

A Diachronic Analysis of the Syntactic Evolution of Gender Neutral Pronouns in Modern Legal Discourse

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Abstract: The growing popularity of inclusivity and equality has resulted in altering the use of the language of law significantly, most notably the use of gender-neutral pronouns. Conventionally, the use of law discourse was based on masculine generics like “he”, which had a tendency to ostracize or marginalize other forms of gender. This paper deals with the change of gender-specific to gender-neutral pronouns in legal writings with a particular emphasis on the syntactic and functional consequences of this change. The main purpose is to perform a diachronic study of the development of the gender-neutral pronouns over the years in the field of law, specifically the use of singular “they”. This study uses the corpus-based approach in which legal texts like statutes, case law, and contracts of two different periods are analyzed, including the period before 2000 and after 2000. The results demonstrate that there is definite growth of gender-neutral pronoun usage, as well as significant syntactic restructuring, such as subject-verb agreement and simplification of the sentence. The institutional factors, including the rules of drafting the legislation and policy reforms, contribute to this development considerably. The paper concludes that pronoun integration (gender neutral) is not only a way of making the text more inclusive, but also more comprehensible, which, to a certain degree, has positive consequences, such as on the legal texts of today and legitimization of the fair use of language.

Key Words: gender-neutral pronouns, legal discourse, diachronic linguistics, syntax evolution, inclusive language

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Introduction

Language has been one of the key areas of focus in the interpretation of the law, institutional power and norms in society. The gendered language has been applied conventionally in legal language especially by the use of masculine pronouns in the generic form of the pronoun like the “he” to refer to individuals of both genders. It is a law-making practice and judicial argument that manifests itself in more broad socio-cultural biases and historical power and is ingrained in the law-making process. Diachronic studies of English have shown that all of these patterns in language are not impervious but evolve in response to social movements as well as ideological change, specifically to feminist movements (Lin, 2025). The perpetuities of the gendered language of the legal sources bring out the issues of inclusiveness, representation and readability.

The question of whether or not the neutrality is a language of law has received a growing scholarly interest and concern in the reform of law. It is also important that the language chosen should be accurate in the interpretation of the law and the use of gender specific pronouns can create ambiguity or leave out. The last theoretical discourse notes the modulated genderized terms of such phrases as a good father of a family to more gender-neutral terms like a “reasonable person” and an overall trend towards more

inclusiveness in legal argument (Liégeois, 2023). This type of movement not only implies a modernization of language, but also a restoration of a legal subjectivity and justice.

Most prominently in modern English, the introduction and acceptance of gender-neutral pronouns, including the singular “they”, and less widely used ones such as “ze” are a significant change in the usage of the pronoun. These pronouns defy the usual grammatical conventions and require syntactic modifications of sentences, especially with regard to agreement and reference. The study of linguistics is moving towards the conceptualization of gender as a social discursive construct and not a fixed grammatical category, thus demonstrating the need to adopt an inclusive system of pronouns (Drăgușin, 2025). Similar parallels in the diachronic analysis of law and institutions are additional evidence of how language is changing according to the shifting communicative demands and ideologies (Giampieri, 2025).

Although the topic of gender-neutral language has become increasingly popular, a significant lack of scholarship on the topic of the diachronic syntactic development of this type of pronoun in legal prose is still observable. Although the diachrony, syntax, and legal language intersection have not been studied extensively, syntactic and semantic variations in translation systems (Shah et al., 2024) and discourse development in digital communication have been studied (Rangsarititikun, 2025). The current literature either dwells on broad trends in language or on its modern use without following the historical progress of language use in legal texts.

This paper tries to fill this gap by performing a diachronic investigation of the syntactic development of gender-neutral pronouns in current legal language. The main goals of the study are three: firstly, to follow the historical developments related to the use of pronouns in legal texts; secondly, to study the syntactic changes related to the use of gender-neutral forms; and third, to determine how institutional and legal reforms influence the linguistic changes. The study, which will integrate the wisdom of corpus linguistics, legal discourse analysis and sociolinguistic theory, will help in creating a more comprehensive understanding of how legal language is evolving, to adapt itself to the evolving demands of the society.

The article is divided into six sections. Section 1 presents a background, research problem and objectives of the study. Section 2 addresses some theoretical background and past studies regarding the gender-neutral language and the legal discourse. In section 3, the research design, data collection and analysis strategy are described. The results are given in section 4, which comprises frequency patterns and syntactic shifts. Section 5 expounds on the findings as per theory and previous studies. Lastly, Section 6 gives a conclusion and points to the main lessons and policy and language standardization implications.

