4
Prescriptions, Standards, and Epicenes

Having established current epicene usage in Chapter 2, and shown that singular *they* appears to be the preferred epicene form in written British standard English, this chapter turns its attention to epicene prescriptions and the issues noted in Chapter 3. The aim here is to bring research on epicene prescriptions in grammar books up to date and address the hypothesis that grammars published at the start of the twenty-first century will continue the trend evident in Chapter 3 to reject generic *he* in favour of epicene avoidance tactics.

Whilst a pre-existing corpus was available to tackle questions concerned with modern epicene usage in Chapter 2, there was no suitable corresponding corpus of grammar textbooks with which to analyse modern epicene prescriptions. Therefore, a new specialist corpus of grammars – The Grammar Corpus – was created, which includes texts published between 2000 and 2010. The texts span different levels of language proficiency, insofar as they are aimed at different audiences with different levels of linguistic knowledge, but they are all written primarily for native speakers of English, and thus they do not focus on second language learning, or English for specific purposes (ESP). Details of how I constructed the corpus are given in the first section of the chapter.

The second section of this chapter details how the analysis of The Grammar Corpus was structured, and initial quantitative data is given for generic *he* and singular *they*. The results show that in The Grammar Corpus, generic *he* is categorised as ‘traditional’ usage, whilst there is much more discussion of singular *they* than in previous similar corpora (cf. Zuber and Reed 1993). Thus there appears to have been a change in how epicenes are dealt with between data from the 1970s–1990s and the current work. I documented the epicene avoidance tactics proposed in The Grammar Corpus to facilitate a comparison between modern
prescriptions and the list of tactics presented by Treichler and Frank (1989) and the trends in prescriptions noted by Zuber and Reed (1993), both of which were discussed in the previous chapter. Additionally, in many of the texts in The Grammar Corpus epicene pronouns are used in illustrative examples (henceforth example sentences). An analysis of the antecedents used in the example sentences shows that the grammar authors tend to avoid syntactically definite antecedents. What is more, the authors of the texts in The Grammar Corpus over-represent indefinite pronouns and avoid using heavily stereotyped antecedents. This distorts the issue of epicene reference, and makes it appear as though the choice of a third-person singular gender-neutral pronoun can be explained relatively simply and unproblematically. This position thus ignores the large body of literature addressed in Chapters 1 and 3 – which is supported by the data in Chapter 2 – that indicates how epicene reference is a complex issue influenced by both language-internal and language-external forces.

The final section of this chapter focuses on how, or indeed if, the impact of language-external forces are realised in the grammars. The Grammar Corpus is compared with the British National Corpus (BNC) – a standard reference corpus – in order to obtain the Corpus Comparative Statistical Keywords and show how the grammar authors reference the social issues which may have an effect on epicene choice and prescription. Furthermore, in order to investigate whether the grammar authors explicitly reference language-external issues The Grammar Corpus is mined for a set of socially based keywords, which are based on discussions in Chapter 3. The occurrence of these terms in The Grammar Corpus would indicate that the authors were aware of language-external issues, and would make explicit reference to wider social debates. The results, shown below, indicate that this is indeed the case. A fine-grained analysis of the keywords highlights the fact that they are pertinent to the corpus, as the grammar authors use the terms in relation to prescriptions and agency.

Creating The Grammar Corpus

In order to compile the modern grammar book corpus a pilot corpus was constructed based on a sample of the top 35 bestselling books on grammar at waterstones.com (31 of which were published post-2000). Justification for this method of text selection is based on the assumption that popular texts have more potential to influence epicene usage. In a more general sense, a text purchased and read by thousands of