Gender Bias and Sexism in Language FREE

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Summary

Language is one of the most powerful means through which sexism and gender discrimination are perpetrated and reproduced. The content of gender stereotypes, according to which women should display communal/warmth traits and men should display agentic/competence traits, is reflected in the lexical choices of everyday communication. As a consequence, language subtly reproduces the societal asymmetries of status and power in favor of men, which are attached to the corresponding social roles. Moreover, the hidden yet consensual norm according to which the prototypical human being is male is embedded in the structure of many languages. Grammatical and syntactical rules are built in a way that feminine terms usually derive from the corresponding masculine form. Similarly, masculine nouns and pronouns are often used with a generic function to refer to both men and women. However, such linguistic forms have the negative effects of making women disappear in mental representations. Although the use of gender-fair linguistic expressions can effectively prevent these negative consequences and promote gender equality, there are even more implicit forms of gender bias in language that are difficult to suppress. By choosing terms at different levels of abstraction, people can affect the attributions of the receiver in a way that is consistent with their stereotypical beliefs. Linguistic abstraction, thus, is a very subtle resource used to represent women in a less favorable way and thus to enact gender discrimination without meaning to discriminate or even be aware that this linguistic behavior has discriminatory results. In order to reduce gender bias, it is necessary to change people's linguistic habits by making them aware of the beneficial effects of gender-fair expressions.

Keywords: linguistic gender bias, sexism, masculine generics, gender-fair language, language abstraction, gender stereotypes, intergroup communication

Subjects: Critical/Cultural Studies, Gender (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies), Intergroup Communication

Introduction: Linguistic Processes and the Reproduction of Gender Bias

Verbal communication is one of the most powerful means through which sexism and gender discrimination are perpetrated and reproduced. Why is that so? The answer is twofold. First, the content of gender stereotypes, according to which women should display communal/warmth traits (e.g., being nice, caring, and generous), and men should display agentic/competence traits (e.g., being efficient, agentic, and assertive; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004;

Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000), are reproduced in the lexical choices of everyday communication (Maass & Arcuri, 1996). However, the content of gender stereotypes is not neutral, as it reflects the asymmetries of status and power in favor of men, which are attached to the corresponding social roles (Eagly et al., 2000). In turn, these asymmetries are subtly expressed in the words used to refer to men and women, with men being described with more agentic-related words and women described with more communal-related words (e.g., Gaucher, Friesen, & Kay, 2011; Madera, Hebl, & Martin, 2009; Moscatelli, Ellemers, Menegatti, & Rubini, 2016). Given that language not only reflects stereotypical beliefs but also affects recipients' cognition and behavior, the use of expressions consistent with gender stereotypes contributes to transmit and reinforce such belief system and can produce actual discrimination against women.

Second, the hidden yet consensual norm according to which the prototypical human being is male is reproduced in the structure of many languages (Silveira, 1980). To understand how the sex is embedded in the grammatical and syntactical rules of different languages, and therefore the extent to which a language contributes to perpetrate gender bias, Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen, and Sczesny (2007) proposed a distinction between three language types: genderless languages, natural gender languages, and grammatical gender languages. All of them have lexical expressions of sex in words of the type "women," "sister," "father," or "man." However, this is the only sex-marking for genderless languages (e.g., Finnish, Turkish), that have neither grammatical gender for nouns nor for personal pronouns. In natural gender languages (e.g., English, Scandinavian languages) there is not grammatical marking of sex, such that most nouns and their dependent linguistic forms (articles, adjectives, pronouns) can be used to refer to both males and females, and personal pronouns are the major resource for expressing gender. In grammatical gender languages (e.g., French, Italian, German) all nouns are assigned feminine or masculine (or neutral) gender, and the dependent parts of speech carry grammatical agreement to the gender of the corresponding noun. For instance, *the sea* is masculine in Italian, *il mare*, and feminine in French, *la mer*. Moreover, in these languages, grammatical and syntactical rules are built in a way that feminine nouns or adjectives are often marked as they derive from the corresponding masculine form. Similarly, masculine nouns and pronouns are often used with a generic function, that is, to refer to both men and women.

In the same vein, there are linguistic conventions according to which powerless groups, such as women, should be compared to powerful groups, such as men ("Compared to men, women are . . .") and not vice versa (Pratto, Korchmaros, & Hegarty, 2007). However, as the content of stereotypes, such linguistic forms are not neutral: They make women disappear in mental representations (Stahlberg et al., 2007) and lead to consider gender differences in favor of men as larger and legitimate (Bruckmüller, Hegarty, & Abele, 2012). The insidious consequence is that people perceive gender bias in language as normative and enact gender discrimination by simply following communication rules (Ng, 2007). For the same reasons, the use of gender-fair expressions instead of masculine generics (i.e., word pairs, which combine

a feminine and a masculine forms, splitting forms such as *s/he*, *she/he*, or neutralizations, such as *chairperson* instead of *chairman*), is considered the primary route to reduce gender bias in language and promote gender equality.

However, there are even more subtle ways to reproduce gender bias through everyday language use that are slightly difficult to suppress. Indeed, by choosing terms that have the same meaning but differ in their level of abstraction, people can affect the attributions of the receiver in a way that is consistent with their stereotypical beliefs even though they are not aware of doing so (Douglas & Sutton, 2003; Rubini, Menegatti, & Moscatelli, 2014). Linguistic abstraction, thus, is a very subtle resource that can be used to represent women in a less favorable way and thus to enact gender discrimination without meaning to discriminate or even be aware that this linguistic behavior has discriminatory results (e.g., Rubini & Menegatti, 2014).

