

Is Language Intrinsically ‘Fascist’? The Relationship between Gender Across Languages and Ostracism

Overview
Article

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Abstract

The present work aims to answer the question of whether and under what circumstances the language can be considered as intrinsically ‘fascist’ (Barthes 1978), in that it compels us to speak in a certain rule-governed way, or it is possible to manipulate it through the use of gender-fair strategies. This will be assessed through a comparative analysis of gendered, natural gender, and genderless languages, together with a discussion of the effects brought on the gender equality achievements by each gender group. In particular, the study aims at examining and comparing theoretical and empirical research on the effectiveness of gender-fair language techniques, including the manipulation of personal pronouns, feminisation, neutralisation, diminutive/augmentative morphology with nefarious intent, and other morpho-syntactic features employed to avoid gender discrimination and stereotyping.

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INTRODUCTION

Linguistic asymmetries and ostracism have been reported to have important consequences on the affirmation of the relative status of men and women, on the sense of belonging to a social group, and on one's ability to feel appreciated (Stout and Dasgupta 2011; Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, Laakso 2012). The proposition that language affects our perception of the world is particularly evident when considering the issue under a gender perspective. Indeed, the power of language has been seen as potentially "dangerous and oppressive" (Penhallurick 2010). Accordingly, it has been claimed that raising awareness of the non-identity of the silent and the verbal levels of experience is fundamental to combat the problem (Korzibsky 1946).

Assuming this scientific background as a starting point, the current research aims at critically discussing Barthes' claim "language—the performance of a language—is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist" (Barthes 1978, 461) under a gender perspective. That is to say, to answer the question of whether and under what circumstances the language can be considered as intrinsically 'fascist', in that it compels us to speak in a certain rule-governed way, or it is possible to manipulate it through the use of gender-fair strategies (Sczesny, Formanowicz, Moser 2016), such as feminisation and neutralisation.

Besides, the present paper reviews the most relevant empirical and theoretical research in the field to examine the social and psychological impact of linguistic ostracism. In particular, it takes into account the type of gender asymmetries due to the intrinsic features of each language system under review as well as the bias and particular connotations associated with some linguistic expressions, which contribute to the discrimination and exclusion of women from certain fields of discourse and social life.

GENDER ACROSS LANGUAGES

Barthes' claim can be mainly interpreted following the Saussurean model of language, in which each language is structured on the basis of an underlying system, that is *langue*. It arises out of communal agreement, in the sense that it is based on a system of conventions. That is to say, "there is no natural connection between a linguistic form and its meaning" (Yule 2010, 12). Accordingly, language involves a compulsion to adhere to the already established conventions leaving the speakers powerless to do anything with the inherited or acquired system. Among the examples made by the author to clarify the so-called fascist aspect of language as a choice over which speakers have no choice, he refers to the French language (i.e. a gendered language). In particular, it compels to always choose between either feminine or masculine since French classifies its words according to the grammatical order and, consequently, the performance of the French language is compelled to make the aforementioned choice.

Nowadays, it can be argued that all languages make distinctions between genders. This means that the distinction between female and male has always existed, linguistically speaking, and that it is particularly "fundamental to social organization and social structure that linguistics means to refer to this category are indispensable for speech communities" (Stahlberg et al. 2007, 163). Nonetheless, although gender asymmetries exist in almost every language, the degree to which languages distinguish between genders varies based on three main grammatical categories in which they have been grouped: i.e. grammatical gender languages, natural gendered languages, and genderless languages. In the first category, of gendered languages, such as French, German, and Italian, every noun has a grammatical gender (feminine, masculine, or neuter) and the gender of personal nouns tends to express the gender of the referent. In natural gendered languages, such as English or Swedish, personal

nouns tend to be gender-neutral and gender is expressed through the use of pronouns. Finally, genderless languages, such as Finnish or Turkish, are characterized by the lack of grammatical gender distinction in the noun system.

Interestingly enough, in the European Mediterranean countries such as Italy and Spain, research on linguistic asymmetry seems characterised by two main specific features: first, the relationship between language and gender has been addressed later compared to other Western European countries; second, it was stimulated from above rather than emerging as a critique from below (Cenni 2015). For example, in Italy, the first study on language and gender by Alma Sabatini (“The sexism in the Italian Language”) appeared about 20 years later than similar works on English and French languages.

