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The Assessment of Gender Pronouns in Relation  
to Gender Stereotypes and Sexism

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## Abstract

All languages distinguish between genders to a varying degree. Gender stereotypes in language are often gender-specific, where agentic words are considered as male and communal words are considered as female. Studies have found that countries with gendered languages express more sexism, compared to countries with natural gender or gender-neutral languages. The following study will investigate the assessment of the three gendered pronouns in the Swedish language, by the use of gender stereotypes (i.e., agentic and communal adjectives). It is also of interest to assess the gendered pronouns and gender stereotypes in relation to sexism or sexist beliefs. No relationship was found between the gendered pronouns and the gender stereotypes in this study. However, sexism influenced the assessment of the gendered pronouns, by describing the female pronoun as more communal, compared to the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*. No relationship was found between sexism and the assessment of the male pronoun, compared to the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*. In the future, more research is needed to determine the actual linguistic importance of the gendered pronouns and their potential impact on gender equality.

Keywords: Gender-neutral pronoun, language, stereotyping, agentic, communal, sexism

## The Assessment of Gender Pronouns in Relation to Gender Stereotypes and Sexism

Sweden is considered to be one of the most gender-equal countries in the world when it comes to access to resources and opportunities regarding economic, political, educational- and health-based criteria (Hausmann & Tyson, 2013). However, differences can still be found in the Swedish language through grammatical gender. Studies have shown that language can play a crucial role in people's assessments, behaviours and decision-making processes (Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen & Sczesny, 2007). Sexist language and/or linguistic gender can widen the gap between the sexes and therefore impede gender relations and the relative status of women and men (Gabriel & Gygax, 2008; Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell & Laakso, 2012; Sarrasin, Gabriel & Gygax, 2012).

Languages are grammatically divided into three separate groups: grammatical gender, natural gender and gender-neutral languages (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). Grammatical gender languages (or gendered languages) distinguish gender through (masculine or feminine) nouns, while natural gender languages distinguish gender through pronouns. Gender-neutral languages (or genderless languages), on the other hand, lack any distinction of grammatical gender through nouns. According to Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012), countries with (grammatical) gendered languages have been found to express more sexism, and thus less gender equality than countries with natural gender or gender-neutral languages. Though, countries with natural gender languages have been found to express less sexism, and thus more gender equality in relation to countries with gender-neutral languages (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). Swedish is a natural gender language, which distinguishes gender through pronouns. In 2013, the Swedish Language Council approved the use of a rather newly established gender-neutral pronoun called *hen* (Språkrådet, 2013). The Swedish language incorporates therefore both natural gender and gender-neutral language characteristics.

The following study will investigate the assessment of the three gendered pronouns in the Swedish language, by the use of gender stereotypes (i.e., agentic and communal adjectives). In other words, will the female pronoun be assessed as stereotypically female, and the male pronoun assessed as stereotypically male? Also, how will the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* be assessed?

*What is gender?*

As stated by the World Health Organization (2013), gender is often referred to as the characteristics of which a society or culture manifest as masculine or feminine (Gender, para. 1). Gender signifies the relationship between biological sex and what is considered to be male and female according to culture and society, in relation to behaviour (Bodén & Hammer, 2008). Literature usually distinguishes between two gender theories: biological theory and sociological theory. Biological theory refers to sex differences such as (sex) hormones, while sociological theory refers to characteristics and behaviours that are attributed to the sexes by culture and society (Bodén & Hammer, 2008; Udry, 1994). These so-called gender roles conditioned by culture and society are supported by gendered norms and acceptable behaviour that differs by sex (Udry, 1994). Gender roles can for example be expressed through language as either lexical gender or sexist language. This can give rise to gender inequalities that systematically favour one group (World Health Organization, 2013). In turn, such inequalities can lead to inequities between men and women in various situations and stages in life (e.g., education, employment opportunities, criminal justice and military service). Gender studies present a comprehensive view of this reality between the sexes.