In the following it is first explained why gender stereotypes can be considered the origin of gender bias in language and how they produce gender inequality. Then research is presented on how such content is reflected in the language used to describe men and women. After that, the main research on how the structure of many languages is biased in favor of men and thus produces gender discrimination, especially in the workplace, is presented. In the subsequent sections, the double-sided effects of the use of gender-fair language are illustrated, and a subtle form of implicit linguistic discrimination transmitted through linguistic abstraction is described. Finally, considerations on how to reduce gender bias through the use of gender-fair language are advanced.

The Origin of Gender Bias in Language: Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are beliefs about the attributes of men and women and produce expectations about what they are like and should be like. According to the social role theory, gender stereotypes originate in the gender-typical social roles and thus reflect the sexual division of labor and gender hierarchy of the society. Men and women have historically held different social roles (Eagly et al., 2000): Men have been more likely to engage in tasks that require speed, strength, and the possibility of being away from home for long periods of time, whereas women have been more likely to stay home and engage in family tasks, such as child-rearing. As a consequence, men are perceived as, and expected to be, *agentic*, namely, active, independent, and resolute, whereas women are perceived as, and expected to be, *communal*, namely, kind, helpful, and benevolent. In other terms, the content of gender stereotypes has been established by the characteristics and activities required by individuals of each sex in their sex-typical occupations and family roles: Women are expected to engage in a feminine gender role that reflects communal qualities but not agentic ones (Wood & Eagly, 2002).

In turn, these expectations lead to normative pressure to engage, since childhood, in behaviors consistent with sex-typical work and family roles. Indeed, behaviors that are consistent with the gender stereotypic expectations of social roles are considered as more desirable for the congruent sex (i.e., agentic behaviors for men and communal behaviors for

women). However, the content of stereotypes is not neutral, as the traditional roles occupied by men are higher in hierarchies of status and authority than those occupied by women. This is particularly evident in the workplace, where women are more likely than men to be employed in positions with lower status and less power than men.

Similar conclusions have been reached by the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), according to which stereotyped groups can be differentiated along two dimensions, *competence* and *warmth*—which in turn can be associated to the dimensions of *agency* and *communion*. Whereas warmth captures traits that are related to perceived intent, such as friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, trustworthiness, and morality, competence refers to traits that are related to perceived ability, including intelligence, skill, creativity, and efficacy (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). The model accounts for evidence according to which attitudes toward some social groups are not negative on both warmth and competence, but are mixed or ambivalent (low on one dimension and high on the other). This is especially true for gender stereotypes. Indeed, “women are usually liked or respected but not both” (Cuddy et al., 2004, p. 705). For instance, housewives are seen as warm, but not competent, and yield to paternalist prejudice that in turn elicits condescending affection. Conversely, female professionals are seen as competent, but cold, and induce envy, jealousy, and resentment.

Because of this very ambivalence, gender prejudice differs from prejudice toward other types of groups. Research has, in fact, shown that attitudes toward women are generally more favorable than those toward men, because of the high value attributed on the positive communal/warmth characteristics (Heilman & Eagly, 2008). Thus, how is it that women are loved and disadvantaged all at once? Eagly and Mladinic (1993) pointed out that the favorable communal traits ascribed to women are also traits of defense that, when enacted in daily interaction, place a person in a subordinate, less powerful position. Thus, the favorable traits attributed to women may maintain their lower status and reinforce gender inequality.

This process has been further clarified by Glick and Fiske (1996, 2001), who identified two forms of sexist prejudice: expressly hostile and subjectively benevolent. Hostile sexism encompasses a derogatory depiction of women and negative feelings toward them in order to justify male power, traditional gender roles, and men’s consideration of women as sexual objects. Benevolent sexisms is a more subtle form of prejudice toward women because it sees them as pure, kind, gentle, and in need of men’s protection, therefore justifying male dominance and women’s subordinate role (Eagly, 1987).

Finally, ambivalent sexism can be alternately hostile or benevolent, depending on the type of women it refers to. Ambivalent sexists can reconcile the seemingly contradictory attitudes about women by directing hostility toward female professionals and benevolence toward homemakers (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Thus, the warm but incompetent stereotype of housewives justifies women’s domestic role and exclusion from male-dominant positions. Similarly, the competent but cold stereotype of working men could be used to keep women out of male-dominated, powerful positions (Cuddy et al., 2004; Phelan, Moss-Racusin, & Rudman, 2008; Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001).

Research on the Content of Gender Stereotypes in Language Use

The content of gender stereotypes is reflected in the lexical choices that people make in everyday communication. It is well established that the category label used to refer to a particular group automatically activates the traits stereotypically associated with the group (Maass & Arcuri, 1996). This is also true for the communal and agentic traits that characterize gender stereotypes. They emerge when individuals freely describe men and women and when they are asked to evaluate the characteristics of individual men and women seen in photographs (Feingold, 1998). Words consistent with gender stereotypes have powerful effects also when presented at a subliminal level, whereby they lead participants to classify gender pronouns more quickly into male and female categories (Banaji & Hardin, 1996). Moreover, participants identify more quickly the gender of male or female first names that matches the primes' gender than when presented with gender-unrelated words (Blair & Banaji, 1996).

