

PREDICTING USE OF AND ATTITUDES TO A NEW GENDER NEUTRAL PRONOUN IN SWEDISH

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Introduction

Gender-fair language reforms adopt several strategies to reduce gender bias in language. An example is neutralization (changing 'chairman' to 'chairperson'). A gender-neutral pronoun is another example of neutralization, which also aims to reduce the binary gendering and to include individuals not identifying themselves as either 'she' or 'he'.

This study investigates attitudes to and use of the gender-neutral pronoun 'hen', which was recently implemented in the Swedish language, and exists parallel to the two gendered pronouns 'hon' (she) and 'han' (he).

Method

Survey to 2600 respondents (47% response rate).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for different uses of 'hen'

When do you use 'hen'?	M (SD)
Talk/write about a person whose gender is irrelevant	2.08 (0.87)
Don't want to reveal who the person is	2.15 (0.94)
When the gender of the person is unknown, for instance instead of using "he or she"	2.45 (0.94)
When referring to a person who does not identify as woman or man	2.09 (1.03)
I try to quit using gender pronouns and use 'hen' regardless of context	1.42 (0.70)

Note: In what situations is 'hen' used (n=495) 1= never – 4 = always

Results

Descriptive results

About 19% said they used 'hen' at least some times in speech and for writing this figure was 11%. The most common use was the practical replacement of the double-form 'he/she', as seen in Table 1.

Table 2. Regression analyses predicting attitudes to and use of 'hen'

	Attitudes	Use
	β (SE)	β (SE)
He ^a	.05 (.11)	.15 (.34)
Hen ^a	.13 (.14) ***	.16 (.33)**
Gender interest	.21 (.02) ***	.14 (.06)*
Age	-.11 (.001)***	-.08 (.01) †
Sex ^b	.05 (.11)	.15 (.33)
Gender identity	-.06 (.02)**	-.08 (.08) †
External motivation to control prejudice	.05 (.03)*	.03 (.08)
Internal motivation to control prejudice	-.01 (.03)	.06 (.12)
Acceptance of stereotypes	-.05 (.05) *	-.06 (.16)
Sexism	-.21 (.05) ***	.04 (.12)
Attitudes to sexist language	-.27 (.03) ***	-.19 (.14)***
Unwillingness to change own linguistic behavior	-.12 (.03) ***	-.06 (.09)
Adj. R ²	.47***	.16***

^aDummy coded with she as reference category (self-chosen pronoun)

^bDummy coded with male as reference category

*** p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05 † p<.10

Main analyses

Two multivariate regression analyses were performed to investigate what factor predict 1) attitudes to 'hen' and 2) use of 'hen'

As dependent variables we employed an index composed of 10 items measuring different aspects of attitudes to 'hen', which were based on results from a pilot-study where participants freely could write why they wanted to/not wanted to use 'hen' (α=.90.) For use of 'hen' as dependent variable we created an index of self-reported frequency of use in both writing and speech, which were highly correlated, r = .77, p<.001.

The independent variables have previously been related to attitudes to gender-fair language. Table 1 shows the results for 1) and 2) above.

Conclusions

Our models were better at predicting the attitudes to hen compared to the use of 'hen'. Nonetheless, overall the same variables predicted both attitudes and use.

Participants were more inclined to use the gender neutral pronoun instead of double forms than as a nonbinary pronoun.

References:

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