### *What are stereotypes?*

Stereotypes are defined as mental representations of a given group and its members (Bodén & Hammer, 2008). These mental representations are mainly comprised of generalized, negative and positive beliefs concerning the group members' characteristics. The formation of stereotypes is based around three principles, which state that: (a) stereotypes are aids to explanation, (b) stereotypes are energy-saving constructs and (c) stereotypes are shared group beliefs (McGarty, Yzerbyt & Spears, 2002).

Stereotypes are predominantly conveyed through upbringing and socialization. However, language (e.g., through television, films, books, advertisements, radio, magazines and newspapers) is just as an important factor, especially when it comes to the formation and preservation of stereotypes. Furthermore, stereotyping is largely based on cultural and societal structures, which informs of how to act. They also provide information of which behaviors and norms that are considered gender-specific or gender-stereotyped (Bodén & Hammer, 2008). In this way, some behaviors are considered more feminine or female, while others are considered more masculine or male. A female gender stereotype denotes women as emotional, nurturing and sympathetic. The male gender stereotype, on the other hand, describes men as ambitious, confident and aggressive (Bevik & Liljegren, 2010; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Eagly & Wood, 1991; Eagly, Makhijani & Klonsky, 1992; Eagly & Mladinic,

2011). Females in various texts are generally also depicted as passive, submissive and dependent (Oskamp, Kaufman & Atchison Wolterbeek, 1996). In contrast, males are often depicted as active, adventurous and independent (Oskamp et al., 1996).

### *Stereotypes in language*

Stereotypes can be mediated through the use of language. Several stereotypes communicated through language are considered gender-specific and/or gender-stereotyped, with a propensity toward gender dichotomization, meaning that certain characteristics are gender-specific and thus not present in the opposite sex and vice versa. These stereotypes can be based on either agentic or communal traits. Agentic traits consist of characteristics such as being dominant, confident and independent (Eagly et al., 1992). Communal traits, on the other hand, contain characteristics like being emotional, warm and nurturing (Eagly et al., 1992). According to Bosak and Sczesny (2011), agentic and communal traits are gender-specific and/or gender-stereotyped; where agentic traits are regarded as male and communal traits are regarded as female.

Previous studies on linguistics have found that agentic traits are generally assigned to men, while communal traits are assigned to women (Bosak & Sczesny, 2011; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Eagly & Wood, 1991; Eagly et al., 1992; Eagly & Mladinic, 2011; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Williams and Best (1977) conducted a study to evaluate agentic and communal traits in relation to gender stereotypes by using the Adjective Check List (the ACL). The results showed that adjectives like *dominant* and *independent* were associated with the male stereotype, whilst adjectives such as *emotional* and *sympathetic* were associated with the female stereotype, which is consistent with previously mentioned studies. Furthermore, the results indicated no overall favourability of agentic and communal words (Williams & Best, 1977).

### *Gender in language*

All languages distinguish between genders, though the degree can vary considerably. Languages can be grammatically divided into three separate groups: grammatical gender, natural gender and gender-neutral languages (Stahlberg et al., 2007). Table A1 in appendix A outlines the basic differences between the three language categories. Grammatical gender languages (or gendered languages) distinguish gender through nouns, which are assigned a feminine or masculine (or sometimes neuter) gender (Stahlberg et al., 2007). The nouns usually denote gender in reference to people as well. Gendered languages include, for

instance French, German and Russian. Natural gender languages, on the other hand distinguish gender through pronouns (i.e., he or she), with no marking of gender through nouns. Languages in this category consist of, for example the Scandinavian languages (i.e., Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and Icelandic) and English. The last category named gender-neutral languages (or genderless languages) is characterized by the absence of grammatical gender distinction through both nouns and pronouns. This category includes languages such as Finnish, Turkish and Chinese. An example is the Finnish pronoun called *hän*, which can be referred to both *he* and *she*, or when gender is unknown, unimportant, unclear or simply not specified. According to Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012), the prevalent distinction in language of masculine and feminine nouns and pronouns could make individuals more inclined to discriminate between men and women. However, the absence of grammatical gender does not necessarily reflect gender neutrality or a more gender-neutral society (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012).