Thus, the linguistic choices made by the speaker (such as the use of stereotypical consistent words) affect the cognitive processes of the listener and this occurs automatically. Given that semantic labels automatically activate information associated with the label, gender stereotypes are activated by gender-related words even in unprejudiced people who do not endorse the stereotype. This is even more relevant as stereotypical beliefs about men and women are embedded in the lexicon of many languages. For instance, there are many more English words to refer to men than to women (Maass & Arcuri, 1996), although the number of expressions to refer to promiscuous women is 10 times greater than those to refer to promiscuous men (Ng, 1990). Importantly, the communal personal characteristics that are assigned to women and the agentic characteristics that are assigned to men are generally expressed in trait terminology. In media texts, for instance, men are placed more frequently in the role of logical subject and are described as more active, whereas women are placed more frequently in helpless or victim roles, and are depicted as more passive and emotional (Kruse, Weimer, & Wagner, 1988). Even the terminology used to compose obituaries of deceased male and female managers reflects gender stereotypes (Kirchler, 1992). Men are described as highly knowledgeable and intelligent experts, and women are described as adorable, likable, and highly committed to their work.

Asymmetries in vocabulary of many languages also result in a lack of terms referring to one sex. Due to gender stereotypes that want women to be pure and family oriented, there is no male counterpart in current language use for terms such as *virgin*, *working mother*, or *career women* (cf. Maass & Arcuri, 1996). Also in many languages there is no male equivalent for *Miss*, suggesting that being married was (and sometimes is) considered as relevant for the status of women but not of men. These lexical gaps are particularly evident for work-related terms. Classic examples are all the English terms ending with *-man*, such as *businessman*, *chairman*, *anchorman*, or *policeman*, for which the corresponding feminine term has been coined only recently when women started to enter male-dominated work fields. Importantly,

efforts have been made to introduce gender-neutral terms, such as *anchor*, *flight attendant*, *chairperson*, or *health operator* (instead of *nurse*), in order to refer to men and women with one occupation term (Maass, Suitner, & Merkel, 2013).

Research on the Content of Gender Stereotypes in Job-Related Language

The stereotype-consistent words used to depict men and women have been analyzed especially regarding the workplace, where "gender stereotypes are alive, well, and busy producing gender discrimination" (Heilman & Eagly, 2008, p. 393). Biased workplace evaluations are caused by the mismatch between the communal stereotypes of women and desirable work roles (Heilman, 2001). Managerial and executive-level jobs are usually considered to be masculine, as they require agentic qualities, such as ambition, aggressiveness, and achievement. Therefore, attitudes are often less positive toward female than male leaders, and it is more difficult for women to become and succeed as leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

On its part, language may reinforce women's underrepresentation in traditionally male-dominated occupations through the gendered wording used in job recruitment linguistic materials. Content analyses of letters of recommendation for college (LaCroix, 1985) and graduate schools (Watson, 1987) revealed the use of stereotypical gender-related words, which describe female applicants as feminine and male applicants as masculine. Moreover, letters of recommendation for male applicants who had been hired at an American medical school contained more outstanding adjectives, such as *superb*, *outstanding*, and *remarkable*, than those for female applicants, even though objective criteria showed no gender differences in qualifications (Trix & Psenka, 2003). Letters for male applicants also included more research-related adjectives, such as a reference to "his research," "his ability," or "his career," whereas letters for female applicants included more reference to "her teaching," or "her training." Recently, Madera et al. (2009) found that agentic and communal stereotypical characteristics are used in letters of recommendation for faculty positions in a way that discriminates against female applicants. Women are described by more communal adjectives, such as *kind*, *helpful*, *sympathetic*, *tactful*, *warm*, *agreeable*, than men, who are described with more agentic terms, such as *dominant*, *forceful*, *independent*, *confident*, *outspoken*, *intellectual*, *ambitious*. Moreover, letters written for women contain more social-communal-related terms, such as *husband*, *kids*, *wife*, *babies*, *family*, *colleagues*, *children*, than letters for men, which are composed of more agentic orientation-related terms, such as *earn*, *gain*, *insight*, *think*, *know*, *do*. Interestingly, for female applicants, male writers use more agentic orientation terms than female writers do. In a second study, Madera et al. (2009) found that applicants who presented with letters composed of more communal-related terms are less likely to be hired than those described with agentic-related terms and the number of communal terms mediates the relationship between applicant gender and hireability ratings.

Gaucher and colleagues (2011) investigated whether masculine-related words (such as *competitive*, *dominant*, and *leader*) emerge within job advertisements in male-dominated areas, and whether the mere presence of these masculine words dissuade women from

applying to jobs in that area. They content coded job advertisements for occupations that were highly male (e.g., *plumber*, *electrician*, *mechanic*, *engineer*, *security guard*) and female dominated (e.g., *administrative assistant*, *early childhood educator*, *nurse*, *bookkeeper*). Results showed that job advertisements within male-dominated areas contained greater masculine wording than advertisements from female-dominated areas. Moreover, the inclusion of more masculine stereotype-linked words, like the ones used in the advertisements for male-dominated jobs, makes a given job less appealing to female candidates. This effect occurred, at least in part, because women anticipated less belongingness in the positions advertised with the masculine-worded descriptions. It is interestingly to note that, in these studies, not a single participant suspected that his or her responses were influenced by the wording of the advertisements. This suggests that the use of stereotypic-consistent words operates beyond people's awareness and could play a particularly powerful and insidious role in perpetrating gender inequality.

