

An Analysis of Chinese EFL Learners' Misuse of Gender Pronouns in Spoken English

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Abstract: This study focuses on the misuse of gender pronouns in spoken English among Chinese EFL learners. Taking 30 English majors with different English proficiency levels as subjects, it collects data through two tasks, comic description and topic elaboration, and semi-structured interviews, analyzing the types, frequency, causes of misuse as well as differences across tasks and proficiency levels. The findings reveal eight categories of errors, with “SHE” occurring 72 times (approximately 35% of total errors), influenced by L1 transfer, cognitive factors, teaching environment, etc. Moreover, the topic elaboration task shows stronger misuse inertia, and higher English proficiency correlates with fewer core misuses. Finally, improvement strategies are proposed in terms of teaching, environment and practice.

Keywords: Chinese EFL Learners; Gender pronoun Misuse; Spoken English; Oral Error Analysis

1. Research Background

As globalization progresses, individuals frequently must converse with people from diverse countries and cultural backgrounds. From business meetings to global summits and cultural interactions, accurate and effective verbal communication is essential for conveying information. In the process of language production, various unintentional errors can affect meaning. One such phenomenon, pronouns, also called deixis, often found in the spoken English of second-language learners, can strongly influence communicative effectiveness. Deixis refers to expressions in language used to refer to or point to a specific object, person, place, time, discourse element, or social relation. According to Karl Bühler, there are six categories of deixis: (1) person deixis, used to refer to people (e.g., “she,” “he,” “them”); (2) time deixis, used to indicate time (e.g., “today,” “last month”); (3) space deixis, used to indicate

place (e.g., “there,” “here”); (4) discourse deixis, used to refer to earlier or upcoming parts of discourse (e.g., “as I just mentioned,” “what comes next”); (5) social deixis, an aspect of person deixis that conveys social relationships and honorifics (Liu & Wen)[1]; and (6) situation deixis, used to refer to specific contexts or states (e.g., “actually,” “by the way”) [2].

Among these, person deixis is especially important because it is commonly used to describe people, such as family members, friends, colleagues, and so on. Gendered pronouns play a critical role here. According to Hornby, the contrast between “he” and “she” is clear-cut: “he” is used for a male human or animal previously introduced or currently under observation, while “she” denotes a female human or animal in the same [3]. Ambiguous use of gender deixis may cause hearers to be uncertain about who is being referred to, leading to confusion. Moreover, incorrect gender references can misrepresent an individual’s gender identity, which is especially important in contexts that emphasize gender equality and respect for individuals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research at Home

According to Jia, there are eight kinds of errors in the use of gender deixis: (1) “HE,” where people use “he” to refer to a female; (2) “SHE,” where people use “she” to refer to a male; (3) “HIM,” the misuse of “him” for “her”; (4) “HERA,” where people use “her” to indicate “him”; (5) “HIS,” where students use “his” to refer to “her”; (6) “HERP,” where the possessive “his” is mistaken for “her”; (7) “HIMSELF,” the use of “himself” where “herself” is required; and (8) “HERSELF,” the use of “herself” where “himself” is required[4].

By investigating gender errors in the SECCL corpus, Dong and Jia (2011) found that the gender error rate among subjects was as high as one-fifth. The feminine error rate was

significantly higher than the masculine error rate, and error rates were higher for subject and possessive pronouns than for object and reflexive pronouns[5]. Cui and Zhou (2018) found similarly that the misuse rate of feminine pronouns is higher than that of masculine pronouns in spoken expression; misuse of "she" as "he" is very common, and the use of masculine pronouns can be almost twice that of feminine pronouns. In other words, respondents habitually use the third-person singular pronoun "he" in their spoken expressions[6].

Zhang and Liu attribute gender-pronoun misuse to three causes: insufficient emphasis in language teaching, cultural differences between Chinese and Western cultures, and lack of contextual knowledge[7]. Chen noted that EFL learners from different native-language backgrounds differ in their oral acquisition of singular pronouns in feminine and masculine forms; omissions of gender information are closely related to native-language characteristics[8]. Zhou pointed out that lower English proficiency levels correlate with higher rates of gender-pronoun mixing; as proficiency increases, such errors decrease significantly[9].