Language becomes gendered due to different linguistic asymmetries and false generics, which convey the status of women and men very differently. A reason for this is that lexical gender refers to whether a word is gender-specific (e.g., father, grandmother) or gender-neutral (e.g., individual, citizen) (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). Gender asymmetry is generated when gender is lexically marked, although there is no need for it. This is for example the case in words like *steward* and *stewardess*, where the latter becomes a specific marked term, separated from *steward* with a completely different meaning (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). Female counterparts for male words often stem from the masculine term, which demonstrates that the masculine form is considered as generic, since the feminine form is exclusively used in reference to females (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). The male form refers thus both to males and generics, while undermining the female form. Lexically marked gender could affect, not only the perception of social gender, but also the use of stereotypes. The previously mentioned gender asymmetry could furthermore be manifested through address terms like the English *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *Miss*, *Ms* or honorary titles.

In addition to asymmetry, the use of false generics can also affect gender in language. A false generic is a solely masculine or feminine term, used generically to represent both women and men (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). An example of a false generic is the English word for *lawyer*. The majority of false generics are masculine and are commonly used in reference to males as well as females. Another example is the uses of the English word *he*, as in “When a student drops a pencil, *he* should also pick it up” (example from Prewitt-Freilino

et al., 2012). In the previous example, *he* becomes a reference to either a male student or a student in general (male or female).

It is therefore of interest to the present study to investigate the assessment of gendered pronouns in relation to gender stereotypes (i.e., agentic and communal adjectives).

### *Language and gender equality*

Asymmetries in lexical gender, male generics and the systematic way language becomes gendered can, as stated by Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012), influence social gender stereotypes and inequities and thus affect the societal status of women and men. Masculine generics are sometimes considered androcentric, causing women to become invisible in various dialogues. Male generics could therefore, if interpreted in a gendered way, cause a lasting effect on gender stereotyping and role behaviour (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). Studies have for example found that the gendering of language in relation to stereotypes about traditional gender roles could influence, for example employment opportunities (Lindblom, 2012; Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012; Strömbäck & Wikström, 2012). Generics might also cause a problem in legal proceedings, especially for women, when legal documents do not clarify to whom it is referring to (i.e., all people or explicitly to men). Previously mentioned research demonstrates how masculine generics and small changes in the use of gendered language can impact the way people think and behave in relation to gender. Reducing male generics should thus promote the inclusion of women in language. The influence gendered language can have on the social status of women and men, as well as people's decisions, judgments and behaviour, have resulted in a need to change language in order to decrease the occurrence of social inequities in society (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). Measures are therefore being taken to reduce male generics and asymmetries, and thus introduce more gender equality into language. An example of this is the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* in the Swedish language.

All three of the grammatical language groups display gender asymmetry with masculine generics and gender related word structures to a varying degree. This prevalent distinction in language of masculine and feminine nouns and pronouns could make individuals more inclined to discriminate between men and women (Prewitt-Freilino, 2012). A study by Wasserman and Weseley (2009) for example, demonstrated that gendered languages have a tendency to increase sexist attitudes. However, research conducted by Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012) indicated that natural gender languages express less sexism, and thus more gender equality in relation to countries with gender-neutral languages.

The absence of grammatical gender does not necessarily reflect gender neutrality or a more gender-neutral society (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). For example, gender-neutral nouns and pronouns (in gender-neutral languages) can be interpreted with an implicit male bias. Also, the use of gender-neutral terminology (e.g., member of congress) can implicitly carry a gendered interpretation (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). Gender or sex can be expressed through lexical means as well, in words such as *girl*, *brother* and *father* (Stahlberg et al., 2007). The occurrence of gendered language is thus prevalent in all of the three language types, though gender is nevertheless most restricted in gender-neutral languages.

