakers are more neutral, because they are more familiar with the issue of gendered-pronouns as the same issue exists in their L1. This hypothesis is based on the *Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis* by Lado (1957), according to which the features of L2 that are similar to L1 are easier to grasp than the features that are different from the L1.

It is also possible that there are no considerable differences between the groups. The research questions that will be addressed in this paper are: (1) Does a speaker's L1 impact their choice of third-person singular pronouns in L2 English? (2) Are there differences in attitudes towards issues regarding gendered language between speakers of Finnish and Swedish?

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Transfer

Cross-linguistic transfer is not easy to define or to identify. L1 can both *constrain* and *facilitate* L2 production (e.g. Jarvis, 2000) and it can be *overt* or *covert* (Ringbom, 1992). In other words, there is not one single way in which an L1 caused behavior manifests itself in L2 language use. Sometimes the effect can be easy to identify, for example when L1 and the target language share cognates and thus L1 facilitates the comprehension of the second language. However, on other occasions (and especially with errors) the root of the error cannot always be proven to be caused by the L1. For example, Russian speakers of English are prone to omit the present tense copula (e.g. *am*), because it does not exist in Russian, but native English speaking children are also known to make the same error when acquiring the language (Odlin, 1989). In this essay, transfer is defined according to a widely accepted definition by Odlin: "Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (1989, p. 27).

One well-established theory for identifying transfer effects is *contrastive analysis hypothesis* (CAH), introduced by Robert Lado in 1957. CAH is based on the idea that the speaker's L1 influences the learning process of second languages. Lado phrases the core idea as follows:

The student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his [sic] native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult. (1957, p.2)

CAH is not faultless, and the view has been contested (e.g. Odlin, 1989), but it is also one of the most established theories within transfer studies and thus it is used as one of the frameworks of this essay. There is, however, one issue in CAH that is worth mentioning; it does not take individual variation into account (Odlin, 1989). As the use of pronouns varies between the speakers based on various factors, CAH might fail to explain L2 English speakers' pronoun preferences. However, its influence on transfer studies should not be overlooked and thus it is a base of one of the hypotheses in this study.

As transfer effects are difficult to define, it is equally difficult to design a valid research method for investigating them. Varying methods and no consistency in definitions can lead to a significant variety of results (Jarvis, 2000). Thus, Jarvis suggests a rigorous framework, in which three conditions should be fulfilled in order for a transfer effect to be considered to be present. These conditions are 1) intra-L1-group homogeneity, 2) inter-L1-group heterogeneity and 3) congruence between performers L1 and IR (interlanguage, i.e. the L2 language learners produce). These differences should be statistically significant, a point which is also brought up by Odlin (1989). In order to convincingly argue for the presence or absence of transfer all of these effects should be examined and “at least two potential effects of L1 are needed to verify this phenomenon” (Jarvis, 2000, p.259). Thus, even though not all of the criteria are fulfilled a recognizable cross-linguistic influence might be present. That is the case especially with the first condition. According to Jarvis, “intra-L1-group homogeneity may ... be low in areas of language use that are more susceptible to individual variation” (2001, p. 256). This is highly relevant for this study, since pronoun choices are affected by extra-linguistic factors, as explained above.

## **2.2 Attitudes and language**

The idea that language affects the way the world is perceived is called *the Sapir-Whorf* or *Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis*. It comes in two versions, “strong” and “weak”, or “extreme” and “moderate”, as suggested by Bing (1992). The extreme version, which means that language would determine and restrict the way the external world is perceived, has been largely disregarded (Hussein, 2012). On the other hand, the “moderate” weak version, which maintains that language affects thought, has some supporting evidence on its side. According to this theorem, language and society are



closely linked, in a way that “we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation” (Sapir in *The status of linguistics as a science*, as cited in Hussein, 2012, p. 643). In other words, language shapes our ideas of the world because our society reflects the language it is using and thus enforces a certain interpretation. This is especially true with gendered language expressions, where sexist use of them can marginalize and exclude certain groups, consciously or unconsciously. For example, the generic use of *fireman* can imply that women could not work in that profession or the use of *man and wife*, that assigns a different role (only) to a woman because of her marital status. Even though it is claimed that using the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to promote gender equality is “oversimplification” (Bing, 1992), these pieces of evidence support the fact that language shapes the way we perceive certain things and that that does have real-life consequences.

A prominent connection between language and thought can be witnessed in relation to generic expressions and specifically to pronouns. After the 18<sup>th</sup> century the default third-person pronoun to be used when referring to unknown and generic antecedents was *he* (Baranowski, 2002). It is a so-called *masculine generic*, which allegedly could be both used as a reference to men specifically and to everyone in general. Despite being used in a generic manner, masculine words are often interpreted as mostly referring to men and thus they are *false generics* (Gastill, 1990). These generics create a male bias and thus are actively excluding and othering women (and everyone else who does not identify as a man) and thus making them “marginal member[s] of PERSON category” (Bing, 1992, para. 16). Gastill studied the interpretations of 3rd person pronouns and singular *they* seems to be the only alternative that is as neutral as possible. Out of the alternatives (*he*, *he/she*, *they*) *he* seemed to be the most biased, whereas women interpreted *he/she* and *they* in a similar, neutral manner. Interestingly, even *he/she* evoked a disproportionate number of male referents by male participants, thus not making it an equal alternative to *they*.

Another link between language and thought is the relation between the speaker’s attitudes and the language they are using. This link is well established, especially with regards to gendered language; the main notion is that negative attitudes towards women correlate with the use of sexist expressions (Parks & Robertson, 2004; Sarasin, Gabriel,

& Gyga, 2012). When analyzing gendered language use, the focus is usually on the difference between men and women. Men are found to use more gendered expressions, but apart from the gender of the speaker, the attitudes towards women are found to mediate the difference (Parks & Robertson, 2004). As this is the case with NS of English, there is no reason to believe that the phenomenon would not be, to some extent, present with (proficient) NNS as well.

