

Why is gender inclusive language so important? A psycholinguistic approach to a societal debate

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When referring to a person's personal, social or professional role as scientists, travellers or managers, knowing the person's sex is not always crucial for comprehending the discourse. In fact, it rarely is. Psycholinguistic research nevertheless suggests that when reading or listening to sentences where gender is not specified, such as "Researchers at AMLaP are keen learners" or in French "Les chercheurs à AMLaP sont des apprenants motivés", we still form a mental representation of workers to include gender, based on different linguistic and non-linguistic cues.

In the presentation, I will present data across different languages to show that we tend to attribute gender in ways that unnecessarily narrow our perceptions of the world. I will specifically argue that language inevitably compel us to attend certain properties of the world that are not always relevant. I will further argue that in grammatical languages where the masculine form is assigned a generic meaning – on top of its specific one – we attribute gender to the relative disadvantage of women, nourishing our androcentric society. Under the heading of "sexist language", this issue has been a topic of political debate since the 1970s, especially in those languages that have grammatical gender, like German or French, and even English, which can be considered as semi-gendered.