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# Language and Gender: Research and Desiderata

## How to (not) encode Referential Gender in Norwegian Bokmål

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# My plan

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I: The language: Norwegian (bokmål)

II: Own research on role nouns

III: (Lack of) Research on third person pronouns

# Norwegian (bokmål)

- North Germanic language, total of ca. 5.3 million speakers
- Språkrådet (Language Council): the government's administrative body for language issues

Spoken language(s):

Written  
language(s):

Bokmål  
(> 80%)



Nynorsk

# Grammatical gender: a thief, a bridge, a hole

	NYNORSK	BOKMÅL <sub>R</sub>	BOKMÅL <sub>M</sub>	Swedish SVENSK	Danish DANSK	
Masculine <i>HANKJØNN</i>	<b>ein</b> tjuv	<b>en</b> tjuv	<b>en</b> tyv	<b>en</b> tjuv	<b>en</b> tyv	Common Gender <i>FELLESKJØNN</i>
Feminine <i>HOKJØNN</i>	<b>ei</b> bru	<b>ei</b> bru	<b>en</b> bro	<b>en</b> bro	<b>en</b> bro	
Neuter <i>INKJEKJØNN</i>	<b>eit</b> hol	<b>et</b> hol	<b>et</b> hull	<b>ett</b> hål	<b>et</b> hul	

Grammatisk kjønn i skandinaviske språk  
 Av Rolf Theil. <https://snl.no/nynorsk>

=> speakers of bokmål can choose between a three-genus and a two-genus system; with research suggesting that the feminine form has almost disappeared.

# Grammatical & referential gender

## Three-genus system

**Ei** kvinne [a woman]

**En** mann [a man]



**En** kvinne [a woman]

**En** mann [a man]

## Two-genus system

*=> grammatical gender no longer encodes referential gender in personal nouns!*

# 3rd person pronouns (bokmål)

	<b>Singular</b>	<b>Plurale</b>
	Subject/Object	Subject/Object
Female referent	hun/henne	de/dem
Male referent	han/ham	de/dem
Gender diverse referent [part of spelling norms since June 2022]	hen/hen	de/dem
Non-human reference/neuter	den/det	de/dem

# Role nouns / job titles

- “do-er”, e.g. å bake => baker [to bake - baker]:
  - Suffixes (e.g. -inne) to mark female referential gender are no longer in use (70s/80s; there are exceptions though)
- “topic-man”, e.g. politimann [policeman]:
  - Alternatives for lexical gender marks (e.g. politibetjent)
- 2020: governmental decision to change [nearly] all gendered job titles

*=> decline in encoding social gender information!*

# Summary I:

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Various linguistic changes contribute to a reduction in the frequency of grammatical, morphological and lexical gender cues in Norwegian (bokmål).



# Own research: Norwegian

- Six studies between 2007 and 2023 (on the role of textual information [e.g. morphology] and world knowledge [e.g. stereotypes] in the formation of mental representations)
- Gender binary framework
- Variety of experimental tasks; Visually presented text (words, sentences); Auditorily presented text (sentences)
- Student samples; bokmål
- Can the results shed light on whether the decline in linguistic gender cues (over time) has contributed to Norwegian role nouns being understood as non-informative in terms of referential gender?

# Methodological challenge

- **How to know if something is “not informative”?**
- Earlier studies: **No effect as indicator**
  - Nomination task (“Name your favourite ...”)
  - Word-association task (“Can X be part of Y?”)
  - Sentence-evaluation task (self-paced reading task; time confined reading task; listening task)
- **Recent studies: Effect as indicator**
  - Response priming - Face-Pair Decision task (“Does the picture show two women, two men, or a woman and a man?”)

# Research findings on role nouns

Task	Key finding	Source
<b>Nomination task</b> (Unmarked vs. marked via adjectives)	<b>More likely</b> to nominate male exemplars when unmarked form used	Gabriel, U. (2008). Social Psychology
<b>Sentence continuation task</b> (Unmarked form; varied by gender ratio expectations)	<b>More likely</b> (2008) to associate with male exemplars when gender ratio 50/50, <b>Slightly more likely</b> (2017) ...	Gabriel, U. & Gygax, P. (2008). Scandinavian Journal of Psychology Gabriel, U., Behne, D. & Gygax, P. (2017). Journal of Cognitive Psychology
<b>Word association task</b> (Unmarked form; varied by gender ratio expectations)	<b>Similarly likely</b> to associate with male exemplars and female exemplars when gender ratio 50/50	Kim, J., Gabriel, U. & Gygax, P. (2019). PlosOne. Kim, J., Gabriel, U. & Gygax, P. (In preparation)
<b>Response priming: Face pair decision task</b>	<b>Facilitates mixed gender</b> categorisation when gender ratio 50/50	Kim et al. (2023). Open Psychology.