### **2.3. Current use of personal pronouns**

Currently, in both British and American English, the use of gendered personal pronouns is in decline and despite the moderate use of *he/she* construction and gendered forms, singular *they* is the preferred form today (Baranowski, 2002; LaScotte, 2016). With regards to the pronouns use of NNS, the issue is more complicated. There has not been any comprehensive study about the current state in general, for obvious reasons. As English is widely used as a lingua franca all over the world, a generalizing study would be challenging to conduct. On the other hand, comparative studies are completely possible. Comparisons can be made contrastively between non-native speakers of English with different L1 or between native and non-native speakers. The latter type was conducted by al-Shaer (2014), who concluded that generic masculine (*he*) was still the most common one as a reference to unknown antecedents by NNS. However, his study focused on pronouns as cohesive devices and some of the sentences analyzed had forms that would have led to concordance errors. Thus, this may have hindered the use of singular *they*, because the L2 participants tried to minimize the ungrammatical structures. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that L2 speakers would always prefer the conventional structure. On the other hand, as also pointed out by al-Shaer, conventions are important and students can easily get confused if there are no clear instructions for language use. With that regard, it is no surprise that L2 speakers would prefer well-established forms to “newer” conventions and use either generic *he* or *he/she* despite the latter sounding clunky to native speakers.

The current conventions of teaching pronouns in Sweden and Finland are not clear, but there are some indications for the preference for singular *they*, at least in Finland. A Finnish upper secondary school teacher who was contacted for this paper reported that the students are advised to avoid the *he/she* construction and to use *they* in different forms instead. According to her, this is also instructed at least in one upper secondary

school English textbook (*On Track*, published by SanomaPro). Another Finnish teacher, though currently teaching classes 7 to 9, mentioned that neutral use of pronouns is not explicitly taught at that level and that if the question arises she teaches it depending on the context and varying structures instead of only preferring one form or the other.

### **3. Current study**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The participants of this study are monolingual native Swedish and Finnish speakers ( $n=34$ ; Swe=17 [F=10, M=7], Fin=17 [F=9, M=8]), henceforth referred to as *the Swedes* and *the Finns*. The Swedes are all from Stockholm and the Finns from Karelia, a South-East region of Finland. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 33 and their proficiency level can be considered to be advanced since all of them have studied English for at least 10 years (each of them had completed at least secondary education and a majority of them had studied or studies on a tertiary level).

In Finland, Swedish is an obligatory subject on all levels, starting from the 7th grade. This means that all of the Finnish participants have studied Swedish. However, Karelia is a monolingual region, where exposure to Swedish is practically non-existent, and all of the participants reported their knowledge of Swedish being minimal with practically no competence to speak or write it. Thus, the Swedish language learning background is not considered to influence the results.

#### **3.2 Method**

Three different types of data were gathered from the participants. First, they were interviewed and after the interview they completed a questionnaire consisting of two sections. In the first one they were asked to modify sentences accordingly (replace a referent with a pronoun) and in the second one they reported their attitudes towards gender-neutral language and issues. Afterwards a few of the participants were asked follow-up questions with regards to their answers on the first section of the questionnaire. The data were gathered in October and November 2019 in Lappeenranta and Vantaa in Finland, and in Stockholm in Sweden. This triangulation of data was

chosen to make sure that the data were as comprehensive as possible. The tasks are described below.

### 3.3 Interview

Each participant was independently interviewed in order to investigate their use of pronouns in spoken communication. The interviews were semi-structured and the participants were not aware that their use of pronouns was analyzed. Each participant was tasked to describe “the ideal student” and *what should that person do*, in order to elicit third-person pronouns that refer to a generic antecedent. This method was used by LaScotte (2016), originally in a written form. It was chosen and adapted for interviews for this paper, because the question is simple enough to answer without requiring advanced vocabulary or grammatical structures and because the formulation prompts the speaker to use third-person pronouns in reference to *the ideal student*. In some cases the interviewer needed to prompt the participant more by asking related follow-up questions. These questions were asked without the interviewer referring to *the ideal student* with any pronouns in order to avoid influencing the interviewee. Each interview took approximately one minute.

### 3.4 Questionnaire

After the interview the participants completed a questionnaire with two sections. The first section consisted of 18 sentences. The participants were tasked to modify the underlined part of each sentence accordingly (e.g. Julia had a great idea; She had a great idea. A child ate chocolate ice cream; \_\_\_\_\_ ate chocolate ice cream.). Eight of these questions were control questions where the underlined word was clearly masculine, feminine or plural in order to make sure that the participants knew how to use pronouns in unambiguous situations. Furthermore, all of the sentences were in past or future tense in order to avoid possible concordance errors that could affect the participants’ word choices. The second section was a set of seven statements asking about attitudes towards gender inclusivity, both in general and in language use, measured with a five-point Likert scale. The questions were both modified based on the Modern Sexism Scale (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995) and picked from the Inventory of Attitudes Towards Sexist/nonsexist Language (Parks & Robertson, 2000). An example statement would be “The elimination of sexist language is an important goal.” The questionnaire was conducted fully in English. The whole questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

### 3.5 Coding

The pronouns are illustrated both as absolute numbers and as percentages. Only *he* and *she* are regarded as gendered forms; all other pronouns (including the combination *he/she*) are considered to be gender-neutral. This method was chosen for simplicity's sake and because the scope of the essay. However, it is worth mentioning that gender-neutral language does not always accurately reflect the speaker's attitudes towards gender equality. As brought up by Jacobson and Insko (1985), sometimes the use of *she* instead of *he/she* expresses more feminist views. However, as this was primarily a quantitative study, this was not further explored.

The statistical significance of the results was calculated with appropriate t-tests with the significance level of 0.05; chi-square was used with frequencies of the pronouns and two tailed t-test for unmatched pairs for the attitude test. The attitude test scores that were used for the t-test can be found in the Appendix B. For the chi-square test, the observed values were the number of occurrences of respective pronouns, and the expected values were the occurrences summed and divided by 2. For example, for *someone*, the observed values were 1 (the Finns) and 12 (the Swedes) and the expected value was an equal distribution between the groups, i.e. 6.5.

The scale of the attitude test was from 1 ("Strongly agree") to 5 (Strongly disagree); neutral "no opinion" was worth 3 points. In questions 3 and 7 the scores were reversed. As there were 7 questions, the potential range of the scores was from 7 to 35. The median indicating neutral opinion was 21; above that, the participants were considered to have negative attitudes towards gender-neutrality and equality and below that the attitudes were considered to be positive. The coding of the attitude test was conducted in accordance to the Inventory of Attitudes Towards Sexist/nonsexist Language (Parks & Robertson, 2000), with the exception that that a low score indicates positive attitudes.