Another way through which language is used to discriminate women in the job selection process is represented by the words chosen to compose their evaluations. Moscatelli et al. (2016) content coded the written reports of a hiring committee to examine how often positive and negative words referred to the evaluative dimensions of competence, sociability, and morality were used to motivate the hiring vs. rejection decision concerning male and female candidates. Recent research has revealed that, within judgments in the warmth/communal cluster, a more refined distinction should be made between sociability and morality (e.g., Brambilla, Sacchi, Menegatti, & Moscatelli, 2016; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). Sociability refers to individuals' ability to establish connections with others and indicates their style of engagement. Morality pertains to perceived (contextual) appropriateness of social behavior, which is seen to reveal intentions to do what is considered right (Ellemers, Pagliaro, & Barreto, 2013). On the light of this distinction, Moscatelli et al. (2016) found that hiring decisions about female candidates are more likely to be motivated by the use of terms referred to their sociability, such as *open*, *friendly*, or *sociable*, and to their morality, such as *respectful*, *responsible*, *correct*, *reliable*, *transparent*, or *trustworthy*, in addition to their competence, such as *efficient*, *pragmatic*, *skilled*, *ability*, *professionalism*, *creative*, or *active*. In a specular way, rejection of female candidates is justified by describing them with terms referred to their lack of morality, such as *disrespectful*, *unreliable*, *unclear*, or *prejudiced*, and sociability, such as *introverted*, *rigid*, *formal*, *closed*, or *aggressive*. Conversely, evaluations of both hired and rejected male candidates were composed by more competence than morality and sociability terms. These results highlighted that selectors use language to differentiate evaluations of female and male job candidates not only on the stereotypical dimensions of warmth and competence, but also on the morality dimension. Moreover, female candidates are asked to meet higher requirements and have to perform well on different evaluation dimensions to be selected, whereas justifications of men's hiring and rejection are primarily based on the use of competence-related terms only.

Research on Gender Bias in the Structure of Language

Gender bias and sexism are embedded in the grammatical structure of most languages and therefore are perceived to be normative (see Hamilton, 1988; Ng, 2007; Stahlberg et al., 2007). The most evident linguistic gender inequality is that expressions referring to females are often grammatically more complex than those referring to males. In languages with grammatical gender, such as German, Italian, or Spanish, the two forms are often symmetrical, as in the case of *ginecologo* (male *gynecologist*) and *ginecologa* (female *gynecologist*) in Italian. In other cases, they are clearly asymmetrical as most nouns referred to female persons are composed by adding a suffix to the corresponding masculine terms. An example is the Italian suffix *-essa* (corresponding to the suffix *-ess* in English, e.g., *hostess, authoress*), which is added to masculine words to create the derived female correspondent, such as *professoressa* (female professor) from the masculine *professore*, or *studentessa* (female student) from the masculine term *studente*. Also in English, a so-called natural gender language because it does not have grammatical marking of sex, there are rather asymmetrical feminine forms that derive from the masculine ones, such as *heroine* from *hero*, *actress* from *actor*. Moreover, linguistic marking with feminine suffices is commonly considered as necessary when referring to a female person. When talking about a man, however, there is no need to make explicit the gender with a distinct masculine marking. This is because there is implicit agreement that the prototypical human being is male. Therefore, when speakers refer to a person with a generic term, it is assumed to be male unless there is an explicit indication to the contrary (Silveira, 1980). For instance, Hamilton (1991), who postulated the equation “Male = People and People = Men,” found that speakers chose the terms individual or person over man when referring to a male adult, whereas they chose women to refer to a female.

More recently it has been shown a “linguistic normativity effect” according to which people tend to compare groups or individuals by mentioning first the more powerful or higher status ones (e.g., “ Compared to men, women are . . .,” or “Compared to fathers, mothers are . . .”). This biased comparison implicitly favors the first mentioned group, which becomes the norm against which the other is compared (Pratto et al., 2007). Specifically, Bruckmüller et al. (2012) found that when men are mentioned as the referent group of comparison in a typically male (leadership) context, status inequalities are perceived as more legitimate and the gender stereotypes of men as agentic and women as communal are more readily endorsed.

However, sexist language has one of its most harmful tools in masculine forms used as a generic. In languages with grammatical gender, it is common and accepted to use masculine nouns to refer to both men and women, or to persons whose gender is irrelevant or unknown. For instance, in Italian and German, the masculine, rather than the feminine, plurals (e.g., *studenti* and *Studenten*) are used to describe a general group of people (e.g., students) in a sex-unspecified way. This is even more likely to occur when speakers refer to women in predominantly male, high-status professions, such as *chirurgo* (surgeon) or *primo ministro* (prime minister), which represent masculine forms used also when referring exclusively to women. The opposite does not occur for men in typical female job positions, such as *infermiera* (nurse) or *ostetrica* (midwife) for which some languages, such as Italian, provide