#### *Gender-neutral pronoun: hen*

There are three theories regarding the origin of the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun known as *hen*. The first theory claims that *hen* is an intermediate position between the words *han* (he) and *hon* (she). Another theory holds that *hen* is derived from a mix of *han* (he), *hon* (she) and *den* (it), where the h- is taken from *han* (he) and *hon* (she) and the -en is taken from *den* (it) (Milles, 2011). The last theory states that *hen* originated from the Finnish word *hän* (Lindblom, 2012; Milles, 2011). It is considered as a third person singular and refers to both men and women. The Swedish Language Council has identified two main categories for using *hen*. Firstly, it can be used as an alternative to *he* (*han*) or *she* (*hon*) in situations where gender is considered to be either unknown, unimportant or unclear (Språkrådet, 2013). Secondly, it can be applied to persons who do not wish to be categorized as either male or female, or used by people who simply do not wish to be associated with a two-part gender segregation (Språkrådet, 2013). In the future, the word could perhaps be established as a generic form, and consequently replace the use of male generics (Milles, 2011). The pronoun has become increasingly popular recently among feminists and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (the LGBT movement) (Milles, 2011). For this purpose, the pronoun has gained a wider meaning and is, as a result not only used to convey a political message, but is also used in a more generic sense as well as a reference to certain people.

The use of *hen* could be considered as a mean to reduce preconceptions based on gender in language. On the other hand, some researchers suggest that gender-neutral pronouns could increase the use of male and female stereotypes in gender-neutral languages (Lindblom, 2012; Sarrasin et al., 2012). Although one study conducted on *hen* indicate that the word is in fact interpreted as gender-neutral (Lindblom, 2012).

Very few studies have been conducted in order to determine if the use of *hen* leads to linguistic equality of the sexes. Another interesting factor to deliberate over is whether



changing language will eventually change society in the long run, and if gender-equal language actually contributes to a more gender-equal society. Therefore, it is of great importance to evaluate the effectiveness of the pronoun *hen* and its impact on both language and gender equality.

### *Sexism and language*

Modern sexism stems from old-fashioned sexism (i.e., antipathy towards women) and is characterized by the endorsement of traditional gender roles (Sarrasin et al., 2012). Examples of modern sexist beliefs are: “On average, society treats men and women equally and discrimination is no longer a problem in Sweden” (examples from the Modern Sexism Scale, Ekehammar, Akrami, & Araya, 2000). Modern sexism is also associated with negative attitudes towards feminism, positive attitudes concerning male chauvinism and a decreased understanding in reference to sexist language and gender equality (Watkins et al., 2006).

Sexist language is defined as “words, phrases and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between women and men, or exclude, trivialize or diminish either gender” (Sarrasin et al., 2012, p. 113). According to Cralley & Ruscher (2005), sexism can influence stereotypical notions of gender in language. Studies have, for example shown that people who score high on sexism are more prone to utilize gender stereotypic conclusions and sexist language (Cralley & Ruscher, 2005; Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012; Sarrasin et al., 2012). The grammatical gender of language can also impact sexist attitudes (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). A study by Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012), has found that countries with (grammatical) gendered languages express more sexism, and thus less gender equality compared to countries with natural gender or gender-neutral languages. Sexist beliefs have also been linked to negative attitudes towards gender-neutral language (Sarrasin et al., 2012).

### *Purpose of study*

The purpose of this study is to investigate the assessment of the three gendered pronouns (i.e., *hon* (she), *han* (he), *hen* (gender neutral)) in the Swedish language in relation to gender stereotypes (i.e., agentic and communal adjectives). It is hypothesized that the female pronoun *hon* (she) will be assessed as stereotypically female (communal), and the male pronoun *han* (he) will be assessed as stereotypically male (agentic). The gender-neutral pronoun *hen* is hypothesized as being less agentic than *han* (he), and less communal than *hon* (she).

Another aspect to investigate in this study is the assessment of the gendered pronouns and gender stereotypes in relation to sexism or sexist beliefs. It is hypothesized that the female

pronoun *hon* (she) will be assessed as more stereotypically female (communal), and the male pronoun *han* (he) will be assessed as more stereotypically male (agentic), when associated with more sexist beliefs or attitudes. The gender-neutral pronoun *hen* is hypothesized as being less agentic than *han* (he), and less communal than *hon* (she) in relation to sexism. High scores on sexism will thus generate more stereotypically gendered language in relation to the gendered pronouns.

