

Attitudes to gender-inclusive pronouns

Gender-fair language reforms aim to promote inclusion and gender equality, but similar to other gender-related initiatives gender-fair language reforms are often met with resistance. Following heated public debates, Swedish was the first language to officially implement a gender-inclusive pronoun. The pronoun *hen*, used as a complement to the binary pronouns *hon* (she) and *han* (he), was included in the Swedish dictionary in 2015. Since then, other languages have followed suit. In English, the gender inclusive pronoun singular *they* was the word of the year in the Merriam-Webster 2019 dictionary. Another, less well-known English gender inclusive pronoun is *ze*.

While languages change all the time, gender-fair language reforms seem to instigate strong resistance (Blaubergs, 1980; Parks & Robertson, 1996). This was also the case with *hen*. Arguments against the use of *hen* included similar arguments to earlier gender-fair language reforms, such as the transition from generic *he* to the paired pronouns *he/she* (Vergoossen et al. 2020). In a qualitative study, analyzing 208 arguments against *hen*, we find that many of the arguments fall into dimensions related a desire to keep the linguistic status quo (39.4%), and gender ideological convictions that gender is essential and binary (27.4%) (Vergoossen et al. 2020).

In this presentation I present data on how attitudes to the pronoun *hen* have changed over time from its initial implementation until today, using large-scale survey data in three waves; 2015; 2018 and 2021. The results show that there are significant increases in positivity across all three time points. Between 2015 and 2018, the younger age groups became more positive, while between 2018 and 2021, older people became increasingly positive as well, although not to the same degree as the young. The results indicate that as *hen* has become more ingrained in the Swedish vocabulary, the population's attitudes have followed suit. The youngest participants in 2021, were only about 10 years old when *hen* started to be used in Sweden.

While our survey items measured general attitudes to *hen*, *hen*, as many inclusive pronouns carry a dual meaning. That is, *hen* can be used both for nonbinary individuals (specific use) and in a generic sense, when gender is unknown or irrelevant. Since these different meanings map differently onto the arguments against the use of *hen*, we have explored to what extent individual level factors connected to a preference for the linguistic status quo and gender essentialism predict attitudes to the dual meanings of *hen* in both survey data and experimental data. In a large scale survey we have measured attitudes to generic and specific use of *hen* and created a quantitative measure capturing the dimensions of argument related to a preference for the linguistic status quo and the position that cisgenderism is acceptable. Further, in an experiment, participants read sentences where *hen* was used generically or specifically and rated grammaticality, reading difficulty and negative valence. Finally, in another experiment, participants were exposed to similar sentences, but where the pronoun in the sentence was missing and they were asked to fill in the blank space. In the experiments we measured traditionalism as a more general indicator of a preference for the status quo, not only related to linguistics, and essential beliefs about gender as a binary concept.

In both survey and experimental studies (Renström et al. 2022), we see a general pattern that people prefer the generic meaning of *hen* over the nonbinary meaning. We also see that traditionalism predicts negative attitudes to generic use of *hen* rather than nonbinary use, while beliefs that gender is essentially binary predicts negative attitudes to the nonbinary meaning rather than the generic meaning. In an attempt to compare the results from Swedish *hen* to the English initiatives singular *they* and *ze*, I also present data from a recent experiment on English speaking participants. Preliminary analyses show that language users prefer singular *they* to *ze*, and that singular *they* most often is seen as equally grammatically correct and easy to read as binary pronouns. However, this is only true for the generic meaning of *they*, as people dislike the nonbinary use of singular *they*. These results are in line with previous research on singular *they* (Bradley et al. 2019; Hekanaho, 2020). In contrast to Swedish

hen, we did not find the same individual level factors to predict attitudes to singular they, neither when used generically nor when used nonbinary.

A general conclusion from our research is that while people seem to dislike gender inclusive pronouns, they mainly dislike them when they are used in a nonbinary way, that is, to refer to individuals with potentially nonbinary gender identities. We argue that this resistance is rooted in a gender identity threat perceived by people with cisgender identities from the emergence of nonbinary pronouns, as nonbinary pronouns challenge the binary view of gender (Morgenroth et al. 2020). However, time seems to be an important factor for the acceptance and use of gender inclusive pronouns, vouching for persistence in the implementation of such initiatives. Finally, even though people prefer the generic use of gender inclusive pronouns, it is still unknown what consequences this use has for the inclusion of nonbinary individuals in language, and whether this use has wider consequences beyond simply the possibility to express gender neutrality in language.

References

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Contact

Dr Emma A. Renström
Associate Professor in Psychology
Kristianstad University, Sweden
Emma.Renstrom@hkr.se

Anna Lindqvist
Lund University, Sweden
Anna.Lindqvist@psy.lu.se

Marie Gustafsson Sendén
Stockholm University, Sweden
mgu@psychology.su.se