Handsome Flowers and Pretty Trains: Gender in A Non-Gendered Language

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In the past, nouns of languages that grammatically mark gender have been studied to determine whether gendered nouns influence the way people think about that noun; nouns in languages that do not mark gender have been traditionally thought to not be associated with a notion of semantic gender. In contrast, I examine whether speakers of English, a language that does not mark gender, in fact attribute notions of gender to nouns and adjectives in English. This current study is part of a broader study that addresses, through a series of multiple studies, a comparison of languages that have different systems of gender and etymological roots, including English, Japanese, Spanish, Dutch, and German.

Study 1 examines speakers’ judgments to determine whether certain adjectives are associated with more stereotypically masculine, feminine, or neutral notions. Participants are presented with pairs of stick figures—one male and one female—and are asked to identify the figure that corresponds to one of 21 adjectives (e.g., This is Jane and this is Todd. Who’s pretty?).

Study 2 examines whether speakers of non-gendered languages associate gender to nouns in their language, by examining the way they associate nouns and adjectives. The judgments from Study 1 regarding the gender associations of adjectives are used to examine the gender associations of nouns. Participants are presented with two adjectives and are asked to identify which corresponds to one of 48 nouns (e.g., The tree is handsome. The tree is happy.).

If results suggest that English speakers do attribute consistent gender to nouns and adjectives, these findings may influence the results of past studies on gendered languages, which have assumed English to be a gender-neutral language. More importantly, these results may suggest that the way in which we view gendered and non-gendered languages needs to be reevaluated, particularly by considering the influences of etymological roots, cultural influences from other languages, and the embodiment of language in human cognition.