There is a male bias in language, where supposedly gender-neutral words are associated with masculinity (see e.g. Hyde, 1984; Stahlberg, et al., 2007; Bäck, et al., 2015; Douglas & Sutton, 2014). Because of this, some scholars have pointed to the need to be creative and come up with new words (see e.g. Wayne, 2004). The Swedish gender-neutral pronoun hen is such an attempt.

The word hen has expanded from LGBT communities to broader parts of the society, and is well known to the Swedish-speaking population (Gustafsson Sendén, et al., 2015; Milles, 2011). This successful inclusion of a gendered third personal pronoun singular, existing parallel with two gendered pronouns, is unique. For example, in English, the attempts to include a gender-neutral pronoun (such as ze and hir) in the common language have so far failed (Crawford & Fox, 2007). To this date, Swedish is the only language with three parallel pronouns that are both gendered and gender-neutral.

In the present research, we test to what extent hen is perceived as gender-neutral in comparison to other grammatically gender-neutral descriptions.

**Methods**

The experiment was framed as a recruitment situation where participants read about a job candidate, referred to as either ‘the applicant’ or hen.

The participants were first given the job description of a position as real-estate agent. Thereafter, the participants read the short summary of one of the candidates, referred to as either ‘the applicant’ or hen, otherwise the summaries were identical. Conditions were randomly assigned to the participants.

The summary was followed by four photos showing two cis-women and two cis-men, see Figure 1. The participants were asked to choose what photo they believed showed the candidate.

**Hypotheses**

**H1** Because of the male bias, participants reading about ‘the applicant’ will tend to choose any of the two men.

**H2** Participants reading about hen will randomly choose any of the photos, and no gender bias will be shown.

**Results**

Figure 2 shows the results from the participants’ gender association of the candidate. It is obvious that ‘the applicant’ was more influenced by a male-bias than hen: Most participants (68.0%) associated ‘the applicant’ with a masculine gender, compared to the participants reading about hen (52%), $\chi^2(1, N = 199) = 5.23$, $p = .029$. Hence, H1 was confirmed.

The participants reading about hen expressed no gender bias whatsoever when choosing what photo they believed was showing the candidate: 48 % chose a woman and 52 % chose a man. This means that H2 was confirmed, indicating that hen is truly gender neutral.

**Take home message**

The Swedish newly implemented gender-neutral pronoun hen seems to be genuinely gender neutral, compared to other “neutral” words, and could thereby be used to reduce gender bias in language.

**References**


