

Who's the surgeon?

Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Fair Language in Italian Speakers

Mara Floris¹, Federico Cella² & Camilla Borgna³

¹Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele, Italy ²Universitat de Barcelona, Catalonia – Spain,

³Università degli Studi di Torino, Italy

floris.mara@univr.it, federicocella@ub.edu, camilla.borgna@unito.it

In recent years, there has been a lively debate concerning gender stereotypes and gender-fair language (GFL) in English and other European languages. An example of this debate is the “specialist riddle”, which has been used to measure gender stereotypes in professions:

“A father and his son are in a car accident. The father dies. The son is rushed to the ER. The attending surgeon looks at the boy and says, ‘I can’t operate on this boy. He’s my son!’ How can this be?”.

While the most plausible solution is that the surgeon is the mother, recent findings indicate that people struggle to provide this answer (Belle et al. 2021, Kollmayer et al. 2018; Reynolds et al., 2006; Skorinko 2018). People often make diverse guesses: the surgeon could be the other parent in a homo-parental couple, or the boy could have been adopted; there is no shortage of solutions that appeal to the supernatural and complex fantasy stories. Yet the “mother” answer seems to be precluded, even though the vast majority of couples are heterosexual. These findings suggest that, even in contexts where medical professions are increasingly feminised, it is hard to imagine the surgeon as a woman, pointing at persistently stereotyped mental representations.

To date, the specialist riddle has primarily been tested in English and with adults. We tested the classical riddle, along with several variants using gender-fair language (GFL), on Italian-speaking adolescents (n = 691, age 14-19). Testing the original riddle with Italian speakers is important: while personal nouns in English tend to be gender-neutral (with some exceptions for compound words like housewife, firemen, policeman, etc.) Italian nouns are gendered whether they refer to animate or inanimate entities. The Italian masculine term for “surgeon” is “chirurgo,” which can be used generically—i.e., it can refer to surgeons of any gender. In contrast, the feminine form “chirurga” refers to female surgeons exclusively. Given this asymmetry, the use of “chirurgo” may further weaken the mental representation of the surgeon as a woman, thus reducing the likelihood of providing the “mother” answer. For this reason, this investigation might fruitfully inform the current debate on the importance of adopting GFL strategies instead of using generic masculine terms for professions.

We measured the effect of “chirurgo” by comparing the difficulty of answering the classic riddle with a baseline given by a riddle where the incident involves the mother and the surgeon is most likely to be the father (cf. Belle et al. 2021). We also compared the effect of the term “chirurgo” with those of two GFL variants: one version employed a gender-neutral periphrasis, “persona che opera” (person who operates). The other version used “chirurg*,” an innovative GFL expression that leaves the gender of the noun explicitly open. Unlike the former, “Chirurg*” does not belong to the repertoire of standard Italian. We found that the GFL strategies, especially the innovative strategy, increased the likelihood of identifying the surgeon as the mother.

References

- Belle, D., Tartarilla, A. B., Wapman, M., Schlieber, M., & Mercurio, A. E. (2021). “I Can’t Operate, that Boy Is my Son!”: Gender Schemas and a Classic Riddle. *Sex Roles*, 1-11.
- Kollmayer, M., Schober, B., & Spiel, C. (2018). Gender stereotypes in education: Development, consequences, and interventions. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 15(4), 361-377.

Reynolds, D., Garnham, A., & Oakhill, J. (2006). Evidence of immediate activation of gender information from a social role name. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 59(5), 886-903.

Skorinko, J. L. M. (2018). Riddle me this: Using riddles that violate gender stereotypes to demonstrate the pervasiveness of stereotypes. *Psychology Learning & Teaching*, 17(2), 194-208.