

Language use shapes cultural stereotypes: Large scale evidence from gender

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Portions of this manuscript appeared in Lewis & Lupyan, 2018, Cog. Sci Proceedings.

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Abstract

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Keywords: cultural norms, implicit association task (IAT), gender

Word count: X

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Introduction

By the time they are two years old, children have already begun to acquire the gender stereotypes in their culture (Gelman, Taylor, Nguyen, Leaper, & Bigler, 2004). This finding is concerning given evidence that children’s conceptualizations of gender can have undesirable real-world consequences. For example, in one study, girls, compared to boys, were less likely to think that girls are “brilliant” and also less likely to choose activities that were described as for “children who are very, very smart” (Bian, Leslie, & Cimpian, 2017). In the aggregate, these behavioral choices could lead to the observed lower rates of female participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Ceci & Williams, 2011; Leslie, Cimpian, Meyer, & Freeland, 2015; Miller, Eagly, & Linn, 2015; Stoet & Geary, 2018). Given the potential downstream consequences of cultural stereotypes, it is important to understand their origins.

While there are likely many causal factors that shape cultural stereotypes, a large body of evidence suggests that language may play an important role. For instances, young children perform worse in a game if they are told that an anonymous member of the opposite gender performed better than they did on a previous round (Rhodes & Brickman, 2008), or merely told that the game is *associated* with a particular gender (Cimpian, Mu, & Erickson, 2012). Further, there is evidence that descriptions as minimal as a single word can influence children’s stereotypes: In one study, children were more likely to infer that a novel skill is stereotypical of a gender if the skill was introduced to children in the form of a generic compared to a non-generic (“[Girls are/There is a girl who is] really good at a game called ‘gorp’”; Cimpian & Markman, 2011).

In our work here, we ask whether language influences psychological gender biases in ways that are more subtle than linguistic descriptions or word choice. In particular, we test

two possible mechanisms through which language might shape gender biases. The first is through word meaning derived from a word's co-occurrence with other words, an approach to word meaning known as *distributional semantics*. Under this approach, words that tend to occur in similar contexts in language may lead speakers to assume—either implicitly or explicitly—that they have similar meanings. For example, statistically, the word “nurse” occurs in many of the same contexts as the pronoun “her,” providing an implicit link between these two concepts that may lead to a bias to assume that nurses are female. This route may be particularly influential because the bias is encoded in language in a way that is implicit and thus may be more difficult to discount. To our knowledge, no work to date has tested the link between distributional semantics and social stereotypes.

The second way word meaning might shape gender biases is through the overt grammatical marking of gender, particularly on nouns, which is obligatory in roughly one quarter of languages (e.g., in Spanish, “nina” (girl) and “enfermera” (nurse) both take the gender marker *-a* to indicate grammatical femininity; Corbett, 1991). Because grammatical gender has a natural link to the real world, speakers may assume that grammatical markers are meaningful even when applied to inanimate objects that do not have a biological sex. In addition, the mere presence of obligatory marking of grammatical gender may promote bias by making the dimension of gender more salient to speakers.

Past experimental work suggests a causal link between grammatical gender and psychological gender bias in both adults (e.g., Phillips & Boroditsky, 2003) and children (e.g., Sera, Berge, & Castillo Pintado, 1994). For example, Phillips and Boroditsky (2003) asked Spanish-English and German-English adult bilinguals to make similarity judgments between pairs of pictures depicting an object with a natural gender (e.g., a bride) and one without (e.g., a toaster). They found that participants rated pairs as more similar when the pictures matched in grammatical gender in their native language. While these types of studies provide suggestive evidence for a causal link between language and psychological gender bias,

they are limited by the fact that they typically only compare speakers of 2-3 different languages and measure bias in a way that is subject to demand characteristics.

Of course, evidence for a close correspondence between language and psychological gender biases is also consistent with the simpler explanation that language reflects a pre-existing gender bias in its speakers (*language-as-reflection hypothesis*). We assume that the language-as-reflection hypothesis is true to some extent: some of the ways we talk about gender reflect our knowledge and biases acquired independently of language. For example, we may observe that most nurses are women, and therefore be more likely to use a female pronoun to refer to a nurse of an unknown gender. Our present goal is to understand the extent to which language may also exert a causal influence on conceptualizations of gender (*language-as-causal hypothesis*).

