

1 The Influence of Grammatical Gender in Languages to Thought

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4

5 **Abstract**

6 The article reviews the correlation between grammatical gender in languages and thought,
7 which is the core of the Sapir -Whorf hypothesis. Although the idea that language and
8 thought are intertwined is ancient, dating back to Plato, St. Augustine, Immanuel Kant, it is
9 quite often linked to the writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf. According to Whorf, since
10 languages differ, the people who use them should vary too. Cognitive development has a more
11 profound impact on language development than the other way around and vice versa. In
12 almost every instance, by numerous studies, the influence of thought on language has been
13 supported so far. However, the potential effects of grammatical genders on perception are
14 among the more troubled areas of psychological research. Quite a few languages are known to
15 have grammatical gender in their noun classes, including inanimate objects. Russian, French,
16 Spanish, and Arabic are all examples of this group. In French, for instance, coffee and salt are
17 of masculine gender. In Arabic, cup, desk, and the calendar year are feminine. Native
18 speakers of these languages should be responsible for using right definite articles and
19 pronouns; even they alter adjectives for gender agreement.

20

21 **Index terms**— grammatical gender, gendered languages, genderless languages, thought, perception, way of
22 thinking.

23 **1 Introduction**

24 It is of prime importance to put words together in a group that shares common features to arrange a language
25 accurately.

26 It helps to acquire a determinate amount of grammar rules being applied to these word groups rather than
27 learning every single word and its features related to the way of its usage in a sentence.

28 There are some general features in different languages that are taken as a core of grouping words together,
29 such as morphological, syntactic, and semantic characteristics, one of which is gender category. That is, gender
30 is simply another way of creating these noun classes. That is the reason why the terms "grammatical gender"
31 and "noun class" are actually considered to be synonyms.

32 Nonetheless, grouping words together under this term is a far more fascinating way because ties to real-life
33 about natural genders of nouns are conspicuously seen on some animate nouns like "girl," "lioness," while this
34 is not the case with most nouns, especially with inanimate ones such as "book," "dream." This makes it rather
35 difficult to perceive the connection between word and its grammatical gender, thus assigning grammatical genders
36 to words is often considered as a bizarre and somewhat random task.

37 Despite differences of opinions over the number of the languages existing on the Earth, philologists roughly
38 calculate that nearly twenty-five percent of the languages in existence use grammatical genders. It can be
39 perplexing for the speakers of genderless languages to encounter words with grammatical genders in other
40 languages, yet this is, in fact, quite a common phenomenon. To illustrate most Indo-European languages make
41 use of grammatical genders, so do some others in the Middle East and Africa. German, Spanish, Russian, Arabic,
42 and Hebrew, among others, all differ in numbers of grammatical genders. A typical division often appears to be
43 a male-female group. Another includes adding a third -neuter -gender.

44 For instance, most Romance languages today only have the male-female distinction, German, Dutch, and the
45 Slavic languages can be a few examples for those that have introduced the additional neuter gender.

2 FIGURE 1

46 The Indo-European languages, all the modern Turkic languages, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Bengali, all the
47 Austronesian languages, Persian and Central Kurdish, all the Uralic languages such as Hungarian, Finnish and
48 Estonian include genderless languages.

49 2 Figure 1

50 Even a complex system of grammatical gender existed in Old-English, the forefather of the modern-day version.
51 At the same time most features of this classification vanished throughout the history. However, some remaining
52 still stick around in modern English, the most obvious example of which are the personal pronouns ("he," "she,"
53 "it") and a few words in use that have distinct male-female forms such as "steward/stewardess," "waiter-waitress,"
54 "god-goddess."

55 Interestingly enough, although Scandinavian languages share familiar linguistic peculiarities, to some extent,
56 different gender systems are used in the aforementioned languages. That is to say, while the masculine, feminine,
57 and neuter division is specific to Norwegian words, the masculine and feminine have merged into one common
58 gender being used to ascribing and Danish.

59 Despite the limited number of the gender classes with these languages, counting only two or three categories,
60 but there exist far more extreme examples of grouping nouns according to the gender. For instance, the
61 Zande language of Africa allocates nouns into four gender classes: masculine, feminine, animal, and inanimate.
62 Interestingly, some inanimate objects that are of prime importance in Zande mythology include animate nouns.
63 Besides, genders in the Fula language add up to approximately twenty. Natural sex does not serve a function in
64 the classification -one common gender includes both human males and females, which is stunning enough.

