Gender Bias in Linguistic Structures: A Comparative Study of French and German

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Abstract:

Language is a form of power that can shape the cognitive thinking of its users and even serve as a tool of domination for those in authority. Historically, language has been an instrument of patriarchy, with its use under patriarchal systems that often serving to suppress women. However, in the modern era, with the rise of feminism, there has been increasing attention to issues of gender inequality. Many linguists have begun to question whether gendered languages exacerbate existing gender biases. Yet, few have undertaken comparative analyses across different language families. Considering grammatical structures and language origins, this paper will examine French from the Romance language family and German from the Germanic language family—both of them are gendered languages. This study will conduct a comparative analysis to identify the gender biases present in these languages and to explain the cognitive and linguistic causes underlying these biases. By highlighting these issues, the research aims to raise readers' awareness of gender bias in linguistic structures.

Keywords: Gendered language; Gender bias; French; German.

1. Introduction

Gender issues have always been a heated topic in sociolinguistics and feminist theory research. This is because the language this paper use can affect our perceptions of men and women. For example, in French and German, words are classified as "male," "female," or "neutral." This affects how people perceive and discuss ideas related to gender. Language is not just a reflection of reality; it actually influences our thinking, behavior, and society's definition of normalcy [1].

In this article, this paper will explore how gendered language perpetuates people's perceptions of gender inequality. This article focuses on comparing French and German because although they come from different language families, they both have similar gender representations in grammar. This gives author the opportunity to understand how different languages maintain unfair gender attitudes. This paper chose French and German because of their enormous influence on Western culture, education, literature, and politics. Although many studies have been conducted on these languages and gender biases, most of them either focus on a single language, or make extensive comparisons between gendered and non-gendered languages [2-3]. Therefore, it is necessary to learn more about how languages with similar structures but different origins unknowingly perpetuate gender bias.

As one of these two main languages, French has a very strict distinction between masculine and feminine nouns, with no intermediate options. This system not only includes nouns but also articles, adjectives, and even certain verbs. This means that gender has always been an important factor in French communication. Usually, in situations where gender should not be involved, the default use of the male form reinforces the notion of male dominance or neutrality [1]. For example, in mixed-gender groups, the masculine plural form is always used, which to some extent ignores females.

On the other hand, German has three genders: male, female, and neutral. You may think that this would make gender more equal, but it still reinforces traditional gender roles. As in French, masculinity is usually assumed in professional or formal settings. Gender neutrality is often associated with objects or abstract concepts, further making neutrality appear indifferent or inhumane [2-3].

Both French and German can influence people's views on gender roles and gender relations. Studies have shown that people who speak these languages are more likely to

associate certain professions with specific genders, even if these professions themselves are not related to gender [2]. For example, French speakers may automatically think of men when they hear "le docteur" (doctor), while German speakers may think of men when they hear "der Ingenieur" (engineer). These language patterns constantly reinforce stereotypes about what jobs male and female should do, increasing the difficulty to imagine women doing jobs traditionally considered male, and vice versa [3]. In addition, the way this paper discuss gender can also affect people's feelings towards each other. In places where highly gendered language is used, the inequality gap between men and women is often larger. Language itself reinforces old notions about gender roles, making those committed to promoting gender equality not only consider behavior but also how people use language [1-2].

2. Gender Bias in French

2.1 Vocabulary

The gender bias ingrained in the French language system manifests primarily in three areas. Firstly, in terms of vocabulary, French belongs to the Romance language family, where nouns are categorized as either masculine or feminine [4]. The gender of most nouns can be determined by their endings. For example, nouns ending in -isme are typically masculine ("le tourisme", tourism); those ending in -ation are predominantly feminine ("la nation", nation) [5-7]. Some studies indicate that masculine nouns in French slightly outnumber feminine nouns [6,8-9]. Meanwhile, additional research suggests that masculine nouns tend to refer to more significant semantic content than feminine nouns [10-12]. This is because many nouns, at their inception, are only performed as masculine form. For instance, professions such as "écrivain" (writer), "médecin" (doctor), "professeur" (professor), "peintre" (painter), and "sculpteur" (sculptor) are all defaulted to the masculine form [13]. The feminine forms of many nouns were only coined in modern times with the increasing feminist consciousness [14]. Consequently, for a long period in the history of the French language, "male" was considered as the default and basic gender [10, 15-16]. Richy and Burnett also analyzed the early and latest articles in the French linguistics journal Langue Française [17]. They found that 82% of the noun phrases referred to men, while only 18% referred to women [17]. This phenomenon is even more pronounced in the use of plural nouns. For example, the plural form les caissières (female cashiers) only refers to a group of female cashiers. In contrast, the masculine plural form les caissiers can refer to three possibilities: a) a group of male cashiers, b) a mixed group of male and female cashiers, and c) a group of cashiers of unknown gender [12]. This phenomenon also extends to the use of pronouns. The pronoun "elles" (they, feminine) refers to a group of women, whereas "ils" (they, masculine) can refer to a group of men, a mixed group, or a group of individuals of unknown gender [18].