It has been observed that gender and linguistic gender asymmetries are more evident in grammatical gender languages than in the other two categories (Hellinger and Baußmann 2001). The way gender is encoded by language systems conveys a particular perception of the world. Accordingly, when language constantly calls attention to gender distinctions by discriminating between masculine and feminine nouns and pronouns, people are led to make more distinctions between men and women. Nonetheless, if it is true that the use of gender-specific nouns and pronouns is one way of classifying gender in language, genderless languages do not necessarily convey gender neutrality. Indeed, there are several linguistic patterns through which a language can become gendered and, accordingly, can convey status differently to men and women.

First of all, as regards lexical gender referring to whether a word is gender-specific (e.g. *mother*, *brother*) or gender-neutral (e.g. *individual*, *citizen*, *scholar*) gender asymmetry is created when gender is lexically marked when it does not need to be (Hellinger and Baußmann 2001). For example, by comparing the English words *steward* and *stewardess*, it has been argued that the feminine version is perceived as referencing the male counterpart, which becomes the base form. Also, to support this claim, it has been argued that female counterparts, often derived from the masculine form, appear more complex, demonstrating that the masculine is taken as the generic form. Analysing the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the two terms (1989), it can be observed that the masculine counterpart also reveals a sense of control as it implies more authority in the description. Interestingly enough, in some languages, compounding is used in nouns to create gender-specific structures of non-traditional professions (Hellinger and Baußmann 2001). A *male-nurse*, for example, reflects a way to specify that a stereotypically female occupation is referred to a man. In other words, it marks the exceptions with marked names. It also reinforces the perception of social gender for specific occupational roles.

In addition to asymmetries, the use of male generics (or false generics) has been identified as one of the most common linguistic patterns leading to group ostracism. It consists in the use of a masculine term to refer to male and female subjects. Such as, in Finnish, the word *lakimies* (literally ‘lawmen’). It has been noticed that the use of male generics is predominant in almost every existing language in the world. The only known languages in which the generic is female are Seneca and Oneida, i.e. some Iroquois languages, and some Australian aboriginal languages (Hellinger and Baußmann, 2001).

An interesting study (Formato 2016) examines the way that the Italian media, in three widely read printed Italian newspapers (i.e. *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Resto del Carlino* and *La Stampa*) use language to refer to ‘female ministers’. Although Italian is a gender specific language, it is common to use masculine forms to refer to and address women. *Ministro* is one of those cases where masculine forms replace feminine ones. The investigation sheds light on how grammar is translated in a way that reproduces women’s invisibility in a sexist society. Specifically, Formato maintains that the promotion of a symmetrical linguistic depiction of women and men could be beneficial to gender equality, particularly in male-orientated work spaces such as politics.

The widespread linguistic practice described has been reported to have a strong impact on both group and individual level, for it has been identified as a form of social exclusion. Indeed, in everyday language, when a term or a pronoun is used to refer to one gender only, usually male, neglecting the other, gender-exclusive language occurs. More precisely, recalling Williams' (2007) definition, it is a form of ostracism in that the gender that is omitted "is being ignored and excluded, and it often occurs without excessive explanation or explicit negative attention" (429).

This type of language, by making use of specific gendered referents, has been defined (Stout and Dasgupta 2011) as subtle and unlikely to involve an explicit attack on the excluded group, i.e. women. It may occur without malicious intent and be perceived as a passive form of expulsion from a speaker's perspective. Nonetheless, from a women's perspective, i.e. the target, it is usually experienced as an active form of exclusion. Indeed, women experience it as an active rejection of their in-group, which is likely to affect how they respond. The consequences between passive and active rejections have been deeply analysed in a study conducted by Molden et al. (2009), where the authors found out that active rejection is mostly associated with a desire to withdraw to avoid future rejections whereas passive rejection activates the desire to regain a sense of connectedness. This is particularly interesting if one considers the consequences of ostracism in terms of social inclusion, employment opportunities and even legal issues.

