

Hoofdstuk 12

A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC VIEW ON STEREOTYPICAL AND GRAMMATICAL GENDER: THE EFFECTS AND REMEDIES

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12.1 Introduction

Gender is a social category we encounter on a daily basis. In fact, social psychology suggests it is one of the first things we notice about another person (Banaji & Hardin, 1996; Fiske, 2000). But what is gender? Definitions are slowly becoming more diverse, though traditionally they have been based on distinctions between males and females. While sex is largely discussed from a biological basis, gender relates to socio-cultural roles and identity. However to this day, gender and sex are often discussed as dependent on one another, and are even used interchangeably, in part since not all languages have distinct terms for the two concepts. Despite the definitional differences, gender is felt by many to be an integral part of identity, and so it is no surprise that gender equality has become such a debated issue in society and politics. The saying goes that actions speak louder than words, and many would argue this to be true when it comes to advancing gender equality in our society. However, words may be actions too.

In the following chapter, we will discuss the distinction between stereotypes and grammatical gender in language. They constitute the two most prominent ways in which we see gender in language and we will briefly outline how the two manifest across languages. Following on from this discussion, we will outline how stereotypes and grammatical gender are processed when people read, and how it influences their decision-making. We will discuss the gender bias in language use, the idea behind gender-fair language and in which ways it can be used to promote more gender-inclusivity.

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12.2 How gender manifests itself in language

The question of whether the peculiarities of the language we speak can influence or even determine our thoughts has been debated since the first half of the 20th century. This debate around a potential language and thought interaction is still very much on-going, and while the trend has moved away from a strictly deterministic view, most researchers would agree that language may at least bias thought in certain situations (see Hardin & Banaji, 1993). Gender is an important category outside of language, but it is also manifested in various different ways within languages. Therefore, gender constitutes a particularly interesting domain to study how language and thought can interact. Let us first take a look at the different ways in which gender can occur within a language.

So-called definitional nouns such as *bachelor* or *bachelorette* are one straightforward way in which gender is expressed in language. These nouns are considered definitional simply because gender is assumed to be part of their very definition, their inherent meaning. Definitional nouns can be assumed to be a manifestation of gender that is found across all languages.

Another kind of gender information found across languages is that of gender stereotypes. For example, nouns that are used to describe people through naming their occupation or hobby (i.e., so-called role nouns) can be primarily associated with one gender. For example, when we hear the word *nurse*, we might think of a woman, but when we hear the word *mechanic*, we might be inclined to think of a man (e.g., Misersky et al., 2014). Words expressing activities (e.g., doing yoga) have also been shown to give rise to gender stereotypes (Redl, Eerland, & Sanders, 2018). The gender stereotypes associated with certain words can differ across languages. Interestingly, Garnham, Doehren and Gygax (2015) showed that people's gender stereotypes regarding occupations are actually fairly representative of the real world.

Definitional nouns, as well as role nouns and their respective gender associations, are thus a phenomenon found across virtually all languages. However, another type of gender associations in language, namely that of grammatical gender, depends on the grammatical system of a language and can largely vary between languages: some languages have it, others don't. Following Sczesny, Formanowicz and Moser (2016), languages can be divided into the following three categories, depending on the presence or absence of grammatical gender: genderless languages, natural gender languages and grammatical gender languages (see also Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen, & Sczesny, 2007).

Genderless languages such as Finnish and Turkish are genderless in the sense that they have no grammatical gender: neither nouns nor pronouns nor any other part of language are grammatically gender-marked. But of course, gender is still represented in “genderless” languages through definitional nouns (e.g., Turkish *anne* ‘mother’) and gender stereotypes (e.g., Turkish *polis* ‘police officer’). Natural gender languages such as English and Swedish, on the other hand, have at least some traces of grammatical gender, such as gendered pronouns (e.g., Swedish *hon* ‘she’, *han* ‘he’), but most role nouns are not marked for masculine or feminine gender.² The name natural gender language derives from the fact that the appropriate noun or pronoun is picked based on the sex of the person the word is supposed to refer to (Sczesny et al., 2016). Dutch as spoken in the Netherlands has been gradually developing from an originally grammatical gender language into a natural gender language, but still knows more gender-marked role nouns than, for example, English (e.g., *student/studente* ‘male student/female student’). Again, definitional and stereotypical gender can of course also be found in natural gender languages. Finally, there are grammatical gender languages such as German, where all nouns fall into a grammatical gender category. German, for example, distinguishes between masculine, feminine and neuter grammatical gender. When nouns are used to refer to people, there is a direct mapping between masculine grammatical gender and males, as well as feminine grammatical gender and females (with only a few exceptions, e.g., neuter *das Mädchen* ‘the girl’). This is also true for role nouns (e.g., *der Pilot* ‘the male pilot’), which can thus carry two types of gender information: grammatical and stereotypical gender information. These two types of gender information can also be contradictory (e.g., *der Kindergärtner* ‘the male kindergarten teacher’).

