Indexing gender, culture and cognition: an introduction

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In their inaugural Editorial for the *Journal of Language and Discrimination*, van der Bom, Mills and Peterson observed that language plays a key role in discriminatory acts. I quote their words: 'Discrimination is manifest (and can be traced and challenged) discursively; ideological stances and beliefs are produced, reproduced and legitimised through discourse, meaning that language is intertwined with people's beliefs and ideologies' (2017:3). This special issue targets the role of gendered language structures in sustaining gender ideologies that reinforce sexism. Contributions in the issue address the following questions: What is the relationship between grammatical and lexical gender, and the construction of social gender? Do gendered terms generate inferences about the social gender order and mediate speakers' thinking of the social world? Can we explore conceptualisations of gender at the level of discourse? What is the cognitive effect of the generic use of the masculine gender, and what are the cognitive mechanisms underlying gender inequality?

The debate on the role of language in producing and stabilising the social gender order can be traced to the early work of feminist linguists in the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Lakoff (1975) treated language as a medium that reflects women's subordination and men's domination at the social level, and Spender (1980) focused on the role of language in constructing and reproducing a man-made worldview that silences female difference. Early feminist linguistic work (e.g. Baron 1986; Bodine 1975; Eakins and Eakins 1978; Graham 1975; Miller and Swift 1976; Schulz

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1975) examined gendered forms, for which the semantic distinction of sex is grammaticised or lexically specified, and their role in encoding and reproducing social gender inequality. However, questions about structural features of language were downplayed or neglected in the following years due to the performativity turn in gender studies (see Motschenbacher 2016 for a critical approach). The latest developments in language and gender research have criticised the binary and static view of gender, foregrounded variation within the categories of ‘women’ and ‘men’, and showed that language does not relate to gender in a straightforward way (general overviews of research on language and gender are found in Bucholtz 2014 and Cameron 2005). In recent years there has been revived interest in the role of gendered language structures in constructing and challenging the binary gender order and heteronormativity (see, e.g., Abbou and Baider 2016; Bing and Bergvall 1996; Hellinger and Bußmann 2001–2002–2003; Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015; Livia and Hall 1997; Motschenbacher 2010).

Researchers claiming that language constructs social gender and maintains gender inequality often tacitly presuppose or imply that language has a cognitive role, namely, that language mediates the way in which speakers interpret experience. However, cognition is rarely addressed explicitly in language and gender research. The past few years have seen new data on the relation between grammatical and lexical gender, and cognition from studies in psychology (Garnham *et al.* 2016), typology (Aikhenvald 2016) and talk-in-interaction (Alvanoudi 2014). Despite a number of in-depth works on the relation between gendered language structures and social gender, there has been no attempt to offer a systematic account of the cognitive aspects of this relation. This special issue is intended to partly fill this gap by exploring the complex interface between indexing gender, culture and cognition across different languages, namely Croatian, English, Greek and Italian. The sections ‘Indexing gender’, ‘Indexing gender and culture’ and ‘Indexing gender and cognition’ outline some theoretical preliminaries for the contributions included in this special issue. An overview is provided in the final ‘Special issue’ section.

Indexing gender

Languages provide speakers with a rich toolkit for interpreting the socio-cultural world and performing daily tasks. When it comes to performing gender identities, speakers draw on specific symbolic resources at the grammatical and lexical level. These resources include linguistic items that index gender referentially, directly and exclusively, that is, via their referential content (Ochs 1992). Referential indexes of gender are grammatically

and/or lexically specified for female or male sex, that is, gender is part of their ‘actual content’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013:62). The formal properties of referential indexes of gender are examined below.