2.2 Grammar and Syntactic Structures

Apart from vocabulary, French grammar and syntactic structures also reflect certain gender biases. Since French nouns are categorized as masculine or feminine, adjectives used to modify these nouns must agree in gender and number. This can lead to conflicts between real-world gender and grammatical gender [10, 19]. As previously mentioned, some nouns are used in the masculine form to refer to all individuals. For instance, when describing a female professor with the noun "professeur" (professor), using the masculine adjective "beau" (handsome) would not align with the real-world gender. However, using the feminine adjective "belle" (beautiful) would create a grammatical conflict, since a feminine adjective does not agree with a masculine noun. This conflict can only be resolved through more elaborate sentences, such as "Elle est belle, le nouveau professeur" ("She is beautiful, the new professor") [19].

Additionally, in syntactic structures, males are more likely to be the subjects of sentences and are more often referred to by pronouns [17]. Richy and Burnett also found that in their analysis of the French linguistics journal Langue Française, men were more likely to be mentioned in subject positions rather than as objects, whereas females were more likely to be mentioned as objects. Moreover, males are more frequently portrayed as agents and experiencers, while females are significantly less likely to hold these roles. It is also noteworthy that in references or studies, masculine are more likely to be adopted in academic positions far more frequently than females.

3. Gender Bias in German

3.1 Vocabulary

In German, it is likely to use a positive or neutral article such as "das" or "der" when the gender is uncertain. This reflects the tendency in the German language to treat the male gender as the default or standard [20]. Many professional names use the positive form by default, even if the practitioner may be a female. For example, "der Professor" can refer to male doctors, while "die Professorin" specifically refers to female professor. This usage may reinforce the concept of males as the default or standard gender. Language reactions may affect social concepts, and gender labelling in German inadvertently conveys gender bias.

3.2 Grammar and Syntactic Structures

In the field of German linguistics, the part of the voice assignment of names shows considerable arbitrariness and irregularity, which brings an additional cognitive burdens to learners in language acquisition and memory consolidation. Learners often have to classify and mark words according to their gender attributes. However, this part of the language-based classification method is essentially a linguistic phenomenon, instead of the attributes inherent in the marked things. Especially with professional names, they are conceptually gender-neutral which should not receive a gender label. Based on the theory of human cognitive psychology, people have a natural tendency to build cognitive structures by placing things in the surrounding world [21]. In this context, gender-specific differences in the German vocabulary can unintentionally act as markers for the recognition of the genre prototype and thus unconsciously strengthen the stereotype of gender cognition [20].

Psychological research shows that gender markers in language use can significantly influence the psychological representation and cognitive process of individuals. More specifically, if a professional name is often combined with the male articles in language practice, this can lead to people preference to associate the profession with male rather than female. This phenomenon can further consolidate the stereotype of gender roles, thus having a significant influence on career choice, employment evaluation and social expectations [22]. Therefore, the study of German and other gender-specific languages not only reveals the effects of the language structure on the cognitive process, but also provides an important theoretical basis for the social practice of gender equality.

4. Discussion

4.1 Gender Bias in Language Acquisition

Gender bias in the use of the French language arises from multiple factors. Beyond the influence of patriarchy throughout history, people can also find explanations from the perspective of child development. When children process gender in language, they might have two mechanisms: phonological representations and syntactic representations [23]. In early development, children recognize and differentiate words based on their phonological forms, which are referred to as phonological representations. However, when they grow up and begin to understand that determiners are independent lexical items, reliance on phonological representations decreases. Instead, children begin to employ syntactic representations, attributing grammatical features to words from a syntactic standpoint [23]. This shifts from phonological to syntactic representations that generally occurs between 14 and 30 months of age [24-25]. During this transition, masculine nouns are more readily learned, because they occupy clearer similarity spaces than feminine nouns [26]. According to the phonological input data recorded by Boloh and Ibernon, 90% of words ending in vowels were masculine nouns, whereas words ending in consonants could be either masculine or feminine. Therefore, at the early stage of language acquisition, children are more likly to grasp masculine nouns and their determiners easily, which further contributes to the perception of masculine nouns as the default [26]. This finding is also reflected in the bilingual experiments conducted by Guillelmon and Grosjean in 2001. They found that both monolinguals and bilinguals who began learning French early in life exhibited sensitivity to gender marking in determiners and nouns, whereas bilinguals who began learning French after puberty did not show this sensitivity [27]. This suggests that gender inequality in the French language is established during early language acquisition.

