

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

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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.