65 It is not the items themselves that have the gender assigned to them. Namely, it is not the hat (un chapeau
66 in French) itself that's masculine. In this day and age, the differentness between masculine and feminine words
67 might be considered erratic, but it stands to a reason that there must have been an essential justification for
68 such systems to build up. The words could merely have been grouped together based on some characteristics
69 that were crystal clear to our ancestors but are known no more. It calls for scrutiny in the field of linguistics,
70 since allocating to one might show up some very apparent real-world outcomes.

71 In the Ket language of Siberia, nouns of no account to the Ket society are feminine, whereas objects of
72 importance such as fish, wood appear to be masculine. It is more likely to have been a sign of women's status in
73 Ket society.

74 It appears from the abovementioned example about Ket Language that grammatical gender in a language can
75 has considerable and perplexing effects on cognizance. If we consider about a language where each word having
76 a positive connotation is included in the female gender and everything negative unlikable is masculine, for sure
77 it would imbue the members of that society with the idea that feminine is equal to good, but masculine to evil,
78 to some extent it would reflect the way how members of that society deem men and women. (Dul'son, A. P.
79 1968) Furthermore, the existence of grammatical genders in languages seems to influence the way how people
80 view and perceive the notions around. As mentioned above, while genders appear to be a way of grouping words
81 together, allocation of them into feminine and masculine will, without a shadow of a doubt, engenders a tie
82 to real-world females and males. Some initiatory evidence asserts that it is most likely to be (Jacobson 1966,
83 Konishi 1993, Sera, Berge, and del Castillo 1994). Russian speakers (a language with grammatical genders) were
84 asked to impersonate days of the week in one study (reported in Jacobson 1966). Once they were requested
85 to do the abovementioned task, the subjects continuously imagined grammatically masculine days as male and
86 grammatically feminine days as female, without bringing a reasonable explanation as to how they put such a
87 characterization forward.

88 As can be viewed from the above-mentioned example, influencing human cerebral processes linguistic gender
89 can orientate speakers to categorize inanimate and abstract nouns as if they genuinely have a gender, which is
90 beyond the bounds of possibility.

91 To a greater extent, there exist far more substantial examples, one of which is a fatwa (Muslim religious decree)
92 issued by a cleric associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. India Today reports that this decree puts women a
93 stop to swim in the sea. He exonerates this prohibition declaring the reason that the Arabic word for 'sea' ????(?)
94) is grammatically masculine, and in case a woman goes swimming and "the water touches the woman's private
95 parts, she becomes an 'adulteress' and should be punished." Then, what if a man goes into the sea? Should
96 it be considered a homophile experience and punished? It is also worthy of noting that this fatwa implies the
97 pre-eminence of Arabic in Islam. What about the fact that there exists an enormous number of non-grammatical
98 gender-based languages spoken natively by large numbers of Muslims such as Turkish and other Turkic languages
99 in Central Asia and the central Volga region of Russia, Persian or Indonesian? Does the very prohibition make
100 a sense for many Muslims with regard to their native languages?

101 This fatwa may appear to be asserted by a man of religious extremism as an excuse thereof not considered
102 genuine, but this issue is worth considering from the linguistic and cultural point of view.

103 Such literal construal of grammatical gender may seem nonsensical. Yet, several experiments in the field
104 of psycholinguistics assert that grammatically masculine words in "gendered" languages are, in point of truth,
105 associated with more "masculine" properties and grammatically feminine words with more "feminine" attributes
106 by the native speakers of those languages.

107 A researcher team was also determined to answer this intriguing question with the assistance of an experiment

108 conducted in 2002 in which German and Spanish speakers were involved, creating a list of two dozen objects that
109 hold opposite genders in Spanish and German, thus in each language, half of the objects were masculine and
110 half were feminine. All the participants were native Spanish speakers and native German speakers, all of whom
111 were fluent in English. They were required to describe each item by three adjectives given on the list speaking
112 and using materials written in English. To conclude, the grammatical gender category of affected participants'
113 judgments. In other words, since the item "key" is of masculine gender in German and feminine in Spanish,
114 German speakers in the study had a propensity to depict the very word using the following words: hard, heavy,
115 jagged, metal, and useful while Spanish speakers used adjectives such as golden, intricate, little, lovely, and tiny
116 when describing keys. The second word taken for the experiment was "bridge," which appears to be feminine
117 in German and masculine in Spanish. Bridges were described with the assistance of the attributes such as
118 beautiful, elegant, fragile, pretty, and slender German speakers, while Spanish speakers asserted that they were
119 big, dangerous, strong, sturdy, and towering. (Lera Boroditsky, Lauren A. Schmidt & Webb Phillips 2003).