The present study will be conducted by the use of a new method called the Evaluative Sentence Generating task (the ESG task). This method is a simple and effective tool for measuring general implicit biases in language (Gustafsson Sendén, Lindholm & Sikström, 2013). In the ESG task, participants are asked to construct sentences with the presented words. A study by Gustafsson Sendén et al. (2013) indicate that the results derived from the ESG task demonstrate that participants use language to create evaluative differences even in the absence of explicit comparisons or descriptions. The ESG task is therefore an effective tool for examining biases such as gender stereotypes in the form of agentic and communal adjectives.

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 51 undergraduate psychology students (39 women and 12 men) participated in this study, with an age range from 19 to 37 years ( $M = 22.7$ ,  $SD = 3.72$ ). All of the participants were enrolled at Lund University, Sweden.

### *Instruments*

*The Evaluative Sentence Generating Task:* The ESG task is composed of stimuli words that contain (a) a personal pronoun, (b) a verb and (c) an evaluative adjective. Stimuli words were presented in three circles where the first circle comprised the pronouns, the second the verbs and the third comprised the adjectives (i.e., positive, negative, agentic and communal). A total of six personal pronouns (i.e., *jag* (I), *hon* (she), *han* (he), *hen* (gender-neutral), *vi* (we), *de* (they)) were included in the ESG task, with the intention to obscure the true pronouns of interest. Also, five verbs were included (e.g., *är* (is/am/are), *tar* (talk), *arbetar* (work)). The ESG task for this study contained a total of 10 adjectives (i.e., 3 agentic, 3 communal, 2 positive and 2 negative). Four different variations of the ESG task were used in order to counterbalance any order effects of the ten stimuli words. Participants were restricted to not use any of the stimuli words more than twice. Positive and negative stimuli words were selected based on previous research conducted by Gustafsson Sendén et al. (2013). These

were not used in the analyses of this study, but could, however be of use in future studies. The agentic and communal stimuli words were selected based on a previous study conducted by Eagly et al. (1992), where agentic words were regarded as male and communal words were regarded as female. Therefore, agentic stimuli words were expected to be linked to *han* (*he*), while communal stimuli words were expected to be linked to *hon* (*she*). Table A2 in appendix A outlines all categories and stimuli words used, while appendix B shows the ESG task given to participants in the present study.

*Modern Sexism Scale:* The Modern Sexism Scale consists of eight items, assessing denial of continuing discrimination (e.g., “Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in Sweden”), antagonism towards (women’s) demands (e.g., “The women’s movement serves no purpose and should be abolished”) and resentment about special favours (e.g., “The school curriculum should be adapted to girls’ needs ”), reversed item (Ekehammar et al., 2000). All of the items were rated on a 1-5 point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. The Swedish translation by Ekehammar et al. (2000) was used for the present study. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .74 for the Swedish version.

### *Measures*

Sentences generated through the ESG task were coded such that a pronoun combined with an agentic or communal adjective was coded with a positive value (+1). Then, two differential measures were calculated. The difference between the number of sentences with *hen* and *han* (gender-neutral pronoun and he) for agentic adjectives was estimated. Also, the difference between the number of sentences with *hen* and *hon* (gender-neutral pronoun and she) for communal adjectives was estimated as well. A positive value represented a tendency to assess *hen* as more agentic compared to *han* (he) or more communal compared to *hon* (she). On the other hand, a negative value represented a tendency to assess *hen* as less agentic compared to *han* (he) or communal compared to *hon* (she).

### *Procedure*

The experiment was carried out at Lund University after the participants’ lecture. Psychology classes were only approached upon confirmation from their professors. Participants were asked to take part in a questionnaire containing language and sentence structure. They were informed that their involvement would be completely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. The participants were also told that the questionnaire would take about 7-10 min to complete. No other information was given in order to obscure the actual measures of interest for this study. The ESG task was completed first, followed by the

additional questionnaire (on sexism) in the lecture hall. Participants received a piece of chocolate as a thank you for their contribution, upon completion of the questionnaire.