In what follows, we ask whether the way gender is linguistically encoded across 25 different languages predicts cross-cultural variability in a specific manifestation of a gender bias—the bias to associate men with careers and women with family. We begin by describing our cross-cultural dataset of psychological gender bias. We then examine whether variability in language, as captured by distributional semantics, predicts differences in the gender-career implicit bias (Study 1). We next ask whether the presence of grammatical gender in a language is associated with greater implicit gender bias (Study 2). Together, our data suggest that language not only reflects existing biases, but plays a causal role in shaping culturally-specific notions of gender.

Description of Cross-Cultural Dataset of Psychological Gender Bias

To quantify cross-cultural gender bias, we used data from a large-scale administration of an Implicit Association Task (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) by Project Implicit (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). The

IAT measures the strength of respondents' implicit associations between two pairs of concepts (e.g., male-career/female-family vs. male-family/female-career) accessed via words (e.g., "man," "business"). The underlying assumption of the IAT is that words denoting more similar meanings should be easier to pair together compared to more dissimilar pairs.

Meanings are paired in the task by assigning them to the same response keys in a two-alternative forced-choice categorization task. In the critical blocks of the task, meanings are assigned to keys in a way that is either bias-congruent (i.e. Key A = male/career; Key B = female/family) or bias-incongruent (i.e. Key A = male/family; Key B = female/career). Participants are then presented with a word related to one of the four concepts and asked to classify it as quickly as possible. Slower reaction times in the bias-incongruent blocks relative to the bias-congruent blocks are interpreted as indicating an implicit association between the corresponding concepts (i.e. a bias to associate male with career and female with family).

In the present study, we analyzed a dataset of gender-career IAT scores collected by Project Implicit between 2005 and 2016. We restricted our sample based on participants' reaction times and error rates using the same criteria described in Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald (2002, pg. 104). We only analyzed data for countries that had at least 400 participants. Our final sample included 764,520 participants from 39 countries, with a median of 1,311 participants per country. Note that although the respondents were from largely non-English speaking countries, the IAT was conducted in English. We do not have language background data from the participants, but we assume that most respondents from non-English speaking countries were native speakers of the dominant language of the country and L2 speakers of English.

Several measures have been used in the literature to quantify the strength of the bias from participants' responses on congruent and incongruent blocks on the IAT. Here, we used the most robust measure, D-score, which measures the difference between critical blocks for each participant while controlling for individual differences in response time (Greenwald,

Nosek, & Banaji, 2003). In addition to the implicit measure, we also analyzed an explicit measure of gender bias. After completing the IAT, participants were asked, “How strongly do you associate the following with males and females?” for both the words “career” and “family.” Participants indicated their response on a Likert scale ranging from *female* (1) to *male* (7). We calculated an explicit gender bias score for each participant as the Career response minus the Family response, such that greater values indicate a greater bias to associate males with career.

At the participant level, implicit bias scores were correlated with participant age such that older participants tended to have a larger gender bias than younger participants ($r = 0.06$, $p < .0001$). Male participants ($M = 0.32$, $SD = 0.39$) had a significantly smaller implicit gender bias than female participants ($M = 0.42$, $SD = 0.36$; $t = 105.60$, $p < .0001$), a pattern consistent with previous findings (Nosek et al., 2002). Finally, implicit bias scores varied as a function of block order on the IAT task ($t = -114.08$, $p < .0001$).

For the present purposes, our goal was to estimate gender bias at the country level. To account for covariates of gender bias, we calculated a residual implicit bias score for each participant, controlling for participant age, participant sex, and block order. We also calculated a residual explicit bias score controlling for the same set of variables. We then averaged across participants to estimate the country-level gender bias (implicit: $M = -0.01$; $SD = 0.03$; explicit: $M = 0.00$; $SD = 0.17$). Implicit gender biases were moderately correlated with explicit gender biases at the level of participants ($r = 0.16$, $p < .0001$) but not countries ($r = 0.26$, $p = 0.10$).

We compared our residual country-level implicit and explicit gender biases to a gender equality metric reported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for each country: the percentage of women among STEM graduates in tertiary education (Miller et al., 2015; Stoet & Geary, 2018). Consistent with previous research (Miller et al., 2015), we found that implicit gender bias was negatively

correlated with percentage of women in STEM fields: Countries with a smaller gender bias tended to have more women in STEM fields ($r = -0.46$, $p = 0.02$). In contrast, there was no relationship between the percentage of women in STEM fields and the explicit gender-bias measure used by Project Implicit ($r = 0.17$, $p = 0.41$). In addition, we found a strong correlation between the median age of each country’s population (as reported by the CIA factbook, 2017) and the residual implicit bias (for which participant age was controlled for): Countries with older populations tended to have larger gender biases ($r = 0.63$, $p < .0001$).