Literature Review

Legal Gender-neutral pronouns are studied in the overlapping areas of most theoretical approaches such as feminist linguistics, sociolinguistics and legal discourse analysis. Feminist linguistics has played a central role in the critique of the bias of androcentrism captured in the language and in promoting inclusive linguistic practices. Diachronic studies show that the changes in gendered language are strongly connected with the socio-political movements, especially the feminist movement, which has had a very positive impact on the reorganization of the English language in inclusivity (Lin, 2025). Such a view emphasizes the ideological aspects of the linguistic change and brings to the fore the aspect of the language as the place of power negotiation.

A sociolinguistic perspective of language considers it as a dynamic system that is determined by social interaction, identity, and the institution. Gender as a construct, which is fluid and relative, has been

conceptualized such that the traditional grammatical categories have been reconsidered. In the recent studies, gender is viewed as a discourse-based phenomenon that develops depending on the context and time, as opposed to being a binary characteristic as argued (Drăgușin, 2025). The ramifications of this change are far-reaching in the utilization of the pronouns, especially in a highly controlled and formal area in language, like a legal one, where accuracy and consistency is the key.

Legal discourse analysis sheds more light on the role of language in the institutional systems. Legal language is said to be conservative, which is based on precedence and is resistant to change. Recent scholarship, however, points to a shift towards gradual simplification and inclusivity, especially by simplifying such complex syntactic forms as nominalization and passivization (Matusiak, 2024). These reforms are closely interconnected with the general efforts to make legal texts more friendly and fair.

Other researchers have already covered several facets of gender bias in language, such as how it is reflected in the media, religious language, and national corpora. As an example, through corpus-based analyses, it is evident that there are still certain trends of gendered representation and stereotyping, even in modern texts (Elewa, 2025). In the same vein, computational-based studies of diachronic change, including word embeddings, have discovered that gender bias persists in large-scale corpora and that changes in the language happen very slowly (Li et al., 2025). These results highlight a necessity of further investigation of the issue of gendered language, especially in such influential areas as law.

Recent years have seen a great deal of interest in the evolution of singular “they”, particularly with regard to English language teaching and use. Studies on the topic of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students show that the use of epicene pronouns is becoming more aware and accepted, as well as a wider understanding of society moving towards inclusivity (Guarino, 2023; Yang & Zhang, 2024). But the adoption of these types of pronouns in the formal register, such as legal language, poses special problems with respect to syntactic agreement and stylistic rules.

Other areas of interest in scholarship have been language reform in legal systems. Comparative studies show that the language of the law is dynamic to both the internal and external forces, such as globalization, technological change, and new social norms. The shift towards the use of gender-neutral, rather than gender-specific, language in legal texts is an example of intentional adjustment of the language to the modern principles of equality and inclusivity (Liégeois, 2023). In addition, the diachronic approach of legal writings (as in the case of Latinisms in judicial opinions) demonstrates more general trends of linguistic accommodation in the legal sphere (Giampieri, 2025).

Besides legal settings, the diachronic techniques have been used for other types of discourse, such as digital communication and translation systems. To illustrate this point, research on the history of discourse about words such as “woke” emphasizes a quick lexical and semantic change that can take place in reaction to socio-political changes (Rangsarittikun, 2025). Equally, studies of neural machine translation show that syntactic and semantic characteristics change over time, can be traced to technological innovations as well as language change (Shah et al., 2024). These analyses give methodological implications that can be used in the study of a legal language.

Studies about discourse markers and language change in various linguistic situations highlight the significance of diachronic analysis in explaining language change (Yang & Jia, 2025). Based on these studies, the interplay of the linguistic structure, patterns of usage and the socio-cultural factors are highlighted. This literature, in conjunction, highlights the complexity of the language change and the need to adopt interdisciplinary approach.

Although these were put in, the gap is still very large in literature on the syntactic development of gender-neutral diachronically developed pronouns in the legal discourse in particular. Although the existing literature provides a valuable understanding of gender bias, linguistic change and legal language reform, it often lacks the ability to put these issues into perspective in an integrative study of the usage of pronouns in different times of history. The proposed research will address this gap considering both discursive study of the diachrony and the syntactic and legal discourse model, hence, providing a detailed insight into how the gender-neutral pronouns are transforming the legal language today.