For example, a research by Briere and Lanktree (1983) reported that when women read an excerpt about ethical standards for psychologists using male generic, they are less prone to apply for that position and less attracted by a potential career in psychology as opposed to a version written in a gender neutral way. Accordingly, beyond the traditional stereotypes about the traditional gender roles associated with certain types of occupation (see the aforementioned *male nurse*), language ostracism may concretely affect the future career of women and their desire to apply for certain positions.

Moreover, the use of false generics has also been reported to have a dramatic impact on legal issues, affecting people's perception of an individual's guilt or innocence. Empirical research by Hamilton et al. (1992) tested participants in their ability to determine whether a woman had acted in self-defence, taking part in a mock murder case. The definition of 'self-defence' was worded using either *he, he or she, or she*. Interestingly enough, only 5 out of 24 participants that had been given the male generic definition acknowledged self-defence suggesting the considerable difference in perception due to the male generic wording in legal proceedings.

Another influential study by Stahlberg and colleagues (2001) investigated the influence of different types of German generics on the cognitive inclusion of women. Particularly, it examined the impact of masculine versus alternative types of generics on the retrieval of male and female examples from memory. The results indicate that the different linguistic forms employed in the experiments affected the responses significantly. Indeed, masculine generics caused the lowest number of female exemplars retrieved from memory. On the other hand, the alternative forms, such as neutralising form or forms that refer to women explicitly, facilitated the retrieval of female exemplars. This research is particularly worth considering since it confirms the assumptions of feminist language critics claiming that masculine generics have detrimental effects on the cognitive inclusion of women and that alternative forms make hearers and readers more prone to think of female references.

Besides, the relevance of this research consists in examining the linguistic feature of a language, German, that is very different from English. Indeed, as demonstrated through the different examples compared and contrasted in the present work, a considerable amount of research conducted on the English language indicates that masculine generics evoke predominantly male associations and tend to exclude women, putting them in disadvantageous positions in different fields. Accordingly, this study contributes to confirming the results also in a language structurally different from English. That is, a language where each noun has a specific gender (i.e. feminine, masculine, or neuter) marked in articles, adjectival suffixes, and pronouns. As already seen, where masculine generics are used in gendered

languages like German, they affect all the other linguistic features and are likely to occur more frequently in a text. That is why, the use of masculine markers, in this case, tends to intensify male associations and produce a stronger male bias than in English.

LINGUISTIC ASYMMETRY AND GENDER (IN)EQUALITY

Thus, aware of the dramatic impact that gender exclusive practices may have on the socio-psychological life, affecting people's judgement, decisions, behaviours, and even mental associations, government agencies, feminist groups, professional associations, and educational institutions have started to take action to reduce the use of gendered language. Indeed, in many countries, people have begun to shy away from the use of masculine generics. Nonetheless, considering the structural differences between the three aforementioned groups of languages, the consequence they have on gender equality may vary.

An interesting study by Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012) analysed the social consequences for gender relations and the relative status for men and women in 111 countries, testing and comparing gendered, natural gender, and genderless languages. This research groups together two important areas of investigation by exploring how grammatical gender in the different gender language groups relates to gender equality from a social point of view. On the whole, the findings suggest that a relationship between the gendering of language at macro-level and social indicators of gender equality exists. Specifically, countries where gendered languages are spoken show less gender equality compared with countries with natural gender or genderless language, especially when gender difference in terms of economic participation is considered. Moreover, another relevant finding from the study indicates that countries that speak natural gender language tend to exhibit gender equality especially in terms of women's greater access to political participation and political empowerment compared to the other countries with the other two categories of languages involved. Importantly, these differences persisted even when other important potential predictors were taken into account (which could potentially affect the results) including various indicators of gender equality such as geographical region, religious traditions, government structure, Human Development Index (HDI) of 2010.

Nonetheless, despite the aforementioned claim that genderless languages may be more gender fair, mirroring a higher level of gender equality, it has been noticed (Stahlberg et al. 2007) that a seemingly gender neutral term (e.g. *they*) may be also interpreted in a gender biased way. The research by Stahlberg and colleagues reviewed several studies with possible corrections for the masculine generic substituted with the gender neutral expression in several languages including Spanish, English, German, and Turkish. They demonstrated that gender neutral terms still connote a male bias in the reader or hearer's mind. On the other hand, in cases where a gender symmetrical version is used (e.g. *he* or *she*), greater inclusion of women is promoted (Braun 2001; Nissen 2002). Therefore, despite the fact that genderless languages, such as Finnish, can include seemingly gender neutral terms, in fact, they may connote a male bias due to the androcentric features of the language itself, which will be further evaluated in the following section of the paper.

