The comprehensibility and appreciation of nonbinary pronouns in newspaper reporting. The case of *hen* and *die* in Dutch

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This paper examines the effect of the recently introduced Dutch nonbinary third person singular pronouns *hen* and *die* on text comprehensibility and text appreciation in the context of newspaper reporting on nonbinary persons. Moreover, it presents a first measurement of Flemish people's familiarity with and attitudes towards this pronominal reform in Dutch in its early stage. In a survey experiment using an experimental between-subjects design, we compared the use of nonbinary *hen* and *die* (as subject forms, both combined with *hen* as object and *hun* as possessive form) with established referential strategies: the use of binary pronouns and pronoun avoidance, i.e., consistently repeating name and profession of the nonbinary person. We also examined the potential mediating role of perceived awkwardness of the referential strategy used and tested the moderating effect of cueing, i.e. making readers aware of the fact that the person reported on identifies as nonbinary and prefers nonbinary pronouns.

Data were collected from a representative sample of 352 Dutch-speaking Belgians. Text comprehensibility was measured objectively through a recall test (see Pöschko and Prieler 2018). In addition, we used 12 items measuring word difficulty, sentence difficulty, subjective comprehensibility and variety of language use. All of these items were based on the validated comprehensibility questionnaire of Friedrich (2017) and Friedrich and Heise (2019). The subscales 'word difficulty', 'sentence difficulty' and 'subjective comprehensibility' were used to measure text comprehensibility subjectively. Since the subscale 'variety of language use' measures the esthetic appeal of texts, we used it as an assessment of text appreciation. As we, however, also wanted to investigate text appreciation more extensively, we added two items to this subscale (*The text was well-phrased; The text was pleasant to read*) based on Pöschko and Prieler (2018) and Bradley et al. (2019). As a potential mediator, the perceived awkwardness of the referential strategy used in the article was assessed through five statements (e.g. *I thought the words used in the article to refer to the youth author were well chosen/appropriate*).

To test the main effects of referential strategy on text comprehensibility and text appreciation, we ran univariate one-way analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs). The results show that gender-neutral pronouns have no negative effect on text comprehensibility compared to binary pronouns and the avoidance of pronoun usage, and that only gender-neutral *hen-hen-hun* significantly lowers text appreciation compared to binary pronouns. The mediating role of perceived awkwardness and the moderated mediation were tested by means of Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro. It was found that perceived awkwardness explains the lower scores of nonbinary *hen* and that cueing improves those scores.

In addition, the study shows that about half of our representative sample of Flemish citizens were, at the time of the experiment (the beginning of 2022), not yet familiar with gender-neutral pronouns in Dutch, and that their attitude towards them was, on average, neutral to slightly negative.

Even though we did not find a statistically significant difference in impact on text comprehensibility and appreciation between gender-neutral *die* or *hen*, we did find a statistically significant difference in their effect on the mediating variable perceived awkwardness. In addition, when tapping directly into respondents' attitudes towards *hen* and *die*, we notice a slight preference for *die* as compared to *hen*. And finally, our manipulation checks also indicated that the combination *hen-hen-hun* was more salient than the combination *die-hen-hun*. Overall, our findings suggest that the nonbinary pronoun *die* has the most potential to be successfully implemented.

References

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