the corresponding male terms, *infermiere* and *ostetrico*. In languages where nouns have no grammatical gender, such as English, generic forms comprise the use of masculine pronouns: *she* and *her* refer to females only, whereas *he* and *his* can be used either in a male-specific or in a generic sense. Masculine generics may represent the grammatically correct form for referring to both sexes and, if masculine generics actually represented males and females with equal likelihood, no particular consequences would occur. However, this is not the case. Experimental research has clearly demonstrated that masculine generic does not depict women and men as equal human beings and that it makes females invisible in people imagery and memory, thus failing to perform its assigned generic function (Ng, 2007). Masculine forms are mainly associated with males in people's mental representations and activate traits, behaviors, and images associates with men. Most studies on the cognitive effects of masculine generics present participants with sentences that could be composed of a masculine generic (*he*, *they*, *mankind*, *men*) or a gender-fair linguistic form (e.g., *she or he*, *s/he*; *women and men*; *human being*; *person*). Then participants are asked to perform different tasks, such as to guess the sex of the described persons, to draw or select pictures representing men and/or women, to decide whether the text referred to women, to write stories about the persons described, and so on. Results showed, for instance, that gender-fair forms, which have an explicit reference to women, activate more female associations than the masculine generic forms (for reviews, see Sczesny, Formanowicz, & Moser, 2016; Stahlberg et al., 2007). When answering a question with a masculine generic ("Who is your favorite musician?" "Please, name three athletes."), people associate and retrieve predominantly male exemplars. Masculine forms are also associated with slower identification of women as members of certain groups (such as athletes, actors, or other occupational groups). More women are mentioned when gender-fair forms (e.g., word pairs such as "$\text{Musiker}_{\text{MASC}}$/ $\text{Musikerinnen}_{\text{FEM}}$"/"$\text{Sportler}_{\text{MASC}}$/$\text{Sportlerinnen}_{\text{FEM}}$") are used instead of masculine forms, especially in male-dominated fields, where women constituted the minority. Interestingly, masculine linguistic forms may lead to assume more men than women to be in a professional group even for typical feminine professions, thus overriding the effects of gender stereotypes (for a review, see Braun, Sczesny, & Stahlberg, 2005).

The male bias activated by masculine generic forms emerges also in real-life contexts, such as legal language. An 1850 Act of the British Parliament prescribed the use of masculine generics in legal language and, consequently, women could claim their rights only when they were mentioned explicitly in a certain law (Scutt, 1985). In an experimental reconstruction of an original trial for murder, Hamilton, Hunter, and Stuart-Smith (1992) asked participants to decide whether the accused woman had acted in self-defense by using the generic pronouns *he* or the word pair *he or she*, or the word *she*. In the first case, only 5 participants decided for self-defense, whereas when gender-fair forms were used 16 and 11 participants respectively made such a decision. In the political context, the use of gender-fair forms when asking participants which politician of different parties should run for the office of chancellor raised the number of female politicians mentioned in response.

Overall, the evidence reviewed here shows that "the choice of masculine words to perform generic functions had little to do with any linguistic superiority that these words might have relative to feminine or neuter words and a lot to do with the male dominance in society at

large" (Ng, 2007, p. 117). This carries the need for developing gender-fair alternatives to masculine generics, such as word pairs, which combine feminine and masculine nouns (*bambini e bambine* in Italian) or pronouns (*she* and *he*), splitting forms (*s/he*, *she/he*), or neutralizations (*hen*, neutral pronoun in Swedish, *chairperson* instead of *chairman*). But if the aim is to promote gender equality, which is the most appropriate expression when referring to women? Psychological research that has attempted to answer this question yielded complex and sometimes divergent evidence.

Recent Developments: Effects of Gender-Fair Language

Early research on the effects of gender-fair language has been conducted by Bem and Bem (1973) who analyzed the wording of job advertisement. They found that women were more willing to apply for a counter-stereotypical occupation when it was advertised with a gender-neutral form. Although the use of gender-specific expressions, such as *lineman* or *linewoman*, which specify a gender preference in job advertisements are not permitted anymore,[1] vacant positions are still often advertised with masculine forms, and this is particularly true for leadership positions. More recent research has shown that masculine pronouns used to describe ideal applicants for a vacant positions reduce women' s motivation to apply as well as their sense of belongingness and identification with the work context and the job (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011).

The wording of job advertisement affects not only potential applicants, but also personnel selectors. Female applicants are perceived to fit less well with a high-status position than male applicants when the masculine form is used, even though they are perceived to be equally competent. However, female and male applicants are judged as fitting the high-status leadership position similarly well when word pairs are used (Horvath & Sczesny, 2016).

Moreover, the perception of professions is affected by the form in which they are referred to. Children's and adolescents' opinions about professions and their vocational interests are strongly affected by linguistic forms. Professions presented to adolescents in the masculine form lead to perceive women as more successful in typically feminine and men in typically masculine jobs. In contrast, when presented with word pairs, female and male professionals are perceived as equally likely to succeed in both typically feminine and masculine professions. Moreover, when professionals are described with masculine forms, they are perceived as less warm in typically masculine jobs and warmer in typically feminine jobs than those described with word pairs. In contrast, perception of competence does not change (Vervecken & Hannover, 2015). Similarly when professions were presented with word pairs, children rated female job holders in typically masculine professions as more successful and girls as more interested in these typically masculine professions (Vervecken, Hannover, & Wolter, 2013). However, side effects of the use of gender-fair forms in job titles also emerged. Children perceive typically masculine professions presented with word pairs as less difficult and therefore more accessible, but they also attribute to such professions less salary (Vervecken & Hannover, 2015).

In a similar vein, referring to Italian female professionals using feminine titles with the suffix *-essa* (e.g., *professoressa*, female professor) instead of masculine titles (e.g., *professore*, male professor) leads to perceive these professionals as less persuasive (Mucchi-Faina, 2005). This effect is probably due to the perceived lower social status of professionals ending in *-essa* as compared to those ending in *-a* (e.g., *professora*), which has been recently introduced as an alternative to the masculine form, especially for higher status positions (Merkel, Maass, & Frommelt, 2012).

