

Contemporary Arguments Against Gender-Neutral Language

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Introduction

In 2015, a gender-neutral pronoun ('hen') was introduced in Swedish as a complement to 'hon' (she) and 'han' (he). Adding a gender-neutral pronoun differs from previous gender-fair language reforms because it removes gender information instead of making women more visible by using double forms (she/he). Similar for both reforms, is that the "double" and the "gender-neutral" language reforms have been met with negative reactions (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015). Blaubergs (1980) analyzed the arguments against a previous language reform of generic masculine forms and structured them into eight categories. Parks and Robertson (1998) added four categories from empirical research to be used in research on non-sexist language. Here, we study whether these categories also are relevant in a reform that reduces binary gender information instead of increasing the salience of both women and men in language.

Method

In a survey, 247 respondents indicated their attitudes towards 'hen' and formulated arguments for or against the word. 38.1% of participants had a mixed or negative opinion toward 'hen'. Their arguments (n = 227) were analyzed and categorized according to existing categories (Blaubergs, 1980; Parks & Robertson, 1998).

Results

In total, 35% were strongly related to old categories, 19% were entirely new categories, and 46% of the arguments belonged to old categories.

Two new categories were developed as subcategories to old categories. '**Binary sexism is acceptable**' is a subcategory of 'Sexism is Acceptable' since both focus on gender as an exclusively dichotomous concept (e.g., "there are only two genders – accept it!"). '**There are other words to use**' is a subcategory to 'Change is too difficult'.

Two categories were completely new: '**Attention Thief**' contains arguments concerning 'hen' distracting attention from the message. '**Gender Identity is Important**' includes arguments on the importance of gender information in communication, and the notion that lack of such information means depersonalization of others and barrier in communication.

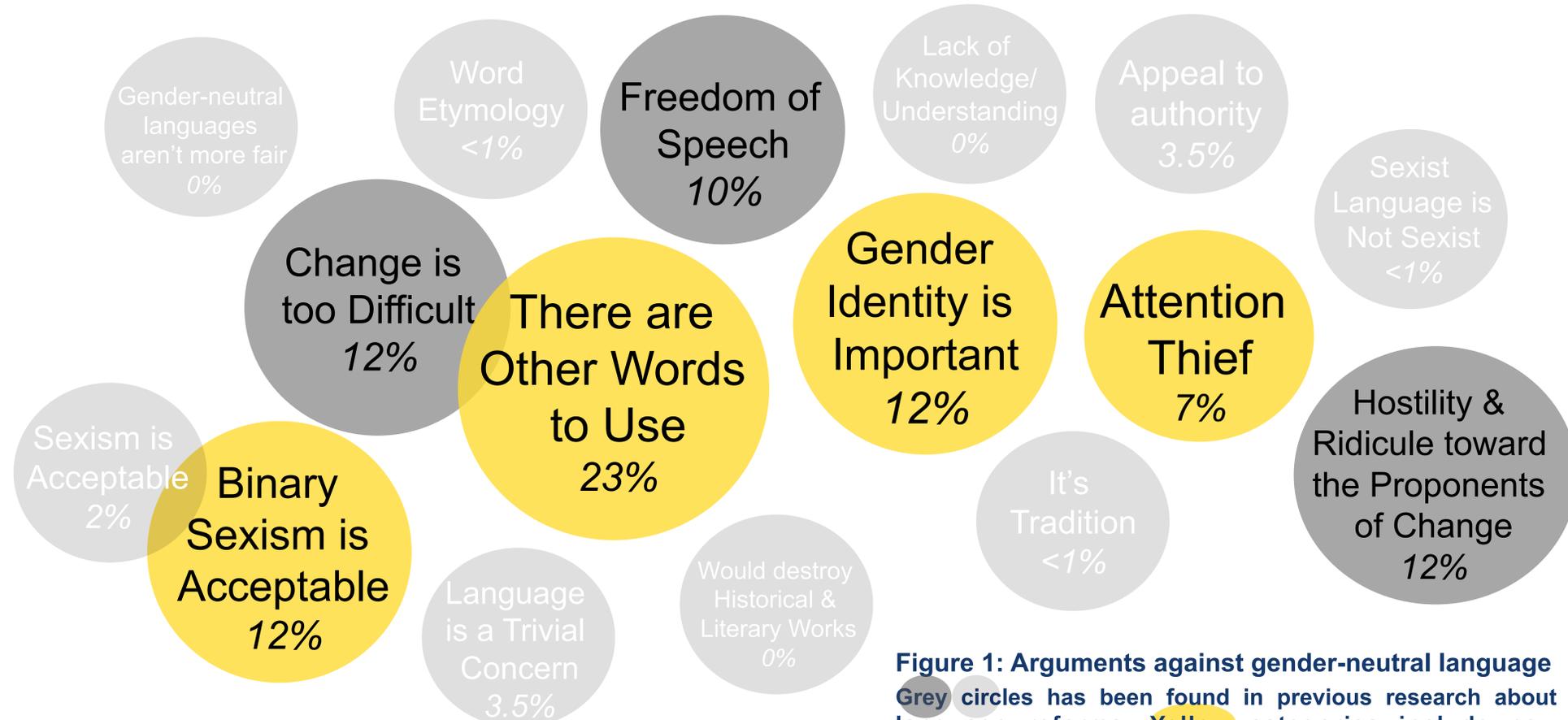


Figure 1: Arguments against gender-neutral language
Grey circles has been found in previous research about language reforms, Yellow categories include new arguments, against non-binary languages reforms. Overlap indicates relatedness between categories

The main categories in previous research remained common, such as "**Change is too Difficult**" which together with its new subcategory 'There are Other Words to Use' accounts for 35% of all arguments. '**Hostility and Ridicule toward the Proponents of Change**' (12%), includes arguments that diminish the word itself and its proponents (e.g., "hen is ridiculous because it means 'hen' in English"). '**Freedom of Speech**' (10%), comprises arguments such as "it feels like an unpleasant and authoritarian imposition from above". Eight old categories hardly occurred at all in this sample (9% in total).

Conclusions

Arguments against gender-neutral language partially tap into the same categories of arguments found against previous forms of feminist language reforms, but also belong to some new categories. Novel is the focus on challenging the idea of gender as being nonbinary. While ideas such as sexism being acceptable or sexist language not being sexist were very uncommon in our sample, the idea that gender identities (and either male or female) are important and that language should reflect this was common.

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