### 3.6 Limitations

One limitation of this study was its scope; the sample size was quite small for a quantitative study. Additionally, the participants had somewhat varying backgrounds as the Swedish participants were from a bigger city, whereas the Finnish ones were from a

smaller town. Also, despite the similarities, Finland and Sweden have their own cultures and education systems. This makes it difficult to completely exclude the influence of education and culture when analyzing the results. Therefore, in order to minimize the influence of cultural and educational differences, a transfer study should ideally be conducted in a place where two or more language groups share one culture even more closely, as in Finland where there are no major cultural differences between the Finnish and Swedish speaking Finns (Ringbom, 1992).

As LaScotte (2016) also pointed out, despite the fact that *he/she* does not enforce masculine bias, it is still a binary way of expressing gender i.e. it excludes people who do not identify as either male or female. This perspective is noteworthy, even though it is not explored in this study. The approach and comparisons between male and female participants are conducted as they are, because all of the participants identified themselves as one or the other. There should still be awareness of the other alternatives and they should be taken into account when it is relevant to analyze or discuss gender as non-binary.

## 4. Results

A statistically significant difference between the Finns and the Swedes was found both between the occurrences of certain epicene pronouns and of the averages of the attitude scale. However, there was no significant difference between gender-neutral and gendered language as both groups preferred gender-neutral pronouns (68.9% of all pronouns used were gender-neutral). Thus, no significant gender-bias was detected. Although the use of pronouns was similar with regards to gender-neutrality, the differences lie in the use of certain pronouns; the majority of the Finns preferred the *he/she* construction, whereas there was more variety within the Swedes' replies. The averages of the attitude scales also varied; the Finns had higher points, thus indicating less favorable attitudes towards gender-neutral language and gender issues. Finally, there was no difference found between male and female participants, neither with attitudes nor the use of pronouns. Detailed descriptions of the results of written and oral

pronouns, the attitude scale and gender differences are found below, and the raw data can be seen in Appendix B.

#### 4.1 Written pronouns

When looking at the written pronouns of the two groups combined, the most common pronoun used was the combination of *he/she*. It covered 42.1% of the occurrences, i.e. it was used almost half of the time. The second most common pronoun was *they* (20.6%). Contrary to expectations *he* was not used considerably more often than *she* was (17.4% and 13.8%, respectively). These four alternatives covered the most of the replies, but few participants occasionally used *someone* (3.8%), *it* (2.1%) or *one* (0.3%). The distribution is illustrated in figure 1.

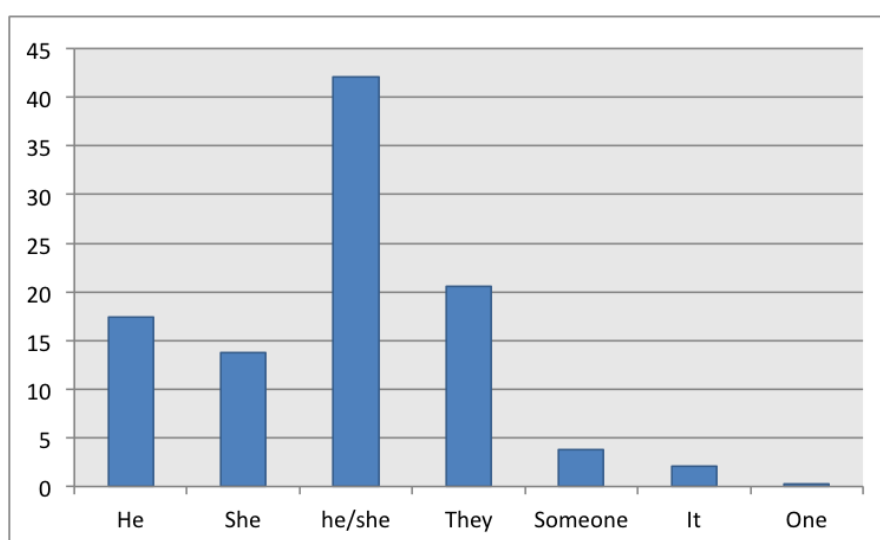
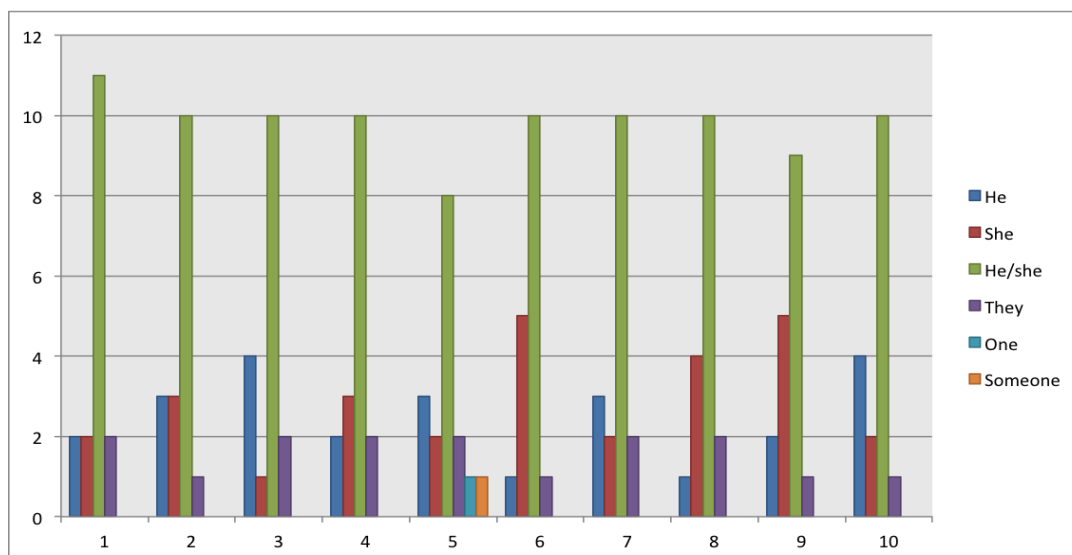