# Summary II

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Taken together these results seem to suggest

- that the likelihood of assuming that a noun refers to men has decreased over time;
- that - in a binary gender framework - no gender is favoured.

However:

- Time of data collection and experimental task are confounded
- Additional external factors (history)
- Studies were not designed to measure changes over time

# Example 1/2:

## Slutt på helsesøster: Flere menn søkte seg til helsesykepleier, men få kom inn

**Kjønn og opptak.** Fra 1. januar 2019 ble navnet helsesøster byttet til helsesykepleier. Dette har gitt flere mannlige søkere, men ikke flere menn i utdanningen. Unntaket er ved OsloMet, der mannlige søkere kan få opptil 5 tilleggspoeng.



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Source: Khrono

PUBLISERT MANDAG 05. AUGUST 2019 - 00:28 SIST OPPDATERT ONSDAG 14. AUGUST 2019 - 11:39

transl. The end of the public health “**sister**”: More men applied to become public health nurses

# Example 2/2:

Kjønnsnøytrale ord og titler:

## Uten et begrep som fedrekvote er det lite sannsynlig at norske menn ville tatt permisjon

KRONIKK: Det er ikke alltid politisk korrekte begrep fremmer likestilling.



*Agnes Bamford*

DOKTORGRADSKANDIDAT I INTERKULTURELL KOMMUNIKASJON, NORGES HANDELSHØYSKOLE

Fredag 26. februar 2021 - 04:30

transl. Without a term like “**fathers** quote” (paternity leave), it is unlikely that Norwegian men would take leave

# Recap: 3rd person pronoun *hen*

- Norwegian marks referent gender on the 3rd person pronouns singular; traditional *hun/han*; additional pronoun *hen*

	Subject/Object	
Female referent	hun/henne	Generic use possible, not encouraged
Male referent	han/ham	Generic use possible, not encouraged
Gender diverse referent	hen/hen	Part of spelling norms since June 2022; Generic use possible, not encouraged

# Språkråd (Language Council)

- [...] When encountering the pronoun 'hen' in texts, it is often within contexts where gender specification is unnecessary.

*Example: If a student is caught cheating, **hen** can be banned from the university for five years.*

- [...] The pronoun 'hen' may refer to a specific individual, as exemplified here:

