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Authors

Carstensen, Alexandra

Opazo, Paloma

Tsaousi, Christina

et al.

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Is grammatical gender assignment arbitrary?

Alexandra Carstensen

Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands

Paloma Opazo

Vrije University Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Christina Tsaousi

Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands

Asifa Majid

Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands

Abstract

Many languages assign grammatical gender to inanimate and otherwise genderless nouns like *key* and *hammer*. Previous studies of grammatical gender have largely considered it from the Whorfian perspective: examining mixed cases like *key* where disagreements on gender across languages enable researchers to ask whether linguistic gender influences gender associations in cognition. This approach has sometimes presumed arbitrariness in grammatical gender assignments and neglected to consider cases like *hammer* where there is broad agreement on gender (masculine) across both Indo-European languages and the intuitions of monolingual English speakers, who do not use grammatical gender but agree on the masculine nature of hammers (Foundalis, 2002). We reanalyze previous findings and present new data to assess whether common principles underlie both gender assignments in Indo-European languages and the gender associations of English speakers. Additionally, we explore the role of semantic domain, usage, and semantic features in predicting grammatical gender and gender association.