Methodology

The study proposed research design is a mixed-method research design since it entails both qualitative and quantitative research design to determine the syntactic transformation of the gender-neutral pronouns in the legal discourses over the years. Neither of these methods nor this approach provides a closer breakdown of the linguistic patterns within group so that the linguistic patterns can be analyzed both statistically as well as in a contextual sense as to how the linguistic patterns have evolved with the years.

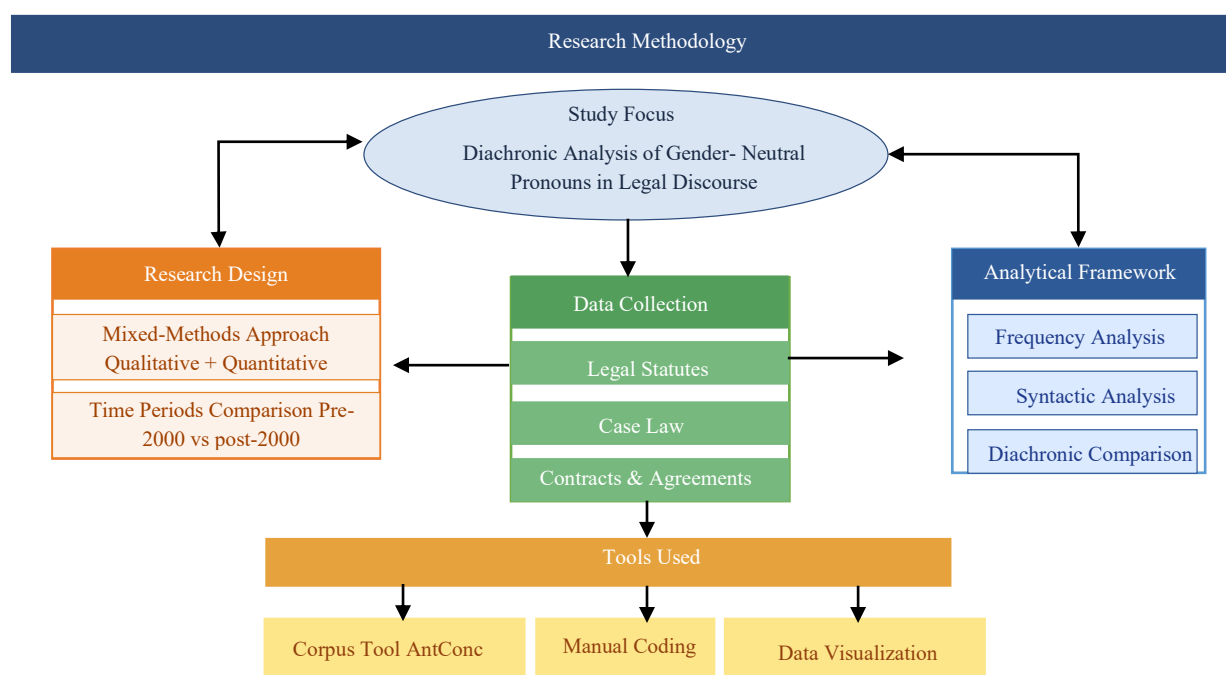


Figure 1: Research Methodology Framework for Diachronic Analysis of Gender-Neutral Pronouns in Legal Discourse

Figure 1 shows the general methodology followed in the study. The process starts with the gathering of the legal corpora of statutes, case law, and contracts, which are then sorted systematically into two groups of time: pre-2000 and post-2000. Such categorization allows making a diachronic comparison of the linguistic patterns. The data collected is then analyzed with the aid of corpus analysis software and manual coding methods to find the cases of gendered and gender-neutral pronouns. The analytical stage can be broken down into three major components: frequency analysis, a way to measure the distributional patterns, syntactic analysis, a way to analyze structural changes in the sentence structure, and comparative diachronic analysis, a way to follow the evolution of the use of pronouns over time. The last step combines these results in an attempt to interpret how institutional and legal reforms impact language change. Therefore, Figure 1 offers a better visual depiction of the step-by-step research design with an emphasis on the combination of the quantitative and qualitative approaches in the study.

Research Design

The study has a diachronic corpus-based design, which involves the comparison of legal texts of two different epochs: prior to 2000 and after 2000. The quantitative aspect concentrates on the measurement of the frequency and distribution of the use of gender-neutral pronouns, and the qualitative aspect is to analyze the syntactic structure and contextual use. Such a two-pronged strategy guarantees the support of numerical patterns by a profound linguistic explanation, especially in regard to the interpretation of how the use of pronouns is compatible with the changing legal standards and drafting patterns.

