

Exploring the Relationship Between Linguistics Gender and Social Gender

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Abstract: The diversity of social gender has been growing recently, and gender is the hot social issue that has the public concerned. Language is a communication tool people use every day, and meanwhile, which also subtly influences a person's mind. This paper discusses social gender issues from a linguistic point of view, trying to figure out if there are any relations between them. People use language to express their thoughts about social and gender issues, so it is important to explore the relationship. To explore the relationship, this paper discusses gender bias in language, the possible reason for this phenomenon, and the effect of linguistic gender binary on non-binary gender. There are lots of papers which discuss these related issues that have greatly inspired and provided strong help to the author. There are some findings from the study: 1) Gender bias is more serious in grammatical gender languages; 2) Linguistic gender subtly influences people's minds by shaping their hobbies and making their cognitive world in a more gender-related way. 3) The linguistic gender binary causes problems for transgender people. It has been discovered that linguistic gender has an adverse effect on social gender equality. This paper may help improve the gender equality situation in society and transgender people's self-expression problems. This paper also provides a way to think about grammatical gender in languages.

Keywords: Linguistic gender, Social gender, Grammatical gender language, Gender equality, Transgender

1. Introduction

Gender equality has been a hot social issue for a long time. Research on how to achieve gender equality has a long tradition but still remains to be solved. And that may be helpful to study it in a linguistic way. In recent decades, many linguist studies on this topic prove that there is a relationship between linguistic gender and social gender. This leads to a further problem of what relationship it is and what influence it may cause. However, this problem has rarely been studied directly. Most papers are just concerned with part of it, such as linguistic gender or the effect it causes, but few papers focus on how it works and the deeper relationship between them. For this study, it is interesting to investigate how grammatical gender in language could affect people's cognitive world in a more gender-directed way and how the language people use influences their minds. The aim of this study is to explain how language affects society in terms of gender and what the consequence is. This paper aims to help achieve gender equality in language. But it is still unclear whether gender-fair language

is an effective way. The key contribution of this work is that it clarifies the relationship between linguistic gender and social gender and reveals the negative influence it causes.

2. Relationship Between Linguistics Gender and Social Gender

2.1. Bias in Language

Languages can be classified into three categories based on their gender-related features: grammatical gender languages, natural gender languages, and genderless languages [1]. Grammatical gender languages, also called gendered languages, have special nouns; each noun has gender as feminine, masculine, or neutral. For example, pronouns and adjectives have the same gender markers as the nouns they refer to. The same noun in different languages may have a different gender. For example, *stylo* is a masculine noun in French, and *caneta* is a feminine noun in Portuguese, and they are the same word in English as the pen. Many linguistic families have grammatical gender languages, such as Spanish (Romance), Russian (Slavic), and German (Germanic) [2]. Now the three specific kinds of flowers' names will be discussed.

English and Northern Germanic (or Scandinavian) are natural gender languages [2]. They have no grammatical marking of gender, so they use personal pronouns (e.g., he or she) as the main means of distinguishing gender. Genderless languages, such as their name, have neither grammatical marking in the noun system nor personal pronouns to express gender. They distinguish gender by using words such as "woman" or "man." Genderless languages include Finnish, Persian, Chinese and Swahili, and so on [2]. Due to this, grammatical gender languages exhibit a much greater degree of gender asymmetries than natural gender languages and languages without gender [3]. Language is an essential tool that is used every day, and it has a subtle influence on society. People use language to spread their thoughts, and language shapes their minds. Gender in language will influence gender in society, and always in a worse way. Stereotypes about gender are deepened by language, and there is a possibility that language will ultimately influence gender differences in status [2]. So, as for gender equality, a greater degree of gender asymmetries may have more influence on gender equality. Characters of a language that especially requires gender distinctions will make common attitudes and beliefs about gender equality. And there are also bias in low level of gender-related languages and grammatical gender languages.

As noted above, nouns and pronouns are an effective way to distinguish the degree of gender-related words in a language. Gender bias could be recognized by word, and gender asymmetry will be created when it does not need to be lexically marked as gender [3]. For instance, "lawyer" means someone whose job is to give advice to people about the law and speak for them in court in English and the person always is seen as a male but not female. When it is mentioned, people always think they are talking about a man, not a woman, and they will use "female lawyer" when they are mentioning a woman. The English term ending with -man as chairman was only coined when women began to enter these work fields and the corresponding feminine term was coined [4]. The same situation happened when women were looking for a job. Regarding the work place, where "gender stereotypes are alive, well, and busy producing gender discrimination [5]." Gaucher and his colleagues investigated whether masculine-related words impede women from applying for jobs [6]. The result showed that women tend to choose not to apply for jobs that have more masculine stereotype-linked words without realizing they were influenced by the words. It indicates that gender in language will affect women's choice of profession and make society's gender inequality worse.

