

Language and gender naming experiment: teacher notes

Background

Feminist campaigners have argued that languages like English, where you have to gender a person when talking or writing about them in third person, are privileging males. This is because ‘he’ and ‘his’, as well as the nouns ‘man’ and ‘mankind’ and the suffix ‘-man’ as in ‘chairman’, ‘postman’ etc. don’t allow people to consider females in those roles. The hope has been that by changing the language from marked for gender, to gender neutral, all members of the audience can identify with roles for example.

This has been a controversial idea, as it has been hard to prove conclusively that gender affects speakers’ perception of others and the world around them. However, in recent years, researchers in psycholinguistics are finding small effects that suggest that languages can influence their speakers’ thoughts and some researchers have even tried to test this for gender. One ingenious experiment was the following, undertaken by Caleb Everett, a field linguist who is researching indigenous languages in the Brazilian Amazon region.

Karitiâna is a language spoken by about 300 people (it belongs to the larger Tupí language family, to which many of the languages spoken by indigenous people in the Amazon belong). Unlike English, Karitiâna has an epicene pronoun for third person. Epicene means that grammatically/lexically there is no differentiation for male or female. Lots of languages have epicene third person pronouns: Estonian, Finnish, Mandarin, Indonesian, Malay, Armenian, Bengali and Tagalog to name but a few.

Several attempts have been made over time (including very recently) to introduce epicene third person pronouns in English (it may be argued that ‘they’ is becoming the epicene pronoun of choice for some English speakers).

Everett wanted to explore what the effect of gender might be when speakers of a language like English still are expected to distinguish females and males in third person, compared to speakers of a language where gender does not matter - as there is no differentiation in third person pronoun. So he showed video stills of babies’ faces with different expressions (crying, laughing, neutral etc.) where it was not possible to tell the babies’ gender. He asked the participants (either native English speakers or native Karitiâna speakers) to give the babies a name. The table below gives his findings (there were many more English speakers taking part than Karitiâna speakers).

Languages	Female names	Male names	Gender neutral
English	30	131	1
Karitiâna	42	23	5

From: Everett, Caleb. (2011). Gender, pronouns and thought: The ligature between epicene pronouns and a more neutral gender perception. In *Gender and Language* 5 (1). pp. 133- 152. Everett has also started on a pilot with Portuguese (gendered pronouns) and Mandarin (non gendered pronouns) which is showing similar results, suggesting that where gender is salient in a language. Speakers conform to the masculine as norm gender ideology and assume male gender for most babies.

Classroom activity: PowerPoint presentation

Using Everett's experiment as a starting point, the slideshow includes images of babies and animals where care has been taken to avoid any clues about the baby/animal's gender. The students are asked to give the animal or baby a name. If they ask whether the baby is a boy or a girl, just ignore these questions and tell them to just go with their 'gut' feeling and think of a name that would suit the individual in the picture.

Usually, with English speaking students, there's a strong (statistically significant) bias for masculine names.

Speakers of languages that lack a gendered third person pronoun tend to have more gender neutral names, as well as more of a balance between masculine and feminine names (although masculine names are still more common than feminine names - a reflection of the gender hierarchy perhaps). So, for English speakers, gender (especially when thinking about 'third person') is more salient and this, combined with a male dominant culture results in the more frequent use of masculine names, even when there are no visual indications of gender. It suggests that masculine is the norm.

It might be interesting to ask which babies/animals students gave feminine names to - sometimes there's a pattern. For example, cats tended to get more feminine names, perhaps a sign that cats are more often associated with femininity.