The double-sided effects of the use of gender-fair language have been specifically examined by Horvath, Merkel, Maass, and Sczesny (2016) who measured women's visibility as well as their status perception and salary estimates. Results showed that women's visibility increased for most professions when word pairs were used instead of masculine forms. Moreover, typically feminine professions lost and typically masculine professions gained in social status when word pairs are used rather than masculine forms. Typically female professions presented with word pairs also lost in salary estimate than when presented with the masculine form.

Another detrimental consequence for women using feminine job titles is that the feminine form emphasizes the reference to their gender and the activation of the corresponding stereotype. For instance, women described using feminine job titles are perceived as less competent by both men and women, but less warm only by men (Budziszewska, Hansen, & Bilewicz, 2014).

Accordingly, women in high-status positions are perceived as warmer, that is, closer to the stereotype of women, than when referred to with a masculine term. Thus there is a paradox according to which, in high-status positions, women could benefit from the use of masculine job titles.

Negative side effects of making women more visible through the use of feminine job titles have been found also in job evaluations. Women designated with a feminine job title receive less favorable evaluations than those designed with a masculine title. Moreover, female applicants who apply for a gender-neutral job and refer to themselves with a feminine (vs. masculine) professional title suffer similar disadvantages (Formanowicz, Bedynska, Cislak, Braun, & Sczesny, 2012).

Recently, Hansen, Littwitz, and Sczesny (2016) found that gender-inclusive forms used in news reports enhanced individuals' own usage of gender-inclusive language and this resulted in more gender-balanced mental representations of the roles described. Reading about "heroines and heroes" made participants assume a higher percentage of women among persons performing heroic acts than reading about "heroes" only. Importantly, the influence of gender-inclusive language on the perceived percentage of women in a role is mediated by the speakers' own usage of inclusive forms. This suggests that people who encounter gender-inclusive forms use them more themselves and, in turn, have more gender-balanced mental representations of social roles.

Accordingly, it should also be noted that reactions to gender-fair linguistic forms are not equal among individuals. For instance, there are differences between people who endorse modern sexist beliefs and those who do not. Unlike old-fashioned sexists, who explicitly support gender inequality and endorse traditional gender roles, modern (or neo) sexists express beliefs that indirectly condone the unequal treatment of women and men (Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & Joly, 1995). The endorsement of modern sexist beliefs leads to less recognition and a higher likelihood of using sexist language. In contrast, those who do not endorse modern sexism may purposefully replace sexist language with nonsexist language, even if they may still have automatic associations that lead to the use of sexist linguistic forms (Swim, Mallet, & Stangor, 2004).

Recent Developments: Subtle Gender Bias and Linguistic Abstraction

Linguistic discrimination of women can be perpetrated not only by the content of linguistic expressions, but also through the use of specific linguistic categories, which call the recipient's attention to specific features of the described person (Semin, 2000). Specifically, the level of abstraction of different classes of terms are functional in "zooming in" or "zooming out" on the target of judgment by providing either a detailed context-dependent or a holistic, general, enduring representation of the person (Rubini et al., 2014). Thus, the same behavioral episode can be described at different levels of abstraction by keeping the content of the message constant. For instance, two applicants for an academic job positions with the very same CV can be evaluated saying that "the candidate did not write enough papers" or that "the candidate was not an innovative researcher." These two statements convey the similar content that applicant's publications are not enough to be suitable for the position. However, the first statement, which is more concrete, implicitly suggests that the applicant did not reach the requested standard in a specific area and thus restricts the unfavorable evaluation to a transitory situation or performance that is likely to change in different contexts or for future selection procedures (Semin & Fiedler, 1988). By contrast, the second statement, which is more abstract, does not only concern the applicant's publications, but refers to a durable quality and conveys the idea that the applicant is not able to do high-quality research at all and therefore that s/he is very likely to fail also in other job evaluations. The concrete-abstract dimension of language has been identified by the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988), which distinguishes between four word categories increasing in their level of abstraction: descriptive action verbs (DAVs: e.g., "to kick," "to hug"), interpretative action verbs (IAVs: e.g., "to hurt," "to help"), state verbs (SVs: e.g., "to hate"; "to love"), and adjectives (ADJs: e.g., "aggressive," "kind"). Terms in the same category trigger similar cognitive inferences, which in turn exert a systematic influence on non-linguistic behavior (e.g., Menegatti & Rubini, 2013). Abstract statements, as opposed to concrete ones, are perceived to reveal more about the person and less about the situation, imply greater temporal stability, and are more likely to produce expectations of repetition in the future. A considerable amount of research has shown that social stereotypes and prejudice are implicitly transmitted through the linguistic intergroup bias (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989; Rubini et al., 2014; Wigboldus & Douglas, 2007), the tendency to describe

ingroup socially desirable behaviors and outgroup undesirable behaviors at a higher level of abstraction than ingroup undesirable and outgroup desirable behaviors. This language use shapes a more favorable portrait of ingroup members as possessing highly stable positive features (while minimizing the generalizability of their negative behaviors), and at the same time emphasizes the negative characteristics of outgroup members. Given that the receivers make precisely the inferences intended by the LIB, this use of language abstraction is actually a means to maintain and transmit social stereotypes (Wigboldus, Semin, & Spears, 2000). Even more important, the linguistic intergroup bias is an implicit way to enact intergroup discrimination and prejudice, because individuals are able to censor or alter their responses to explicit or outward measures of those phenomena, but appear unable to spontaneously inhibit linguistic bias (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2003; Franco & Maass, 1999).