When a language distinguishes between masculine and feminine grammatical gender, the masculine gender usually has a special status: it is used as the default. Thus, when a person’s gender is unknown or irrelevant, the masculine gender is used. For example, when a teacher wants to complain about a group of littering students to the university’s janitor, they will do that using the masculine word *Studenten* in German or similarly *studenten* in Dutch (both ‘male students’), and not *Studentinnen* or *studentes* (both ‘female students’). Similarly, the same teacher might state the course requirements by saying that every student has to hand in *his* paper on time:

- | | |
|---|---------|
| 1. <i>Elke student moet zijn paper op tijd inleveren.</i> | Dutch |
| <i>Jeder Student muss seine Arbeit pünktlich abgeben.</i> | German |
| <i>Every student must hand in his paper on time.</i> | English |

2 Note that the definition of the three types of gender languages by Sczesny et al. (2016) largely focuses on whether the present grammatical gender categories directly map onto biological sex. Thus, while Dutch also knows grammatical gender, since nouns fall into either the common or neuter category, it is still considered a natural gender language and not a grammatical gender language, because this distinction does not directly relate to sex and gender categories outside of language

Such masculine words which are used to refer to people in general, regardless of their gender, are usually referred to as masculine generics. Both natural as well as grammatical gender languages know this phenomenon. The opposite, namely the female grammatical gender being used as the default, occurs in barely any languages (Aikhenvald, 2016). Avoiding masculine generics and the possible use of more inclusive language has long been a focus point in the equality debate. But could the words we use really influence our thoughts, and by extension equality, regarding job opportunities and gender roles in society? Psycholinguistic research suggests they could.

12.3 Effects of gender in language on language processing and decision-making

Psycholinguistic research employs various techniques to understand how we process language as it unfolds, for example during reading. As a result, we can study how the brain reacts to language, even when readers do not actively have to evaluate what they are reading. In other words, this allows us to understand the automatic processing of language when no decision-making (e.g., responding to questions about the text) is required. One such technique is the electroencephalogram (EEG), a neuroimaging method which enables us to study the electrical activity generated in the brain during various (cognitive) processes, including language comprehension. Specific patterns can be attributed to underlying specific processes. Two specific response patterns that have often been studied in language processing, including in relation to gender in language, are the so-called N400 and P600 effects. Grossly simplified, both have been associated with integrative processes, i.e. the degree of how well different parts of language input, such as the beginning and the end of a sentence, are compatible with each other (for further reading, see Kutas & Federmeier, 2011 on the N400; Osterhout & Holcomb, 1992 on the P600, and Schmitt, Lamers, & Münte, 2002 for N400/P600 in relation to processing of referential gender in language). While reflecting different processing mechanisms, larger responses in the N400 and/or P600 reflect processing difficulties during language comprehension, and these patterns have been used to study gender in language in various ways.

12.3.1 Gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes reflect socio-cultural beliefs about gender roles. As described above, they can be found in language in various ways, often between the lines.³

3 The socio-cultural beliefs reflected in stereotypes can also be considered in wider linguistic contexts. For example, when we talk about groups of people, we often contrast these groups in a way in which one group becomes the perceived norm, whereas the other is the effect to be explained. An example of this is to say that women lead differently than men (example from Bruckmüller, Hegarty & Abele, 2012). In this example, the framing of the statement results in men becoming the status quo, whereas

For now, we shall focus on stereotypes in relation to role nouns. Testing English speakers, White, Crites, Taylor and Corral (2009) used a method in which they presented word pairs consisting of a role noun and an adjective. Word-pairs, which mismatched in gender stereotypicality (e.g., secretary–aggressive) resulted in a larger N400 effect than matching word-pairs (e.g., secretary–caring). This shows how single words such as role nouns have the power to elicit a specific association in line with socio-cultural stereotypes we find in our environment.