Grammatical gender is a noun class system of two or three distinctions, which always include the feminine and the masculine. This type of classifier system is found in many languages of the world, including most Indo-European, northwest Caucasian and African languages; Papuan languages of the Sepik area; and Australian and Algonquian languages, among others (Aikhenvald 2000; Corbett 1991). Grammatical gender is an inherent property of the noun, which controls grammatical agreement between the noun and other elements in the noun phrase or the predicate (Hellinger and Bußmann 2001:7). Gender systems across different languages vary according to the number of genders, gender assignment and semantic principles of gender assignment, examined in turn. There are languages with two genders (masculine and feminine), including French, Spanish and Portuguese; three genders (masculine, feminine and neuter), including Greek, German and Russian; four genders, including Dyirbal, a language spoken in North Queensland, Australia (Dixon 1972); and five genders, including Hinuq, a language spoken in western Daghestan, in the Caucasus (Forker 2016). The same noun can be classified as feminine in one language (*karékla* ‘chair(F).NOM.SG’ in Greek) and masculine in a different language (*Stuhl* ‘chair(M).NOM.SG’ in German). Moreover, gender systems correlate with various semantic characteristics, such as animacy, humanness, shape, size and sex (Aikhenvald 2000). For example, in languages of New Guinea, such as Manambu and Yalaku, the masculine gender is applied to big, tall, long and slender objects, whereas the feminine gender is applied to short, squat and wide objects (Aikhenvald 2016:44). In many Indo-European languages, gender assignment for nouns with inanimate reference is semantically arbitrary. However, gender assignment in nouns with human reference is sex-based, as in general nouns denoting female humans are grammatically feminine and nouns denoting male humans are grammatically masculine. The correlation between masculine/feminine grammatical gender and the referent’s male/female sex is depicted in example (1) from Romanian (cited in Maurice 2001:232).

(1)	(a)	<i>bun</i> good.M.SG	<i>profesor</i> professor(M).SG
	(b)	<i>bună</i> good.F.SG	<i>profesoară</i> professor(F).SG

In languages with sex-based gender systems, the semantic distinction of female/male sex is grammaticised. Moreover, this semantic distinction can

be codified lexically. The lexical specification of nouns as female or male is known as *lexical gender*. For example, in French the nouns *femme* ‘woman’ and *homme* ‘man’ encode lexically the semantic properties of femaleness and maleness, respectively (Schafroth 2003:95). In this case, the grammatical gender of the noun corresponds to its lexical specification (Hellinger and Bußmann 2001:5). Lexical gender is found in genderless languages, that is, languages without grammatical gender. For example, in the Papuan language Nungon, the nouns *oe* ‘woman’ and *oesit* ‘girl’ are female-specific, whereas *amna* ‘man’ and *ketket* ‘boy’ are male-specific (Sarvasy 2016). In English, the nouns *mother* and *sister*, and *father* and *brother* carry the semantic properties of femaleness and maleness, respectively, and are pronominalised as feminine (*she*) or masculine (*he*) (Hellinger and Bußmann 2001:7).

The use of gendered terms communicates meanings related to social gender. These are discussed in the next section.

Indexing gender and culture

Indexing gender is a component part of person reference. In reference, speakers use formulations that enable hearers to identify the specific person that speakers intend to be identified by hearers. The referential formulation picks out an individual and also construes the referent in certain ways (Hanks 2007:149). For example, the use of a referring expression that is grammatically or lexically specified for sex presupposes and invokes common knowledge about the binary gender order. The linguistic form encodes the semantic distinction of sex, that is, the anatomical/biological differences between female and male humans. The binary sexual split is used as the basis on which social gender is built. Social gender is defined as a cultural and historical process that consists of the ‘many and complex ways in which social differences between the sexes acquire a meaning and become structural factors in the organisation of social life’ (Braidotti 2002:286–7). The information of referent gender is part of the routine meanings communicated in interaction (cf. Enfield 2007) when speakers select gendered terms to refer to themselves, addressee(s) or third person(s). The information of referent gender extends beyond the male/female dichotomy and encompasses gender ideologies; that is, systems of beliefs about typical feminine and masculine roles, traits and behaviours, as well as power structures, namely, men’s dominance and women’s subordination.

