

Implicit gender priming in language production?

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In most current models of language production (e.g., Levelt, 1999), lexical-syntactic properties of words, like grammatical gender, are assumed to be processed at an intermediate level (the “lemma-level”) between a word’s semantics and its phonology. However, there is discord about how gender is accessed and represented.

According to some theories it is an abstract node to which all words of a given gender are linked. This view is not undisputed. Obtaining a gender priming effect, that is, facilitation in the production of a gender-marked element through prior usage of an element of the same gender, would speak strongly for the existence of such an abstract node. To date, only very feeble and short-lived gender priming effects had been found (Jescheniak & Levelt, 1994; but see van Berkum, 1997). Recently, Vigliocco et al. (2002) reported a gender priming effect in Dutch in a blocked translation task. Reaction times were faster in gender-homogeneous blocks than in gender-heterogeneous blocks. Costa and Caramazza (submitted) pointed out two possibly confounding factors, response set size and stimulus type, that would cause look-a-like effects to a genuine gender priming effect. In two experiments in Dutch (Perdijk et al., submitted) we manipulated gender homogeneity, response set size, and stimulus type independently. There was no effect of genuine gender priming, but we obtained significant effects of both stimulus type and response set size. A more fine-grained time-course-analysis of the data suggests that there is a short-lived gender priming effect in the first part of the experiment, but that this effect is quickly overwritten by stimulus-response mapping strategies.

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