In sum, we replicate previously-reported patterns of gender bias in the gender-career IAT literature, with roughly comparable effect sizes (c.f. Nosek, et al., 2002). The weak correlation between explicit and implicit measures is consistent with claims that these two measures tap into different cognitive constructs (Forscher et al., 2016). In addition, we find that an objective measure of gender equality—female enrollment in STEM fields—is associated with implicit gender bias.

Study 1: Gender bias and semantics

Are participants’ implicit and explicit gender biases predictable from biases found in the semantic structure of their native languages? For example, are the semantics of the words “woman” and “family” more similar in Spanish than in English? Both the language-as-reflection and language-as-causal hypotheses predict a positive correlation between the measured biases and biases present in language.

As a model of word meanings, we use large-scale distributional semantics models derived from auto-encoding neural networks trained on large text corpora. The underlying assumption of these models is that the meaning of a word can be described by the words it tends to co-occur with—words occurring in similar contexts, tend to have similar meanings (Firth, 1957). The word like “dog”, for example is represented as more similar to “hound”

than to “banana” because “dog” co-occurs with words more in common with “hound” than “banana.” Recent developments in machine learning allow the idea of distributional semantics to be implemented in a way that takes into account many features of language structure while remaining computationally tractable. The best known of these word embedding models is *word2vec* (Mikolov, Chen, Corrado, & Dean, 2013). The model takes as input a corpus of text and outputs a vector for each word corresponding to its semantics. From these vectors, we can derive a measure of the semantic similarity between two words by taking the distance between their vectors (e.g., cosine distance).

As it turns out, many of the biases previously reported using implicit association tests can be predicted from distributional semantics models like *word2vec*. Caliskan, Bryson, and Narayanan (2017; henceforth *CBN*) measured the distance in vector space between the words presented to participants in the IAT task. CBN found that these distance measures were highly correlated with reaction times in the behavioral IAT task. For example, CBN find a bias to associate males with career and females with family in the career-gender IAT, suggesting that the biases measured by the IAT are also found in the lexical semantics of natural language.

CBN only measured semantic biases in English, however. In Study 1, we use the method described by CBN to examine whether the gender bias of the participants in the Project Implicit dataset is correlated with the gender bias measured in the dominant languages spoken in the countries of these participants. We begin by validating word embedding measures of gender bias by comparing them to explicit human judgements of word genderness (Study 1a). We then apply this method to models trained on text in other languages (Study 1b). To foreshadow the results, we find that the implicit gender biases reported in Study 1 for individual countries are correlated with the biases found in the distributional semantics of the language spoken in the countries of the participants.

Study 1a: Word embeddings as a measure of psychological gender bias

To validate word embeddings as a measure of psychological gender bias, we asked whether words that were closely associated with males in the word embedding models tended to be rated by human participants as being more male biased. We found human and word-embedding estimates of gender bias to be highly correlated.

Methods. We used an existing set of word norms in which participants were asked to rate “the gender associated with each word” on a Likert scale ranging from *very feminine* (1) to *very masculine* (7; Scott, Keitel, Becirspahic, Yao, & Sereno, 2018). We compared these gender norms to estimates of gender bias from a word embedding model pre-trained on the corpus of English Wikipedia using the fastText algorithm (a variant of word2vec; Bojanowski, Grave, Joulin, & Mikolov, 2016; Joulin, Grave, Bojanowski, & Mikolov, 2016). Each word in the model is represented by a 300 dimensional vector. To calculate a gender score from the word embeddings, for each word we calculated the average cosine distance to a standard set of male “anchor” words: (“male”, “man”, “he”, “boy”, “his”, “him”, “son”, “brother”) and the average cosine similarity to a set of female words (“female”, “woman”, “she”, “girl”, “hers”, “her”, “daughter”, “sister”). A gender score for each word was then obtained by taking the difference of the similarity estimates (mean male similarity - mean female similarity), such that larger values indicated a stronger association with males. There were 4671 words in total that overlapped between the two data sources.