Accordingly, gender discrimination can be perpetrated at the implicit, subtle level of language abstraction. Born and Taris (2010) examined the impact of wording gender typical and atypical candidate profiles in an employment advertisement using behaviors/verbs or nouns/adjectives. They found that women were more sensitive to gender typicality of the job advertised when it was described with nouns or adjectives. Moreover, they were more likely to express the intention to apply for masculine jobs when they were described in more concrete, behavioral terms. No differences were found in the male sample. Thus, variations in the level of abstraction of interpersonal terms strongly affect gender discrimination right from the early phases of the personnel selection process.

Later on, women could be implicitly discriminated by the terms chosen to write formal evaluations that justify and motivate hiring decisions. Rubini and Menegatti (2014) coded the level of abstraction of judgments written by selection committees about applicants for associate professor positions at an Italian university. These judgments are part of formal documents that report the entire selection procedures and constitute the “rationale” upon which a final hiring decision is made. Results revealed a gender linguistic bias according to which judgments of female applicants were composed of negative terms at a more abstract level and positive terms at a more concrete level than those of male applicants, which were composed of negative terms at a lower level of abstraction and positive terms at a higher level of abstraction. Furthermore, this tendency was enhanced for rejected applicants, such that rejected women were described more unfavorably than rejected men. More importantly, this implicit discrimination was perpetrated only by male committee members, whereas female ones did not differentiate the level of abstraction used to describe men and women. These findings were further explained by a fine-grained analysis of the use of each linguistic category, revealing that discrimination against female applicants was mainly based on the use of adjectives. Women were evaluated with greater proportions of negative ADJs (e.g., “She is not an innovative researcher”) independently of whether they were or were not selected for the position. In contrast, male applicants, even when rejected, were evaluated with many negative action verbs, which allow negative aspects to be limited to restricted contexts.

Overall, this research shows that selectors use language abstraction to implicitly communicate that the positive traits of men and the negative traits of women are stable across situations and more likely to remain unaltered than those of male applicants. This

language, in turn, conveys a representation of women as having less worth than their male colleagues and could damage their future opportunities to enter academia or reach higher positions. In this vein, the use of language abstraction can be a subtle means to discriminate against female applicants—assuming equal qualifications of male and female applicants—without explicitly selecting more men than women. Since modern societies explicitly and legally forbid gender inequality in job recruitment and career development, men seem to use language abstraction as an implicit means to maintain and reproduce their power (Reid & Ng, 1999) in academia by depicting women as less-deserving scientists than their male colleagues.

However, there is a communicative context in which the subtle gender discrimination perpetrated trough variations of language abstraction works in the opposite direction, namely, that of primary school evaluation. Menegatti, Crocetti, and Rubini (in press) coded the level of abstraction of positive and negative terms used by primary school teachers in final written evaluations of their students. The studies were conducted in Italy, where written judgments are part of formal records that comprise marks for each school subject and overall feedback on students' global learning achievements that are collectively written by the teachers of each class. These final records constitute formal documents that are delivered to parents at the end of each academic year and are kept in the school archives. Results first showed a correspondence between the implicit and explicit levels at which evaluations were communicated, namely, language abstraction and marks: The more students received high marks, the more they were evaluated with positive abstract terms, which convey a very favorable description. Conversely, the lower the marks, the more students were described in abstract negative terms, thus conveying that their negative achievements are due to stable, inner characteristics, and difficult to change. Second, there was an implicit gender linguistic bias in favor of female students, who were evaluated with more abstract positive and more concrete negative terms than males. This linguistic representation can have significant consequences for children in a direct way, by affecting their motivation and self-esteem; or in an indirect way, by affecting the representation that their families and teachers of subsequent school grades form of their social and learning skills. Indeed, children from the age of 5 years onward are able to infer that certain behavior described at a high level of abstraction is more likely to be repeated than the same behavior described with more concrete terms, and they recognize that abstract stories lead to attributions to the person instead of the situation (Werkman, Wigboldus, & Semin, 1999). Thus, evaluations containing abstract negative terms, as those received by boys, could have detrimental consequences for their identity and self-esteem, motivation to improve, and future learning achievement. In contrast, at an early age, girls seem to have an advantage compared to boys. But it is well known that, as the years pass, they start to be discriminated at both implicit and explicit levels and to find barriers to achieve the highest positions (e.g., Bellas & Toutkoushian, 1999; Ellemers, van den Heuvel, de Gilder, Maass, & Bovini, 2004). Following this reasoning, it remains to understand at what point of girls' and women's lives their positive linguistic representation is dramatically reversed and language becomes a subtle means to maintain gender inequality.

Future Research: Reducing Gender Bias in Language

Research on sexism and gender bias in language has clearly shown that asymmetries in the social structure are reproduced in the content and the structure of language. Given these assumptions, how could gender bias in language be reduced? Importantly, is the use of gender-fair language actually effective in reducing gender bias and inequality?