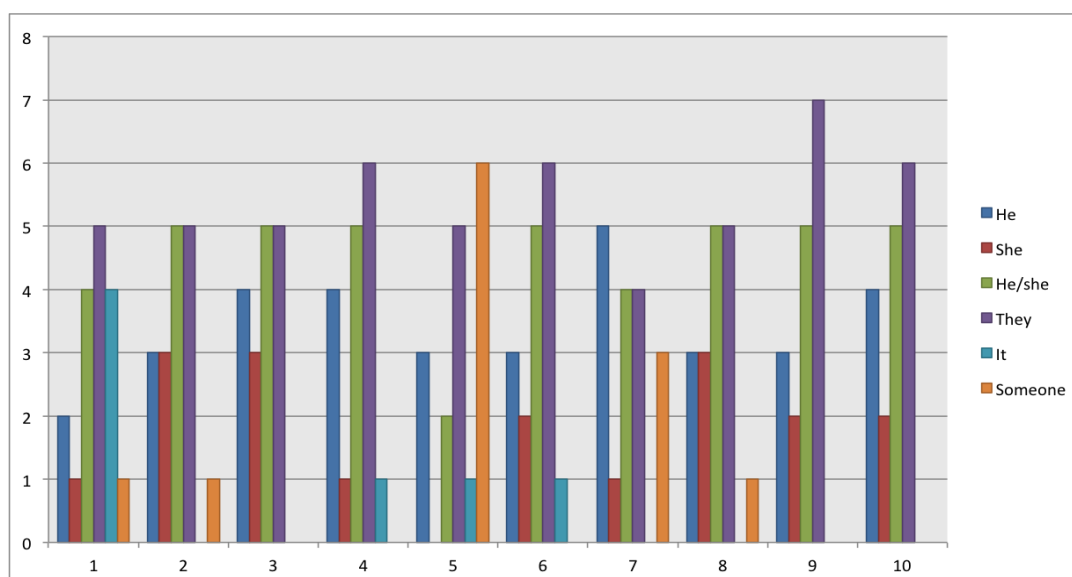
Figure 1. The Swedes and Finns' combined distribution of all written pronouns as percentages

For the Finns, the combination of *he/she* was the most common pronoun used in the written form. It occurred 57.6% of the time and 8 out of 17 Finns used it exclusively (and two more Finns used mostly it, with the exception of using *one* and *someone* in sentence 12). Surprisingly, *she* was used more often than *he*, 17% versus 14.7% of the times, respectively. *They* was used 9.4% of the time, with only one participant using it in every sentence. The distribution of pronouns is illustrated in Figure 2 as numbers of occurrences.



**Figure 2: Distribution of the written pronouns of the Finns**

For the Swedes, the most common pronoun used in the written questionnaire was *they* (31.8%) and it was used exclusively by four respondents. This was only slightly more than the combination of *he/she*, which was used 26.5% of the time. The third most common pronoun was *he*, occurring 20.0% of the time. The variation of the pronouns was greater among the Swedes than the Finns; they used *it* and *someone* several times, whereas Finnish respondents used *someone* only once and *it* never. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of the written pronouns of the Swedes as a number of occurrences in the respective sentences.



**Figure 3. Distribution of the written pronouns of the Swedes**



Finally, a comparison of pronouns is shown in Figure 4. As can be seen, there is a clear discrepancy between the use of *he/she* and *they*. The differences are statistically significant ( $p=.00001$ ). This will be discussed in detail in the discussion section below.

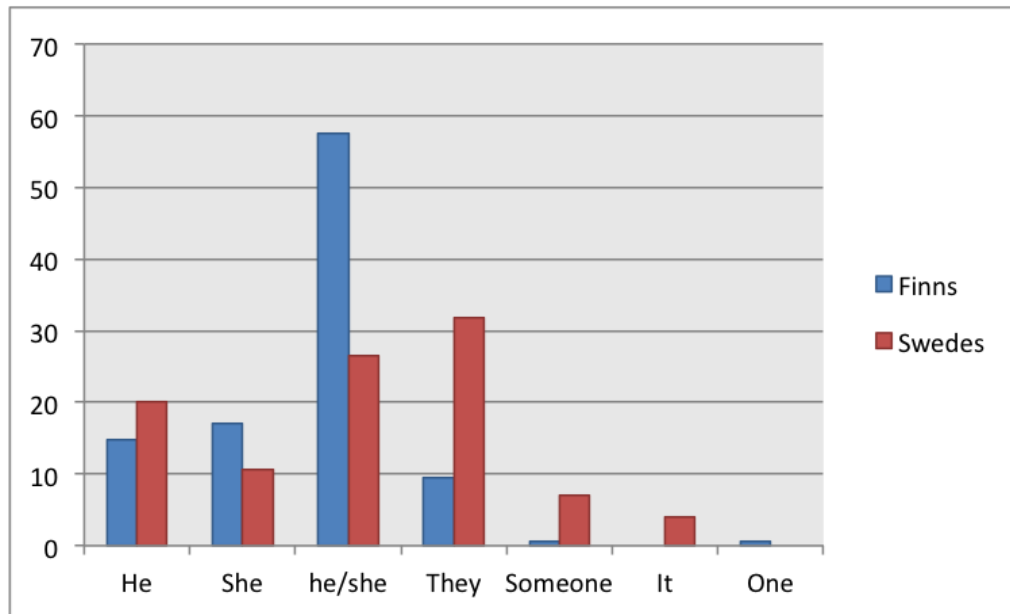
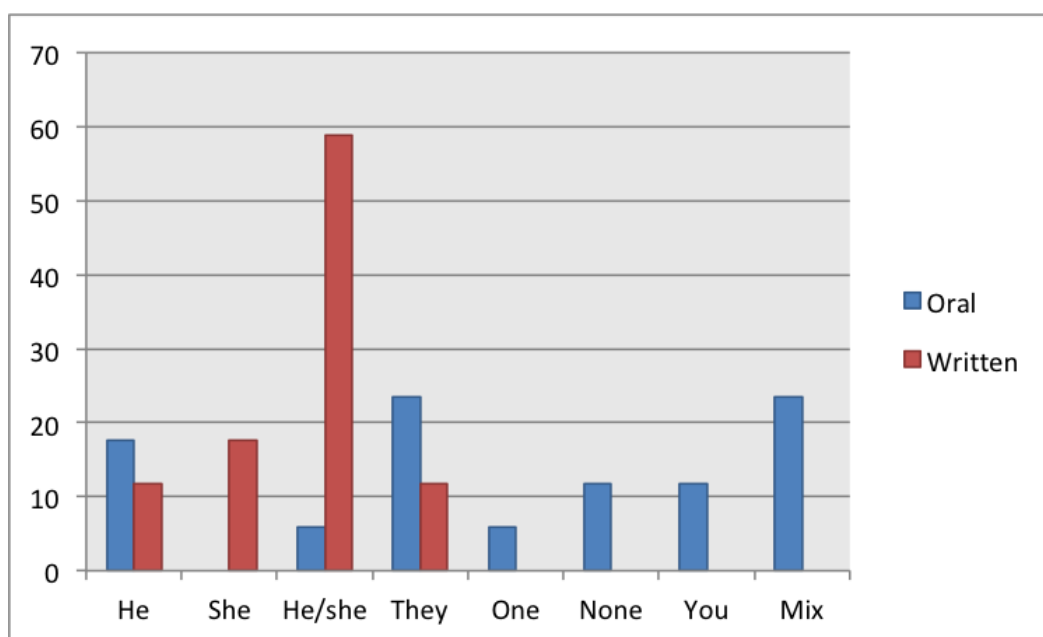