Referential indexes of gender normalise the binary asymmetrical gender order via the semantic derogation of women and the generic use of the

masculine. Male- and female-specific nouns are often subjected to different social evaluations, as in the English pairs *bachelor/spinster*, *master/mistress* and *wizard/witch*. Female-specific nouns carry negative connotations (Schulz 1975) and female referents are construed as subordinate, trivial and less valued humans. Similar patterns are observed in other languages as well (see, e.g., Engelberg 2002 for Finnish and Nissen 2002 for Spanish). For example, in Greek the diminutive nouns *adráci* ‘small man’ and *jinekáci* ‘small woman’ carry different pragmatic import, as the male-specific noun has positive meaning and the female-specific counterpart denotes a woman of no importance (Pavlidou 2006:44–5). The semantic derogation of women is a mechanism through which the patriarchal symbolic economy establishes the hierarchical dichotomy of male versus female (Irigaray 1985a, 1985b).

Patriarchal reasoning is also tacitly displayed in the generic use of the masculine, illustrated with the following example from Greek.

(2) <i>I</i>	<i>kaθijités</i>	<i>aperyún</i>
DEF.M.NOM.PL	professor(M).NOM.PL	strike.3PL.PRS

‘Professors are on strike.’

The speaker uses the masculine gender as the default gender for reference to all professors, that is, male plus female, presupposing the stereotypical association of man as norm. What passes as a gender-neutral choice is in fact an exclusionary practice that reflects the ideology of man as the universal human subject and woman as the deviant and subordinate other (Hellinger 2001:108). The generic use of the masculine is a common pattern found in various languages (see, e.g., Marcato and Thüne 2002 for Italian; Bußmann and Hellinger 2003 for German; Schafroth 2003 for French; Grönberg 2002 for Icelandic; and Graham 1975; Martyna 1978, 1983; Miller and Swift 1981 for English). The colonisation of discourse by the masculine gender normalises power relations among women and men, and makes grammatical and/or lexical gender an ‘index of the political opposition between the sexes and of the domination of women’ (Wittig 1992:77).

Languages sustain the belief of a pre-social biological essence that pre-exists and determines social relations. Gendered terms categorise persons as female or male, women or men, and, thus, connect biological sex with social gender and produce a matrix of intelligible and non-intelligible, or ‘abject,’ subjects (Butler 1990). Words produce the materiality of gender regimes by establishing particular habits of thinking. This is the topic of the next section.

Indexing gender and cognition

Prior research within sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and cognitive and social psychology provides evidence for the correlation between grammatical gender and the interpretation of referent sex as female or male (see, e.g., Doleschal and Schmid 2001 for Russian; Irmen and Rossberg 2004 and Esaulova, Reali and Von Stockhausen 2014 for German; Gabriel and Gygax 2008 for Norwegian; Gygax and Gabriel 2008 for French; Gygax *et al.* 2008 and Garnham *et al.* 2012 for French and German; Makri-Tsilipakou 1989 for Greek; MacKay and Fulkerson 1979 for English; Nissen 2002 for Spanish). A common finding reported by these studies is the correlation between the generic use of the masculine gender and a strong tendency of speakers to interpret referents as male. For example, in a series of experiments conducted by Gygax and Gabriel (2008), French speakers were given role nouns, such as *nurse* or *musician*, in the masculine form or in the feminine form, and they were asked to decide whether a person introduced by a kinship term, such as *sister*, could be part of the group represented by the role noun. The study showed that regardless of role-noun stereotypicality, speakers had more difficulties in relating female kinship terms to role nouns in the masculine form, as masculine forms tend to guide speakers towards gender-specific rather than generic interpretations. Interestingly, the correlation between grammatical gender and the interpretation of sex in person reference is so strong that it can also be extended to the conceptualisation of the inanimate world as ‘female’ or ‘male’; for example when speakers personify animals or inanimate objects according to the grammatical gender of the noun denoting these items (e.g. Beller *et al.* 2015; Bender, Beller and Klauer 2016a, 2016b; Boroditsky, Schmidt and Phillips 2003; Imai *et al.* 2014; Pavlidou and Alvanoudi 2013, 2019; Saalbach, Imai and Schalk 2012; Sera *et al.* 2002). This cognitive aspect of grammatical gender is not addressed in this special issue, whose scope is narrowed down to person reference.