Gender asymmetry in masculine generics is nearly universal. An expression used generically to represent men and women but reserving a singular gender is a false generic [3,4]. As an example, "he" in English, "When a person is thirsty, he should drink water." And in grammatical gender language, it is common and acceptable to use masculine nouns to refer to men and women or to people whose

gender is irrelevant or unknown. In Italian, *studentei*, which is a masculine form, is used as several students that are of unspecified gender [4]. Therefore, masculine forms could also represent mixed-gender groups or those whose gender is unknown, which a feminine form could not do.

The structure of language is one of gender inequality. Gender bias and sexism are ingrained in most grammatical structures of languages and therefore perceived to be normative [7-9]. The way to refer to females is always more complex than males. In grammatical gender languages, such as *ginecologo* and *ginecologa* in Italian, these two forms are symmetrical. In other cases, *-essa* is added at the end of a word to express female (such as *professoressa*), just as *-ess* in English [4]. Another example is in Norwegian, *forfatter* (writer) is a masculine term and *forfatterinne* is the feminine form, which is much longer and will never be a generic term unless a female is referred to [10]. Extra distinction is needed when mentioning a female.

In daily life, gender in language also has an impact. Gender distinction in language is important to women's rights [11]. Estonian is a genderless language, and Russian is a gendered language. Pérez and Tavits conducted an experiment that shows that speakers of genderless language will express more liberalized views on gender equality [12]. In Hamilton, Hunter, and Stuart-Smith's experiment, participants were asked to decide whether a woman had self-defense. And the definition of self-defense uses "he", "he or she", "she". Five, sixteen, and eleven participants with different definitions determined the woman had self-defense [13]. The consequence is that words used in legal proceedings could affect whether a person is guilty or innocent. And also, when asking participants which politician will run for the office of chancellor with gender-fair forms, the number of females referred to rose.

Gender in language affects gender equality in society. There are lots of words in languages that inflect gender bias, and people still use them frequently in daily life. And the consequence is that in society, gender stereotypes still exist, so males and females are treated with inequality, even they do not realize. Gender-fair language may improve this situation.

2.2. Inequality in Gendered Languages

Countries where people speak grammatical gender languages have less gender equality than other gender systems [2]. The researchers tested their hypotheses in 111 countries with different language systems and controlled for other characteristics of countries (e.g., geographic, political, religious, and developmental differences) that could be related to gender. The Global Gender Gap Index of the World Economic Forum was used to measure gender equality [2]. The result is that countries with grammatical gender reach lower levels of social gender equality than others, which shows that grammatical gender languages cause more gender inequality than others. It reveals the influence of grammatical gender languages on society's gender equality much more than other language systems. The research shows that the higher gender asymmetry may cause more gender inequality. Another study on sexist attitudes also proves this opinion. When the investigation was conducted with grammatical gender language (French or Spanish) rather than natural gender language (English), the respondents who are native speakers of English and bilinguals showed more sexist attitudes [14]. The expression of a sexist attitude could be encouraged by using grammatical gender language. This supports the hypothesis that grammatical gender languages can increase social gender inequality as well. The relevance of gender in language affects the level of gender equality in society.

The reasons for this consequence are varied and unclarified. People's perceptions of the masculine or feminine characteristics of objects are influenced by the grammatical genders of the objects in their native languages. Researchers discovered through their studies that the grammatical genders are assigned to objects in Spanish and German distinctions, English speakers' intuitions about the gender of animals [15]. Konishi compared German and Spanish and it turned out that half of the words were of masculine gender in Spanish but of feminine gender in German, which proved that grammatical

does affect meaning but is not purely grammatical [16]. And this influence appears not only in objects but also in males and females. One possible reason that causes this situation is that grammatical gender has to deal with information related to gender. According to Chen and Su's recent work, grammatical gender languages could increase sensitivity to the gender of a person. Relative to none gender-related sentences, English participants were faster and more accurate than Chinese participants in responding to the sentences related to gender [17]. It suggests that grammatical gender contributes to the processing of social information relating to gender. According to the research, speakers of grammatical gender languages are more aware of gender differences than speakers of other gender languages, and they tend to categorize the world using masculine and feminine terms [15-20]. For example, when Jakobson required Russian participants to personify days of the week, they always chose male or female to match grammatical masculine or grammatical feminine days [21,22]. It shows that grammatical gender affects the way people think about daily life.

Based on these, it is reasonable to argue that people's attitudes towards gender equality have been affected by how their language deals with gender in their daily life in certain ways. Grammatical gender languages ask people to distinguish between males and females no matter what it is, which makes people have a strong sense of gender in the subconscious. Therefore, they are more sensitive about social gender equality.