Figure 4. Comparison of all written pronouns

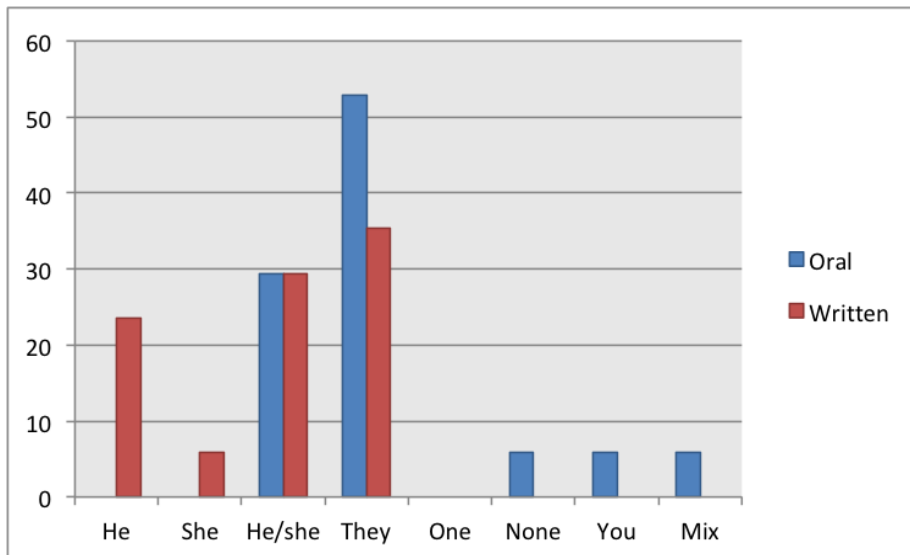
## 4.2 Oral pronouns

A little surprisingly, *he/she* was not the preferred pronoun in speech for the Finns. Figure 5 illustrates the difference between oral and written production. In both instances the referent was *student*. As can be seen, whereas *he/she* was by far the most preferred choice in writing, *they* was the most common in speech. “Mix” indicates that the speakers did not use one specific pronoun consistently. Two speakers started with *he*, but used *him or herself* once; one started with *he or she* but continued with *she* and one switched between *he or she* and *they*. Two respondents did not use any pronouns despite further prompting and instead only listed actions that an ideal student should do. Additionally, there was much more variation in speech than in writing. The use of *they* in speech indicates that despite following conventional rules in writing, the Finns are not unaware of other alternatives.



**Figure 5. Comparison of oral and written pronouns as percentages by the Finns**

The pronouns in speech by the Swedes were almost completely gender-neutral. *They* was the most common pronoun, used 52.9% of the time (9 out of 17 participants used it at least once). None of the participants used exclusively gendered pronouns in the interview, even though one started with *he or she* and proceeded to use *he* in the rest of her speech for “convenience’s sake”. Two people did not use any pronouns in their speech at all; one only listed actions much as the Finns did, but the other one used generalized *you* construction. Not using pronouns while only listing actions can be attributed to proficiency levels as the interviewees who resorted to that could be considered to have lower proficiency and thus fluency in their speech. Further support for this is the fact that they also made some simple subject-verb agreement errors (e.g. “the ideal student buy all the books”). The general *you* on the other hand could be seen as another tactic to avoid gender-marked language, as the participant has a high English proficiency. Figure 6 illustrates the oral and written pronouns used by the Swedes to the referent *student*. Finally, as can be seen from the figure, the use of pronouns was quite consistent in written and spoken language unlike with the Finns.



**Figure 6. Comparison for oral and written pronouns as percentages by the Swedes**

### 4.3 Attitudes

Another statistically significant result was found in the attitude questionnaire ( $p=.0016$ ). The range of possible scores was from 7 to 35; a score around 21 indicates neutral opinions, higher scores indicate negative attitudes towards gender-related issues and lower indicate positive attitudes towards gender equality. The average score for the Finns was 19.89 and the points ranged from 13 to 31 (SD: 4.78). The average for the Swedes was 14.47. The score of the Finns is still within the neutral area, but nevertheless higher than the Swedes'. Seven out of 17 Finns (41%) had a score above 21, as a contrast to only one Swede. As can be seen from Figure 7, the biggest differences between the groups were in questions 1, 4 and 6. Question 1 asks about the problematization of gendered language and 4 and 6 about sexism and equal opportunities in society. The Swedes were more aware of inequalities in society and did not regard worrying about sexist language as trivial, whereas the Finns had neutral attitudes towards them.

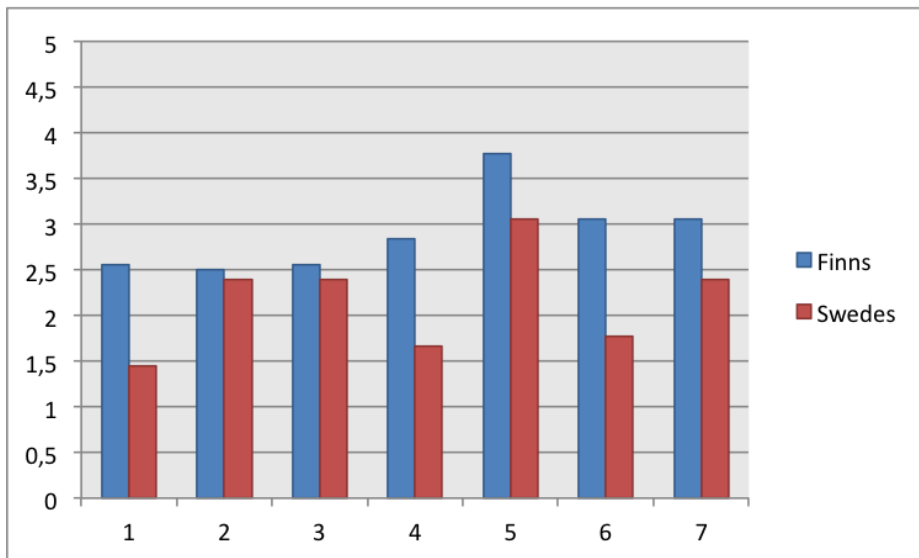


Figure 7. Comparison of the attitudes towards gender-related issues

#### 4.4 Gender

Somewhat surprisingly, there were no great differences between the male and female participants. Men scored slightly higher on the attitude scale than women, 18.3 and 16.3, respectively, but the difference is not statistically significant. Furthermore, as can be seen in Figure 8, the use of pronouns is extremely similar between men and women.