### Results

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the assessment of the three gendered pronouns in the Swedish language in relation to gender stereotypes (i.e., agentic and communal adjectives). It was also of interest to assess the gendered pronouns and gender stereotypes in relation to sexism or sexist beliefs.

A paired-dependent sample t-test was conducted to evaluate the assessment of gender stereotypes regarding the gendered pronouns. It was hypothesized that the female pronoun *hon* would be assessed as stereotypically female (communal), and the male pronoun *han* would be assessed as stereotypically male (agentic). The gender-neutral pronoun *hen* would be assessed as less agentic than the male pronoun *han* (he), and less communal than female pronoun *hon* (she). Obtained results indicate no statistical significance for the female pronoun *hon* as stereotypically more female (communal) ( $M = .25$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ,  $t(50) = -1.72$ ,  $p > .05$ ) than the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*, nor was the male pronoun *han* perceived stereotypically more male (agentic), ( $M = -.01$ ,  $SD = .61$ ,  $t(50) = -1.72$ ,  $p > .05$ ) than the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*, which is not in line with the hypotheses. Thus, the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* was not assessed as less communal than the female pronoun *hon* and less agentic than the male pronoun *han*. That is, the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* cannot be considered, in this study, to be perceived as more gender-neutral than either of the gendered pronouns.

To test the assessment of gender stereotypes and the gendered pronouns in relation to sexism, two hierarchical multiple regressions were performed for each of the two differential measures. Due to the large number of female participants in this study, these were performed after controlling for the influence of gender. Analyses were conducted by using SPSS REGRESSION for evaluation of assumptions. No outliers or missing data were found among the cases,  $N = 51$ .

*Hen and hon, communal:* It was hypothesized that the female pronoun *hon* (she) would be assessed as more communal, compared to *hen*, when associated with more sexist beliefs or attitudes. A hierarchical multiple regression was therefore conducted to test the differential measure between the number of sentences with *hen* and *hon* for communal adjectives as the dependent variable and sexism as the independent variable, after controlling for the influence of gender. Obtained results showed a negative linear relationship between sexism and the difference index. Sexism made a unique and statistically significant contribution to the

prediction of the female pronoun *hon* for communal adjectives. Thus, sexism influenced the participants' assessment of the female pronoun *hon* for communal adjectives, leading the female pronoun to be perceived as more communal or stereotypically female, compared to the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*. This model was statistically significant at  $p < .05$  with a standardized regression coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of  $-.31$ ,  $p < .05$ . Thus, sexist attitudes increase the difference between the female pronoun *hon* and the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* in communal traits, after controlling for gender. This means that the more sexist beliefs the participants incorporate, the more likely it is to assess the female pronoun *hon* as more communal, compared to the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*.

*Hen and han, agentic:* It was hypothesized that the male pronoun *han* (he) would be assessed as more agentic than the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*, when associated with more sexist beliefs or attitudes. A hierarchical multiple regression was therefore conducted to test the differential measure between the number of sentences with *hen* and *han* for agentic adjectives as the dependent variable and sexism as the independent variable, after controlling for the influence of gender. No statistical significance was found between sexism and the male pronoun *han* for agentic adjectives. Thus, sexism did not influence the participants' assessment of the male pronoun *han* for agentic adjectives, compared to the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*. This model was not statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . The standardized regression coefficient ( $\beta$ ) was  $.02$ .

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the assessment of the three gendered pronouns in the Swedish language in relation to gender stereotypes (i.e., agentic and communal adjectives). It was also of interest to assess the gendered pronouns and gender stereotypes in relation to sexism or sexist beliefs.

Obtained results indicated no statistical significance for the female pronoun *hon* as stereotypically female (communal), and the male pronoun *han* as stereotypically male (agentic), in relation to the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*, which did not support the hypotheses. Thus, the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* was not assessed as less communal than the female pronoun *hon* and less agentic than the male pronoun *han*. A possible reason for the previous results might be due to the large number of female participants in this study.

Results also indicated that sexism influenced the participants' assessment of the female pronoun *hon* for communal adjectives, leading the female pronoun to be perceived as more communal or stereotypically female, compared to the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*. This was

in line with both the hypothesis of the present study and previous research (Cralley & Ruscher, 2005; Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012; Sarrasin et al., 2012).