On the other hand, the issue with gendered languages is that they are so fundamentally based on gender that it is difficult to modify the gender asymmetry that pervades pronouns, nouns, dependent forms, etc. Indeed, if one reforms the gender symmetrical form in a given sentence, this will affect all the grammatical rules of agreement of the other linguistic features making the period difficult to read.

GENDER FAIR STRATEGIES VS. ANDROCENTRIC LANGUAGES

On the whole, it can be claimed that all grammatical groups display gender asymmetry, conveyed through the analysed lexical structures, false generics, social use of language, and gender related word structures. Nonetheless, Stahlberg et al. (2007), for instance, maintain that all language types could be used in a symmetrical and gender-fair way. Indeed, in grammatical gender languages, the authors suggest the consistent use of the feminine to refer to female individuals and masculine to refer to male groups. In natural gender language, instead, symmetry could be reached through the use of sex-marking pronouns. Finally, for genderless languages they suggest disregarding sex symmetrically.

In particular, a work by Sczesny and colleagues (2016) has reported the most common strategies employed by languages belonging to different gender groups to reduce gender stereotyping and discrimination: i.e. neutralisation, feminisation, and a combination of the two. Concerning the first strategy, gender-marked terms are replaced by gender indefinite nouns, that is to say, it relies on linguistic forms that do not express sex (e.g. in English *policeman* by *police officer*). They can be nouns of neutral gender, non-differentiating forms, and forms of fixed gender referring to both men and women. In particular, in grammatical gendered languages, gender differentiated forms are replaced by epicenes, that is to say, forms with invariant grammatical gender which refer to female as well as male persons (e.g. in German *Staatsoberhaupt*, neut. *head of state*). Neutralisation has been particularly recommended for natural gender languages and genderless languages as it is easy to avoid gender markings in these languages. In modern written British English the singular *they* is the dominant epicene pronoun. Nonetheless, despite its common use, it has never been endorsed by institutions of the English language, including dictionaries and style guides. In Swedish, on the other hand, a gender neutral third person pronoun has been recently invented, i.e. *hen*. Its first reported use occurs in 2012 in a children's book as an alternative to the gender marked pronoun *she*.

The second most common strategy described by the author, i.e. feminisation, is based on expressions that make the inclusion of women explicit. That is, masculine generics are replaced by feminine-masculine word pairs (e.g. *studentesse e studenti*, female and male students, in Italian; *Elektrikerinnen und Elektriker*, female and male electricians, in German). This strategy has been particularly recommended for grammatical gendered languages such as German, Spanish, Czech, and Italian (Hellinger and Bußmann, 2003; Moser et al., 2011) combined with neutralising forms to avoid a complex sentence structure. Besides, in German, it is worth mentioning the so-called capital *I* form, invented in feminist circles to encompass masculine generic plurals such as *Leser* (male readers) in writing. The new form is created using the feminine plural as a base form and capitalising the *I* in the suffix *-innen*, to highlight the generic function (e.g. *LeserInnen*) which stands for both male and female readers. However, despite its use in certain newspapers and magazines as well as in certain scientific publications, capital *I* form is still not accepted for official usages.

Nonetheless, as it has been pointed out by Sczesny and colleagues (2016), feminisation cannot always be considered as advantageous for women. The Italian feminine suffix *-essa*, for example, has been reported to have a slightly derogatory connotation (e.g. Marcato and Thüne, 2002). Indeed, as Mucchi-Faina (2005) maintains, a woman addressed with *professoressa* (female professor) is perceived as less persuasive than a man or woman referred to with the masculine generic *professore*. In particular, masculine terms used in reference to a female professional are associated with higher status than feminine jobs with the suffix *-essa*. Similarly, the German suffixes *-euse* or *-öse* have been reported to evoke frivolous or sexual associations (e.g. *Masseuse*; *Frisöse*). Consequently, the neutral suffix *-in*, such as in *Ingenieur-in*, is usually preferred.

