Gendered Language and Male Bias: The Effect of Masculine Generics vs. Inclusive Forms on the Cognitive Inclusion of Women – Empirical Evidence from Arabic

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Introduction: Arabic is a gendered language with a binary grammatical gender system—masculine and feminine. The masculine grammatical gender is used not only to refer specifically to men but also generically to refer to people of any gender, a usage referred to as *Masculine Generics*. In contrast, the feminine grammatical gender is used solely to refer to women. This asymmetrical use of grammatical gender has been widely criticized by feminist linguists across various languages as reflecting patriarchal structures (e.g., Lakoff, 1973; Spender, 1990). Beyond its socio-historical roots, empirical research across languages has shown that *Masculine Generics* tend to evoke predominantly male-biased mental representations rather than inclusive ones (e.g., Brauer & Landry, 2008; Strickland & Peperkamp, 2023; Braun et al., 2005; Gastil, 1990; Hamilton, 1988; Kaufmann & Bohner, 2014; Heise, 2000). However, no empirical study has yet tested this effect in Arabic. The present experiment seeks to fill this gap by investigating whether job advertisements written using *Masculine Generics* versus inclusive language affect the cognitive inclusion of women. This study is an adaptation of Brauer and Landry's (2008) experiment conducted in the French language.

Theoretical Framework: This experiment draws on Rosch's Prototype Theory (1978), which posits that certain members of a category are more cognitively salient or "typical" than others. We hypothesize that encountering *Masculine Generics* activates the prototypical referents of the masculine category—namely, men—leading to predominantly male mental images. The study also builds on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf, 1956), which suggests that language influences thought.

Method

Participants: 176 students from Emmanuel High School in Lebanon (mean age = 16.42 years) took part in the experiment.

Materials: Five job advertisements were selected from various Arabic job websites. The ads represented non-gender-stereotypical professional categories: journalist, Arabic literature teacher, pharmacist, TV presenter, and chief translator.

Procedure: Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. One group read job advertisements written using *Masculine Generics*, while the other group read equivalent advertisements rewritten using inclusive feminine–masculine word pairs. Each participant was exposed to a single advertisement from one of the aforementioned professional categories. They were then asked to imagine a person suitable for the role and describe them in terms of name, age, physical appearance, personality traits, and hobbies. This indirect approach aimed to conceal the study's purpose and assess whether Masculine Generics prompt gender-balanced descriptions.

Results: The findings revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups in the imagined gender of the candidate. In the group exposed to *Masculine Generics*, 83% of participants imagined a man, while only 17% imagined a woman. By contrast, in the inclusive language group, 47% pictured a woman and 53% a man.

Conclusion: The use of Masculine Generics biased mental representations toward men, highlighting the importance of adopting inclusive alternatives in Arabic.

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