Swedish: Ten Years of Using the Gender-Neutral pronoun *hen* (2012–2022)

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Overview

- History of *hen*
- Analysis of public attitudes towards *hen*

https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=38525567; Created by user: Myskoxen
Swedish

- a North Germanic language
- spoken as a first language by ~10 million speakers (ISOF 2020)
- official language in Sweden and Finland
- in Finland, 5.2% of the population speak Swedish as their first language (OSF 2023)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Swedish_language_map.svg
### Hen – a timeline (1/2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Hen is proposed by a linguist as a short and useful alternative to e.g., hon eller han (“she or he”), inspired by the Finnish gender-neutral pronoun hän (Dunås 1966)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s - 1990s</td>
<td>Hen is occasionally mentioned by other linguists as an inclusive generic term for both women and men (e.g., Molde 1976; Blume 1982; Sahlquist 1984; Mårtensson 1988; Karlgren 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>Hen is introduced by activists in trans*gender and queer communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ca 2005</td>
<td>Hen is used in more widespread queer and feminist magazines and newspapers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Hen is included in the online version of the Nationalencyklopedin (a Swedish-language encyclopedia)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hen – a timeline (2/2)

January 2012
- start of the extensive media debate on *hen*

2015
- *hen* is included in *Svenska Akademiens ordlista* (the "Word list of the Swedish Academy")

2023
- *hen* is widely used in different types of texts; has lost a lot of its activist connotations

Today’s use of *hen*:
1. as a generic pronoun
2. to anonymize the gender identity of specific persons
3. to refer to specific non-binary people
4. as the sole third-person pronoun to challenge gender binary radically
Public attitudes towards *hen* - the corpus

- **2012**
  1474 comments
  (989 from *Svenska Dagbladet*,
  485 from *Flashback forum*)

- **2022**
  1176 comments
  (800 from *Aftonbladet*,
  376 from *Flashback forum*)

Wojahn (2015; 2023)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>US</th>
<th>THEM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- we, the people, ordinary people, normal people, we ordinary people, and a few more</td>
<td>- the extreme feminists, the fanatic ultra-feminists, the crazy feminists, gender-confused feminists, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- the gender idiots, the gender Taliban, the gender weirdos, etc.</td>
<td>- left-wing radicals, ultra-left extremists, the crazy socialists, Marxists, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- moralists, politicians, the elite, etc.</td>
<td>Hardly any changes over time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Types of reactions to *hen*

- denial
- warning
- downplaying
- ridiculing
- personal attack

1. trans*people do not exist
2. ...

There are only two biological sexes! Men! And women! There are no hens! *(Flashback forum, 2022)*

1. *hen* aims to discriminate against cis men
2. *hen* is implemented by an elite aiming to limit the freedom of speech
3. discussions on gender-neutral pronouns are unique to Sweden and damage Sweden’s image abroad
4. ...

Obviously, you must be HBT or Muslim to be accepted in today’s Sweden. As a white working heterosexual man, you don’t get very far… *(online forum, Svenska Dagbladet, 2012)*

In 2022, there are still strong reactions to *hen*. But the total number of negative reactions is lower.
Thank you for listening!

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