2.2 Research Abroad

Antón-Méndez experimentally studied English subject-pronoun production by native Spanish and native French speakers and found that native Spanish speakers (from a pro-drop language) made significantly more he/she errors in response to leading questions than native French speakers (a non-pro-drop language), while other pronoun-error types did not differ between groups. The study suggested that Spanish speakers may fail to incorporate natural gender information into the preverbal message when producing English sentences, resulting in pronoun gender errors when native gender cues are absent[10].

To validate the "pro-drop hypothesis," Tsoukala, Frank, and Broersma used a computational dual-path bilingual model to simulate subject-pronoun gender errors in L2 English acquisition by virtual speakers whose native languages were pro-drop Spanish and a non-pro-drop Spanish variant (NPD_ES). Significant he/she confusions occurred only in the pro-drop model; the NPD_ES model was nearly error-free. Because the two models were identical in other respects, the study confirmed that the pro-drop feature alone can trigger

gendered pronoun errors in second-language English[11].

Like Spanish, Korean is also a pro-drop language. Song surveyed native Korean speakers living in the United States and found three main causes of gender-pronoun misuse: (1) influence from the native language (Korean) and its pro-drop system, which allows pronoun omission while English generally requires explicit subjects; (2) speakers' gender-conceptualization biases, such as the existence of gender-neutral words in Korean; and (3) the limited use or lower status of feminine forms in Korean language practice, causing masculine pronouns to be used more frequently[12].

Antón-Méndez (2011) examined possessive-pronoun production (his/her) in 62 high-proficiency native speakers of Italian, Spanish, and Dutch using a picture-sentence retelling task. Italian and Spanish speakers made significantly more gender errors referring to animate nouns than Dutch speakers and more errors when antecedents did not match noun gender; no differences arose across groups for inanimate nouns. This pattern suggests over-application of native-language rules that align pronoun and noun grammatical gender to English, causing bilingual output errors[13].

2.3 Research Gap

Existing studies have shortcomings. Domestic studies have focused heavily on categorizing types of gender-pronoun misuse but have rarely examined root causes; foreign studies have addressed causes more thoroughly. However: (1) both domestic and foreign studies generally analyze causes from researchers' perspectives without sufficiently describing learners' own perspectives; (2) few studies propose concrete remedies; (3) most studies rely solely on quantitative analyses without incorporating qualitative interviews; and (4) studies tend to focus either on free conversation or on picture-based descriptions, rather than combining both or comparing error frequency and causes across these task types.

3. Study Design

3.1 Research Questions

This study uses Tencent Meeting to collect spoken corpus data and analyzes it both qualitatively and quantitatively. The research

questions are:

- (1) What types of gender-pronoun misuse occur, how often do they occur, and what are the causes?
- (2) Is there a difference in the frequency of gender-pronoun misuse between the two tasks, and what explains this difference?
- (3) Do participant groups with different English proficiency levels differ in the frequency of pronoun misuse?
- (4) What measures can reduce the frequency of gender-pronoun misuse?

3.2 Subject Selection

The study was conducted among English majors. Thirty participants took part, divided evenly into three groups by proficiency level. The first group consisted of 10 freshmen who enrolled in the English major in September 2025, with overall English proficiency roughly equivalent to the college entrance-exam level. The second group consisted of 10 English majors who passed the College English Test Band 6 (CET-6). The third group consisted of 10 English majors who passed the Test for English Majors Band 8 (TEM-8). All participants were required to provide proof of language-proficiency level (e.g., transcripts) before participating. General information for each participant sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. General Information of Each Sample

Number	English Level	Number	English Level
01	TEM-8	16	TEM-8
02	TEM-8	17	CET-6
03	TEM-8	18	Freshman
04	CET-6	19	Freshman
05	TEM-8	20	Freshman
06	TEM-8	21	Freshman
07	TEM-8	22	Freshman
08	TEM-8	23	Freshman
09	TEM-8	24	CET-6
10	CET-6	25	TEM-8
11	CET-6	26	CET-6
12	CET-6	27	Freshman
13	CET-6	28	Freshman
14	CET-6	29	Freshman
15	CET-6	30	Freshman