Finally, the results showed no influence of sexism on the participants' assessment of the male pronoun *han* for agentic adjectives, compared to the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*. This finding was not in line with the hypothesis of the present study. A reason for this might be due to the low number of male participants.

Another reason for the results in the present study, could be that the participants had not yet been able to take a stand regarding the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*, and had thus not have had any time to reflect any further on its meaning, use and importance. Moreover, the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* was perhaps simply not a word which the participants found controversial. Sexist attitudes might also have influenced the use and occurrence of the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*. More sexist attitudes could therefore have lead the participants to use the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* less, or perhaps the participants simply refused to use it. On the other hand, participants who score high on sexism, perhaps do not perceive language as sexist and thus do not acknowledge the actual need for a gender-neutral pronoun (Watkins et al., 2006). Another factor to keep in mind is the relationship between gender and the use of the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*. A previous study has found that women tend to be more positive toward the use of the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* compared to men (Språktidningen, 2013).

The use of the ESG task in this study can also be questioned. Perhaps it did not measure the actual values of interest, and another type of implementation might have been more appropriate or suitable for the purpose of this survey. Also, the ESG task might not have been a sufficient enough tool to measure the implicit biases, though previous research state otherwise (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2013).

According to the current findings, language might perhaps not be as important after all, although some studies claim the opposite (Williams & Best, 1977; Strömbäck & Wikström, 2012). It is a possibility that language has actually begun to change and therefore spun away from not only former gender roles, but also from what has previously been considered as stereotypically female and male.

*Limitations:* As with most empirical research, the present study was not without limitations. First, the low sample size could have limit the generalizability of the current findings. A larger sample is therefore recommended for possible future replications of this study. The selection of agentic and communal adjectives can also be reviewed, as these could be considered outdated to some extent, mostly due to their effect as semantic reflex cues

(Strömbäck & Wikström, 2012). Furthermore, the questionnaire was distributed after the participants' lecture. Several students who did not wish to take part in the study vacated the lecture hall during the completion of the questionnaire, and this might have caused a disturbance in the participants' ability to concentrate on the task at hand. Another major aspect to keep in mind was the uneven distribution of women and men. The majority of participants in this study were women (76%). A more uniform distribution over the sexes would have been much more desirable, although gender was controlled for in the performed analyses.

*Future research:* It would be interesting for future research to examine how the uses of gendered pronouns are assessed in different contexts (e.g., work, educational settings). Also, different communities of people such as from the LGBT movement and the feminist movement, where the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* is considerably more established, would be of great interest. Another would be to examine the assessment of the gendered pronouns in relation to positive and negative adjectives. Also, replications of the current study in 10-20 years' time could perhaps show a more generally established use of the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*, and that masculine generics have thus lost their semantic reflex as a cue for natural gender. In line with that, it would also be of value for future replications of this study to extend the age range of the participants, in order to determine whether the study holds over different birth cohorts.

An additional aspect to consider in future research is the participants' possible tendency to exhibit some form of gender dichotomization, by favouring their own sex. The potential influence of gender dichotomization would therefore be interesting to examine in future studies in relation to the gendered pronouns, and the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*. Furthermore, previous research have found that sexism influence negative attitudes toward gender-neutral pronouns (Sarrasin et al., 2012). However, much more research is needed to determine why and how sexism influences the use of gender stereotypes in language, especially in relation to the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*.

## Conclusions

The current study indicates that sexism can possibly influence the assessment of the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* compared to the gendered pronouns, in relation to gender stereotypes. Gendered and sexist language through the use of pronouns can perhaps play a role in people's assessments, behaviours and decision-making processes, and can impede the

relative status of women and men (Gabriel & Gygax, 2008; Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012; Sarrasin et al., 2012; Stahlberg et al., 2007). However, more research is needed to determine the influence of sexism and gender stereotypes on the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* in relation to the gendered pronouns. Taking everything into account, it seems that all languages distinguish between genders to a varying degree.