In a study with English-speaking participants, Osterhout, Bersick, and McLaughlin (1997) examined participants' processing of sentences in which a reflexive pronoun (*himself/herself*) followed a role noun. The pronouns either did or did not match a role noun's gender definition (e.g., *bachelor*) or stereotype (e.g., *doctor*). The amplitude of the P600 was larger for mismatches between reflexives and definitional role nouns (e.g., *bachelor ... herself*) than for mismatches involving stereotypical nouns (e.g., *doctor ... herself*). Though definitional and stereotypical role nouns resulted in different processing, Osterhout et al. (1997) found a P600 effect for both types of gender mismatches. Thus, both types of gendered nouns led participants to expect a specific reflexive pronoun that would match the gender suggested by the nouns. As a result, participants' brains spot a mismatch upon reading '*The doctor prepared herself for the operation*' compared to when the sentence read '*himself*'. To summarise, the violation of gender stereotypes associated with role nouns can lead to immediate processing problems as reflected in the brain's electrical activity.

12.3.2 Grammatical gender

Recent psycholinguistic research by Misersky, Majid and Snijders (2018) has looked into how our brain processes the grammatical gender information found in role nouns in German. As briefly outlined above, role nouns in the masculine form can be used to specifically talk about males, but they can also be used generically with the intention to address all genders. Indeed, since the masculine is regularly used as a default to describe groups of people, it is potentially problematic if such masculine forms cause a male bias and hinder a gender-neutral interpretation. Misersky et al.'s study aimed to answer the question of whether grammatically masculine forms are interpreted as specific (i.e., referring only to men) or generic (i.e., referring to all genders). To really hone in on the grammatical effect as separate from the effects of stereotype information, the researchers opted to only look at role nouns which people rated as stereotypically neutral (i.e., the role nouns were not predominantly

women are perceived deviant from that status quo Bruckmuller et al (2012) found that framing affects what we perceive to be the (linguistic) norm and how this may reinforce existing gender stereotypes and their relation to power and status. In the main text, we will continue to discuss gender in language predominantly from the perspective of single words carrying gender information within sentences

associated with males or females, respectively). In their study, German native speakers read sentences, which introduced a group of people using a role noun in either the grammatically masculine or the grammatically feminine form, and later in the sentence, the group was specified as consisting in part of either men or women, e.g.:

2. *Die Studenten/Studentinnen gingen zur Mensa, weil einige der Männer/Frauen Hunger hatten.*

‘The students went to the canteen because some of the men/women were hungry.’

Using EEG, the researchers recorded how the participants’ brain responded to their reading *men* or *women* in each of the experimental sentences. Note that a masculine form such as *Studenten* is perfectly fine to use for either males or females from a grammar and style perspective. The feminine form (e.g., *Studentinnen*), however, specifically refers to females, deeming the continuation *men* incorrect. The reasons for introducing both the masculine and feminine forms were threefold. First, it made for a balanced experimental design since both masculine and feminine grammatical gender were considered. Second, including *Studentinnen* followed by *men* would establish a benchmark of processing difficulty, since this pairing is incorrect to use. While *Studenten* followed by *women* is a correct pairing, processing difficulties were still expected. Establishing a benchmark allowed the researchers to contextualise the strength of processing difficulties elicited by *Studenten* followed by *women*. Interestingly, using both forms within one study has been criticised as artificially increasing any bias the masculine form might have by contrasting it with the highly specific feminine form. However, this was the third reason to keep both forms in the design, as we encounter both forms in daily language use and so it is important to reflect this linguistic reality in experimental work.

