Encouraging gender-fair language

How does language shape the cognitive representations of women and men? An EU-funded study has investigated the roles that language and culture play in gender inequality.

An important issue in Europe is the reduction of gender inequality, yet on a large scale this has not been fully addressed. The project ITN-LCG (Language, cognition, and gender) therefore used an interdisciplinary approach and brought together 10 research training providers and 12 associated partners from public and private sectors.

Objectives were interrelated and included measuring the extent to which linguistic aspects conjure gender-related representations and to what degree gender fairness in language relates to higher levels of socioeconomic gender equality. The study also aimed to examine the impact of language on gender stereotyping and to develop and evaluate guidelines and training tools for gender-fair communication.

Researchers employed advanced techniques such as eye tracking electrophysiological measurement and neuroimaging. Investigations involved both cross-linguistic differences and looking at grammatical and lexical features of a particular language. The studies show that gender information is extracted from
linguistic input in a highly automatized way and that the social category of gender is deeply implemented in language processing. Data collection has resulted in updated norms on the gender perception of role nouns. A tool for online surveys was designed that can assist cross-language and cross-cultural comparisons.

The relation between language use, language policies and socioeconomic factors was studied by collecting and assessing guidelines for gender-fair language in different countries and languages and by analyzing their impact on language use, such as in job advertisements. Gender-fair language was proven to be important and make a significant contribution to overcoming gender inequality, e.g. in workplaces. Additionally, brain activity reflects the different status and power conveyed by a gender-unfair or gender-neutral language. This suggests that gender stereotypes are part of the knowledge that the brain automatically triggers.

The team evaluated guidelines, strategies and training programmes for gender-fair language and communication. They examined the role of individual language competence in gender fair language use, how effective guidelines are in increasing people’s awareness of gender stereotypes and in reducing the use of gender-unfair language. Furthermore, experiments were conducted on how to make people feel positive about gender-fair language and increase their use of it as a result.

Insights gathered help us to understand basic cognitive processes that relate language and gender equality, they are useful for developing strategies for gender-fair language use and online and onsite training to avoid gender stereotypes. This will be useful for policymakers as well as academia.

Keywords

Gender-fair language, cognitive representations, gender equality, gender stereotyping

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