The role of language in mediating speakers’ thinking of the world features as an underlying assumption in feminist linguistic discussions about linguistic sexism and language planning, examined below. Feminist language reform initiatives target the semantic derogation of women and the generic use of the masculine (see, among others, Cameron 1995; Frank and Treichler 1989; Kramarae and Treichler 1985; Miller and Swift 1981 for reform proposals for English; Tsokalidou 1996 for Greek; and Pauwels 1998 for various languages). For example, speakers are encouraged to opt for gender-neutral and non-sexist alternatives, such as *firefighter* instead of *fireman*, and *homemaker* instead of *housewife*, or to implement strategies

of linguistic disruption, in order to raise awareness of subtle sexism in language; for example, to break morphological rules, as in *herstory* (as an alternative to *history*), and reclaim female-specific words with negative connotations, such as *spinster* or *girl* (Pauwels 2003:555). Two reform strategies are often used to tackle male bias in language: gender-specification and gender-neutralisation (Pauwels 2003). For example, Greek speakers can avoid the generic use of the masculine by either adding the feminine gender whenever the masculine gender is used for generic reference (3), or by avoiding denoting male or female sex (4).

- (3) *I*   *kaθijitēs*   *ce*   *i*
 DEF.M.NOM.PL   professor(M).NOM.PL   and   DEF.F.NOM.PL

kaθijitries   *aperyún*
 professor(F).NOM.PL   strike.3PL.PRS

‘Male and female professors are on strike.’

- (4) *to*   *ðiðaktikó*   *prosopikó*   *aperyí*
 DEF.N.NOM.SG   teaching.N.NOM.SG   staff(N).NOM.SG   strike.3SG.PRS

‘Teaching staff is on strike.’

Feminist linguists implementing language reform policies to eliminate linguistic sexism often subscribe to strong or weak versions of linguistic relativity; namely, the idea that grammar guides speakers to specific unconscious interpretations of experience (Sapir 1949; Whorf 1956; Slobin 1996). What we choose to codify when we design and produce utterances makes particular aspects of our experience conceptually salient. Thus, when we codify both female and male sex, we resist the idea of man as the prototypical human being.

If language mediates speakers’ experience of the world, is it the case that grammatical or lexical gender operate as a ‘trap’ which limits speakers to a binary gender order (Livia 2001:192), or can speakers use language to overcome gender dichotomies? A number of studies (Borba and Ostermann 2007; Hall and O’Donovan 1996; Livia 1997, 2001) indicate that the relation between grammatical gender and speakers’ cognition is not unidirectional or static. Speakers can use grammar in innovative and radical ways to resignify gender in non-essentialist ways and subvert the fixed dichotomies of woman/man, feminine/masculine or hetero/homo. For example, grammatical gender is one of the resources that hijras in India deploy to take up a ‘third gender’ identity which extends beyond the female/male binary (Hall and O’Donovan 1996). Hijras use the feminine gender instead of the

masculine to refer to themselves and establish a hijra identity, and they switch between the feminine and the masculine gender when they refer to others depending on the parameters of the social context. For instance, they use the feminine gender to construct relations of social proximity and they use the masculine gender to index social distance. In particular contexts, gendered forms can become signifiers of multiplicity and difference. As Canakis (2018) points out, drawing on prototype theory, categories are fuzzy, non-clear-cut historical constructs and, thus, they can be negotiated and redefined. Who is taken to be a more central or peripheral member of the category woman or man is subject to change.