Data Collection

The information in this paper is based on a legal corpus of data, which includes:

- Statutory documents (legislation and amendments)
- Judicial decisions (case law)
- Legal contracts and formal agreements

These texts are chosen to reflect institutional legal discourse in a variety of institutional settings. To compare the shows in a diachronic way, the corpus is split into two temporal categories to enable the comparison of the shows in table 1:

Table 1: Corpus Distribution Across Time Periods

Time Period
Pre-2000
Post-2000

The changes in the patterns of usage of the pronouns, especially the replacement of the gender-specific ones (e.g., “he”, “he/she”) by the one that is gender-neutral (e.g., “they” in plural form), can be identified with the help of this division.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is based on a diachronic linguistic analysis framework to follow the changes in the use of pronouns throughout the years. The analysis will be done at three levels:

1. Frequency Analysis

- Quantitative measurement of pronoun occurrences
- Comparison of gendered vs gender-neutral forms across periods

2. Syntactic Pattern Analysis

- Examination of sentence structures involving pronouns
- Analysis of subject-verb agreement (e.g., singular “they” with plural verbs)
- Identification of structural shifts in legal sentence construction

3. Comparative Diachronic Analysis

- Cross-period comparison to identify trends and transitions

- Evaluation of consistency in usage across different legal text types

This stratified structure allows the work to reflect the changes at the surface level and more profound syntactic changes.

Tools Used

The study has been performed using both computer and manual analysis:

- **Corpus Analysis Software (*AntConc*)**

Used for keyword searches, concordance analysis, and frequency counts of pronouns.

- **Manual Coding and Annotation**

Used to determine contextual use, solve ambiguities, and interpret syntactic structures that might not be fully represented by automated tools.

Data Analysis and Findings

The analysis of the legal corpus obtained will be presented in this section in detail and the diachronic evolution of gender-neutral pronouns will be highlighted. The results are summarized into frequency distribution, syntactic changes, institutional forces and general trends of language which are observed over a period of time. The legal texts were analysed based on the texts of the years before and after 2000 in order to determine the change in the application of pronouns and structural adjustment of the legal discourse.

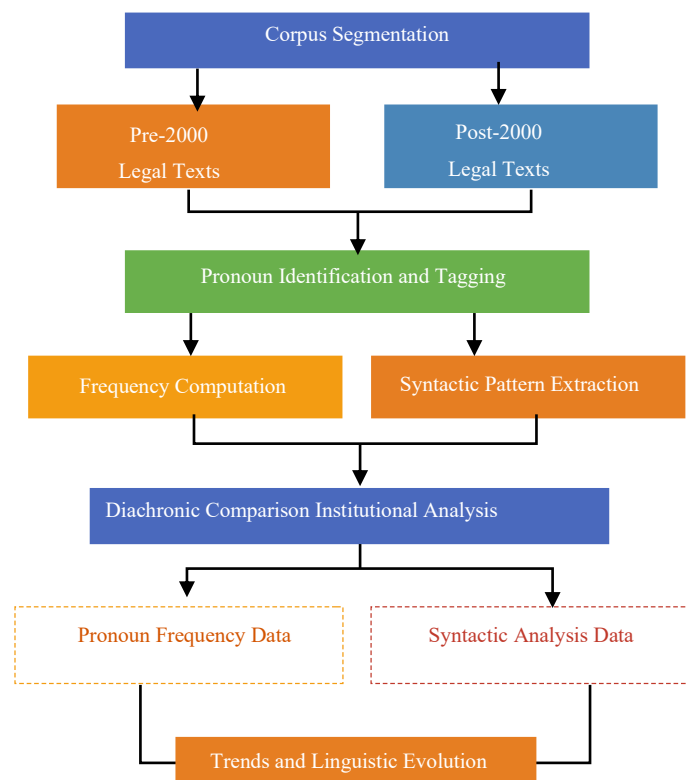


Figure 2: Flow Diagram of Data Analysis Process

Figure 2 shows the analysis procedure that will be used in this study. It starts with the segmentation of the corpus into the pre-2000 and post-2000 data. It is then followed by the identification and tagging of pronouns using a corpus and manual coding. The frequency calculation and syntactic pattern extraction are the next steps. Lastly, the findings are discussed with the help of the diachronic comparison and institutional analysis to determine trends and linguistic developments in legal language.