It is worth noticing that, in some Slavic languages, feminine job titles apart from conveying a lower status connotation, are also associated with rural speech or with the meaning of 'wife of' rather

than being the feminine counterpart of the job position held. In some cases, the asymmetry also concerns the meaning distinguishing the masculine and feminine versions of the same word. For example, in Polish, the term *sekretarka* (i.e. female secretary) designates a personal assistant. However, only in the masculine counterpart of the term, i.e. *sekretnarz*, there is also a reference to the high governmental function. As Lakoff points out, the language has difficulty coping with the sexual identity of women. In particular, the author highlights the imbalance in some pairs of words which might at first appear as a simple male/female opposition such as *master* and *mistress*. She argues that the two terms are not equivalent opposites since *mistress* conveys an overtly sexual connotation, referring to a woman according to her relationship to a man, whereas *master* indicates a relation of power over something. Indeed, in her essay, Lakoff claims that the language treats women and men unequally and that the personal identity of women is “linguistically submerged” (1973, 45).

Accordingly, the issues associated with the use of feminisation in certain languages tend to make this gender fair strategy less preferred and less widespread in order to avoid any negative connotation. When feminine suffixes are productive, instead, feminisation can become the linguistic norm, being used regularly. If early research on gender fair language was focused on the bias associated with masculine generics, latest research tends to be more comprehensive showing how linguistic asymmetries may facilitate unintended forms of social discrimination.

On the other hand, apart from the issues due to the negative, sexist, and undermining connotations of the feminine counterparts, when dealing with gender fair strategies, there is a more structural problem to face. That is to say, certain types of languages are defined androcentric for their internal structure, which tends to hide female reference, excluding their participation from the discourse. As it has been analysed through the examples included in the present work, several strategies to modify the linguistic patterns resulting in ostracism have been employed by different languages in the attempt to reach a more gender fair language. Nonetheless, as debated, all the three grammatical groups convey a certain degree of gender inequality through their lexical structures, false generics, social use of language etc. If it is true that gender fair conventions and strategies can be applied within all the different gender groups, on the other hand, it is important to highlight that it is not equally easy to address those conventions and employ the aforementioned strategies across all the language groups. For instance, Stahlberg and colleagues (2007) point out that grammatical gender languages, such as German, involve much more effort to create a gender neutral configuration compared to natural gender languages like English in that applying those strategies requires a whole reconfiguration of the sentences with all the related gender agreements of adjectives, pronouns etc.

CONCLUSION

Thus, going back to Barthes’ claim on the intrinsically ‘fascist’ aspect of language, on the one hand, it can be argued that it is true that it compels us to speak in certain ways, according to inherited conventions. Moreover, this choice over which we have no choice since we “must always choose between masculine and feminine” (Barthes 1978, 460), is strongly affected by the aforementioned social conventions. Nonetheless, considering the research examined and discussed in the present paper, it can be concluded that the degree of intrinsically ‘fascist’ aspect of language varies considerably based on the group to which the language object of analysis belongs. Indeed, it is important to highlight that Barthes’ assumption referred to the French language. Accordingly, it is not surprising that it particularly applies to gendered languages for all the reasons debated in the present work.

However, if one considers the claim under a more general perspective, that is, referred to the language system on the whole, it is certainly true for all languages that they are the result of inherited

conventions. Specifically, as it has been reported (Penhallurick 2010, 146), language is the product of patriarchy, that is a society in which much social and cultural practice is organised around the concept of the male sex as the dominant, superior sex with the power to exclude females from the production of cultural forms and, most importantly, these forms include language too. More specifically, to use Spender's words "the language has been made by men and they have used it for their own purposes" (Spender 1985, 52).

Thus, what can be done? Some scholars, including Barthes, convey the paradoxical idea that the only possible release from the tyranny of language is through using language. That is to say, language must be turned against itself, by means of itself. In particular, Barthes argues that the best strategy is evasion from language itself by means of literature, described by the author as a "truly revolutionary activity" (147). It is important to underline that, by literature, he does not refer to a particular body of work but to the practice of writing itself. That is, where the convention of language can be played with and made to work against itself. In other words, it can be concluded that the gender fair strategies employed by the different languages, from different gender groups, may have the potential to make a significant contribution to the reduction of gender stereotyping and discrimination, representing the only escape from the "tyranny of language".

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