*Example: **Hen** was born in 1991 and defines themselves as non-binary.*

Source: <https://www.sprakradet.no/svardatabase/sporsmal-og-svar/hen/>

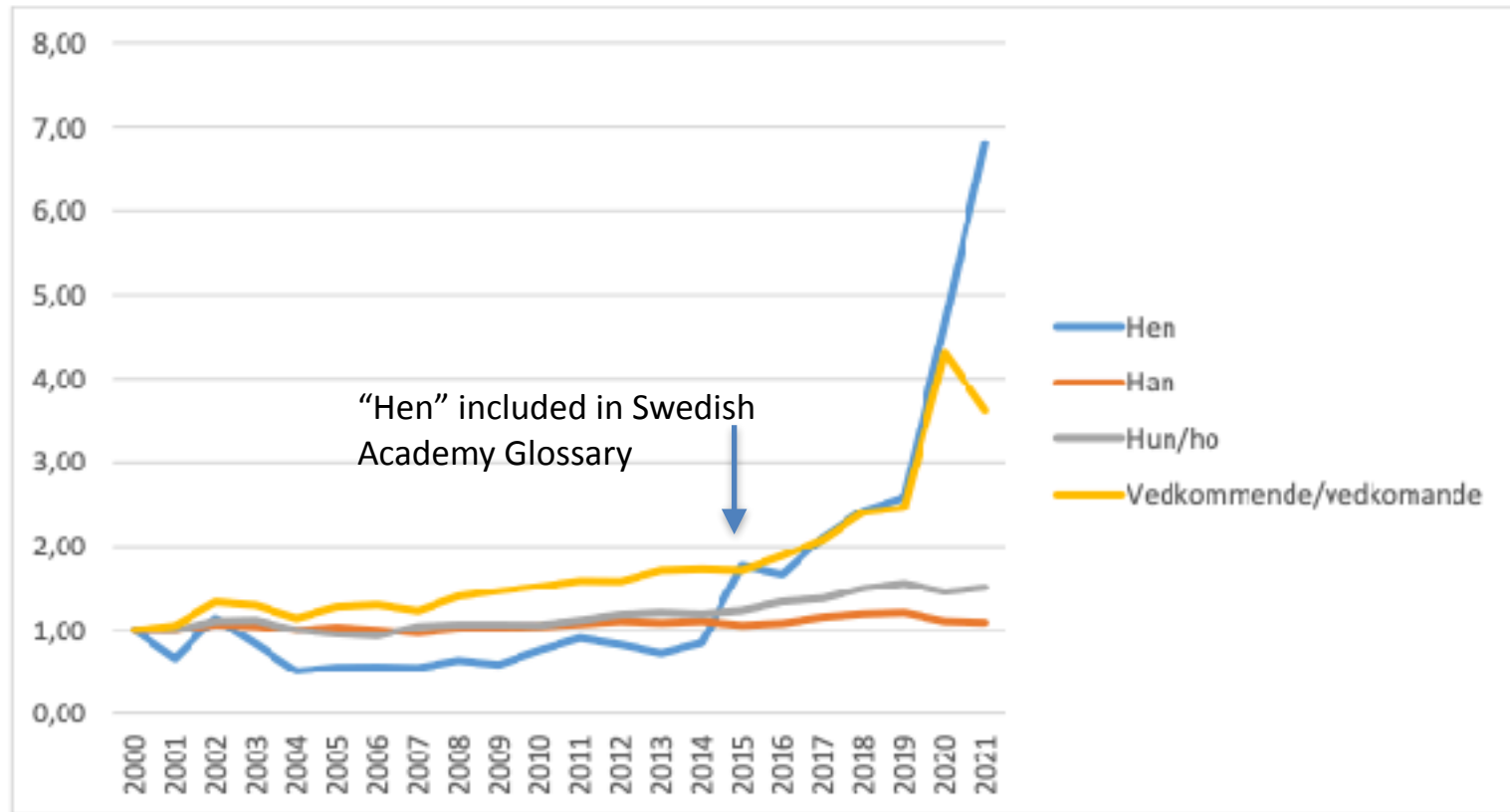


# Recommendation

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- *Språkrådet* (Language Council) recommends
  - gender diverse usage **when a person prefers** to be referred to by this pronoun;
  - to use **alternatives** (e.g., "hun eller han" [s/he], "vedkommende" [that person]) for gender-neutral usage.

# Relative frequency (Web Corpus)



The graphs show relative frequency over time with the value in 2000 set to 1.00.

Source: <https://www.sprakradet.no/globalassets/vi-og-vart/hoyringar/2022/sakspapir-juni-2022-normering-av-hen.pdf>

# Empirical research

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- Use has increased since 2016 (we don't know much in what function - meta-generic-specific)
- Little empirical research for Norwegian (Three master theses - 2016, 2018, 2019 and one research article; frequency analysis; qualitative research)
- Ongoing public debate; few actors; polarised and polarising
- More research available on Swedish *hen* - can it be assumed that many of those findings would also apply for Norwegian *hen*?

# Summary III

- Little empirical research on Norwegian 3rd person pronoun *hen*
- Three questions:
  - **Different needs:** Recognition and respect towards a vulnerable group that is not legally recognised (gendered *hen*) vs. equality by making gender invisible (privatisation; non-gendered *hen*) - is such a *dual-function* a good idea?
  - Cultural and individual **importance of gender categories:** Who experiences their identity as threatened? Who experiences their identity as strengthened?
  - **Linguistic prescriptivism** in a community that offers at least two written varieties and where dialects are valued?

# Do small words make a difference? Investigating the effects of gender-neutral pronouns on mental gender representations and perceptions of text quality in Dutch, French and Norwegian

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