3.3 Data Collection

Participant recruitment was conducted via online posters. Participants were screened by submitting English test score reports to determine eligibility. If eligible applicants

exceeded the required number, random sampling was used. Informed consent was obtained from participants. The experiment was conducted via Tencent Meeting. In the first task, participants described five different five-panel comics selected from the Singapore Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Before describing each picture, participants had 30 seconds to prepare. To reduce abstraction, Chinese prompts were also provided; the first task lasted 7.5 minutes per participant. The second task used five IELTS Speaking Part 2 prompts; participants were given one minute to prepare followed by a two-minute response for each prompt, for five rounds. The total duration was 22.5 minutes. After the experiment, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Analysis of the Types, Frequency, and Causes of Gender Pronoun Misuse

4.1.1 Types and frequency of gender-pronoun misuse

This chapter first presents all error types in chart form, then discusses them with corresponding examples. All error types and frequencies are shown in Figure 1.

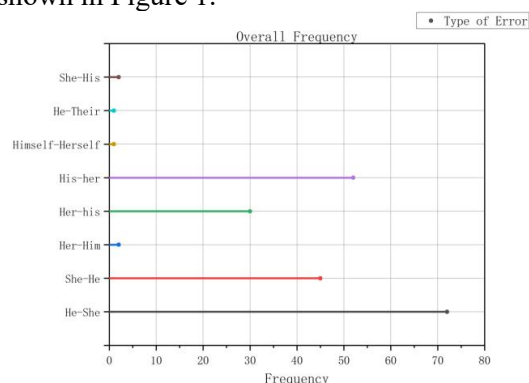


Figure 1. Overall Frequency

There were eight error types observed in the experiment.

The first type of error involves using “she” to refer to “his.” This type of error occurred a total of 2 times. As stated in sample 1: “she, his words and comments upon women is rather affronting and disgusting.” Here, the scene where “his” should be used as a possessive is replaced by the subject “she.”

The second type of error occurred once, involving the substitution of “he” for “their.” As stated in Sample 1, “He, their daughter with a little car came home.” In this example, the

subject confused the two gender pronouns during the first use of them.

Similarly, the third type of error also appeared only once across all corpora. This category involves using “himself” where “herself” is required. Concurrently, this error is referred to as “HERSELF” [4] by Jia. Sample 8 commits this type of error: “She usually said that her home, the moon, is nothing like the earth, so the doomed himself.” This error falls under the category of incorrect reflexive pronoun usage.

The fourth type of gender pronoun misuse involves using “his” instead of “her.” This error, which is defined as “HIS” [4] by Jia appeared 52 times across all corpora, ranking as a secondary high-frequency error. For example, sample 30: “A mother went to a store with his son.” In this example, we can see that the speaker uses “his” to refer to “mother’s.”

In contrast, the fifth mistake is misusing “her” as “his.” This error is classified as “HERP.” [4] This type of error occurred a total of 30 times. Examples of mistakes displayed by sample 28: “One day a boy and her and his mother went to the store for shopping.” In this corpus, “her” replaces “his.”

The sixth type of error is categorized by Jia as “HIM.” [4] This error type occurs when the subject uses “her” instead of “him”, which totally occurred 2 times. As expressed in sample 10: “But when the men came the boy go with her.” Here, the subject used “her” (objective case) to refer to “the man.”

The seventh type of error involves using “she” to express the meaning of “he.” This category of error is defined by Jia as “HE.” [4] This type of error occurred a total of 45 times. As expressed in sample 7: “She was always, he was always smiling to everyone.”

The last type of error is using “he” to indicate “she”, which called “SHE” [4] by Jia. This error occurred a total of 72 times. For example, sample 1: “He, she wanted to enjoy the all the welfare in America.” In this corpus, the subject used “he” to refer to “she,” but self-corrected after the error occurred. However, this also affected communication to some extent.

Notably, the misuses defined by Jia as “HERA” and “HIMSELF” [4] did not appear in the corpus. Also, two additional usages not listed in Jia were observed: “she” used with the meaning of “his,” and “he” used with the meaning of “themselves.”

4.1.2 Reasons for gender-pronoun misuse

From a language foundation and habitual perspective, influence from learners’ native languages is significant. Chinese often omits subjects and pays less attention to grammatical gender. The uniform pronunciation of “ta” in Chinese can cause confusion between “he” and “she.” Additionally, some subjects hold the believe that the pronunciation of English “he” is simpler than “she,” which was also mentioned by subjects, which may lead learners to choose “he” more often. Some learners form expressions in Chinese and then translate them into English, reducing pronoun accuracy.