Frequency of Gender-Neutral Pronouns

The quantitative analysis shows that there is a high change in the pronouns in the two-time spans. Male generic pronouns like "he" and "his" are dominant in the discourse in a pre-2000 legal text and are often used to refer to people of either gender. Combined forms, such as the use of "he/she", are also available, but in limited numbers, which implies that there was an early inclusivity effort, but without structural modification.

Conversely, legal texts published after 2000 show a significant shift towards the use of gender-neutral pronouns, especially the singular "they". This change is part of a larger trend towards the use of inclusive language in the drafting of the law. The frequency test indicates that the introduction of neutral pronouns does not only represent a stylistic change but also a systematic change in law language practices.

Table 3: Pronoun Usage Across Time Periods

Pronoun Type	Pre-2000 (%)	Post-2000 (%)
He / His	68%	25%
He/She	20%	15%
They (singular)	5%	45%
Other Neutral Forms	7%	15%

Table 2 shows clearly that the gender-specific pronouns decreased significantly and the number of gender-neutral options increased significantly. The rise in singular use of "they" is especially interesting, as it may indicate the rising level of its use in official legal circles.

Syntactic Shifts

The shift to gender-neutral rather than gendered pronouns has led to some significant syntactic change in the legal text. Among the greatest changes, one can mention the substitution of such constructions as "he/she" and "they" with singular "they". This substitution makes the sentences less complex and makes them easier to read without being exclusive.

For example:

- **Pre-2000:** "If any person fails to comply, "he" shall be liable."
- **Post-2000:** "If any person fails to comply, "they" shall be liable."

This change requires changes in the subject-verb agreement. Although traditionally there is a plural pronoun, the singular form of the pronoun is frequently used in modern legal language (e.g., "they are", "they shall"), forming a mixed grammatical form. This trend has been established as more and more of a norm in modern legal writing, although initially resisted.

Also, gender-neutral pronouns have been used, which has also helped to eliminate unnecessary structures. The legal texts no longer repeat the phrase "he or she" but use simplified phrases in order to

make them easier to understand and comprehend. This linguistic development can be seen as a more general movement towards the simplification of the language of law.

Institutional Influence

The institutional aspects play a crucial role in development of linguistic behavior in law. The movement toward the use of gender-neutral pronouns is closely connected to changes in legislation, policies, and the rules of composition. Several legal systems and organizations have embraced advice encouraging the use of inclusive language to ensure fairness and non-discrimination.

Manuals used to draft legislation in several jurisdictions now plainly recommend against the use of gender-specific pronouns unless essential to the context. Instead promote neutral solutions like themselves and repetition of nouns to prevent ambiguity. This has also been facilitated by judicial rulings that have embraced inclusive language, thus establishing precedents that will be used in the future.

This change has been driven by international organizations and legal bodies, which have advanced a standard, inclusive legal English. The growing internationalization of legal discourse has facilitated the use of neutral language, as legal texts are usually aimed at multicultural, heterogeneous readers.

Emerging Patterns

The comparison of the legal language evolution has found several new tendencies:

○ ***Increased Informality vs Formal Standardization***

Though the law's language has always been formal and strict, it allows some flexibility with gender-neutral pronouns. Singular “they” used to be informal, but nowadays it is becoming an acceptable standard. This change is a compromise between the need to preserve the law and follow the modern linguistic standards.

○ ***Structural Simplification***

The substitution of complex forms (e.g., “he/she”) with simpler ones helps produce more understandable, easier-to-read legal texts. This tendency aligns with broader efforts to advocate plain English in legal writing.

○ ***Global Influence on Legal English***

The development of gendered-neutral pronouns does not apply to a specific legal system but is a worldwide trend. The global nature of international legal practice and the need to communicate across borders have fostered the use of inclusive language and increased its consistency in law.

○ ***Gradual but Consistent Change***

The results show that changes in the legal field are not sudden. Although in certain documents traditional forms can still be found, the tendency is evidently towards gender-neutrality.

Discussion

The result of our research indicates an evident and gradual shift in legal language towards gender-neutral rather than gender-specific pronouns, reflecting broader socio-linguistic and institutional changes. The fact that the use of the singular “they” in post-2000 legal texts is more frequent can be

interpreted as a shift in linguistic preference as well as a more profound structural and ideological shift toward inclusivity. This change indicates that the law's language, traditionally conservative and not particularly open to change, is slowly evolving to conform to modern social demands and traditions.