Misersky and colleagues (2018) specifically looked at the response patterns mentioned above, which have been associated with integrative processes relevant to successful sentence processing. If the masculine (e.g., *Studenten*) is processed as generic, the brain should respond similarly to either continuation, be it *men* or *women*. However, this was not the case. Indeed, when participants read *women* after a masculine form like *Studenten*, their brain response suggested they had difficulty integrating the two. This response was absent when *Studenten* was followed by *men*. In other words, while the masculine can function as a generic, the results suggest that participants had a bias toward interpreting masculine forms as specifically referring to males.

12.3.3 Combined research on grammatical gender and gender stereotypes

The research examples above clearly show the respective relevance of grammatical gender and stereotype information in how we process language. From a psycholinguistic perspective, it is worth studying grammar and stereotypes separately to understand their specific contribution to language processing. However, in the real world, we often encounter these two types of gender information together – and sometimes they even contradict each other. It is therefore worthwhile to include both in experimental setups and study how they may (or may not) interact.

One such study was set up by Irmen (2007) who used a reading paradigm paired with eye-tracking methodology. During reading experiments using this methodology, the participants' pupil movement is tracked such that we can see which features of a given text they fixate on. This allows us to understand which parts of the language allow for easier or more difficult processing, with longer fixation times being associated with longer processing times and potential processing difficulties. Additionally, eye-tracking gives detailed insights into the time-course of language processing.

Irmen (2007) conducted two eye-tracking experiments. In Experiment 1, participants read passages in which a group was introduced by means of a stereotypically male, female or neutral role noun. Importantly, in addition to the stereotype information, the role nouns all carried masculine grammatical gender. The group was then referred back to by the continuation *diese Frauen* 'these women' or *diese Männer* 'these men'. A mismatch between the stereotype and the continuation led to an increase in reading times right before and after the continuation, but only for male stereotype contexts. This means that encountering *diese Frauen* 'these women' in a male stereotype context led to processing difficulties. Irmen (2007) suggests this effect might be due to stereotype information and grammatical information both being used in order to prepare for the upcoming continuation. As a result, when participants read a stereotypically male role noun in the grammatically masculine (e.g., *die Schmiede*, 'the blacksmiths'), both the stereotype and grammatical information added up to cue for a male referent (*diese Männer*). Conversely, when participants read female role nouns in the grammatically masculine (e.g., *die Kindergärtner*, 'the kindergarten teachers'), they received cues for either continuation and were thus flexible in interpretation. Additionally, Irmen (2007) found a mismatch between the continuation *Frauen* 'women' and the grammatical gender of the masculine generic role noun lead to an increase in reading time on the role name itself, thus reflecting a male bias induced by the masculine generic. In Experiment 2, role nouns not marked for gender (e.g., *Studierende* 'students') were tested using the same setup as in Experiment 1. Irmen (2007) found evidence for a general male bias in which people (as described by the role nouns) are considered to be males by default, even if no gender cue is given by stereotype or grammatical information.

Reali, Esaulova and von Stockhausen (2015) tested how pervasive the grammatical gender of role nouns is in a grammatical gender language such as German. To do so, they used descriptions of role nouns rather than the role nouns themselves (e.g., *stellt Möbel her* 'produces furniture' instead of *Tischler* 'carpenter'). The role noun descriptions varied in terms of gender stereotype. By doing this, they tried to tease apart gender stereotypes and grammatical gender in a highly gendered language such as German, while also looking to see if the role noun description still invokes the role noun and, with it, the role noun's grammatical gender. In other words, they could test how pervasive the grammatical gender of role nouns is. Reali et al. (2015) presented their native German speakers first with a description of someone with a job that was either stereotypically male, female or neutral. In a second sentence, participants read the pronoun *he* or *she* which revealed the gender of the person described. Importantly, they did not use role nouns in the initial descriptions to avoid grammatical gender markers, which would provide additional cues to gender besides the stereotype information. Though, they hypothesised that the grammatical gender might be activated nonetheless. Their results indicate that when the stereotype information of the descriptions mismatched the grammatical gender of the pronoun, participants fixated longer on the pronouns. Interestingly, the researchers also found an asymmetry in this mismatch effect: When participants read a stereotypically female descriptions, followed by *he*, processing difficulties started much earlier compared to stereotypically male descriptions followed by *she*. Thus, *she* was easier to link to all descriptions in comparison to *he*, for which only a male description led to easy processing. In other words, a male referent (*he*) is penalised when not adhering to a male stereotype, whereas a female referent (*she*) is granted more flexibility with regards to what gender role is appropriate for them.

