

Researchers reveal link between job titles and gender equality

November 29 2018



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (MPI) have revealed a link between role nouns (e.g. job titles) in gendered languages and gender equality. The study, which examined whether the masculine form in the plural in German is understood as gender-neutral or as specific to males, confirms earlier findings in behavioural research: People tend to interpret the grammatically masculine form as male-specific, despite its regular use to refer to both males and females.

"Der Buchhalter, der Musiker, der Student." Three everyday German words, but there might be more to them than meets the eye. In today's society, in which gender equality is often the subject of heated socio-political debates, role nouns in grammatically gendered languages are perhaps not as innocent as they may seem.

In social contexts, the influence of gendered role nouns is unmistakable; Dutch school pupils perceive jobs presented in the masculine form to be more important, and in German, masculine role nouns used to address all genders are often interpreted as referring to only males. This can have a profound impact on gender equality.

Grammar versus stereotypes

In gender-neutral languages, such as English, speakers can only detect the gender of the referent via the use of pronouns and stereotypicality. In gendered languages, however, while stereotypes also play a role, grammatical gender indicates the gender of the referent since specific forms are used to indicate males and females. In German, for example, the suffix -innen is added.

In the study, which used event-related potentials (ERPs) to assess grammatical gender processing in German, the researchers selected stereotypically neutral role nouns and used them to create sentences in which that role noun (grammatically masculine or feminine) introduced a group of people. In the second part of the sentence, this group was specified as containing men or women.

"Focusing on specific neural markers, which highlight how well we can process and integrate different pieces of information when reading, we looked at how the brains of our participants responded to the words men and women," explained Julia Misersky, member of the Neurobiology of Language group of the MPI.

Processing difficulties and masculine bias

The study revealed that participants found it difficult to process sentences with mismatches (incongruent continuations) in the biological and the grammatical gender, for example, where a grammatically masculine role [noun](#) was followed by women and vice versa.

"Grammatically masculine role nouns seem to be interpreted as specific to men, yet are regularly used to refer to all genders," said Misersky.

"Our research suggests masculine role nouns may be inadequate for representing all genders equally," the researcher added.

Overlap with behavioral research

"Behavioral research already suggests that masculine role nouns may lead to a male bias in interpretation. However, these experiments usually require conscious decision-making, so people may actively think about gender," explained Misersky. For this study, the team used a different approach; they used EEG to observe [brain processes](#) that occur while

reading, so without conscious decision-making. In future, both approaches can be combined to discover how [language](#) affects the way people interpret gender roles.

Misersky added, "The much-debated use of gender-neutral/[gender-fair role](#) nouns may provide an interesting new avenue to find out whether the male bias can be reduced."

More information: Julia Misersky et al, Grammatical Gender in German Influences How Role-Nouns Are Interpreted: Evidence from ERPs, *Discourse Processes* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/0163853X.2018.1541382](#)

Provided by Max Planck Society

Citation: Researchers reveal link between job titles and gender equality (2018, November 29) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-11-reveal-link-job-titles-gender.html>

| |
|---|
| This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only. |
|---|