Interpretatively, the failure of masculine generics like *he* and the decreased use of binary constructions like *“he/she”* show that there is a purposeful step towards removing gender bias in legal discourse. Gender-neutral pronouns simplify sentence structure and avoid redundancy, making the text easier to read and retain its legal correctness. In the meantime, the further adaptation in the form of the use of plural verb agreement with singular *“they”* can be regarded as a syntactic further development, as the traditional rules of the grammar are redefined to adapt to the new usage. This combination of form and functionality brings the dynamic quality of language into view, despite a very formal world.

The results can be successfully connected to the main theoretical models presented in the literature. In the feminist linguistic approach, the move towards gender-neutral pronouns goes hand in hand with the dismantling of the androcentric language formations that marginalized non-male identities historically. The fact that male-default pronouns are gradually being replaced shows that language reform is an important instrument for ensuring gender equality. Within the sociolinguistic perspective, the change observed in legal discourse has resulted from social changes in language use. With the rise in social consciousness about gender diversity, language usage changes accordingly, including in institutions where change is normally slow. Moreover, the analysis of legal discourse helps explain how formal conventions, policy writing, and the need for clarity in interpretation mediate such linguistic changes. The changes elucidated indicate that legal institutions are increasingly inclined to strike a balance between tradition and greater inclusivity.

Of great interest is the relationship between the developments and the law in terms of law legality and inclusiveness. On the one hand, the introduction of gender-neutral pronouns makes legal texts more inclusive, ensuring they are not gender-specific. This is particularly necessary in the new legislation, which stresses equality and non-discrimination. On the other hand, grammatical stability and interpretative accuracy is put into question by the change. The results, however, show that the use of singular *“they”* does not cause significant ambiguity in context; on the contrary, it tends to make the language less cumbersome by using constructions that are less cumbersome than *“he or she”*. Therefore, there is no need to choose between inclusiveness and clarity, because they can be mutually supportive when considered.

The findings of this study both substantiate and expand on existing knowledge compared to past studies. Previous studies have highlighted the issue of gender bias, which persists in various forms of discourse and at a slow rate of language change. This work supports such findings by demonstrating that, even today, gendered pronouns are still used in certain legal texts, especially in older texts. But it also evidences a greater movement towards neutrality in recent legal discourse than has been previously recorded. Language reform and inclusive drafting research have examined the impact of institutional policies on change; the current results follow this line of inquiry by illustrating the role of legal provisions and international standards in introducing neutral pronouns.

Besides, previous studies have tended to focus on general language use or on specific domains, e.g., education and media; this paper offers a more detailed study of legal discourse, its peculiarities, and limitations. The diachronic approach taken here also introduces a temporal aspect that is not always present in previous literature and enables one to gain better insight into how linguistic changes can occur over time. By doing so, the research helps fill the gap between theoretical discourses on gender and empirical studies of language use.

Overall, the discussion points out that the creation of gender-neutral pronouns in legal practices is not only a linguistic change but also a societal shift and a general holding. The results illustrate the ability of legal language to evolve and retain its fundamental purposes of accuracy and authority, thereby leading to a more inclusive and fair communicative system.

Conclusion

The paper has expounded on the diachronic development of gender-neutral pronouns in contemporary law; it has also noted historical changes in their frequency and syntax. It shows that the shift from the prevalence of masculine pronoun forms to the rising popularity of gender-free forms, especially the singular “they”, does exist. Such a shift not only implies a language change but also entails broader socio-cultural and institutional change towards inclusivity and equality in legal systems. Of particular concern is the syntactic growth which is apparent in the study. Substitution of more complex constructions, such as “he/she,” with simpler ones has helped simplify and streamline legal texts. Simultaneously, the plurality of the verb used in the agreements and the singular form of the verb in combination with the plural form of the agreements, the possibility of the usage of the singular form of “they” can also be interpreted as the weakening of the grammatical norms to the demands of the modern type of communication. Such transformations demonstrate the ability of legal language, which has traditionally been conservative, to adapt to societal demands. These findings have some implications for legal writing, policy-making, and language standardization. Gender-neutral pronouns will improve readability, reduce confusion, and make a legal document more inclusive. Policy-wise, the findings can be expounded upon to advocate policies that promote the use of non-discriminatory language. The paper itself also contributes to existing efforts to ensure consistency and inclusion of languages in legal systems through language standardization. Overall, the paper underscores the need to align the language of the law with emerging social values, while retaining accuracy and strength.

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