Similar asymmetries have also been observed by Redl and colleagues (2018), which highlights the socio-cultural change towards more women employing a larger array of professions. Importantly, Reali et al. (2015) did not find that the role noun descriptions activated the grammatical gender of the role noun itself. Thus, it is possible to isolate the effect of gender stereotypes from grammatical gender effects in grammatical gender languages. Furthermore, Reali et al. (2015) did not find a relationship between the eye-tracking patterns and their participants' individual attitudes to sexism and gender roles. Thus, the automatic processes we study in EEG or eye-tracking studies do not necessarily causally affect the decisions people make. This is important to note, as it highlights that there may not necessarily be a causal link between peoples' attitudes, their automatic response patterns as seen in EEG or eye-tracking, and the decisions that they end up making. Indeed, the link between brain signatures, eye movements, and how they relate to results we see in decision-making experiments still needs to be explored further and deserves scientific attention. But for now we can conclude that gender stereotypes which are encoded in language, as well as the use of the masculine grammatical gender as a default, both affect language processing and give rise to expectations we have about the people these words

refer to. In this way, gender in language biases our interpretation of gender and (in) appropriate gender roles during some cognitive processes. Next, let us look towards the research that has focused on the effects language can have on decision-making.

12.3.4 Decision-making and societal effects of gender in language

Recently, a study with Dutch and German primary school children has revealed how wide-reaching the effects of gender on language may be. As discussed, both languages have different grammatical gender systems, but in both languages we can theoretically choose between *metselaars* (masculine; German: *Maurer*) and *metseelaarsters* (feminine; German: *Maurerinnen*), depending on whether we want to talk about men or women. Importantly though, *metselaars* can be used for men, but also for groups consisting of men and women. In the experiment, one group of children was presented with the masculine forms (e.g., *metselaars*), and another with a pair form addressing males and females explicitly (e.g., *metselaars en metseelaarsters*). Both groups had to answer questions about job status and accessibility. For jobs stereotypically associated with men, children who read the pair form felt that the job was more accessible and that the chances of succeeding in the job would be higher, compared to their peers who read only the masculine form. This was true for both boys and girls. Therefore, the researchers suggest that using words which explicitly address males and females – as in the pair form *metselaars en metseelaarsters* – “empowers young children to believe: ‘YES I CAN!’” (Vervecken & Hannover, 2015, p. 88).

12.4 Avoiding the gender bias

As we have seen above, genders are not treated equally throughout languages and this has unwanted effects on language-related tasks such as reading (e.g., Misersky, Majid & Snijders, 2018) as well as beyond language (e.g., Vervecken & Hannover, 2015). Therefore, attempts have been made in many languages to reduce the bias that comes with masculine generics – be it role nouns, pronouns or other parts of language – and opt for what is often called gender-fair language instead (e.g., Sczesny et al., 2016). Put simply, masculine words are swapped for more inclusive alternatives in order to make language more gender-fair, and there are different strategies for doing so: neutralisation, feminisation or a combination of the two. Neutralisation, on the one hand, seeks to replace masculine word forms with neutral ones (e.g., *pollicemen* → *police officers*). Feminisation, on the other hand, contrasts the masculine word form with its feminine equivalent (e.g., *pollicemen* → *pollicemen and pollicewomen*). Which strategy is most suited depends on the language and how important grammatical gender as a category is within it – and even then the right choice is often not obvious.

For example, in German, every noun is either feminine, masculine or neuter. Thus, grammatical gender is a very prominent feature, ubiquitous and hard to avoid altogether. The dominant strategy for German therefore is feminisation, e.g., using *die Arbeitnehmerinnen und Arbeitnehmer* 'the female employees and male employees' instead of just *Arbeitnehmer* 'male employees'. However, feminisation is oftentimes complemented with neutralisation whenever possible, e.g., using new inventions such as *Studierende* 'students', for which the masculine and feminine word forms are identical, instead of *Studenten* 'students', which is grammatically masculine.⁴

Conversely, languages such as English do not mark grammatical gender on nouns, with only pronouns showing this gender distinction (*he, she, it*). Thus, it is somewhat easier to avoid grammatical gender altogether compared to a language such as German, and therefore neutralisation is the prevalent strategy of choice for English.