Similar situations happen in German acquisition. When children learn German, they may internalize the gender bias inherent in the language due to its grammatical gender system. When children learn German, they may memorise words by the gender of the noun, which may lead them to unconsciously internalise gender-related stereotypes [28]. For example, some positive nouns that indicate occupation may mislead children think that certain jobs are more suitable for men. Long-term exposure to gender-labelled languages may affect children's views on gender roles and gender equality.Language is not only utilized for communication, but also shape our way of thinking. If gender markers in German are combined with gender stereotypes, it may affect children's cognition and understanding of the world. This will affect their views on gender roles and gender equality [28-29].

4.2 Impact of Gendered Language on Perception and Cognition

The use of gender in grammar will affect people's cognition and evaluation of gender characteristics [10]. The default use of nouns in the male form may make it easier for people to think of men, so when thinking of a certain profession, the first thing that comes to mind is the male practitioner. For example, some professions suitable for women that meet people's stereotypes are male in German, and people may subconsciously think that this profession is not so suitable for women. Also, some jobs that both men and women can do, first of all, using the male form in terms, will deepen people's gender stereotypes such as "this job is more suitable for men" and "men may

do better". From the perspective of the employer's own psychology, women may feel that they are less suitable or not good at certain occupations because of the gender marks in the language, which may affect their willingness and self-confidence in choosing a career [16].

4.3 Syntactic Structures and Gender Prominence

Additionally, certain syntactic features of the French language also provide an explanation. In French, the grammatical role of the subject is closely related to its semantic role [30]. The subject in a sentence typically performs the action of the verb. For example, in the sentence "Qui touche la table?"(Who is touching the table?), "Qui" (who) is the subject and is both the initiator and the performer of the verb "touche" (touch). Semantically, "Qui" (who) is the agent, meaning the one who carries out the action, while "a table" (the table) is the patient, the entity that receives the action. This structure provides the subject a prominent position in both grammar and semantics [30]. Moreover, McDonald and Heilenman tested the extent to which native French speakers rely on different linguistic cues when interpreting sentence meaning. They found that speakers primarily rely on pronominal agreement,

followed by verb agreement and noun animacy, with word order having the least influence. In line with the previous discussion, masculine pronouns and nouns in French are more likely to be subjects and agents [17]. When the subject of a French sentence is a masculine noun, this gender characteristic is further reinforced and amplified through related pronouns, verbs, and other associated words. This, in turn, increases the influence and prominence of the masculine form within the sentence for the reader.

In the gender assignment of German nouns: Each German noun has a gender that is divided into three categories: masculine (male), feminine (female) and neutral (neutral). The assignment of gender is not based on logical or semantic content, but is part of the grammatical rules. For example, the table (masculine) and the lamp (feminine) are arbitrarily assigned and do not follow a rule. Learners must remember the gender of each noun in order to be able to use the language fluently and correctly. At the same time, German adjectives must change according to the gender, the number and the case of the noun. This means that the same adjective can have different forms to match the genders of the noun. For example, Table 1 shows the types of singular with its English and German expressions:

Table 1.Types of singular with its English and German expressions.

Types of Singular	English	German
Masculine singular	a large table	ein großer Tisch
Feminine singular	a large lamp	eine große Lampe
Neutral singular	a large book	ein großes Buch

The pronouns in the German language must also remain the consistency of gender, for example: he (masculine), she (feminine), it (neutral). In the German language, there are also differences in job titles: Many job titles have gender-specific forms that often reflect gender roles and traditional ideas. For example, "professor" is male and "professor" is female. Such gender-specific nouns can reinforce gender stereotypes [16]. In the German language, there is also the problem of non-consistency between grammatical gender and biological gender: the grammatical gender does not always correspond to the biological gender. For example, "the person" (the person) is feminine, but can refer to people of any gender. This discrepancy can lead to ambiguities in the gender designation and deepens the gender problem in German.

In addition, gender in the German language can influence the sentence structure, especially in the context of using relative clauses. The relative pronoun must coincide with the reference word in gender and case. For example: The

man who reads the book (the man who reads the book) - in this context, "the" as a relative pronoun must match the reference word "the man" in gender and case. These changes have been made so far:In 1980, the publication of Richtlinien zur Vermeidung Sexistischen Sprachgebrauchs is the first book in Germany. How to avoid the language code of gender discrimination among women in German [31].

5. Conclusion

To sum up, through analyzing two languages from different language families, this study reveals similar evidence of gender bias caused by default norms and grammatical structures in language use. The default use of masculine forms, the association of certain professions with specific genders, and the prominence of male subjects in syntactic structures all contribute to the perpetuation of traditional gender roles. These linguistic patterns not only shape individuals' perceptions of gender but also influence social

expectations and cognitive processes related to gender roles. However, the conclusions of this study may have certain limitations. The lack of a neutral language for parallel comparison may limit the generalizability of the findings to some extent. Additionally, the process of language acquisition in children is influenced by various interacting factors, including parents' educational levels, family socioeconomic status, and racial differences among speakers of different languages, which is necessary for future readers to take into consideration.

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