The special issue

The idea of editing this special issue originated in a panel I organised at the 15th International Pragmatics Conference in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 2017 (16–21 July). The issue consists of four articles that unlock the language, gender and cognition puzzle, drawing on a variety of methods, such as conversation analysis, corpus linguistic methods and psychological analyses.

In the first article, ‘Personality traits, adjectives and gender: integrating corpus linguistic and psychological approaches’, Heiko Motschenbacher and Eka Roivainen target gendering mechanisms associated with personality traits and personality trait-denoting adjectives. Bringing corpus linguistics and psychology together, the authors analyse the distribution of personality-trait adjectives with female, male and gender-neutral personal nouns in the Corpus of Contemporary American English, and relate the usage frequencies of personality-trait adjectives with the nouns *man*, *woman* and *person* in the Google Books corpus to desirability ratings of the adjectives. The linguistic study detects an overall male = people bias, but also shows that many adjectives are used in cross-gender patterns. The psychological study shows that *man* is qualified with more desirable Agreeableness- and Neuroticism-related adjectives than *woman*, whereas *woman* is more often qualified with positive Intellect/Openness-related adjectives. This finding indicates that cross-gender usages of personality adjectives may be more frequent than stereotype-consistent usages, and that the discursive construction of femininity and masculinity is a non-binary configuration that allows for overlaps.

In the second article, ‘*Uno*: a corpus linguistic investigation of intersubjectivity and gender’, Federica Formato and Vittorio Tantucci examine whether the Italian impersonal masculine generic *uno* ‘one’ and the feminine form *una* are markers of extended intersubjectivity, namely, markers

of awareness of a general third party acting as the social bearer of the utterance. They analyse the frequencies of these forms in spoken and written genres of the Perugia Corpus in relation to linguistic variables such as polarity, tense, phoricity and illocutionary force. Their corpus-based analysis yields that the masculine *uno* is the prototypical marker of extended intersubjectivity, used with positive polarity in its present tense. Italian speakers use the impersonal masculine to construct generalised ideas about who is prototypically seen as operating in the world and whose experience predominates.

Angeliki Alvanoudi's article, 'Are gendered terms inference-loaded? Evidence from Greek talk-in-interaction,' grounds the cognitive role of referential indexing of gender on social action in Greek talk-in-interaction. Drawing on audio recordings of everyday conversations as data and on conversation analysis as method, the author analyses instances of gendered noticing, which occur after actions that invoke specific presuppositions about gender, such as heteronormativity. The author shows that in gendered noticings speakers deploy grammatically and/or lexically gendered items to attend to social gender as a relevant aspect of context, and position the self and others as women or men. Gendered noticings uncover the inferences associated with gendered terms and bring speakers' covert assumptions about social gender to the 'surface' of the talk.

Roswitha Kersten-Pejanić's article, 'The social deixis of gender boundaries: person appellation practices in Croatian' examines the sociocognitive effects of indexing gender in the Croatian context, drawing on an interdisciplinary approach that combines analyses of newspaper texts and online-based questionnaires. More specifically, the author explores how person appellation forms have been normalised and conventionalised in public language use in Croatian; she addresses the cognitive effects of gendered naming practices in Croatian, focusing on the generic masculine; and she discusses the role of language in subverting dominant gender ideologies and increasing political awareness in norm-critical movements.

I hope that the special issue will be of substantial use to linguists interested in how language use relates to gender inequality, and to feminist scholars mapping their social and symbolic locations as they navigate the complex third-millennium landscape.

The articles in the special issue are followed by an additional research article entitled 'The impact of British accents on perceptions of eyewitness statements,' written by Lara A. Frumkin and Amanda Thompson. The article examines the impact of Received Pronunciation, Multicultural London English and Birmingham accents on evaluations of eyewitness testimony in criminal trials. The study shows that Received Pronunciation

is rated more favourably than other accents on accuracy, credibility and prestige.

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Appendix A: Abbreviations

3	third person
DEF	definite
F	feminine
M	masculine
N	neuter
NOM	nominative
PL	plural
PRS	present
SG	singular