The Role of Language in the Gender Gap

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Our use of language reflects and influences perceptions of gender roles.

Picture a room full of female and male executives at a business conference. There are six speakers on the stage. Each is about to talk about her or his successes to the assembled crowd of top business women and men. Are you able to visualise the scene? Or do you feel slightly uneasy because the previous two sentences didn't flow in quite the same way as they normally would?

How we use phrases containing words relating to men and women (and doesn't that sound so much more, well, normal?) is the subject of **my research** into how people use phrases that join two gendered words such as "his and her".

In general, people are not very conscious of the language they're using. But a body of evidence suggests that how people use gendered words, including personal pronouns, not only expresses their beliefs around gender but also

shapes the way they see the social world and their place in it as a woman or a man. When people hear these word order choices, they read them as cues indicating the relevance of the people described by them. Word order can both convey and reinforce gender beliefs.

Why does this matter? Because language has the power to alter people's viewpoints – if we choose our words with care. By ordering words one way rather than the other, we conjure up a particular mental model in the minds of our audience – either reinforcing an existing stereotype or slightly puncturing it.

Handle with care: Words have power

Masculine generics, such as the use of "his" when the person in question isn't necessarily male, have consistently been shown to evoke mental images of men rather than women, even if they are accompanied by explicit statements that the reference should be understood to include both genders. These mental images have consequences. In more than one study in my paper, women were less likely to pursue a job when it was described using the masculine generic as opposed to gender-neutral language.

This is why feminists of the 1970s insisted on a wholesale change from the generic pronoun "his" to a more inclusive "his or her". People realised that there are consequences, so we should be more careful about how we use language. But my research suggests the latter is still not a perfect solution, because the female is cast in a position secondary to the male. Most conjoined phrases are male-first – "kings and queens", "prince and princess", "actors and actresses".

The male-first convention goes back to an era when men were universally considered to be more important than women. The Arte of Rhetorique, a definitive guide and English literary hit by Thomas Wilson in 1553, was very clear about the correct way of ordering words: "The worthier is preferred and set before...let us keep a natural order and set the man before the woman for manners' sake," he wrote.

Nowadays, the prescription to put the man first in written communications is gone, but male-first phrases are still common partly because people have a strong tendency to repeat pre-existing dominant patterns in language. Long-held habits are hard to break. A pattern of speech gains its own momentum

and, after being used commonly for decades, even centuries, it becomes hard to reverse.

What this research also implies is that should you choose to flip a convention on its head, you might be able to reshape expectations and your audience's perception of who might be more relevant in a given context.

Who are you looking at?

One of my studies involved 647 participants recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. They were shown one of two pictures and asked to describe, in one or two sentences, what they saw.

One picture (below) showed a woman and a man in an office setting, complete with suit jackets, computer and business-type books. The second picture was created from the first in Photoshop, by pasting the heads of the woman and man from the first picture onto another picture: this time, they were depicted in a primary-school classroom. It was otherwise identical. A statistical analysis of the results found that where people's descriptions included conjoined phrases (for instance: "A man and a woman are having a meeting in an office"), they followed a strong pattern.

In the office setting, 92.4 percent of conjoined phrases in participants' responses positioned the man before the woman. In the classroom setting (a stereotypically female context), 85.7 percent of the conjoined phrases placed the man first. In other words, female-first conjoined phrases were almost twice as likely to be produced when describing the same two people in a classroom (14.3 percent) than when they were pictured in an office (7.6 percent).

In addition, people showed a strong tendency to reproduce the prevalent word order: "man and woman". I was surprised by how many people still used the male-first pairing, even when describing the primary school classroom. This made it very clear that two different forces are at play here: the pull toward repeating prevalent patterns and another, weaker force, which is the tendency to mention first the presumably more relevant party in the context.

Next, I wondered whether these word order choices matter. At the beginning, I was interested in how these patterns look and what explains them, but then as I went deeper into the research the question became, does it matter?

Does this have real consequences for people's understanding of the social world? So, in another my studies, I invited participants to write a story about either "a businesswoman and a businessman" or "a businessman and a businesswoman". Starting with "businesswoman" vs "businessman", is a very subtle manipulation. You're just changing the order of two words. I was curious to see whether a different word order would change people's perceptions. I predicted that whichever was mentioned first in the phrases would feature more centrally in the story.

This hunch proved correct. Across all stories, the businessman was significantly more likely to be mentioned before the businesswoman, with 68.3 percent first mentioning the man and 31.7 percent the woman. But the instructions affected the outcome: The ratio of stories mentioning the businessman first was 87.5 percent for stories written about "a businessman and a businesswoman", whereas it was 49.4 percent for stories in which the instruction was to write about "a businesswoman and a businessman".

What this study shows is that the order of genders in a conjoined phrase has communicational consequences. When the woman was mentioned before the man in a business context, participants constructed an imaginary world in which the woman was more central and received more attention. These findings provide further evidence that the order of conjoined words is perceived to indicate relevance.

Mums and dads: Another story

Note that there are some contexts (home and family) when the order of the male and female words in conjoined phrases followed the opposite pattern. By analysing a vast body of news articles using the Factiva media database, which includes 35,000 written news sources, I searched for word pairs joined by "and". I discovered that the average male-first ratio for word pairs relating to *family* was 43 percent whereas for non-kinship pairs it was 89.5 percent.

Consistent with the idea that people put the presumably more relevant party first, women are more likely to be placed first in the family domain, where they are seen as more central. Mothers, in particular, are perceived to be more central in caretaking than fathers. In this instance, it's fathers who suffer from cognitive exclusion – assigned a more marginal role through language.

Interestingly, it has become less common to see parents addressed as "fathers and mothers". It seems that the changes we are seeing right now are because people see the mother as the more relevant party in the family context and they are no longer constrained by the outdated norm that men have to be placed first always.

The words we use make a difference. The use of language conveys how much you belong in a particular context. In the 21st century, where women belong as much in the workplace as at the kitchen sink, and where many men are as happy to be seen pushing a pram as carrying a briefcase, will what we say about ourselves eventually catch up with what we do?

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