Results and Discussion. Estimates of gender bias from word embeddings ($M = 0$; $SD = 0.03$) and human judgements ($M = 4.10$; $SD = 0.92$) were highly correlated ($r = 0.59$; $p < .0001$; Fig. 1). This suggests that the psychological gender bias of a word can be reasonably estimated from word embeddings.

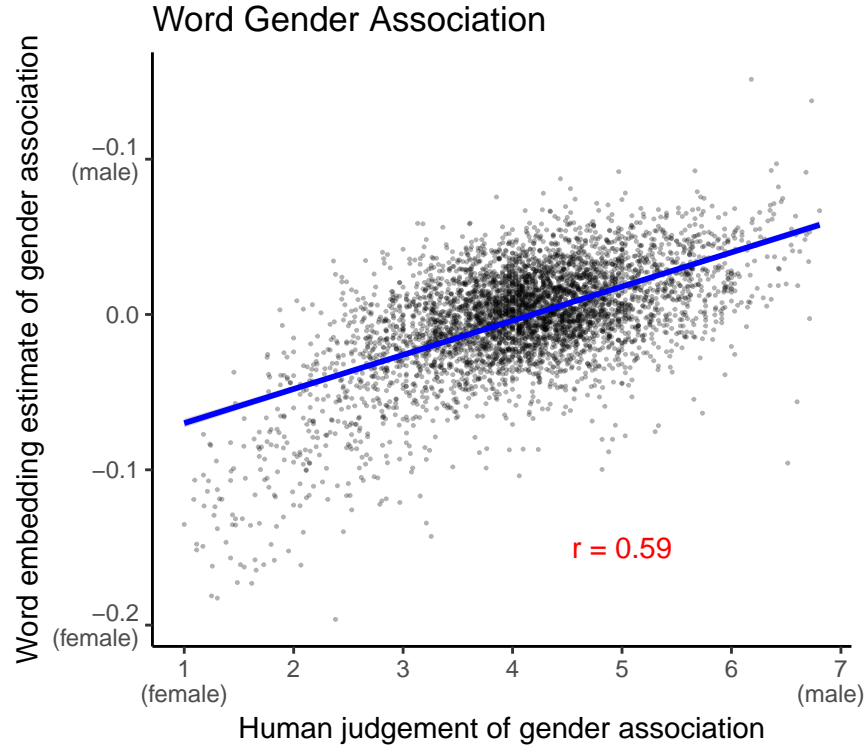


Figure 1. Word embedding estimates of gender bias as a function of human judgments of gender bias (Study 1a). Each point corresponds to a word. Larger numbers indicate stronger association with males. Blue line shows linear fit and the error band corresponds to a standard error (too small to be visible).

Study 1b: Gender bias across languages

Having validated our method, we next turn toward examining the relationship between psychological and linguistic gender biases. In Study 1b, we estimate the magnitude of the gender-career bias in the dominant language spoken in the countries of the Project Implicit participants and compare it with estimates of behavioral gender bias from the Project Implicit data set.

Methods. For each country represented in our analysis of the Project Implicit, we identified the most frequently spoken language in each country using Ethnologue (Simons & (eds.), 2018). This included a total of 27 unique languages. For two languages, Zulu and

Tagalog, the corpora that the models were trained on (see below) were too small to be reliable, and so we excluded these languages from our analysis. Our final sample included 25 languages, representing XX different language families.

For each language, we then obtained translations from native speakers for the stimuli in the Project Implicit gender-career IAT behavioral task (Nosek et al., 2002) with one slight modification. In the behavioral task, proper names were used to cue the male and female categories (e.g. “John,” “Amy”), but because there are not direct translation equivalents of proper names, we instead used a set of generic gendered words which had been previously used for a different version of the gender IAT (e.g., “man,” “woman;” Nosek et al., 2002). Our linguistic stimuli were therefore a set of 8 female and 8 male Target Words (identical to Study 1a), a set of 8 Attribute Words associated with the concept “career” (“career,” “executive,” “management,” “professional,” “corporation,” “salary,” “office,” “business”) and 8 Attribute Words associated with the concept “family” (“family,” “home,” “parents,” “children,” “cousins,” “marriage,” “wedding,” “relatives”).