From an individual cognitive perspective, learners may have weak awareness of gender-pronoun distinctions, reduced concentration, limited language proficiency, inadequate preparation, or carelessness. They also said they may also be influenced by their own gender, for example, males habitually using “he”, by the subconscious effect of prior corrections, or by focusing on content instead of pronoun selection.

From a teaching and environmental perspective, biases exist in pedagogical emphasis (e.g., less focus on gender pronouns after basic instruction, test-oriented education emphasizing writing over speaking, and use of non-English teaching language), insufficient emphasis by teachers, and entrenched gender-unequal expressions with “he” used more widely. Other contributing factors include male-oriented teaching materials, limited oral practice and exposure to English-speaking environments, and everyday topic selection that influences pronoun choice.

4.2 Differences Between the Two Tasks and Their Causes

4.2.1 Differences between the two tasks

This chapter discusses differences in error frequency between the picture-description and topic-description tasks and explores underlying reasons via interview analysis. Figure 2 and 3 compare error frequencies for Task 1 and Task 2. In the two scenarios, there are marked differences in gender-pronoun misuse:

First, some high-frequency error types change in frequency. “SHE” occurs 29 times in picture description but rises to 43 times in topic description, indicating stronger inertia toward using “he” instead of “she” in topic description. Meanwhile, “HIS” misuse drops sharply from 39 times in picture description to 13 times in topic description; misuse of possessive pronouns

therefore decreases significantly. Reverse possessive misuse, “HERP”, also decreases from 23 to 7.

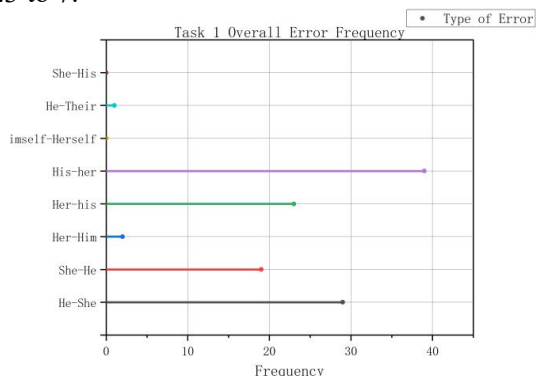


Figure 2. Task 1 Overall Error Frequency

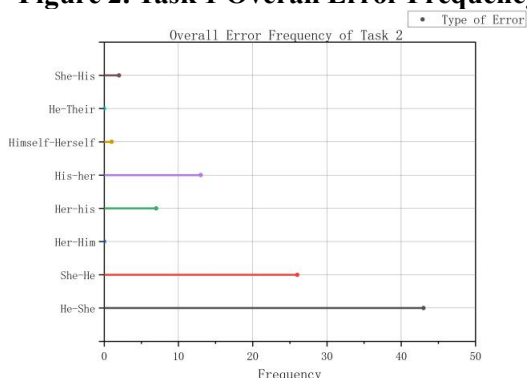


Figure 3. Task 2 Overall Error Frequency

Second, objective and reflexive pronoun misuse differs by scenario. “HIM” occurs twice in picture description but disappears in topic description. Reflexive-pronoun misuse is scenario-specific: there is no mistake of “HERSELF” in picture description, but it appears once in topic description.

Third, low-frequency error types differ. He-Their misuse occurs once in picture description but not in topic description. Conversely, She-His misuse is newly observed twice in topic description.

Overall, topic description amplifies the inertial misuse of “he” for “she,” while misuse of possessive and objective pronouns is reduced. In picture description, high-frequency errors are mainly possessive-pronoun errors, and low-frequency errors differ across scenarios.

4.2.2 Reasons for differences

In a survey of 30 participants, 13 subjects believed that picture description produced higher accuracy than topic description. Reasons included: “Picture description has visual support, while topic description relies on imagination” (7 mentions); “There are specific characters in picture description” (4 mentions); and “Picture description has logical order and prompts” (1 mention).

Twelve participants thought topic description had higher accuracy. Reasons included: “Picture description involves more characters of different genders” (7 mentions); “Not being in the right state during picture description” (2 mentions); and “Picture description has more errors due to unfamiliar scenes,” “Topic description is closer to daily life,” and “Topic description allows more freedom of expression” (each 1 mention). Besides, five participants believed there is no difference in accuracy between the two tasks.