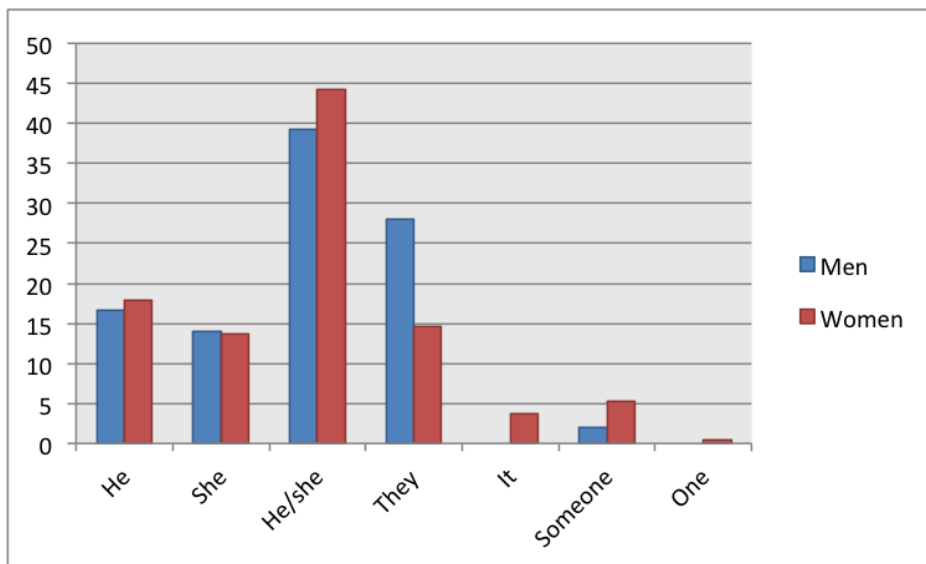


Figure 8. Written pronouns by all men and women participants

## 4.5 Summary of the results

Finally, to summarize the results Table 1 illustrates the actual averages of the occurrences of the pronouns, as well as the average attitude test scores of the both groups. More detailed numbers of occurrences listed as question by question can be found in Appendix B.

**Table 1. Average scores of the tasks.**

		Finnish	Swedish
Written pronouns	He	1.47	2
	She	1.71	1.06
	He/she	5.76	2.65
	They	0.94	3.18
	One	0.06	0
	It	0	0.41
	Someone	0.06	0.71
Oral pronouns	He	0.18	0
	She	0	0
	He/she	0.06	0.29
	They	0.24	0.53
	One	0.06	0
	None	0.12	0.06
	You	0.12	0.06
	Mix	0.24	0.06
Attitude scores		19.89	14.47

## 5. Discussion

Contrary to expectations, there was no significant difference in the use of gendered pronouns between the two groups. As there were no differences, it strongly indicates that the existence of gendered 3rd person pronouns in the speaker's L1 does not affect the gender-neutrality of pronoun use in English. Despite the lack of differences in the neutrality of the pronouns, it is somewhat surprising that most of the participants preferred gender-neutral alternatives, as opposed to generic *he*, which was the preferred pronoun in the study of L2 English speakers by al-Shaer (2016). Despite the similarity in gender-neutrality and multiple factors that could cause it, there were differences between used pronouns that can be attributed to the speaker's L1. However, these

pronouns were not the most commonly occurring ones; the main difference in the use of pronouns, that is, the contrast between using *they* and *he/she*, is more likely to be caused by educational differences. Firstly, the differences in the distribution of pronouns will be discussed. The second topic for discussion here is the biggest difference between the two L1 groups; their differing attitudes towards gender-related issues. This difference turned out to be significant only between the L1 groups and unexpectedly not between men and female participants. Thus, the final point to be discussed is the absence of differences between the genders.

### **5.1 Distribution of pronouns**

The preference for the written *he/she* construction by the Finns could be attributed to educational background more than to L1 inference. Even though *he/she* can sound clunky to native speakers (LaScotte, 2016) and is less favored today (Baranowski, 2002), the participants must have some reasons for choosing it. The educational background seems to be the most plausible explanation. The reason is not necessarily because *he/she* is the form that is most often taught, but because the issue of pronouns is not explicitly taught at all at the advanced level, let alone at the beginning of English studies. None of the Finnish participants recalled being taught about the inclusive use of pronouns and the issues related to gendered ones. The participants also reported that the English courses they took in tertiary education were primarily about the field of study and did not include, for example, academic writing. Even though at least one upper secondary school textbook mentions *they* as the preferred form, this seems to be a relatively new addition. Thus, learners resort to the combination *he/she* because they are not taught about the possibility of using *they* as a reference to singular entities. This explanation is supported by one of the Finnish respondents, who said that he used the combination construction because it was taught to him in primary school and it “stuck”. Another Finnish respondent (who alternated between the gendered options) said similarly that it is difficult to shift to *they* because the gendered ones have been taught to her. Both respondents were aware of singular *they* but said that using it is sometimes confusing because they associate it with plural referents. Furthermore, one of the Finns admitted that it is sometimes difficult to grasp and remember the issues with gendered pronouns because similar issues do not exist in Finnish. This lends some support to the hypothesis that Finnish speakers would use more sexist language because they are unaware of the problematic nature of gendered pronouns. Also, they might not be aware

of the awkwardness of the *he/she* construction. Finally, it could be possible, that the gender-neutrality of both groups is due to the combination of L1 influence and attitudinal (as well as educational) factors, rather than only one factor being the sole cause of the similarities.

The second discrepancy with the distribution of the pronouns was between oral and written texts. Firstly, *they* was the most commonly occurring pronoun in speech for both groups. This is somewhat unexpected, especially for the Finns, because they preferred the *he/she* construction in writing. One explanation for this is that speech is considered to be less formal than writing. Another one is that the reflexive or genitive might sound more fluent than the basic form. For example, there is little ambiguity in terms of number in “an ideal student does *their* homework”, whereas “*they* study hard” might cause the speaker to think of several students instead of one. Lastly, there was an interesting phenomenon among some of the Swedish participants, who seemed to be unaware of their use of *they* in speech. Two of the Swedes used *they* in all forms in their speech when talking about an ideal student, but used only gendered pronouns in writing. One of them even made a remark about hoping, that “there existed *hen* in English”.