The gender-neutral pronoun *hen* has been heavily debated. For some people it is a very political and loaded word filled with ideological beliefs. It is often portrayed as a provoking word that can obscure the true meaning of what is actually being conveyed (Milles, 2011). In this way, language can never be completely neutral. However, the use of gender in language could transform along with other changes in the world. For example, discussions regarding the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* could lead to an increased awareness about gender inequalities. Changes in language may be of importance in the pursuit of gender equality and the status of women and men. Although, such linguistic transformations must be accompanied by social and political adjustments as well, in order to truly change existing asymmetries regarding both gender and language (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). Societal gender equality is perhaps, in the end less about whether language contains grammatical gender per se, but rather about the ability to reduce sexist language, gender stereotyping and gender inequalities.



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*Catharina Bevik, 17/1-2014*

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## Appendix A

Table A1.

*Expression of gender in different language types.*

	Languages		
	Gendered	Natural Gender	Gender-Neutral
Frequency	High	Middle	Low
Necessity	Often	Sometimes	Rare
Linguistic forms	Lexical, pronominal, grammatical	Lexical, pronominal	Lexical

Table A2.

*Words used in the evaluative sentence generating (ESG) task, categorized into word class, with agentic, communal and valence for adjectives.*

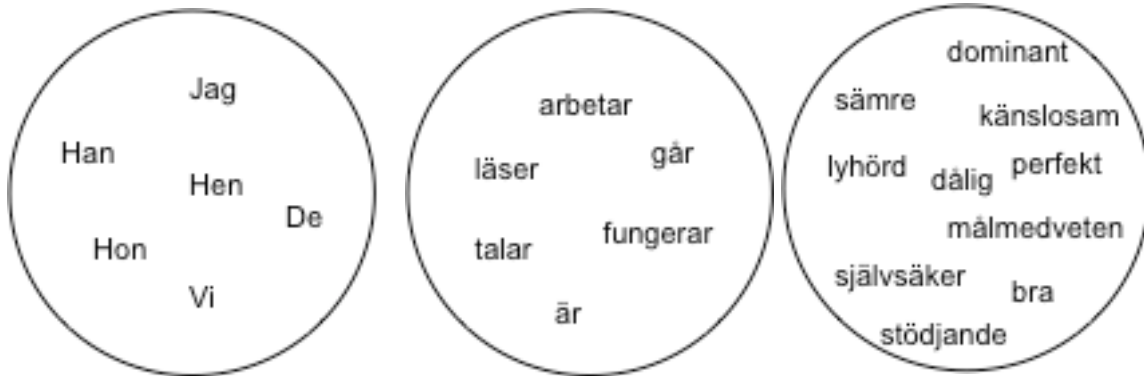
Pronouns	Verbs	Adjectives			
		Agentic	Communal	Positive	Negative
I ( <i>jag</i> )	Is/Am/Are ( <i>är</i> )	Dominant	Emotional	Good ( <i>bra</i> )	Bad ( <i>dålig</i> )
He ( <i>han</i> )	Talk ( <i>talat</i> )	( <i>dominant</i> )	( <i>känslosam</i> )	Perfect	Worse
She ( <i>hon</i> )	Read ( <i>läser</i> )	Confident	Supportive	( <i>perfekt</i> )	( <i>sämre</i> )
Gender-neutral	Work ( <i>arbetar, fungerar</i> )	( <i>självssäker</i> ) Purposeful	( <i>stödjande</i> ) Responsive		
( <i>hen</i> )	Walk ( <i>går</i> )	( <i>målmedveten</i> )	( <i>lyhörd</i> )		
We ( <i>vi</i> )					
They ( <i>de</i> )					

*Note:* Swedish words in parenthesis.

## Appendix B

***Meningar av svenskans vanligaste ord***

Din uppgift är att skapa nio grammatiskt fullständiga meningar av nedanstående ord.



Varje mening ska innehålla tre ord med ett ord från varje kategori (pronomen, verb och adjektiv). Du får böja samtliga ord så att korrekt grammatiska meningar kan skapas (t.ex. snabb -> snabba - > snabbt). Du får använda samma ord vid högst två tillfällen.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_