4.3 Group Differences

The error frequencies of the three groups of students with different English proficiency levels are shown in Figure 4 to 6.

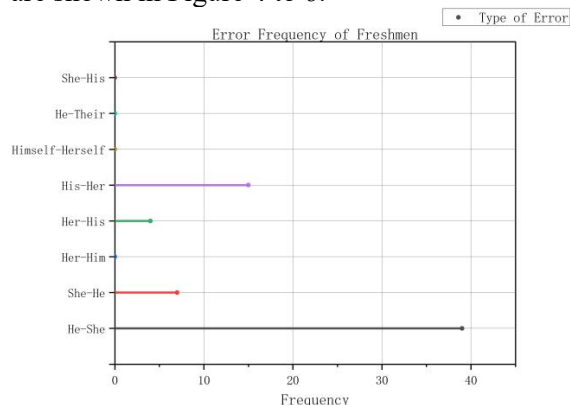


Figure 4: Frequency of Freshmen

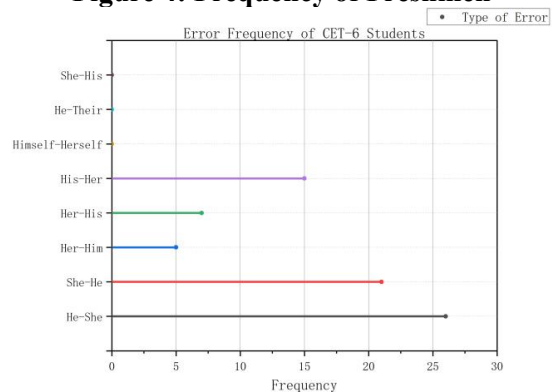


Figure 5. Frequency of CET-6 Students

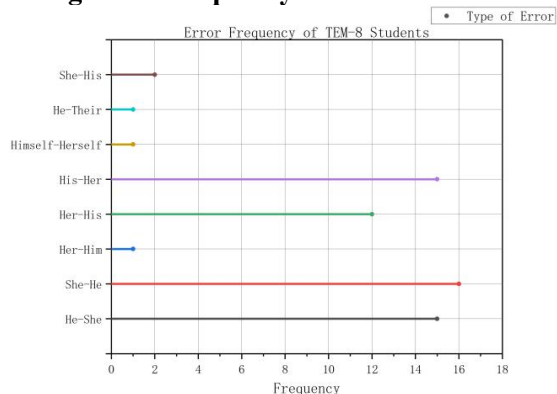


Figure 6. Frequency of TEM-8 Students

Distribution of misuse types shows notable differences by proficiency level. The freshman group has the highest total frequency of gender-pronoun misuse, with 39 instances of “SHE” confusion alone. There were no confusions of reflexive or singular-plural pronouns in this group, indicating beginner learners’ weaker ability to distinguish gender pronouns.

In the CET-6 group, core gender-pronoun misuse decreased (“SHE” dropped to 26 instances), while misuse of possessive pronouns, “HERP”, slightly increased. This suggests intermediate learners improved on basic gender pronouns but still need stronger accuracy with possessives.

In the TEM-8 group, core gender-pronoun misuse decreased further (“SHE” only 15 instances), but new confusions appeared with reflexive pronouns “HERSELF” and the error of He-Their. Types of misuse were more dispersed, indicating that high-level learners generally grasp basic pronouns but remain prone to occasional errors with complex pronouns.

For “SHE” and “HE” confusion, the trend of fewer misuses at higher proficiency is evident: the “SHE” frequency in the freshman group is 2.6 times that of the TEM-8 group. Although the “HE” frequency in the CET-6 group (21 instances) exceeds that of the TEM-8 group (16 instances), it remains lower than the freshman group. This fluctuation may reflect intermediate learners producing more complex output and allocating less attention to pronoun choice. Objective-pronoun confusions “HIM” are almost zero in low- and intermediate-level groups but occur once in the TEM-8 group, suggesting higher-level learners may make basic-pronoun errors in complex contexts.