The only result that can be linked to L1 transfer is the use of *someone* and *it* by the Swedes. The difference in the use is statistically significant, which fulfills the criteria by Jarvis (2000). *Someone* was used at least once by six of the Swedes, but by only one Finn and only once. *Someone* can be a trace of *en/man* construction in Swedish, which is also what one of the respondents replied when asked about it. Another, non-L1 related reason could be that the grammar of the sentence prompted the use of *someone*, because it makes semantically more sense. The sentences that prompted the most uses of *someone* had indeterminate referents (“a stranger” and “a runner”) and the object was “me”. Thus, “Someone sent me a postcard” is semantically closer to “a stranger sent me a postcard” than to “he/she/they sent me a postcard”, which implies some knowledge of the sender. A stronger case for transfer is the use of *it*. It was used several times to a referent “a child”. In Swedish, a child (*ett barn*) can also be referred to with *it* (*det*), especially if the referent is an unknown child. What is unclear, however, is why the Finns did not use *it* or *someone* as often as the Swedes did, because similar constructions can be found in Finnish as well. Furthermore, it is more common in spoken Finnish to refer to everyone (and everything) as *it* (*se*). It can be that the

influence of education is stronger when the L1 and L2 differ more, because unfamiliar L2 structures are more difficult to learn and L1 is of little help and thus the learners would follow the learned conventions more thoroughly. This interpretation is in line with CAH (Lado, 1957).

Finally, it is important to mention the influence of the referent to the chosen pronoun. Stereotypes affect and bias the view of the language user. Even though the sentences were constructed in a way to minimize this, some bias is unavoidable. One participant reported that they chose the pronouns based on the most stereotypical view on the referent according to them; another said that they tried to use realistically the most accurate one, i.e. they said that they had read that there are more female than male doctors in Sweden and thus referred to the doctor as *she*. However, language and stereotypes are intertwined in a way that there must be conscious effort in changing both. Changes in one do not automatically lead to changes in the other. Even though it is argued that *they* diminishes feminine gender because it still elicits more mental images of men than women (Gustavsson Sendén, Bäck, & Lindqvist, 2015), it does not mean that we should stop using it. If the goal is attaining gender equality, it would eventually need to include gender as a spectrum and not only as the binary male and female. The reason for *they* or *he/she* evoking disproportionate number of male images does not mean that it is the word itself that evokes them but the culture behind it. Patriarchal societies give less value and visible role in a society to women and thus the mental representation is not equal either.

## **5.2. Attitudinal differences**

A statistically significant difference between the Finns and the Swedes was found in the attitude questionnaire. Even though neither of the groups scored above the neutral opinion range on average, the Swedes scored significantly lower points indicating more awareness towards gender-related issues and positive attitudes towards gender equality. Sarrasin, Gabriel, and Gygax (2012) hypothesized in their study that speakers of languages with little inbound gender forms (i.e. languages in which the implementation of gender equal forms is easier) would have more positive attitudes towards gender-inclusive language, but also that sexist attitudes would be less linked to language for those speakers. Additionally, people holding positive views and supporting gender-



equality would be in favor of language reform. Even though these hypotheses were supported with English, French and Swiss German speakers, they do not fully hold with this study. According to the hypotheses, the Finns should have more positive attitudes towards gender neutral language, because Finnish has fewer gendered expressions and constructions than Swedish does. On the other hand, among the Swedes and Finns who support gender equality equally as much the Swedes should be more in favor of non-sexist language than the Finns. The first part does not seem to apply to this study, as the Swedes had slightly more favorable attitudes towards the elimination of sexist language than the Finns (2.39 vs. 2.56, statement 3), even though the difference was minimal. The second hypothesis is more applicable; the Swedes indicated more awareness towards gender equality issues and were more likely to intentionally focus on using gender-neutral language (2.39 vs. 3.06, statement 7). Despite the differences, the highest points in both of the groups was in the statement regarding sexism in fixed expressions such as “man and wife” and whether it is sexist regardless of the speaker’s intention.

### **5.3 Gender differences**

For a final point of discussion, the lack of difference between the male and female participants should be noted. Even though previous research has established a link between the gender of the speaker and the level of sexism they are using, i.e. men are prone to using more masculine biased language than women are (Parks & Roberton, 2004) there is also evidence of this not always being the case (LaScotte, 2016). The results of this study are in line with the latter study because the male participants were not more likely to use male-biased expressions than the females ones were.

The similar results across both genders indicate that there are factors that mediate the gender difference in both attitudes and language use. One factor for the former could be found in societal values; both Sweden and Finland are rated among countries with the highest level of gender equality (European Union Gender Equality Index, 2017). Thus, it is not surprising that the attitudes are similar. The reason for the latter could be educational. All genders learn the pronouns all the same and might be unaware of the extent to which masculine generics are used (or have been used) by NS. Thus both male and female learners associate *he* and *she* exclusively with men and women and their use of pronouns is more likely affected by stereotypes with regards to referents than to extensive use of *he* generically.

## 6. Conclusion and implications

The research questions addressed in this study were: (1) does a speaker's L1 impact their choice of third-person singular pronouns in L2 English? And (2) are there differences in attitudes between speakers of Finnish and Swedish towards issues regarding gendered language? Firstly, the impact of the speaker's L1 was discovered to have moderate impact in some cases for the Swedes; when referring to an unknown child there was a tendency for using *it*. According to Jarvis' (2000) framework for detecting transfer effect, the three criteria are fulfilled, even though the result should be accepted cautiously. There was a statistically significant difference between the two L1 groups; the use of pronouns within one L1 group was somewhat consistent and there is homogeneity between the use of L2 and L1. Whether a speaker's L1 has or does not have gendered 3rd person pronouns does not seem to impact the use of gendered pronouns in English. However, despite the lack of difference of gender-neutrality, the Finns preferred the combination *he/she* to *they*, which was unexpected. This preference can be attributed to education, or specifically the lack of education on the matter, which emphasizes the importance of adequate education in problematic areas. The implication of the importance of education is significant, because there were no differences in gender neutrality between the male and female participants. Thus, education could mediate the gender bias that is found between the English NS men and women. Secondly, there was a statistically significant difference between the attitudes towards gender-related issues. The reasons behind this can be attributed to cultural factors, but as language and culture are intertwined it is difficult to say how much awareness of sexism in language affects the awareness and attitudes towards gender-related issues in society.

