

Kids show cultural gender bias

February 9 2012, By Jamie Hanlon



(PhysOrg.com) -- Talk about gender confusion! A recent study by University of Alberta researchers Elena Nicoladis and Cassandra Foursha-Stevenson in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* into whether speaking French influenced how children assigned gender to objects yielded some interesting observations. Nicoladis and Foursha-Stevenson found some differences between the unilingual English children and the bilingual French-English children they surveyed.

Some of the more startling results from the Anglo crowd? Cows are boys. Cats and stars are girls.

Le culture or la culture: our bias

The researchers showed objects or images to the children participating in

the study and asked them whether the objects seemed to be masculine or feminine in nature. While the unilingual children seemed to identify most objects as masculine, many younger bilingual children were willing to consider that, globally speaking, some objects could be feminine in nature even though, Nicoladis says, “their categorizations didn’t correspond very well to whether the objects were masculine or feminine in French.”

As to how Bessie may have inadvertently become Bernie, Nicoladis says that there is an explanation as to why the children may have chosen masculine more often than feminine, even for cows: it reveals a bias embedded in the language.

“Traditionally, in most languages – and English is no exception – the kind of default pronoun is a masculine pronoun,” Nicoladis says. “If you read prescriptive grammar books, they might say ‘everyone put on his coat’ not ‘everyone put on his or her coat.’ The default, even when the gender isn’t specified, is masculine.”

No need to check under the hood

These gender-bending statements are no cause for panic. The researchers note that the identity issues were actually relatively common among the unilingual and bilingual kids, with French seeming to have only a small influence with pre-school children.

“What we found is that the monolingual children had a huge boy bias for all of the objects we asked them about,” says Nicoladis. “Cats are girls, stars are [girls](#).” But to the participants, pretty much everything else was masculine, including cows. To the researchers, it said more about culture and language rather than factual knowledge.

Don't know much about biology...

Nicoladis says that the gender identification is not based on biological knowledge in the younger years. She notes that the older children she surveyed seemed able to reason that cows were the female members of the cattle clan, indicating their understanding of the biology of the animals. And, while some may be tempted to chalk it up to “kids saying the darndest things,” some adults seemed to get a little mixed up, too.

“We found the same trends with adults who clearly should be able to reason about the biology,” says Nicoladis. “But I think when you're just answering the question really fast, it's picking up some other aspect of their understanding of the world.” The embedded [bias](#) towards the masculine pronoun was, in effect, trumping the obvious fact that cows are female.

Vive la difference!

Nicoladis says that, with older participants, speaking French seemed to give the kids a different perspective on objects, likely due to the use of masculine and feminine determiners in the language. She notes that the older bilingual children were more apt to identify objects in English as feminine corresponding with their feminine counterparts in the French language, such as: cow/la vache. But she says this is more likely an influence of the structure of the language than it is a reflection of their knowledge of biology.

It's quite possible that the gender in French is making a difference, and not that [bilingual children](#)'s factual knowledge about cows is any better than that of monolingual [children](#), says Nicoladis. “It's just that the association – how they associate cows – is a little bit changed when they know something about French.”

Provided by University of Alberta

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