We used these translations to calculate a gender bias effect size from word embedding models trained on text in each language. Our effect size measure is a standardized difference score of the relative similarity of the target words to the target attributes (i.e. relative similarity of male to career vs. relative similarity of female to career). Our effect size measure is identical to that used by CBN with one exception (see SM for replication of CBN on our corpora). Namely, for languages with grammatically gendered Attribute Words (e.g., *ninas* for female children in Spanish), we calculated the relationship between target words and attribute words of the same gender (i.e. “*hombre*” (man) to “*ninos*” and “*mujer*” (woman) to “*ninas*”). In cases where there were multiple translations for a word, or the translation contained multiple words, we averaged across words such that each of our target words was associated with a single vector in each language. Our effect size measure is analogous to the behavioral effect size measure obtained from the IAT task in Project

Implicit, where larger values indicate larger gender bias.

We calculated gender bias estimates based on models trained on two different corpora: Wikipedia (Bojanowski et al., 2016) and Subtitles [where are these from?]. These two models capture different types of XX. We then compared the effect size of the linguistic gender bias to the behavioral IAT gender bias estimated from Project Implicit, averaging across countries that speak whose participants speak the same language.

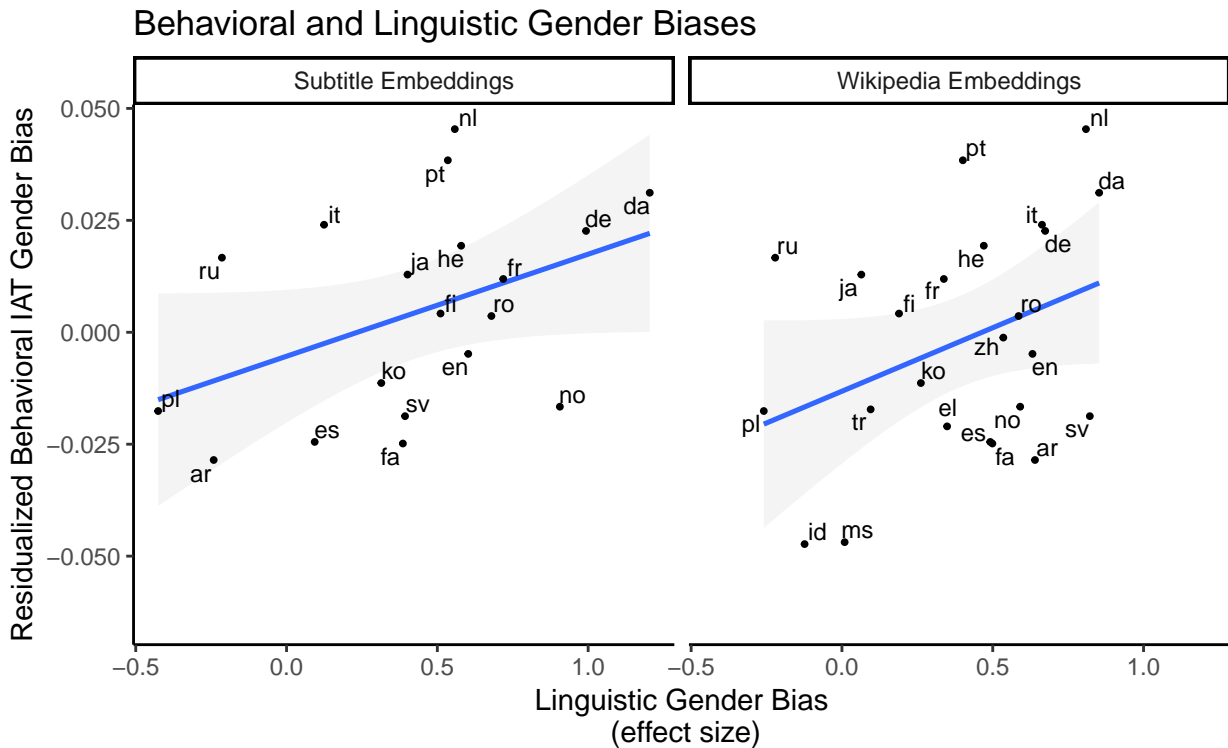


Figure 2. Residualized behavioral IAT gender bias as a function of linguistic gender bias, with each point corresponding to a language (Study 1b). Linguistic biases are estimated from models trained on each language using a subtitle corpus (left) and a sample of Wikipedia (right). Larger values indicate a larger bias to associate men with the concept of career and women with the concept of family. Error bands indicate standard error of the model estimate.

Results. The estimate of gender bias for each language was positively correlated the implicit gender bias of participants from countries where that language was dominant (and, we assume, was the native language of most of these individuals; $r = 0.36$; $p = 0.08$; Fig. 2).

