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BACKGROUND

In Sweden, the gender-neutral third person pronoun singularis (hen), has been introduced as an addition to the gendered pronouns (hon, han, representing she and he). In 2014, hen was included in the official dictionary of the Swedish language. The pronoun was proposed by feminists and LGBTQ+ activists, and was included in the dictionary after a long and spiteful medial debate. At the time, everyone in Sweden held strong opinions about the word.

The pronoun ‘hen’ can be used in a generic way to refer to anybody that is not gender-specified, or for people who do not identify themselves with the binary categories. In recent years, its use has increased and opinions have become more favorable.

There is no comparable case of the intentional “trichotomization” of a previously dichotomous gender in a language in the history of behavioral science. Our research group examines the psychological correlates and processes in relation to the implementation of the gender-neutral pronoun ‘hen’ and its integration in the Swedish language. The general question in our research project is whether hen influences perceptions of gender role beliefs.

On the right is an overview of some of our studies completed from 2012 to 2016. Hand-outs with more details are available.

1. Arguments against ‘hen’

• In a survey, 247 respondents described their attitudes towards hen. Among them, 38% had a mixed or negative opinion about hen.
• About half of the arguments against hen were the same arguments studies found against previous feminist language reforms, e.g. when masculine forms were changed to double forms. Of those arguments, “Change is too difficult” (35%) and “Freedom of Speech” (10%) were common in our sample.
• New categories of arguments were “Gender Identity is important” (12%), “There are only two genders” (12%), and “Hen is an attention thief” (7%).

2. Use & Attitudes

• Data was collected from 686 participants between 2012 and 2015.
• 19% used hen in speech
• 11% used hen in writing
• Common replacement for he/she
• Predictors for positive attitude were interest in gender, motivation to control prejudice, low sexism and a negative attitude to sexist language.

3. Reducing gender bias

• Participants were asked to read applications in a recruitment situation. The job candidates were described as hen, the applicant, N.N. (“Jane/John Doe”), or the candidate.
• During the debate about hen, it has been argued that other neutral words could be used. Our results show that ‘hen’ was genuinly gender-neutral, while the alternatives had a strong male bias.

Current projects

• The effect of ‘hen’ on reading, and its potential to reduce gender stereotype activation
• The effect of a third gender category on determining gender and emotions in faces

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