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How speakers avoid gender ambiguous pronouns: A cross-linguistic study

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Abstract

We examined how speakers avoid gender ambiguous pronouns, exploiting cross-linguistic variations in French, Italian, and English. The gender congruence between two human referents led to fewer pronouns (more nouns) in both French and English, whereas the grammatical gender congruence between two inanimate referents had no effect on the use of pronouns in English, where grammatical gender is absent, as well as French, where grammatical gender is present. In Italian, gender congruence did not affect the use of null pronouns in all conditions, which are ambiguous regardless. The results are compatible with the non-linguistic competition account: Speakers avoid gender ambiguous pronouns only when the gender congruence increases their non-linguistic similarity.

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