The Dutch language lies somewhere in between English and German, and while debates about whether feminisation or neutralisation should be used in Dutch go back decades (e.g., Van Alphen, 1983), there is no consistent strategy that has been widely accepted. Below, we will present some suggestions as to how gender-fair language can be implemented in both English and Dutch in order to avoid the male bias which has been shown to be introduced by masculine generics (see above). Before delving into this, let us first turn to the question of whether implementing gender-fair language has the desired effect.

12.5 Gender-fair language

12.5.1 Does it do the trick?

We have seen that masculine generics lead to a male bias that we should avoid, but can we actually do that by using gender-fair language? Irmen and Roßberg (2004) conducted three reading experiments in German to investigate the male bias of masculine generic role nouns (e.g., *Hundebesitzer* 'male dog owner'), but also of their alternatives: the commonly used feminisation strategy of splitting (e.g., *Hundebesitzerinnen und Hundebesitzer* 'female and male dog owners'), and what they call gender-unmarked forms (e.g., *Studierende* 'students'). The results again indicate that masculine generics lead to a male bias. Crucially, they found that this male bias can be successfully avoided by using the split forms and explicitly referring to men *and* women instead. The use of split forms even outweighed the

4 In German, new role nouns are often based on verbs, as is the case for *Studierende* (instead of *Studenten*). *Studierende* 'students' is based on the present participle form *studierend* 'studying' of the verb *studieren* 'to study'. This is not possible for role nouns for which a verb form does not exist, as is the case for *Bürgermeister* 'mayor'.

effect of gender stereotypes; by explicitly naming men and women, the gender stereotype was overwritten. Thus, for example, when mechanics were introduced using the split form (i.e., *Mechaniker und Mechanikerinnen* 'male mechanics and female mechanics'), the masculine gender stereotype associated with *mechanic* showed no effect. Interestingly, Irmen and Roßberg (2004) also found that using the supposedly neutral gender-unmarked forms such as *Studierende* 'students' still led to a male bias – according to them possibly due to a more general cognitive male bias – but the authors conclude that using gender-unmarked forms is still better than sticking with the original masculine form, since the male bias of the former is smaller.

Heise (2000) came to a similar conclusion in another experiment on German. She showed each participant a sentence that introduced a group of people using either a masculine generic role noun or the split form (e.g., *The diners found something in their soup*). Under the pretext of a creativity test, participants had to write a short story about one of these people introduced in the sentence. The results showed that the majority of stories were written about a man after participants had been shown the masculine generic sentence, while the distribution between stories featuring men and women was more equal after the person was introduced using the split form.

Thus, gender-fair language and particularly split forms successfully make women more visible. Interestingly, this enhanced visibility through the use of feminine forms can also have unwanted side effects. For example, split forms reinforce the idea that gender is purely binary and do not accommodate people who do not identify as male or female (Gabriel, Gygax & Kuhn, 2018). Unfortunately, we are not aware of any studies investigating the linguistic visibility of non-binary people after either a masculine generic or the split form.

A different kind of unwanted side effect has been found for Polish, where feminine job titles are still rarely used. Formanowicz, Cislak, Szczesny, Bedynska and Braun (2013) found that using these relatively rare feminine word forms reflects negatively on female applicants during a job selection process. More specifically, in their experiment they found that participants were less inclined to hire a female applicant when she was referred to with a feminine role noun in application documents, than when she was referred to with a masculine role noun or when a male applicant was presented. However, the authors argue that as these feminine word forms are becoming more frequent, the negative connotations associated with them will decline, and the positive effect of making women more visible would prevail.

Research has further shown that once decided to use split forms to make women more visible, this should be done consistently within a text, as the inconsistent use of split forms can actually have the opposite of the intended effect. Gygax and

Gabriel (2008) showed that when split forms and masculine generics are used within the same text, the latter are interpreted as even less generic and referring to men only – thus, their male bias increases despite the effort to reduce it.

