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# Neutral pronouns as promoters of gender equality

## 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.

### 1.

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.

### 2.

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.

### 3.

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

## Current projects

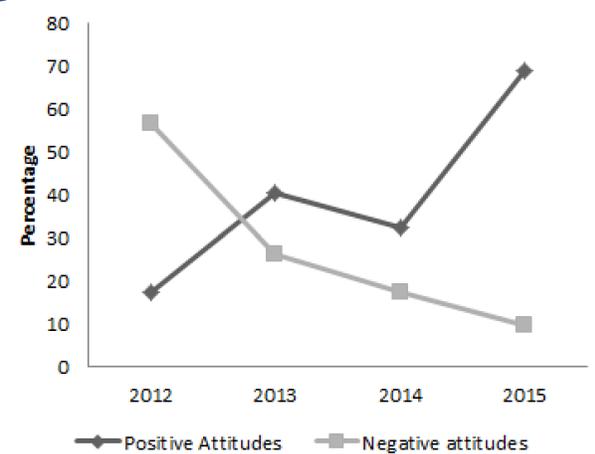
- The effect of 'hen' on reading, and its potential to reduce gender stereotype activation
- The effect of a third gender category on determining gender and emotions in faces

## 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 genuinely gender-neutral, while the alternatives had a strong male bias.