120 In the same experiment, German and Spanish speakers were asked to have a look at picture couples with
121 no written labels, and participants did not converse during the assignment. Each pair contained of a picture
122 of a person and an object, which should be rated how congruent with each other. Interestingly, both Spanish
123 and German speakers deemed couples to be far more congruent if the biological sex of the person in the picture
124 coincides with the grammatical gender of the object. To illustrate, a couple made up of a bridge and a man gives
125 a Spanish speaker the impression of being similar, but not at all to a German speaker. (Lera Boroditsky, Lauren
126 A. Schmidt & Webb Phillips 2002).

127 **3 II.**

128 **4 Conclusion**

129 As can be shown, people's thinking can be affected by grammatical gender, either when one is speaking a language
130 with no grammatical gender -or even when he is not speaking any language at all! While the aforementioned
131 several examples might seem like very absurd assignment; it is lucid that filtering the universe through a lens of
132 masculine versus feminine can lead to some very deep-rooted prejudice.

133 Scrutiny is, therefore, needed in grammatical genders in languages, since the majority of people suppose to
134 live in a world being of no sex discrimination anymore, leaving the worst of gender biases behind. However, what
135 if the language, a means we use every minute throughout the 50 years' life expectancy, can influence our way
136 of thinking -taking a cleric as an example who declares the prohibition of the swimming of women in the sea
137 due to the masculine gender of the word for "sea" in Arabic. That being the case, we seem not to be yet free
138 of hackneyed ideas about biological sexes. It is like the butterfly effect, a part of chaos theory. Our thoughts
139 are likely to be affected by small scale, inconspicuous aspects of a language, subsequently in more ways. It's
140 not astonishing that some languages are likely to eliminate using grammatical genders undergoing such a kind of
141 pressure. For instance, there are ideas that German is on the verge of limiting its use of genders and plans to go
142 to a more neutral language.

143 A more considerable gender disparity is linked to the usage of grammatical genders according to several other
144 studies. Surprisingly, quite a few societies in which non-grammatical gender-based languages are spoken more
145 likely to observe gender inequality on a daily basis. It is, no doubt, necessary to bear in mind that a few studies
146 can hardly be a stable basis for anything, but at least require further investigation.

147 Grammatical features of a language are supposed to influence people's mindset. Studies unveil the effects of
148 grammatical gender on how people perceive the environment they live in, more specifically, how they depict the
149 objects. It is striking that even gender disparity can be affected by the grammatical gender of the language of
150 the speaker. Considering both the fact that languages differ, having quite a few different grammatical aspects,
151 lexical sources, and semantic features and its effects of mind, it's no surprise to find a large number of differences
152 even among people's thoughts.

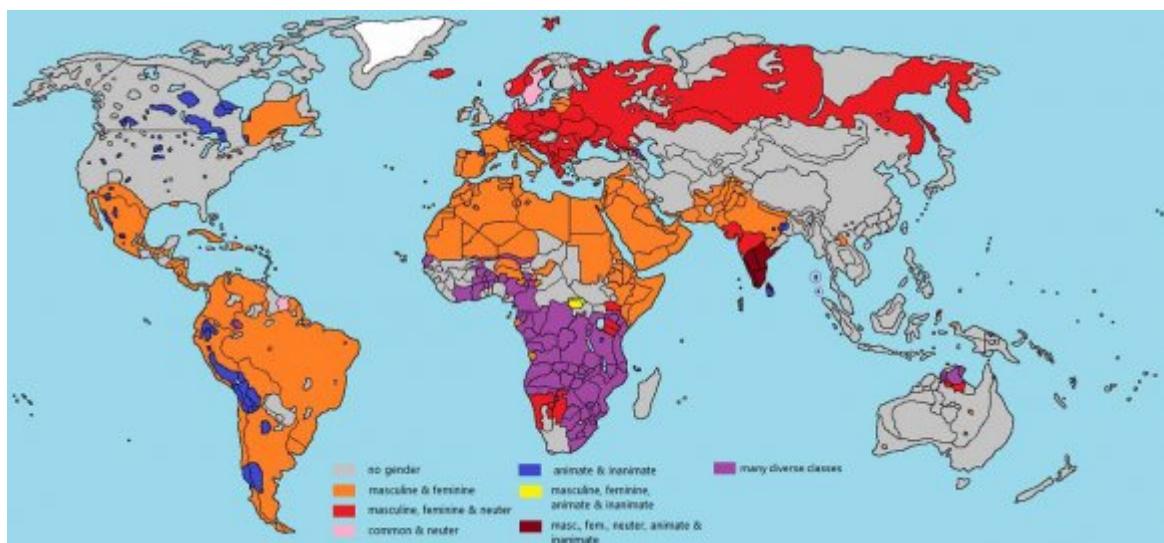


Figure 1:

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