Finally, the readability and comprehensibility of gender-fair texts have often been criticised and used as an argument against gender-fair language. Steiger-Loerbroks and von Stockhausen (2014) tested empirically whether the readability and comprehensibility of German legal texts is in fact impaired by using gender-neutral word forms instead of masculine generics.⁵ They did not find a difference in total reading times between the two types of texts, and they even found that comprehensibility had increased for gender-fair texts.

To sum up, avoiding masculine generics and using gender-fair language can successfully reduce the male bias within a language. It has not been shown to impair the readability and comprehensibility of legal texts. Furthermore, using split forms can even outweigh a gender stereotype bias, but consistent use is important. We will now see how this can be done in English and Dutch.

12.5.2 How to use gender-fair language

12.5.2.1 English

As described above, grammatical gender is not a very prominent category in English, and gender-fair language can therefore be achieved through neutralisation (see also Hellinger, 2001). There is a reasonable number of words featuring the word *man*, which can easily be avoided by using more neutral words instead, for example:

3. mankind	→	humankind
policeman	→	police officer
fireman	→	firefighter
chairman	→	chair, chairperson

There is also a handful of feminine role nouns ending in *-ess* (e.g., *actress*, *waitress*). The general trend for these words is to render the ‘male’ word form ‘neutral’ and use it for both men and women (e.g., *actor*, *waiter*) (“*-ess*, suffix.” 2018).

However, the masculine generic, which will probably be encountered most often, is the masculine pronoun *he*, as well as *him*, *his* and *himself* (e.g., *Every student must hand in his proposal on time*), and style guides generally recommend to avoid its

⁵ Note that they only compared masculine generics with gender-neutral forms (e.g., *Studierende* ‘students’), but did not test split forms (e.g., *Studentinnen und Studenten* ‘female and male students’)

use (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2010). One alternative to generic masculine pronouns is *singular they* (e.g., *Every student must hand in **their** proposal on time*). The pronouns *they*, *them*, *their*, and *themselves* are then used instead of the masculine pronouns without changing the sentence otherwise. The advantage of singular *they* over alternatives such as *he/she* is that *they* is truly genderless and therefore even more inclusive as it goes beyond a binary gender categorisation. While singular *they* has become increasingly popular (e.g., American Dialect Society, 2016; Baranowski, 2002; LaScotte, 2016), it is still not the favoured option in most style guides due to the perceived mismatch in number between the plural pronoun and the single person it is thought to refer to (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2010). To be on the safe side, it is therefore recommended to use the plural pronoun in actual plural contexts and thereby avoid having to specify a person's gender,⁶ e.g.:

4. All students must hand in their proposals in time. They are further required to submit a motivation letter.

To sum up, masculine generics in English can be avoided relatively easily by pluralising sentences which would otherwise contain generic *he*, *him*, *his* and *himself*, and by avoiding words which contain generic *man* and role nouns which are still marked for gender otherwise (e.g., *waitress*). A less officially accepted, but increasingly popular alternative, is singular *they*, which we have also chosen to use in this chapter.

12.5.2.2 Dutch

As described above, with Dutch falling in between German and English in terms of grammatical gender, the choice between neutralisation and feminisation is not obvious. Official advice on what gender-fair language could or should look like is issued by the *Nederlandse Taalunie* ('Dutch Language Union'), an official organisation which issues language policies and advice on linguistic matters. Further guidelines come from the well-established dictionary *Van Dale*. Let us discuss how masculine generic pronouns and role nouns can be avoided in turn and whether feminisation or neutralisation is more suitable – taking into account the advice by these official institutions.

⁶ Note that the American Psychological Association (2010) does not recommend the use of singular *they* in generic contexts (i.e., for one or multiple persons of which the gender is unknown or irrelevant). However, using singular *they* for a person who chooses *they* as their personal pronoun is highly recommended, also by the APA. In the main text, we will consider gender-inclusive language in generic contexts, which do not cover cases in which a person prefers to be referred to by *they*. In general, people's personal preferences should *always* be considered carefully when referring to them.