The results of this study bear implications to education, especially in the early stages of learning. As the results imply, education can mediate the gender bias between men and women. However, shifting to the more fluent *they* can be more difficult at more advanced level if the learners have already gotten used to using the *he/she* construction, which further highlights the importance of early education.

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# Appendix A

## Section 1

Please modify the underlined part of the sentences below according to the example. Choose the word that you think fits the best.

Example: "Hannah and John walked to school." -> "They walked to school."

1. Helena bought a new dress.

\_\_\_\_\_ bought a new dress.

2. Jason had a sandwich.

\_\_\_\_\_ had a sandwich.

3. Mike, Sarah and Xi used to live over there.

\_\_\_\_\_ used to live over there.

4. A child ate chocolate ice cream.

\_\_\_\_\_ ate chocolate ice cream.

5. Jean and Andrea did not want to get married.

\_\_\_\_\_ did not want to get married.

6. Julia ran all the way back home.

\_\_\_\_\_ ran all the way back home.

7. A doctor saved the day.

\_\_\_\_\_ saved the day.

8. A musician needed a sick leave.

\_\_\_\_\_ needed a sick leave.

9. Michael found a puppy.

\_\_\_\_\_ found a puppy.

10. The student will not pass the exam.

\_\_\_\_\_ will not pass the exam.

11. Anna had never been to London before.

\_\_\_\_\_ had never been to London before.

12. A stranger sent me a postcard.

\_\_\_\_\_ sent me a postcard.

13. The teacher had never had a better day.

\_\_\_\_\_ had never had a better day.

14. A runner bumped into me yesterday.

\_\_\_\_\_ bumped into me yesterday.

15. Cathy used to believe in ghosts.

\_\_\_\_\_ used to believe in ghosts.

16. The artist slept for too long.

\_\_\_\_\_ slept for too long.

17. The cashier forgot to give me my change back.

\_\_\_\_\_ forgot to give me my change back.

18. The producer loved Monty Python.

\_\_\_\_\_ loved Monty Python.

## Section 2

Report your opinion towards the following statements. Be honest.

	Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Worrying about sexist language is a trivial activity.					
2. If the original meaning of the word "he" was "person," we should continue to use "he" to refer to both males and females today.					
3. The elimination of sexist language is an important goal.					
4. Gender discrimination is no longer a problem in my home country.					
5. When people use the term "man and wife," the expression is not sexist if the users don't mean it to be.					
6. Society has reached a point where everyone has equal opportunities for achievement, despite their gender.					
7. I intentionally focus on using gender inclusive language.					

## **Appendix B**

The raw data from the interviews and the questionnaires. Only the sentences with ambiguous referent are listed here, the number indicates the number of a sentence as it is in the questionnaire. The table on the top portrays the results as they were written and the table at the bottom illustrates the occurrences of pronouns in every sentence.

The results of the Finns												
Name	4	7	8	10	12	13	14	16	17	18	Oral	Attitude score
F1 (f)	He	He	They	He	They	She	They	They	She	He	They	17
F2 (f)	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	One	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	They	19
F3 (m)	He	She	He	He	He	He	He	She	She	He	-	28
F4 (m)	They	He	They	He	He	She	He	She	She	He	He (He or She)	13
F5 (f)	She	She	He	She	She	She	She	She	He	She	She or he	16
F6 (f)	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	16
F7 (f)	She/he/they	He/she/they	He/she/they	He/she/they	He/she/they	He/she/they	He/she/they	He/she/they	He/she/they	He/she/they	One	14
F8 (f)	She	He	He	She	She	She	She	He	He	He	She or he/they	18
F9 (m)	He/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	he/she	he/she	You	31
F10 (m)	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	He	23
F11 (m)	he/she	she	he	she	he	she	he	she	she	she	He (him/herself)	22
F12 (f)	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	You	23
F13 (m)	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	she	he/she	He	19
F14 (m)	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	someone	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	He	20
F15 (m)	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	-	23
F16 (f)	she/he	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	They	14
F17 (f)	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	He/she (she)	22
												19.88235294

the occurrences of written pronouns, question by question (the Finns)											
	4	7	8	10	12	13	14	16	17	18 total	
He	2	3	4	2	3	1	3	1	2	4	25
She	2	3	1	3	2	5	2	4	5	2	29
He/she	11	10	10	10	8	10	10	10	9	10	98
They	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	1	16
One	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Someone	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1



The results of the Swedes													
Name	4	7	8	10	12	13	14	16	17	18	Oral	Attitude score	
S1 (m)	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They		11
S2 (f)	Someone	Someone	She	They	Someone	They	Someone	Someone	They	They	-		17
S3 (m)	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she		13
S4 (m)	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	Who/You		24
S5 (f)	It	He/she	He/she	Someone	Someone	He/she	Someone	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she		14
S6 (f)	He	He	He	Someone	Someone	He	He	He	He	He	He/she (he)		18
S7 (f)	He/she	He/she	He/she	Someone	Someone	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	He/she	They		19
S8 (m)	They	They	They	Someone	Someone	They	Someone	They	They	They	They		9
S9 (f)	It	He	He	He	He	He	He	He	She	She	They		19
S10 (f)	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They		15
S11 (f)	It	She	It	It	It	He	He	She	She	He	He/she		11
S12 (m)	He	She	He	They	He	He	He	She	They	He	He/she		16
S13 (m)	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They	They		8
S15 (f)	it/he/she	He/she	He/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	They		9
S16 (f)	He/she	He/she	he/she	Someone	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she	he/she		14
S17 (m)	She	He	He	He	She	He	She	He	He	He	They		15
S18 (f)	It	She	He	He	She	She	She	He	He	She	They		14
												14,47058824	

The occurrences of written pronouns, question by question (the Swedes)												
	4	7	8	10	12	13	14	16	17	18	total	
He	2	3	4	4	3	3	5	3	3	4	34	
She	1	3	3	1	0	2	1	3	2	2	18	
He/she	4	5	5	5	2	5	4	5	5	5	45	
They	5	5	5	6	5	6	4	5	7	6	54	
It	4	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	7	
Someone	1	1	0	0	6	0	3	1	0	0	12	

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