First of all, it is necessary to make people aware of how sexist language works and of the beneficial effects of the use of gender-fair expressions (Swim et al., 2004). This should motivate the change of linguistic habits and to use language in a more symmetrical and equal fashion. If this is very clear, less clear is whether the use of gender-fair expressions could have positive effects. For instance, individual use of feminine job titles makes women as a group more visible and such job titles more familiar. This produces gains for women as a group (Braun et al., 2005). However, individual women who use feminine job titles are evaluated in more disadvantageous ways, as they suffer the negative effects of gender stereotypes and gender inequality prompted by female linguistic reference. For this reason, several authors suggest that, to decide whether gender-fair form would help to promote gender equality, it is necessary to consider long-term effects (for an overview, see Sczesny et al., 2016). Indeed, more positive reactions to gender-fair linguistic forms could be expected as time passes as a consequence of habituation. Some feminine forms are perceived as negative because they sound awkward and grammatically incorrect in a given language. As a consequence, the more feminine or gender-fair words are coined and used, the more usual and neutral they will sound for a mere exposure effect. For instance, in Sweden, the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* was added to the existing pronouns for she and he. The pronoun was proposed to refer to persons whose gender was unknown or irrelevant, and to people who categorize themselves outside the gender dichotomy. At first, the majority of Swedish had negative attitudes toward the new word, but after two years the use of the word increased and the reactions become more positive (Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, & Lindqvist, 2015). This is in line with recent findings (Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, & Laakso, 2012) showing that gender equality—especially in terms of gender differences in economic participation and women's greater access to political empowerment—is higher in countries that speak natural gender or genderless languages than in counties that speak gendered language. This relation is obtained by controlling for other possible explaining factors, such as divergent geographic locations, religious traditions, government systems, or level of development.

Finally, it should be considered that there are even more implicit forms of gender discrimination in language use, such as those produced by the choice of terms at different levels of linguistic abstraction, which are very difficult to recognize and suppress. Up to now, no research has shown whether people could be trained to control the choice of concrete or abstract terms, but it has been demonstrated that they are able to inhibit linguistic bias if they are explicitly asked to do so (for instance, if they are asked to describe an enemy in a favorable way; Douglas & Sutton, 2003). Thus, people should first be informed of the effects of holding and communicating gender stereotypic expectations, and then they should be formed to choice linguistic forms that facilitate gender equality.

Literature Review

The social-psychological literature on sexism and gender bias in language is extensive and focused on different aspects. On the one hand, many authors have studied gender bias in language with the aim of examining the more general topics of stereotypes and prejudice. It is the case of the work by Banaji and colleagues, who analyzed the cognitive organization of stereotypes by using terms that could be consistent or inconsistent with gender stereotypes. They found that gender-related labels activate very easily the corresponding stereotype at both superliminal and subliminal levels (Banaji & Hardin, 1996; Blair & Banaji, 1996). Others have examined the content of language use with the aim of unfolding different ways through which gender discrimination in the workplace is perpetrated. They showed that the content of gender stereotypes is reflected in the content of the language used to describe men and women in both job evaluation (Madera, Hebl, & Martin, 2009; Trix & Psenka, 2003) and job advertisement (Bem & Bem, 1973; Gaucher, Friesen, & Kay, 2011). Moreover, this language use has concrete negative consequences, as women described with stereotypic-consistent words are less likely to be hired for high-status positions.

On the other hand, there is a large amount of research explicitly designed to investigate the use and effects of masculine forms. Early works were conducted by Ng and colleagues showing that masculine words fail to perform their assigned generic function, as they actually render females invisible in imagery (Wilson & Ng, 1988) and memory (Ng, 1990). More recently, Braun and colleagues (2005) wrote a comprehensive overview of their line of research on the effects of masculine generics and gender-fair linguistic forms on the cognitive inclusion of women. They demonstrated that gender-fair forms, which have an explicit reference to women, activate more female associations than the masculine generic forms and make women more visible, especially in male-dominated fields.

An increasing interest on the effects of gender-fair language emerged from the study of the effects of feminine job titles. Results of this research are controversial. Indeed, it has been found that women’s visibility and perceived status increased for most professions when word pairs are used instead of masculine forms (Horvath, Merkel, Maass, & Sczesny, 2016). However, the use of feminine forms lead to less salary estimates (Horvath et al., 2016), perceptions of lower competence and warmth (Budziszewska, Hansen, & Bilewicz, 2014), and worse evaluations (Formanowicz, Bedynska, Cislak, Braun, & Sczesny, 2012).

Less known is the contribution of the literature on the classic linguistic intergroup bias (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989) for the study of gender bias in language use. Although 20 years of research on the use of language abstraction in the intergroup context (for reviews, see Rubini, Menegatti, & Moscatelli, 2014; Wigboldus & Douglas, 2007), only recently Rubini and Menegatti (2014) have demonstrated that this linguistic property of interpersonal terms could be a powerful yet implicit tool for gender discrimination in personnel selection.

Current research has mostly focused on investigating whether the use of gender-fair language is actually effective in hindering gender inequality and discrimination and whether people are actually willing to use such language in formal and everyday communication. In general, attitudes toward gender-fair language seem to become more favorable the more frequently and longer it has been used (Gustafsson et al., 2015; Sczesny et al., 2016).

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Notes

1. On the heels of U.S. civil rights legislation (Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act) deeming the practice of using job advertisements that overtly specify a preference for male applicants unconstitutional, and the advent of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, explicit sex segregation of advertisements had abruptly ended by 1973 (Pedriana & Abraham, 2006).

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