UC Merced

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

Is gender-fair langauge needed? How grammatical gender influencesrepresentations of discourse referents

Permalink

Journal

Authors

Ferstl, Evelyn
Dietsche, Lena

Publication Date

2017

Peer reviewed

Is gender-fair langauge needed? How grammatical gender influences representations of discourse referents

Evelyn Ferstl
Centre for Cognitive Science, University of Freiburg

Lena Dietsche
Centre for Cognitive Science, University of Freiburg

Abstract: The use of gender-fair language is an important measure to boost gender equality. However, there is wide-spread scepticism as to the usefulness of avoiding male bias in language, even in gendered languages. For instance, in German all nouns carry grammatical gender, and role names are considered generic, even when their gender is masculine. We used a sentence-picture matching task to test whether male references in language induce gendered representations. After presenting a sentence with a role name, a picture of a person was shown. In 48 trials, the factors gender of the role name (masculine vs. feminine) and sex of the person in the picture (woman vs. man) were crossed. The results of 40 participants showed that women after masculine referents were more readily accepted than men after feminine referents, but reaction times increased. Thus, readers interpret some masculine forms as generic, but only with considerable cognitive effort.