As for how grammatical gender works, it is unclear as well. The doctrine of linguistic determinism, the idea believes thought is determined by language [23]. Although it has long been abandoned in the field, there is a relationship between thought and language. For instance, Mandarin and English speakers talk about time in different ways. Mandarin speakers use both vertical and horizontal metaphors to talk about time, while English speakers just talk about it as if it were horizontal. And when Mandarin speakers use English to talk about time, they still tend to do it in the vertical way [24]. The consequence suggests language is important to shaping thought and one's native language plays an important role in one's habitual thought. And habitual thought determines how people's cognitive the world even if they do not realize it.

Grammatical gender language may shape people's habitual thought, which makes them cognizant of the world in a more gender-related way as well as society. Therefore, the consequence is that the country reaches a low level of gender equality. That is just an impossible assumption. What is confirmed is that countries with grammatical gender language have more gender inequality.

2.3. Linguistic Gender Binary

Most grammatical gender languages are a kind of grammatical binary linguistic system. Nouns are classified as masculine or feminine, and when used to refer to people, they represent males and females, as for nouns that represent non-life objects and which do not reflect semantics are categorized without sex distinction. There is also a third grammatical gender in some grammatical gender languages, which is neuter. When it relates to human gender, neutral nouns are not used. So, basically, grammatical gender is binary. Different from binary grammatical gender, social gender is contemporary diversity. Therefore, grammatical gender can not encode the expression of all social genders. Not everyone can express themselves when they use grammatical gender language, especially transgender people. Even though there are fewer grammatical genders in natural gender language structure, the limitation still exists.

Transgender people have a different gender identity than their biological sex, which is usually assigned at birth, including people who have the gender identity as opposed to their assigned sex (trans men and trans women), and also including people who are non-binary or genderqueer. As for non-binary or genderqueer people, they do not fit into socially defined genders as males and females can mix characteristics of any gender and express gender fluidity. Susan argues that how one feels about being represented by a certain pronoun can describe one's gender identity [25]. The language

a transgender person uses obviously affects their self-expression. The traditional linguistic binary in grammatical gender impedes transgender people from expressing their self-identity. The problems between language and identity always adulterate other social factors based on local society, which is complex and intractable.

The situation in Iceland is a typical example [26]. Icelandic is a highly gender-related language, which has three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. One's expression is strongly influenced by one's gender, and there is no gender-neutral expression. Although a person just wants to say "I'm happy," which is a really simple expression in daily life, there will be just two different sentences that can be used: one is a male expression and the other is female. Therefore, it is hard for transgender people who use Icelandic to express themselves. Gender-neutral expression does not exist in grammatical gender language.

There is some other supportive evidence to prove that grammatical gender is unfriendly to non-binary expressions of transgender people. According to recent studies in English, Swedish, French, and German, the survey included ten questions addressed to transgender people using one of these four languages. The consequence showed that grammatical gender language has a direct influence on transgender identity expression and acceptance and is inadequate for the expression of non-binary identities [27]. Referring to French, a grammatical gender language, is being challenged, subverted, and adapted by speakers [28]. And transgender people are demanding visibility and creating the linguistic conditions for congruent self-expression [29]. Investigating the linguistic forms used by non-binary speakers in French may be beneficial to other grammatical gender language users as well.

The linguistic gender binary in grammatical gender language restricted transgenders to self-identification. Gender neutral language in grammatical gender language is seen as a solution, but it is not widely used so far and there are still some deficiencies. There is still a long way to go to solve this complex problem of language and identity.

3. Conclusion

This paper discusses the influence of linguistic gender on causes. It has presented gender bias in language and argues for both the reason and the role grammatical gender plays in it. The investigation came to the following conclusions: 1) Gender bias is more severe in grammatical gender languages. 2) linguistic gender gradually shapes people's thoughts by molding their hobbies and constructing their cognitive environments in a more gender-related fashion. 3) Transgender people encounter issues as a result of the linguistic gender binary. The consequences provide evidence that there is a relationship between linguistic gender and social gender. Linguistic gender affects people's attitude to gender issues, which is reflected in gender bias and sexism when language is used, and also impedes the self-expression of transgender people. And to go further, this increases the level of social gender inequality. Therefore, improving language is one of the most effective ways to reach a higher level of social gender equality. Gender bias in language is an external performance and the impact of linguistic gender on human thinking is an internal cause. The trouble that transgender people encounter is a specific example. In addition, gender-fair language may contribute to gender equality in the long run. This paper possibly provides help to linguists who are concerned about grammatical gender and gender-related studies specialists. Linguistic gender influences social gender and, through improving the problem of languages, contributes to achieving gender equality in society.

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