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Gender bias in grammatical gender systems across languages

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Abstract

A non-trivial number of the world's languages have grammatical gender linked to biological sex. It is known that grammatical gender classification is not arbitrary, often following a semantic "core". We investigate whether grammatical gender systems exhibit gender bias in different semantic domains, particularly terminologies of technology (e.g., microcomputer), a domain that has been considered male-dominant, and disease terminologies (e.g., hepatitis), a domain susceptible to negative connotations. In an initial analysis with five languages, we found a baseline bias towards masculine classification of nouns compared to feminine. The technology domain showed no significant bias in grammatical gender with respect to the baseline, but two of the studied languages, French and German, showed statistically significant biases towards feminine classification in disease terminologies, while Arabic showed a significant bias towards masculine classification. These initial findings suggest that languages may be subject to domain general and specific gender biases through overt grammatical features.