When it comes to Dutch pronouns, we are aware of only one study which investigated a Dutch masculine generic pronoun, namely *zijn* ‘his’ (Redl et al., 2018). In this study, no evidence for a male bias of this particular pronoun was found. However, currently ongoing research suggests that Dutch masculine generic pronouns do cause a male bias (Redl, de Swart, Frank & de Hoop, 2019). Furthermore, given the well-established male bias of masculine pronouns in English (Moulton, Robinson & Elias, 1978), these pronouns are better avoided in Dutch as well. As opposed to style guides for the English language, which generally are in favour of the avoidance of masculine generic pronouns, Dutch institutions are less outspoken and less wary regarding the use of masculine pronouns to refer to all genders. The Dutch Language Union as well as the Van Dale specifically state that the generic use of masculine pronouns such as *hij* ‘he’ and *zijn* ‘his’ is the common way to refer to all genders. However, they further state that one can use split forms such as *hij of zij* ‘he or she’ if one wishes to emphasise that both men and women are being referred to, an option that has increased in use (Van Dale, 2015, p. xxxvi; “Zijn / haar (de sollicitant).” n.d.), e.g.:

5. *Elke werknemer moet zijn of haar vakantie op tijd aanvragen.*
 ‘Every employee must submit his or her vacation request on time.’

A good and somewhat less cumbersome way to avoid masculine pronouns is, similar to English, pluralisation, e.g.:

6. *Alle werknemers moeten hun vakantie op tijd aanvragen.*
 ‘All employees must submit their vacation request on time.’

Thus, a male bias induced by pronouns can be avoided through feminisation and using split forms such as *hij en zij* ‘he and she’, but pluralisation constitutes a neutralising alternative.

There has been an ongoing debate whether Dutch role nouns (e.g., *werknemer* ‘employee’) should be ‘neutralised’ or feminised (*werknemer en werkneemster* ‘male and female employee’) (see for example Van Alphen, 1983). The Dutch Language Union itself does not give strict advice and, somewhat ironically, states that “everyone can follow **his** own preference” regarding role nouns (“Vrouwelijke beroepsnamen,” n.d.). However, one should keep in mind that the latter strategy of neutralisation of Dutch role nouns simply entails using the masculine forms for neutral purposes. Therefore, it does not technically constitute a strategy of neutralisation – at least not as long as feminine role nouns are also still in use. An experiment in Norwegian, in which role nouns were used in a very similar way compared to Dutch these days, shows why neutralisation could be problematic in Dutch (Gabriel & Gyga, 2008). Norwegian has undergone significant change throughout the last few decades: a language policy in favour of neutralisation led to the decrease of

feminine role nouns and the masculine role nouns were “neutralised” and used for both men and women. Even though the formerly masculine role nouns have been used as neutral role nouns for decades, a psycholinguistic experiment showed that they still have not lost their male bias (Gabriel & Gygax, 2008). Thus, one must be careful not to wrongly assume that a male bias can be avoided by simply using the masculine forms as if they were neutral, even if the feminine forms are relatively infrequent anyway. Nonetheless, the trend for Dutch role nouns is neutralisation (Gerritsen, 2001). So how can one reconcile the trend of neutralisation with one’s wish to avoid a male bias? The answer once again is pluralisation. Research on role nouns in Belgium has shown that plural role nouns (e.g., *werknemers* ‘employees’) are interpreted as more neutral and as having less of a male bias than singular role nouns (e.g., *werknemer* ‘employee’) (De Backer & De Cuypere, 2012). It is therefore best to use plural forms whenever possible, and to use split forms in singular contexts when one wants to emphasise that both men and women are being referred to.

12.6 Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, we have shown that gender is a ubiquitous category across languages. It can be found in the shape of gender stereotypes, but also as the more abstract grammatical gender category. The masculine grammatical gender takes a special role and is used as a supposedly neutral default. However, neuro- and psycholinguistic research using methods such as EEG and eye-tracking suggests that our brains do not treat these masculine words as neutral, but they cause a male bias instead. Behavioural research on decision-making tells a similar story. These results emphasise the need for more inclusive gender-fair language. With this chapter, we hope to have provided the reader with some useful tools to use such gender-fair language and more awareness regarding the power that our words have.

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