

Processing the gender star in German

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Language shapes the way we organize and express thoughts (Slobin, 2003). Grammatical gender, for example, influences mental representations of gender, with grammatical cues playing a key role in assigning gender to noun referents (Esaulova et al., 2014; Sato et al., 2013). However, language processing and gender inferences can be biased due to the asymmetrical use of grammatical gender: masculine forms can serve as specific and generic references, a phenomenon known as masculine generics (Gygax et al., 2019). Masculine generics reinforce male representations and reduce the cognitive availability of non-male individuals (Rothermund & Strack, 2024; Stahlberg et al., 2007). In order to counteract this bias, gender-fair language strategies have been proposed, such as the use of terms that explicitly include feminine and masculine terms (i.e., *Lehrer und Lehrerinnen*, ‘male teachers and female teachers’) and terms that avoid gender marking (i.e., *Lehrende*, ‘teaching stuff’). In German, the language under scrutiny, the gender star appears to be the most prominent language-fair form, intended to represent female, male, and non-binary genders equally (Diewald & Steinhauer, 2020). However, it remains unclear whether it truly elicits balanced mental representations, as findings are mixed.

The present study examines the processing of the gender star and the gender inferences it generates during reading. A semantic priming task was designed, in which 101 native speakers of German were primed with singular masculine, feminine, and gender star forms (e.g., *Abonnent/Abonnentin/Abonnent*in*, ‘male subscriber, female subscriber, male/female/non-binary subscriber’), and the German third person masculine and feminine pronouns (*er*, ‘he’, *sie*, ‘she’) were used as targets. The prime-target pairs involving masculine and feminine primes could be grammatically congruent (*Abonnent-er*, *Abonnentin-sie*), or incongruent (*Abonnent-sie*, *Abonnentin-er*), whilst pairs with the gender star were deemed congruent in both cases (*Abonnent*in-er*, *Abonnent*in-sie*). Sixty role nouns were selected as primes, all of which were stereotypically neutral. Participants’ task was to decide the gender of the target pronoun, and gender decision latencies were measured. Response times for both pronouns following a gender star prime did not differ. The absence of response time differences illustrates that accessing the gender of the pronoun was neither facilitated nor hindered, suggesting that the gender star did not impose additional cognitive effort when linking it with gendered referents. Additionally, the effect of attitudes towards the gender star was also investigated, indicating that higher ratings of its usefulness were associated with faster responses to both pronouns following a gender star prime.

References

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