This relationship held when controlling for median country age in a linear model ($\beta = 0.02$; $SE = 0.01$, $p = 0.09$). Linguistic gender bias was not correlated with explicit gender bias ($r = 0.29$; $p = 0.16$). [Percentage women in stem and language are marginal $p = .06$]. Table 1 shows the language-level correlations between all variables.

Table 1
Correlation (Pearson’s r) for all measures in Study 1 at the level of languages. Asterisks indicate significance at the .05 level.

	Linguistic Gender Bias (Subtitles)	Linguistic Gender Bias (Wikipedia)	Explicit Gender Bias (residualized)	Behavioral Gender Bias (residualized IAT score)
Language IAT (Subtitles)				
Language IAT (Wikipedia)	.58**			
Residualized Explicit Bias	.04	.29		
Residualized Behavioral IAT	.42	.36	.14	
Percent Women in Stem	-.40	-.19	.30	-.44

Discussion.

Study 2: Gender bias and grammar

The findings in Study 1 are consistent with the possibility that people’s implicit biases are in part caused by input from language (language-as-causal) and that the linguistic biases simply reflect existing biases (language-as-reflection). In Study 2, we try to distinguish between the two possibilities by examining whether linguistic biases are associated with grammatical gender, a structural aspect of language that is clearly not caused by people’s gender biases. [Describe what grammatical gender is]. We predicted that grammatical gender would act to exaggerate the linguistic biases present in the language. To the extent

that these are causally related to people’s implicit biases, these languages may be providing their speakers with additional exposure to gender biases thereby increasing their speakers’ implicit biases.

Method. We coded each of the languages in our sample (Study 1) for grammatical gender. We used a coarse binary coding scheme, categorizing a language as encoding grammatical gender if it made any gender distinction on noun classes (masculine, feminine, common or neuter), and as not encoding gender grammatically otherwise.

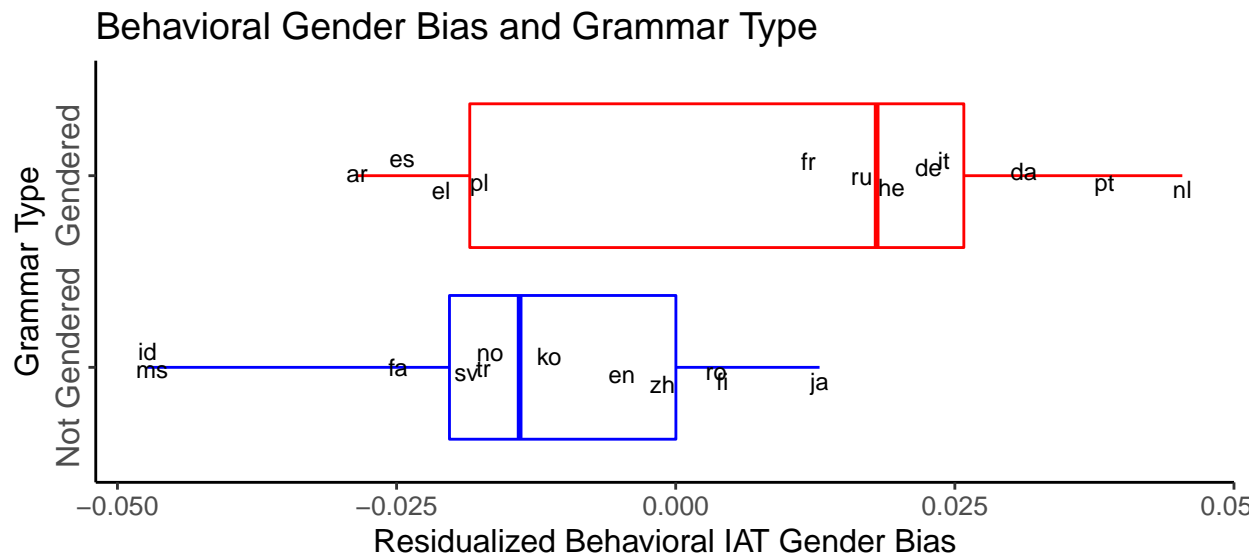


Figure 3. Residualized behavioral IAT gender bias as a function of whether or not the language encodes grammatical gender. Each label code corresponds to a language. The bold vertical line corresponds to the group median, and the box width indicates the first and third quartile.

Results and Discussion.

General Discussion

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