

Ten years with *hen*. Public attitudes towards the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun *hen* (2012–2022)

In previous research, the Swedish debate on gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language has been described as “insignificant” and “whispering”, especially when compared to the more extensive public debates in English- and German-speaking countries (Edlund 2004; Jobin 2004). That changed in 2012 when the gender-neutral personal pronoun *hen* became the subject of extensive debates. *Hen* has been used at least since the 1990s by queer and trans*activists, but without attracting much public attention. In queer and trans*activist contexts *hen* is used with the explicit aim to challenge the idea of two stable, natural, and mutually exclusive gender categories (Hornscheidt 2006, 2008; Vergoossen et al. 2020; Wojahn 2013, 2015). The media debate in 2012 was sparked by a children’s book in which the author consistently labels the main character – a child – *hen* instead of using one of the gender-specific pronouns *hon* (‘she’) or *han* (‘he’). Due to the intensive public debate, *hen* became known to nearly all Swedes in a relatively short time.

In this paper, I’m interested in the reactions that are provoked by the use of *hen*. I focus on reactions in two different contexts: (1) public comments in online forums and (2) recommendations of the Swedish Language Council. The data consists of 2500 online comments (mainly published in forums subsequent to newspaper articles) and all recommendations on *hen* published by the Swedish Language Council. The comments and recommendations are from the years 2012 to 2022. Thus, they enable a diachronic comparison.

The central research questions that I pose to the material are the following:

- How do authors of negative public comments position and characterise themselves and those who use gender-neutral pronouns?
- What kind of arguments and discursive strategies are used in the negative public comments?
- How, and with what kind of arguments, reacts the Swedish Language Council to gender-neutral pronouns?

Furthermore, I’m interested in how authors of comments in online forums, as well as the Swedish Language Council, understand and describe the relationship between language and gender and between strategic language change and changes in the non-linguistic world.

Queer and trans*activists have seen language as performative and as a tool for changing society (Hornscheidt 2008; Wojahn 2015). Even those who, in online forums, react negatively to feminist language change assume that language has performative effects on the conceptualisation of gender. The performative approach is also the reason for the strong negative reactions. The authors of the online comments assume that the use of gender-neutral pronouns has a “dangerous” influence on the non-linguistic world, e.g., on social orders and gender norms.

The official language organisations, on the other hand, describe language mostly as something unpolitical that reflects rather than constructs society. However, the Language Council has changed its opinion on *hen* over the last years. While the Language Council was initially highly critical, it now takes a more open stance. Initially, the Language Council’s main arguments against *hen* and other newly created gender-neutral pronouns were that they are unaesthetic, not “natural language” and that they irritate and distract the reader. Today, both pros and cons are discussed in the recommendations and the choice is left to the users.

Regarding the arguments and discursive strategies used in the negative public comments, the most common discursive strategy in online forums is to warn of the hidden intentions of gender-neutral pronouns. Common arguments are that gender-neutral pronouns are used to discriminate against men,

that gender-neutral pronouns are introduced “from above” to restrict the freedom of speech, and that gender-neutral pronouns are unique to Sweden and harm Sweden’s image (Wojahn 2015: 154–189).

All in all, many of the attitudes towards *hen* are similar to those Blaubergs (1980), Hellinger (1990), and Pauwels (1998) found 30 to 40 years ago in their analyses of English and German debates on gender-inclusive language.

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