

Non-Binary Pronouns Are Conquering the West



by Bruce Bawer

For a long time now, Sweden has had a history of being impressively ahead of the rest of the West in a number of areas: appeasing Nazis, remaining neutral during the Cold War, exporting porn, legalizing euthanasia, serving meatballs at furniture emporia, capitulating to Islam, putting legitimate Ukrainian refugees into asylum centers where they're raped by bogus Muslim refugees, etc.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that Sweden was also ahead of the curve on the pronoun front. *Way* ahead.

To be sure, the Swedish pronoun for people claiming to be non-binary, *hen*, has other uses (for example, to avoid "he or she"-type constructions). First proposed way back in 1966, it was inspired by the Finnish language, in which pronouns aren't gendered and the word *hän* means both "he" and "she." The debate really took off in 2011, when a trendy Stockholm day-

care center [erased](#) gendered pronouns from its working vocabulary. The word finally [entered](#) the Swedish Academy's official dictionary a full seven years ago.

Other European countries are way behind. Not until this past January did the Language Council of Norway (*Språkrådet*) [join](#) the *hen* brigade. As it happens, the word *hen* already existed in Norwegian – it's an adverb meaning "away, off, over." But now, as in Swedish, it's also a [pronoun](#) for non-binary individuals. Ditto *høn* in Danish and *hán* in Icelandic.

The idea of inventing new Icelandic pronouns feels especially odd, by the way, given the centuries-long refusal of that language's guardians to change it in any way whatsoever. (Citizens can't go by non-Icelandic names, for example, and the Icelandic words for new concepts or inventions must have an Icelandic etymology – hence the Icelandic word for "computer," *tölva*, which combines the Icelandic word for "number" and an Old Norse word for "fortune teller.") But as it turns out, the Icelandic purists bent their rules not only to allow a new pronoun but also, with the passage of the [Gender Autonomy Act](#) in 2019, to exempt non-binary individuals from the ancient rule that all surnames must end with either *-son* (for men) or *-dóttir* (for women).

Like Icelanders, of course, Frenchmen are notoriously protective of their language. Nonetheless, the non-binary pronoun *iel*, a cross between *il* and *elle*, was admitted last October to the *Le Robert* online dictionary. Widespread outrage ensued. [Noting](#) that French pronouns haven't changed since the fourth century, Larousse lexicographer Bernard Cerquiglini called the acceptance of *iel* a "militant act." The debate even reached Quebec, where Marilou J.-Marsan, a literature teacher, [pointed](#) out that adding a non-binary pronoun to the language throws a monkey wrench into its grammar since French is, after all, highly gendered.

As for German, it hasn't yet come anywhere near this far, although some native speakers do use the newfangled pronouns *xier* (subject) and *sier* (object). Similarly, some speakers of Spanish, eschewing *él* and *ella*, opt for *elle* (not to be confused with the French *elle*), although the Association of Academies of the Spanish Language has yet to give this neologism its approval. Catalan has *elli*; Galician, *eli*; Portuguese, *elu*.

One argument for this lexicological revolution is that languages are in constant flux. True enough: Every three months, the *Oxford English Dictionary* adds dozens of words, the most recent [list](#) including a slew of Islam-related terms such as *hijabi*, *jummah*, *kufr*, *tawhid*. But the shoehorning of a brand-new word in between the third-person singular male and female pronouns is a big deal. In the cases described above, in fact, it's a transparent attempt at social engineering.

In November 2017, the *Atlantic* ran an [article](#) by Annabelle Timsit about widespread efforts to degender the French language. But the efforts had nothing to do with non-binary people: As recently as four and a half years ago, that issue had yet to raise its head. Rather, the goal was to promote women's equality by addressing situations whereby, for example, "if you have a room full of ten women and just one man, you have to describe the whole group in the masculine." Supporters of this move, wrote Timsit, view language as "a vector for social progress"; she quoted linguist Raphaël Haddad's description of language as "the space where we must inscribe societal transformations."

George Orwell couldn't have put it better. Well, actually, he *did* put it better, in "The Principles of Newspeak," his appendix to *1984*. Referring, of course, to the official language of the dystopian nation of Oceania, he [wrote](#):

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the

devotees of Ingsoc [English socialism, Oceania's ruling ideology], but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak [English] forgotten, a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words.

Like Newspeak, the attempt throughout the Western world to force people to use new pronouns is, at bottom, an attempt to force them to embrace a new world order in which reality-defying ideas about gender identity go unquestioned.

Orwell, then, wouldn't be at all surprised by what happened to a Swedish teacher who recently declined to refer to a particular student as *hen*. The kid took the case to the [Equality Ombudsman](#) (“a government agency in Sweden tasked with supervising the laws relating to discrimination on the basis of someone's sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation or age”), which ordered the teacher to pay the kid \$15,000. (The average annual teacher's salary in Sweden is \$57,000.) If the teacher refuses to pay, the case will go to the Swedish Supreme Court.

It will be remembered that Jordan Peterson shot to fame after complaining that Canadian [Bill C-16](#) would compel citizens to use alternative pronouns. The charge was fiercely denied by the bill's proponents, who mocked Peterson as a hysteric. It has since been proven that Peterson was absolutely right to be concerned that his nation's government was seeking the right to force him and other citizens – at the risk of fine, incarceration, and/or professional and social obloquy – to give assent to ideas in which no sane person can truly believe.

Peterson understands – as Orwell did – that such conflicts are

never really about the irrational truth claims that are supposedly being proffered but about the determination of those in authority to use such claims to demonstrate their power. As the pressure to buy into this new age of unreason increases across the Western world, then, let's keep in mind that it's not really about pronouns. It's about control and submission. And if you give in on pronouns today, heaven knows what it will be tomorrow.

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