

Offline and online processing of masculine generics in Czech

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In Czech, as in German or French, masculine forms are often used generically to refer not only to males but also to gender-mixed groups or in contexts where gender is irrelevant. However, this practice has been criticized, as masculine generics have been shown to evoke male-biased rather than gender-neutral representations. Most of this criticism is based on findings from experiments using offline measures, such as in naming or sentence judgment task, that tap into more conscious, later stages of processing [1, 2]. Some evidence has also emerged from experiments reflecting earlier stages of language processing, such as self-paced reading or EEG [3, 4]. However, studies that directly compare these measures using the same stimulus set remain scarce and have yielded mixed results so far [5]. To address this gap, the present paper employs a self-paced reading task and a sentence judgment task to investigate the processing of generically intended masculine role nouns in Czech, a language with rich gender marking that has remained largely understudied in this area.

In both experiments, participants read sentences containing a masculine role noun and a co-referring pair of names. The study manipulated three factors: the gender stereotypicality of the role noun (feminine, masculine, neutral), the gender composition of the name pair (male–male, female–male), and the order of presentation (role noun first vs. names first). The order was manipulated to compare how speakers react when the generic meaning is clear from the beginning (names first) and when it becomes clear later (role noun first). For an example of a sentence with a stereotypically neutral noun presented first, followed by female and male names, see (1). For a sentence where the names appear first, followed by a stereotypically neutral noun, see (2). Experiment 1 employed a self-paced reading paradigm, where participants (N=162) read sentences phrase-by-phrase and answered comprehension questions. Experiment 2 presented whole sentences to participants (N=150), who rated their naturalness using a slider.

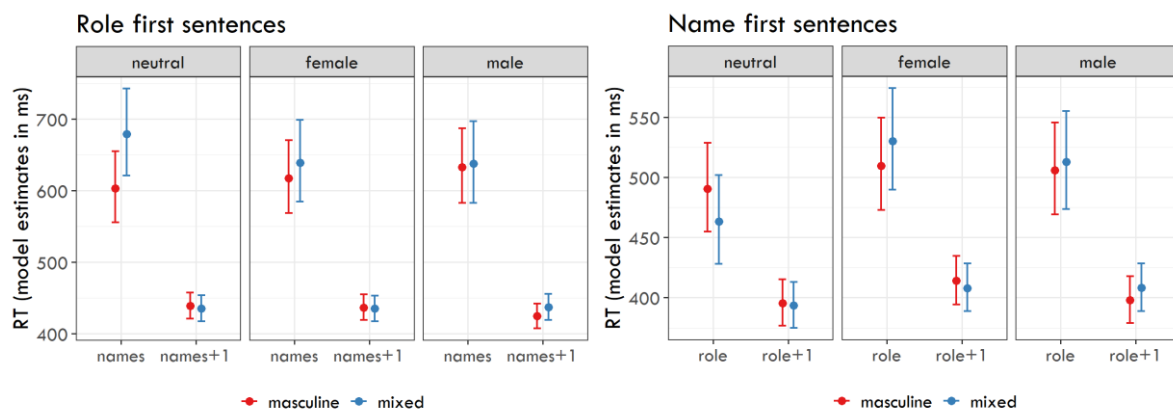
In Experiment 1, separate linear mixed-effects models were run for the role noun-first and names-first conditions, predicting log-transformed reading times for the region of interest (ROI; role noun/names) and the subsequent phrase as a spillover region. Stereotypicality and name-gender were included as fixed effects. The model included random intercepts for participants and items, with a varying slope for name-gender across items. In the role-first condition, we found a significant effect of name-gender in the ROI: reading times were longer for gender-mixed name pairs (see Fig. 1). In the names-first condition, a significant interaction between name-gender and stereotypicality in the ROI emerged: reading times were longer for gender-mixed name pairs when combined with stereotypically feminine role nouns than with neutral role nouns (see Fig. 2). In Experiment 2, a linear mixed-effects model with the same set of effects was run, with the order of role noun and names included as a fixed effect. The model yielded no significant result.

The results from Experiment 1 indicate that when encountering masculine role nouns, Czech speakers are more likely to associate them with males rather than females (role noun first condition). However, when the generic meaning is clear from the context (names first condition), the processing becomes affected by gender stereotype, with masculine generics referring to stereotypically feminine roles resulting in greater difficulties. Importantly, although the results from Experiment 1 show that generically used masculine forms are more difficult to process, Experiment 2 shows that speakers still perceive it as natural. This highlights the problematic nature of masculine generics, which function as a conventional linguistic form while simultaneously reinforcing a male bias.

Examples

- (1) Nejvyhledávanější | lékaři | v nemocnici | jsou skutečně | Martina a Samuel, | ale
| nejsou | nejzodpovědnější.
'The most sought-after | physicians | in the hospital | are surely | Martina
and Samuel, | but | they are not | the most responsible.'
- (2) Martina a Samuel | jsou skutečně | nejvyhledávanější | lékaři |
v nemocnici, | ale | nejsou | nejzodpovědnější.
'Martina and Samuel | are surely | the most sought-after | physicians |
in the hospital, | but | they are not | the most responsible.'

Figures



References

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