

Gender stereotypes, neologisms, and concept-formation

Maarten Lemmens, Mégane Lesuisse, and Océane Foubert
Université de Lille and UMR 8163 STL, France

maarten.lemmens@univ-lille3.fr; megane.lesuisse.etu@univ-lille.fr; oceane.foubert.etu@univ-lille.fr

Keywords: gender stereotypes, neologisms, diffusion, concept-formation, hypostatization

Over the past decades, studies on gender biases in language (and beyond) have shown various differences between men and women in all domains, which leads Tannen (1990) to claim that men and women belong to two different cultures (see also Hellinger & Bußmann 2001, 2002, 2003, 2015). This paper presents three studies looking into gender stereotypes in English based on three different studies.

The first study is a corpus study (data drawn from the BNC and COCA) concerning stereotypes related to the domain of intelligence which stipulate that men possess innate intelligence (“raw intellectual talent”), while women do not. As Wyer *et al.* (2001) show, this stereotype has had considerable influence on the entry of women into the professional world. Similarly, Leslie *et al.*'s 2015 study evaluates the gender imbalance in academia, and more especially in the STEM fields. The corpus data, based on adjectives referring to (innate or acquired) intelligence, such as *brilliant*, *intelligent*, *gifted*, etc. overwhelmingly confirm what Leslie *et al.* call the “field-specific ability belief” which holds that women are stereotyped as not possessing the raw innate talent needed for certain kinds of disciplines (among which some STEM disciplines and some disciplines in the humanities).

The second study, an extension of the first, is a collocation analysis (based on COCA) of adjectives that qualify a (selective) number of gender-specific nouns, such as *man*, *woman*, *father*, *daughter*, *girl*, etc. The (statistically significant) differences overwhelmingly confirm gender stereotypes. Men are qualified in terms of (i) sexuality, (ii) status and intelligence, and (iii) strength and bravery; women, in terms of (i) relationships, (ii) beauty and sexiness, (iii) dumbness and hysteria, and (iv) race, religion or origin.

The third study is different in kind and looks into stereotypes as reflected in gender-specific neologisms (regular derivations or blends) following the template *man(-)X*, such as *man bun*, *manscara*, or *mansplain* (*man+explain*). The data for the qualitative part of the study is drawn from two crowd-sourced user-content based websites (*the Urban Dictionary* and *Merriam Webster's Open Dictionary*); in total 1,403 neologisms have been analysed. We show that there are different motivations underlying these neologisms, such as the male (re)appropriation of domains stereotypically associated with women, the confirmation of stereotypes, and naming undesirable male behaviours (e.g., *mansplain*). As already observed by Spender (1980), such naming practices of undesirable male behaviours give credit to the experiences of women, e.g. *sexual harassment* or, more recently, Kate Manne's (2017) term *himpathy* (the inappropriate and disproportionate sympathy powerful men often enjoy in cases of misogynistic behavior). Quantitative data from the iWeb corpus shows that precisely neologisms that name such undesirable behaviours have a higher degree of diffusion compared to those built on other motivations (such as domain reappropriation). Following Schmid (2008), this shows how such neologisms can be helpful to understand the issue of concept-formation and hypostatization, the subjective impression that the existence of a word suggests the existence of a class of things denoted by the word.

References

- Hellinger Marlis & Bußmann Hadumod, (eds.). 2001; 2002; 2003; 2015. *Gender across languages: The linguistic representation of women and men* (resp. Vol. 1, 2, 3, 4). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Leslie, Sarah-Jane, Andrei Cimpian, Meredith Meyer, & Edward Freeland. 2015. Expectations of brilliance underlie gender distributions across academic disciplines. *Science* 347, 262-265.
- Manne, Kate. 2017. *Down Girl. The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford University Press.
- Spender Dale, 1980, *Man made language*, London/Boston/Sydney/Wellington: Pandora Press.
- Schmid, Hans-Jörg. 2008. New words in the mind: concept-formation and entrenchment of neologisms. *Anglia* 126(1), 1-36.
- Tannen, D. 1990. *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New-York: William Morrow and Company.
- Wyer, M., Barbercheck, M., Geisman D., Örün Öztürk H., Wayne, M. (2001) *Women, Science and Technology: a Reader in Feminist Science Studies*. New-York/London: Routledge.