4.4 Strategies and Measures

To address the improper use of gender pronouns in spoken English, targeted improvement measures can be implemented in four areas: teaching methods, language environment, practice formats, and foundational competency development. In teaching, instructors should guide students to identify and correct pronoun errors independently and use targeted mnemonic techniques, visual explanations, and games tailored to different types of gender-pronoun confusion. For example, conduct family-tree description exercises to reinforce the correct mistakes in possessive contexts. Increase specialized training so students can correct

pronoun errors promptly and accurately in real situations. For instance, organize real-time pronoun-correction oral practice: when students give oral accounts (personal introductions, daily experiences, etc.), teachers should pause to point out mistakes as soon as they detect confusion, guide students to revise their expressions on the spot, have them repeat the correct versions, and quickly rectify usage deviations through immediate feedback.

When building a language environment, use full-English instruction and create dedicated oral-communication scenarios, such as one-on-one conversations with native speakers centered on everyday pronoun use. Supplement learning materials with videos and readings focused on women’s issues and gender diversity to create an immersive language atmosphere that helps students intuitively understand pronoun logic. For example, select short English stories about women’s career development, graphic materials that explain gender diversity, and clips from English-language films with female protagonists such as *Hidden Figures* and *Coco Before Chanel*, so students can observe natural pronoun usage in authentic contexts.

Regarding practice formats, increase the proportion of exercises focused on gender pronouns in classroom and impromptu activities, and design targeted interactive tasks-context-specific questioning and thematic discussions-to guide students in reflecting on pronoun rules across contexts. For example, pose context-based, daily-life questions such as: “Your deskmate lent you a pen. How would you thank her or him and describe what you use it for?” Ask students to select appropriate pronouns in their answers. Hold thematic discussions (e.g., Famous People I Admire) that require students to use standard gender pronouns consistently when introducing figures. Have students prepare before class by researching figures’ gender information, deciding on pronouns in advance, and drafting brief outlines to increase the relevance and effectiveness of practice.

Finally, cultivate students’ awareness of distinguishing gender pronouns in communication, improve their concentration, and expand their pronoun-related vocabulary. These efforts will lay a solid foundation for accurate and flexible use of gender pronouns in spoken English.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that gender-pronoun misuse in spoken English among Chinese EFL learners is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by language transfer, individual cognitive factors, teaching practices, and task type. The corpus analysis revealed several frequent error types, most notably the substitution of “HE” and misuse of possessive pronouns, while higher proficiency reduced core pronoun errors but introduced more dispersed, complex mistakes. Task comparisons showed picture description and topic description each elicit different error patterns: picture-based tasks tend to produce more possessive-pronoun errors due to multiple characters and rapid description demands, whereas topic-based tasks strengthen inertia toward default masculine forms, increasing subject-pronoun confusions.

These findings point to practical implications for pedagogy. Teachers should emphasize spoken-pronoun accuracy through targeted oral practice, increased exposure to natural English contexts, and diversified materials that include gender-balanced topics. Instructional strategies, such as focused corrective feedback, mnemonic devices, role-play, and pre-task preparation, can raise learners’ awareness and reduce error rates. Creating immersive English-speaking environments and incorporating more pronoun-focused drills into assessments will also help consolidate students’ correct usage.

Limitations of the current study such as sample size, focus on English majors, and reliance on specific task types suggest avenues for future research. Subsequent studies should expand participant diversity, combine longitudinal designs, and test intervention effectiveness (e.g., targeted training programs). Combining quantitative corpus analysis with richer qualitative interviews remains valuable for capturing learners’ introspective explanations and for designing learner-centered remedial approaches.

Ultimately, addressing gender-pronoun misuse requires coordinated efforts across curriculum design, classroom practice, and materials selection. By integrating targeted instruction with increased oral exposure and reflective feedback, educators can help learners achieve more accurate and socially sensitive English pronoun use, thereby improving communicative effectiveness in multilingual, multicultural contexts.

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Appendix

Table 2. Error Code Definition

Error Code	Word Used	Target Word	Note
SHE	He	She	/
HE	She	He	/
HIS	His	Her	/
HERP	Her	His	/
HIM	Him	Her	/
HERA	Her	Him	Not found in the corpus
HIMSELF	Himself	Herself	Not found in the corpus
HERSELF	Herself	Himself	/
/	She	His	First occurrence in the corpus
/	He	Themselves	First occurrence in the corpus