

Feminization is more gender-fair than neutralization

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In many languages, masculine forms can be used generically. However extensive research shows that these forms exhibit a male bias. To counteract this bias, alternative linguistic forms have been proposed. These forms are typically categorized into two main strategies: feminization (e.g., pair forms, like *he or she*) and neutralization (e.g., *they*). Both feminization and neutralization have been shown to be more gender-fair than masculine forms. But whether they are equally gender-fair is less clear (e.g., Tibblin et al., 2023 vs Spinelli et al., 2023).

The present study investigates this question by focusing on how feminization and neutralization interact with stereotypical information in determining gender representations in French. Based on previous research, we hypothesize that feminization is more effective at gender-fair language than neutralization because its interpretation is less sensitive to contextual stereotypical information, bringing gender representations closer to parity across stereotypes (male, neutral, female).

To test this, we constructed 12 quadruplets of classified-like job ads. Each quadruplet consisted of four ads differing by the linguistic strategy used to refer to a specific job (e.g., *beautician*). In the **baseline** condition, the job was referred to using a verb phrase without any gender-marked human-denoting noun. This condition provides an estimate of the baseline gender stereotype associated with a job. In the three other conditions, the job was referred to using a human-denoting noun presented in **masculine form**, **pair form** (i.e., masculine and feminine) or **neutral form** (i.e., an epicene/collective noun). A sample is shown in Table 1. The 12 quadruplets consisted of an equal number of male-stereotyped, non-stereotyped, and female-stereotyped jobs (based on Misersky et al., 2014).

In a preregistered online experiment, 90 participants were asked to read the 12 ads in the baseline condition (Study 1) and another sample of 90 subjects were asked to read them in the three other conditions, with an equal number of ads by condition (Study 2). Subjects in both studies were asked to estimate the proportion of women in the group targeted by the ad, using a slider ranging from 0 to 1. We fit a Bayesian hierarchical Beta regression (Bürkner, 2017) to the data from Study 1, obtaining an estimate of the gender stereotype associated with each of the 12 advertised jobs, independent of gender marking. We fit another Bayesian hierarchical Beta regression to the data from Study 2, regressing the estimated proportions of women for the three linguistic forms on the stereotypical baseline established in Study 1.

Figure 1 shows how the interpretation of the three linguistic forms interacts with stereotypical information according to our results. Overall, feminization and neutralization gave rise to less male-biased interpretations than masculine forms (as indicated by generally higher estimated proportions of women). However, feminization was less sensitive to stereotypical information than neutralization (as indicated by a smaller slope in Figure 1) and resulted in representations closer to gender parity. In other words, feminization more strongly counteracts stereotypical information, whereas neutralization works more like a stereotype-preserving mechanism. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our results, as well as the limits of our study.

Condition	Example
stereotypical baseline	Vous voulez travailler dans un institut de beauté ? 'You want to work in a beauty salon?'
masculine form	Vous voulez travailler comme esthéticien ? 'You want to work as a beautician.MASC?'
pair form (feminization)	Vous voulez travailler comme esthéticien ou esthéticienne ? 'You want to work as a beautician.MASC or beautician.FEM?'
neutral form (neutralization)	Vous voulez travailler comme spécialiste des soins de beauté ? 'Do you want to work as a specialist in beauty treatments?'

Table 1: An example of quadruplet.

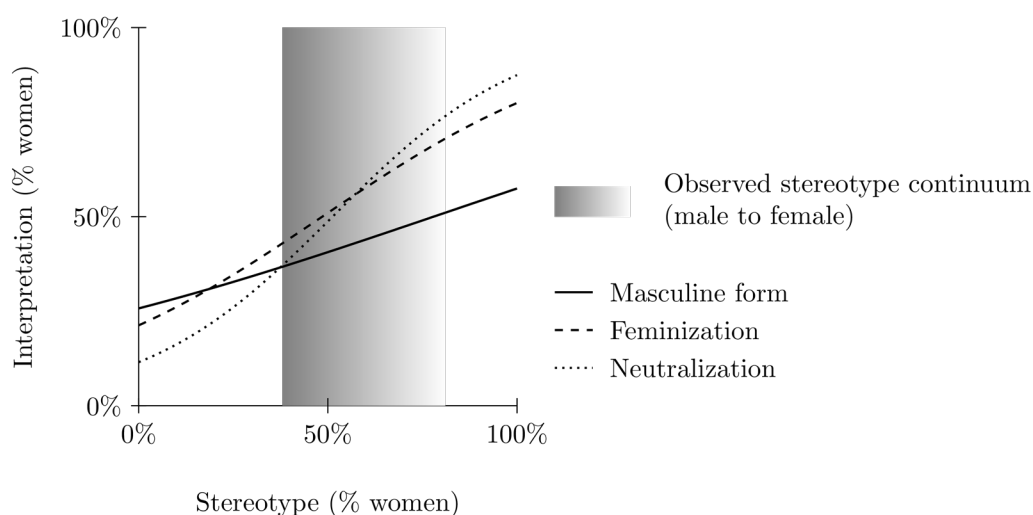


Figure 1: Interpretation of masculine forms, feminization (pair forms) and neutralization as a function of gender stereotypes.

References

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